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IN THE SHADE OF HIMYAR AND SASAN - THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA ACCORDING TO THE ʔAYYAM AL-ʔARAB- LITERATURE

A conventional text-book on the history of the Arabs or the history of Islam starts with a short survey of the pre-history, i.e. the background of the appearance of the Prophet in Mecca. This background is well summarized by Bernard Lewis: 'The population [of Arabia] was mainly pastoral and nomadic, living by its flocks and by raiding the peoples of the oases and of the cultivated neighbouring provinces'. This eminent historian of course knows about the conditions in South Arabia and has a section on it but even in his book the picture of pre-Islamic Arabia is dominated by the nomadic-tribal complex. This is even more prominent in more conventional presentations like those of e.g. Watt, Hitti, Hodgson, Cook. Mansfield's statements are quite characteristic 'Most of the settled peoples showed that they accepted this belief by adopting nomadic values; some of them abandoned their settlements for the freedom of the desert'. Shahîd (1970) shows a more realistic concept of geography and ethnicity but the description of the inhabitants outside the rain-watered lands shows the classic static picture: the bedouin with all his well-known characteristics is the perpetual dweller of the 'desert'. A modern standard work like H. Kennedy (1986) devotes 14 pages to pre-Islamic Arabia of which some three lines deal with South Arabia which is equalled with oases like Yathrib and Yamāma. Lapidus (1988) states that 'Arabia was primarily pastoral. While the imperial world was civilized, Arabia was the home of camps and oases. Whereas the imperial peoples were committed to monotheistic

religions, Arabia was largely pagan. While the imperial world was politically organized, Arabia was politically fragmented'. The kingdom in Yemen was 'peripheral'. Common to all these presentations is a) the alleged dominance of the nomadic-tribal structure of pre-Islamic Arabia b) a tendency to see this as a type of society existing from times immemorial in Arabia. A predominant feature in this is the emphasis on the 'bedouin' character of pre-Islamic Arabian society. There is a strong tendency to see ancient Arabian society more or less identical with that of the present-day bedouin where the blood-vengeance ethos and the razzia-institution are basic features.

The reasons for this are not so difficult to discern. There are obvious similarities between present-day bedouin and pre-Islamic tribal life as depicted in the ancient Arabic poetry and the parts of the Arabo-Islamic historiography dealing the history of the pre-Islamic tribes. But this superficial similarity has tended to overshadow the differences there are between modern and ancient times as well as the problems arising from a too static view on pre-Islamic Arabian history. The reason for the failure to make this distinction is to a large extent due to the fact that this history is usually written by Arabists and Islamologists who are familiar with the Arabic sources and thus tend to reproduce the picture of history given in them. If non-Arabic sources are taken into account the picture may be drastically changed as has been shown by the debate around the provoking study by Patricia Crone (1977). Even if the conclusions in that book remain controversial and, probably, often not correct, it nevertheless shows that it is necessary to take all relevant historical sources into account when reconstructing history, not only a selection according to which languages one happens to know.

One problem is why the picture of pre-Islamic Arabian history in the early Islamic historiography looks as it does. Apart from the dominance of tribal history a striking feature in it is the shallow chronological perspective. The bulk of stories and poems deal with and are attributed to persons and events located in the century preceding the appearance of the Prophet. For the epoch before that the Arabo-Islamic historiography has very little concrete to say. We have a list of kings in al-Ḥīra reaching back to the end of the third century AD.

Another list of royal names of the rulers of Ḥimyar starts in the same period. This is all. The rest is legend. Even the two royal lines of al-Ḥīra and Ḥimyar are shaky and not very reliable even if it is worth pointing out that of the ca. twenty names occurring in the list of kings of Ḥimyar one half is identifiable with royal names in the inscriptions from South Arabia from the period 275-570 AD.

The explanation for this is the fact that the Arabo-Islamic historiography on pre-Islamic Arabia (apart from the history of the two cities in Ḥiḡāz) is founded on traditions emanating from the large tribes of Central and Eastern Arabia who became the dominating political power in the Umayyad caliphate. The traditions from these tribes were collected mainly by two writers: ʿAbū l-Mundhir Hishām b. Muḥammad b. as-Sāʿib al-Kalbī (-819) and ʿAbū ʿUbayda Maʿmar b. al-Muthannā (-824/25). Ibn al-Kalbī wrote an astonishing amount of books dealing with everything pre-Islamic whereas the traditions collected by Abū ʿUbayda were mainly concentrated in a few monographs, the most important of which was *Kitāb ʿayyām al-ʿArab*, ‘The Book on the battle-days of the Arabs’. Most of the original works of the two are lost but they are widely quoted by most later historians and commentators on the old poetry. From this is it apparent that the picture in medieval Islam on the *ḡāhiliyya*-period was mainly built on these two authors.

There is a shortage of good research on this material, the basic works still being those of W. Caskel and his school. Caskel has analysed the *ʿayyām*-stories and many of his observations are very valuable even if they can be interpreted differently. He underlines the literary character of the narratives. It can be shown that they contain a stock of literary motifs which are used in different contexts. Like in most epic traditions similar events tend to be told by using similar literary formulaic devices. Another important observation is the existence of two different literary strata in the *ʿayyām*-stories. One consists of short novellistic stories, mainly elaborating on one event, usually a *ghazw*, a razzia, and its consequences, involving smaller groups and clans within the large tribes. Another layer consists of more developed epic structures telling

about wars that are said to have lasted for a long time, involving larger tribal groups. Unlike the shorter narratives, this latter category is centred around the idea of blood vengeance and the maintenance of honour. What Caskel did not point out is the fact that the larger epic stories have a wider political perspective than the others, containing several references to the general political situation in Arabia which is much less prominent - or absent altogether in the short stories. If we look at the main large epics: the story of ʾImruʾ al-Qays and its prologue, the story of the Basūs-war, the cycle about Ḥārith b. Zālim, the Dāḥis-war and the dramatic narrative leading to the battle of Dhū Qār they take place in a general political framework encompassing the kingdom in al-Ḥira and their overlords in Iran as well as the kingdom of Kinda and their overlords in Ḥimyar as the background of the unfolding events. The interesting thing about this is that the aim of the stories themselves is not to tell political history. The main purpose of this narrative tradition is to glorify the virtues of the ancestors of the leading tribes in the Arabo-Islamic empire in the later Umayyad period. ʾAbū ʾUbayda's book was, in fact, an argument in the conflict around the *shuʿūbiyya*, the debate concerning the ranking of the different Muslim groups, mainly Arabs and Iranians. It can be argued that this ‘involuntary’ reference to the general political situation contains genuine memories which has not been tampered with to the same extent as the concrete events themselves. This general framework is, of course, not entirely trustworthy but has to be critically evaluated, as has been shown by studies by G. Olinder (1927), E. Meyer (1970) and M. Lecker (1989). But in general it can be said that the *ʾayyām*-tradition contains a lot of valuable historical memories preserved among the tribes, such as names of persons and groups, names of battles - and references to the general political situation. The concrete narrative on the other hand: the characterisation of persons, detailed descriptions of events etc. is, as Caskel has shown, strongly literarized and cannot be used as a source for reconstruction of history.

I shall now sketch the picture of the political developments in Arabia from the end of the 5th century to the beginning of the 7th mainly based on the peripheral remarks in the *ʾayyām*-stories.

There is a cluster of stories about the fall of the kingdom of Kinda in Central Arabia which culminate in the epics of Imruʿ al-Qays and the Basūs war. The dominance of the Kinda kings, the dynasty of Ḥuḡr ʿĀkil al-murār reflects a political dominance of the kings of Ḥimyar over large parts of the peninsula, in fact, stretching to the shores of the Euphrates. Ḥuḡr was, according to several stories, installed as a vassal of a Ḥimyarite king, Tubbaʿ, Tubbaʿ b. Karib or Ḥassān b. Tubbaʿ. The tradition thus seems to hesitate between ʿBKRB ʿSʿD or his successor ḤSN YHʿMN. The dating would then be around 450 AD. The story of his successors, ʿAmr b. Ḥuḡr al-maqṣūr, al-Ḥārith b. ʿAmr and his sons, among whom we find Ḥuḡr the father of Imruʿ al-Qays, is the starting point for the whole *ʿayyām*-tradition involving the outbreak of the Basūs-war in eastern Arabia between the tribes Bakr and Taghlib. It is told that the Basūs-war was finally ended through the mediation by al-Mundhir b. Nuʿmān of al-Ḥīra. This is symptomatic since al-Mundhir is said to have married the daughter of al-Ḥārith b. ʿAmr, Hind māʿ as-samāʿ. He is thus originally an associated member of the Kindite ruling dynasty. But later on he emerges as the prolonged arm of the kings in Ctesiphon. His mediation in the Basūs war pictures growing ambition from al-Ḥīra to extend its influence in Eastern and other parts of Arabia as well. After the fall of the Kinda-kings, perhaps datable to ca. 530 AD, we also encounter local chieftains in western Naḡd with supertribal ambitions This is likely to reflect a situation after the campaign of Abraha told in the inscription Ry 506. Here the *ʿayyām*-stories tell about a conflict between the Hawāzin tribes, mainly ʿAmir b. Ṣaṣṣaṣa, and the Ghāṭafān tribes Dhubyān and ʿAbs. The main issue is the fall of the family of Zubayr b. Ḡadhīma of ʿAbs who is said to have ruled both Ghāṭafān and Hawāzin. These conflicts have generated the two epic cycles about al-Ḥārith b. Zālim adh-Dhubyānī and the Dāḥis-war between the two main Ghāṭafān-tribes, Dhubyān and ʿAbs. In these cycles the king of al-Ḥīra, Nuʿmān b. Mundhir, appears as having interests and allies in western Naḡd, first Zubayr of ʿAbs and then Ḡaṣfar b. Kilāb in ʿAmir b. Ṣaṣṣaṣa. We are

now in the 570ies AD. In this period the Arabic sources tell about another event of great importance viz. the instalment of a domestic dynasty in Yemen with Iranian help. This event, which was of great significance is only known from Arabic sources. The enthronement of Sayf b. Dhī Yazan at the same time meant the definitive extension of Iranian influence over almost the entire peninsula. After 570 Iran appear as the heir of the Himyarites in controlling Arabia. In the *ʔayyām*-stories the kings of al-Ḥīra appear as their agents and go-betweens among most tribes in Arabia. The abolishment of the Ḥīra-kings by the Iranian government and the ensuing conflict with the tribes in Eastern Arabia resulting in the fall of the dynasty of al-Ḥīra constitute the main themes of the great romance about the career of ʔAdī b. Zayd al-ʔibādī and the battle of Dhū Qār. Behind this story, one of the highlights of the *ʔayyām*-literature, lies a growing unease among the tribes of Arabia about the now strong Iranian hegemony.

The general picture given by the *ʔayyām*-literature is thus the dissolution of an initial stage of Himyaritic dominance in Arabia mainly through the kings of Kinda, and its successive replacement by an Iranian one through the kings of al-Ḥīra. This picture is an important complement to the one extracted from contemporary sources: inscriptions and Greek and Syriac texts. The *ʔayyām*-texts show that Arabia was much more involved in imperial politics than is usually imagined. Of crucial importance for those who work with pre-Islamic South Arabia is the ample documentation of the Himyarite involvement in the affairs of the Peninsula as a whole. The *ʔayyām*-texts show more clearly than any other sources that the classic period of pre-Islamic Arabic culture, i.e. the 6th century AD., was preceded by almost one century of political dominance from Yemen. The picture emerging is the rise of a political vacuum in Arabia as a result of the breakdown of Himyarite dominance. The reason for the breakdown is probably connected with the dramatic events around 525 and the Ethiopian conquest although the exact connections between these events still escapes us. The general picture in the *ʔayyām*-literature is how the political vacuum created by the disappearance of the power of Ḥimyar was successively filled out by the Iranian ambitions. The *ʔayyām*-literature

documents a period of uncertainty and even anarchy in Arabia where different local chieftains strove to carve out kingdoms of their own - with the power of Kinda as example. The realisation of the fact that the 6th century in Arabia was a transitional period between the dominance of two great powers must also change our view on the origin of classical Arabic culture. The feuds and wars which filled Arabia during the 6th century according to the *ʔayyām*-literature was not a natural condition of this land, an expression of a bedouin culture existing from time immemorial. It was a unique phenomenon due to a very special political situation: the disappearance of a dominating power with imperial ambitions. The picture of Arabia given by the earliest Arabic poetry and the *ʔayyām*-stories is not a reflex of timeless, unchanging conditions in a primitive bedouin society. Instead it can be seen as a great crisis upsetting a society which had been under external dominance for almost a century. The narrative traditions formulated in the large epic stories as defined by Caskel emerge from the aristocracy directly involved in the main political events during this period. The short, conventional *razzia*-stories, constituting the other stratum in the *ʔayyām*-literature, reflect the more 'natural' bedouin life where camel-raiding on a local scale between smaller segments of the big tribes was established more or less as an institution. This explains why the literary culture of Arabia - and the historical memory of later times do not reach further back than a little more than one century before the Prophet. The 6th century was a great turning point. New political and social structures emerged which in the end were able to withstand the new Iranian influence and almost crush the Roman empire. These institutions became the main carriers of the new religion proclaimed in Ḥiğāz, the only area which does not seem to have been under Iranian domination in the beginning of the 7th century. The growing insight by new archeological and epigraphic data about what the Himyarite empire was, together with a renewed reading of the *ʔayyām*-literature help us to create a new picture of the history of Arabia and the background for the rise of the Islamic world empire. Pre-Islamic Arabia was definitely not a static society dominated by nomads erring around seeking pasture and booty. The crucial factor in Arabia's appearance on the stage of world history was not nomadism but imperialism, the impact of the rise and fall of a domestic Arabian empire, that of Ḥimyar, and its relations to its

neighbours in the north: Rome, Iran and the rest of Arabia.

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