



Late Antique Iran and the Arabs: The Case of al-Hira*

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Abstract

This article reevaluates our evidence for the interaction of Arab and Iranian elements in the Arab frontier-state of al-Hira, a state in late antiquity, which can be seen as a paradigmatic “third space” of special cultural dynamics. First, it sums up our evidence about the political and commercial ties connecting the Lakhmid principality and the Sasanian Empire; next, it focuses on the possible agents of cultural exchange between the two; finally, we direct our attention to the cultural spheres themselves and the issue of where and how Iranian-Arab transculturation as a process can be detected in the Hiran context. The article argues for a cautious reassessment of the material in light of current research in cultural studies. This is significant in its wider historical perspective, as such a process might have prepared the path for later developments in Islamic times, when the apogee of Arab-Iranian interaction is supposed to have taken place, i.e., in Abbasid Iraq.

Keywords

Constantine legend, Lakhmids, al-Hira, Nu‘man b. al-Mundhir

Al-Hira: A Multicultural City

The city of al-Hira, the capital of the principality of the Arab Lakhmids (*ca.* 300 until 602 CE), was one of the main Arab urban hubs in late antiquity (besides Mekka, Najrān, and Yathrib). It was situated along the Northeastern periphery of the Arabian Peninsula, more specifically on the West Bank of the Euphrates, in the large Roman-Sasanian frontier-zone, between the Syrian Desert and the fertile flood plain of Mesopotamia. Here the cultural spheres of Rome, Iran, Arabia and the Syrian world interacted and overlapped. This resulted in a cultural hybridity that is reflected in the multiple ethnic composition of the Hiran population, which was composed of a mixture of

* The author has prepared an exhaustive monograph, entitled *Al-Hira. Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (forthcoming, BRILL, in print), which elaborates on the cultural and political history of the Lakhmids and the themes discussed here.

Arab tribes (nomads and settlers alike), Aramean peasants, Syriac clergymen and Iranian aristocrats. The religious situation was also characterized by an amazing symbiosis of communities: We find, side by side, Nestorians, Monophysites, Arab “pagans,” Manicheans and other Gnostics, Jews and Zoroastrians. As a frontier-settlement, al-Hira was without a doubt a place of intensive cultural dynamics, and can be seen as a paradigmatic example of a “third” or “in-between” space, as Homi Bhabha has put it (Bhabha, 38). From a similar perspective, Zygmunt Bauman emphasizes the importance of frontier studies for the configuration and reconfiguration of cultural identities:

The meeting ground, the frontier-land of cultures is the territory in which boundaries are constantly obsessively drawn only to be continually violated and re-drawn again and again—not the least for the fact that both partners emerge changed from every successive attempt at translation. Cross-cultural translation is a continuous process, which serves as much as constitutes the cohabitation of people who can afford neither occupying the same space nor mapping that common space in their own, separate ways (Bauman, xviii).

In what follows I will reevaluate our evidence of the interaction between the Arab and Iranian elements in al-Hira. I will first begin by sketching the political and commercial ties between the Lakhmid Principality and the Sasanian Empire; then I shall proceed to look at the possible agents of cultural exchange; and finally locate the cultural spheres where an Iranian-Arab transculturation can be detected in the Hiran context. This process is significant from a wider historical perspective, because it might have prepared the path for later developments in Islamic times, when the apogee of Arab-Iranian interaction is supposed to have taken place, i.e., in Abbasid Iraq.

It should be pointed out at the outset that there are several methodic *caveats* to be kept in mind. The first point is that, in the case of Arabs and Iranians, cultural contact was endemic, and the result of a long-lasting geopolitical situation, dating back to the Achaemenid period. Since then, Arab populations inhabited the western margins of the region and were dominated by Iranian people (Hoyland, 13-35). “As two of the most prominent ethnic elements in the Middle East, Arabs and Iranians have been in contact with each other, and at times have had their fortunes intertwined, for some three millennia.” (Bosworth, 1983) It is therefore difficult to establish a “before” and “after” in this cohabitation or to describe subsequent changes in the original patterns of either of these groups in these terms. Second, we have to abandon the idea of homogeneous cultural entities coming into contact, exchanging cultural items like commodities, mixing like chemical elements or “clashing” like chariots. For this assumption does not give sufficient consideration to the

complexity of the societies under investigation, or to the factor of diachronic evolution (Gotter 2000, 387f). So, although there has long been the perception that people can be classified in groups according to ethnic categories, it must be acknowledged that the boundaries between such ethnic categories become blurred upon closer examination. The same applies to individuals who often have the disturbing quality of having unstable and multiple ethnic identities.

The attribution of ethnic identities, however, is not only pervasive in our research, but also in our sources. A serious study of the ethnic terminologies in a synchronic and diachronic perspective on the subject of our investigation would be necessary, but cannot be undertaken here. In the meantime, I can only emphasize that I am aware of how diffuse and problematic these ethnic terms are: Most of my study, for example, concentrates on Sasanian Persians (in the sense of the population that represented, or was related, to the Sasanian dynasty, a population that was mostly Iranophonic, i.e. spoke Persian, and was Zoroastrian), not on other Iranian people in the wider sense. The Arabs studied here, by contrast, are more defined by their common tribal culture, a culture a very important element of which was the imagined and literary universe evoked by Arabic poetry (Montgomery 1997, 258 f.; Montgomery 2006, 55f.), rather than its religious or political affiliations. That is, I view these as a sort of “Kulturnation” (von Grunebaum 1964).

Geographic Position and Commerce

Al-Hira was probably an important *emporium* for the Sasanians because of its favorable geographic position. The city lay at the crossroads between important commercial overland routes, which parted from Ctesiphon, 100 km in the Northeast, and the Arabian Peninsula. It was located exactly between the fertile alluvial plain of Babylonia and the caravan routes to Central and Western Arabia (Morony 1984, 127, 137-141). Later on, in Islamic times, al-Hira played an important role as a station in the pilgrimage road between Baghdad and the Hijāz, which itself followed the old caravan route (Finster 1978).

Further along, the city was located near the western arm of the Euphrates, which irrigated a rich agricultural micro-region that was part of the larger Babylonian plain. The river determined the urban outline of al-Hira, and converted it into a typical Arab oasis-city: There was no city-wall, the lightly fortified houses were scattered over a large area, and surrounded by palm-groves and fertile gardens, following a settlement pattern very similar to the one we find in Yathrib and other Arab cities (Whitcomb, 39; Talbot Rice, 1932 and

1934). But the Euphrates was not only important for the vital water supply in this arid zone: It was also certainly navigable at this height and could be used downstream and upstream because of the small slope (10 cm) of the riverbed in this region (Hartmann; Buringh). Since antiquity, the Euphrates had been a main fluvial route, which connected the wealthy cities in Greater Syria to the Persian Gulf. It was also part of the greater Babylonian canal system, which dates back to remotest antiquity and linked the Tigris with the Euphrates. In Roman times, there was regular commerce between Palmyra and the Persian Gulf, with the Euphrates as the main fluvial route; there were also Palmyran depots in North-Eastern Arabia (Gawlikowski, 139-145; Bin Seray 1996b). Thus, the river connected al-Hira with the Central Babylonian Plain and its channel network, with Ctesiphon, with the Upper Euphrates, and with the Persian Gulf.

Commerce means the exchange of commodities, but also of ideas. Traders have always functioned as important cultural mediators. The gradual and early Christianization of the Hiran elites from the fourth century onwards (Toral-Niehoff, 333-341; Hainthaler, 81-110), for example, was probably the result of continuous contact with western merchants from Syria and northern Mesopotamia, who, by introducing religious ideas rooted in late Hellenism, such as universalism, monotheism, community etc., prepared the way for later developments.

Political Ties between Sasanian Iran and the Lakhmids

Arabic narratives—and much of our evidence is based on a rich bundle of traditions preserved in Arab-Islamic historical collections— (Tabari I, 821 ff., 858, 2016 ff., 2038 ff. and index; al-Esfahāni II, 97-154 and index; Hamza al-Esfahāni, 83-97; Abu l-Baqā' *passim*) tend to emphasize the political dependence of the Lakhmids on the Sasanian Empire. Frequently we read that the Lakhmids were the subordinated “deputies” of the Persians, who were the real rulers of the region. The Persian kings are said to have treated the Lakhmids as “slaves” or “servants” (Abu l-Baqā', 381). The petty kings of al-Hira, furthermore, wore a crown in the Persian style (*tāj*) conferred by the Sasanians, who elected the Lakhmid king and legitimated their authority. In the late sixth century, for example, the first Christian king could only be baptized with the permission of the great Sasanian king (Toral-Niehoff 2012).

This one-sided picture is most probably distorted by later perceptions of a strict hierarchy and authority, and is biased on account of the negative perspective that has existed about pre-Islamic Arab kingship (Crone, 6-8; Ayalon).

We have to be aware of the political agenda of the Arabic authors in Abbasid times, however, who saw the Lakhmids as notorious examples of barbaric *jāhiliyya* and illegitimate authority, hence, politics not sanctioned by Islam.

In fact, the evidence is too slim to make any reliable statement about the nature of bilateral political relationship between the Sasanians and the Lakhmids in the period from the third to the fifth centuries CE, especially as it concerns al-Hira. We have to suppose a gradual change of patterns: The Lakhmid kingdom seems to have emerged soon after the emergence of the Sasanian State, in the late third century (Rothstein, 28-40; Bowersock, 132f.; Retsö, 473-485) and, obviously, both states underwent various changes up until the late sixth century. Parvaneh Pourshariati has shown in her studies (Pourshariati 2008) that the degree of decentralization in the Sasanian state (a Parthian legacy) has been underestimated until recently, which means that a fixed, formalized relationship between the Empire and the peripheral “Barbarian” states, similar to the Roman *foedus*, is highly improbable. All we can say for the earlier period is that there was an Arab chiefdom, ruled by a family called Lakhmids or Naşrids, which was situated on the western frontiers of the Sasanian Empire, and located in the hegemonic sphere of Persian rule.

Probably, the Lakhmid position gradually developed into a more formally subordinate status vis-à-vis the Sasanian Empire during the sixth century, partly as a consequence of the centralizing tendency of the late Sasanian state, and partly because of the continuous wars between the great powers (Shahid, I, 1, 43-49; 79-80; 236-255 and *passim*; Rothstein, 75-87). This state of affairs required the Sasanians to have closer control over their Arab allies at the borders. Sometime in the early sixth century, the Sasanians must have started to support the Lakhmids by regularly stationing a fixed armored contingent of the famous, heavily-armed, Persian cavalry or cataphractes (*ca.* 1000) in the city. The amazing military superiority of these knights known as *dosar*, *shahbāʿ*, or *wazāʿi* was an essential factor for enforcing the payment of tribute from subordinate Arab tribes, and impressing all the others, thereby securing Sasanian hegemony over northern Arabia and its commercial routes (Kister, 165f.). Thus, the Lakhmids acted on the one hand as a protective shield of the Persians against the aggressive nomads of the Arabian Peninsula; and on the other, as representatives of Sasanian interests among Arab tribes, expanding the Sasanian hegemony over eastern and central Arabia, and the Hijāz (Kister, 144-149; Tabari, I, 958).

In the sixth century, in the midst of the conflict between the great powers of late antiquity, the Byzantine and the Sasanian Empires, the Lakhmids were the Arab allies of the Persians. Their main function was to fight against the Arab Ghassanids who were, in turn, the Arab allies of the Romans. The most

successful Lakhmid monarch in this context was al-Mundhir b. Mā' al-Samā' (ca. 505-554), who defeated the Ghassanids in Callinicum 531. He must have received numerous stipends to finance these proxy wars. With the support of the Sasanians, al-Mundhir was also able to expand his hegemony over the Arab tribes as far as the Arabian Peninsula, a state of affairs, which marked the apogee of the Lakhmid power. However, the Lakhmids' supremacy began to decline with the death of this monarch and later, in the following decades, the Sasanians started to intervene frequently in the internal affairs of the Lakhmids, until they finally and definitively deposed the dynasty in 602, replacing them with a Persian governor (Toral-Niehoff 2012; Horovitz, 60-63). The last Lakhmid king, Nu'mān b. al-Mundhir, had converted to Christianity ten years earlier, and perhaps this was seen as a sign of disloyalty. When the troops led by Khālid b. Walid reached al-Hira during the Islamic conquest of Iraq, there was no longer a Lakhmid kingdom in existence.

Agents of Exchange

Although we know little about the exact nature of the political relationship between the Sasanians and the Lakhmids, we do have plausible reports about the existence of some sort of institutionalized exchange. In fact, the Arab sources tell us that the members of the Hiran urban elites (nearly all of them Nestorian Christians), would regularly send their sons to the local *dehqāns* to learn the Persian language and receive a Persian education. These Christian Arabs grew up together with the young Persian aristocrats, their families establishing firm, mutual, personal bonds. This systematic coeducation fostered a sense of loyalty among the Persians and Arabs, and produced a trustworthy, bicultural Arab-Persian elite capable of working in the Sasanian administration, and skilled in the intercultural expertise that was necessary to mediate between the Arabs and the Persian authorities.

Thus we read the following account about Zayd b. Hammād, a member of the Christian family of Banu Ayyub (Esfahāni II, 101; Horovitz, 37).

After Hammād's death Zayd was taken by the Dehqān to his own house, who belonged to the Marzobāns, and grew up with his children: Zayd had already received good instruction in the art of writing and in the Arabic language before the Dehqān took charge of him; the Dehqān now taught him the Persian language which, thanks to his diligence, he soon assimilated. The Dehqān then petitioned the Kesrā to place the postal service under him, an office which he generally entrusted only the sons of Marzobāns, and which Zayd administered for a time.

The same applies for his son, the famous Arab poet, ‘Adi b. Zayd, who was educated as a Persian aristocrat and even went to a Persian school (Esfahāni II, 101):

As soon as ‘Adī could apply himself and was grown up, his father put him to school and, when he had acquired some knowledge, the *marzbān*, Farrokhamāhān, sent him, together with his own son, Shāhānmard, to the Persian school where he learned to read and write Persian until he became one of the most knowledgeable in Persian and among the most eloquent speakers of Arabic, who [also] composed poems. He also learned archery and soon became one of the best riders and bowmen as well as a brilliant polo player among other . . . things.

These accounts sound plausible, since the *curriculum* strongly resembles what we know of Persian aristocratic schools: This included the learning of Pahlavi, rhetorical and literary skills, calligraphy, the memorization of Zoroastrian holy texts, [as well as education in] music, courtly games (like chess) and sports (especially horse riding, polo and archery); in sum, it reflected the chivalric norms and courtly ideals of the Persian landed aristocracy. The best parallel to this text is to be found in a Pahlavi text, “*Xusrōv Kavātān ut Rētak*” (“Khosrāu and his Page”), which contains a dialogue between an exemplary page and King Khosraw. Boasting about his refined education, the page tells his king that (Monchi-Zadeh, 64 f.):

§ 8 “In due time I was given to School, and in my study, I was very diligent.

§ 9 I memorized the *Yāst*, the *Hādōxt*, the *Bāgān*, and the *Videvdāt* like a *hērbad*, and passage by passage, heard the *Zand*.

§10 And my scribal ability is such that I am a good writer (= calligraphist) and a swift-writer, eager for subtle knowledge, skilful in work, and versed in learned speech.

§11 And my skill in riding and archery is such that the other (i.e. the opponent) must be taken for fortunate who can escape through my race-horse.

§ 12 My skill in levelling the spear is such that the rider must be taken for unfortunate who comes for encounter and combat with me on horse-back with spear and sword, and in the race-course wishes predominance. In an instant I raise over my girth, the other under me, and over his head my horse. I strike him quickly and easily as one strikes swift memories on a lute; and the battle-axe and arrow-heads appear in this moment.

§13 Also I am master of playing the *sūr-vin* (banquet-vina), the lute, the *sitār* (?) and the *kannār*, and of giving answer (i.e. responding with song to instruments) and in dancing.

§14 And in playing chess and backgammon and *aštapa* (a kind of musical instrument?) I am superior to my comrades.”

This custom of regular exchange was probably also encouraged, if not officially fostered by, the Persian authorities. The establishment of a loyal, local, Arab-Persian elite who functioned as reliable representatives of Sasanian interests, served as a sound political strategy. The Romans applied a similar policy towards the Teutons and other *confederati*. In fact, as we have seen in the testimony on Hammād b. Zayd, these Iranized Arab-Christians were engaged as secretaries and translators in what seems to have been a bureau responsible for “External Correspondence” in Ctesiphon.

Courtly Culture and Power Semiotics

The development of an Arab-Persian elite in al-Hira imbued with Persian aristocratic values must have marked the court culture in al-Hira. At least, this is suggested by the evidence of the Pre-Islamic poetry: The poems composed in the Hiran milieu portray a court characterized by a mixture of Arab tribal traditions (Blachère, II, 293-304; Sezgin, II, 165-186). The Lakhmid kings represent themselves as Arab tribal chiefs, listening to Bedouin panegyric poetry, sitting in a leather tent or *qubba*, and surrounded by a tribal *majlis*, while incorporating Persian elements inspired by Sasanian court culture (using the *tāj* or Persian-style crown, ceremonial cushions, pearl necklaces and robes, pavilions, a throne, etc.). It is highly probable that the Lakhmid rulers admired and imitated the splendid power semiotics of Ctesiphon and the Sasanian King of Kings, a semiotics which goes back to the Babylonian traditions, and which impressed all the peoples in the region, including the Roman and Byzantine Emperors. So, the elites in al-Hira seem also to have adopted Persian wine culture, attested by numerous quotations of grape wine, cupbearers etc. in Hiran pre-Islamic poetry, establishing an important precursor for the Umayyad and the Abbasid wine-poetry (Bencheikh). Similarly, the elites in al-Hira adopted several Persian music traditions and instruments, since Kufa, the Islamic successor of al-Hira, became in Abbasid times an important centre of refined musical culture, rooted in local, pre-Islamic Persian traditions (Kilpatrick, 15ff.). There is also a testimony that Hirans told each other Persian legends like that of Rostam and Isfandiyār (Ebn Eshāq, 191ff.). This sounds plausible: the Persian epic tradition and the chivalrous ideals that it conveyed, constituted a pervasive model for all social ranks within the Sasanian Empire (Walker, 121-163). However, the equating of “Persian culture” with “luxury,”

very common in Arabic sources, should be considered with caution, since it reminds one strongly of *topoi* from the sho'ubiya debates of Abbasid times.

The sparse Hiran archeological material, as preserve, shows that the local Hiran palace architecture (Talbot Rice 1932; 1934; Leisten; Okada; Bin Seray 2006a) and many everyday items (such as ceramics, glass and textiles), were strongly influenced by Persian models, although it is difficult to date these findings exactly as there is no clear break between pre-Islamic and Islamic material. (Rousset 1994; 2001).

The linguistic evidence points to a similar direction: Most of the early Persian loanwords in Arabic refer to luxury items, musical instruments, refined cuisine, hunting and architecture; this is also the case for Persian terminologies pertaining to administration and commerce which were taken over in Arabic. The latter were, after all, also cultural spheres of contact. (Siddiqi, *passim*; Bosworth 1983, 610f.; Tafazzoli). Nevertheless, since it is not clear which of these loanwords penetrated Arabic in pre-Islamic times, a reassessment of the linguistic evidence in light of current loan-word research would be highly desirable (Asatrian).

One neglected aspect in this cultural interchange is the evidence transmitted by legends such as that of Bahram-e Gur, the Persian prince who is said to have been educated in al-Hira, where he is also said to have learned Arab customs (Hanaway). In my opinion, such legendary material should be read as symbolic cultural legends that personalize the Iranian-Arab cultural contact.

Concluding Remarks

We have seen that there were close political and commercial ties that linked the Sasanians with the Lakhmid principality, configuring a long-term relationship that began probably in the late third century and gradually gained momentum until the sixth century, when it was institutionalized, converting the Lakhmids into a fundamental part of Sasanian politics towards Byzantium and the Arabs of the Peninsula. One important element was the systematic formation of a mixed "minority in the middle," (Zenner; cf. also Barth, Fludernik/Gehrke) composed by Iranized-Arab noblemen, mostly Christians, who held offices in the Sasanian administration. The evidence of the pre-Islamic Arab poetry, archeological material and Persian loanwords in Arabic, all suggest that this contact resulted in a voluntary cultural orientation of the Hiran elites towards the court culture of Ctesiphon, by assimilating Persian luxury items, aristocratic values and power semiotics. However, this transculturation process requires a much deeper and actualized analysis in light of

current research methodologies in Cultural studies, especially those which relate to frontier societies. In order to further pursue this line of investigation, furthermore, we must not only find mechanisms for differentiating the pre-Islamic from the Islamic sets of data; but also consider the later distortions that have influenced these by later debates, current during the Abbasid period, like the shu'ubiya controversy.

The long-term relationship briefly discussed above, produced a mixed, multicultural milieu amongst the settled Arab tribes living along the western borders of the Sasanian Empire. This milieu, in turn, presumably influenced the ways in which multiculturalism was perceived and effected in the early Islamic period in neighboring urban centers that gradually developed. The case of al-Hira, however, was just a chapter in the long-term, endemic acculturation processes that had taken place between the Arabs and the Iranians, a process which had started with the Achaemenians, and continued during the Sasanian period, reaching its apogee in Abbasid times, and and lasting until present-day.

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