This study examines the evidence for three small but prominent groups of Arabs in the fifth and sixth centuries—the Jafnids, allied to the Roman Empire, the Nasrids, allied to the Sasanians, and the Hujrids, client rulers of the kingdom of Himyar, but equally subject to pressure from the Romans and Sasanians. It explores the numerous problems that have impeded efforts to produce a balanced assessment of these peoples, including source-critical, historiographical, and ideological pressures. It also highlights the long-held attachment of each group to a “people,” the Jafnids to Ghassân, the Nasrids to Lakhm, and the Hujrids to Kinda, connections that have produced a misleading impression of kingdoms or stable polities under each name. The evidence only allows us to describe family dynasties composed of small groups of individuals. Finally, highlighting the importance of the framework of imperial power in any analysis of the late antique east, it offers some thoughts on what the evidence discussed here suggests for our understanding of Arab identities before Islam.

The historical dominance of the Muslim Arabs after the mid-seventh century has, perhaps inevitably, overshadowed the history of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the role and place of the Arabs in the fifth and sixth centuries remained an overlooked topic, and only a very small number of highly-specialised works were dedicated to it. This situation has now changed somewhat, a product of an effort

1 Research for this paper was supported by The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada’s Standard Research Grant program. The support of the Council is gratefully acknowledged. I am grateful to Christian Robin for sharing work in progress and for reading a draft of this paper and offering suggestions and corrections. I also gratefully acknowledge the assistance of the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities in facilitating research travel to Saudi Arabia.

2 Theodor Nöldeke, Die Ghassânischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafnas (Berlin, 1887); Gustav Rothstein, Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Hira: Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sasaniden (Berlin, 1899); François Nau, Les Arabes chrétiens de Mésopotamie et de Syrie du VIIe au VIIIe siècle (Paris, 1933); Henri Charles, Le christianisme des Arabes nomades sur le limes et dans le désert Syro-Mésopotamien aux alentours de l’Hégire (Paris, 1936); John Trimingham, Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times (New York, 1979).
to introduce new perspectives to the study of the Arabs of the fifth and sixth centuries. One of the major products of this trend has been to situate the Arabs in contact with Rome and Sasanian Iran, for whom there is the most abundant evidence, within the broader schemes of the history of Late Antiquity, viewing them just as much as barbarian imperial allies as the antecedents of those who would go on to conquer the Near East after the seventh century. This advance has opened up a variety of new critical perspectives that reflect similar progress made for the study of western barbarians.3 Looking laterally

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3 Drawing on e.g., Walter Pohl, ed., Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity (Leiden, 1997); Walter Pohl, Helmut Reimitz, eds., Strategies of Distinction:
at the important influences of Roman and Sasanian frameworks of power has helped to remove some of the imposing sense of later Muslim Arab identity, connected to political dominance in the Near East, the Arabic language, and Islam, from the problem. It has also helped to spread the focus across the different source components now accessible and that were unavailable to earlier scholars such as Theodor Nöldeke and Gustav Rothstein. Introducing these different contexts has allowed scholars to begin a reassessment of Arab identity before Islam.

Despite these advances, many questions and difficulties remain. Not least of these is the fact that writing the history of any particular group of Arabs in Late Antiquity depends on challenging and sparse source material, largely produced by external observers and dependent on the ethnographic and literary conventions of the time. There are many terminological problems: what, for example, should be understood by words such as “tribe” and “state,” or even “Arab,” a label that possessed a bewildering number of associations in

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antiquity. These and other difficulties mean that there remains a very real danger that any modern study seeking to understand any aspect of the Arabs before Islam will suffer from distortion, either because of problems with the source material or, indeed, as a result of modern ideological pressures.

The monumental study of Irfan Shahid, which began with *Rome and the Arabs* in 1984, is an enduring testament to these issues and has formed a nexus of sorts for ideologically-driven views of the past. For example, largely (but not exclusively) through Shahid’s work, Arabic was put forward as an important component of a pre-Islamic Arab identity, without any recourse to modern studies on the links between language and identity in the ancient world, or an examination of the development of Old Arabic. Shahid’s work has also helped to cement the idea of “kingdoms” of Ghassānids and Lakhmids, linked respectively to the pro-Roman Jafnid and pro-Sasanian Nasrid family dynasties, as examples of powerful groups of Arabs before Islam, elevated from indistinct groups of people into discrete polities and separate entities within the late antique world.

These ideas have proved at times popular, credible, and highly persuasive, and the present author is not immune. They were often, but not always, drawn or distorted out of the Muslim histories of the pre-Islamic period, and sometimes influenced by more recent histories dealing with the formation of national and ethnic identities, which tried to identify easily-categorised “national” groups. They are attractive, also, because they give body to inadequate and difficult ancient source material; but they are also misleading. The reasons for their appearance in modern histories range from blithe assumption and uncritical use of sources, to, in Shahid’s case, at least, attempts to create a certain representation of the past that aggrandises the Arabs before Islam as worthy Christian ancestors of the Muslims. There certainly have been serious attempts to try to explain later Arab political dominance and the important role of Arabic in creating Arab identity, by seeking out similar phenomena in the pre-Islamic period, but without any real view to whether or not they actually existed. The result has been distortive, and the importance of both has been overestimated. This does not mean that Arabic was not important for Arabs, nor does it mean that there were no politically astute or powerful Arabs, and nor does it mean that there was no Arab identity in the sixth century; but it is now clear that we

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9 Greg Fisher, “The Political Development of the Ghassan between Rome and Iran,” *JLA* 1/2 (2008), 313–36, where the evidence for Ghassān was overinterpreted.
must be much more circumspect about the source material, and be more aware of the ideological influences which have affected the ways in which we perceive and discuss this extremely complex topic.

This paper will briefly survey the problems involved in writing about the Arabs before Islam, focusing on those who were a part of the Roman and Sasanian Near East. Building on ideas originally advanced by Christian Robin, it will emphasise why it is preferable to talk of elite dynasties—the so-called Jafnids, Nasrids, and Hujrids—and not kingdoms, and it will provide an overview of what can be said of each group of individuals. It will become clear that any argument that seeks to discern entities such as the “Ghassānid” kingdom rests on very tenuous evidence. Finally, it will offer some thoughts on what conclusions we might draw about Arab identity in the sixth century in light of what is discussed here.

A Series of Problems

Any study of the pre-Islamic Arabs confronts a wide array of difficulties. Source material is scarce, consisting of brief mentions in Roman classicizing authors, such as Procopius or Menander, who tend to write about the Arabs only when they impinge on part of their wider political or diplomatic narrative; ecclesiastical historians, whose focus is on conversion narratives and the translation of the barbarous peoples of the desert into a Christian, civilized empire; and others, such as chroniclers and those, like Photius, excerpting older works. Most difficult to assess is arguably the Ecclesiastical History of John of Ephesus, a personal, polemical work which features the Arab allies of the Roman Empire refracted through the lens of John’s passionate opposition to the Chalcedonians, and which exaggerates the anti-Chalcedonian position of the pro-Roman Jafnid Arabs in his narrative.10 Archaeological material is also extremely sparse, and the unstable political situation throughout much of the Middle East remains the main impediment to adequate archaeological study. For example, despite promising attempts in the 1930s, al-Hira, in Iraq, the reputed “base” of the Arabs allied with Sasanian Iran, has yet to be investigated in any detail, and the location of Jabiya, the presumed center of activity for the Roman-allied Arabs, has never been conclusively identified.11 Archaeological material from the Arabian peninsula has yielded a greater share of information, particularly through the discovery and publication of

inscriptions concerned with the activities of the kingdom of Himyar. The study of these inscriptions is a highly-specialised endeavour because of the scripts and languages used.\textsuperscript{12} Aside from the material concerning the Jafnids (on which more below), the corpus of Syro-Arabian “Safaitic” graffiti and a very small group of mostly Latin and Greek inscriptions concentrated in Syria and Jordan provide most of the information on the otherwise-unknown Arabs who occasionally came to the attention of the empire in those regions.\textsuperscript{13} A sole inscription from Kurdistan is, it seems, the only epigraphic evidence from the Sassanian Empire to deal with their Arab allies.\textsuperscript{14}

Another category of sources, the writings of Muslim authors, offer a great deal of information on aspects of pre-Islamic history for which we have no other source. We are, for example, dependent on al-Tabari’s work for some of the descriptions of al-Hirah, and on Hamza al-Isfahani (d. after 349 CE/961 AH) and Yaqut (d. 626 CE/1229 AH) for accounts of the buildings said to have been erected by Ghassan or those connected with them. These accounts are by no means to be dismissed, and they have been applied in, for example, assessments of the Meccan leather trade and the Sassanian conquest of Himyar.\textsuperscript{15} They can, though, easily introduce a distorting effect because of the manner in which a variety of theological and political concerns affected the way that the events and peoples of the pre-Islamic period were perceived and explained.\textsuperscript{16} Hamza al-Isfahani’s list, for example, is distinctly embroidered, and may have more to do with a desire to elevate the Jafnids or Ghassan within a context of an imagined pre-Islamic regal past, than to provide an actual list of real buildings. The occasionally uncritical use of this list has created numerous phantom buildings connected to the Jafnids, but that are otherwise unsupported by other literary or archaeological evidence.\textsuperscript{17} The material contained in the pre-Islamic

\textsuperscript{14} Helmut Humbach, Prods Skaervo, The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli (Wiesbaden, 1983).
oral poetry corpus, or the sometimes invented and embellished battle stories known as the ayyām al-ʿarab, also played a part in the construction of early ideas about the past. These sources must be used with great care. There are also difficulties for late antique Romanists seeking to work with these sources, because rarely is a Roman historian also an Arabist, and vice versa. At any rate, the issue is a significant, complex, and an occasionally divisive one, and the comments here are intended only to point to the most obvious dangers that result from an uncritical use of Muslim sources. The most sensible approach is to try to use the Muslim sources in tandem with the late antique Greco-Roman, archaeological, and epigraphic material, in an attempt to create a balanced perspective. In addition to James Howard-Johnston’s recent immense work on the varied and difficult sources for the seventh century, new works on primary source material incorporating both Greco-Roman and Muslim source traditions have appeared or are underway that should, together, help provide a fresh apparatus for understanding the critical time bridging the pre-Islamic period and the Muslim invasions.

Modern ideas about nationalism and ethnicity also present a source-related problem and have played a prominent role in creating misleading perceptions of the past. This is especially evident in the strong connection in the modern world between language and identity, a link that was by no means always as strong in the ancient world. The assumption that the two might be the same has resulted in imagined connections between language, culture, and identity being projected backwards onto concepts of the past. For example, a “ghost” community of “Safaitic” people was created in the ancient Near East, purely from the “Safaitic” graffiti from southern Syria and northern Arabia. “Thamudic,” a linguistic “pending file” for largely


unidentified texts, inspired an attempt to write the history of *le Thamoud* as a single group of people.\(^{22}\) Similarly, investigations into the function of Arabic in identity-formation, prior to the seventh century, have occasionally manipulated the language into a framework governed more by the strong modern link between the Arabic language and Arab identity. Attention has focused on those groups of Arabs, such as the Jafnids and Nasrīs, who possessed the means and possible motive to promote Arabic. The result has been unsubstantiated speculation that it was the Nasrīs at al-Hirah who played the key role. Abbott made this identification, as did Shahid, who speculated that the deeds of the Arabs at al-Hirah were recorded in Arabic because the Nasrīs “were very conscious and proud of their achievements,” making an explicit link between the choice of language and a desire to promulgate a particular identity separate from those around them.\(^{23}\) The *Encyclopaedia of Islam* has also suggested that the Arabic language was practised and standardised at al-Hirah, an act that linked Arabic speakers together into a wider separate community, largely based on language.\(^{24}\) Not only is there no evidence that the Nasrīs made the records described by Shahid, but this sort of deliberate choice to use language as a strategy to promote ethnic difference is very hard to prove for antiquity, and there are few convincing examples.\(^{25}\) The repetition of this position, which cannot be substantiated, can be explained perhaps by a desire to locate a decisive attachment between Arabic and Arab identity in the pre-Islamic era. There is though no evidence at present to support a link between the development of Arabic and the activities of the Nasrīs at al-Hirah.

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\(^{24}\) *EI* s.v. “Arabiyya,” 565: “The court of Hira remained a centre of bedouin poets: this helped in developing and unifying the language of poetry; its written use at al-Hira also furthered its standardisation.”

It is important to note that the comments here do not amount to a denial that those speaking the same language enjoyed a sense of commonality, a prospect that we can, without danger, reasonably assume; or, indeed, that Arabic may have helped to foster a feeling of community. It is simply that there is no conclusive evidence either for or against the idea that speaking Arabic in antiquity was a deliberate marker of cultural difference, and thus to state and readily accept that this was the case is to run the risk of ascribing modern expectations to a situation in the sixth century. What can be reliably said about the development of the Arabic script is that, in the current opinion of experts, it developed from the Nabataean Aramaic script, probably out of repeated writing on soft materials, but the actual specifics are unknown. Any number of locations or catalysts might serve for a “definitive” phase in its development, and there is no reason to suppose either way that al-Hirah should be preferred. We might equally, for example, point to Syria, where the three Arabic-script inscriptions of the sixth century have been found (see below), but this could simply stem from an accident of archaeological survival.

Finally, there are also problems of terminology, such as how to understand state, tribe, and Arab, mentioned above, and the connected question of appropriate nomenclature. The names Ghassān/Ghassānid, Lakhm/Lakhmid, and Kinda, have become closely associated with the most prominent individuals who appear in the sixth-century sources that describe the relationship between Rome, Sasanian Iran, and the kingdom of Himyar. While ancient sources describe individual Arab élites, they are largely silent about the wider groups of people whom they are presumed to have led. It has now become preferable therefore to talk of Jafnids, Naṣrids, and Ḥuhr̲ids, supposed family dynasties, rather than groups of people, Ghassān, Lakhm, and Kinda, respectively, about whom we know very little, and the strength of whose links to the Jafnid or other élites is open to debate. Such dynastic terms are not themselves without their own difficulties, because they are derived from supposed eponymous ancestors, “Jafna,” “Naṣr,” and “Ḥujr̲,” about whom equally little may actually be known; Ḥujr̲ is perhaps the exception. To further complicate matters, contemporary Greco-Roman authors do not talk of “the Jafnids,” but prefer to use the names of individuals, such as al-Ḥārith (Arethas) or al-Mundhir (Alamoundaros), for reasons that are unclear, but that are con-

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27 Shift in nomenclature initiated by Robin, “Le royaume Hujride.” Robin and Genequand focused on the problem further in their conference, Regards croisés de l’histoire et de l’archéologie sur la dynastie Jafnide, held in Paris (Nov. 2008), breaking associations between Jafnids and Ghassān originally made by Nöldeke (Ghassānischen Fürsten), and by Rothstein (Die Dynastie der Lahmiden), for the Lakhmids and Naṣrids, taking their cue from Muslim Arabic sources.
sistent with the Roman preference for personal, inter-ruler relationships with single powerful individuals, rather than those with larger, inter-state groups of people. In general, the primary sources show a frustrating lack of interest in anything beyond the most basic facts about who the Arab leaders were, and in the majority of cases they say nothing at all about the wider groups of people under their influence.

It is apparent that there are many problems, issues, and obstacles that must be cautiously navigated if we are to arrive at a balanced view of the role and place of the Arabs in the sixth century. We now can turn to the three main groups or family dynasties—the Hujrids, the Nasrids, and the Jafnids—to assess what we know about their activities in the fifth and sixth centuries. While nothing can be definitive, it is hoped that this brief analysis will show how it is appropriate to discuss individual élites within the context of the fifth and sixth centuries, rather than the kingdoms, which may, or may not, have existed.

The Hujrids and Kinda

After the kingdom of Saba was annexed by Himyar ca. 275, the Himyarite kingdom became the dominant power in southern Arabia and extended its authority northwards. By the mid-fourth century, Himyarite expeditions were reaching central Arabia. While there is no direct link between the extension of Himyarite power and a deliberate policy of proxy rule, using the leaders of Kinda, a group of people who lived under Himyarite control in southern Arabia, there is a correspondence between Himyarite military expeditions in northern Arabia and the emergence of a Kindite family dynasty, the so-called “Hujrids,” in the same region. An inscription known as Ry 509, found at Ma’sal al-Jumh in Najd, in central Arabia, celebrates the Himyarite expedition north to the “land of Ma’add,” carried out with the assistance of forces from Kinda. The later account provided by Ibn Habib about the activities of a king of Kinda, Hujr b. ‘Amr, lends support to the theory that it was during the events described by Ry 509 that, with Himyar’s assent, Hujr was either installed over, or took control of, Ma’add, a group of people or an area in northern Arabia. Hujr may not have been the only ally or client leader


under Himyar’s direction; Ry 510 (521 CE) describes a certain Nu’man, or al-Nu’mān, at the head of a group of people called Muḍar, paying allegiance to the Himyarites at Maṣal al-Jumh, possibly reflecting the existence of a second dynastic lineage under the influence of the Himyarites.32

What was the relationship between Hujr, Himyar, and Kinda, and what was the nature of Hujr’s position? Hujr is described as “Hujr, son of ‘Amr, king (malik) of Kinda,” in a graffito, found to the northeast of Najrān, and datable probably to the fifth century.33 Kinda appears again in Ry 510 taking part, with others, in an offensive against the pro-Sasanian Nasrīd leader al-Mundhir in Mesopotamia.34 Yet while Hujr may have been drawn from Kinda, and even claimed kingship over it, he and his descendants appear to have been used not to rule Kinda exclusively, but instead, to act as Himyarite allies or deputies for the territory of Ma’add, some distance away in northern Arabia. Any understanding of Hujr as a king of a defined territorial area or kingdom is thus potentially misleading, because it is not clear exactly what relationship he maintained with Kinda, whose territory lay far to the south.35 It also seems clear that Himyar considered individuals such as Hujr or Nu’mān or al-Nu’mān to be under their control. In Ry 509, for example, at approximately the same time as Hujr claimed kingship over Kinda—a group clearly expected to render military service to Himyar when required—Himyarite kings refer to their royal power over “the Arabs of the highlands and the littoral.” Himyarite power, not Hujrid, was the dominant factor. Indeed, the graffito claiming Hujr’s rule over Kinda is just that, and there is a clear correspondence with a sixth-century Arabic graffito at Jebel Seis in Syria, which records the Jafnīd leader al-Hārith as malik, “king,” but in a similarly low-profile fashion and within the geographical and temporal context of the Jafnīds’ subordination to the Roman Empire. The “royalty” of both Hujr and al-Hārith was probably of the sort denoting elite status for local consumption, tolerated by their imperial patrons, and not a reference to serious territorial claims.36
In addition to being clients or allies of the Himyarite kingdom, Hūjr and his descendants also found themselves embroiled in Roman attempts to extend their political influence into northern Arabia. The Romans were historically interested in this region, as the second-century Ruwwāfa inscriptions, and the recent inscription discovered at Hegrā (Mādāʾin Šāliḥ), both from the time of Marcus Aurelius, emphasize. Roman policy apparently sought to create a series of buffers along the west side of the Arabian peninsula, posing an attractive counterpoint to possible Sasanian attempts to do the same further east, and controlling trade interests in the area. The sources—Procopius, Malalas, the accounts of Roman diplomats preserved by Photius, and the later writer Theophanes Confessor—suggest that the Hujrids became the objects of Roman diplomatic policy not long after Hūjr became leader over Maʿadd. Initially, a man called al-Ḥārith, a grandson of Hūjr, and not to be confused with al-Ḥārith the Jafnid, apparently concluded an agreement with Anastasius in 502/3 after a period of unrest in northern Arabia. It might be presumed that the alliance was of at least some value to the Romans, because al-Ḥārith fought the pro-Sasanian Naṣrids, whose raids would later prompt the decisive actions of Justinian with regard to the Jafnid Arabs in Syria and Arabia. Al-Ḥārith, grandson of Hūjr, was killed in 527 fighting the dangerous Naṣrid leader, al-Mundhir. Subsequently, in 530/1, a certain Kaisos, the “leader of Kinda and Maʿadd” and descendant of al-Ḥārith, received a Roman embassy.

39 Theoph. Chron. 144.
40 Malalas, Chron. 434–5; Theoph. Chron. 179.
and later enjoyed a visit to Constantinople. Subsequently, the diplomat Nonnus also visited Kaisos, and, simultaneously, another ambassador, Julianus, embarked on a mission to exert pressure on Axum and Himyar to join with Rome against the Sasanians. Here, Procopius portrays Kaisos as the Roman favourite in the region.

Both the Roman Empire and the Himyarite kingdom seem to have attempted to influence events in northern and central Arabia through the Hujrids, and it is possible that the Romans also had contact with Mudar as part of this process. Ry 510 notes the involvement of a (?)group of people, “Tha’labat,” alongside Kinda and Mudar. Elsewhere, Joshua the Stylite had already recorded the appearance of “Tha’labite Arabs,” fighting for the Romans. The link between Mudar and Tha’labat seems to suggest the likelihood of friendly contact between Rome and Mudar, especially if, as Robin has argued, the territory of Mudar was generally consistent with that of northern Arabia, and was close to or even overlapped with the southern frontiers of the Roman Empire.

The fate of the Hujrids is vague. That they were continued objects of Roman policy is underlined by the report preserved by Photius that Kaisos was granted the office of phylarch in Palestine, a position that bound him into the Roman frontier “system.” Kaisos later divided his position between two brothers. After this point, the disappearance of the descendents of Hujr from the literary sources, accompanied by the rise of the Jafnids as Roman allies in Syria in 527/8, raises the possibility that Ma’add had fallen under Roman control via the Jafnids. However, evidence suggests that it was the Nasrids, not the Jafnids, who took over as powerbrokers in the region, at a time when the Himyarite kingdom was experiencing difficulties controlling its clients.

According to the famous inscription at Marib (548 CE), Abraha of Himyar received embassies from Axum, the Romans, the Sasanians, al-Mundhir the Naṣrid, and two Jafnids, al-Hārith, elevated by Justinian in 527/8, and Abu-Kārīb, perhaps the brother of al-Hārith. The presumed grandeur of this occasion belies the various problems plaguing Himyarite dominance in Arabia, including the need to deal with a revolt by Yazīd ibn Kabsha, the man

41 Phot. Bib. 3.
46 Phot. Bib. 3.
whom Abraha had posted to control Kinda. Only four years later, Abraha campaigned successfully against Ma‘add, indicating that there were contests against Himyarite power in the north as well as the south. The details for the expedition against Ma‘add come from an inscription known as Ry 506 (552 CE) and the same inscription also suggests that ‘Amr, son of the Naṣrid al-Mundhir, had rather ambitiously installed himself as leader of Ma‘add, taking advantage of the temporary opportunity the revolt offered. In the end, Abraha enjoyed some success in his endeavours, and the Naṣrids surrendered hostages following their defeat. However, Himyar’s power was waning. The productive diplomatic contacts between the Hujrids and the Romans, and the forays into Ma‘add by the Naṣrids, were a symptom of this decline.

What of Kinda? Although Hujr may have styled himself “king of Kinda,” it does not necessarily follow, given their apparent position in northern Arabia, that he or his descendants were “kings” of the territory usually ascribed to Kinda, in the southwestern part of the peninsula. Based on the evidence from Saudi excavations at Qaryat al-Fāw, 700km southwest of Riyadh, and identified by inscriptions as the “capital” of Kinda, the group minted its own coins, produced frescoes and statues, and imported fine goods, doing so as a client “state” within the territory of, and under the control of, the kingdom of Himyar.

The Naṣrids and al-Ḥīrah

The term “Naṣrid” refers to a putative and eponymous ancestor. It has now replaced “Lakhmid” as the preferred term to describe the leaders of the family understood to have held power over the course of several centuries at al-Ḥīrah, in Iraq. The Naṣrids became allied to the Sasanians from at least the end of the third century, as the Paikuli inscription from Kurdistan indicates, referring to an individual named ‘Amr of Lakhm in a list of Sasanian vassals. This early connection between the individuals and Lakhm led to the conventional application of the label “Lakhmid” to include anyone under the Nasrid control, but we have very little information about who made up the people who lived in or around al-Ḥīrah, and there is no reason to suppose that any connection between Nasrid leaders and Lakhm that may have existed in the third century was still present in the sixth, or that the Naṣrids ruled over a homogeneous Lakhmid kingdom. As mentioned above, the city

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48 CJS 4.541; Hoyland, Arabia, 55; Smith, “Events in Arabia,” 440.
50 Abd al-Rahman al-Ansary, Qaryat al-Faw: A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Sa‘udi Arabia (Riyadh, 1982).
of al-Ḥirah has only received the most limited attention from archaeologists, notably Talbot Rice in 1931–1933, but the results that he published mostly identified material from the seventh century and later. Most recently, Japanese archaeologists have worked near al-Ḥirah, but have unfortunately not been able to do any major work at al-Ḥirah itself.52

In common with the Jafnids, it is only in the late fifth and early sixth centuries that the Nasrids appear in a significant way in contemporary literary sources, primarily in negative contexts: the problems which a certain al-Nu’mān caused to the Romans; the attacks of the most prolific Nasrid leader, al-Mundhir; the role of his descendant, ‘Amr, in negotiations with the Roman Emperor Justin II; and, finally, the apparent Christianisation and death of another al-Nu’mān, the final Nasrid leader.53 The attention paid to the Nasrids and particularly al-Mundhir in Roman sources focuses on their military activities, and their difficult relationship with the Christian religion. Al-Mundhir gained notoriety amongst Roman authors for his sacrifices to the goddess al-‘Uzzā, with his victims purportedly including 400 nuns.54 Yet beyond the promising rhetoric of these stories, al-Mundhir, a man of some political acumen, exploited Christians and their religion when it suited him. He was, for example, reported to be open to the idea of becoming Christian, although the details are very obscure.55 In 530, he used a deacon named Sergius to treat, successfully, with the Romans on his behalf.56 The Nasrid leaders did also not stop anti-Chalcedonian missionaries from working in the environs of al-Ḥirah, and Simeon of Bēth Arshām was active in promoting miaphysite Christianity in opposition to the local Nestorians.57 This was presumably designed to appeal to the Christian minority in Sasanian Iran, some of whom may have made up the population of al-Ḥirah.

Throughout the sixth century the Nasrids continued to resist “conversion,” but, equally, they avoided being drawn into episodes of persecution. In 523, Justin I sent the diplomat Abraham, the father of Nonnosus, to al-Ḥirah to arrange for the release of two Roman generals captured in battle.58 Abraham

56 Malalas, Chron. 466.
58 Zach.Rhet. HE 8.3.
and his entourage missed al-Mundhir at al-Hirah but found him in the desert at Ramleh, where al-Mundhir had also received ambassadors from the anti-Christian king of Himyar, Dhū Nuwās, who apparently informed al-Mundhir of the massacre at Najrān in north Arabia. 59 While Dhū Nuwās was perhaps looking for support from the Naṣrids, they did not respond favourably. 60 Aside from the problems which help for Dhū Nuwās may have caused in the Naṣrid militia, some of whom, according to the narrative of Zacharias, professed the Christian faith, and reacted nervously to news about events at Najrān, an inscription reported by Yaqūt shows that Hind, wife of al-Mundhir, and daughter of al-Hārith, grandson of Hujr of Kinda, dedicated a monastery at al-Hirah. Al-Mundhir thus had his wife’s Christian faith, and that of her supporters, to consider as he made his decision. Hind’s son, ‘Amr (ca.554–70), the same individual who appears engaged in diplomatic contacts with the Romans, appears on the same inscription. 61 Following the short reign of ‘Amr’s son, another al-Mundhir (ca. 580–582/3), a number of sources report that his successor al-Nu’mān (583-ca. 602) adopted Christianity—the first and last Naṣrid leader recorded to openly do so. According to Evagrius’ excited report, al-Nu’mān melted down a golden Aphrodite, and requested baptism. 62 In any case, al-Nu’mān was short-lived, and was imprisoned and executed in 601/2. 63

In common with the Hujrids, the Naṣrids were a multi-generational dynasty, at least partially dependent on state patronage for their position and for sanction of their activities, and so it is likely that they, like the Hujrids, would not have had access to sources of revenue as well as political and military opportunities without some form of state support. If anything, imperial support was even more vital for the Naṣrids, because al-Hirah lay in close proximity to the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon. Any interference by the Naṣrids in Ma’add was probably encouraged by Ctesiphon, and Arabs under Naṣrid control were themselves usually supervised, on campaign, by Sasanian forces. Yet in these instances, the Naṣrid leaders also tried to influence the Sasanian King himself, even if under the pretense of a common set of goals, and, as argued elsewhere, the Naṣrids grew beyond their roles as imperial clients as a result of the wealth and political backing they received from their Sasanian sponsor. 64

59 For Najrān see now Beaucamp, et al., eds., Juifs et Chrétiennes en Arabie.
60 Trimingham, Christianity Among the Arabs, 169.
61 Zach. Rhet.HE 8.3; Yaqūt, Mu’jam, 2.542.
62 Evag. HE 6.22; the story also appears in Chron. Seert (PO 13, 468–69).
63 Al-Tabarī, 1.1018–28; Chron. Jacob of Edessa, 20; Rothstein, Dynastie, 115–17; Howard-Johnston, Witnesses to a World Crisis, 438.
Robin has convincingly argued that the Naṣrids were the most state-like group out of the Naṣrids, Jafnids, and Hujrids. Unlike the Jafnids and Hujrids, they developed some sort of stable and apparently urban center, and their relationship with their patrons lasted considerably longer than either of their competitors. In the end, however, their effective encapsulation by the Sasanian Empire and the resulting vulnerability to the state was as much felt by the last Naṣrid leader, al-Nu'mān, as by his Jafnid counterpart, al-Mundhir.

The Jafnids and Ghassān

The term “Jafnid” refers to a small number of individuals who were allies of the Roman Empire between approximately 500 and 585. Far more is known about them than either the Naṣrids or the Hujrids, due to a small corpus of inscriptions and a relatively large number of references to their activities in sixth-century Roman sources. Even so, it is not clear how they initially came into contact with the Roman Empire. Muslim Arab sources suggest that Ghassān, a tribal group usually associated with the Jafnids, moved into the frontier regions of Syria and displaced those who were already there. The Jafnid leaders emerged from these encounters with the strength and acumen to negotiate with the Romans for an alliance. The exact nature of the links between Ghassān and the Jafnids is obscure, but a recently-suggested analogy offers a possible solution. Hoyland relates that in the seventeenth century, the chief of the Shammar group led Shammar out of Najd, and his descendants could be found two centuries later ruling a confederation of Shammar and other allied tribes in Mesopotamia. While this had occurred, some from Shammar had stayed in Najd, and, over time, the members of Shammar in Mesopotamia in fact constituted a minority. This is not dissimilar to the situation described above for the Hujrids and Kinda, and we might imagine a situation where the Jafnids left the territory of Ghassān without all of Ghassān accompanying them. This hypothesis finds parallels in the debates on barbarian migrations in late antique western Europe, particularly in the possibility of a “chain migration,” where some elements move, leaving others behind, or even an “elite transfer,” where the top stratum of one group takes over another, larger group, where it remains a powerful minority. Both

67 Hoyland, “Late Roman Provincia Arabia,” 118.
are plausible correspondences. Certainly one theme that has emerged in the rebalancing of ideas about western European barbarian migration is that such movements of people were likely far smaller than previously thought, and indeed possibly far smaller than some ancient sources would like us to think. A wholesale migration of Ghassān, for which there is no clear evidence, is not necessary to explain Jafnid leadership in the sixth century. We should thus exercise caution in attaching the names of the Jafnids and Naṣrids to entire groups of people such as Ghassān or Lakhm, especially because it is clear that power rested with the individual leaders, not groups of people.

The Jafnids would eventually become the principal Arab allies of the Roman Empire in the sixth century. Al-Ḥārith was the first to receive a significant level of imperial recognition in 527/8, although his father, Jabala, may have initiated contact with the Romans at the beginning of the sixth century. This is by no means clear, however, and an individual named Tha’labā, a possible father of Jabala, may be preferred instead as the individual who brought the Jafnids to the attention of the empire. After these early contacts, the critical boost for the development of Jafnid power was the elevation of al-Ḥārith a generation later to a position of direct imperial patronage under Justinian, a situation that recalls Himyarite support for Ḥuṣr and Sasanian support for the Naṣrids. According to Procopius, Justinian saw an opportunity to use al-Ḥārith to tackle the problems caused by the troublesome raids of the Naṣrid leader al-Mundhir. Al-Ḥārith was already a phylarch, and Justinian now gave him what Procopius refers to as the “dignity of king,” probably an honorific and some funding to support his position.

Why else did Justinian pursue this policy? Beyond the risk presented by al-Mundhir, Justinian probably also saw a useful opportunity, alongside his initiatives with Axum, Himyar and the Ḥuṣrids, to frustrate Sasanian ambitions through a calculated interference in Naṣrid activities on the fringes of Roman territory. In this respect, the Jafnids presented an opportunity to turn Arab allies against Sasanian interests in a different, eastward sphere, in conjunction with efforts towards the south, which were exploited using the Ḥuṣrids or perhaps the leaders of Muḍar. Whatever the precise motivation, the rec-

70 Theoph. *Chron.* 141 (Jabala); Shahid, *Sixth Century*, 1/2, 10–11 (Tha’labā).
72 Ibid., 1.17.47.
ognition accorded to the Jafnids by Constantinople provided them with a consistent degree of extremely influential political backing. Between 527 and 582, the Jafnids concentrated an impressive amount of political power in their family, primarily through their involvement in the religious life, politics, and military activities of the Roman Empire. As supporters of the anti-Chalcedonian miaphysites, they helped to obtain the ordination of Jacob Baradaeus from the empress Theodora, and they were invited to mediate in disputes both within the miaphysite camp and at court. They benefited from invitations to the capital city of the empire. They also received honorary titles, such as patrikios, and al-Hārith is venerated in the Arabic graffito from Jebel Seis, a location within reach of Roman power, as malik. The Jafnids were commemorated in a number of Greek inscriptions, including at the monastery at Qasr al-Ḥiyr al-Gharbi, at a large house at al-Ḥayyat in the Haurān, and, most famously, in a small building at the site of Ṛṣāfa in northern Syria, which was probably a commission of the Jafnid al-Mundhir. They accompanied Roman forces on campaign, and fought with them in a number of important engagements, notably at Callinicum in 531. Despite this, no Jafnid, to our knowledge, ever held a significant military command or prominent civilian post, a fact which stands in stark contrast to the penetration of the Roman hierarchy by those of barbarian origin elsewhere in the empire. Part of this seems to be due to aspiration—the Jafnids were, it seems, content with the status quo, and were satisfied to work within the constraints of the position of phylarch, a leadership role that largely governed their relationship with the empire. But it also seems to be that their status as encapsulated allies also placed them “in between”—dependent on the political support offered by the

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77 IGLS 2553b, d.

78 Wadd. 2110.


81 E.g., Stilicho; Mallobaudes, king of the Franks and comes domesticorum, Amm. 31.10.6; Gildo, initially comes Africae and later magister utriusque militiae per Africam, *CTh* 9.7.9 (30 December 393).

empire; reliant on the backing of the people in Syria, where they were most active, and whom they backed through their work for the miaphysite leadership; and, most of all, perhaps, dependent on their “own people” for their position. The vulnerability that this position entailed shielded them from any direct absorption into the Roman Empire, but it was also put into stark relief when, on two occasions, the Roman emperor decided to move against the Jafnids; on the second attempt, Maurice, in 582, was successful. After a brief period of resistance from al-Nu'mān, a son of al-Mundhir, whose actions are notable for being one of the very few occasions where any evidence is found for the activities of Jafnid supporters, the Jafnids disappear entirely from Roman histories of the period and, with one contested exception, the archaeological record.

**Arab Identities**

The Roman Empire, Sasanian Iran, and the kingdom of Himyar played a key role in supporting individual Arab leaders. They did not support wider groups of people per se, and they only supported the leaders for as long as it suited them to do so. Imperial alliance offered a significant range of opportunities, and these are best exemplified by the Jafnids, who became involved in imperial religious politics, took Roman titles, visited Constantinople, and participated in military campaigns. The Jafnids were dependent on their imperial sponsors for a significant part of their power, and when this support was withdrawn they swiftly found themselves unable to hold their position. This same was true for the Nasrīds, who were easily eliminated by the Sasanian monarchy when they became surplus to requirements. All three Arab family groups broadly fit the paradigm of frontier allies, as elaborated in studies of the Roman west and anthropological studies of the Near East. Like the Goths, Franks, and other western barbarians, they were able to profit from their situation on the periphery to build up political power and support in

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ways that might not otherwise have been possible; this is particularly true of the Jafnids and the Nasrids.86

Noticeably absent from this picture is this wider group of people. Clearly, they existed; after the arrest and exile of the Jafnid al-Mundhir, his supporters created problems from the Romans at Bostra, and throughout their tenure as allies the Jafnids had fought with their own forces alongside those of the Romans.87 Yet beyond such sparse mentions, there is little we can find out about the identity, culture, politics, or religion of those who supported the Jafnids, any more than we can similarly know a great deal about many of the barbarian groups who appeared along the Roman frontiers at various stages in antiquity. This does not mean that Ghassan were not present in northern Arabia or Syria, but even if we could say for certain that Ghassan did exist in Syria, there would be little more that could be said about them. It is certainly clear that there is not really any justification for seeing a “Ghassanid” kingdom any more than “Lakhmid” one. If we must find a label more satisfying than “dynasty” or “group,” Robin’s term, principauté, which refers primarily to the type of individual power exercised by the Jafnids, is surely more appropriate.88

Finally, one might return briefly to the question of language. This is a topic dealt with at length elsewhere in relation to the Jafnids and Nasrids, and the critical foundation for which a debt is owed to the work of Michael Macdonald, Christian Robin, and others.89 Work has focused around a number of problems, such as identifying the catalyst for the development of the Arabic script. Hoyland, Robin, and Shahid have examined the possibility that it might be linked to the Jafnids or to the activities of Christians in Syria.90 The idea has also been proposed that court traditions, emulating those of Rome or


87  Joh.Eph. HE 3.3.41–2.
90  Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur’an,” 59; Robin, “La réforme de l’écriture arabe à l’époque du califat médinois,” Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph 56 (2006), 319–64, at 329; categorically: Shahid, Sixth Century, 2/1, 403 n.3: “there is no doubt . . . that Christianity played a major role in the final stages of the development of the Arabic script in pre-Islamic times.”
Sasanian Iran, may also have played a part. As yet, no satisfactory solution has emerged.91 Questions have arisen as well about the “ethnic value” of Arabic on the three Arabic script inscriptions of the sixth century, one, the graffito from Jebel Seis described earlier, the other two, martyria inscriptions from Zebed and Harrān in Syria, where the Arabic text appears with other languages and scripts.92 Did the deliberate choice of Arabic reflect a desire to express a particular identity? The same controversial question has been asked about the remarkable Arabic-language inscription from Nemāra in Syria, dated to 328, and which celebrates the career of a certain potentate, Imru’ l-Qays.93 One answer to this problem is to point to the remarkable fact that those who used Arabic were now, initially in the fourth century, but more prominently in the sixth, of sufficient status to create inscriptions in Arabic where the usual prestige language was Greek or, occasionally, Nabataean Aramaic. At the same time, it is equally remarkable that the corpus of oral poetry and the collection of the ayyām al-'arab stories, both written down much later, were apparently being created.94 Quite what underpinned these extraordinary developments is unknown, but we perhaps should see the simultaneous phenomena of the use of Arabic on inscriptions, the production of the oral poetry corpus, and the growth of Arab elites such as the Jafnids, as significant in and of itself. This is a conclusion which does not try to answer the somewhat unanswerable question of whether or not Arabic was being used to broadcast a different sense of identity, but instead ties the sudden relative prominence of cultural phenomena such as the Arabic language and Arabic poetry not to imagined or unknowable processes, but to the visible and measurable political development of Arab elites in contact with the empires of the Near East.

What then can be said about Arab identity in the pre-Islamic period, if we are to set aside, for now, at least, the idea that there were necessarily kingdoms, where Arabic was necessarily used as a means to create an Arab

91 Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur’ān,” 57–58.
identity, an attractive proposition which would fulfill some modern expectations of how a people should be defined? It is worth stressing the important context of a Near East dominated by Rome and Sasanian Iran, seeing the Arabs as imperial clients and subject to similar pressures and possibilities as those experienced by their Germanic counterparts in the west. Imperial power and support certainly had critical consequences for the Jafnids, Naṣrids, and Hūjrids. All owed a large portion of their own political strength to their interface with Rome, Sasanian Iran, and Himyar. Even before the sixth century, the power of Rome and Iran was relevant enough to warrant recognition in the boasts attached to Imru’ l-Qays on the Nemāra inscription, where it was claimed that he had acted as a deputy for both empires. But while we look sideways to the world in which these Arab leaders found themselves, and from which they seized their opportunities, we must also keep one eye on the future; for the presence of the Jafnids in Syria as leading Arab potentates offers a vital strand of continuity between the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, where what was one of the most important parts of the Roman Empire had, in the end, long experience of Arab leadership in political, religious, and military arenas.⁹⁵ The presence of the Naṣrids, so close to the future ‘Abbasid capital at Baghdad, is perhaps of similar import. Places associated with the Jafnids, such as Resāfa, would go on to be important for the Umayyads as places of religious power and as locations which facilitated contact with the varied elements which constituted Umayyad political support.⁹⁶

There was a long history of interaction between Arabs and the Roman and Sasanian empires, framed by imperial competition for frontier allies and by the activities of the kingdom of Himyar. In the sixth century, before the emergence of Islam, some aspects of Arab identity which would become important for the creation of later, Muslim Arab identity, such as political leadership, the Arabic language, familiarity with and adherence by some to a religion of the Book, were developing, and what is of stunning significance for our understanding of Arab identity before Islam is that they were doing so within the framework created by Roman, Sasanian, and Himyarite power. The sixth century, surely, is of great significance for our understanding of Arab identity.