



The Ancient *Dād* in Southwest Saudi Arabia*

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Abstract

Al-dād is a unique sound in Arabic. It is believed that this sound is what makes Arabic a distinguished language. However, its description has confused the linguists for long time. Some modern linguists believe that *al-dād* described by the ancient linguists is not used in the present time. On the other hand, Arabic speakers may not know that the sound they use for the classical pronunciation of *al-dād* is not the one described by the ancient Arab linguists.

This study records the existence of a sound that has the features of *al-dād* as described by the ancient Arab linguists. It is used among some speakers in Southwest Saudi Arabia.

Keywords

al-dād, Arabic sounds, Arabic dialectology, lateral sounds

Arabic is known as the language of *al-dād*. This attitude is borne of the belief that the *al-dād* sound exists only in Arabic.¹ However, the sound that has been used as *al-dād* in recent times is not the one described by ancient grammarians.²

Ancient Arab grammarians described the place and manner of the production of *al-dād*. The earliest mention of this sound is by al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad, who listed it among the Arabic sounds in his book, *al-Ayn*. The eighth-century grammarian Sībawayh describes the articulation of this sound in his book, *al-Kitāb*. He describes its utterance and specifies its place of articulation as “between the first part (from the back) of the side of the tongue with

* Acknowledgments:

The author thanks the Deanship for Scientific Research, King Faisal University, Saudi Arabia, for the financial support of this study.

¹ A.A. al-Nassir, *Sibawayh the phonologist: a critical study of the phonetic and phonological theory of Sibawayh as presented in his treatise Al-Kitāb*, London-New York, Kegan Paul International, 1993, p. 44.

² I. Anīs, *al-Aṣwāt al-luḡawīyya*, Cairo, Maktabat al-Angilū l-Miṣriyya, 1992, p. 48 f.

the molars next to it”.³ He adds that the air goes out through the sides of the tongue and that the sound is uttered from the right side, whereas Ibn Yaʿīš,⁴ in his book *Šarḥ al-Mufaṣṣal*, adds that the sound can be uttered from either the right or left side of the mouth.

Sibawayh provides further details of the production of *al-dād*. He groups it with the *maǧhūr* voiced, *riḥwa* fricative, and *mutbaqa* emphatic sounds.⁵ Thus, we might conclude that, as described in ancient Arabic books, this sound is a voiced fricative emphatic lateral sound. Given that there is no phonetic symbol in the IPA for a sound that has these features, there is no set way to transliterate this sound. Each of the phonetic symbols *l*, *dl*, *lʒ*, *ɖ*, *ɗ*, *ɗ̣*, *ɗ̤*, *ɗ̥*, *ɗ̦*, and *ɗ̧* have been used in different works to refer to this sound or laterals in general. In this article, it is intended to use the name of the sound. However, it was necessary to use the symbol *ɗ* within the name. This symbol was not accepted by Vollers, who actually criticized some linguists for using *ɗ* to transliterate this sound by this symbol.⁶

Other philologists have studied this sound and have anticipated hypotheses about the history of the lateral sound in Semitic languages. Many Western scholars have contributed to the examination of this sound, or the lateral sounds in general. Lepsius (1861) was one of the first to discuss the place and manner of the articulation of *al-dād*. He and the scholars who followed him did not concentrate only on *al-dād*; they studied the similarity between this sound and other lateral sounds in Semitic languages.⁷ They also examined the Arabic loanwords with this lateral sound in Spanish, West African, and Southeast Asian languages.⁸

Background of the Change of *al-dād* as described in Early Arabic Books

As mentioned above, *al-dād* as described by early grammarians is not the sound that has been used in recent times. The modern form is the voiced

³ Sibawayh, *al-Kitāb*, ed. ‘A.-S. Hārūn, Cairo, 1982, IV, p. 433.

⁴ Ibn Yaʿīš, *Šarḥ al-Mufaṣṣal*, Beirut, ‘Ālam al-kutub, n.d., p. 127.

⁵ Sibawayh, *al-Kitāb*, IV, p. 434-435.

⁶ K. Vollers, “The system of Arabic sounds as based upon Sibaweih and Ibn Yaʿīš”, in *Transactions of the Ninth Congress International of Orientalists*, London, Committee of the Congress, 1893, II, p. 130-154.

⁷ R.C. Steiner, *The case for fricative-laterals in Proto-Semitic*, New Haven, American Oriental Society, 1977, p. 57-60.

⁸ K. Versteegh, “Dād”, *Encyclopedia of Arabic language and linguistics*, Leiden-Boston, Brill, 2006.

dental emphatic stop /d/. This is the sound that is most commonly used in accurate standard speaking. It is also used when reciting the Qur'ān.⁹ Importantly, as we shall see below, it is also the sound that is taught in schools as the sound of *al-dād*.

This change in *al-dād* is not recent. Sibawayh and Ibn-Ya'īš record that different varieties of *al-dād* existed at that time. Some of these varieties are *al-zāy al-mufahhama*, *al-dāl al-mufahhama* or, as they describe it, *al-dād al-dā'ifa*. They describe them as bad and incorrect forms of *al-dād*. No satisfactory explanation was offered by them to explain this change, except what they regard as the difficulty in producing this peculiar sound.¹⁰

In the fourth century of al-Hijrah (tenth century AD), the disappearance of *al-dād* and its merger with *al-zā'* were noted. This merger indicates a period during which the two phonemes were used freely and interchangeably. Many books were written about this merging, or confusion, as early grammarians thought of it. These books list the words that have *al-dād* and others that have *al-zā'*.¹¹

It has been observed by modern linguists that when two sounds are difficult for the hearer to distinguish, they either merge or one of them changes and acquires a new feature that makes it easier to distinguish it. It seems that the sound shift in *al-dād* is an example of this.¹² Cohen (1961) suggests that the ancient lateral *dād* merged into the existing *al-zā'*, whose articulation remained in Arabic dialects that use interdentalials in the form of rural dialects, and became a new phoneme in dialects that do not use them in the form of the urban dialect.¹³

⁹ T. Mitchell, *Pronouncing Arabic 1*, Oxford, OUP, 1990, p. 40-41; Kamāl Muḥammad Bišr, *al-Aṣwāt al-'arabiyya*, Egypt, Maktabat al-šabāb, n.d., p. 104-108; Muṣṭafā Ḥarakāt, *al-Šawṭiyyāt wa-l-funūlūgiyā*, Beirut, al-Maktaba l-'ašriyya, 1998, p. 118-119. Muḥammad, Manāf Mahdī, *Ilm al-aṣwāt al-luḡawiyya*, Beirut, 'Ālam al-kitāb, 1998, p. 62-63.

¹⁰ N. Kinberg, "Treatise on the pronunciation of the Dād", *Studies in the linguistic structure of Classical Arabic*, Leiden-Boston-Koln, Brill, 2002, p. 199-227; I. Anīs, *al-Aswāt al-luḡawiyya*, p. 52-53.

¹¹ Jonathan Brown, "New data on the delateralization of *Dād* and its merger with *Zā'* in Classical Arabic: Contributions from Old South Arabic and the earliest Islamic texts on D/Z, minimal pairs", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 52/2 (2007), p. 335-368; 'Abd Allāh al-Ġabbūri, "al-'Arabiyya luḡat al-dād", *Nadwat dā'irat 'ulūm al-luḡa l-'arabiyya*, Bagdad, al-Maḡma' al-'ilmī l-'irāqī, 1998, I, p. 11; Abū l-Ḥasan al-Šiqillī, *Kitāb fi Ma'rifat al-dād wa-l-zā'*, ed. Ḥātim Šālih al-Ḍāmin, Beirut, Mu'assasat al-risāla, 1985.

¹² Al-Nassir, *Sibawayh the phonologist*, p. 46.

¹³ Jonathan Brown, "New data on the delateralization of *Dād*", p. 338.

The Use of *al-ḍād* in Modern Standard Arabic

In modern spoken standard Arabic, *al-ḍād* has a reflex that is the voiced dental stop emphatic /ḍ/, as mentioned above. This sound is not listed among the ancient Arabic sounds and is not mentioned by Sībawayh, al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad, or others in their times. It was first mentioned in Arabic books by Ibn al-Ġazarī in the eighth century of *al-Hiġra* (fourteenth century AD) then al-Ḥazraġī in the ninth century of *al-Hiġra* (fifteenth century AD).¹⁴ Corriente assumes that Arab linguists accepted this new pronunciation of *ḍād* so that there would be two distinct sounds for the two letters.¹⁵

In addition to this sound being used in standard spoken Arabic, it is also used in some of the dialects of Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and among sedentary speakers in Bahrain, Christian speakers in Baghdad, and urban speakers in Jordan; for more information, see Holes (1995).¹⁶

In the Gulf and some parts of Yemen, there is no /ḍ/ in the spoken forms, but the interdental fricative emphatic /z/ is used, as a reflex of *al-ḍād*.¹⁷

The Aim of the Study

The study reported herein¹⁸ aimed to investigate a sound used in two villages in 'Asīr Province in Southwest Saudi Arabia: al-'Irḍayn (17° 57' 18.08" N, 43° 13' 6.09" E) and al-Maḍḍa (18° 50' 7.10" N, 43° 14' 38.97" E). This sound is used as a reflex of *al-ḍād*. It has features that do not exist in any other reflexes in modern Arabic dialects. The dialect used in this area is one of Modern South Arabian dialects. Thus, the study aimed to determine whether this sound has the features of the ancient *ḍād* that is described in the writings of the ancient grammarians.

¹⁴ I. Anīs, *al-Aṣwāt al-luġawiyya*, p. 49-52; 'Abd Allāh al-Ġabbūrī, "al-'Arabiyya luġat al-ḍād", I, p. 9-18.

¹⁵ F. Corriente, "D-L doublets in Classical Arabic as evidence of the process Delateralisation of *Ḍād* and development of its standard reflex", *Journal of Semitic Studies*, 23/1 (1978), p. 50-55.

¹⁶ C. Holes, "Community, dialect and urbanization in the Arabic-speaking Middle East", *BSOAS*, 58/2 (1995), p. 270-287; E. Al-Wer, "Variability reproduced: a variationist view of the [Ḍ]/[D] opposition in modern Arabic dialects", in M. Haak, R. De Jong and K. Versteegh (eds), *Approaches to Arabic dialects*, Leiden, Brill, 2004, p. 21-31.

¹⁷ B. Ingham, "Notes on the dialect of the Al-Murra of Eastern and Southern Arabia", *BSOAS*, 49/2 (1986), p. 271-291.

¹⁸ The primary findings of this study were presented in AIDA 7, Vienna, September 2006.

The informants

Forty-three persons (14 women and 29 men) participated in the study; 22 were from al-Maḍḍa and 21 from al-ʿIrḍayn. They were aged from 15 to 70 years. Fourteen of them were educated (*i.e.* they had completed high school), 12 were semi-educated (*i.e.* they had received some formal education but had not attended high school), and 17 were uneducated (*i.e.* they had not received any formal education at all). These people participated in conversation on a variety of topics, such as farming, weather, weddings, and ʿĪd ceremonies. The conversations were tape recorded, yielding about 23 hours of tape-recorded data in all.¹⁹ See the tables below.

Table 1

		Sex			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Male	29	67.4	67.4	67.4
	Female	14	32.6	32.6	100.0
	Total	43	100.0	100.0	

Table 2

		Age			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	15-20	6	14.0	14.0	14.0
	21-30	7	16.3	16.3	30.2
	31-40	10	23.3	23.3	53.5
	41-50	11	25.6	25.6	79.1
	51-60	5	11.6	11.6	90.7
	61-70	4	9.3	9.3	100.0
	Total	43	100.0	100.0	

¹⁹ It was not easy to persuade people to allow their conversations to be recorded. Video taping was impossible except with one informant. It was obvious that people were not ready to accept that their *ḍād* is different from that used by others.

Table 3

		Education level			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Educated	14	32.6	32.6	32.6
	Semi-educated	12	27.9	27.9	60.5
	uneducated	17	39.5	39.5	100.0
	Total	43	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

		Place of birth			
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Al-Maḍḍa	22	51.2	51.2	51.2
	Al-ʿIrḍayn	21	48.8	48.8	100.0
	Total	43	100.0	100.0	

The Findings

The sound that was investigated in the study retains the same features as the sound described by ancient grammarians. It is a voiced sound. The front of the tongue touches the alveo-palate. It is an emphatic sound. It is sometimes produced with one side (mostly the right one) or both sides. The side(s) of the tongue touches the molars next to them. The air goes out through the side(s) passage of the mouth. So, we may conclude that it is a voiced alveo-palatal fricative lateral emphatic sound. Below are the figures that show the spectrogram and waveform for this sound in different positions in the word.

This sound has been in recent use in the two villages studied. However, further studies are needed in order to examine the use of this sound in other spoken dialects in the surrounding areas in Southwest Saudi Arabia. It might be important to note that the use of this sound seems to vary a little according to social factors, such as age and education. Old and uneducated people use this sound as a matter of course, whereas some of the young and educated people seem to minimize using it.²⁰

²⁰ A sociolinguistic study is in progress.

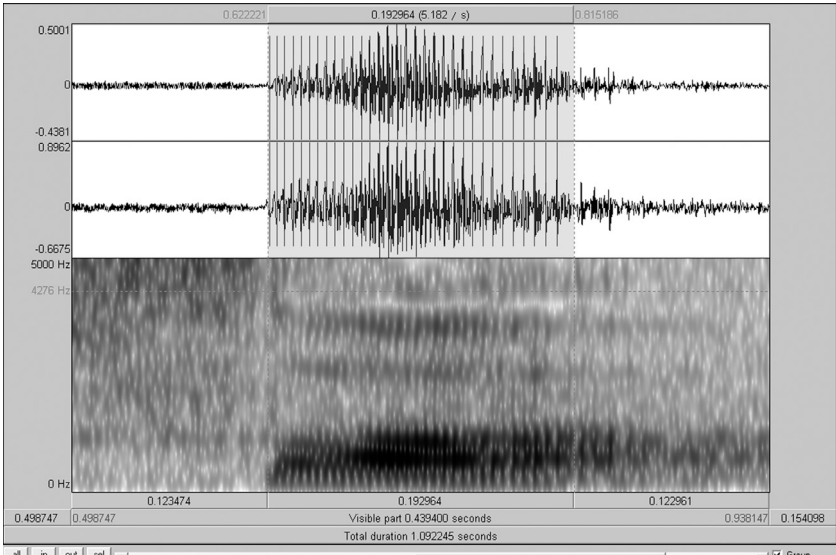


Figure 1. The spectrogram and waveform of the *al-dād* as pronounced in isolation.

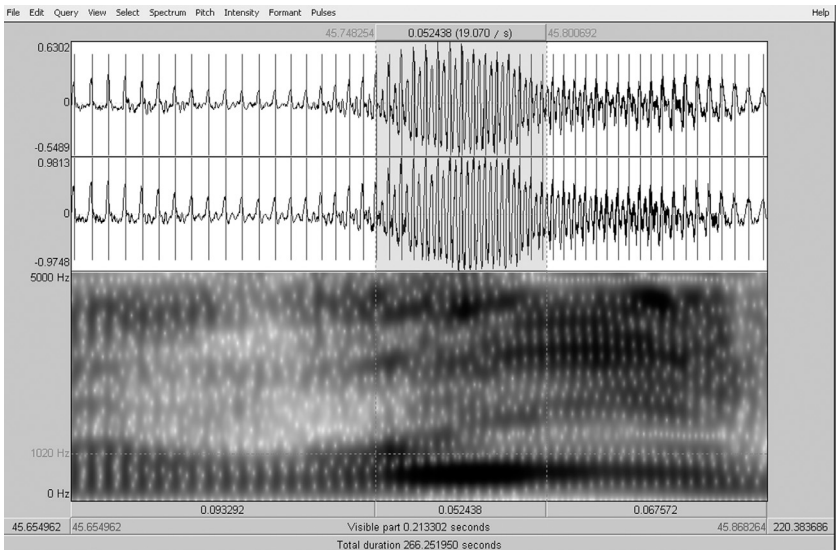


Figure 2. The spectrogram and waveform of the *al-dād* in the word *difān* "guests".

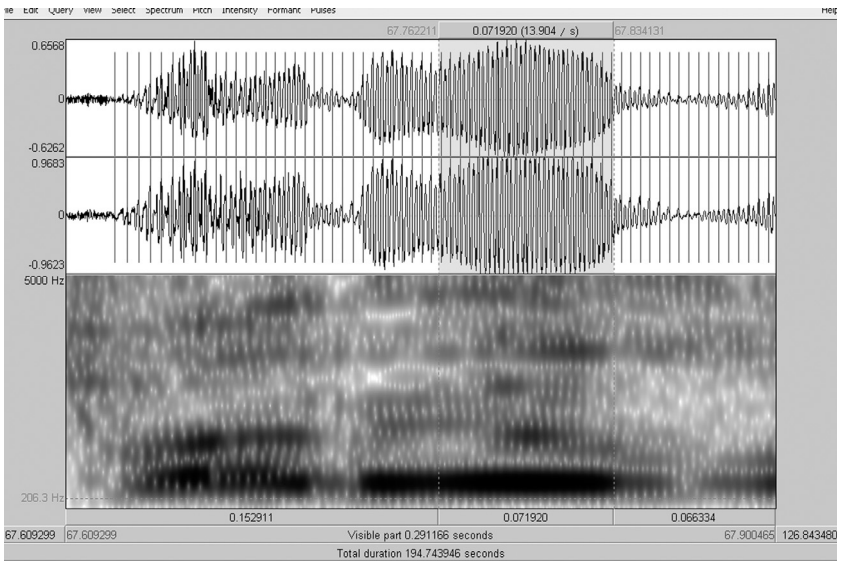


Figure 3. The spectrogram and waveform of the *al-dād* in the word *farīḍa* “obligatory”.

Discussion

There is no record of the existence of a lateral (*i.e.* ancient) *dād* in the north of the Arabian Peninsula. However, it is recorded that this lateral sound existed in the south and southwest, in Oman and Yemen. Steiner provides a fine history of the study of the lateral sound in southern Arabic. The history starts in 1861, when Lepsoius delivered his lecture in Berlin, where he advanced the hypothesis that the Classical Arabic *dād* was an emphatic assibilated *l* in early Islamic times. This hypothesis attracted little attention at the time. Fifteen years later, investigators in South Arabia discovered the use of a lateral sound in Hadrami Arabic, and Mehri and Shihri Arabic. Even several Arabic loanwords in Spanish were recognized in which the lateral *dād* is rendered as *ld*.²¹ Al-Ġundī mentions that the lateral *dād* is still used in Dhufar in South Oman.²² Watson also mentions that usage of the lateral *dād* is attested in the dialect of Jabal Razih.²³

²¹ R.C. Steiner, *The case for fricative-laterals in Proto-Semitic*, p. 2, 3, 57, 58.

²² Aḥmad 'Alam al-Dīn Ġundī, *al-Lahaġāt al-'arabiyya fī l-turāt* (Heritage of Arabic dialects), Tripoli-Tunis, al-Dār al-'arabiyya li-l-kitāb, 1983, p. 430.

²³ Janet Watson, Bonnie Glover Stalls, Khalid Al-Razihi and Shelagh Weir, “The language of Jabal Razih: Arabic or something else?”, *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 36 (2006), p. 35-41.

If we wish to characterize the sound precisely, it might not be sufficient to simply indicate the existence of a lateral *dād* in some dialects in the south and southwest of the Arabian Peninsula. A lateral *dād* means that the air is released from the side of the mouth. To characterize the sound precisely, it might also be necessary to investigate other features mentioned by the ancient grammarians. The tongue, for example, could touch the alveolar ridge similarly to [l] or touch the palate or other parts inside the oral cavity. We find that Sībawayh and al-Ḥalīl b. Aḥmad list *al-dād* after [ǧ] and [š] and that they name all three sounds as being *al-šağariyya*, which means they are palatal sounds. They do not list it with [l]; nor do they consider it as lying within the same group. This might indicate that the tongue inside the mouth cavity takes the palatal sound position but the air is released along the sides of the tongue. This manner of articulation is seen in inhabitants of the two villages studied.

Corriente²⁴ concludes that the change of the sound of *al-dād* started in north Arabia, yet met strong resistance in south Arabia. This raises a significant issue. What preserved this sound from change for centuries in some parts of Arabia, while it changed in others?

Social factors could be responsible for the preservation of the ancient's *dād* over many centuries. The two villages are small, as shown in Map 1. Until twenty years ago, al-Maḍḍa had around 2165 inhabitants, while al-ʿIrḍayn had 2586.

The two villages were almost isolated. They had little communication with the outside world, in contrast to the inhabitants of the east and north of the Arabian Peninsula. There were no tarmac roads. Along with the lack in communication, trade was very limited and travel to and from the outside world was also very limited. Access to the media, in the form of television and radio, was not always possible.

Regarding education, Report (1991a) indicates that, in al-Maḍḍa, there were schools as follows: one primary school for girls and two for boys; one elementary school and one secondary school for boys; and no elementary or secondary schools for girls. Unfortunately, no information is available for the number of schools in al-ʿIrḍayn at that time. For further details, see (Reports 1991a, 1991b).²⁵ This regional remoteness causes a cultural isolation that preserves the local dialect of the speakers. This dialect has many features of Semitic languages, such as the lateralization, pharyngealization and ejective

²⁴ Corriente, "D-L doublets in Classical Arabic", p. 51.

²⁵ Report: *al-Maḥḥ al-maydānī li-l-mawāqīʿ wa-l-ḥadamāt: al-miṭṭaqa l-idāriyya l-sādīsa*, Abhā, Emirate of ʿAsīr-Ministry of Interior, 6 (Taṭlīt), (1991a); Report: *al-Maḥḥ al-maydānī li-l-mawāqīʿ wa-l-ḥadamāt: al-miṭṭaqa l-idāriyya l-sābiʿa*, Abhā, Emirate of ʿAsīr-Ministry of Interior, 7 (Sarāt ʿAbīda), (1991b).

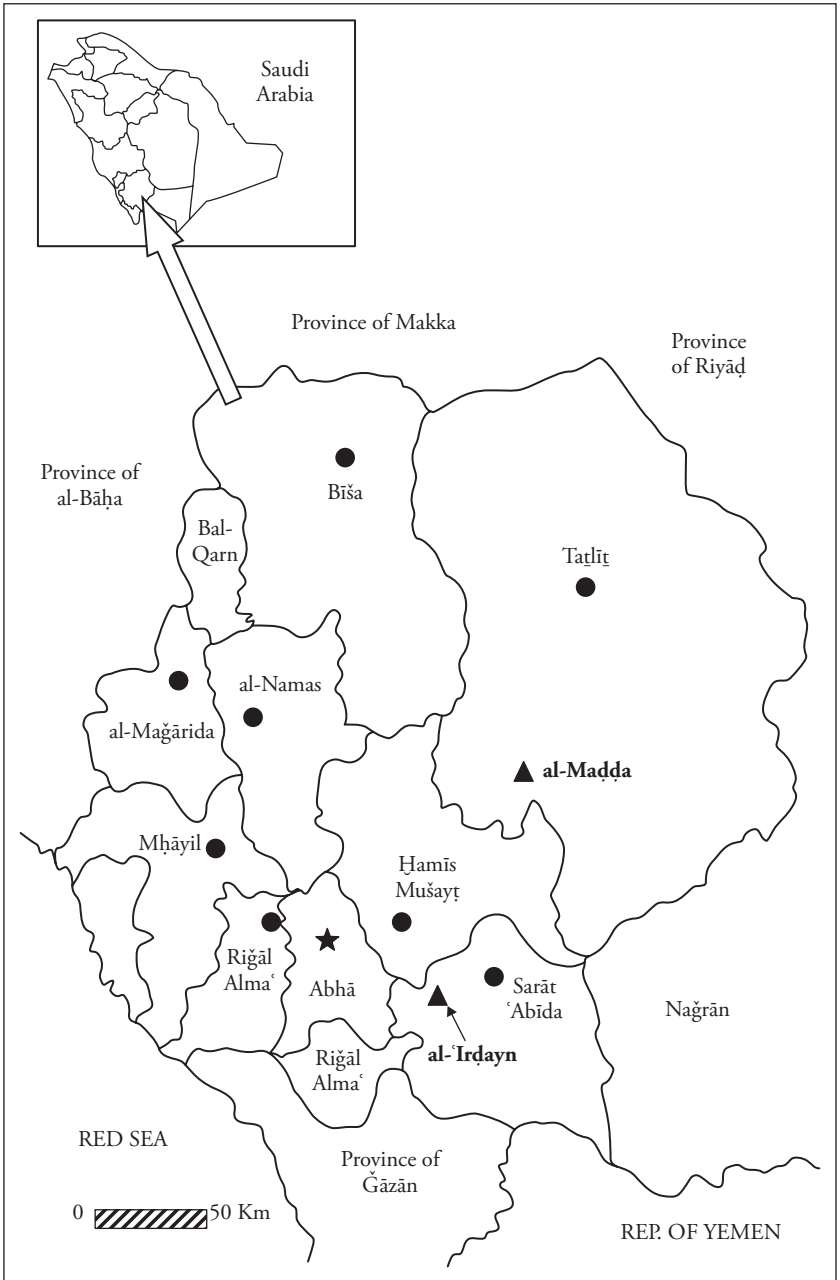
/k/ which is a glottalised /k/ that is produced with a closed glottis then opened after the main release, to give a 'popping' sound *e.g.* a 'popped' 'k'.

It is worth mentioning here that along with the existence of the ancient sound of *dād*, a delateralization is occurring regarding this sound. Two other reflexes were found among some speakers, especially young people: (i) the voiced inter-dental fricative emphatic /z/, and (ii) the voiced alveolar lateralized emphatic. This change will be studied in detail in further research, as mentioned below.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Further Studies

We conclude that *al-dād*, which many linguists believe is no longer used in any form of Arabic, still exists in southwest Saudi Arabia, in two villages named al-ʿIrḍayn and al-Maḍḍa, in the Province of ʿAsīr. This sound has the same features as that described by the ancient grammarians. It is the ancient classical *dād*.

Further research is required to investigate the following: (i) whether or not this sound is used in other surrounding areas, such as Tihāma in Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and Oman; and (ii) the change that is occurring in this sound, particularly the effect of changes in social life that occurred as a result of increased communication with the outside world.



Map 1. 'Asir Province map illustrating the location of al-Maḍḍa and al-Īrḍayn villages. The small map in the top left corner shows the map of Saudi Arabia including 'Asir Province.