



## Robert Hoyland's Epigraphic Approach and Its Implication For The Historical Study Of The Qur'an

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### Abstract

This study examines epigraphy as an innovative and empirically grounded approach to understanding the Qur'an. It aims to analyze Robert Hoyland's epigraphic discourse in Qur'anic studies, critically assess the factors underlying the emergence of the epigraphic approach, and explore its theoretical implications for contemporary Islamic scholarship. Employing a qualitative research design, this study adopts Van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis as its theoretical framework, as it enables the examination of ideological, historical, and contextual dimensions embedded within epigraphic discourse. This framework is essential for understanding how epigraphy shapes interpretive authority and reconfigures methodological assumptions in Qur'anic studies. The findings demonstrate that the epigraphic approach offers an empirical basis for understanding the Qur'an through inscriptions, manuscripts, and material evidence from the formative period of Islam. This approach is methodologically significant for its capacity to illuminate the historical context of Qur'anic revelation, substantiate the stability of the Qur'anic text, and reveal its dynamic interaction with pre-Islamic cultural and religious traditions. Moreover, the study shows that epigraphy contributes to a transformation of hermeneutical methodology by shifting Qur'anic interpretation toward a historically informed and materially anchored perspective. Theoretically, this research broadens the epistemological horizon of Qur'anic interpretation and underscores the urgency of a multidisciplinary approach in contemporary Qur'anic studies. By situating epigraphy within critical discourse analysis, the study affirms its relevance not merely as an auxiliary tool, but as a significant paradigm in rethinking the foundations of Qur'anic scholarship.

**Contribution:** This research contributes to contemporary Qur'anic studies by critically articulating the epigraphic approach as an alternative epistemological and methodological framework for examining and understanding the Qur'an.

**Keywords:** *Qur'anic Studies, Epigraphy, Robert Hoyland, Critical Discourse Analysis, Contemporary Islamic Studies.*

### Abstract

Penelitian ini mengkaji epografi sebagai pendekatan inovatif dan berbasis empiris dalam memahami Al-Qur'an. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah menganalisis diskursus epografi Robert Hoyland dalam studi Al-Qur'an, mengkritisi faktor-faktor yang melatarbelakangi kemunculan pendekatan epografi, serta menelaah implikasi teoretisnya bagi kajian Islam kontemporer. Penelitian ini menggunakan desain penelitian kualitatif dengan Analisis Wacana Kritis Van Dijk sebagai kerangka teoretis, karena pendekatan ini memungkinkan pengungkapan dimensi ideologis, historis, dan kontekstual yang melekat dalam diskursus epografi. Kerangka ini penting untuk memahami bagaimana epografi membentuk otoritas penafsiran sekaligus merekonfigurasi asumsi metodologis dalam studi Al-Qur'an. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa pendekatan epografi menyediakan dasar empiris dalam memahami Al-Qur'an melalui inskripsi, manuskrip, dan bukti material dari periode awal Islam. Pendekatan ini memiliki signifikansi metodologis karena kemampuannya dalam mengungkap konteks historis pewahyuan Al-Qur'an, menegaskan stabilitas teks Al-Qur'an, serta memperlihatkan dinamika interaksinya dengan tradisi budaya dan keagamaan pra-Islam. Selain itu, penelitian





ini menegaskan bahwa epigrafi berkontribusi pada transformasi metodologi hermeneutika dengan menggeser penafsiran Al-Qur'an ke arah perspektif yang lebih historis dan berlandaskan bukti material. Secara teoretis, penelitian ini memperluas horizon epistemologis penafsiran Al-Qur'an dan menegaskan urgensi pendekatan multidisipliner dalam kajian Al-Qur'an kontemporer. Dengan menempatkan epigrafi dalam kerangka analisis wacana kritis, penelitian ini menegaskan relevansinya tidak hanya sebagai instrumen pendukung, tetapi sebagai paradigma penting dalam meninjau ulang fondasi keilmuan studi Al-Qur'an.

**Kontribusi:** Penelitian ini memberikan kontribusi bagi kajian Al-Qur'an kontemporer dengan mengartikulasikan secara kritis pendekatan epigrafi sebagai kerangka epistemologis dan metodologis alternatif dalam mengkaji dan memahami Al-Qur'an.

**Kata Kunci:** *Studi Al-Qur'an, Epigrafi, Robert Hoyland, Analisis Wacana Kritis, Studi Islam Kontemporer*

## Introduction

In understanding the Qur'an, Orientalists experienced stagnation through the pattern of excription, but Hoyland refreshed the understanding of the Qur'an with the pattern of inscription through an epigraphic approach. With epigraphy, Hoyland stated that the writing of the verses of the Qur'an in Arabic found on inscriptions was a symbol of the Arabic language that had been used previously in Arabia. Basically, the main source for understanding religion in pre-Islamic South Arabia is inscriptions carved on solid materials.<sup>1</sup> This is reinforced by Grasso's discovery of inscriptions engraved with verses from the Qur'an in 716 AD or the 8th century on rocks around Mecca, thus representing that the Qur'an was understood in written form and not only orally. Therefore, it can be assumed that Arabic as a whole was used before the birth of the Qur'an.<sup>2</sup> Of course, this assumption contradicts Christoph Luxenberg's argument that the Qur'an is not pure Arabic, but is influenced by Syro-Aramaic, resulting in many words being misunderstood in the Qur'an.<sup>3</sup> With evidence from inscriptions engraved with verses from the Qur'an, Hoyland attempts to propose a new approach to understanding the Qur'an through epigraphy.

Meanwhile, studies that discuss epigraphy are currently expressed in several views. *First*, studies that are coupled with historical approaches such as research by Firmanto<sup>4</sup>, Grasso,<sup>5</sup> and Haris.<sup>6</sup> Grasso revealed that epigraphy can be integrated with new findings of recent archaeology to

<sup>1</sup> Jane Dammen McAuliffe and General Editor, "Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an" 2 (2003): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Valentina A. Grasso, Ana Davitashvili, and Nadja Abuhussein, "Introduction. Epigraphy, the Qur'an, and the Religious Landscape of Arabia," *Millennium* 20, no. 1 (2023): 1–14, <https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2023-0002>.

<sup>3</sup> Khaeruddin Yusuf, "Orientalis Dan Duplikasi Bahasa Alquran (Telaah Dan Sanggahan Atas Karya Christoph Luxenberg)," *Hunafa: Jurnal Studia Islamika* 9, no. 1 (2012): 149–70.

<sup>4</sup> Alfan Firmanto, "Jejak Sejarah Kesultanan Pontianak (Kajian Inskripsi Situs Makam Batu Layang)," *Jurnal Lektrur Keagamaan* VOL.10, No (2012): 249–78.

<sup>5</sup> Grasso, Davitashvili, and Abuhussein, "Introduction. Epigraphy, the Qur'an, and the Religious Landscape of Arabia."

<sup>6</sup> Tawalinuddin Haris, "Epografi Islam: Telusuran Sejak Orde Baru Hingga Kini," *Jurnal Lektrur Keagamaan* 12, no. 1 (2014): 1–32.





explore the origins of the Qur'ān, the Arab cultural background, as well as the broader cultural context in the pre-Islamic environment, with a special emphasis on the development of Islam. *Second*, the discussion of epigraphy is framed within a linguistic approach by Hardani,<sup>7</sup> and Tozzi.<sup>8</sup> In his research, Hardani mentioned that epigraphy is a linguistic tool in researching inscriptions. *Third*, the discussion of epigraphy is coupled with archaeology by Bustamam,<sup>9</sup> Sodrie,<sup>10</sup> and Syarifuddin.<sup>11</sup> Not much different from Hardani, Syarifuddin positioned Epigraphy as a tool for Archaeology to observe ancient inscriptions written on wood, rocks and other hard media. From the typology previously described, the study of Qur'anic epigraphy conducted by Robert Hoyland has not received adequate attention in the existing scientific literature.

This research arose from the identification of a gap in contemporary Qur'anic methodology, which generally relies on the analysis of written sources and classical exegesis, but ignores the potential of archaeological material sources that can provide a more comprehensive historical perspective.<sup>12</sup> There are not many studies that discuss epigraphy and the Qur'an comprehensively. Although there are indications of such discussions, they are only intertwined in Arabic literary studies,<sup>13</sup> the identities of pre-Islamic peoples mentioned in the Qur'an,<sup>14</sup> and evidence of the interconnection between Islam and Christianity. While, Robert Hoyland presents an innovative approach through epigraphy the study of inscriptions as an archaeological method to analyze and understand the Qur'an by integrating the identification, tracking, and interpretation of historical Islamic remains carved on stone to gain deep insights into the context and development of early Islam

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<sup>7</sup> Kayato Hardani, "Metode Linguistik Historis Komparatif Bagi Epigrafi: Metode Dan Analisis Bagi Gejala Kebahasaan Dalam Prasasti Berbahasa Jawa Kuna," *Berkala Arkeologi* 27, no. 2 (2007): 18–31, <https://doi.org/10.30883/jba.v27i2.950>.

<sup>8</sup> Giulia Tozzi, "Bilingual Epigraphs in Rome: Translation, Coexistence and Transcriptions between Greek and Latin," *Axon (Italy)* 3, no. 2 (2019): 411–28, <https://doi.org/10.30687/Axon/2532-6848/2019/02/023>.

<sup>9</sup> R. Bustamam, "Mengenal Ulama Melalui Inskripsi Keagamaan (Studi Kasus Di Martapura Kalimantan Selatan)," *Jurnal Lektor Keagamaan*, 2012, 373–406, <https://jlka.kemenag.go.id/index.php/lektur/article/view/187>.

<sup>10</sup> Ahmad Cholid Sodrie, "Ulama Dalam Temuan Arkeologi Islam," *Berkala Arkeologi* 15, no. 3 (1995): 70–73, <https://doi.org/10.30883/jba.v15i3.674>.

<sup>11</sup> Syarifuddin Syarifuddin, "Inskripsi Pada Makam Kiai Hasan Maulani: Sosok Pejuang Islam Dari Kuningan," *Jurnal Lektor Keagamaan* 12, no. 2 (2014): 499–514.

<sup>12</sup> María Antonia Martínez-Núñez, "When the Stones Speak: Believing, Living and Dying in Qurtuba. The Arabic Epigraphy," *A Companion to Late Antique and Medieval Islamic Cordoba: Capital of Roman Bactria and Caliphate of Al-Andalus. Leiden: Brill*, 2023, 304–36.

<sup>13</sup> Peter Stein, "Literacy in Pre-Islamic Arabia: An Analysis of the Epigraphic Evidence," *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*. Edited by Angelika Neuwirth-Nicolai Sinai-Michael Marx, 2009, 255–80.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad Al-Jallad, "The Epigraphy of the Tribe of 'Ād," *Athīrat: Journal of Ancient Arabia* 1, no. 1–2 (2025): 281–89.





that cannot be accessed through conventional textual sources.<sup>15</sup> The uniqueness of Hoyland's methodology lies in his finding that pre-Islamic Arab social structures used the Arabic language and expressed understandings that correlate with the Qur'an based on epigraphic evidence, which implies a reconceptualization of the intellectual genealogy of Islam and opens up a new discourse that challenges the dominant paradigm in Qur'anic studies. To analyze the complexity of Hoyland's epigraphic discourse, this study applies a descriptive-qualitative method with Teun A. Van Dijk's<sup>16</sup> critical discourse analysis framework to reveal the ideological, contextual, and epistemological dimensions underlying the construction of epigraphic arguments in the understanding of the Qur'an.

### Description of Robert Hoyland Epigraphic Discourse

The choice of epigraphy as an approach to understanding the Qur'an is closely related to trends in Western scholarship.<sup>17</sup> This selection is revealed by Hoyland in the introduction which states that history-based studies have experienced imitation. The argument can be ascertained in the statement:

"This article will attempt to give very much needed discussion of these issues, which are crucial to any real exploration of the historical environment into which the Qur'an was born. To keep the article to a manageable length, I will focus on the epigraphic data, which also have the advantage of not being prey to the questions of authenticity that have dogged the literary witnesses to pre-Islamic Arabic".<sup>18</sup>

On the other hand, Epigraphy as an approach also requires Hoyland to reveal the authenticity of the Arabic script as a background to understanding the Qur'an (Hoyland, 2002). He calls Epigraphy as an approach to analyzing inscriptions, which specifically analyzes writing, language, script, media and symbols in the inscriptions. Such as the discovery of graffiti (small writing) in the form of quotations from Surah Shad verse 26 and Al-Baqarah verse 21. He also presents the discovery of inscriptions using Qur'anic texts in the pre-Islamic period. Therefore, Hoyland considers the statement that the Arabic script and the Qur'an were adopted by the colloquial language of Christians, an overclaim (Hoyland, 2002). Then he believes through the Epigraphic approach can prove evidence

<sup>15</sup> Ismail Lutfi, "Epografi: Studi Tentang Prasasti," *Sejarah* 3, no. 4 (1997): 40–76, <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/336666874>.

<sup>16</sup> Teun A Van Dijk, "Discourse Analysis as Ideology Analysis," in *Language & Peace* (Routledge, 2005), 41–58.

<sup>17</sup> William V Harris, "Literacy and Epigraphy II," *Catherine Apicella, Marie-Laurence Haack u. François Lerouxel (Hgg.), Les Affaires de Monsieur Flandreau. Économie et Société Du Monde Romain*, 2014, 289–99.

<sup>18</sup> Robert Gerard Hoyland, "Epigraphy," in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Brill, 2002), 7.





of past relics that cannot be manipulated. Thus Hoyland assumes that epigraphy can make the understanding of the Qur'an more comprehensive.

In addition, Hoyland rejects that the Epigraphy approach is only used for archaeological studies, and he calls Epigraphy can be applied in multidisciplinary science.<sup>19</sup> This includes using epigraphy as an approach to understanding the Qur'an.<sup>20</sup> In his introduction, Hoyland critically mentions that the focal point of his study is the use of the Qur'ān in the corpus of Muslim inscriptions. Some Muslim inscriptions state that "Muslim societies believe in the existence of inscriptions containing Qur'anic texts". Then, Hoyland explicitly mentions that Muslims not only believe in it, but they also preserve and extend the inscription tradition by finding tangible evidence.<sup>21</sup> The evidence shows the discovery of the carved text of the Qur'an Surah Al-Qalam verse 2 and Al-Alaq verse 4. For Hoyland, the above letter and verse show that the conditions at that time emphasized the command to write actively.<sup>22</sup> Thus, the inscriptional evidence assumes that the epigraphic approach in Islam does not only reveal religious messages, but also an art of carving.

Although Qur'anic texts have circulated in the form of carved art and are often mentioned in the context of Islamic history, normative orientalists doubt this. This doubt is based on orientalist skepticism about the development of inscriptions in the post-Prophet era. Hoyland responded to these doubts by stating that at that time the spread of Islamic teachings was carried out orally which was so massive.<sup>23</sup> So that the term Qur'an is mentioned explicitly after 100 years of the Prophet Muhammad's time. Like the inscription in Egypt (810 AD / 9th century) which mentions the testimony of someone in believing the Qur'an as the book of truth and the book of the all-knowing God.<sup>24</sup> In addition, Hoyland said that in the early days of Islam, the Qur'ān was understood and became a source of inspiration for writing inscriptions. Moreover, the dissemination of Qur'ānic verses in epigraphy to the public shows the expansion of spiritual and ideological influence in daily life. Thus, the Qur'ān did not only aim to provide aesthetics and decoration. It also emphasizes the spiritual

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<sup>19</sup> Robert Hoyland, "The Content and Context of Early Arabic Inscription," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, no. 21 (1997): 77–102.

<sup>20</sup> Robert Hoyland, "Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur'an," in *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (Routledge, 2007), 67–85.

<sup>21</sup> Robert Hoyland, "New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 69, no. 3 (2006): 395–416.

<sup>22</sup> Tjahjono Prasodjo, "Epografi Indonesia: Peran, Kedudukan, Dan Pengembangannya," *Berkala Arkeologi* 18, no. 1 (1998): 7–16.

<sup>23</sup> Robert G Hoyland, "Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East," *Al-'Usur Al-Wusta* 25, no. 1 (2017): 113–40.

<sup>24</sup> Nicolai Sinai, *Qur'an: A Historical-Critical Introduction* (Edinburgh University Press, 2017).





relationship with God. Therefore, Epigraphy leads people not only to gain visual insights related to Islamic teachings, but also strengthens their religious identity.

### **Epigraphic Discourse Factors in Understanding the Qur'an**

*First*, historically, epigraphy can provide an overview of the historical context during the early development of Islam, including the early period of Qur'anic revelation.<sup>25</sup> Writings found on inscriptions, coins, or ancient manuscripts can record important events that occurred during the time of the Prophet Muhammad and his companions. Hoyland mentions that in the beginning of the appearance of Qur'anic texts in inscriptions, Muslims carved them into several media.<sup>26</sup> The media functioned to integrate the Qur'anic verses as a whole or partially word by word or by paraphrasing. In the pre-Islamic era, epigraphic evidence shows that Arabic script and Arabic language were used for communication. As Hoyland says about the controversy over the source of the Syriac script and Arabic script "Although historically it is possible that Syriac played a role in the development of the Arabic script, the available epigraphic evidence suggests otherwise. There are no Arabic inscriptions written in the Syriac script, while there are a number of inscriptions written in the Nabataean Aramaic script". In addition, epigraphy provides evidence of the political, social and religious environment in the Arabian Peninsula in the 7th century AD. This evidence contributes to illustrating how Islam developed and Qur'anic texts interacted with pre-existing traditions.

*Secondly*, besides the historical aspect, the continuity of the Qur'anic text also factors into the Epigraphic discourse. The transition of text writing, calligraphic style, and layout of Qur'anic texts can be reviewed over time. Such as 'Abd al-Malik's coin of 77/696 and later inscriptions show attempts to clarify or emphasize the message.<sup>27</sup> One example of a visible change is the addition of words from Surah Al-Fath (Q.48:29) to Surah At-Taubah (Q.9:33), which changed the original text to be more personal and direct. The text that originally read "It is He who sends his messenger with guidance" was changed to "Muhammad is God's messenger whom He sends with guidance" This is an example of how Qur'anic verses can be modified to emphasize the role of the Prophet Muhammad in

<sup>25</sup> Irfanuddin Wahid Marzuki, "Pasar Pada Masa Bali Kuno Abad IX-XI Masehi (Kajian Epografi)," *Naditira Widya* 4, no. 2 (2010): 282–94.

<sup>26</sup> Juan Cole, "Paradosis and Monotheism: A Late Antique Approach to the Meaning of Islām in the Quran," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 82, no. 3 (2019): 405–25.

<sup>27</sup> Noha M Hussein, "The Role of Qur'anic Calligraphy and Epigraphy in Contemporary Mosque Architecture: Cases from Australia, Slovenia, and the United Kingdom" (Nottingham Trent University (United Kingdom), 2023).





revelation.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, the text found in Egypt, in Surah Shad (Q.38:26) goes from “O David, we have made you a representative on earth, so command (faḥkum)” to “O David, we have made you a representative on earth so that you may rule (li-taḥkuma)” This change is not only a word substitution, but also changes the sentence structure to be more straightforward and clear, changing “command” to “so that you may rule” which may aim to convey the meaning more directly or with different nuances.<sup>29</sup> These changes thus indicate that despite the existence of a standardized text in the official *Mushaf*, in the early days of Islam, Qur'ānic texts in graffiti or informal writing often underwent adjustments or more flexible variants, reflecting the dynamic process of oral and written transmission.

Third, Robert is careful to emphasize the importance of understanding the Qur'ān in interaction with pre-existing religious traditions, such as Judaism, Christianity and even the local religions of pre-Islamic Arabia.<sup>30</sup> In this context, epigraphy has a role to play in uncovering the influences that existed between the Qur'ān and these religions, and how Qur'ānic texts can be understood in the context of these interactions. By utilizing inscriptions, Greco-Christian societies documented their actions, decisions, hopes, aspirations and prayers.<sup>31</sup> Robert cites evidence of Arabic Qur'anic epigraphy in the 7th century widely in the area of the former Nabatean Kingdom. This is evidenced by the Oboda and Madaba inscriptions to pray to the Divine.<sup>32</sup> Later, in 717 AD or the 7th century a piece of wisdom verse was inscribed on a stone in Mecca written by one of the Pre-Islamic era kings of Yemen, Quss ibn Sa'ida.<sup>33</sup> Overall, epigraphic discourse offers an in-depth, multidimensional approach to understanding the Qur'ān, not only in terms of the text, but also in terms of its historical, cultural, linguistic and transmission contexts. This provides a more comprehensive and rich understanding of divine revelation in the context of its time and place.

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<sup>28</sup> Robert Hoyland, “The Language of the Qur'an and a Near Eastern Rip van Winkle,” *A Life with the Prophet*, 2017, 17–43.

<sup>29</sup> Hoyland, “Reflections on the Identity of the Arabian Conquerors of the Seventh-Century Middle East.”

<sup>30</sup> Robert G Hoyland, “The Jews of the Hijaz in the Qur'ān and in Their Inscriptions 1,” in *New Perspectives on the Qur'an* (Routledge, 2012), 91–116.

<sup>31</sup> Guy G Stroumsa, “Jewish Christianity and Islamic Origins,” *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Professor Patricia Crone*. Brill, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> Robert Gerard Hoyland, “Epigraphy,” in *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'an* (Brill, 2002).

<sup>33</sup> Meri, J. (Ed.). (2006). *Routledge Revivals: Medieval Islamic Civilization (2006): An Encyclopedia - Volume I* (1st ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315162447>



## Implications of Robert Hoyland's Epigraphic Discourse

Robert Hoyland's Epigraphic Discourse in understanding the Qur'ān has implications for Qur'ānic studies, providing a new perspective that connects archaeological evidence and religious texts. The Epigraphic discourse built by Robert not only invites researchers to look at the inscriptions found, but also invites them to reflect on the historical and linguistic context in which the Qur'an was revealed. Epigraphy, then, can provide deeper and more authentic insights into historical events that may not be recorded in other textual sources such as historical or literary texts. Through his work *Epigraphy and the Qur'an*, Robert speaks that epigraphy is not only relevant for historians or archaeologists, but also important in other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and religious studies.<sup>34</sup> Likewise with Islamic studies, Robert's Epigraphy discourse invites academics to dive into the History of the Muslim caliphate not from literary texts or hadith, but with inscriptional evidence that cannot be manipulated.<sup>35</sup>

On the other hand, this study also has implications for social values in both academic and practical contexts. By explaining the function of inscriptions in the pre-islamic era, it implicitly describes the prevailing conditions of social and cultural identity. Also with the social conditions in the 7th century, cultural heritage and social identities such as Hierarchy status in the context of past occupations have historical-reflective value. This study also reveals tolerance and pluralism as evidenced by the occurrence of interfaith dialog, especially Christian-Muslim<sup>36</sup> which negates the emergence of egocentrism and fanaticism. This has relevance when applied in the context of a democratic state to provide a nuance of peace in religion. Robert Hoyland's epigraphic discourse in a social context provides valuable insights into how ancient Arab societies were shaped by intertribal interactions, social structures, and the influence of religion and political power.

In addition to implications for studies and society, Robert's Epigraphic Discourse also has implications for religious practice. If the religious practices described by the inscriptions are applied in a modern context, it certainly has not found ideal relevance. However, it provides a broad insight

<sup>34</sup> Yehoshua Frenkel, "In God's Path: The Arab Conquest and the Creation of an Islamic Empire: By Robert Hoyland. Oxford University Press, 2014. 320pp., 30 Illustrations, Including Map. Hb. 29.95, ISBN-13: 9780199916368. Pb.(2017) \$19.95, ISBN-13: 9780190618575.," *Journal of Islamic Archaeology* 4, no. 2 (2017): 256–60.

<sup>35</sup> Robert G Hoyland, "The Earliest Christian Writings on Muḥammad: An Appraisal," in *The Biography of Muḥammad* (Brill, 2000), 276–97.

<sup>36</sup> Suleiman A Mourad, "Christians and Christianity in the Sīra of Muḥammad," in *Christian-Muslim Relations. A Bibliographical History. Volume 1 (600-900)* (Brill, 2009), 57–71.





into Islamic teaching and prioritizes the plurality of teachings in religious practice. While in the context of understanding the Qur'an, Epigraphy has the potential to pose a risk that reduces the complexity of the teachings of the Qur'an under certain conditions that can ignore the universality of the moral and spiritual messages contained therein. However, Epigraphy also reveals the varied readings of the Qur'an, as well as understanding the process of evolution and coding of the Qur'anic text from a more holistic perspective. While in the context of academic research, Robert offers challenges for research into the origins of the context of revelation.<sup>37</sup> Epigraphic interpretation in the context of tolerance and pluralism requires methodological caution. As shown in the debate between Donner and Crone, early Islamic inscriptions do show diversity in symbols, but Crone<sup>38</sup> warns that this does not necessarily reflect tolerance in the modern sense. Neuwirth affirms that epigraphy can complement textual analysis of the Qur'an, but Reynold takes the opposite view, being more cautious about the risk of over-interpreting limited archaeological data.<sup>39</sup> He also asserts that without a strong theological foundation, epigraphy can introduce bias in understanding the Qur'ān if it relies too much on limited historical findings.

### **The Relevance of Robert Hoyland's Epigraphic Discourse**

Robert Hoyland's study of Epigraphic Discourse in understanding the Qur'an raises 3 new points between Epigraphy and the Qur'an. First, Epigraphic Discourse has a strong value to describe the historicity of early Islamic society, both in social and cultural contexts, especially in the early days of the Qur'an being revealed. Second, there are certain factors in understanding the Qur'an using epigraphy, namely the historical factors of pre-islam and Islam, regarding the continuity of the Qur'anic text and the interaction with other religions. With these factors Robert can describe the originality of the Arabic text and the transmission process that plays a role in preserving the Qur'anic text well. Third, Robert's views on epigraphy to understand the Qur'an have important implications that can be applied in multidisciplinary studies. Robert's work in this regard can be implemented into the context of modern reality. Even in the midst of the era of disruption, taking into account the history and sacred values of the Qur'an is believed to have noble values in goodness. The 3 points

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<sup>37</sup> Sean W Anthony, "Notes and Brief Communications," 2018.

<sup>38</sup> Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran: Rural Revolt and Local Zoroastrianism* (Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>39</sup> Angelika Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage* (Oxford University Press, 2019).





above can illustrate the discourse of Epigraphy in understanding the Qur'an built by Robert Hoyland has a significant impact and needs further study.

The above discussion of epigraphic discourse in understanding the Qur'an also reflects that epigraphy is not only used in archaeological studies as an explanation of early Islamic history but is also relevant to Qur'anic studies.<sup>40</sup> Robert points out that epigraphy can read inscriptions to understand the Qur'an. This indicates a significant shift in Qur'anic studies. Although it does not describe the Qur'an in its entirety, the credibility of Epigraphy still deserves to be recognized. Because the Qur'anic quotations on inscriptions not only symbolize the religious side, but also illustrate the aesthetics related to the economy in the medieval era.<sup>41</sup> In addition, epigraphy is believed to verify the authenticity of the Qur'anic text through the discovery of ancient inscriptions found in pre-islamic times.<sup>42</sup> Gultom revealed that the form of inscription that gave rise to the Qur'anic text was not only found in something hard with a small volume, but could also be found in monuments built at that time. This affirms that although orientalist criticism of the originality and sanctity of the Qur'an continues to be voiced persuasively, the existing epigraphic evidence can be validated for its authenticity. However, Hoyland's claim regarding the existence of evidence of the Qur'an from the pre-Islamic period still requires more rigorous verification of the data. In contrast to Gultom's assessment, which tends to be supportive, several experts such as François Déroche and Michael Cook have expressed skepticism regarding the dating of these inscriptions.<sup>43</sup> Methodologically, this raises a crucial problem, highlighting the difficulty of establishing an accurate chronology without concrete archaeological context and the possibility of stratigraphic contamination that could obscure periodization.<sup>44</sup>

The study of epigraphic discourse in understanding the Qur'an provides a broader perspective on the development of Qur'anic studies. This study offers an effort to understand the study of the Qur'an can be done by using modern sciences that seek to reveal the understanding, interpretation, and context of the revelation of the Qur'an. Because basically the Qur'anic text will always struggle with society, then understood according to social reality dynamically.<sup>45</sup> Although at

<sup>40</sup> Mustafa Shah and Muhammad Abdel Haleem, eds., "The Oxford Handbook of Qur'anic Studies" (Oxford University Press, May 14, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199698646.001.0001>.

<sup>41</sup> Neuwirth, *The Qur'an and Late Antiquity: A Shared Heritage*.

<sup>42</sup> Gabriel Said Reynolds, *The Qur'an in Its Historical Context* (Routledge London, 2008).

<sup>43</sup> François Déroche, *Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview* (Brill, 2013).

<sup>44</sup> Yasin Dutton, "Qur'ans of the Umayyads: A First Overview. By François Déroche," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 18, no. 1 (February 1, 2016): 153–57, <https://doi.org/10.3366/jqs.2016.0227>.

<sup>45</sup> Hoyland, "The Content and Context of Early Arabic Inscription."





first glance it seems normative, this study is critically presented also with social and cultural phenomena at that time. At that time, there was a relationship between text and tradition that represented early Islam with a little tradition.<sup>46</sup> Meanwhile, this study attracts the attention of philologists, with the existence of Islamic inscriptions and Qur'anic texts indicating the evolution of language and writing forms. However, it should be noted that in the early Islamic period, the name Muhammad did not appear at all in the earliest chronological strata of Arab-Islamic epigraphy and papyri.<sup>47</sup> Thus, epigraphy contributes to a deeper understanding of the Qur'an, but we must also be cautious because epigraphy is often perceived as merely contextualizing the era.

When juxtaposing Robert Hoyland's epigraphic studies with other typologies, it seems to have significant differences. Like the studies conducted by Firmanto, and Haris,<sup>48</sup> which use Epigraphy in the Historical step. This difference in approach has significant methodological implications. The historical approach adopted by Firmanto tends to be subjective in its interpretation, while Hoyland's empirical approach minimizes interpretive bias but risks overlooking contextual nuances that can only be understood through hermeneutic analysis. Likewise, Hardani<sup>49</sup> and Tozzi<sup>50</sup> conducted linguistic analysis using Epigraphy. Of course in this case, the study positions Epigraphy as a tool for reading inscriptions on the linguistic aspects of the text. In addition, the study conducted by Bustamam,<sup>51</sup> Sodrie,<sup>52</sup> and Syarifuddin<sup>53</sup> he collaborated Epigraphy and Archaeology to examine inscriptions. In this case, although epigraphy is one of the elements of archaeology, the research uses epigraphy as a tool to understand the inscriptions on hard objects. Of the studies that have been mentioned, the majority examine the history of religious scholars. Therefore, Hoyland gave a new breakthrough to make Epigraphy as an approach to analyzing Islamic inscriptions, and focused on the study of the Qur'an.

The study of Epigraphic discourse to understand the Qur'an by Hoyland is a reminder that although this study reveals reliable evidence, it is sensitive. Because ancient writings do not always

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<sup>46</sup> Ahrar Ahmad, "Islam and Democracy: Text, Tradition, and History," *American Journal of Islam and Society* 20, no. 1 (2003): 20–45.

<sup>47</sup> Sean William Anthony, *Muhammad and the Empires of Faith*, 1st ed. (University of California Press, 2020), <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvw1d5tc>.

<sup>48</sup> Haris, "Epigrafi Islam: Telusuran Sejak Orde Baru Hingga Kini."

<sup>49</sup> Hardani, "Metode Linguistik Historis Komparatif Bagi Epigrafi: Metode Dan Analisis Bagi Gejala Kebahasaan Dalam Prasasti Berbahasa Jawa Kuna."

<sup>50</sup> Tozzi, "Bilingual Epigraphs in Rome: Translation, Coexistence and Trascriptions between Greek and Latin."

<sup>51</sup> Bustamam, "Mengenal Ulama Melalui Inskripsi Keagamaan (Studi Kasus Di Martapura Kalimantan Selatan)."

<sup>52</sup> Sodrie, "Ulama Dalam Temuan Arkeologi Islam."

<sup>53</sup> Syarifuddin, "Inskripsi Pada Makam Kiai Hasan Maulani: Sosok Pejuang Islam Dari Kuningan."





interpret accurately in religious and social or cultural contexts. Even Nicolai Sinai called it incompatible if it glorified epigraphy too much.<sup>54</sup> As Hoyland points out, he challenges researchers to trace inscriptions relating to the early revelation of the Qur'ān. And he assumes that epigraphy can be integrated into multidisciplinary science. Therefore, it is necessary to balance epigraphic research, especially in the context of the Qur'an with the study of other sources. Such as Hadith, Tafsir Science, hermeneutics, History, and so on. Thus this study is deemed worthy enough to be analyzed more critically and in depth by further research.

## Conclusion

The study of Epigraphic discourse in understanding the Qur'an by Robert Hoyland is a breath of fresh air to the study of Excription that has been carried out by orientalists. Through epigraphy, Hoyland explained that the writing of the Qur'anic text on the inscriptions illustrates that the use of Arabic has been used since before Islam. Inscriptions in pre-islamic Western Arabia reveal the existence of Qur'anic texts that had spread not only by oral tradition, but also in writing. Likewise, in the 8th century, inscriptions with Qur'anic texts were found to have spread and existed before the formal canonization of the Qur'an. Thus, Hoyland's epigraphic approach opens new insights in Qur'anic studies by emphasizing the importance of written media on inscriptions as a means of understanding Qur'anic texts.

This study also assumes an effort to contribute to the study of epigraphy and multidisciplinary studies. Especially in the discourse of Qur'anic Studies by orientalists. In addition, studies on the discourse of Epigraphy in understanding Robert Hoyland's Qur'an have never been found. There are several reasons for choosing Robert Hoyland, namely that he is an orientalist who is quite intense in Islamic studies with the background of an archaeologist. And this Epigraphic Study can be a foothold by other parties to expand knowledge and literature, especially in Qur'anic Studies. From this explanation, this research has an authoritative value that is quite credible in understanding Qur'anic Studies. This study has limitations on the scope of the discourse of Epigraphy in Understanding the Qur'an by Robert Hoyland. Although this study has considerable academic value, the evidence of inscriptions and inscriptions does not always provide sufficient insight into broader

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<sup>54</sup> Sinai, Nicolai. "When Did the Consonantal Skeleton of the Quran Reach Closure? Part I." *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 77, no. 2 (2014): 273–92. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X1400010X>.





religious dynamics, especially in Qur'anic studies. Therefore, although epigraphy contributes greatly to Islamic studies, a more interdisciplinary approach that incorporates textual studies, sociology, linguistics, and so on, is needed to further explore the understanding of the Qur'an in the early Islamic period.

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