

ARABIA AND THE LATE ANTIQUE EAST: CURRENT RESEARCH, NEW PROBLEMS

Greg Fisher
College of the Humanities & Department of History
Carleton University, Ottawa, Canada
greg.fisher@carleton.ca

INTRODUCTION

Once a niche subject area, the pre-Islamic period in ‘Arabia’—a region spanning the Red Sea and the Gulf, the Peninsula, southern Syria, Iraq, Jordan, and the Sinai—is now an established research focus, particularly within the framework of late antique studies. A period of intensive enquiry has provided a more complex view of the Arabian past, one that connects the history of the region and its inhabitants to that of the Near East and the states of Rome, Persia, and Ḥimyar.¹

Numerous methodologies and approaches are driving modern studies of the relationship between the inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia and their neighbours. Some enquiries remain rooted, for a range of reasons, in the Graeco-Roman and Syriac sources, leaving the later Persian and Arab-Islamic traditions to one side.² Others seek to combine the pre- and post-Islamic traditions, although the (general) lack of modern critical editions of key Arab-Islamic sources (in particular) poses numerous challenges.³ Some research focuses on archaeological, philological, and epigraphic evidence, either alone or as supplements to the different historical traditions.⁴ Other studies are adopting a comparative-based methodology, in part to mitigate the limitations of the primary sources. Anthropological studies are providing templates with which to address ancient Near Eastern scenarios, and a recent volume, couched in an anthropological framework, examines similarities and differences between the late antique Arabian and Egyptian frontiers.⁵ Arab ‘barbarians’ are situated alongside late antique western Germanic ‘barbarians’, offering an assessment of the evolving relationship between Romans and Arabs as one of chiefdom- and state-formation; other studies place that relationship within the framework of classicising historiography.⁶ Another recent analysis places the position of the Arabs within the context of state-formation amongst the Berbers in late antique North Africa.⁷

One strand of current scholarship examines the way in which developments of great significance for the Islamic period were not only *underway* prior to the seventh century, but were also *intertwined* with the history of areas adjacent to Arabia. The recent discovery of three drawings of a single elephant and mahout near the city of Najrān is just one example, offering

¹ The literature is vast. For a comprehensive analysis with complete and up-to-date bibliography, see Fisher (ed) in press; see also Hoyland 2012: 1055, conceptualising Islam (in part) as ‘another facet of the kaleidoscope world of Late Antiquity’. See now too al-Azmeh 2014a and 2014b; Neuwirth and Marx 2010; Fowden (G.) 2014. On the ‘Arabias’: Macdonald 2001 [=2009, V]; Hoyland 2001; Macdonald *et al* in press.

² Fisher 2011a and Fisher 2011b, written from the perspective of a Roman historian.

³ Hoyland 2001, Shahīd 1984a, 1195–2010. See most recently Fisher (ed) in press.

⁴ Genequand in press (archaeology) and Genequand 2006; Macdonald 2010 (philological); Gatiér 2015 (epigraphy).

⁵ Dijkstra and Fisher (eds) 2014; see within that volume Salzman 2014 and Fisher 2014.

⁶ Fisher 2011a and 2011b (barbarians); Greatrex 2014 (classicizing historiography).

⁷ Drost and Fisher in press; cf. Hoyland 2015: 17.

further tantalising evidence of the ‘historicity’ of later stories of the expedition—led by just one elephant—made against Mecca by Abraha, king of Ḥimyar (c. 535–65).⁸ While this event took place in ‘Arabia’, the reign of Abraha demands to be understood within the context of the competition between Rome and Persia, the actions of Rome’s client Aksūm, and the growth of religious communities, and underscores the relevance of the ‘sectarian milieu’ of the pre-Islamic period to the study of later periods.⁹

Another example of the way that different cultural and religious phenomena connect the pre-Islamic and Islamic periods concerns the history of the Arabic script. It is now known that the script most likely evolved from the Nabataean Aramaic script, perhaps in the south of the old Roman *Provincia Arabia*. There, in modern Saudi Arabia, texts have been discovered that are in a form of writing that is transitional between Aramaic and Arabic.¹⁰ However—curiously—the three known pre-Islamic examples of a recognisably Arabic script are found not there, nor anywhere in the Peninsula, but in the territory of Roman Syria. Two of the three attested examples, at Zabad and Ḥarrān, are dedicatory inscriptions found on Christian martyria.¹¹ By the sixth century, Christianity had penetrated deeply into Arab communities from Syria to Iraq, with the martyr cult of St. Sergius, to whom one of the inscriptions is dedicated, particularly popular with the Arabs.¹² Of the numerous theories advanced to explain the development of the Arabic script, some have focused on the activities of Arab Christians, as well as an imitation of ‘court culture’ by Arabs allied with the Roman or Persian empires. (Indeed, later traditions suggest that the Persian-allied Arabs played a major role in standardising the script at the court of al-Ḥīra in Iraq).¹³ This debate illustrates that the development of the Arabic script—a script of immense religious significance in the Islamic era—needs to be understood within the context of the late antique milieu. Studies of the Old Arabic language, and work on ‘Graeco-Arabica’—the fascinating interplay between Greek and Arabic in the *Provincia Arabia* and neighbouring regions—further reflect the importance of the pre-Islamic period, and Roman dominance in the Near East, for an understanding the evolution of Arabic.¹⁴

ROME, PERSIA, AND ARABIA

One important advance in the scholarship of the pre-Islamic Near East is a much clearer understanding of how Roman, Persian, and Ḥimyarite interests intersected in Arabia, including the west/central and northern areas that include Mecca and Yathrib (Medina) and adjacent regions. Such competition, often infused with febrile ideologies and political concerns, created an environment that, by the sixth century, was progressively polarised along different sectarian lines.

⁸ Published in Robin 2015. I am most grateful to Christian Robin for alerting me to this discovery. For the ‘elephant’, see Robin 2012: 286–7, and Robin in press: 151.

⁹ For Abraha, see Robin in press: 150–4; Bowersock 2013: 115–20.

¹⁰ On the development of the Arabic script, see Macdonald 2010 and Fiema *et al* in press, especially 417–21 for an overview of ‘transitional’ texts, with full references.

¹¹ Zabad: Fiema *et al* in press: 410–11 and Fisher and Wood *et al* in press: 347–9; Ḥarrān: Fiema *et al* in press: 414–15 and Fisher and Wood *et al* in press: 349–50.

¹² Fowden (EK) 1999 remains the classic study.

¹³ See for discussion Shahīd 1984b: 90; Abbott 1939: 5–8; cf. Fisher 2011: ch.4, Macdonald 2009, and Hoyland 2001: 242–3 for discussions of language and identity.

¹⁴ See now Fiema *et al* in press: 395–421.

The ‘Great Game’—the contest between Rome and Persia for influence in Arabia—can be traced back to as early as the end of the first century BC, when Augustus ordered the prefect of Egypt, Aelius Gallus, to lead an expedition to *Arabia Felix*.¹⁵ As a result, embassies from Ḥimyar and Saba’ were dispatched to Rome, acknowledging the emergence of Roman power in the Red Sea.¹⁶ During the same time period, the Parthians appear to have established a presence along the eastern side of the Peninsula, triggering concerns in Rome that may have factored into the decision to send Gallus to the south.¹⁷ In the second century, the annexation of the Nabataean kingdom (AD 106)¹⁸ and the inscriptions from al-Ruwāfa in northwestern Arabia (before 169)¹⁹ reflect continued Roman interest in exerting some kind of influence in the western portion of the Peninsula, but it was not until the reign of Constantius II (337–61) that a determined effort was once again directed southwards. By this point, Ḥimyar had supplanted Saba’ as the most powerful kingdom in *Arabia Felix*, while the kings of Sasanian Persia had established a foothold along the eastern side of the Peninsula and, most probably, into Oman.²⁰ Ḥimyar, which had already despatched embassies to both Rome and Persia, received a Roman embassy in *c.* 340. Its leader, Theophilus the Indian, sought to convert the Ḥimyarite kings, proponents of a form of Judaism (‘Judeo-Monotheism’)²¹ to Christianity. This early ideological effort to win over an increasingly important southern kingdom failed, and it seems likely that Ḥimyar subsequently sought alignment with Sasanian Persia. Roman-Persian competition for the peoples of Arabia intensified significantly in the fifth and sixth centuries, and was progressively infused with ideological concerns. By the mid-fifth century, Ḥimyar had conquered much of *Arabia Deserta*, extending its influence to the southern boundaries of the Roman and Persian empires. References to polytheism vanished on Ḥimyarite inscriptions by the end of the fourth century, and with Zoroastrian Persia and Christian Rome to the north, much of central Arabia was ‘encircled’ by ‘ecumenical’²² states with monotheistic (or universal) religions.²³

The three states developed a complex political relationship, managed in practical terms via the use of Arab proxies. Ḥimyar co-opted the great confederation of central Arabia, Ma‘add, probably by using the leaders of the southern Arabian tribe of Kinda (beginning with a certain Ḥujr) and installing them as viceroys.²⁴ In the 470s, an Arab leader in Persian service named Amorkesos (Imru’ al-Qays) had defected to Rome, before setting up a fiefdom somewhere at the northern end of the Red Sea.²⁵ Not long afterwards, after a time of tension between Christians and Jews in South Arabia, Rome’s ally Aksūm gained a stranglehold on Ḥimyarite politics, installing a series of rulers in Zafār receptive to Aksūmite (and thus Roman) interests.²⁶ Meanwhile, in the north, Roman pressure finally delivered results as the Arab leaders in control

¹⁵ Strabo, 16.4.22; see Hoyland 2001: 44–5; Sidebotham 1986; Sidebotham 2011.

¹⁶ *Periplus* §23; see Hoyland 2001: 46–7.

¹⁷ *Periplus* §33; Potts 1990, vol. 2: 111–14, 146–52, 228–9, 274–88.

¹⁸ See Fiema *et al* in press: 373–95 and Bowersock 1983.

¹⁹ A new edition of these inscriptions is published in Macdonald *et al* in press: 44–66.

²⁰ Daryaei 2013: 2–6; Piacentini 1985; Potts 2008: 198.

²¹ See Robin 2014 and Robin in press: 129–36, and 130 for the terminology used here.

²² Hoyland 2012: 1057.

²³ Theophilus’ mission is reported by Philostorgius, *HE* 3.4. See also Robin 2014. For the conquest of *Arabia Deserta* see Robin in press: 137–44.

²⁴ Robin in press: 144.

²⁵ Malchus, fragment 1. See Macdonald *et al* in press: 85–88 for translation and commentary on this passage.

²⁶ Robin in press: 145–7.

there apparently ‘went over’.²⁷ It was a time of great change, and for a period, with Ḥimyarite leaders aligned with Rome under Aksūm’s wardship, and the western side of the Peninsula and the north apparently stable under the tutelage of Roman allies, Rome controlled a swathe of territory perhaps as far as Yemen itself, reaping tangible results: one Ḥimyarite royal inscription, found in the desert west of Riyadh, and dated to June 521, records a mission led by the Ḥimyarite king Ma’dīkarib Ya’fur that perhaps penetrated as far as southern Iraq, and may have been carried out with the support of Roman allies.²⁸

In 523, the situation changed once again. Ma’dīkarib Ya’fur had died by the summer of 522, and was replaced by a man known variously as Joseph, Masrūq, or Dhū Nuwās. Once in power, Joseph, reverting, it seems, to the form of Judaism of the earlier Ḥimyarite kings, revolted against his Aksūmite overlords and attacked the Aksūmite troops in Yemen. He then began a pogrom against the Christians in Najrān. The killing of the Najrāni Christians, a political event disguised as one embedded in a religious dispute,²⁹ became famous throughout the Near East, leaving a strong imprint in the Arab-Islamic tradition as well as in the Qur’ān.³⁰ The Najrāni Christians mostly belonged to the Miaphysite interpretation of Christology, opposed to the tenets of the Council of Chalcedon, but intercommunal ties proved strong: at the urging of Justin I (518–27), the Aksūmite king Ella Asbeha launched an expedition across the Red Sea to oust Joseph, who died perhaps sometime between 524 and 530.³¹

The end of Joseph’s rule gave new life to the possibility of a Christian axis binding South Arabia to the Roman Empire, and Justinian (527–65) persisted with ideological and diplomatic efforts throughout the western part of Arabia. The Emperor sent embassies to the Aksūmite appointee on the Ḥimyarite throne, Sumūyafa’ Ashwa’ (Esimiphaeus), as well as to Ella Asbeha, ‘demanding that both nations on account of their community of religion should make common cause with the Romans in the war against the Persians.’ Justinian also pressured the descendants of Ḥujr in northern Arabia, winning over a certain Kaisos/Qays, as well as his sons.³² Yet tangible results from the south were not as promising, as Sumūyafa’ Ashwa’ and Ella Asbeha appeared reluctant to commit to fighting on Rome’s behalf. In c. 535, Sumūyafa’ Ashwa’ was replaced by Abraha, who ‘only once began the journey [to invade Persia] and then straightway turned back.’³³

Abraha distanced Ḥimyar from Aksūm, and was the kingdom’s last independent ruler—and one of significant political influence. A long inscription on the Marib Dam records a diplomatic conference held in 547, to which ambassadors from Rome, Persia, Aksūm, and the Roman- and Persian-allied Arabs were summoned. Abraha was a Christian, as clearly shown by his royal inscriptions,³⁴ but the king was clearly reluctant to surrender Ḥimyarite policy to the demands of the great Christian power to the north. Nevertheless, Abraha’s religious choices could not avoid an ideological association with the Roman Empire, and relations between the

²⁷ See the confused passages in Theophanes, *Chronicle* p. 141 and 144, and Evagrius *HE* 3.36, with commentary in Edwell *et al* in press: 219–21; see too Robin in press: 147.

²⁸ Ma’sal 2 = Ry 510. For translation and discussion see Robin in press: 156–8. Cf. too. Ps.-Josh. Styl. *Chronicle* 57–8 for activities of pro-Roman Arabs.

²⁹ As characterized by Fowden forthcoming b.

³⁰ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’riḫ* 1.919–20; *Qur’ān* 85.4. For the Najrān episode see Beaucamp *et al* 2010 and Robin in press: 147–8.

³¹ Robin in press: 149; Bowersock 2013: 92–105.

³² Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20.9–10, trans. Dewing; see too Nonnosus = Photius, *Bibliotheca* 3; Robin 2014: 35; Edwell *et al* in press: 238–40.

³³ Procopius, *Persian Wars* 1.20.12, trans. Dewing; cf. though Malalas, *Chronicle* 18.56.

³⁴ For translation and discussion of these texts see Robin in press.

two states appear to have been cordial: Justinian, for example, may have provided artisans and material for the famous church in Ṣan‘ā’, al-Qalīs. (Notably, Abraha apparently intended to use this church to divert pilgrims away from Mecca—another reflection of the close intertwining of the political, the ideological, and the sectarian).³⁵ The most notorious event of Abraha’s reign was most certainly his attack on Mecca, which left echoes in the Qur’ān and the *Sīra* of Ibn Ishāq.³⁶ Later, after Abraha’s death, his sons Yaksūm and Masrūq proved unable to maintain Ḥimyarite independence. Fighting between themselves for control of the kingdom, perhaps with the connivance of Roman and Persian agents, they squandered their inheritance. Masrūq emerged victorious, but soon fell victim to Persian ambitions in the region. The Romans had finally lost the Arabian Great Game, and soon found themselves locked in a titanic struggle for survival, after the assassination of the emperor Maurice triggered an invasion of the Empire by Khusrau II in the early seventh century.³⁷

ARAB ALLIES, ARAB ENEMIES, ARAB MEDIATORS

Another important development in modern studies of pre-Islamic Arabia focuses on the role and function of individual Arab leaders, and the ‘tribal’ groups to which they are conventionally related. Current views privilege the élite over the ‘tribe’³⁸, partly due to concerns over the evidence, and partly for methodological reasons concerned with state formation, state/tribe relationships, and to facilitate comparisons with élite barbarian leaders elsewhere in the Roman and Persian empires.³⁹

Different groups of Arabs, and individual Arab leaders, are known to us from contemporary Graeco-Roman, Syriac, and epigraphic sources, caught up in the competition between Persia, Rome, and Ḥimyar, as shown in the table below. Independence of action largely proved impossible: alliance with one of the major powers offered the only practical solution to those in the Arabian borderlands, reflecting political realities that played out in similar ways for the peoples of western Europe, the Caucasus, and Mesopotamia.⁴⁰

*Major Arab Allied leaders known from contemporary evidence*⁴¹

Persian Arabs

late 3 rd c.	‘Amr(u) of Lakhm
d. 328	Mara’ l-Qays/ Imru’ l-Qays
late 4 th c.	Podosaces
460s/70s	Amorkesos/ Imru’ l-Qays (switched sides → Rome)
5 th c.	al-Mundhir
late 5 th /early 6 th c.	al-Nu‘mān
r. c. 504–54	al-Mundhir, (Al(a)moundaros/as), son of Sikika/Saqiqa/Zekike

³⁵ al-Ṭabarī, *Ta’rīkh* 1.935–6. For commentary on this passage see Munt *et al* in press: 450–1. On the ‘tug-of-war’ see Fowden forthcoming b.

³⁶ Ibn Ishāq, *Sīra* 33–6; *Qur’ān* 105. See Munt *et al* in press: 451–4.

³⁷ See Hoyland 2014: 273–5; Bowersock 2013: 116–17; for the Roman-Persian war, see Howard-Johnston 2010.

³⁸ See for e.g. Salzman 2014 for definitions and discussion of this term.

³⁹ Fisher 2014 for discussion of these elements; see too Hoyland 2014.

⁴⁰ See e.g. Fisher 2011a.

⁴¹ Adapted from Fisher (ed) in press: xxv–xxvi.

c. 554–?	‘Amr/Ambrus, son of al-Mundhir
570s	Qābus, brother of ‘Amr
590s–c. 602/4	al-Nu‘mān, son of al-Mundhir

Roman Arabs

350/60s	Zokomos
370s	Mavia
4 th /5 th c.	Tha‘laba, possible king of Ghassān
c. 420	Aspebetos/Peter
c. 420	Terebon (Elder, son of Aspebetos)
mid-fifth c.	Terebon (Younger, grandson of Terebon)
late 5 th c.	Jabala (Gabala)
528	al-Tafar
520s	Gnoupas
520s	Naaman (al-Nu‘mān)
early 6 th c., r. c. 528/9–568/9	al-Ḥārith (Arethas), son of Jabala
early-mid 6 th c.	Abū Karib, brother of al-Ḥārith
early 6 th c.	Erethas, son of al-Ḥārith
early 6 th c.	Tha‘laba, son of Audelas
?–d. 545	unnamed son of al-Ḥārith
?–d. 554	J(G)abala, son of al-Ḥārith
c. 568	(presumed ally) Asaraēl, son of Talemōs
?–?, r. 568/9–581/2, d.??	al-Mundhir (Al(a)moundaros/as), son of al-Ḥārith
late 6 th c.	al-Nu‘mān, son of al-Mundhir
late 6 th c.	unnamed sons of al-Mundhir (one perhaps al-Nu‘mān)
late 6 th c.	Jafna, son of al-Mundhir

Ḥimyarite Arabs

5 th c.(?)	Ḥujr
late 5 th /early 6 th c.	al-Ḥārith/Arethas
	<i>possibly the same figure as:</i>
late 5 th /early 6 th c.	Arethas, ‘son of Thalabene’
late 5 th /early 6 th c.	Ogaros (?Ḥujr), son of Arethas, ‘son of Thalabene’
late 5 th /early 6 th c.	Badicharimos, son of Arethas, ‘son of Thalabene’
early-mid (?) 6 th c.	Qays/Kaisos, related to al-Ḥārith/Arethas (above)
early-mid (?) 6 th c.	Mavias, son of Qays
early-mid (?) 6 th c.	‘Amr, son of Qays
early-mid (?) 6 th c.	Yezid, son of Qays

With political pressures came ideological and religious expectations, such as alignment, for allies of Rome, with Christianity. Hagiographies of the fifth and sixth centuries are replete with stories

of Arab ‘conversion’, often effected in rural areas by wandering holy men.⁴² Some ‘conversions’ resulted in military alliance, and tangible results on the battlefield.⁴³ Many such narratives are didactic or rhetorical in nature, but at least one Arab convert became a bishop, attending the Council of Ephesus in 431,⁴⁴ while Amorkesos won an audience with the Emperor Leo through his timely use of a Christian priest.⁴⁵ The high-profile participation in ecclesiastical politics of the Jafnids,⁴⁶ the scattered epigraphic examples from parts of the late antique Near East, and evidence for the martyr cult of St. Sergius, also illustrate the permeation of Christianity into Arab life.⁴⁷ Such interest was not confined to the Roman Empire: Sergius was, in the eyes of one seventh-century observer, ‘the most efficacious saint in Persia’.⁴⁸ Aḥūdemmeḥ, the bishop of Tikrit, even attempted to lure pilgrims away from Ruṣāfa by providing an alternative site of Sergius worship closer to home in Iraq.⁴⁹

The literary and epigraphic evidence for the Jafnids illustrates their role as Christian Arab leaders in the villages and towns of what is now rural northern Jordan and southern Syria. Little is known about what, if any, religious affiliation was followed by Ḥujr and his sons, although deepening Roman interest in northern and central Arabia in the late fifth and early sixth centuries suggests that Christianity may have penetrated deeply here as well. Parts of eastern Arabia and the Gulf were organised as departments of the Church of the East, and excavation has revealed the existence of an ancient monastic settlement at Kilwa, in northern Saudi Arabia. Certainly it seems clear that Christianity spread southward from Rome and Persia throughout parts of the Peninsula, even if mapping the spread with certainty has proven elusive.⁵⁰

Contemporary knowledge of Persia’s Arab allies and their religious affiliation is largely provided by Roman sources. The Naṣrids⁵¹ may have been linked with Persia as early as the late third century, but it is impossible to establish a definitive link between the ‘Amr(u) who appears on the late third-century inscription of Narseh from Paikuli,⁵² and the series of Persian Arab leaders that (in the eyes of Roman sources) terrorised church congregations, performed human sacrifice, fought Rome’s armies, and had the ear of the Persian kings, and who were eventually deposed in c. 602/4.⁵³

⁴² See Fisher and Wood *et al* in press for a collection of such accounts with commentary; on the importance of rural ‘networks’ of religious significance, see Fowden forthcoming.

⁴³ E.g. Zokomos: Sozomen, *HE* 6.38; see also the story of Mavia: Socrates Scholasticus, *HE* 5.1.

⁴⁴ ‘Aspebetos.’ For his career see Cyril of Scythopolis, *Life of St. Euthymius* 10.

⁴⁵ Malchus, fr. 1 (trans. Blockley): ‘Amorkesos wished to become an ally of the Romans and phylarch of the Saracens under Roman rule on the borders of Arabia Petraea. He, therefore, sent Peter, the bishop of his tribe, to Leo...’

⁴⁶ The name given to the Roman-allied Arab family that dominates our sources for c. 528–590. For Jafnid epigraphy see Gatier 2015; Fisher and Wood *et al* in press: 313–47.

⁴⁷ E.g. the range of martyria inscriptions from Anasarthā and al-Ramthāniye, together with those from Zabad and Harrān, combined with the evidence from the Jafnids. See Fisher and Wood *et al* in press: 311–12.

⁴⁸ Theophylact Simocatta, *History* 5.14.3.

⁴⁹ *Life of Aḥūdemmeḥ* (PO 3, p. 29). For discussion of Aḥūdemmeḥ’s career see Fisher and Wood *et al* in press: 350–7.

⁵⁰ Farès-Drappeau 2011 (Kilwa). See also Hoyland 2015: 15; Finster 2010: 70; Trimmingham 1979: 259–283; Cameron forthcoming 255–6, for a summary.

⁵¹ The name given to the line of Persian-allied Arab leaders between c. 293 and 604. See Fisher and Wood forthcoming.

⁵² NPi § 91 (trans. Humbach and Skjærvø, vol 3/1: 71).

⁵³ For the Naṣrids see Fisher and Wood forthcoming.

Much has been written about the military function of both Roman- and Persian-allied Arabs in the war between the two great powers, and of Arab raiding and its consequences.⁵⁴ Away from the military sphere, and of great interest for the themes of this conference, is the function of the Jafnid and Naṣrid leaders as mediators in both religious and secular spheres. While Arab leaders, according to our evidence, at least, were *rarely* priests and did not overtly style themselves as holy men, they mimicked the role of such figures by carrying ideas between different communities, acting as middle men between the divine and the secular, and fusing religious and political authority.⁵⁵

Our understanding of Arab mediation is informed by modern studies of tribal leadership that emphasise the importance of the skill for the survival of tribal leaders. Such studies show that successful mediation allowed leaders to navigate the complex relationships between tribes and states, and could also bring extensive opportunities to win prestige, wealth, and political power, especially during periods of inter- (or intra-) state competition. Obtaining resources from the state for the benefit of others, and protecting the integrity of the tribe from the state, are two examples of such intercessory activities.⁵⁶ While little is known of any role played by the Ḥujrid leaders in this regard, mediation was a defining attribute of the approach taken by Jafnid and Naṣrid leaders to opportunities and obstacles in their relations with their Roman and Persian patrons. Success at mediation brought renown and stability to the two principal tribal dynasties in both the religious and secular fields, and highlights the place of tribal chiefs as intercessory agents between different late antique communities.

The Jafnids: religious mediators

The preeminent position of the Jafnids was primarily won through success in mediation: between tribe and state, between the state and the rural settlements of Syria and Jordan, and between rival bishops. It was sometimes carried out at the direct invitation of the state.

In 528, the Jafnid leader al-Ḥārith was personally chosen by Justinian as a consolidated ruler over the numerous Arab tribes in alliance with Rome.⁵⁷ He thus became the primary locus for the movement of state resources such as gold, supplies, and equipment, and also became responsible for protecting the position of his family and the people under his leadership. Shortly afterwards, al-Ḥārith rightly or wrongly became associated with the transfer of state resources to the beleaguered Miaphysite Christians in the Roman eastern provinces, who had been heavily persecuted under Justin I. Two new bishops, including Jacob Baradeus—later, an important talisman for the Miaphysites—were provided at the ‘behest’ of the Arab leader and Theodora, the empress. While the role of al-Ḥārith may subsequently have been exaggerated, the ramifications of his association with this event quickly became clear. Jacob began to consecrate Miaphysite clergy, many of whom were based in rural areas and so provided an organisational alternative to the urban-based Chalcedonians. Al-Ḥārith had thus become the patron not only of the Miaphysite Arabs under his leadership, but also of the eastern Miaphysite population more

⁵⁴ See Edwell *et al* in press; Lenski 2011, on raiding/sacrifices.

⁵⁵ For Arab leaders as mediators see generally Fisher forthcoming and Fisher 2014.

⁵⁶ See for e.g. Salzman 2008, 2004, and 1974; Lancaster and Lancaster 2004; Gellner 1990.

⁵⁷ Procopius, *Persian Wars*, 1.17.40–8.

generally.⁵⁸ Proof of the prestige that he won from his generosity is found on an array of inscriptions,⁵⁹ and the family quickly emerged as highly visible supporters of the Miaphysites.⁶⁰

As allies appointed by a Chalcedonian emperor, but whose political position was increasingly associated with the Miaphysites of the rural empire, al-Ḥārith and his son al-Mundhir cultivated a political middle ground where mediation was the key to success. This middle ground spanned the sectarian milieu, enabling them to move between different communities that were often suspicious of one another. Both al-Ḥārith and his son al-Mundhir convened negotiations between wayward bishops and the Miaphysite leadership, as well between the Miaphysites themselves, and al-Mundhir in particular appears to have been well aware of polemic against, and dialogue between, different religious positions. In the murky world of persecution and reconciliation between and amongst Chalcedonians and Miaphysites, requests for help came both from Chalcedonians and Miaphysites.⁶¹ In this complex environment, attempts to work with and for the Miaphysites, but for the benefit of the Empire, provided opportunities for the Jafnids to make their reputation as middlemen.

The Jafnids were not holy men, but their actions blurred certain boundaries between ‘actual’ holy men and themselves. Holy men were arbiters who could negotiate between state and tribe, delivering state resources to outsiders and, through conversion, offer access to membership in the Roman Christian commonwealth.⁶² It was holy men whose late antique eremitic wanderings had made them the first point of contact between the Arabs of the desert and Christianity, and it was holy men who emerged as a favoured tool for Arab leaders to mediate with Roman agents.⁶³ Successful intercession played a vital role in creating and maintaining the prestige of holy men—men such as Symeon the Stylite (below). Intercession included providing healing miracles to the sick, as well as delivering solutions to a whole range of divine and earthly difficulties, including how to access the wealth and resources of the state. Clearly the Jafnid leaders did not provide all of these services, but they delivered sufficiently in terms of provisioning divine sustenance (bishops) and tangible problem solving (healing spiritual wounds incurred through factional strife) to take on some of the aura of their holy counterparts. The Jafnids fostered a strong association with St. Sergius, even co-opting a spot close to the site of his presumed martyrdom at Ruṣāfa for a rather interesting church-like structure known as the ‘al-Mundhir building’, designed, it seems, as a space for meetings, communication, and mediation. The Jafnid leader was celebrated on an inscription in the building’s apse, with visitors unlikely to miss the rather obvious association between al-Mundhir and the holy celebrity, whose relics lay in the basilica nearby.⁶⁴ A new inscription, referring to al-Mundhir, discovered in 2009 in the suburbs of Amman and belonging to a church of St. Sergius, offers further proof of the important relationship between the Jafnid family and this popular saint.⁶⁵

Eventually, the Jafnids lost their privileged position: partly this was due to the fallout surrounding a failed military expedition against the Persians, but mostly it was a result of a disastrous negotiation between rival Miaphysite leaders in Constantinople. Al-Mundhir

⁵⁸ John of Ephesus, *Lives of the Eastern Saints* (PO 19, 153-4); Menze 2008: 222–3. For commentary on this passage see Fisher and Wood in press: 315–16; see also Hoyland 2009 and Millar 2009.

⁵⁹ Gatier 2015.

⁶⁰ Fisher and Wood in press.

⁶¹ See van Rompay 2005 and Frend 1972.

⁶² Brown 1971: 100 calls such holy men ‘the locus of the supernatural’.

⁶³ Fowden (EK) forthcoming. For older perspectives see Trimmingham 1979.

⁶⁴ Genequand in press: 202–5.

⁶⁵ Bevan *et al* 2015.

seemingly resolved a schism that was rapidly emerging as a threat to social peace, but was undone by the duplicity of one of the patriarchs involved. The Jafnid leader was quickly deposed, and the alliance between his family and the Empire dissolved.⁶⁶

The Naṣrids: secular mediators

While the Jafnids played an active role as mediators in religious politics, the Naṣrids sought a secular balance in a political arena where sectarian religious tensions were also prevalent. An early source illustrating the approach taken by the Naṣrids to religious matters is the Syriac *Life of St. Symeon*, describing how a certain al-Nu‘mān responded to the power of the famous saint. Explaining that his allegiance to Ctesiphon prevented him from becoming Christian, al-Nu‘mān then tried to enforce a conversion ban amongst his followers. He then mysteriously received a vision, and then a sound thrashing. Bruised, he wisely decided to allow anyone who wished, to adopt Christianity without fear.⁶⁷ It would be easy to dismiss this story as Roman, Christian, anti-barbarian (and anti-Persian) rhetoric. But beyond the expected demonstration of the superiority of the Christian God, in a Christian text, lies an important clue to Naṣrid policy. The approach taken by al-Nu‘mān—non-committal, or even inclusive—was replicated in various degrees by those who followed him, even during times where the Naṣrid leaders themselves were demonized for persecuting Christians. The best-known of the Naṣrid leaders, (confusingly named) al-Mundhir (504–54) is repeatedly castigated in Roman sources for sacrificing all manner of people to pagan deities.⁶⁸ Yet these atrocities took place on raids into *Roman* lands; the killing of *Roman* Christians can be explained as part of the ideologically-polarised conflict between Christian Rome and Zoroastrian Persia. Roman Christians, many tied through orthodoxy to Constantinople, were fair game; but in Iraq, there had been churches at the Naṣrid city of al-Ḥīra since at least 410, and a town near al-Ḥīra had held a major synod in 424.⁶⁹ The foundation of the Church of the East, the position of Christian leaders in Sasanian political circles, and the sporadic patronisation of (and interest in) St. Sergius sites (including Ruṣāfa) by Persian monarchs clearly show that the Naṣrid leaders required a balanced strategy to approach sectarian issues.⁷⁰

It does not seem, then, that the Naṣrids were particularly interested in fomenting problems between themselves and Christians in their *own* territory. If anything, they made a conscious attempt to appeal to all confessions, and there is a curious tradition that al-Mundhir flirted with the idea of becoming Christian himself, although these stories have the odour of Roman propaganda.⁷¹ More interesting is the response which al-Mundhir made to an embassy from Joseph in the aftermath of the killings at Najrān. Joseph sent messengers to al-Mundhir, encouraging him to escalate his anti-Christian raids; al-Mundhir demurred, apparently to avoid alienating Christians in his own army. (Interestingly, the later Persian conquest of Ḥimyar may have been effected through the mediatory agency of the Naṣrids at al-Ḥīra, a further illustration

⁶⁶ For the demise of the Jafnids, see Edwell *et al* in press: 255–68 and Fisher and Wood *et al* in press: 325–8.

⁶⁷ *V. Sym. Syr.* 67.

⁶⁸ Procopius, *Persian Wars* 2.28.12; Theophanes, *Chronicle* pp. 177–9; Malalas, *Chronicle* p. 445, 460–1.

⁶⁹ *Syn. Or.* 285, 676. See Bosworth 1983; on al-Ḥīra see Toral-Niehoff 2014. For the Church of the East see Walker 2012.

⁷⁰ Christian bureaucrats: McDonough 2001, and cf. Walker 2010 and Payne 2011; Persian kings and Sergius: see Fowden (EK) 1999: 128 (Khusrau I) and 135 (Khusrau II).

⁷¹ See for e.g. Theophanes, *Chronicle* pp. 157–8.

of long-distance links between the Ḥimyarite throne and al-Ḥīra).⁷² Yet only a short while later, our main source for these events, the *Chronicle* of Ps.-Zachariah, records one of al-Mundhir's most daring raids into Roman Syria, where, the author dramatically claims, nuns from Emesa and Apamea were captured and then sacrificed.⁷³ But there was no contradiction here. Roman Christians could be killed or sold for ransom, as long as those nearer to home—that is, those whose support was required—were left alone. Prestige for the Naṣrid leaders might be won on the battlefield and bolstered by royal support, but it was also crucially obtained by holding the respect of different communities, both Christians and non-Christians alike. This, too, was a form of mediation which was driven by secular concerns, of keeping the peace between the different groups of people under Naṣrid influence, and it also represented an ability to bridge different parts of the sectarian milieu. The balancing act embodied by the policy of the Naṣrids reflected the fundamental capacity of a tribal leader to build prestige and influence, by maintaining the goodwill of the constituent parts of those under his leadership.⁷⁴

When the final Naṣrid leader al-Nu'mān abandoned this approach, his political position became untenable. According to al-Ṭabarī, al-Nu'mān persecuted a poet, a favourite of the Sasanian king Khusrau II.⁷⁵ For the Roman Christian writer Evagrius, it was al-Nu'mān's conversion to Christianity;⁷⁶ for the *Chronicle of Khuzistan*, the Naṣrids picking the wrong side in the late sixth-century Persian civil war, in which Khusrau emerged victorious.⁷⁷ Whichever case should be favoured (with the conversion story the least convincing) it was the surrender of the middle ground—the space defended by the successful negotiator—which is found in all three. The consequence was a loss of prestige. It was a simple matter for the Sasanian leadership to assume direct control of al-Ḥīra and its people.⁷⁸

CONCLUSION: NEW PROBLEMS

The Romans do not seem to have envisaged a well-defined southern limit for the *Provincia Arabia*; the ambition of Ḥimyar took its armies to Iraq; Sasanian (and Parthian) interests embraced eastern and southern Arabia. The major late antique powers viewed Arabia as a competitive arena, in all of its geographical scope, and from the fourth century onwards the balance of power shifted repeatedly and unpredictably between Roman, Persian, and Ḥimyarite leaders. Well-known events such as the massacre of Najrāni Christians illustrated the interface between questions of political and sectarian allegiance, as keenly felt in Ṣafār as they were in Constantinople or Ctesiphon. The competition in Arabia witnessed the interface of three major religious traditions, whose spheres of influence shifted throughout the Arabian Peninsula. This, of course, has been long known, and helps to inform an understanding of early Islam 'born of Late Antiquity'.⁷⁹

Military campaigns offered the Jafnids and Naṣrids ephemeral opportunities for political advancement (plunder, martial success, and so on), but did not provide the means for more complex forms of community and regional leadership within and at the edges of the Roman and

⁷² Bowersock 2013: 117.

⁷³ Ps.-Zachariah, *Chronicle* 8.5a.

⁷⁴ Grunebaum 1963: 11.

⁷⁵ al-Ṭabarī 1.1018-28.

⁷⁶ Evagrius, *HE* 6.22.

⁷⁷ *Chronicle of Khuzistan* pp. 19–20.

⁷⁸ On the dissolution of the Naṣrids, see Fisher and Wood forthcoming, and Howard-Johnston 2006: 20-1.

⁷⁹ Hoyland 2012: 1069.

Persian empires. Rather, the same complex interweaving of religious and political concerns that is so crucial for understanding the relationship of Arabia to its neighbours allowed Jafnids and Naṣrids (as well as other Arab leaders not discussed here)⁸⁰ to assume intercessory roles and high profiles in the local community that had important consequences for their own positions, and for those of the people under their control.

In his paper for this conference, Philip Wood notes the importance of sites of Christian pilgrimage and the prominence of Christian holy men in the early Islamic world (Ruṣāfa, and the Sergius cult, are themselves an excellent example).⁸¹ Robert Hoyland has identified different sorts of holy men in the early Islamic world, including Muslim holy men who talked with Christian ascetics, and saw no contradiction in moving between different communities.⁸² Finster, in her recent review of the cultural situation in late antique Arabia, also examines the position of the holy man, framed as ‘an intermediary...organizer and bearer of the divine’.⁸³ Muḥammad was perhaps the ultimate ‘arbiter’, and correlated, as well, political and religious authority in his position.⁸⁴

It is surely of great significance, if also highly problematic, that leaders such as the Jafnid al-Mundhir became hybrid figures that blurred together expectations of the late antique holy man and the functions of successful tribal leaders. The latter delivered political success, and so there was also an unavoidable correlation between political and religious authority. But it was around sectarian religious issues, and around pilgrimage sites (such as those connected to St. Sergius) that this type of hybridisation appears to have taken place. We might ask, then, a vexing, but crucial question: did Arab leaders such as the Jafnid al-Mundhir link the pre- and Islamic worlds in ways that run far deeper than previously thought?⁸⁵ Such men, avatars of strong Arab leadership, were also uniquely placed to solve political and religious problems, and to act as conduits of information across a range of barriers. While the Jafnid and Naṣrid leaders were deposed in *c.* 582 and 602/4, respectively, our sources clearly show that Arab militia remained in imperial service. Numerous individuals are mentioned for the late sixth and early seventh centuries, including one clearly in a position of importance at Ruṣāfa, and acting as a mediator between warring Miaphysite factions. Another (or possibly the same) appears as a go-between for the Roman Emperor Maurice and Khusrau II during the Persian civil war.

Hoyland has argued that the ‘Qur’ān is the ultimate late antique document and provides us with a means to link Arabia, the origins of Islam, and Late Antiquity.’⁸⁶ This view, Hoyland suggests, bridges the divisions between those looking for an Arabian origin for Islam, and those seeking answers more firmly grounded in the late antique milieu. As a late antique Romanist, and neither an Islamic historian nor a specialist of the Qur’ān, my aim here is to highlight an alternative way to deal with this problem—to think about the relationship between what al-Azmeh has called ‘Paleo-Islam’ and the sixth-century Near East, and hopefully one which will avoid ‘collapsing Islam into prevailing late antique models.’⁸⁷ We should, I think, consider more closely what role late antique Arab leaders, as ‘secular holy men’, might have played, in helping to bring about a charismatic fusion of the religious and the political, perhaps by offering an early

⁸⁰ For example those recorded at Zabad and Ḥarrān, as well as on other martyria.

⁸¹ The caliph Hishām paid especial interest to Ruṣāfa and Sergius: see Fowden (EK) 1999: 174–82.

⁸² Hoyland 2012: 1064–5.

⁸³ Finster 2010: 62, discussing Peter Brown.

⁸⁴ Hoyland 2012: 1058.

⁸⁵ Cf. their characterisation in Fisher 2011a.

⁸⁶ Hoyland 2012: 1072.

⁸⁷ To borrow a phrase from Averil Cameron.

model of bridging different parts of the sectarian milieu.⁸⁸ Part of the groundwork for this line of thinking has already been laid by detailed studies of the Jafnids.⁸⁹ Certainly, it is time to explore more deeply the role, and function, of Arab leaders in the late antique Near East.

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