

# From Mavia to al-Mundhir: Arab Christians and Arab Tribes in the late antique Roman East<sup>1</sup>

## Introduction

In 2009, construction crews improving road access to Queen Alia International Airport uncovered a church complex at Tell al-‘Umayri, north-east of Madaba. A rescue excavation revealed a substantial basilica-style structure containing a seven-line Greek inscription, found in front of the apse, which demonstrates the connection of the church to the cult of St. Sergius, and calls for the protection of ‘the great majesty’ Alamoundaros.<sup>2</sup> The chance discovery of the church provides further evidence for the link between the family of Alamoundaros, the Jafnids, the leading dynasty of Ghassān in the sixth century, and the rural churches and monasteries of Syria and Arabia. As supporters of these mostly monophysite<sup>3</sup> communities, the Jafnids persuaded imperial authorities to provide new bishops following the persecutions of Justin I, and worked to mediate ecclesiastical disputes on behalf of successive emperors in Constantinople. By doing so, the Jafnids deftly exploited the political opportunities which were packaged together with becoming Christian, and which had been utilised by their predecessors in the fourth and fifth centuries. The narratives of the ways that Arabs were Christianised along the periphery of the Empire, and the careers of individual Arabs – Mavia, Aspebetos, and Amorkesos – reveal the role played by Christianity in establishing alliances, and repairing broken treaties. But by providing new opportunities, and new hierarchies, Christianisation threatened to reorder the world of new converts. To some extent, the Jafnids were subjected to these pressures, as they became subsumed into the highly-politicised world of late Roman religious affairs. The other face of Jafnid Christianity, however, was an expansion of the traditional functions of tribal leadership, particularly mediation, to the imperial arena, and a predominantly rural focus for their public expressions of Christian piety which avoided an overt association with the mostly urban Chalcedonian hierarchy. Becoming Christian, but staying tribal, the Jafnids provided, on the eve of the Muslim invasions, powerful models of Arab élites, openly connect to a vigorous

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<sup>2</sup> A. al-Shami, ‘Archaeological excavation project in the eastern ‘Umayri Hill – First Season 2009’, *ADAJ* 54 (2010), 35-42 (Arabic). For the publication of the inscription, see G. Bevan and G. Fisher, ‘A new mosaic inscription from Jordan’, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> The term is used here (as with Jafnid) for the sake of familiarity and convenience, although it must be noted that the monophysites never referred to themselves as such. See. F. Millar, ‘The evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church in the pre-Islamic period: from Greek to Syriac’, *JECS*, forthcoming, who prefers the term ‘the orthodox’, used by the monophysites to describe themselves. Millar offers a comprehensive examination of the terminological issues and urges caution over the use of the term ‘miaphysite.’

monotheism which linked the rural communities of Syria and Arabia, and the Arabs, and others, who lived within them.

### Becoming Christian

The victory of Constantine ensured the primacy of a powerful universal monotheism in Roman politics, and gave the Roman state a new form of religious identity.<sup>4</sup> From Nicaea to Chalcedon and afterwards, defining Christian orthodoxy now became the responsibility of the Emperor, as divisions between different communities – Nestorians, Chalcedonians, Donatists, monophysites, and others, threatened efforts at imperial stability and unity.<sup>5</sup> From the perspective of interstate politics, the Romans looked east to a Sasanian Empire which now possessed a more sharply-defined religious posture than its Parthian predecessor, even while it tolerated expressions of religious difference. The Sasanians placed Zoroastrianism at the centre of a multireligious community which also included Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and others, forming a counterpoint to the Roman Christian state.<sup>6</sup> Over time, though, the Roman Empire, driven by an increasing focus on state-sponsored monotheism, came to infuse a greater emphasis on universal religion in its political and military stance towards its neighbour. If the fifth century witnessed only minor confrontations between the eastern Empire and Sasanian Iran, even these, especially that of 421/2, contained prominent religious subcurrents.<sup>7</sup> Between the fifth and the seventh centuries, competition between the two states for religious influence as far afield as Armenia, Axum, the Caucasus, and Himyar, as well as the ongoing Roman concerns over the status of Christians in the Sasanian Empire, ensured that Roman political decisions, sometimes more so than Sasanian ones, were ever more influenced by religious concerns.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The emergence of a Christian commonwealth is still best expressed by G. Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Princeton, 1993); see too *idem*, 'Varieties of religious community', in G. Bowersock, P. Brown and O. Grabar (eds.), *Interpreting Late Antiquity. Essays on the Postclassical World* (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 82-106; H.A. Drake, 'The impact of Constantine on Christianity', in N. Lenski (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* (Cambridge, 2006), 111-136.

<sup>5</sup> See P. Allen, 'The definition and enforcement of orthodoxy', in Averil Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby (eds.), *The Cambridge Ancient History*, xiv: *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425-600* (Cambridge, 2000), 811-834; L. van Rompay, 'Society and community in the Christian east', in M. Maas (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2005), 239-266.

<sup>6</sup> On the complexity of Sasanian religious identity, see S. Shaked, 'Religion in the late Sasanian period: Eran, Aneran, and other religious designations', in V.S. Curtis and S. Stewart (eds.), *The Idea of Iran*, iii: *The Sasanian Era* (London, 2008), 103-118; T. Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia. The Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London, 2009), esp. 69-99. See too J. Walker, *The Legend of Mar Qardagh. Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq* (Berkeley, 2006).

<sup>7</sup> War of 421: R. Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy. Formation and Conduct from Diocletian to Anastasius* (Leeds, 1992), 52-29, and Z. Rubin, 'Diplomacy and war in the relations between Byzantium and the Sassanids in the fifth century AD', in P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (eds.), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a Colloquium held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, 2 vols, (Oxford, 1986), ii, 677-695; F. Decret, 'Les conséquences sur le Christianisme en Perse de l'affrontement des empires romain et sassanide', *ReAug* 14 (1979), 91-152; most recently on interstate relations, F. K. Haarer, *Anastasius I. Politics and Empire in the Late Roman World* (Cambridge, 2006), B. Dignas, and E. Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity. Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge, 2007), and M. Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth. Art and Ritual of Kingship Between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> G. Greatrex, 'Byzantium and the East in the sixth century', in Maas (ed.), *Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian*, 477-510; J. Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis. Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2011); P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith. The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Islam, 500-700*

Against this background, the choice of religious affiliation became infused with political overtones, and Christianisation became, for the Romans, a powerful tool through which entire communities could be politically subsumed into the Christian *oikoumenē* and denied to the Sasanians.<sup>9</sup> Bonds of trust and obligation between allied states were strengthened, when political power in those states was centralised around Christian leaders.<sup>10</sup> A shared religion brought common cultural and political ties; the speech which Agathias placed in the mouth of the pro-Roman and Christian Lazican elder, Phartazes, as he argued against the desirability of an alliance with the Sasanians, underscored this important late antique political reality.<sup>11</sup> Affecting an interest in the new religion could also liberate: Evagrius relates how Persarmenian envoys came to Justin II in secret, pleading to become vassals of a Christian Roman Empire, to free them from the restraints placed on them by the Sasanians.<sup>12</sup>

The role of Christianity in defining political affiliation, and binding peripheral ‘outsiders’ to the state, was quickly recognised by ancient authors, who added it to their well-developed lexicon of civilising influences. Deceptively one-sided narratives described ‘conversion’, emphasising both the barbarity of those who had not embraced the new religion, while showing the benefits of ‘turning’ away from worshipping idols and false gods. Language of rebirth and redemption emphasised passing from one state to the next.<sup>13</sup> Arabs played a role in such stories, where they were used to show how remaining ignorant of Christianity could be correlated with barbarism; the literary models deployed were not necessarily new to Christian authors.<sup>14</sup> Ps.-Nilus’ *Narrationes* lamented the ‘bestial and bloodthirsty life’ of the Arabs, who worshipped not Christ, but the ‘Morning Star’; worse, the writer claimed, they liked to sacrifice children at dawn! Only conversion could save them.<sup>15</sup> Ps.-Nilus also tells us of savage raids on holy men by Arab barbarians, St. Sabas implores the Emperor Anastasius to build a fort to protect his laura, and the pilgrimage story of Egeria refers to a fort at Clysmā, constructed specifically to defend against Saracen raids. These stories reflect a common concern that the holy might easily become the prey of the lightning-fast and savage swoops from the desert which such barbarians perpetrated.<sup>16</sup> Narratives of this sort highlighted the barbarity of the non-Christian Arabs, as well

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(Oxford, 2011). For disputes over Caucasian and Armenian border areas, see Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity*.

<sup>9</sup> M. Maas, ‘“Delivered from their ancient customs”: Christianity and the question of cultural change in early Byzantine ethnography’, in K. Mills and A. Grafton (eds.), *Conversion in Late Antiquity And The Early Middle Ages* (Rochester, NY., 2003), 152-188.

<sup>10</sup> C. Haas, ‘Mountain Constantines: the Christianization of Aksum and Iberia’, *JLA*, 1/1 (2008), 101-26.

<sup>11</sup> Agath. *Hist.* 3.12.7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Evag. *HE.* 5.7.

<sup>13</sup> The literature on conversion is extensive. The classic account remains D. Nock, *Conversion: The Old and the New in Religion from Alexander the Great to Augustine of Hippo* (Oxford, 1933). For discussion see R. Lim, ‘Christian triumph and controversy’, in Bowersock, Brown, and Grabar (eds.), *Interpreting Late Antiquity*, 196-218; R.W. Hefner (ed.), *Conversion to Christianity. Historical and Anthropological Perspectives on a Great Transformation* (Berkeley, 1993); R. MacMullen, *Christianizing the Roman Empire (A.D. 100-400)* (New Haven, 1984); P. Brown, *Power and Persuasion in Late Antiquity. Towards a Christian Empire* (Madison, 1992).

<sup>14</sup> E.g. Amm. 14.4.1-4, for the Arabs. For an engaging discussion, B.D. Shaw, ‘“Eaters of flesh, drinkers of milk”: the ancient Mediterranean ideology of the pastoral nomad’, *AncSoc* 13/14 (1982), 5-31.

<sup>15</sup> Ps.-Nilus, *Narrationes*, 3.1. For Ps.-Nilus, Ammonius, and others, see now D.F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai* (Liverpool, 2010).

<sup>16</sup> Ps.-Nilus, *Narrationes*, 4.1-5; Cyr. Scyth. *Vit. Saba*, 72; Egeria, *Travelogue*, 6, in the section preserved by Paul the Deacon (=Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 212). N. Lenski, ‘Captivity and slavery among the Saracens in late antiquity (CA. 250-630 CE)’, *AnTard* 19 (2011), 237-266, at 254-256, on fortifying against Saracens, and Caner, *History and Hagiography*, 273-286, discussing testimony of Procopius, Theophanes, and others.

as the corresponding holiness of monks, nuns, and others who were frequently taken captive and sold, sacrificed, or ransomed.<sup>17</sup> Even if they were sometimes overblown in the ecclesiastical literature, raids of this sort were a Near Eastern reality, and not always targeted at hapless ascetics. An inscription from 334 from near Azraq, in Jordan, records the construction of a reservoir, needed to save Roman soldiers the risk of being ambushed by Arabs while out foraging for water.<sup>18</sup> Authors writing in Syriac recall similar ‘atrocities’ perpetrated by non-Christian Arabs against Christians.<sup>19</sup> Stories of sacrifice to barbarian deities also appear in the writings of Procopius, in his description of the activities of the Sasanian Arab ally, al-Mundhir (504-554).<sup>20</sup> Jerome’s biography of St. Malchus took delight in describing the hapless saint’s capture by savage Arab raiders, who compelled him to drink camel milk, and eat barely cooked meat. To make matters worse, Malchus lost his clothes, and assumed the stereotyped lifestyle of the wandering shepherd. Nothing, Jerome’s audience would easily have understood, could be farther from Christian civilisation.<sup>21</sup>

As a didactic, moralising message, Christian authors provided numerous stories of hermits, monks, and priests, who encountered the whole spectrum of barbarians – including Arabs – and through their divinely-inspired actions, produced startling results: the childless conceived, nomads ceased their travels and built homes, evil spirits were banished, and the ignorant learned how to bake bread, farm, and engage in other pursuits vital to civilisation.<sup>22</sup> Healing miracle stories, grounded in the repudiation of earlier and false faiths, were particularly popular. Theodoret’s biography of Symeon the Stylite, for example, describes how an Arab leader begged Symeon to heal a man paralysed in his legs. Symeon ordered the irrevocably damaged man to give up his impiety, and then, when he was suddenly made well, to pick up the Arab who had brought him to the saint. Astonished, the newly-healed duly hoisted the Arab, ‘a large man’, proving the saint’s power to the astounded multitude who witnessed the miracle.<sup>23</sup> Other examples of this story type exist in the literature, including the famous tale of Zokomos, who was unable to father children, and so sought the healing powers of those who promised a divine solution. In exchange, he arranged for his subjects to be baptised and, tellingly, to provide soldiers for Rome.<sup>24</sup>

Such categorical stories, intended to entertain, moralise, and teach, naturally obscured the complexities of ‘conversion.’ While Christianising did of course involve change, adopting Christianity did not necessarily mean the irrevocable loss of earlier, non-Christian identities; nor did the introduction of a monotheistic religion immediately jeopardise the survival of paganism,

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<sup>17</sup> For others, see Ammonius, *Relatio*, 3-5; Jer. *Ep.* 126 (*PL* 22, col. 1086), Mich. *Syr. Chron.* 2.422. See Lenski, ‘Captivity and slavery.’

<sup>18</sup> *AÉ*, 1948, 136. See D. Kennedy, *The Roman Army in Jordan* (London, 2004), 72; S.T. Parker, *Romans and Saracens. A History of the Arabian Frontier* (Winona Lake, 1986), 144.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. Isaac of Antioch, 1.208; Ps-Zach, *HE* 8.5 on al-Mundhir sacrificing four hundred virgins from ‘the assembly of the apostle Thomas’ at Emesa (Homs), Syria. For what is still the best survey of Syriac writings on Arabs, see J.B. Segal, ‘Arabs in Syriac literature before the rise of Islam’, *JSAI* 4 (1984), 89-124.

<sup>20</sup> Proc. *BP* 2.28.12, on al-Mundhir’s sacrifice of a son of the Jafnid leader al-Hārith (active 528-569) to Aphrodite.

<sup>21</sup> Jer. *Vit. Sanct. Malch.* 4-5 (*PL* 23, col. 55). For the most recent discussion of this episode, see Lenski, ‘Captivity and slavery’, 237-239.

<sup>22</sup> E.g. Cyr. *Scyth. V. Euth.* 15; Soz. *HE* 6.38; Jer. *Vit. Hil.* 1-12, 25 (*PL* 23, col. 41.); Antonius, *V. Sym.* 22; Theod. *V. Sim.* 21.

<sup>23</sup> Theod. *V. Sim.* 16.

<sup>24</sup> Soz. *HE* 6.38.

in a world where non-Christian forms of monotheism existed.<sup>25</sup> Rather, across the spectrum of possibilities, there was room for a surprising range of individual and group responses. Looking, then, beneath the binary structure of conversion narratives, we find subtexts which show the benefits, and pitfalls, faced by new converts, including Arabs, of manifesting even a superficial interest in Christianity.

### **Terebon, Aspebetos, and Amorkesos: social stratification and political opportunism**

Against the background of a common ‘healing story’ template, Cyril of Scythopolis tells the story of Terebon, the son of an Arab potentate named Aspebetus, a vassal of the Sasanians. A persecution of Christians had convinced Aspebetus to switch sides, a decision assisted by Terebon’s illness, which the Sasanian *magi* had been unable to heal. These two facts – his rather convenient (or opportune) sympathy towards Christians, and his need for a ‘true’ healer – highlighted the suitability of Aspebetus to receive Christianity. Sure enough, when he arrived in the Roman Empire, the *magister militum* Anatolius engaged Aspebetus as phylarch (literally ‘tribal leader’), a title used for Arabs serving under Roman commanders in a range of functions, including frontier defence.<sup>26</sup> While Aspebetus went about his duties, Terebon had a dream, which led his father, and those with him, to St. Euthymius.<sup>27</sup> The saint cured Terebon’s illness; Cyril narrates that ‘the barbarians, astounded at so total a transformation and so extraordinary a miracle, found faith in Christ.’ In a fine example of the popular framework of a conversion narrative, emphasising rebirth and renewal, the Arabs with Terebon and Aspebetos immediately abandoned their old ways, and were ‘transferred through baptism from slavery to freedom.’<sup>28</sup> This idea reappears in another part of the story, where Cyril explains that the Arabs of Aspebetos had ‘formerly been wolves of Arabia, but had then joined the rational flock of Christ.’<sup>29</sup> The finality of the ‘conversion’ which took place was designed to underscore the precious attainment of membership in a Christian world, obtained only by decisively forsaking one’s previous existence. Elsewhere, those who flocked to see Symeon the Stylite gave up idols and chose God,<sup>30</sup> while the leader of the pro-Sasanian Naşrid Arabs at al-Ĥīrah melted down (sometime after 580) a golden Aphrodite, choosing baptism, once and for all giving up his ‘savage’ former way of life.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See P. Athanassiadi and M. Frede (eds.), *Pagan Monotheism in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 1999); S. Mitchell and P. van Nuffelen (eds.), *One God: Pagan Monotheism in the Roman Empire* (Cambridge, 2010). Cf. G.W. Bowersock, ‘Polytheism and monotheism in Arabia and the Three Palestines’, *DOP* 51 (1997), 1-10, at 6: ‘In Caesarea sat a Christian bishop, while pagan gods were cultivated alongside the Talmudic investigations of rabbis... At Petra, amid the rock tombs of ancient Nabataean worthies, and virtually adjacent to a Nabataean temple, stood a Christian church within earshot of the annual celebration of the birth of the indigenous god Dusares...’

<sup>26</sup> For the best comprehensive discussion of the position of phylarch, see A.G. Grouchevov, ‘Trois ‘niveaux’ de phylarques. Étude terminologique sur les relations de Rome et de Byzance avec les Arabes avant l’Islam’, *Syria*, 72 (1995), 105-131.

<sup>27</sup> Cyr. Scyth. V. *Euth.* 10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. Translations are from Cyril of Scythopolis, *Lives of the Monks of Palestine*, trans. R.M. Price (Kalamazoo, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Cyr. Scyth. V. *Euth.* 15.

<sup>30</sup> V. *Sym. Syr.* 77.

<sup>31</sup> Evag. *HE.* 6.22.

The healing of Terebon may have convinced some that the God worshipped by Euthymius was more powerful than their own, and thus offered a wise choice; in a world with a range of deities, adding another was hardly new, especially when that deity offered a quantifiable advantage. Whether or not this was genuine commitment is impossible to know, and the question is, in any case, a circular one. What is more interesting, and measurable, is the range of benefits and changes which accrued to the followers of Aspebetos, and particularly Aspebetos himself, as a result of the events narrated by Cyril. The newly-baptised Arabs built churches, ovens for baking bread, cisterns, and settled down, ceasing their wandering.<sup>32</sup> These events may simply reflect the typecast benefits of membership in the Christian *oikoumenē*, advertised by those who promoted the activities of holy men like St. Euthymius. On the other hand, the existence from this time of the Palestinian ‘Parembolē’ or ‘Encampment’ – created by Euthymius, and whose first bishop was Aspebetos – does suggest that social changes were taking place as a consequence of Christianisation. Recently discussed-evidence for the sedentarisation of Arabs in the Eastern Desert suggests that similar changes may have also been taking place across the Sinai.<sup>33</sup> Hermitic lauras elsewhere in Palestine attracted Saracens, as is related in the *Life* of St. Sabas (439-531), himself a friend of Euthymius.<sup>34</sup> Simeon the Stylite offered an immobile holy resource (Theodoret exclaims that for a time, he even chained himself to a rock!) and represents another locus around which would-be converts could congregate.<sup>35</sup> Religiously-associated fixed points, some of which were probably encouraging settlement, did exist, and could be people, as well as objects or places.<sup>36</sup>

Changes resulting from the introduction of Christianity to would-be converts were not confined to Palestine. They could also be more overt in their pressures to settle or in the way that they re-ordered the worlds of the newly-Christian. The Caucasian Tzani, when Christianised, found their territory punctuated by a different sort of fixed points – forts and other military installations – which sought to forcibly orient their attention around expressions of imperial control.<sup>37</sup> Sometimes a more subtle approach was used. The *Life* of the bishop of Tikrīt, Ahūdemmeḥ (d. c.575) narrates his attempts to reach out to the Arabs of the Iraqi steppe and desert, and to focus their religious activities around static centres of worship.<sup>38</sup> While Ahūdemmeḥ did not attempt to sedentarise them, this more inconspicuous form of control exercised over the movements of the desert Arabs was itself an important form of social influence.<sup>39</sup> In less ancient times, the introduction of Christianity in the colonial Americas involved pressures to adopt new social frameworks, including the introduction of settlements organised around churches and church missions.<sup>40</sup> The use of such fixed places was understood

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<sup>32</sup> Cyr. Scyth. V. *Euth.* 15.

<sup>33</sup> T. Power, ‘The material culture and economic rationale of Saracen settlement in the eastern desert of Egypt’, in A. Borrut, M. Debié, A. Papaconstantinou, D. Pieri, and J.-P. Sodini (eds.), *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides. Peuplement et dynamiques spatiales* (Turnhout, 2011), 331-344.

<sup>34</sup> Cyr. Scyth. V. *Saba.* 13.

<sup>35</sup> Theod. V. *Sim.* 10.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Soz. *HE* 6.38.10. The importance of fixed points, especially in rural areas, is examined in E.K. Fowden, ‘Rural converters among the Arabs’, forthcoming.

<sup>37</sup> Proc. *BP* 1.15.26; *Aed.* 3.6.6-8, 3.6.9-14. For discussion see Maas, ‘“Delivered from their ancient customs.”’

<sup>38</sup> *Hist. Ahud.* 4 (*PO* 3, 26-7); T. Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam* (Leuven, 2007), 106-107.

<sup>39</sup> E.K. Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, 1999), 120-129.

<sup>40</sup> C. Radding, *Wandering Peoples: Colonialism, Ethnic Spaces and Ecological Frontiers in Northwestern Mexico, 1700-1850* (Durham, N.C., 1997); T. Braatz, *Surviving Conquest. A History of the Yavapai Peoples* (Lincoln, NE., 2003).

by observers, both ancient and modern, to help with converting peripheral, nomadic, or ‘unsettled peoples’, by reordering space, and traditional lifeways.

While the followers of Aspebetos may have undergone social change, the bulk of the benefits – particularly the political profit – went not in the majority to them, but to Aspebetos, whose relationship with his people dramatically changed when he transitioned from tribal chief to a bishop, under the authority of a church hierarchy. This divergence of the élite stratum and the group into a new hierarchy reflects a common process, stratification, catalysed by the introduction of external pressures. Tribes are, and were, particularly susceptible to stratification: as forms of segmented political organisation, arranged around family groups and under the leadership of a chief, they are more decentralised and egalitarian than states, which tend to be hierarchically-organised, using established institutions to control resources.<sup>41</sup> When examining older tribal societies, we are largely dependent on modern anthropological studies for context, which can present difficulties. Yet while it would be erroneous to assume that ancient tribal societies necessarily functioned in precisely the same way as modern ones, applying the results of anthropological research to ancient problems has proved productive.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, the characteristics of tribal leadership, outlined here, are highly relevant to the careers of the Arab individuals discussed in this paper.

Chiefs of tribes depended not on coercive control for their position, but on the consent of the families whom they led. Their élite status came from their ability to mediate disputes within the tribe and maintain peace, and, especially when states became involved – as is the case for the fifth- and sixth-century examples examined here – through acting as representatives for tribal interests, delivering benefits to the tribe.<sup>43</sup> In other words:

the functions of tribal leaders, those of reputation, good men...are as spokesmen, negotiators, advisors, consultants, instigators of defence, and initiators of enterprises...leaders have a basic function for tribespeople and others of solving problems, which they do by advice, generosity, and mediation.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> For definitions, see most recently, J. Szuchman, ‘Integrating approaches to nomads, tribes, and the state in the ancient Near East’, in J. Szuchman (ed.), *Nomads, Tribes, and the State* (Chicago, 2009), 1-14, and references in n. 41.

<sup>42</sup> P.C. Salzman, ‘The meeting of the twain: tribe and state’, in J. Dijkstra and G. Fisher (eds.), *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity (200-800 CE)* (Leuven, forthcoming). See too W. Lancaster and F. Lancaster, ‘Concepts of tribe, tribal confederation, and tribal leadership’, paper delivered at the conference *Regards croisés de l’histoire et de l’archéologie sur la dynastie Jafnide*, organised by Christian Robin and Denis Genequand, held in Paris, November 2008, and by the same authors, ‘Concepts of leadership in bedouin society’, in J. Haldon and L. Conrad (eds.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, vi: Elites Old and New in the Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East* (Princeton, 2004), 29-61. See also, for ancient and modern perspectives, R. Tapper, ‘Introduction’, in R. Tapper (ed.), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan* (London, 1983), 1-82; W. Lancaster and F. Lancaster, ‘Tribal formations in the Arabian peninsula’, *Arab. Arch. Epig.*, 3 (1992), 145-72; I.M. Lapidus, ‘Tribes and state formation in Islamic history’, in P.S. Khoury and J. Kostiner (eds.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley, 1990), 25-47, at 25-6; and in the same vol., R. Tapper, ‘Anthropologists, historians, and tribespeople on tribe and state formation in the Middle East’, 48-73, at 50.

<sup>43</sup> The role of the chief as outlined here is clearly explained in P.C. Salzman, *Pastoralists. Equality, Hierarchy, and the State* (Boulder, 2004), esp. 77-101. See too by the same author, ‘Tribal chiefs as middlemen: the politics of encapsulation in the Middle East’, *Anthropological Quarterly*, 47/2 (1974), 203-10.

<sup>44</sup> Lancaster and Lancaster, ‘Concepts of tribe.’ The consensual position of chief is underscored by L. Beck, *The Qashqa’i of Iran* (New Haven, 1986), 218: ‘the nature of the gathering [of *ilkhani*, or chief, and tribal members] was relatively egalitarian, and the decision-making process was often informal. People presented their problems in this

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the smallish, close-knit yet brittle tribe as the autonomous center; the *sayyid*, ‘spokesman’ and leader, effective through the assumption of responsibilities, hence prestige and influence rather than circumscribed prerogatives.<sup>45</sup>

These functions of the chief, specifically that of providing benefits to the tribe, could be adapted into an imperially-controlled contexts because the Romans favoured centralising communication around the tribal leadership. This was accomplished by creating the office of phylarch, used in Arabia to access the resource of the tribe, and elsewhere, for example, in north Africa, Roman authorities designated the leaders of tribes as *principes*, dealing with them to maintain peace and stability in tribal communities. Occasionally, as in Spain, early imperial Syria, and north Africa, they used Roman officials as prefects to provide the same conduit between tribe and state, but by the late Empire, prefects in north Africa were drawn from tribal leaders, reinforcing the position of a tribal chief as the legitimate point of contact between tribe and state. This general scenario was not confined to the Roman Empire: in the kingdom of Mari, representatives of the tribe were appointed to negotiate transactions between tribe and state, and in more recent times, the Iranian government focused on the position of sardar (tribal leader) as the way to access and negotiate with the tribe.<sup>46</sup>

Two important and connected points arise from this. Firstly, because the chief did not possess any innate authority, but ‘worked for the tribe’, his prestige was maintained through success in his position, primarily through mediation and accessing state resources on behalf of the tribe. Imperially-designated offices such as phylarch were thus more of a help than a hindrance. They gave tribal leaders access to the resources of the empire, and, in some cases, the Emperor himself. This meant that high-profile political opportunities stemming from holding the phylarchate, such as arbitration at the invitation of the Emperor, which buttressed authority within the tribe through association with high-prestige people or places, were highly desirable. A chief such as al-Hārith the Jafnid could, as we shall see below, point to such personal connections as proof of his ability to fulfill his role.

Secondly, ‘hierarchical political institutions’ within the tribe tended to be generated by dealings with states, rather than by evolving by themselves.<sup>47</sup> The development of such hierarchies in the tribe, characterised by the elevation of the chiefs by imperial support (political, moral, or financial) and the access of the people under them to new sources of food, shelter, and

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open forum, presided over by the ilkhani and his advisors, and decisions could be reached in the course of group discussion without the ilkhani’s having made any kind of definitive statement.’

<sup>45</sup> G.E. von Grunebaum, ‘The nature of Arab unity before Islam’, *Arabica*, 10/1 (1963), 5-23, at 11.

<sup>46</sup> Y. Modéran, *Les Maures et l’Afrique Romaine (IV<sup>e</sup>-VII<sup>e</sup> siècle)* (Rome, 2003), for *principes* and prefects in north Africa. For prefects in Syria and Spain, M. Sartre, *The Middle East Under Roman Rule*, trans. C. Porter and E. Rawlings (Cambridge, Mass., 2005), 56; H. Cotton, ‘Some aspects of the Roman administration of Judaea/Syria-Palestine; in W. Eck and E. Müller-Luckner (eds.), *Lokale Autonomie und römische Ordnungsmacht in den kaiserzeitlichen Provinzen vom 1. bis 3. Jahrhundert* (Munich, 1999), 75-91. For a discussion of *principes*, prefects, and phylarchs, see G. Fisher, ‘Structures of power in late antique borderlands: Arabs, Romans, and Berbers’, forthcoming. For Mari, see V.H. Matthews, *Pastoral Nomadism in the Mari Kingdom (ca. 1830-1760 BC)* (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), 139-140, and for the sardar, see Salzman, ‘Tribal chiefs as middlemen’, 205.

<sup>47</sup> W. Irons, ‘Political stratification among pastoral nomads’, in Équipe Ecologie et Anthropologie des Société Pastorale (ed.), *Pastoral Production and Society* (Cambridge, 1979), 361-374, at 362, discussed by Salzman, *Pastoralists*, 101.



opportunities as soldiers, monks, and so on, could all be causes of stratification. Changes in the position of the chief could have significant consequences. In 1836, for example, political power in Jebel Shammar (in central-northern modern Saudi Arabia), hitherto separated between the mostly sedentary population of Hail, and the nomadic sections of Shammar, was centralised around a single chief. The man who accomplished this, Abdullah Ibn Rashid, did so in 1836 by deposing his cousin, Ibn Ali, the ruler of Hail. Ibn Rashid, a tribal chief of the Abde section of Shammar, thus found that not only had he retained control of a nomadic part of Shammar, but that he now also had to assume the functions of a town ruler. His position was transformed, and subsequent events – the raising of a standing military force, an organised method of extracting taxes, and so on, reveal that under his leadership, hierarchical mechanisms associated with the state, rather than the tribe, were emerging. Ibn Rashid was able to mitigate some of the problems all of this posed to his relationship with the tribe by acquiring a reputation for generosity. As a man who could find (financial) solutions to issues faced by tribesmen, Ibn Rashid found a way to keep his prestige intact, and as a military leader who could deliver victory to his soldiers, he provides a good example of the Shammar ideal of *al-amir saif wa mansaf* – a generous and victorious tribal leader.<sup>48</sup> This vignette reveals the importance of maintaining a continuity of benefits to the tribe as a way to manage changes at the top – the same solution, to the same problem, faced by the Jafnids in the sixth century.

Not all chiefs could maintain their position when faced with the challenges and intrusions presented by the state. The chief and his coterie had always represented an élite stratum in the tribe, but Christianisation into a world of religiously-influenced imperial politics could further, and more dramatically, stratify tribes into élite levels, connected to and with stakes in the hierarchy of the Empire, and non-élites, whose traditional relationship with tribal leaders was now threatened.<sup>49</sup> (It should be noted that such stratification was not necessarily an official policy, but, rather, a potential consequence of adopting the state religion). With Christianisation and baptism, then, the position of Aspebetos changed. He took the name Peter, and was ordained as bishop, with the consent of the patriarch of Jerusalem, Juvenal. Later, he took part in the council of Ephesus in 431, moving now in the same circles as those arbitrating the heresy of Nestorius. Peter's subscription is found in the acts of the Councils, and from the debates and arguments of the Council, Cyril states, Peter reported to none other but St. Euthymius himself.<sup>50</sup> What had happened to Aspebetos' position as chief? Cyril has cause to aggrandise the position of Aspebetos, in order to show the power that came with Christianisation, but even if parts of the story are exaggerated, the role of bishop accorded to Aspebetos engendered a signal change from his mundane earlier job – guarding the frontiers against Christian escapees, on the orders of the Sasanian *magi*. While the most dramatic examples of stratification of Arab converts are provided by the Jafnids, who attained audiences in Constantinople, took Roman titles, patronised building construction, and were celebrated on church mosaics and monastery inscriptions, Cyril's story

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<sup>48</sup> M. al-Rasheed, 'The process of chiefdom-formation as a function of nomadic/sedentary interaction. The case of the Shammar nomads of North Arabia', *Cambridge Anthropology*, 12/3 (1987), 32-40, at 35-36.

<sup>49</sup> Cf. R. van Dam, *Becoming Christian. The Conversion of Roman Cappadocia* (Philadelphia, 2003), 50. For modern parallels, see J. Adelman & S. Aron, 'From borderlands to borders: empires, nation-states, and the peoples in between in North American history', *AHR*, 104/3 (1999), 814-41, at 830-831; D.J. Weber, *The Spanish Frontier in North America* (New Haven, 1992), 105-106; B. Barber, *Social Stratification. A Comparative Analysis of Structure and Process* (New York, 1957).

<sup>50</sup> Subscription: *ACO*, 1, vol. 1/7, 85 ('of Peter of the Parembolē') and 115 ('Peter bishop of the Parembolē'); Cyr. Scyth. V. *Euth.* 20.

provides an early glimpse of some of the social and political changes which might have been occurring as Arab tribes accepted Christianity.

Aspebetos found advancement and a new role in the religious hierarchy of the Empire. Other Arab newcomers also found opportunities through becoming Christian, while the Roman state found that accepting new Christian allies could relieve pressure on the Empire during difficult times. A story related by Malchus illustrates some of the variables involved and underscores once again how the position of tribal leaders could be altered by engagement with the state. In 474, an Arab adventurer named Amorkesos sent a priest, Peter (not to be confused with Aspebetos) to treat on his behalf with the emperor Leo. Amorkesos was, like Aspebetos, an *émigré* from the Sasanian Empire, and had obtained for himself the island of Iotabe in the Gulf of 'Aqaba. Here, he expelled the Roman tax officials and installed himself in their stead, becoming wealthy from imposing tariffs on the trade which flowed through the region.<sup>51</sup> Probably realising that he was about to attract the wrong sort of Roman attention, he used Peter to obtain an alliance with Leo to legitimise his position. Malchus says that Leo received him, invited him to dinner, and seated him amongst the patricians present. He also gave Amorkesos public funds, gifts, and, above all, allowed him to retain Iotabe. Malchus is hostile to Leo, and castigates him for accepting Amorkesos, via Peter's entreaties, as one who had been 'persuaded' to become a Christian. Leo may have had ulterior motives for allowing Amorkesos to keep his position: military levies were heavily depleted after the loss of the Roman expeditionary force at Cape Bon in 468, and Leo faced tensions with both the Ostrogoths and the Sasanians.<sup>52</sup> Amorkesos, for his part, succeeded in staving off the expected armed Roman response, which did not materialise until the reign of Anastasius, in 498.<sup>53</sup> The agreement between Leo and the 'barbaric' Amorkesos would probably have been unthinkable without the veneer of respectability provided by the priest, Peter, and Amorkesos' claim to have become a Christian. If Amorkesos had gained an advantage, though, it was something of a false economy. He had won a reprieve, and presumably maintained his position by translating the tax wealth into a reputation for generosity, imitating the future Abdullah Ibn Rashid. But he had also politically subordinated himself to a Christian emperor, within a hierarchy which was not of his choosing. In effect, he was not dissimilar to Aspebetos in adopting a Roman identity, expressed via an open connection to the Christian religion, which placed him firmly within Roman, not tribal power structures.

The Christianisation of Arabs thus contained both benefits and liabilities for would-be converts. Christianisation offered a form of acceptance into the *oikoumenē*, and offered new roles for those who took advantage of it: bishops, military and community leaders, soldiers, and parishioners. The careers of Aspebetos and Amorkesos show how significant and tangible benefits could accrue to the chiefs, as tribal élites, but their positions also changed as a result. During the time period of these stories, the Romans pursued very much an 'ad hoc' form of alliance with Arabs along the southeastern frontiers of the Empire, but by the sixth, the policy was altered to support a single family dynasty, the Jafnids. Christianity continued to play an important role in the relationship between Rome and the Arabs in the sixth century, as it had in the fourth and fifth. Between the support of the Emperor and the opportunities fostered through their religious activities, the Jafnids emerged as high-profile Christian Arab leaders. But even with such close links to the Empire, the Jafnids show that whatever else being Christian might

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<sup>51</sup> Malchus, fr. 1. For Iotabe, see P. Mayerson, 'The Island of Iotabe in the Byzantine Sources', *BASOR*, 287 (1992), 1-4.

<sup>52</sup> Priscus, fr. 37 (Goths), Blockley, *East Roman Foreign Policy*, 74-75 (Sasanians).

<sup>53</sup> Theoph. *Chron.* 141.

offer to the Arabs, it was entirely compatible with remaining tribal, and the conduct of the family remained grounded in the essential chiefly duties of mediation and communication between tribe and state.

## The Jafnids, St. Sergius, and the monophysites

### *Changing relationships*

Between the third and sixth centuries, the relationship between the Romans and the Arabs who lived along the southern and eastern frontiers of the Empire grew steadily more complex in ways which parallel frontier relationships in the west: the recruitment of barbarians into the Roman military, agreements with individual barbarian leaders for military assistance, and the appearance of the formal language of treaties, as barbarian *foederati* became part of Rome's military hierarchy.<sup>54</sup> Early evidence for Roman efforts to build friendly relations with Arabs along the southern frontier comes from the Greek/Nabataean Aramaic bilingual inscription, from a temple at Ruwwāfa, now in Saudi Arabia, dating to the reign of Marcus Aurelius.<sup>55</sup> An inscription from Ḥegrā/Madā'in Šāliḥ, southeast of Ruwwāfa, confirms that Roman soldiers were present in the area during the same period.<sup>56</sup> A century and a half later, the famous Arabic language inscription from Nemāra, in Syria, demonstrates the importance of imperial support in underwriting Arab political authority.<sup>57</sup> The Romans were actively extending their power across the southern frontiers, as they had along the Rhine and the Danube in the west, and by the late fourth or early fifth century, units designated *Saraceni indigenae* were part of the late Roman army.<sup>58</sup> Arabs

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<sup>54</sup> For the west, see P. Heather, 'The late Roman art of client management: imperial defence in the fourth century west', in W. Pohl, I. Wood, and H. Reimitz (eds.), *The Transformation of Frontiers: from Late Antiquity to the Carolingians* (Leiden, 2001), 15-68; *idem*, 'Foedera and foederati of the fourth century', in W. Pohl (ed.), *Kingdoms of the Empire. The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 1997), 57-74; *idem*, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development, and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford, 2010); G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376-568* (Cambridge, 2007), 417-454; E. James, *Europe's Barbarians, AD 200-600* (Harlow, 2009). For comparison between east and west, G. Fisher, *Between Empires. Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011), 72-127.

<sup>55</sup> J. Milik, 'Inscriptions grecques et nabatéennes de Rawwafah', *University of London. Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology*, 10 (1971), 54-58; M.C.A. Macdonald, 'Quelques réflexions sur les Saracènes, l'inscription de Rawwāfa et l'armée romaine', in H. Lozachmeur (ed.), *Présence arabe dans le Croissant Fertile avant l'Hégire : actes de la table ronde internationale organisée par l'unité de recherche associée 1062 du CNRS, Études sémitiques, au Collège de France, le 13 novembre 1993* (Paris, 1995), 93-201.

<sup>56</sup> D. al-Talhi and M. al-Daire, 'Roman presence in the desert: a new inscription from Hegra', *Chiron*, 35 (2005), 205-217.

<sup>57</sup> P. Bordreuil, A. Desreumaux, C. Robin, and J. Teixidor, '205. Linteau inscrit: AO 4083', in C. Robin and Y. Calvet (eds.), *Arabie heureuse, Arabie déserte. Les antiquités arabiques du Musée du Louvre* (Paris, 1997), 265-269; M.C.A. Macdonald, 'Old Arabic (Epigraphic)', in K. Versteegh and M. Eid (eds.), *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, 3 (Leiden, 2006-2008), 464-477, at 469. For a recent discussion of the inscription, Fisher, *Between Empires*, 138-144.

<sup>58</sup> E.g. *ND Or.* 28, 32; see Amm. 22.15.1-2: 'et Scenitas [tent-dwelling]...Arabas, quos Sarracenos nunc appellamus.' The term 'Saracen' (Syr. *ṭayyāyē*) appears from the third/fourth century to describe the Arabs of the desert, although the reasons for the change are not clear. For a summary of possibilities, see D. Graf, 'The Saracens and the defense of the Arabian frontier', *BASOR*, 229 (1978), 1-26; see too R.G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs. From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London, 2001), 235; Segal, 'Arabs in Syriac literature', 101-105.

offered military services of Julian during his ill-fated expedition,<sup>59</sup> while the use of the term *hupospondoi*, sg. *hupospondos* ‘those/one under treaty’, and the equivalent of the western *foederati*,<sup>60</sup> appears in a variety of contexts describing alliances with Arabs, suggesting that the Romans were attempting to apply a formal administrative or legal framework to their increasing use of Arab militia.<sup>61</sup>

Even before the arrival of Aspebetos and Amorkesos, Arab military allies were expected to be Christian. The story of Mavia (fl. 375) is an illustration of how that expectation might also cut both ways.<sup>62</sup> Mavia was a queen, married to an unnamed Arab leader, who had been allied with Valens. When the alliance was cancelled after the death of her husband, Mavia took umbrage and rebelled, coming close to worsting in battle a senior Roman commander who was saved at the last gasp by the subordinate who had initially summoned his assistance. Peace was only agreed when the Romans acceded to her demand that a non-Arian bishop, Moses, would be provided for her and her people (Moses may even have been one of her tribe, but this is not clear). On her return to alliance with Rome, Mavia’s forces defended Constantinople in the wake of Valens’ death at Adrianople,<sup>63</sup> and Mavia sealed her new status by marrying her daughter to another senior military commander, Victor.<sup>64</sup> Valens’ attempt to force Arianism on Mavia seems to have been part of the reason for the rebellion, and while the religious angles of the story might have been exaggerated by the numerous church writers who report it, the details underscore the importance of a common, shared religious outlook in creating ties of trust. Indeed, the Arian/Orthodox tensions in the story of Mavia (if they are not inventions of Rufinus)<sup>65</sup> suggest that while the Romans saw value in demanding religious conformity from their allies, at least the same might be said about the Arabs themselves – this was not a passive receipt of Christianity, but an active interest, and the tale suggests that others beyond the tribal élite found the religion relevant. The Christian outlook of Mavia helped not just in dealings with imperial authorities, but was also of relevance to her people. As a tribal leader, her position required her to maintain her prestige and deliver benefits to the tribe. Military victory against a formidable enemy, and extracting concessions from the Emperor, did just that, and it is clear from the subsequent defence of Constantinople, that she maintained her positions both of Roman ally and tribal chief. We might thus imagine that the provision of a bishop for her people, in which she effectively delivered state resources to the tribe, did for Mavia’s reputation what it would do for that of al-Hārith the Jafnid, nearly seven generations later.

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<sup>59</sup> Amm. 23.3.8.

<sup>60</sup> Malchus, fr. 15, makes this equivalence.

<sup>61</sup> E.g. Malchus fr. 1 (Amorkesos); Soc. Schol. *HE* 4.36, on Mavia (discussion in this section); Soz. *HE* 6.38, 7.1; Cyr. Scyth. *V. Euth.* 10 on Aspebetos (above); Soc. Schol. *HE* 7.10, concerning Alaric.

<sup>62</sup> For a detailed examination of this episode, see A. Lewin, ‘Amr ibn ‘Adī, Mavia, the phylarchs and the late Roman army: peace and war in the Near East’, in A. Lewin and P. Pellegrini (eds.), *The Late Roman Army in the Near East from Diocletian to the Arab Conquest. Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Potenza, Acerenza, and Matera, Italy (May 2005)* (Oxford, 2007), 243-262. See too O. Schmitt, ‘Mavia, die Königin der Sarazenen’, in T. Herzog and W. Holzwarth (eds.), *Nomaden und Sesshafte – Fragen, Methoden, Ergebnisse* (Halle-Wittenberg, 2003), 163-179. See also G. Bowersock, ‘Mavia, Queen of the Saracens’, in W. Eck, H. Galsterer, and H. Wolff (eds.), *Studien zur antiken Sozialgeschichte. Festschrift Friedrich Vittinghoff* (Vienna, 1980), 477-495, and P. Mayerson, ‘Mavia, Queen of the Saracens – a cautionary note’, *IEJ*, 30 (1980), 123-131, who warns against over-interpreting the story as it is reported by ecclesiastical historians.

<sup>63</sup> Soz. *HE*. 7.1.

<sup>64</sup> Soz. 6.38; Soc. Schol. *HE*. 4.36; Theod. *HE*. 4.20.

<sup>65</sup> Mayerson, ‘Mavia, Queen of the Saracens’, 131.

Delivering benefits thus helped tribal leaders to maintain their position and their traditional roles as chiefs, a process helped by the Roman policy of dealing directly with tribal representatives, rather than the tribe as a corporate entity. This ensured that Mavia, not the Romans, could portray herself as the benefactor of her people. Mavia was probably also helped by not working too closely with the state itself – although she married her daughter to the *magister militum* Victor, there is no evidence that she played the kind of high-level political roles enjoyed by the Jafnids.

### *The Jafnids*

The Jafnid family was the beneficiary of the Empire's decision, after the fifth century, to give up a fragmented system of alliances of *hupospondoi* and concentrate, instead, on one single alliance, as a counterpoint to the Sasanian Empire's reliance on the Naṣrid dynasty.<sup>66</sup> (While debate continues over the usefulness of terms such as 'Jafnid', for the sake of convenience, and because of the familiarity of such terms, we shall treat here the family leadership of Ghassān, comprised of the descendants of Jabala, as 'Jafnids'). Between 500 and 528, the Romans turned their attention to the northern part of the Arabian peninsula. Disturbances in c.500 involved a man named Jabala, who seems to have concluded an agreement with the Emperor Anastasius after being defeated by Romanus, the commander in the region.<sup>67</sup> At the same time, the Romans intensified diplomatic efforts to win over the Ḥujrid family of Kinda, vassals of the kingdom of Ḥimyar, which resulted in an alliance in 502/3.<sup>68</sup> But by 527/8, the Ḥujrid alliance collapsed with the death of its leader in battle, and the Emperor Justinian shortly afterwards turned to the son of Jabala, al-Ḥārith, known as 'Arethas' in Roman sources, and placed him in a position of authority over 'as many clans as possible.'<sup>69</sup> Al-Ḥārith, and his son, al-Mundhir, retained the confidence of the Empire until 582, providing forces for frontier defences and playing a role in several important engagements, including at Callinicum in 531, attacks on the Naṣrid base at al-Ḥīrah in Iraq, and an attempted invasion of the Sasanian Empire across the Euphrates in 580.<sup>70</sup> They also played a considerable role in ecclesiastical politics, becoming increasingly active over the course of the sixth century as advocates of the monophysites. This choice to support the monophysites, opposed for much of the sixth century to the orthodox Chalcedonian position desired by the Emperor, can perhaps be explained by the correspondence between the timing of the entry into the Empire of the Jafnids and their followers, Ghassān, and the presence on the throne of the pro-monophysite Emperor Anastasius. For new allies wanting to be aligned with the dominant form of religious belief in the early sixth century, monophysitism was the obvious

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<sup>66</sup> Outlined by Proc. *BP*. 1.17.40-47.

<sup>67</sup> Theoph. *Chron.* 141. See discussion in I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, 2 vols (Washington, 1995, 2002, 2010), 2/2, 10-11.

<sup>68</sup> The outline of events is explained by the career diplomat Nonnosus, preserved by the later compiler Photius, *Bib.* 3. The Roman alliance with the Ḥujrids is inferred from the latter as well as Theoph. *Chron.* 144 and Proc. *BP* 1. 20. 9-10. For discussion of this and the Ḥujrid alliance with Ḥimyar, see C. Robin, 'Les Arabes de Ḥimyar, des <<Romains>> et des Perses (III<sup>e</sup>-VI<sup>e</sup> siècles de l'ère chrétienne)', *SemClas* 1 (2008), 167-208; idem, 'Le royaume Ḥujride, dit <<royaume de Kinda>>, entre Ḥimyar et Byzance', *CRAI* (1996), 665-714; I. Gajda, 'Ḥuḡr b. 'Amr roi de Kinda et l'établissement de la domination Ḥimyarite en Arabie central', *PSAS* 26 (1996), 65-73; G. Fisher, 'Kingdoms or dynasties? Arabs, history, and identity before Islam', *JLA* 4/2 (2011), 245-267.

<sup>69</sup> Proc. *BP* 1.17.47.

<sup>70</sup> Jafnid/Ghassān on Roman operations: Proc. *BP*. 2.16.1-6 (AD 541); local defence: Malalas, 446-447; Callinicum: Proc. *BP* 1.18.35, with discussion in G. Greatrex, *Rome and Persia at War, 502-532* (Leeds, 1998), 200-207; attack on al-Ḥīrah: Joh. Eph. *HE* 3.6.3-4; AD 580: Joh. Eph. *HE* 3.6.16-17.

choice, and with the death of Anastasius almost a generation later in 518, it is distinctly possible that monophysite Christianity had now become the preference of the Arabs who had entered the Empire along with Jabala.

It is not clear if Jabala played any political role in the Empire. By contrast, his son, al-Ḥārith, quickly emerged as a supporter of the monophysites. Whether al-Ḥārith did so for personal political gain or out of religious conviction is hard to measure, but great political prestige came in 542 when he petitioned Justinian's wife, Theodora, for two new bishops for the monophysites in Syria, who had suffered heavily under the persecutions of Justin I (r. 518-527). Jacob Baradeus and Theodore were soon made available, and quickly began, themselves, to consecrate a new batch of monophysite bishops to repair the damage.<sup>71</sup> In these activities, al-Ḥārith applied the actions of a tribal chief to a wider setting, for it was apparent that even if the bishops were initially intended only for Ghassān, the wider monophysite population would be the beneficiaries.<sup>72</sup> The Jafnid leader thus assumed the position of chief not only of his tribe, but of the monophysites in the communities of Syria and Arabia. He had become a Roman patron, but framed in tribal terms, and his son, al-Mundhir, would continue in the same fashion.

Evidence of the respect won by al-Ḥārith and his family is found scattered across modern-day Syria and Jordan. Greek inscriptions from Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī near Palmyra, in Syria, log a visit by al-Ḥārith just before his death in 569, recording an archimandrite who used al-Ḥārith's tenure as phylarch to date his own time in office.<sup>73</sup> The inscriptions at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr refer to al-Ḥārith as 'Flavius Arethas, *patrikios*', using the Roman honorific title as well as the common reference to the family of Constantine. Elsewhere, it is al-Ḥārith who should likely be identified with the the mosaics from the church of St. Sergius at Nitl, near Madaba – close to the newly-discovered church of St. Sergius at Tell al-'Umayri – which acclaim 'Erethas, the son of al-Arethas.'<sup>74</sup> The Sergius cult was especially popular with the Arabs in antiquity, and the church at Nitl is an early example of the association between it and the Jafnids, a link assiduously exploited by al-Ḥārith's son, al-Mundhir.<sup>75</sup> Meanwhile, al-Ḥārith's brother, Abū-Karib, appears in a monophysite Syriac codex from a monastery near Palmyra, where he carries the title *mlk*, 'king', a title also given to al-Ḥārith on the Arabic inscription from Jebel Seis in southern Syria.<sup>76</sup> A lintel from Sammā' in the Ḥaurān, based on Psalm 120, appeals for the protection of the 'illustrious [*endoxotatos*] phylarch Abū-Karib',<sup>77</sup> and he also appears giving a gift of land to

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<sup>71</sup> Joh. Eph. *Vitae* (PO 19, 153-4); V. Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford, 2008), 222-223.

<sup>72</sup> R. Hoyland, 'Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite monks and Arab tribes: a problem of centre and periphery', *SemClas* 2 (2009), 117-139, at 128.

<sup>73</sup> *IGLS* 2553 b,d. For discussion see D. Genequand, 'Some thoughts on Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, its dam, its monastery and the Ghassanids', *Levant*, 38 (2006), 63-84.

<sup>74</sup> M. Piccirillo, 'The church of Saint Sergius at Nitl. A centre of the Christian Arabs in the steppe at the gates of Madaba', *Liber Annuus*, 51 (2001), 267-284.

<sup>75</sup> Theoph. Sim. 5.1.7, and Sev. Ant. *Hom. cath.* (PO 4, 93), both make the link between the Arabs and the cult. See Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 98.

<sup>76</sup> Abū-Karib as *mlk*: F. Millar, 'A Syriac Codex from near Palmyra and the "Ghassanid" Abokarib', *Hugoye*, forthcoming. Al-Ḥārith at Jebel Seis: M. A. el-Faraj al-'Ush, 'Unpublished Arabic texts in Jabal Usais', *Al-Abhath*, 17/3 (1964), 227-316, at 320 (Arabic); M.C.A. Macdonald, 'A note on new readings in line 1 of the Old Arabic graffito at Jabal Says', *SemClas*, 2 (2009), 223-5; for the inscription, C. Robin and M. Gorea, 'Un réexamen de l'inscription arabe préislamique du Ḡabal Usays (528-529 É. Chr.)', *Arabica*, 49 (2002), 503-10.

F. Millar, 'A Syriac Codex from near Palmyra and the "Ghassanid" Abokarib', *Hugoye*, forthcoming.

<sup>77</sup> M. Sartre, 'Deux phylarques arabes dans l'Arabie byzantine', *Muséon*, 106 (1993), 145-54, at 151.

Justinian<sup>78</sup> and, significantly, mediating a dispute recorded in *P. Petra inv.* 83.<sup>79</sup> A possible link to the Jafnids comes from Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān in Syria, where a bronze plaque describes 'Naaman', illustrious (*endoxotatos*) phylarch, and military leader (*stratēlatos*). This may be the same individual as the al-Nu'mān, son of al-Mundhir, arrested shortly after his father in (?)583.<sup>80</sup> The overall impression is one of regional prominence, and the preponderance of Christian contexts underscores the public links between the Jafnids and Christianity.

The site of Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī has been tentatively identified with the monastery of 'Haliarum', mentioned in a letter to Jacob Baradaeus confirming the faith of Arabian monophysite clergy, in the face of the Tritheist heresy. The 137 subscriptions to the letter, which contain a wealth of information on places and individuals, have recently been translated into English for the first time by Fergus Millar.<sup>81</sup> The letter itself is part of a larger collection of correspondence (*BL Add.* 14602), edited with a Latin translation by J.-B. Chabot.<sup>82</sup> Traces of the Jafnids appear both in the confirmation of faith (°41) and in correspondence in the wider collection. In °39 al-Ḥārith is described as the 'Christ-loving and glorious *patrikios*', working to find common ground between the letter's authors and two Tritheist bishops, Conon of Tarsus and Eugenius of Seleucia, apparently in or around 568/9.<sup>83</sup> The mediatory function is significant, especially in its anticipation of the much wider intercessory role played by al-Mundhir in religious disputes. Either al-Ḥārith or al-Mundhir should also be seen as the unnamed phylarch urging mediation alongside of Peter of Callinicum. This event took place, significantly, at a church of St. Sergius at Gabitha, a location which appears under signature 24 in letter °41 ('the monastery of Beth mar Sergius of Gabitha').<sup>84</sup> Gabitha is the Syriac rendering of Jabiya, a site frequently connected with the Jafnids by Muslim authors, but as yet unidentified.<sup>85</sup> Al-Ḥārith is also apparently the author of letter °23 in the collection, addressed to Jacob Baradaeus, although the main issue being discussed is not clear.<sup>86</sup> Al-Ḥārith's son, al-Mundhir, also appears in the signature 121 in letter °41, which identifies Mar Eustathios as presbyter of 'the church of the

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<sup>78</sup> *Proc. BP.* 1.19.8-14.

<sup>79</sup> M. Kaimio, 'P. Petra inv. 83: a settlement of dispute', in I. Andorlini, G. Bastianini, M. Manfredi, and G. Menci (eds.), *Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papirologia. Firenze, 23 - 29 agosto 1998*, 2 vols (Florence, 2001), ii, 719-724.

<sup>80</sup> *IGLS* 1550. The identification is suggested by F. Millar, 'Rome's Arab allies in late antiquity. Conceptions and representations from within the frontiers of the empire', in H. Börm and J. Wiesehöfer (eds.), *Commutatio et Contentio. Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East in Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Düsseldorf, 2010), 199-226, at 218.

<sup>81</sup> F. Millar, 'Christian monasticism in Roman Arabia at the birth of Mahomet', *SemClas* 2 (2009), 97-115. A. van Roey and P. Allen (eds.), *Monophysite Texts of the Sixth Century* (Leuven, 1994), usefully number the letters in the collection, a sequence followed by Millar and also here. For Haliarum: Letter °41 (=van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 270), subscription °119 = Millar, 'Christian monasticism', 112. See Genequand, 'Some thoughts on Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī', 70, on Haliarum.

<sup>82</sup> The letter (°41) was originally published by Th.-J. Lamy, 'Profession de foi adressé par les Abbés d'Arabie à Jacques Baradée', *Actes du XIe Congrès des Orientalistes, section sémitique* (Paris, 1898), 117-137, and the collection as a whole by J.-B. Chabot, *Documenta ad origines Monophysitarum illustrandas* (Leuven, 1952). For a general discussion of the documents see Millar, cited n. 81, and van Roey and Allen (eds.), *Monophysite Texts*.

<sup>83</sup> Letter °39 (=van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 270). Date of the letter: Millar, 'Christian monasticism', 106, citing E. Honigman, *Évêques et évêchés monophysites d'Asie antérieure au VI<sup>e</sup> siècle* (Leuven, 1951), 185.

<sup>84</sup> Letter °41 (=van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 270), subscription °24 = Millar, 'Christian monasticism', 109. For Peter, see Mich. Syr. *Chron.* 2.384, and Millar, 'A Syriac codex.'

<sup>85</sup> Millar, 'A Syriac codex.' On Jabiya, see: M. Sartre, *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et byzantine* (Brussels, 1982), 177-189.

<sup>86</sup> Letter °23 (=van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 269). For a discussion, see *idem*, 280.

glorious and Christ-loving *patrikios*, Mundhir.<sup>87</sup> This phrase presumably refers to a physical structure, not an organisation or hierarchy (below, n. 93). Throughout these examples, we find actions known from other contexts: involvement in mediation, a connection to St. Sergius, and an overall elevated level of prestige indicated by a personal connection with Jacob Baradaeus.

The provision of Jacob and Theodore to the monophysites was a supreme political coup for the Jafnids, and set the tone for the activities of the family until their demise in 582. Success in religious affairs provided a consequential ascendancy of their political profile. That they supported monophysites rather than Chalcedonians seems to have mattered less than it might seem, especially under the tenure of Justinian and Theodora. Yet even when subsequent emperors returned to persecution, the religious landscape remained sufficiently ambiguous for much of the sixth century, allowing even high-profile monophysites to also maintain allegiance to the Emperor. The latter years of Justinian's reign bore witness to the ascendancy of the Jafnid family: in 548, al-Ḥārith and his brother sent envoys to Abraha, king of Ḥimyar.<sup>88</sup> In 562, a peace treaty agreed between Rome and the Sasanians changed the status of the Jafnids and their allies from *hupospondoi* to *symmachoi*, recognising the greater contribution in defending frontier areas and also in maintaining stability in Syria and Arabia. Although it is clear from Procopius' discussion of *foederati* (*hupospondoi*) that the term, by his day, engendered greater equality with imperial authorities, the change to *symmachoi* was significant, in that this term was also used in contemporary authors (including Procopius) to make a specific appeal to an independence of action which set *symmachoi* apart from *hupospondoi*.<sup>89</sup> Al-Ḥārith died in 569. His son al-Mundhir succeeded him, and continued the trends begun by his father, particularly in support for the monophysites. The tenure of al-Mundhir also witnessed a greater emphasis on the cult of St. Sergius, an increase in public connections to rural churches, and the establishment of buildings. Through these actions al-Mundhir staked a claim to membership in the Roman Christian élite. Even as he slowly became more identified with this role, though, he avoided relinquishing his primary role of tribal leader.

Muslim sources attributed a large number of buildings to the Jafnids. Modern consensus is that the lists of these structures, particularly that of Hamza al-Ifṣahānī (b. 280/893, d. after 349/961), are greatly exaggerated, but a very small number of buildings connected with the Jafnids have been identified.<sup>90</sup> They include Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī and Nitl, linked to al-Ḥārith, but the rest are associated with the reign of al-Mundhir: a martyrrium near Damascus, no longer in existence,<sup>91</sup> and a house at al-Ḥayyat, in the heart of the Ḥaurān, with a Greek building inscription dating the structure 'to the time of the *patrikios* Alamoundaros.'<sup>92</sup> The newly-discovered church of St. Sergius at Tell al-'Umayri yielded an inscription with the invocation 'our Lord Jesus Christ, God of Saint Sergius, protect his great majesty, the *comes* al-Mundhir.'

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<sup>87</sup> Letter °41 (=van Roey and Allen, *Monophysite Texts*, 270), subscription °121 = Millar, 'Christian monasticism', 112.

<sup>88</sup> *CIS* 4. 541; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 55; S. Smith, 'Events in Arabia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century A.D.', *BSOAS*, 16/3 (1954), 425-468, at 440.

<sup>89</sup> *Men. fr.* 6.1; *Proc. BP.* 3.11.1-3. See for discussion P. Heather, 'Foedera and foederati of the fourth century', in W. Pohl (ed.), *Kingdoms of the Empire. The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 1997), 57-74, and Fisher, *Between Empires*, 116-124.

<sup>90</sup> For the most recent assessment, see Genequand 'Some thoughts', 78. See as well Sartre, *Trois études*, and I. Shahid, 'Ghassānid religious architecture', in P. Canivet and J.-P. Rey-Coquais (eds.), *Mémorial Monseigneur Joseph Nasrallah* (Damascus, 2006), 115-138.

<sup>91</sup> *Wadd.* 2562c, originally thought to be a tower. See Hoyland, 'Late Roman provincia Arabia', 120, for the amended reading.

<sup>92</sup> *Wadd.* 2110.



The reference to the ‘church of al-Mundhir’ in the collection of letters, discussed above, likely reflects another, unknown location.<sup>93</sup> The most prominent building connected with al-Mundhir is the extramural structure at the site of Reṣāfa, the location of the major shrine of St. Sergius in the Roman Empire. The building, which is still standing, contains an inscription reading ‘the fortune of al-Mundhir triumphs.’<sup>94</sup>

There has been a long debate over the exact purpose of the building, and whether or not it can (on the basis of the inscription) be accepted as having been built by or on the orders of the Jafnid leadership. In her exhaustive study of the Sergius cult, Elizabeth Key Fowden suggested that the building was both religious and secular in function. Close to the ornate northern gateway of the city, it provided a highly visible locus where the Jafnid leadership might interact with pilgrims visiting the shrine, and for al-Mundhir to exhibit the position of authority which he enjoyed as an imperial Christian ally.<sup>95</sup> Several aspects of the building underscored its Roman, Christian connections: its plan mimics that of the baptistry of Reṣāfa’s ‘basilica A’ (the church of St. Sergius) and it is stylistically similar to other sixth-century churches in Syria,<sup>96</sup> while the richly-decorated interior, featuring friezes, relief sculptures, and crosses, boasted of the wealth and sophistication of al-Mundhir, via the inscription over the apse, ‘within the standard repertoire of fifth- and sixth-century church decoration.’<sup>97</sup> Curiously, however, the building was placed a considerable distance outside the northern walls of Reṣāfa, which distanced it from the overwhelmingly imperial context of the fortified city. If al-Mundhir or the Jafnids did indeed use this space, it seems that they were seeking to appeal to as wide a base as possible – pilgrims passing through the northern gateway; shepherds and nomads of the steppe; and Roman agents and officials. Mark Whittow conceptualised the building as ‘the equivalent of a great shaykh’s seven-pole tent, but built in stone and in a Roman idiom... [which] lay outside the city, isolated like an immovable tent from any other structures.’<sup>98</sup> Developing this expression of the structure’s essentially tribal character, Fowden has argued that the building also fulfilled the function of a *ḥaram*, a ‘neutral ground where conflicting parties could meet and seek resolution of disagreement’, backed, in this case, by the authority and prestige of St. Sergius, whose shrine lay several hundred metres away, but whose blood from his own martyrdom was said to have spilled on the very ground where al-Mundhir may have met those who came to see him.<sup>99</sup> Whether or not al-Mundhir ever set foot inside the structure, his invocation on the inscription, together with the proximity of the major shrine of the Sergius cult (linked as it was with the Jafnids) provides another prominent Jafnid connection to a site located for meeting and communication, deliberately disassociated from an urban context. It is hard to think of a more appropriate location for the tribal leader’s role of representing the tribe to the outside world, mediating

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<sup>93</sup> Millar, ‘Christian monasticism’, 114.

<sup>94</sup> *SEG* 7. 188.

<sup>95</sup> For discussion about the purpose of the building, see: J. Sauvaget, ‘Les Ghassanides et Sergiopolis’, *Byzantion* 14 (1939), 115-30; G. Brands, ‘Die sogenannte Audienzsaal des al-Mundir in Reṣāfa’, *DaM* 10 (1998), 237-41; E.K. Fowden, ‘An Arab building at al-Ruṣāfa-Sergiopolis’, *DaM* 12 (2000), 303-27. See Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 167-70, and the discussion on these views by Genequand, ‘Some thoughts’, 78.

<sup>96</sup> Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 153.

<sup>97</sup> Fowden, ‘An Arab building at al-Ruṣāfa-Sergiopolis’, 307. For a later comparison, G. Fowden and E.K. Fowden, *Studies on Hellenism, Christianity and the Umayyads* (Paris, 2004), 145, on the Q. ‘Amra frescoes: ‘they attest to a rather advanced state of Mediterranean acculturation on the part of their Umayyad patron and his immediate circle.’

<sup>98</sup> M. Whittow, ‘Rome and the Jafnids: writing the history of a 6<sup>th</sup>-c. tribal dynasty’, in J. Humphrey (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, 3 vols (Portsmouth, R.I., 1995-2002), ii, 207-224 at 222.

<sup>99</sup> Fowden, ‘An Arab building at al-Ruṣāfa-Sergiopolis’, 314-315, *idem*, *Barbarian Plain*, 98-99.

disputes which threatened peace, and presiding over discussions between members of the tribe. To underscore this interpretation of the building's function, it is necessary also to consider the other side of al-Mundhir's role as a late Roman, but also a tribal, élite – as powerbroker and arbitrator for the monophysites in the Empire.

In 579/80, a dispute began amongst the monophysites, threatening attempts which had continued intermittently throughout the sixth century to negotiate a compromise with the Chalcedonians. After 542, the consecration of new bishops by Jacob and Theodore promised a new company of monophysite clergy which might eventually match the Chalcedonian hierarchy, but now, divisions between monophysites endangered the unity so crucial to any future success. Failure to provide a single, unified voice might cause loss of face, and also of ground in negotiation. What was worse, the schism potentially threatened the ability of the movement to defend itself against future persecution. At stake for the Emperor, meanwhile, was nothing less than the ongoing effort to negotiate religious peace and stability in the eastern provinces. The row had begun when Jacob's authority was challenged through the consecration of Paul, as patriarch of Antioch, and became more complicated by 580, when two successive Alexandrian patriarchs, Peter and Damian, involved themselves: Peter had deposed Paul, and as Jacob had supported Peter in his struggle with Paul, those following Paul naturally turned on him. The end of Peter's tenure in 578, when he was replaced by Damian (patriarch 578-606), did little to assuage the wounds which had opened.<sup>100</sup> Yet another complication emerged part of the way through when Jacob died in 578, and the controversy continued to burn. Ironically, at the top level of the monophysite leaders, the bitter arguments had come to resemble a tribal feud, which urgently required mediation.

Even if some in the Chalcedonian camp may have watched these developments with a certain sense of satisfaction, they were overruled by the Emperor, Tiberius II, who invited al-Mundhir to Constantinople as arbitrator.<sup>101</sup> Tiberius reinforced his expectations by providing al-Mundhir with a 'royal crown.'<sup>102</sup> Given the prestige of the Jafnids amongst the monophysites, and the previous role of al-Hārith as mediator between the monophysites and Trithesists, the summons was logical. For al-Mundhir, though, problems loomed: in the 570s, he had crossed swords with Justin II, who had ordered an assassination attempt, botched in the actual event, and a dangerous enemy was emerging in the person of Maurice, from 574-582, the Count of the Excubitors.<sup>103</sup> With the political credibility of the Jafnids thus on the line, al-Mundhir was surely wary of how his tribal supporters, who depended on him to deliver the benefits of the Roman alliance, would view any failure in Constantinople; in the event, al-Mundhir disappointed. The negotiations collapsed when Damian made an agreement with al-Mundhir, and then reneged after it had been presented as a *fait accompli* to the Emperor. John of Ephesus' vitriolic discussion of the event screams the betrayal he felt on behalf of his Jafnid hero.<sup>104</sup> With al-Mundhir's standing and integrity in tatters in Constantinople, and presumably with some among the tribe questioning his leadership, it was only a short while before al-Mundhir found, in a spectacular piece of bad luck, that his enemy, Maurice, had become the next Emperor, and al-

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<sup>100</sup> Allen, 'The definition and enforcement of orthodoxy', outlines this complex affair, as well as van Rompay, 'Society and community', 252. See too *idem*, *Evagrius*, 32-34, and W.H.C. Frend, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement. Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries* (Cambridge, 1972), 324-329.

<sup>101</sup> Joh. Eph. *HE* 3.4.38-41.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.4.39.

<sup>103</sup> For the curiously Shakespearean way in which the assassination was botched, see Joh. Eph. *HE* 3.6.3. For Maurice as *comes excubitorum*, *PLRE* IIIB, 'Mauricius 4.'

<sup>104</sup> Joh. Eph. *HE* 3.4.43.

Mundhir was deposed and exiled in short order. While the Romans acted first, it seems likely that there may have been elements among the tribe who saw in their leader's failure an opportunity to depose him, but the clamour of his supporters at Bostra after his arrest shows that he still retained a great deal of support.<sup>105</sup> Furthermore, even though these events signalled the formal end of the Jafnid alliance, mediation remained a function of Arab leaders. A certain Jafna, in the 590s, appears as a broker in yet another dispute between monophysites. The argument once again involved the troublesome Damian, and, again, he seems to have scuppered proceedings.<sup>106</sup>

Jafnid support for monophysitism was complex. The idea that al-Ḥārith and his son possessed a singular zeal for monophysitism<sup>107</sup> is easily deduced from the partisan history of John of Ephesus, who had suffered personally in the persecutions of Justin II, and from later stories such as that related by Michael the Syrian (West Syrian Patriarch, 1166-1199), whose *Chronicle* causes al-Ḥārith to engage in debate with Ephrem, a member of the Chalcedonian clergy. Ephrem puts the merits of Chalcedonianism, but al-Ḥārith refuses to be taken by the position and snubs Ephrem's offer of bread, claiming that by coming from Chalcedonian hands, it is as tainted to the Jafnid as camel meat would be to his opponent.<sup>108</sup> The appearance of 'camel meat' as a negative element in the story recalls the stereotypes of traditional Roman views of the peoples of the desert, and this was, too, a very late story when the divisions between Chalcedonians and monophysites had hardened considerably. Further, as van Ginkel has shown, much of the *Chronicle* was designed to show how monophysites withstood Chalcedonian pressure; in a parallel fashion, much of John's work was intended to demonstrate that monophysitism, not Chalcedonianism, was the true orthodoxy.<sup>109</sup> Such positions required champions, and the Jafnids provided highly-visible actors, whose ultimate betrayal at the hands of perfidious Chalcedonians (or 'polluted' monophysites) only served to highlight their own moral superiority. Even in exile the Jafnids could be champions for John's purposes: Maurice, after toppling al-Mundhir, demanded the latter's adherence to Chalcedonian orthodoxy through his son al-Nu'mān. In a manner worthy of a McAuliffe, al-Nu'mān refused, stolidly averring that the Arab tribes were *already orthodox*, adding that he would be killed if he wavered. John's portrayal of al-Nu'mān's fortitude provided an unmistakable message.<sup>110</sup> It should also be remembered that the process by which Chalcedonians and monophysites divided was neither linear nor quick, and despite periods of violent persecution, serious attempts were made throughout the sixth century to find a compromise. Politically-motivated missionary work along the frontiers, during the reign of Justinian, was every so often carried out using imperially-sanctioned monophysites – including John of Ephesus – and such events served only to inject

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<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.3.41-42.

<sup>106</sup> Mich. Syr. *Chron.* 2.368, discussed by Hoyland, 'Late Roman provincia Arabia', 129.

<sup>107</sup> Most recently, I. Shahid, 'The peninsular Arab presence in *Oriens (Bilād Al-Shām)* in Byzantine and Umayyad times', in K.G. Holum and H. Lapin (eds.), *Shaping the Middle East. Jews, Christians, and Muslims in an Age of Transition, 400-800 C.E.* (Bethesda, 2011), 173-180; Frend, *Monophysite Movement*, 284, 297; cf. discussion in Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth*, 130.

<sup>108</sup> Mich. Syr. *Chron.* 2.246-248, discussed in Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 142-143; J. van Ginkel, 'Making history: Michael the Syrian and his sixth century sources', in R. Lavenant (ed.), *Symposium Syriacum VII: Uppsala University, Department of Asian and African Languages, 11-14 August 1996* (Rome, 1998), 351-358, at 357.

<sup>109</sup> J. van Ginkel, 'John of Ephesus. A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium', D. Litt. Thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995; cf. n. 3, above, on the views of the monophysites as 'the orthodox.'

<sup>110</sup> Joh. Eph. *HE.* 3.3.56. See discussion of this episode in Millar, 'The evolution of the Syrian Orthodox Church.'

further opacity into the relationship between Chalcedonians and monophysites in the sixth century.<sup>111</sup>

Al-Mundhir's role as mediator, carried out in Constantinople, failed, but it does not obscure the fact that he had managed to protect his position as tribal chief, even while he engaged in high-level imperial ecclesiastical politics. Both he and his father, al-Ḥārith, had done this by a structured disengagement from the Empire. By supporting monophysitism to such a degree, they retained a certain distance from the centre of Chalcedonian politics, but profited from the ambiguities in the sixth-century relationship between orthodoxy and heresy. When they did engage with popular expressions of Christian piety, such as monasteries, they chose, on the basis of Haliarum and the codex from Palmyra, those of the monophysites. Since monophysitism also had yet to acquire a hierarchy of patriarchs and bishops that could match that of the Chalcedonians, supporting the monophysites also avoided overt identification with the Chalcedonian hierarchy, which itself was strongly linked to imperial power. It presumably also gave the Jafnids the opportunity to assume more of a leadership position than would have been possible amongst the Chalcedonians, where they would likely have been shut out of the ecclesiastical chain of command. The rural context was also important – all of the Christian sites connected with the Jafnids, including the urban environment of Reṣāfa, are in the country. The 137 signatures to letter ʿ41 discussed above also indicate overwhelmingly rural locations. As Millar notes, the list 'mentions not a single bishop, and refers at the most to one or two cities...it is a vivid and detailed reflection of the life of monasteries located in villages.'<sup>112</sup> While al-Ḥārith and al-Mundhir arbitrated for the Empire in Constantinople, their prominence was maintained amongst the rural monophysite communities, far from metropolitan sees and the Chalcedonian hierarchy. Around these locations – monasteries, churches, martyria – elements of Arab Christian identity coalesced, insulated from the urban focus of the Chalcedonian hierarchy.<sup>113</sup>

With the Jafnid connection to the cult of St. Sergius, lines were blurred further. The cult was popular amongst the Arabs, but not exclusively so, and it was available to both Chalcedonians and monophysites, who both celebrated the feast day of the saint on the same date.<sup>114</sup> At Reṣāfa, the most public of all the connections to St. Sergius, the Jafnids based themselves in a building clearly designed for communication, patronage, and mediation free of overtly-Roman associations. The al-Mundhir building is not a *qasr* in the Umayyad sense, but is a remarkable avatar for those structures in its ability to transmit a particular image of power, framed in the terms of the state through the frescoes, inscription, decoration, and design, and in the terms of the tribe via its distancing from the city and through its function as an audience hall connecting desert tribes and state-sanctioned political power.<sup>115</sup> Reṣāfa lay on major communication routes in the region and because it held an honoured place in Syria as the home

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<sup>111</sup> van Rompay, 'Society and community', 250-251.

<sup>112</sup> Millar, 'Christian monasticism', 113.

<sup>113</sup> Fowden, 'Rural converters', discussing Tell al-'Umayri, Nitl, and other rural locations, in the context of 'the pattern adopted by rural converters, in which Christian architecture played a significant role in establishing and affirming a Christian identity among the Arabs.'

<sup>114</sup> Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 156.

<sup>115</sup> The communicative function of the Umayyad *quṣūr* is discussed by D. Genequand, 'Umayyad castles: the shift from late antique military architecture to early Islamic palatial building', in H. Kennedy (ed.), *Muslim Military Architecture in Greater Syria: From the Coming of Islam to the Ottoman Period* (Leiden, 2006), 3-25, at 3-6, and stressed by G.R.D. King, 'Settlement patterns in Islamic Jordan: the Umayyads and their use of the land', in A. Hadidi (ed.), *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, iv (Amman, 1992), 369-375, and O. Grabar, R. Holod, and W. Trusdale, *City in the Desert. Qasr al-Hayr East*, 2 vols (Cambridge, Mass., 1978), i, 156-65.

of the Sergius cult, it formed a nexus for the exchange of people, news, and intelligence.<sup>116</sup> At the same time, it was sufficiently distant from places such as Bostra, Damascus, Antioch, and Constantinople, to allow the Jafnids to do business on much their own terms. One is reminded of Garth Fowden's characterisation of the site of al-Ḥumayma in southern Jordan, 'at once remote from the intensely Umayyad atmosphere of Damascus and its satellite *quṣūr*, and well-placed, right by the road that linked the port of Ayla...by way of Ma'an to Damascus, for the gathering of news and gossip.'<sup>117</sup> In this light, it is also curious to note that the rural sites linked to the Jafnids were never far from the desert, where some manpower of Ghassān was probably still based. These locations were also out of the cities of the Empire, while within easy reach of major communication routes. Such places thus favoured communication between desert and settled lands, between imperial Chalcedonian centre, and monophysite periphery. We can note, too, parallels with forms of tribal leadership in the post-Roman west – that of the Ostrogoth Theoderic, for example:

Theoderic took great care to maintain regular face-to-face contact with his chief military retainers and their retinues. This he achieved through a network of lavishly-decorated royal palaces...Theoderic and his court travelled between these palaces and throughout the Ostrogothic encampments holding sumptuous feasts, distributing donatives and rewards, and hearing grievances...Theoderic's kingship was thus military in tone, itinerant in nature, and rooted in the traditions of face-to-face lordship [and] he further bound his Ostrogothic followers to him by supporting the Arian church.<sup>118</sup>

The multitude of sites connected to al-Ḥārith and al-Mundhir which were designed around public meeting spaces, especially churches, public spaces *par excellence*, reinforces how the Jafnids retained their tribal functions. And so, whether as imperial arbitrator, present amongst church congregations at Nitl or Tell al-ʿUmayri, or at Reṣāfa receiving delegations during the pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Sergius, the tribal roles of mediation, with a stress on communication, and representing the tribe to the various agents of the state, and vice versa, were always at the centre of the way that the Jafnids framed their relationship with the Christian Roman state.

### **A Christian Arab identity?**

The Arabs castigated by Ps.-Nilus or Ammonius for being barbarous, savage, and cruel, could be redeemed by joining the commonwealth; this was part of the promise of conversion. Even so, some authors, such as Procopius, still saw even the Christian al-Ḥārith through the range of ethnographic assumptions about barbarians – perfidious, treacherous, an echo of Ammianus' famous statement that Arabs were good 'neither as friends or enemies.'<sup>119</sup> Even Arab Christians, then, could still be barbarians, but what Christianity did do was open up a range of political, cultural, and social possibilities within the Empire that might otherwise have remained closed. Some of these have been explored here. Becoming Christian provided ambitious Arabs like al-

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<sup>116</sup> Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 67. See on the site most recently, G. Brands, 'City and territorium of Ruṣāfa in late antiquity and early Islam', in Borrut et al (eds.), *Le Proche-Orient de Justinien aux Abbassides*, 59- 76.

<sup>117</sup> G. Fowden, *Qusayr ʿAmra. Art and the Umayyad Elite in Late Antique Syria* (Berkeley, 2004), 282. On Ḥumayma, see J.P. Oleson, K. ʿAmr, R. Foote, J. Logan, B. Reeves, R. Schick, 'Preliminary report of the al-Ḥumayma Excavation Project, 1995, 1996, 1998,' *ADAJ*, 43 (1999), 411-50.

<sup>118</sup> P. Sarris, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam, 500-700* (Oxford, 2011), 353.

<sup>119</sup> Proc. *BP*. 1.17.48; Amm. 14.4.1.

Mundhir with the chance to play a role usually associated with late Roman élites – taking honorific titles such as *patrikios*, acting as benefactors, and working with high-ranking officials in the Empire. Thus, while it might not make Arabs or other barbarians into Romans, Christianity provided access to a collective membership, which made Arab converts culturally and politically compatible with other Christians in the Empire.

How can the effect of Christianity on any developing Arab identity prior to the emergence of Islam be measured? It would be misleading, perhaps, to think that there was such as thing as pan-Arab identity (in the modern sense) in the 500s; examinations of the term ‘Arab’ in antiquity reveal a perplexing range of meanings and understandings, and it is instead more likely that the identities of tribes, rather than the Arabs as a discrete people, dominated.<sup>120</sup> The poetry of the pre-Islamic era, and the stories of the ‘battle days of the Arabs’ focus on tribal identities, not ‘Arab’ ones. Al-Akhnas, for example, focused on the attributes of individual tribes, saying, in part of one poem:

And Ghassān – their strength, all know, is other than in their kin  
-for them fight the legions and the squadrons of mighty Rome.<sup>121</sup>

The Jafnids, closely linked with Ghassān, became the most ‘Roman’ of any of the Arabs in pre-Islamic late antiquity because of their close link with the Empire, which underwrote their power. The development of that power, from defeat at the hands of Romanus in 497/8, to categorisation as *symmachoi* in 561, and then to the gift of a ‘crown’ by Tiberius II to al-Mundhir on his ill-fated visit to Constantinople in 580, was accompanied by their association with the Christian religion. I have argued here that being Christian and being tribal were compatible, and that the Jafnids exploited their Christian affiliations to retain their tribal functions. What then, of others?

The experience of the Jafnids seems to have had a knock-on effect of sorts elsewhere in Syria and Arabia. A series of martyria from the fifth and sixth centuries, all from rural areas on communications routes, and the appearance of Arabic language and script inscriptions from sixth-century Christian contexts, show how the experience of the Jafnids, while prominent, was not an isolated example. The martyria and inscriptions show again how Arab élites were behaving like late Roman community élites, but the sudden appearance of Arabic, and its connection to these Christian monuments, raises questions. The Arabic inscriptions did not necessarily represent an attempt at ethnic differentiation on the part of their authors, but I would suggest that they really only make sense within the context of the emergence of Arab Christian élites within the Roman Empire (specifically the Jafnids), cultivating places of convergence and

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<sup>120</sup> M.C.A. Macdonald, ‘Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic before Late Antiquity’, *Topoi*, 16/1 (2009), 277-332, offers a comprehensive discussion of the different meanings applied to the word ‘Arab.’ See for discussion of the problem of Arab identity, Fisher, *Between Empires*, and ‘Kingdoms or dynasties?’, as well, R. Hoyland, ‘Arab kings, Arab tribes, Arabic texts and the beginnings of (Muslim) Arab historical memory in late Roman inscriptions’, in H. Cotton, R. Hoyland, J. Price, and D. Wasserstein (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), 377-400, and *idem*, ‘Epigraphy and the emergence of Arab identity’, in P. Sijpesteijn, L. Sundelin, S. Tovar, and A. and Zomeño, A. (eds.), *From Andalusia to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden, 2007), 219-242.

<sup>121</sup> C.J. Lyall (ed.), *The Mufaḍḍalīyāt. An Anthology of Ancient Arabian Odes Compiled by Al-Mufaḍḍal son of Muḥammad, according to the recension and with the commentary of Abū Muḥammad Al-Qāsim ibn Muḥammad al-Anbārī*, 3 vols (Oxford, 1918), ii, 149-151.

communication.<sup>122</sup> Christianity was an overarching unifier which could at times cut across the different divides between individual tribes, as it also cut across other divides, such as the gulf between Roman and non-Roman, civilised, and barbarous. Membership in the polyglot Christian commonwealth permitted the maintenance of tribal identities even while being Christian required, at least on the surface, allegiance to Rome.

The inscribed martyria in question are all from Syria and its environs. Of the five, the earliest offer only tenuous connections between Arabs and Christianity. The first is a martyrrium of St. Thomas, from Anasartha in northern Syria, dating to 425/6, dedicated by a Mavia/Mavia. This has attracted attention mostly because of speculation that the Mavia here might be the same Mavia from the story described above, but it is almost certainly too late for that to be the case.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, the Arabic name is not conclusive proof of ethnic identity.<sup>124</sup>

The second martyrrium, also from Anasartha and from the same period, offers a few more clues. It is dedicated by a *clarissimus*, Silvanus, and includes a Greek text featuring a number of ‘Homeric echoes’; Feissel interprets the reference to Silvanus’ power in ‘Erembois’ as an analogy to the *Odyssey*, referring to Arabs.<sup>125</sup> The martyrrium also honours Silvanus’ daughter, who is described as a wife of a phylarch, and since the latter term is very commonly used to describe Arab allies, questions have been asked about Silvanus’ identity – was he a Roman officer, or perhaps even a phylarch himself? Unfortunately, despite strenuous attempts, the question cannot be answered with certainty.<sup>126</sup>

The third (and weakest) example comes from al-Ramthāniye in the Golan. A martyrrium from 377, sponsored by a certain *illustrius ordinarius*, Flavius Na‘amān, suggests, via the name (but with the same caveats) an Arab connection. Dauphin, who published the find, connected the site with Ghassān. While this cannot be certain (especially if Ghassān did not enter the Empire until the late fifth century) the martyrrium is close to the generally-presumed location of Jabiya, and, more convincingly, analysis of the site has suggested that it might have offered a seasonal focus for nomads.<sup>127</sup> These three examples thus suggest, but do not prove, a connection between public expressions of devotion of the sort usually associated with élite benefactors, and Arabs. With the fourth example, a martyrrium of St. John from Ḥarrān in Syria – containing an inscription in Arabic – this connection becomes far more certain.

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<sup>122</sup> Fowden, ‘Rural converters’: ‘it is not surprising that the new script appeared in these contexts, since the accommodation of the Christian religion and exploitation of ecological knowledge [referring to the provision of water at Jebel Seis] were absolutely central to the Arabs’ maintenance of local and regional power.’

<sup>123</sup> R. Mouterde, *Le limes de Chalcis: organisation de la steppe en haute Syrie romaine: documents aériens et épigraphiques*, 2 vols (Paris, 1945), i, 194-195. See the discussion in D. Feissel, ‘Les martyria d’Anasartha’, in V. Déroche (ed.), *Mélanges Gilbert Dagron, T&M*, 14 (Paris, 2002), 201-20, at 205-9.

<sup>124</sup> Cf. J.H.W.G. Liebeschuetz, ‘Nomads, phylarchs and settlement in Syria and Palestine’, in A.S. Lewin and P. Pellegrini (eds.), *Settlements and Demography in the Near East in Late Antiquity. Proceedings of the Colloquium, Matera 27-29 October 2005* (Pisa, 2007), 131-146, at 144. On the problems of associating names and ethnicity, see M.C.A. Macdonald, ‘Personal names in the Nabataean realm: a review article’, *JSS*, 44/2 (1999), 251-289.

<sup>125</sup> *IGLS* 297. Feissel, ‘Les martyria d’Anasartha’, 213-214.

<sup>126</sup> Mouterde, *Limes*, 193; Jalabert and Mouterde in *IGLS* ii, 168-70, see him as a *dux Arabiae*; Feissel, ‘Les martyria d’Anasartha’, 213: ‘Titulaire d’une dignité romaine, Silvanos n’était cependant pas un fonctionnaire impérial: son autorité sur les Arabes (appelés en style homérique...), qui plus est une autorité perpétuelle, ne peut être que celle d’un chef indigène, autrement dit un phylarque arabe.’

<sup>127</sup> C. Dauphin, ‘Pèlerinage ghassanide au sanctuaire byzantin de Saint Jean-Baptiste à Er-Ramthaniyye en Gaulantide’, in E. Dassman and J. Engeman (eds.), *Akten des XII. Internationalen Kongresses Für Christliche Archäologie, Bonn 22.-28. September 1991*, 2 vols (Münster, 1995), ii, 667-73. See the discussion in Fowden, *Barbarian Plain*, 147-149.

The date of the Ḥarrān structure, 568, a year before al-Ḥārith died, is significant. Over a generation had passed since the monophysites had won Jacob and Theodore, and by now the Jafnids had provided highly visible models of Arab leadership, supported by no less an individual than the Emperor. It seems reasonable to think that this development had encouraged acceptance, and greater engagement of Arabs in similar activities. Thus, while models of Christian Arab leaders had existed in the fourth and fifth centuries – Mavia and Aspebetos, for example – they never possessed the level of prominence, or, vitally, the depth of Roman support, which the Jafnid family enjoyed. This explains why it is at Ḥarrān that, after the ambiguities of the fifth century, a clear, public connection is made between a non-Jafnid Arab leader and a Christian site, and made not just in Greek, but also in Arabic, attesting that a phylarch, Sharaḥīl, paid for the structure.<sup>128</sup> Earlier Arabic inscriptions, such as that at Nemāra, were written in the Arabic language but in scripts, such as Aramaic, usually associated with other languages. Here, at Ḥarrān, the inscription is in both the Arabic language *and* script – indeed, it is one of the very earliest extant examples of this phenomenon and one of only three from the pre-Islamic era. While one of those three is from a secular context – the Jebel Seis inscription mentioned earlier (n. 76) – the other is also, like Ḥarrān, from a clearly Christian setting. A martyrium of St. Sergius, from Zebed in northern Syria, the Arabic addition to the Greek and Syriac is a prayer for a number of people. Aside from everything else, it is another indication of the link between Arabs and the Sergius cult.<sup>129</sup>

The Arabic part of the Ḥarrān inscription was done first, which, Hoyland argues, implies ‘that the Arabic was more important to the phylarch who commissioned the work, presumably in some way an important aspect of his identity.’<sup>130</sup> Addressing the same issue, Millar states that ‘there is no sufficient reason’ to connect the appearance of Arabic purely to ‘the power or influence of any one dynasty of ‘Arab’ phylarchs.’<sup>131</sup> Yet the emergence of the Jafnids as Christian Arab leaders, prominent in rural areas such as the location where the Ḥarrān martyrium is found (and for which the martyrium of the *illustris ordinarius* Flavius Na‘amān had earlier provided an avatar, as a rural node for Christian worship) is key to the puzzle.<sup>132</sup> As Jafnid power rested on Roman support, so we might imagine that other phylarchs, such as Sharaḥīl, took at least some of their cues from the Jafnids. The Ḥarrān example is, then, as Hoyland suggests, a statement of identity – but perhaps not in the way we might expect. While it may indicate a progressive interest in being linguistically different – Greek was the usual prestige language for public inscriptions of this sort – it also reflects a crucially important trend: the increasing

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<sup>128</sup> *Wadd.* 2464. See R. Dussaud and F. Macler, ‘Rapport sur une mission scientifique dans les régions désertiques de la Syrie moyenne’, *Nouvelles archives des missions scientifiques et littéraires*, 10 (1902), 411-744, at 726. Discussed by Sartre, *Trois études*, 177; Genequand, ‘Some thoughts’, 80; E. Littmann, ‘Osservazioni sulle iscrizioni di Harran e di Zebed,’ *Revista degli studi orientali*, 4 (1911), 193-98, and C. Robin, ‘La réforme de l’écriture arabe à l’époque du califat médinois’, *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph*, 56 (2006), 319-364, at 332-336.

<sup>129</sup> E. C. Sachau, ‘Eine dreisprachige Inschrift aus Zebed’, *Monatsberichte der Königlichen Preussische Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin*, 169-90; also, *idem*, ‘Zur trilinguis Zebedea’, *ZDMG*, 36 (1882), 345-52; Littmann, ‘Osservazioni sulle iscrizioni di Harrān e di Zebed’, 193-198. Most recently, Hoyland, ‘Epigraphy and the emergence of Arab identity’, 232; Fisher, *Between Empires*, 144-153; Robin, ‘La réforme de l’écriture arabe’, 336-338.

<sup>130</sup> Hoyland, ‘Late Roman provincia Arabia’, 133.

<sup>131</sup> Millar, ‘A Syriac codex.’

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Millar, ‘Rome’s Arab allies in late antiquity’, 219: ‘the role of the major sixth-century dynasty of phylarchs was thus compatible with the contemporaneous activity of (apparently) lesser figures.’



participation of Arabs in a monotheist commonwealth.<sup>133</sup> And so, when it was that Sharaḥīl laid out the Arabic text, he added a detail missing from the Greek – that he had built the martyrion ‘a year after the expedition of Khaybar.’ Elizabeth Key Fowden suggests that he included this to make the Roman date more meaningful to Arabs in the area. That he did so only makes sense, if there was a community of Christian Arabs of sufficient significance to the people of the area, whom he could address.<sup>134</sup>

## Conclusion

The Christianisation of the Arabs between the third and sixth centuries changed the status of the tribes and the chiefs who led them. It gave them access to the *oikoumenē*, and provided previously unparalleled political opportunities within the Roman political and ecclesiastical hierarchy. Christianisation posed obstacles, such as the threat of stratification, but I have stressed here how the actions of the Jafnids, in particular, mitigated those risks by framing their participation as Roman allies in tribal terms – as mediators, conduits, and providers of benefits to the tribe. Some, on the pattern of an Aspebetos, probably decided to make their careers in the Roman hierarchy and leave the tribal milieu, but it is clear from the experience of the Jafnids that tribal identities did not disappear with Christianity. While the Sasanian-allied Naṣrids have not been discussed in detail here, it is noteworthy that while they avoided too open an affiliation with Christianity, this never prevented the flourishing of the religion at al-Ḥīrah, their base.<sup>135</sup> It was not just that tribal leaders found ways to fit Christianity into their social structures, but also that Christianity was compatible with the tribe.<sup>136</sup> We have seen here how tribal leaders arbitrated Christian disputes, but that the reverse could also be true is underscored in a vignette from Theodoret’s *Life* of Symeon Stylite. Symeon arbitrated a quarrel between Arabs in a most unholy way, ‘hurling threats at them from above and calling them dogs’, but it is clear that his prestige as a holy man was interpreted as of equivalent rank to the prestige and influence of a tribal sheikh.<sup>137</sup> Likewise, it was the cachet of St. Sergius which underpinned the authority of al-Mundhir at Reṣāfa. While Christianisation could bring stratification, it was not inevitable. Indeed, it was as the engagement of the Jafnid family with Christianity grew more prominent that Jafnid power was strengthened. This suggests that the growing Christian ‘identity’ of the Jafnids actually strengthened the tribal power of the leadership. Like other successful tribal leaders throughout history, the Jafnids – until 582 – keenly understood the ‘ambiguities and dilemmas’ of their relationship with the Empire, and ‘balanced their conflicting aspects’ accordingly.<sup>138</sup> While al-Mundhir did not become a holy man, he assumed some of the prestige and esteem

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<sup>133</sup> Cf. Fowden, ‘Rural converters’, commenting that ‘Arab adoption of church-building activity as a means of identification with the Christian faith as attested in our growing epigraphical evidence shows a tangible degree of integration.’

<sup>134</sup> Fowden, ‘An Arab building’, 316.

<sup>135</sup> J.S. Tringham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (New York, 1979), 189-190; most recently, I. Toral-Niehoff, ‘The ‘Ibād of al-Ḥīrah: an Arab Christian community in late antique Iraq’, in A. Neuwirth, M. Marx, and N. Sinai (eds.), *The Qur’an in Context – Entangled Histories and Textual Palimpsests* (Leiden, 2010), 323-347.

<sup>136</sup> Cf. M. Debié, ‘La Christianisation des Arabes nomads de la mer rouge à l’Euphrate’, *Dossiers d’Archéologie et Sciences des Origines* 309 (2005/6), 16-23, at 19, on the adaptability of Christian ceremony away from ‘settled’ church environments, geared towards nomads.

<sup>137</sup> Theod. V. *Sim.* 15.

<sup>138</sup> Paraphrased from L. Beck, ‘Tribes and the state in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran’, in Khoury and Kostiner (eds.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, 185-225, at 218.

accorded to such figures by having access to bishops, priests, and St. Sergius. By displaying these connections prominently, usually at fixed points designed for communication and convergence, the Jafnids 'reaffirmed and maintained' their position as community leaders and tribal chiefs.<sup>139</sup>

When the followers of The Prophet invaded the Roman Near East in the seventh century, they were not the first examples of Arabs in Syria and Jordan under powerful leaders, adhering to a potent, universalising religion which could unify and bind together the different tribes. The spread of Christianity among the Arabs anticipated, at least in part, what was to come. In what we now know retrospectively as the 'eve of the Muslim invasions', the Jafnids wielded considerable power by cultivating the interface between orthodoxy and heresy, centre and periphery, desert and settled lands, and tribe and state, all connected by the cultural bond provided by Christianity. One cannot help but speculate that the followers of The Prophet would not have been quite as successful, in such a short space of time, had they not already been shown the way by powerful tribal leaders, following, and exploiting, a religion of the Book.

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<sup>139</sup> Fowden, 'Rural converters.'