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ASPECTS OF LATE ANTIQUITY AND EARLY BYZANTIUM

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The Road to Yarmuk: The Arabs and the Fall of the Roman Power in the Middle East

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give a sketch and an interpretation of a far-reaching historical process, viz. the development leading to the Islamic conquest of the Roman eastern provinces, permanented after the battle at Yarmuk in Syria in 636, and the end of the Sasanian Empire at Qadisiyya in Iraq in 637. The historian's daily toil with sparse and ambiguous sources sometimes tends to blunt the senses to the larger perspectives in history which, after all, are the main purpose of this kind of scholarship. Being fully aware of the dangers of such an enterprise, much more vulnerable to criticism than solid philological work, we nevertheless dare to set out on a sea not often sailed.¹

The emergence of the Muslim Arabs, according to the traditional picture, took place with frightening suddenness. The picture of the wandering bedouin, searching for centuries for pasture and booty, and then suddenly being struck by religious frenzy, inspired by an obscure prophet, and these events resulting in the conquest of most of the "civilised" world in a very short time, is indeed fascinating but, at the same time, unsatisfying.² If we suppose that history

¹ Of the few attempts to give a synthesis of this process the following are worth mentioning: J. Harmatta, "The Struggle for the Possession of South Arabia Between Aksum and the Sasanians", *Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei Quaderna* 191 (1974) [= *IV Congr. Intern. di Studi Etiopici, Roma 10-15 aprile 1972*], 95-106. This article is a lucid and valuable survey and interpretation of the conditions in the southern part of the Arabian peninsula. It does not, however, deal with the northern Arabs or the whole complex of Rome-Iran-Arabia-Ethiopia. An attempt to make a synthesis of the development in Northern Arabia is W. Caskel, "Zur Beduinisierung Arabiens", *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 28 (1953), *28-*36. See also id., "Die Bedeutung der Beduinen für die Geschichte der Araber", *Arbeitsgemeinschaft f. Forsch. des Landes Nordrhein-Westfalen. Geisteswiss.*, 8 (1953), 4-24. Caskel does not pay much attention to the course of events in the surrounding empires, and his bedouins seem strangely isolated. The extensive work of F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, *Die Araber in der alten Welt*, 1-5 (Berlin, 1964-68), does not quite live up to its title. It is a rather uneven collection of articles on different historical subjects, some of which deal with Arabic matters. The older work by De Lacey O'Leary, *Arabia before Muhammad* (London, 1927), is still a useful survey, but is outdated in many views and facts.

² Cf. a classic description in Ph. Hitti, *The History of the Arabs*, 10th ed. (London, 1970), part I: *The pre-Islamic age*, especially ch. III: "Bedouin life" (pp. 23-29). More cautious authors include B. Lewis, *The Arabs in History*, 5th ed. (London, 1970), 21-35, and I. Shahid, "Pre-Islamic Arabia", in *The Cambridge History of Islam I: The Central Islamic Lands*, ed. by P. M. Holt (Cambridge, 1970), 3-29; more traditional is F. M. Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, 1981), 11-50. Considering the fact that Arabs were documented continuously from 853 BC to the rise of Islam, the small space given to this period in the standard handbooks mentioned is indeed remarkable. The impression is that these 1400 years were not especially important as compared with the 1400 years that followed, a debatable standpoint to say the least. Another deficiency in most standard works on the subject is the

consists of processes, in principle comprehensible, a military conquest of this scale and with such a lasting effect, creating a new world culture that still exists 1400 years later, must have had deep underlying causes and a long prehistory. Those causes, however, have mostly been hidden or invisible. This is due, to a large extent, to the later Islamic culture itself. It is striking how short the Islamic perspective on its own prehistory is. The classic Islamic historians of the Middle Ages knew of a history that stretched approximately one century before the appearance of the Prophet. What lay before that was legend.³ The lack of perspective in Islam's concept of its own prehistory may be the fundamental reason why the emergence of Islam and the Arab conquest have always seemed to hang at loose ends in Western scholarship as well.

Sources

There are, however, plenty of sources that shed light upon the period before Islam, more light than we usually imagine. As far as written evidence is concerned, we find continuous documentation of Arabs and other closely related groups from the year 853 BC until the seventh century AD in Akkadian, Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Syriac and Persian texts. These sources are often contemporary, and are very illuminating. The Graeco-Roman material from Late Antiquity (AD 200–600), i.e. the period which concerns us most here, has lately been subjected to comprehensive study by I. Shahid.⁴ Although many of Shahid's methods and judgements merit sharp criticism, he nevertheless knows the Arabic sources well and is sometimes able to make interesting connections between Greek and Arabic testimony.⁵ Unfortunately, there is no corresponding study based on the other sources and, consequently, no modern comprehensive study

systematic confusion between "South Arabians" and "North Arabians/Northern Arabs". The very terminology indicates that the differences between these two peoples are considered negligible, since they were both Arabs.

³ For a survey of the Islamic view on the pre-Islamic period in general see M. Springberg-Hinsen, *Die Zeit vor dem Islam in arabischen Universalgeschichten des 9. bis 12. Jahrhunderts* (Würzburg, 1989). In the modern Arabic works on this subject the fairy-tale nature of pre-Islamic history is sometimes highly conspicuous, e. g. T. Barrū, *Tārīx al-'arab al-qadīm* (The Ancient History of the Arabs) (Damascus, 1984); A. Farrūx, *Tārīx al-ġāhiliyya* (History of the Pre-Islamic Period) (Beirut, 1984); L. A. Yaḥyā, *Al-'arab fi al-'aṣr al-qadīm* (The Arabs in Antiquity) (Beirut, 1979); A. Sālim, *Tārīx al-'arab fi 'aṣr al-ġāhiliyya* (The History of the Arabs in the Pre-Islamic Period) (Beirut, 1971); B. Dallū, *Ġazirat al-'Arab qabla l-'islām. at-tārīx al-iqtisādī al-iġtimā'ī al-ṭaqāfi wa-s-siyāsī* (The Arabian Peninsula before Islam. The economic, social, cultural and political history) (Beirut, 1989). The main work in Arabic is still G. 'Alī, *Al-mufaṣṣal fi tārīx al-'arab qabla al-'islām* (Exposition of the History of the Arabs before Islam), I–X (Baghdad, 1950–1959). A good impression of the rather confused picture of the pre-Islamic period even among competent modern Arab historians is given by A. A. Duri, *The Historical Foundation of the Arab Nation*, transl. by L. I. Conrad (London–New York–Sydney, 1987; original Arabic ed. Beirut, 1984), 4–28.

⁴ I. Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs* (Washington, DC, 1984); id., *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, DC, 1984); id., *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, DC, 1989). The volume dealing with the sixth century has not yet appeared. Cf. also the minor studies collected in I. Shahid, *Byzantium and the Semitic Orient before the Rise of Islam* (London, 1988). – Shahid has an inclination to overvalue the passages where "Arabs" (i. e. Arabs, Scenitae, Saracens, Ismaelites and nomads) are mentioned. On the whole, he seems to take it for granted that everything that is told about these "Arabs" is basically true. A much more cautious and skeptical (and less voluminous) study on the same subject is M. Sartre, "Les nomades et l'empire en Arabie", in *Trois études sur l'Arabie romaine et byzantine* [Collection Latomus, 178] (Brussels, 1982). An illustrative point of comparison between the two scholars is the way the story of the revolt of Mavia, Queen of the Saracens in the 370s, is analysed: Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*, 138–202; Sartre, *Nomades*, 140–144. Shahid accepts the story as a rather close rendering of the actual events, Sartre is skeptical about the whole thing.

⁵ An excellent survey of the Greek sources in spite of its humble title is A. A. Vasiliev, "Notes on Some Episodes Concerning the Relations between Arabs and the Byzantine Empire from the Fourth to the Sixth Century", *DOP* 9–10 (1955–56), 306–316. See also N. V. Pigulevskaja, "Vizantijskije istoriki ob arabax v v.", *Palestinskij Sbornik* 7 (70) (1962), 89–100.

of the Arabs in Antiquity as a whole, based on all the written sources.⁶ Only certain periods have been studied, and not always with convincing results.⁷

The epigraphic material from Arabia and adjacent areas relevant to the problem discussed here is extensive but, as a rule, lacks historical information. From the Peninsula, there are inscriptions in local languages from at least the seventh century BC until the sixth century AD.⁸ One strange detail is that the century immediately preceding the appearance of the Prophet is curiously lacking in epigraphic texts. Yemen is an exception, as far as the historical content in the epigraphical material is concerned. The bulk of inscriptions from South Arabia is now considerable, approximately 10,000 specimens, many of which contain long descriptions of military campaigns undertaken by the South Arabian kings.⁹

This material is becoming increasingly important and grows every year in connection with the ongoing archaeological investigations in Yemen. The American expedition to Yemen in 1950–51 was followed by Germans in Northern Yemen, French expeditions in both North and South Yemen in the 1970s and 1980s, and the work of Soviet archaeologists in the South.¹⁰ A correspond-

⁶ A survey of the sources in Syriac is found in J. B. Segal, "Arabs in Syriac Literature before the Rise of Islam", *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984), 89–123. Cf. also the older survey by N. V. Pigulevskaja, "Araby VI v. po sirijskim istočnikam", in *Trudy vtoroj sessii asociacii arabistov 19–23 okt. 1936 g.* (Leningrad, 1941), 49–70.

⁷ There is fairly extensive literature on the history of the Roman *limes* in the Syrian desert from the Roman viewpoint, an area which was of crucial importance for the history of the Arabs. A good survey of the research up to around 1970 is G. W. Bowersock, "A Report on Arabia Provincia", *JRS* 61 (1971), 219–242. Cf. further E. W. Gray, "The Roman Eastern Limes from Constantine to Justinian – Perspectives and Problems", *Proceedings of the African Classical Associations* 12 (1973), 24–40; G. W. Bowersock, "Limes Arabicus", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80 (1976), 219–229; D. Graf, "The Saracens and the Defense of the Arabian Frontier", *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 229 (1978), 1–26; F. E. Peters, "Romans and Bedouins in Southern Syria", *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 37 (1978), 315–326. A collection of papers is found in *Roman Frontier Studies* 12 (1979) [= *Papers presented to the Twelfth Int. Congr. of Roman Frontier Studies*, III]. The beginning field research on the *limes* is documented in Th. Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier* (Winona Lake, 1986). Most of these studies deal with the southern part of the *limes* running through present-day Jordan. For Syria, A. Poidebard, *La trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie*, 1–2 (Paris, 1934), is still relevant. Still fundamental, however, is R. E. Brünnow, A. v. Domaszewski, *Die Provincia Arabia*, I–III (Strassburg, 1904–09). There are few fresh attempts from the Arabic viewpoint. For the role of the Arabs in the age of Justinian (not yet treated by Shahid) see still Th. Nöldeke, *Die Ghassânischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafna's*, *Abhandlungen der Kgl. Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Phil.-hist. Kl.*, 1887:II. A study on the same subject which takes the contemporary Greek sources more into account is W. Smeaton, *The Ghassanids* (diss. Chicago, 1940). A general survey of the role of Arabs in Roman Syria is R. Dussaud, *La pénétration des arabes en Syrie avant l'islam* (Paris, 1955). Apart from the articles by Shahid (note 4) cf. also the collection in T. Fahd (ed.), *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 24–27 juin 1987* (Leiden, 1989). Cf. also N. V. Pigulevskaja, *Araby u granic Vizantii i Irana v IV–VI vv.* (Moscow – Leningrad, 1964).

⁸ A good survey of the epigraphic material and some of its implications for the history of Arabia is H. P. Roschinski, "Sprachen, Schriften und Inschriften in Nordwestarabien", *Bonner Jahrbücher* 180 (1980), 155–188. For the inscriptions from the fourth to the sixth centuries in North Arabia see W. Fischer (ed.), *Grundriss der arabischen Philologie*, I (Wiesbaden, 1982), 32–34 and 167–170.

⁹ The basic collections are *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, IV:1 (1889), II (1909), III (1929); *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique*, T. V, No. 2624–5104 (Paris, 1927–1938); the publications of G. Ryckmans in *Le Muséon* between 1949 and 1963; A. Jamme, *Sabaeen Inscriptions from Mahram Bilqis (Mârib)* (Baltimore, 1962). An attempt to gather all the new material is *Corpus des inscriptions et antiquités sud-arabes*, T. I:1, *Inscriptions* (Louvain, 1977). A forum for South Arabian epigraphy is (was?) the journal *Raydan* 1–5 (1978–88). Unfortunately, the publication of new epigraphic material from South Arabia tends to spread into all kinds of publications which makes it difficult to follow. For a bibliography of published inscriptions see *Sabaic Dictionary*, ed. by A. F. L. Beeston, M. A. Ghul, W. W. Müller, J. Ryckmans (Louvain – Beyrouth, 1982), xxxiv–xli. A general bibliography is *Corpus des inscriptions et antiquités sud-arabes: Bibliographie générale et systématique* (Louvain, 1977).

¹⁰ Among the older archaeological studies, the following can be mentioned: G. Caton Thompson, *The Tombs and Moon Temple of Hureidha (Hadramaut)* (Oxford, 1944); C. Rathjens, *Sabaeica*, I–III (Hamburg, 1953–1966); for the American expedition see R. L. Bowen and F. P. Albright, *Archaeological Discoveries in South Arabia* (Baltimore, 1958); G. Van Beek, *Hajar bin Humeid: Investigations at a Pre-islamic Site in South Arabia* (Baltimore, 1969); cf. also the two volumes by B. Doe, *Southern Arabia*

ingly exciting field is the Saudi kingdom, where a comprehensive archaeological survey has been made from 1975.¹¹ There have also been systematic excavations, the most important ones so far in Tayma in North Western Hijaz and Qaryat al-Faw in the south on the road between Riyadh and Najran.¹² The research in the Gulf area should be added to this: the Danish expedition to Bahrayn in the 1950s was followed by the French excavations on Faylaka in Kuwait and the work of the Italians in Oman.¹³ In twenty-five years our knowledge has increased immensely, so we are now able to sketch the archaeological history of the Arabian Peninsula, not possible a quarter of a century ago when we knew almost nothing.

As far as the written sources in Arabic are concerned, they do indeed contain valuable historical information. Unfortunately, they are in an utterly disorganised form, which raises very complicated problems of source criticism. The oldest texts are the pieces of classical poetry ascribed to poets living in the sixth century AD. These poems, however, contain very few references to historical facts and are difficult to interpret without the commentaries and supplementary material of commentators from the Abbassid period three hundred years later.¹⁴ There is also a large corpus of prose texts that can be gathered from the commentators mentioned above as well as from Islamic historians, dealing with the history of the tribes during the sixth century, and especially the intertribal wars. These stories, known as *'ayyām al-'arab*, "the wars of the Arabs", often of very high literary quality, by and large go back to two authors: Hisham ibn al-Kalbi and Abu Ubayda, both active in Iraq and both of whom died c. AD 820. These two were mainly editors of historical material which had reached them through written and oral transmission. It is, however, very difficult to get a clear idea of how the historical memories changed during this process. The *ayyām*-stories should be used with caution, since they are highly literary and were codified in their present form almost three hundred years after the events depicted in them. Since the ambition of the transmitters of these stories was to

(London, 1971), and *Monuments of South Arabia* (Cambridge-New York, 1983). The French and the Soviets have not yet come forth with a final publication but it is said to be in press. For a preliminary survey of the Russian work in Hadramaut see the articles by B. B. Piotrovskij, P. A. Grjaznevič, A. V. Sedov, A. G. Lundin, G. M. Bauer and V. V. Naumkin in *Vestnik drevnej istorii* 2 (1989), 128-169. The main German publication is the periodical of the German Archaeological Institute in Sanaa: *Archäologische Berichte aus dem Yemen*, 1- (1982-).

¹¹ Reported in *Atlat. The Journal of Saudi Arabian Archaeology* 1 (1397/1977) and onwards. The journal published by D. T. Potts, *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy* 1- (1991-), is a periodical which unites epigraphy and archaeology.

¹² A. R. Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw. A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Saudi Arabia* (Riyadh, 1982[?]); H. I. Abu-Duruk, *Introduction to the Archaeology of Tayma* (Riyadh, 1986/1406). For Tayma see also G. Bawden et al. in *Atlat* 4 (1400/1980), 69-106, id., *Atlat* 5 (1401/1981), 149-154; Bawden's work at Tayma has been strongly criticised e. g. by P. J. Parr in D. T. Potts (ed.), *Araby the Blest. Studies in Arabian Archaeology* (Copenhagen, 1988), 73-90.

¹³ An excellent survey of the archaeology and history of the region up to the Islamic conquest is D. T. Potts, *The Arabian Gulf in Antiquity*, I-II (Oxford, 1990).

¹⁴ For an orientation about the problems concerning the historical value of pre-Islamic poetry see F. Sezgin, *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, II (Leiden, 1975), 1-32. See also now E. Wagner, *Grundzüge der klassischen arabischen Dichtung*, I: *Die altarabische Dichtung* (Darmstadt, 1987). A good study of the historic value of the ancient Arabic poetry is N. al-'Asad, *Maṣādir aš-šī'r al-ghāhili wa-qīmatuhā at-tārīxiyya* (The Sources of Pre-Islamic Poetry and their Historical Value) (Cairo, 1956). Both Sezgin and Asad represent a rather moderate standpoint in that they consider large parts of the poetic corpus attributed to pre-Islamic times to be genuine. Some scholars, among whom R. Blachère is the most important, have taken a radically different stance, rejecting most of pre-Islamic poetry as forgery created by scribes and scholars in the Abbassid period, see R. Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe des origines à la fin du XVIe siècle de J.-C.*, T. I (Paris, 1952), especially pp. 83-186. The dispute has not yet been settled and has gained fuel from the "London school" which, however, is more concerned with Islamic than pre-Islamic history. For the drastic views on the earliest Islamic history found in this school see e.g. P. Crone, M. Cook, *Hagarism: The making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977).

create good entertainment, we may suppose that the less literary a detail is the more valuable it is for the historian.¹⁵

The traditions stemming from Yemen, preserved in later Arabic texts, are important for the whole complex. One Arabic text which has usually been neglected is "The Book of Diadems" by Muhammad Ibn Hisham, which preserves large parts of the "Book of the Kings of Himyar" by Wahb ibn al-Munabbih, a collection of legends about the kings of Yemen written c. AD 710–720.¹⁶ This makes it the oldest long prose text preserved in Arabic, and in spite of its legendary character it contains many historical facts. The other basic text about the pre-Islamic period of Yemen is al-Hamdānī's *al-Iklīl*, "The Crown", a rich collection of data about the geography and history of Yemen written c. AD 940.¹⁷ A contemporary evaluation of these texts, taking the now extensive epigraphic evidence from Yemen into account, is a desideratum.

Based on a thorough investigation of the sources mentioned, a sketch of Arabian history up to the year 622 is presented below, concentrating on the period AD 300–600.

The Empires and Arabia until the Third Century AD

During the period before the year 300 there are two geopolitical events that can be seen as milestones in the history of the Middle East: (1) the political unification of the area under the Achaemenids in c. 540 BC, and (2) the division of the Middle East between Iran-Parthia and the Graeco-Roman Empire, in c. 140 BC. The division in 140 occurred in connection with the dissolution of the Seleucid Empire and was cemented through the Roman conquest of Syria in 63 BC. The division thus established turned out to be very stable: it lasted almost seven hundred years and the border changes during the period were only cosmetic.¹⁸

The relationship of Arabia to the Empires at this time was mainly economic. As it does today, Arabia then possessed a natural resource without which the rest of the world could not function. Since the seventh century BC, the export of frankincense from South Arabia to the Mediterranean went through the western part of the Peninsula, and the empires showed a continuous interest in controlling the trade and also the production of the perfume.¹⁹ It turned out, however,

¹⁵ On the whole, the Arabic traditions of the pre-Islamic period have received far less attention than those of the life of the Prophet and the early history of Islam. For a pioneering study of the *ayyām*-literature see W. Caskel, "Aijām al-'arab. Studien zur altarabischen Epik", *Islamica* 4 (1931), 1–99. Cf. his preliminary "Die einheimischen Quellen zur Geschichte Nord-Arabiens vor dem Islam", *Islamica* 3 (1930), 331–341. The historical notes in his monumental edition of Hisham Ibn al-Kalbi's *Ġamharat an-nasab*, Bd. I–II (Leiden, 1966), are important. He was followed by his disciple E. Meyer, *Der historische Gehalt der Aiyām al-'arab* (Wiesbaden, 1970). An excellent introduction to medieval historical writing in Arabic is still H. A. R. Gibb, "Ta'rikh", *Enzyklopaedie des Islam*, Ergänzungsbd. (1938), 246–263, repr. in id., *Studies on the Civilization of Islam* (Princeton, 1962), 108–137. For Islamic historical writing in general see F. Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, 2nd rev. ed. (Leiden, 1968). Very useful is also D. M. Dunlop, *Arab Civilization to AD 1500* (London–Beirut, 1971), 70–149, as well as A. A. Duri, *The Rise of Historical Writing among the Arabs*, transl. by L. I. Conrad (Princeton, 1983; Arabic ed. Beirut, 1960). Cf. further J. B. Roberts, *Early Islamic Historiography. Ideology and Methodology* (Columbus, 1986).

¹⁶ Ed. F. Krenkow (Hyderabad, 1935; corrected ed. by Abd al-Aziz al-Maqalih, Sanaa, 1979). Cf. F. Krenkow, "The two Oldest Books on Arabic Folklore", *Islamic Culture* 2 (1928).

¹⁷ The *Iklīl* originally consisted of ten books of which only I, II, VIII and X have been preserved in manuscript. For the details see O. Löfgren, "al-Hamdānī", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, III (1971), 124–125.

¹⁸ For the history of the eastern frontier of the Roman empire see E. Frézouls, "Les fluctuations de la frontière orientale de l'empire romain", *La géographie administrative et politique d'Alexandre à Mahomet. Actes du colloque de Strasbourg 14–16 juin 1979* (Leiden, sine anno), 177–225.

¹⁹ Cf. N. Groom, *Frankincense and Myrrh. A study of the Arabian Incense Trade* (London – New York – Beirut, 1981); J. Retsö, "The Domestication of the Camel and the Establishment of the Frankincense Road from South Arabia", *OrSuec* 40 (1991), 187–219.

that they did not have the means to attain either of these goals. Their inability was plainly demonstrated through the attempt by Augustus to conquer Yemen through the expedition of Aelius Gallus in 24 BC, an enterprise that nearly met with a catastrophic end.²⁰ This Asterixian venture was a blatant demonstration of the inability of the empires to handle the Arabian environment.

Yemen and large parts of the Peninsula were thus left in peace. Instead, the Romans tried to control the ends of the trade routes from Arabia and from the Parthian Empire by establishing a system of client kingdoms immediately adjacent to the Syrian province. Most of them were ruled by dynasties of Arabian descent.²¹ This system, established by Pompey in 63 BC, turned out to be problematic. A web of oriental intrigues characterised the interior political life in these kingdoms as well as their mutual relations and their relations to Rome. The Herodians of Judaea are the most well-known of these client kings. The Roman emperors successively lost patience and incorporated the kingdoms into their provinces one by one, the last one being the Nabataean kingdom, the *Anschluss* of which took place in AD 106.²²

Up to the beginning of the third century, the main antagonist of Rome in Middle Eastern politics was the Parthian Empire.²³ The Arsacid dynasty had its main stronghold on the Iranian plateau and its control of Mesopotamia seems to have been rather lax, allowing the existence of several more or less autonomous entities such as Edessa, Hatra and the kingdom of Charax on the Persian Gulf.²⁴ These were also, as a rule, governed by Arab dynasties. Their most important role was to function as transit-stations for the trade from India. Between Rome and Iran lay the fairy-tale city of Palmyra which by virtue of its position could thrive and prosper from the South Arabian trade as well as that from India.²⁵

The New Empires: the Sasanians and the Himyarites

This relative idyll capsized during the third century which, as we all know, was the turning point in the history of the later Roman Empire. The upheavals had been fermenting for a long time. In South Arabia, the sea route through the Red Sea to India had been established with the beginning of the Roman supremacy in Syria and Egypt. During the following two hundred years, Yemen was torn by the struggle between different local rulers with ambitions to control not only the frankincense trade but also the shores of the Red Sea. Among these we hear

²⁰ For the expedition of Gallus see H. v. Wissmann, "Die Geschichte des Sabäerreiches und der Feldzug des Aelius Gallus", *ANRW* II:9,1 (1976), 308–545.

²¹ For the history of these kingdoms see *ANRW* II:8 (1977), 198–219 (Emesa), 520–686 (Nabatea), 799–906 (Hatra, Palmyra and Edessa); E. Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ* I, rev. ed. by G. Vermes, F. Millar, M. Black (Edinburgh, 1973), 561–586 (Ituraea, Abilene, Nabataea).

²² The literature on the Nabataeans is extensive. An excellent study of the history of the whole area from the coming of the Nabataeans until the time of Diocletian is G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass.–London, 1983). Cf. also A. Negev, "The Nabateans and the Provincia Arabia", *ANRW* II:8 (1977), 520–686.

²³ There is no good contemporary study of the political history of the Parthian empire. The best is probably R. N. Frye, *The History of Ancient Iran* [HAW, III.7] (Munich, 1984). Cf. also K. Schippmann, *Grundzüge der parthischen Geschichte* (Darmstadt, 1980).

²⁴ See note 21. For the history of Charax see S. A. Nodelman, "A Preliminary History of Characene", *Berytus* 13 (1959–60), 85–121.

²⁵ For Palmyra see J. Starcky, "Palmyre", *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, Suppl. 6 (1957–60), cols. 1066–1103. Some supplementary material can be found in J. Teixidor, *Un port romain dans le désert: Palmyre* [Semitica, 34] (Paris, 1984), and J. Starcky, M. Gawlikowski, *Palmyre* (Paris, 1985). Cf. also the article by H. J. W. Drijvers and M. J. Versteegh on Palmyra, in *ANRW* II:8 (1977), 799–906.

about the kings of the *Homeritae*, the Himyar of the Arab historians, as early as in the first century AD.²⁶

The decisive factor for the history of Arabia, however, was the development of the Middle East proper. A new power emerged in Iran c. AD 220, the Sasanian kings, who established a well-organized, ideologically tight state which took a much firmer hold of Mesopotamia than its predecessor.²⁷ Under Aurelian and Diocletian Rome was reinvigorated. There was no longer room for local potentates: Palmyra & Co. were swept away or ground to pieces between the two giants. At the same time, the struggle in Yemen ended in the unification of the whole of South Arabia under the king of Himyar, Shammar Yuhar'ish, at the end of the third century. The new South Arabian Empire included Hadramaut, where frankincense was produced.²⁸

There is no doubt that all these events are somehow connected, although we do not yet know exactly how. The result was that the two empires, Rome and Iran, now stood face to face with no buffer between them. It is evident that the new situation made the transit trade through the Middle East more problematic from a Roman point of view. By now, silk was playing an increasingly important role, and Rome imported silk through Iranian territory. At the same time, they tried to circumvent this route by using the Red Sea and the South Arabian coast. The increased importance of Arabia after AD 300 was, however, not only attributable to economic policy. From a Roman standpoint, Arabia was a means of circumnavigating the Iranian left wing militarily. The result was a marked increase of Roman pressure against Western Arabia and the Red Sea after AD 300.²⁹ One aspect of this increased pressure was the Christian missionary activity which resulted in the establishment of the Christian kingdom in Aksum in Ethiopia. This kingdom often became the prolonged arm of Rome.³⁰

From this point, Arabia was drawn into world politics much more definitely than before, and the protagonists embarked on the road that led straight to Yarmuk and Qadisiyya. With the increased military and political importance of Arabia, the old problem of control became acute, and, as always, highly complex.

²⁶ We still lack a modern synthesis of the pre-Islamic history of Yemen. The scholarly discussion is highly technical and not easily accessible to the non-expert in South Arabian epigraphy. The debate between the handful of scholars with first-hand knowledge of the material is often characterised by a strongly polemic tone which makes it difficult for outsiders to judge it. The material consists almost exclusively of undated epigraphic texts and the dating of events and rulers is very uncertain for many periods. A readable introduction is constituted by the following essays in W. Daum (ed.), *Yemen*, 2nd ed. (Innsbruck – Frankfurt/Main, 1988): J. Pirenne, "Überblick über die Lehrmeinungen zur altsüdarabischen Chronologie", pp. 122–128; W. Müller, "Skizze der Geschichte Altsüdarabiens", pp. 50–56.

²⁷ The basic study of the Sasanian empire is still A. Christensen, *L'empire des sassanides* (Copenhagen, 1942). For a more up-to-date viewpoint see Frye, *History of Ancient Iran* (above, note 23), 287–339. Cf. also K. Schippmann, *Grundzüge der Geschichte des Sasanidischen Reichs* (Darmstadt, 1990). The remarks by Th. Nöldeke in his translation of the relevant parts of Tabari's world history: *Geschichte der Perser und Araber zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Leiden, 1879; repr. Graz, 1973), are still fundamental.

²⁸ For this process see A. Bafaqih, *L'unification du Yemen antique* (Paris, 1990).

²⁹ For this development see the classic study by W. Ensslin, *Zur Ostpolitik des Kaisers Diokletian* [Sitzungsberichte der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Phil.-hist. Abt., 1942:1] (Munich, 1942).

³⁰ For the early history of Ethiopia see J. Doresse, *Au pays de la reine de Saba: l'Éthiopie antique et moderne* (Paris, 1956), 52–63; F. Anfray, *Les anciens éthiopiens. Siècles d'histoire* (Paris, 1990). There is a fairly extensive literature on Christianity in Arabia. Fundamental is still the magnificent article by R. Agrain, "Arabie", *Dictionnaire d'histoire et de géographie ecclésiastiques*, III (1924), 1158–1339. Further F. Nau, *Les arabes chrétiens de Mésopotamie et Syrie de VI–VII siècles* (Paris, 1933); H. Charles, *Le christianisme des arabes nomades dans le désert syro-mésopotamien aux alentours de l'hégire* (Paris, 1936); R. Devreesse, "Le christianisme dans la province d'Arabie", *Vivre et Penser* 2 (1947), 110–146; J. Ryckmans, "Le christianisme en Arabie du Sud", *L'Oriente cristiano nella storia della civiltà* (Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1964), 413–455; J. S. Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (London – New York – Beirut, 1979); J. Beaucamp, Ch. Robin, "Le christianisme dans la péninsule arabique d'après l'épigraphie et l'archéologie", *TM* 8 (1981), 45–61; A. Havenith, *Les arabes chrétiens nomades au temps de Mohammed* (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1988).

The military strength of Rome and Iran was based on infantry and cavalry forces, none of which were usable in Arabia. Horses demanded large quantities of fodder and water. In normally watered and inhabited regions, the generals could improvise: fodder and water were usually within reach. However, in the steppes and deserts of Arabia things were very different. The sparse resources did not allow for any margins: anyone who did not have perfect knowledge of the whereabouts of fodder and water was likely to end up like Aelius Gallus at best. The infantry and cavalry of the empires were thus completely dependent on the locals who knew where to find water and fodder, a nightmare for every general. In the long run, Arabia could only be controlled by those who knew where these things were to be found.

One solution to this dilemma was to provide oneself with allies among tribes which, hopefully, knew the local conditions. All three empires did so, Rome at least from c. AD 360 and possibly earlier.³¹ They were attached to Rome by the kind of treaty called *foedus*. The *foederati*, referred to as Saracens in Roman sources and distinguished from the earlier clients who were called Arabs, dwelt along the *limes* in Syria and were used as scouts and frontier guards. The *foedus*-system was different from that of the old client-states à la Herod or the Nabataeans. The latter had settled in urban or village societies based on agriculture and trade under kings with bureaucracies. The new *foederati* were mobile, living in a pre-stage of the classical bedouin culture, organised in tribes led by professional warriors.

Through the *foedus*-system the tribes were militarised, and became more and more difficult for the Romans and Iranians to handle. At the same time, these federate tribes had a limited range: it seems that they were not useful for large-scale military ventures even in Arabia. The empire that seems to have been most successful in handling the tribes was, not unexpectedly, the Himyarite kingdom, which was "domestic" to a larger extent than Rome or Iran. The tribes hired by them, like Kinda, were effective in extending their influence among the other tribes in the southern part of the Peninsula until the early fifth century. In the inscriptions, the federates of the Himyar kings were still referred to as "Arabs". The position of the kings of Kinda is dramatically illustrated today by the excavation of their capital in Qaryat al-Faw. This town was founded in the second century AD, and flourished for three hundred years. It was a well developed society with temples, palaces and large bazaar areas. Inscriptions in South Arabian script now document kings who were previously known only through late Islamic sources.³²

After the Roman débâcle with Iran under Julian the Apostate in 363, both Rome and Iran were involved in other problems—the Romans with the Germans and the Iranians with the Huns. In the beginning of the fifth century, the Himyaritic king Abukarib As'ad, the great hero of the royal sagas of Yemen, established his power in western Arabia at least as far as Medina. At the same time, chiefs from Kinda settled in Central Arabia and extended their power even to the tribes on the Persian Gulf. The ambitions of the rather loosely organised Himyaritic kingdom are ideologically reflected in the epigraphic material. Around 370 the inscriptions dedicated to the old pagan gods in the national

³¹ For the literature on the Roman "Arabs", see the references in notes 4 and 7. For the Iranian Saracens, see G. Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lahmidien in al-Hira, Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sassaniden* (Berlin, 1899; repr. Hildesheim, 1968). Th. Nöldeke's remarks (see above, note 27) are also most important.

³² Cf. note 12 for the archaeological evidence. For the history of Kinda as reflected in medieval Arabic sources see G. Olinder, *The Kings of Kinda of the Family of Ākil al-murār* [Lunds Universitets Årsskrift N.F. 1, 23:6] (Lund – Leipzig, 1927). See also id., "Āl al-Ġaun of the Family of Ākil al-Murār", *Le Monde Oriental* 25 (1930), 208–229.

sanctuary in Marib ceased. Instead, we find inscriptions to a new god: RĤMN-N (Arabic *rahmān*) "the Merciful", an epithet which is probably Christian or Jewish. At the same time we have epigraphic evidence of the presence of Jews in Yemen. In the early sixth century we find that the Himyaritic ruler converted to Judaism.³³

Just before the end of the fifth century, the influence of the Himyaritic kings reached the Roman *limes* in southern Syria. Despite the fact that the Himyaritic Empire was quite a loose alliance between the kings in Yemen and the tribes on the Peninsula, its existence was obviously intolerable to Rome, which was not interested in an independent power operating in North Arabia and threatening the Roman flank. As early as under Anastasius (491–518), there were signs of a renewed expansionistic Roman *Ostpolitik* which continued under his successor Justin I. New, fresh Arabs, the Ghassanids, were imported and settled along the Syrian *limes*. The renewal of the Syrian frontier defence culminated in 527, when Justinian made the Ghassanid chief Hārith ibn Gabala supreme ruler of all the Saracens attached to Rome. This action was clearly directed against the local Saracen of the Sasanians, Mundhir III of Hira, who, at this time, was allied to the Kinda chiefs in central Arabia. But the most fateful event was the activation of the Roman ally in Ethiopia. This culminated in the Ethiopian invasion of Yemen around 520, which caused the fall of the Himyaritic Empire under its Jewish king Dhu Nuwās, and the dissolution of the alliance with the tribes.³⁴ In the turmoil following the disappearance of the power of Yemen in the Hijaz we may note, *en passant*, that a small clan belonging to the Kināna tribe settled in the hitherto completely insignificant hamlet of Mekka. A century later a storm arose from this clan, the Quraysh.

The fall of the Himyaritic Empire was the turning point in the pre-Islamic history of Arabia. The Ethiopians turned out to be as incapable as the Romans and Iranians of controlling the Peninsula. They could not even keep their own generals in line; one of them, Abraha, tried, like an Ethiopian Alexander the Great, to play the role of the conquered king, with disastrous results.

The Rise of the Arabs

The shaky Ethiopian rule in Yemen shattered the control of the rest of Arabia. Among the tribes, several heirs rose who, with varying degrees of success, tried to carve out mini-empires on their own. The sixth century was a period of internal upheaval and perpetual strife and anarchy among the tribes in Arabia. Thus the chaotic aftermath of the Himyaritic rule was the cradle of classical Arabian culture. The hiring of professional soldiers by the Himyaritic kings from among the tribes created a professional class of warriors all over Arabia. The term Arab was probably originally the designation for this warrior caste. Such warriors had earlier existed only along the borders of the northern empires. But the classical Arabic literary culture originated in central Arabia, not in Syria or Iraq. A close reading of the *ayyām*-stories shows that they are basically spun around some facts about the Kinda chiefs and their successors. The most famous poets who were also, as a rule, great warriors, were either closely attached to these chiefs or

³³ For the religious development in South Arabia see M. Höfner, "Die vorislamischen Religionen Arabiens: Südarabien", *Die Religionen Altsyriens, Altarabiens und der Mandäer* (Stuttgart, 1970), 237–353. The history of the Jews in Arabia has received surprisingly little attention as compared with the history of the Christians. See, however, G. D. Newby, *A History of the Jews of Arabia From Ancient Times to Their Eclipse Under Islam* (Columbia, SC, 1988).

³⁴ For these events see I. Shahid, *The Martyrs of Najran: New Documents* (Brussels, 1971).

direct descendants of them. The classical Arabic poetry and its language was created in this *milieu*.³⁵

The anarchy in Arabia led to an Iranian intervention around AD 570. Through a general, Wahriz, a Sasanian puppet, Sayf dhū Yazan, was installed on the throne in Sanaa. The fragility of this arrangement, however, was shown in the legendary battle of Dhū Qār at the Euphrates c. 600, where tribes from Eastern Arabia dispersed an army of Iranian cavalry and Arab allies. The storm was now rising.

The result of one century of anarchy was thus the confirmation of a political vacuum in Arabia. Neither Rome, nor Iran, nor Ethiopia could control the Peninsula in the long term. At least the two former suffered from growing internal problems, basically economic anaemia: the whole administrative and military apparatus had become too expensive. In Arabia, the century had three fundamental results: (1) political anarchy, (2) modernisation of weaponry, and (3) insights into the importance of ideology in politics. There must have been circles where it had been realised that foreign intervention and anarchy would continue if no counterweight were created. The ambitions of the warrior caste, awakened by the Himyarite venture, needed a modern ideology if it were to handle the old established antagonists in the north, and in those days ideology was religion. The Himyar kings had tried Judaism, as did the Khazars in the north somewhat later; both attempts failed.

In this world of spiritual and military unrest and in the vacuum left by the failures of the empires, there suddenly emerged the state of Medina. From AD 622 there was, in Western Arabia, a state independent of Rome, Iran and Ethiopia, equipped with an ideology that could cope with both Christianity and Zoroastrianism on equal footing.³⁶ The basis of the state of Medina was an alliance of tribes in the central Hijaz and central Arabia. It is typical that Muhammad did not have to conquer the main tribes: in the year 630, "the Year of Delegations", the tribes came voluntarily. It is as though they were attracted towards a magnet. The structure of this new state was in some respects similar to the old Himyaritic Empire: a locally-based political leadership ruling allied Arabs, i.e. a choice of warriors from the main tribes. The main difference was the role of ideology: this new state was ruled not by a king and his dynasty, but by a charismatic preacher promulgating divine law.³⁷

The Islamic state in Medina can be interpreted in secular terms as an attempt to avoid circumvention of Arabia by excluding foreigners from controlling Yemen and abolishing the system of tribes being hired as mercenaries by outsiders. The policy of the government in Medina was thus (1) blocking Iranian expansion from the east, (2) establishing control of Yemen from Hijaz and from nowhere else, and (3) securing the north either by drawing the Syrian tribes,

³⁵ For some aspects of bedouin society see the studies in F. Gabrieli (ed.), *L'antica società beduina* (Rome, 1959). A basic bibliography for the history of Central Arabia is S. D. Ricks, *Western Languages Literature on pre-Islamic Central Arabia. An annotated bibliography* (Denver, 1991).

³⁶ It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the vast literature on Muhammed and the early history of Islam. For the political aspects of the Islamic movement, W. W. Watt, *Muhammed at Mecca* (Oxford, 1953), and id., *Muhammed at Medina* (Oxford, 1956) are still a good starting point. An updating of Watt's views can be found in id., *Muhammad's Mecca: History in the Quran* (Edinburgh, 1988). A moderate Marxist viewpoint is found in M. Rodinson, *Mahomet*, 2nd ed. (Paris, 1967). A radically different view on the whole problem is found in P. Crone, M. Cook, *Hagarism. The making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977). The economic structure of Muhammad's environment is tackled rather differently by P. Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam* (Oxford, 1987), and R. Simon, *Meccan Trade and Islam. Problems of Origin and Structure* (Budapest, 1989). The studies by M. J. Kister gathered in *Studies in Jahiliyya and Early Islam* (London, 1980), and *Society and Religion from Jahiliyya to Islam* (London, 1990), are fundamental to the whole complex.

³⁷ For the political structure of Medina see the basic study by J. Wellhausen, "Muhammads Gemeindeordnung von Medina", *Skizzen und Vorarbeiten*, IV (Berlin, 1889; repr. Berlin - New York, 1985).

always a potential threat since they were friends to Rome, into the sphere of Medina or by extracting their teeth through crushing them militarily. The Medinean policy thus did not seek world dominion, but rather security and independence from the empires. This striving for independence was probably an old ideal among the desert aristocrats, and must have constituted a strong impetus to unite with the new state. The submission was made more appealing by Islam: a religion claiming independence and superiority over those of the empires. It is typical and very illustrative of what has been said here that the main target of the foreign policy of the government in Medina was Syria: in 628 Rome had defeated Iran and apparently emerged as the dominant power. Rome could thus have been expected to resume her aggressive policy towards the southeast. The Muslim expedition to Syria in 629 appears to have been an attempt at a preemptive strike at least against the Syrian allies of Rome, but it had dire consequences: the battle at Mu'ta in Transjordan in 630 began a struggle that ended in Constantinople in 1453.

As we all know, the state of Medina was a total success. In twenty years' time it grew from controlling Medina and the oases around it to controlling all the lands from Egypt to Afghanistan. And after another sixty years it ruled an empire from the Atlantic to the Indus, the largest political organisation in world history to date.

Summary

In summary, the division of the Middle East in the second century BC resulted in a growing interest in the Arabian Peninsula on the part of the Roman and Iranian Empires. Their accelerated interference after AD 300 caused the revolt of the inhabitants of Arabia. By striking back with unexpected might they ultimately broke the power of the empires. Iran disappeared altogether and Rome was reduced to an Anatolian power. The result was thus the political reunification of the Middle East. The wall dividing East from West for seven hundred years was torn down for good. When this dividing line disappeared, the Peninsula lost its importance. Life there could return, if not to what it had been, then at least to the management of its inhabitants.

After AD 750 the tribes who had created the Islamic empire lost political power. It seems that when they had won their freedom, the Arabs lost interest in participating in world history. They returned to their tents, their feuds, and their poets. They left behind them two legacies of overwhelming importance: the Arabic language and the Islamic religion, both of which began independent careers among other peoples: the Syrians, Egyptians, Iranians, Turks, Berbers etc. But few peoples in world history have altered its course as the Arabs did.

The interpretation presented here is different, in many ways, from that which is usually given. The traditional view of the Arab conquest as the work of undisciplined bedouins who undertook a gigantic razzia is, in my opinion, completely erroneous. This is also true of the idea that this process was part of the perpetual waves of immigration of Semites from a presupposed home in Arabia. Instead, the conquest bears all signs of being the result of rational political considerations and—at least in the beginning—of being a well planned venture. It was directed primarily against Rome, which was seen as the main enemy after AD 629. The trigger of the Arab conquest was thus Heraclius' triumph over the Sasanian Empire.