This paper explores the depiction of one of the most important characters in classical Arabic narratives of pre-Islamic history: al-Shām. Al-Shām may seem a peculiar protagonist since it is a place, a region that broadly encompasses the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine, and for centuries western historians treated places as ahistorical, inert landmasses. They believed geography was impervious to the passage of time, and hence places could not be actors in historical narratives. But over the past thirty years, the distinction between geography and historiography blurred as theorists began to argue that places are not just passive stages upon which events happen, but are in fact dynamic components in stories about the past. This observation resonated with Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur’s investigations into the parallels between writing history and storytelling. By demonstrating that it is
essentially impossible to reconstruct the past “as it really happened”; White and Ricoeur tarnished the former empirical lustre of the cold, ‘hard facts’ of history and showed that the past is a messy array of data points which historians creatively reconstruct into literary narratives. As the study of history and storytelling converge, the status of spaces in historical writing also calls for fresh scrutiny: just as storytellers craft spaces in which their narratives take place, historians must also create spaces to reflect how they want their readers to understand how history ‘happened’.6

Analysing how writers of historical narratives represent places opens new avenues for understanding their reconstructions of the past. For example, by depicting a place with stereotyped topographies, they can compel readers to conceptualise its populations in targeted ways (consider how depictions of Arabia as desert engender axiomatic impressions that its populations are Bedouin). Historians can also make places interact via representations of boundaries, giving some places positive associations of ‘home space’, while depicting others as ‘outside space’ to conjure feelings of distance, difference and enmity.7 Like characters, places can also be depicted as changing, and shifts in a place’s portrayal will likely accord with seminal junctures in a historical narrative. The act of writing about a place converts physical geography into subjective spatial constructs with specific literary, ‘metageographic’ meanings which are core building blocks for the construction of meaning from the past.8

What then are al-Shām’s metageographic meanings in classical Arabic narratives about pre-Islamic history, and how do they relate to the ways classical writers constructed their stories of the Arab past and Islam’s rise? For answers, we must move beyond the physical places of Byzantine Syria and turn to the literary representations of the space of “al-Shām” in third/ninth and fourth/tenth-century Arabic texts.

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5 Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 3, p. 142.

6 See Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 42: “We should have to look at history itself in a new light. We should have to study not only the history of space, but also the history of representations, along with that of their relationships—with each other, with practice and with ideology. History would have to take in not only the genesis of these spaces but also, and especially, their interconnections, distortions, displacements, mutual interactions and links with the spatial practice of the particular society . . . under consideration”.


8 I use ‘metageography’ in the sense that Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen’s *Myth of Continents*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997 argues that Kantian notions of the arbitrary division of space necessarily bequeath subjective and symbolic meanings to spatial categories.
Al-Shām and the Arab Past: Contemporary and Classical Views

The study of al-Shām and the Arab past meets a debate in modern scholarship about Arab origins. Some posit al-Shām as the very birthplace of the Arab people, and situate Arab ethnogenesis on the Syrian/Arabian frontier between the fifth and sixth centuries CE when groups of Arabian nomads settled as border guards for the Byzantine Empire.9 This theory proposes that Arab ethnic self-awareness formed amongst frontier guard groups akin to the analogous and nearly contemporaneous formation of modern European ethnic identities via the settlement of Germanic groups in military/governing capacities across the late Western Roman Empire.

Identifying al-Shām as the birthplace of Arab identity has a form of support in epigraphic evidence, since nine of the fourteen known pre-Islamic inscriptions written in a language tolerably close to Arabic (though not all in the Arabic script) were found in al-Shām: from Zabad near Aleppo to Petra in southern Jordan.10 The inscriptions, however, pose problems of interpretation: nine finds spanning half a millennium (c.100-600 CE) is a scant sample, and the presence of a language resembling Arabic on a given inscription does not necessarily mean its writer was an ‘Arab’, or that he lived in a consciously ‘Arab milieu’.11 Opinions about Arab origins remain contested, but,12 al-Shām is often


10 The “old-Arabic” inscriptions are, in chronological order: ‘En Avdat (first/second century CE?), Namāra (328), Jabal Ramm (c.350), Umm al-Jimāl (early fifth century), Zabad (512), Usays (528), Harran (568), Nebo (mid-sixth century) and Petra (late-sixth century). See B. Gruendler, The Development Of The Arabic Scripts: From The Nabataean Era To The First Islamic Century According To The Dated Texts, Atlanta, Scolars Press, 1993; and R. Hoyland, “Epigraphy And The Linguistic Background Of The Qurʾān” in The Qurʾān In Its Historical Context, ed. G. S. Reynolds, London, Routledge, 2008. See also Michael Macdonald “Reflections on the linguistic map of pre-Islamic Arabia”, in Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia, ed. Michael Macdonald, Farnham, Ashgate, 2009, 111, pp. 28-79, pp. 36-37 for the status of “Old Arabic” in Arabia’s linguistic map.


at centre stage, and groups of its inhabitants from the dawn of the Common Era to the rise of Islam—the Nabataeans, Palmyrenes,13 and especially the fifth-seventh century CE military groups of Salīḥ, Tanūkh and Ghassān/Jafna14—star in contemporary reconstructions of Arab history.

In classical Arabic literature, references to al-Shām do appear in pre-Islamic poetry preserved in third/ninth century collections. For example, the administrative centre Ḥimṣ (Emessa) is cited by the poets Imruʾ al-Qays and al-Aʿshā,15 Imruʾ al-Qays mentions Antioch16 and Ḥamā,17 and al-Aʿshā cites Jerusalem by the archaic Ūrīshalam.18 Smaller Levantine villages such as Shayzar,19 Khamala and Awjar are also attested.20 Poetry mentions Ghassanid ‘Arab kings’ from


Imruʿ al-Qays, Dīwān, p. 349.

Ibid., p. 62.

Al-Aṣḥā, Dīwān, p. 91.

Imruʿ al-Qays, Dīwān, p. 62.

Ibid., p. 61.
pre-Islamic *al-Shām* too, and third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century Arabic histories such as al-Yaʿqūbī’s (d.c.284/897) *Ṭārīkh*, al-Masʿūdī’s (d.346/956) *Murūj al-dhahab* and Ḥamza al-Isfahānī’s (d.350/961) *Ṭārīkh sanī mulūk al-ard* each contain chapters on pre-Islamic *Shāmī* ‘Arab’ history. Genealogical accounts of the tribes Qudā’a, Ghassān and Tanūkh in Ibn al-Kalbī’s (d.c.204/819) *Nasab Ma’add wa-l-Yaman* offer another source for finding memories of *al-Shām*.

Closer analysis of the classical Arabic sources, however, unearths complexities in their representations of *al-Shām’s* space. For instance, al-Aʿshā’s Himṣ and Jerusalem appear in a poem where the poet flamboyantly describes his travels, citing far-flung places he visited to boast of worldwide adventure:

> In search of wealth I journeyed the horizons  
> Oman, Ḥimṣ, Jerusalem—  
> I met the Najāshī in his Ethiopic land—  
> And the Nabaṭīs and ʿAjam too.\(^{22}\)

Al-Aʿshā’s *al-Shām* is part of the world’s edges, space evocative of long-distance travel. *Al-Shām’s* separation from a sense of an ‘Arab’ centre also features in a lampoon poem by the pre-Islamic Ḥurayth ibn ʿAnnāb, recorded in Abū Tamām’s *al-Ḥamāsa*:

> Oh Banū Thuʿal, sons of whores!  
> What is your language?  
> It is a strange tongue.  
> Their prattle sounds like the rumbling of a camel’s gut,  
> Or the sound of a croaking bird, fluttering.  
> They’re from Diyāf [in *al-Shām*]; uncircumcised;  
> Their orator rises late, chewing on his own excrement.\(^{23}\)

Commentators on this graphic *ḥijāʾ* note that “the poet’s intention was to banish [Banū Thuʿal] from being Arabs and to connect them to non-Arabs

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22 Al-Aʿshā, *Diwān*, p. 91.

He achieves this not only linguistically, by chiding their dialect, but also ritually, via their non-circumcision, and spatially, through fixing their residence in the Levantine Diyar. It is instructive that Shāmī space is cited as something incompatible with, or at least deleterious to perceptions of Arabness.

Classical Arabic literary treatment of the Ghassanids is also curious. The three histories cited above do not agree on a Ghassanid king list and provide only scant details of Ghassanid history compared to their narratives of other pre-Islamic ‘Arab’ kingdoms. Al-Ṭabarī’s Tārīkh omits the Ghassanids almost entirely, a contrast with its narratives of the pre-Islamic Iraqi ‘Arab’ kings of Lakhm, and a particularly surprising omission considering al-Ṭabarī’s express intention to record the history of “all kings across time”. Al-Ṭabarī only mentions Ghassān where they clashed with the Lakhmids, and the Lakhmids receive far more coverage in classical Arabic literature in general. Irfan Shahid praises al-Iṣfahānī’s Tārīkh for narrating rare gems of Ghassanid lore, particularly their building programs in al-Shām, but a wider question could be asked: why is al-Iṣfahānī so unique? It seems that many classical Arabic writers were writing the Ghassanids out of history, reducing their memories to rare finds in scattered manuscripts rather than according them a full place in narratives of the pre-Islamic Arab past.

The disparity between modern theories of Arab origins in al-Shām and the almost obliterated Shāmī Ghassanid memories in classical Arabic literature is curious. Full exploration of Ghassān’s literary portrayal is beyond this paper’s scope, but analysis of al-Shām’s spatial narratives in classical Arabic writings could provide a first step. Was the downplaying of Ghassān a by-product of a much broader discourse? Did Muslim authors employ al-Shām for narrative

26 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh 1, p. 6.
27 Contrary to its frequent citation in Arabic sources, al-Ḥira has received limited modern scholarly attention: Isabel Toral-Niehoff, al-Ḥira, Leiden, Brill, 2013. is the only major study of prose sources. For evidence from poetry, see Ahmad al-Najjār, ʿAlāqāt umarā al-Ḥirah bi-ʿarab shibh al-jazīrah, Cairo, Dār al-Nahḍah al-ʿArabīyah, 1979.
28 Shahid, Byzantium and the Arabs, 2.2, pp. 308-310.
29 Julia Bray’s careful detective work tracing the story of the last Ghassanid Jabala ibn al-Ayham would be an excellent model to study the Arabic representations of earlier Ghassanid princes (“Christian king, Muslim apostate: depictions of Jabala in the early Arabic sources”, in Writing True Stories: Historians and Hagioographers in Byzantium and the Middle East, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, pp. 175-203.)
purposes which required its depiction as a remote, non-Arab place which consequently left little room for Ghassanid memories to assert themselves? The following sections investigate these questions in an array of narratives about the pre-Islamic past.

*Al-Shām in Third/Ninth Century Collections of Pre-Islamic Arabica*

Collections of pre-Islamic Arab lore such as Ibn al-Kalbī’s *al-Aṣnām*, Ibn Ḥabīb’s (d.245/859) *al-Muḥabbar*, Ibn Qutayba’s (d.276/889) *al-Maʿārif*, and genealogical texts such as Ibn al-Kalbī’s *Jamharat al-nasab* and al-Balādhurī’s (d.279/892) *Ansāb al-ashrāf* cite *al-Shām* as a destination for Arab travellers, but not as a quotidian Arab environment. We encounter *al-Shām* in these texts as the object of travel, and its visitors are often reported as acquiring special esoteric knowledge. *Al-Muḥabbar* and *al-Maʿārif* relate stories of pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists who, dissatisfied with Arabia’s putative paganism, fled to *al-Shām* to commence spiritual wanderings in search of religious enlightenment, and *al-Shām*’s ‘special knowledge’ extends beyond monotheism too: Ibn al-Kalbī reports that it was the origin of idol worship in Mecca, explaining that the first idol brought to Mecca was procured from *al-Shām* by the Qurashī ‘Amr ibn Luḥayy. *Al-Shām* is also noted as the origin of the statute of Hubal, another pre-Islamic Arabian idol, and it is the home of a soothsayer whom Arab tribes would visit to resolve disputes.

*Al-Shām*’s mysterious knowledge appears in another guise in the fabulous tale of how ‘Abd Allāh ibn Ḫud‘ān, a rich Meccan, obtained his wealth. Ibn Ḥabīb describes that ‘Abd Allāh was trading in the “markets of *al-Shām*” when he met a stranger asking for conveyance to Mecca. ‘Abd Allāh agreed to take him, and when the pair neared Mecca, the stranger led ‘Abd Allāh to a

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cave which no Meccan knew existed. In a bizarre twist, the stranger revealed the special cave—which was stuffed with treasure—was the mausoleum of his ancestors, the ‘lost’ tribe of Jurhum who ruled Mecca in ancient times. He had returned to die with his forefathers, and promptly did, though as payment for his passage to Mecca, he permitted ‘Abd Allâh to take as much gold as he could carry on condition that he re-concealed the cave’s entrance.

A pattern seems to emerge from the texts. *Al-Shām* is invoked as destination of distant travel, not an Arab homeland, and its association with extraordinary knowledge suggests a twinning of spatial remoteness with novelty. ‘Foreign space’ hearkens ‘foreign knowledge’, and we perceive pre-Islamic *al-Shām* becoming a *topos*: a faraway place where mysterious things can be expected to exist and from which special knowledge can be procured and imported into Arabia.

Genealogical accounts also depict *al-Shām* as remote space ‘outside’ Arabia. Quṣay, one of the most important ancestors of Quraysh, is said to have acquired his name (related to a root connoting ‘distance’) because his mother “took him far away, to *al-Shām*”.

Genealogies of Quraysh and other Ma’addite (Northern Arabian) tribes make limited mention of pre-Islamic *al-Shām*; it has no kin relation to pre-Islamic Ma’addite roots, and it is only integrated in genealogies of Muslim-era (i.e. post-conquest) *Shāmīs*. For instance, Ibn Ḥabīb restricts mention of *al-Shām* in pre-Islamic genealogy to stories of long-distance trade, giving particular mention to Gaza, a commercial centre at the very edge of *al-Shām*. Ibn al-Kalbī’s *Jamharat al-nasab* lists the genealogy of Quraysh and Ma’addite Arabs without any reference to pre-Islamic *al-Shām*. Genealogists record *al-Shām* as the destination of pre-Islamic tribes that ‘disappeared’ from Arabian history, and as a refuge for social outcasts seeking to escape ‘Arab society’ in Arabia. Curiously, Southern Arabian ‘Yāmānī’ genealogy did claim that pre-Islamic peoples in *al-Shām* were ‘Yemeni Arabs’; the mechanics of this genealogical imagination are complex and relate to Yemeni lore outside the scope of this paper, but for present purposes, it is key to note that those tribes

38 *Ibid.*, p. 43, p. 44. The story is repeated at pp. 97-98 where Gaza is not mentioned, only *al-Shām*.
40 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 1, p. 70. See also the analogous story of the ancient pre-Islamic prophet Šālīh, who, after his unbelieving Arabian community was destroyed by God, fled the scene of their unbelief and migrated to *al-Shām* (al-Mas‘ūdī, *Murūj*, §935).
41 *Yamānī* history is detailed in the early texts *Akhbār al-Yaman* of ‘Ubayd ibn Sharya, Cairo, al-Hay’a al-‘Amma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 1996; *Tārikh al-‘arab qabla al-Islām* by
who lived in pre-Islamic northern Arabia chose not to conceptualise/remember a kin linkage with pre-Islamic *Shāmīs*.

The above sources are also silent on *al-Shām*’s pre-Islamic ethnic composition. Its people are not described in any detail; it is as if the spatial remoteness crafted for *al-Shām* renders its people dimly perceived and indistinguishable too. The absence of reference to ‘Northern Arabs’ living in *al-Shām* suggests that barriers were being erected between pre-Islamic Levantines and Arabness, hearkening Ḥurayth ibn ‘Annāb’s poem about the ‘non-Arab’, *Shāmi*-domiciled Banū Thu’al cited above. In contrast to modern scholarly attention to Arab/*Shāmī* roots, therefore, classical Muslim collectors of Northern Arabian *Arabica* and genealogy distance *al-Shām* from Arab origin history, and they were not alone in constructing this spatial narrative: other classical-era historical discourses also represent *al-Shām* as a distant ‘outside’ space with an attendant, and special role in their stories of Arab and Islamic origins.

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**Al-Shām** and Muḥammad: Spatial Narratives of the Dawn of Islam

The ḥadīth (collected sayings of the Prophet and his Companions) and the *Sīra* (the Prophet’s biography) both contain numerous references to *al-Shām*. The debates over the material’s historicity and the relative authenticity of ḥadīth vs. *Sīra* do not concern this study, since I eschew empirical questions of Muḥammad’s ‘actual’ connections with the ‘real’ Levant in order to focus on the role *al-Shām* plays in the literary memories of the rise of Islam. Because the main collections of ḥadīth and the extant version of the Prophet’s biography

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were compiled during the third/ninth century,\(^\text{43}\) they can be read as contemporaneous narratives engaged with reconstructing the Prophet’s world. This approach adopts Hayden White’s methods to treat both as textual sources that shared and repackaged memories from the past, and we shall find that their approaches to \textit{al-Shām} are complimentary.

Akin to the anecdotes about pre-Islamic \textit{Arabia} noted above, stories in both ḥadīth and \textit{Sīra} radically distance \textit{al-Shām} from the action of Muḥammad’s Arabian milieu, and they refer to it only generically: \textit{al-Shām} is simply “\textit{al-Shām}”, a stand-alone place in their conceptual map of the dawn of Islam. Typically, readers encounter \textit{al-Shām} in citations such as “the Prophet mentioned \textit{al-Shām}”\(^\text{44}\); “a caravan arrived from \textit{al-Shām}”\(^\text{45}\); “the road to \textit{al-Shām}”\(^\text{46}\); “al-Madīna is better than \textit{al-Shām}”\(^\text{47}\); or, in predictions of the future, Muḥammad says “\textit{al-Shām} is on the verge of being captured”\(^\text{48}\) and “Jesus will appear in \textit{al-Shām}”\(^\text{49}\). This \textit{al-Shām}, devoid of cities or sub-regions\(^\text{50}\), evokes undifferentiated space: readers have no opportunity to observe it as something other than a distant generalisation, prompting them to conceptualise it as ‘over there’, disconnected from the familiar interaction of the Arabians.

Out of the undifferentiated \textit{Shāmī} space, only Buṣrā, a commercial entrepôt located on the Syrian side of today’s Syrian-Jordanian border and known to the Byzantines as Bostra, receives specific attention. Buṣrā’s spatial narratives in Arabic texts, however, also enforce a distancing of \textit{al-Shām}. Buṣrā was located on \textit{al-Shām}’s edge: in the sixth century CE it was the southernmost permanent outpost of the Byzantine Empire, and from the Byzantine perspective, beyond Buṣrā lay the unfamiliar land of the \textit{Saracenī} (what we conceptualise today

\(^\text{43}\) The extant \textit{Sīra} was written by Ibn Hishām (d.218/833); ḥadīth collections I consult begin with Ahmad ibn Ḥanbal (d.241/855) and extend to the ‘Six Books’ compiled in the second half of the third/ninth century.


\(^\text{48}\) Ibn Ḥanbal, \textit{Musnad}, 5, p. 220.

\(^\text{49}\) Muslim, \textit{Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Fitan} 110.

\(^\text{50}\) It is only (very rarely) given more detailed texture via mention of \textit{Filistīn}/Palestine (see Abū Dāwūd \textit{Sunan Abī Dāwūd}, Riyadh, Dār al-Salām, 1999, \textit{al-Jihād} p. 83; al-Tirmidhī, \textit{Jāmiʿ}, \textit{al-Fitan} 66), and (more commonly) the town of Buṣrā. I presently discuss Buṣrā’s spatial narratives.
as Arabia). The ḥadīth reflect the flipside: from their perspective, beyond Buṣrā lay al-Shām. We encounter Buṣrā as the destination of Arab caravans, but in contrast to Buṣrā’s relatively frequent citation, we hear nothing of what lay beyond—it is only that undifferentiated Shāmī hinterland of the “Rūm”/Byzantines which the Arabians are not described as exploring. Buṣrā’s spatial significance thus marks the furthest edge of the familiar world, the nodal point where the narratives’ Arabia transitions to the ‘outside’ space of al-Shām.

Buṣrā’s particular spatial narrative manifests in idiomatic expressions repeated in different contexts in the Sīra and ten ḥadīth from the ‘canonical’ collections. For example, Muḥammad describes the vast clap of lightning which will herald the Last Day as extending from “Yemen to Buṣrā”, Ibn Hishām relates that the light which shone from Muḥammad’s mother when he was conceived lit up the “palaces of Buṣrā”, Muḥammad describes his water cistern in Paradise around which his Companions will gather as being equivalent to the distance “between Buṣrā and Ṣanʿāʾ”, and to illustrate the vastness of Paradise, Muḥammad explains that the width of one of its door leaves is

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51 Following the Emperor Trajan’s conquest of the Nabataeans in 105 CE, the Romans founded a province named ‘Arabia’ with its capital in Buṣrā. By the seventh century, the province of Arabia had been turned over to Ghassanid control and Buṣrā became a frontier town, beyond which Byzantine authority had very little direct control. Unfamiliarity with the Saraceni beyond the Imperial Frontier prompted generalised impressions in Latin and Greek writing see Retsö, The Arabs, pp. 505-521 and Michael Macdonald, “Arabians, Arabias and the Greeks: contact and perceptions”, in Macdonald, Literacy and Identity, V, pp. 1-33, pp. 21-30.


56 Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, 5, p. 282.
equal to “the distance between Mecca and Buṣrā”. These idioms invoke Buṣrā symbolically, not as a precise measure of distance, but rather a byword for ‘far away’ or ‘the furthest imaginable place’.

The Buṣrā metaphor resembles the Colonial-era English vernacular ‘Timbuktu’ that communicates the idea of exaggerated distance via a place-name associated with the remotest reaches of the world. The ḥadīth’s Buṣrā must be intended as an analagous conceptual trigger for remoteness, and in this vein, the story of Muḥammad’s letters to the “kings of the world” is instructive. A ḥadīth reports that Muḥammad’s letter to the Byzantines was addressed to the “Grandee [aẓīm] of Buṣrā”. The Prophet is thus shown to have interacted with the Byzantines via the extreme south of their world. The ḥadīth and Sīra’s attention to Buṣrā creates tangible space at the edge of an Arabian-centred worldview which intriguingly renders all the land beyond—i.e. al-Shām—unfamiliar and unexplored. Readers are made familiar with Buṣrā’s space in order to conceptualise the ‘last stop’ of Arabian travel, and the resultant outside-ness for the rest of al-Shām assisted the narrations of both Muḥammad’s Meccan and Medinan periods, though in different ways, which I explore in turn.

Al-Shām in Meccan-Period Narratives

In narratives of Muḥammad’s Meccan period, al-Shām makes several appearances, two of which concern journeys Muḥammad himself made to al-Shām. The first occurs during his childhood, before his prophecy began, when he is reported to have accompanied a Meccan trading caravan that stopped near Buṣrā. The Meccans there meet a Christian monk, Baḥīrā, who, upon seeing Muḥammad and observing in him the signs of prophethood, reveals that the youth is destined to be a prophet. Muḥammad’s second Shāmi journey, dated during his early prophethood, is the miraculous al-Isrāʾ (the Night Journey). Led by the Angel Gabriel, Muḥammad rides the extraordinary mount al-Burāq

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57 Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, Tafsīr v7.5.
58 Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, Badʾ al-waḥī 7.
60 The sources offer various dates, either (i) one year prior to his emigration to Medina; (ii) sixteen months prior to his emigration; (iii) at some point prior to the death of his first wife, Khadija which occurred either five, four or three years prior to his emigration; or (iv) five (or seven) years after the commencement of his prophetic mission, i.e. seven years prior to his emigration. See Abū al-Fidāʾ ibn al-Kathīr, al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya, ed. Aḥmad Abū Mulḥim, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, n.d., 3, p. 107.
from Mecca to Jerusalem and back in one night. Some narratives report that Muḥammad led a prayer with past prophets in Jerusalem, while other versions, more numerous in later literature, recount that Muḥammad ascended from Jerusalem’s holy mosque to the Heavens where he met past prophets and God Himself, a journey known as *al-Miʿrāj*. Irrespective of the precise details, *al-Isrāʾ wa-l-Miʿrāj* are pivotal miracles in the Prophet’s early career and highlight the central ritual of prayer and Muḥammad’s status as pre-eminent prophet.

The journey narratives portray *al-Shām* with two salient characteristics. Firstly, and in common with the placing of *al-Shām* already noted, the region appears as a distant location on the ‘outside’ of Arabian space. Baḥīrā’s residence near Buṣrā marks the encounter’s setting at the proverbial edge of the ‘Arab world’, and *al-Isrāʾ* narratives expressly invoke spatial remoteness too: Muḥammad’s destination, Jerusalem’s mosque, is pointedly referred to as “*al-masjid al-aqṣā*” (the “furthest mosque”), and there is particular stress on the fact that the pagan Meccans refused to believe Muḥammad’s journey story because *al-Shām* was too impossibly far away. The *Sīra* reports their incredulity:

This is clear absurdity! By God, the caravan must be driven for a month from Mecca to *al-Shām* and a month back; indeed, this Muḥammad really made the return trip in one night?!

We read that only Abū Bakr, the sincerest believer, accepted that Muḥammad traversed such a vast distance in such a short time.

Secondly, and akin to the narratives of pre-Islamic *Arabica*, *al-Shām* is a font of special religious knowledge: a monotheistic heritage which prophesises and legitimises Muḥammad’s mission. Muḥammad is connected to this spiritual space from the moment of his conception via the *Sīra*’s description of the light that shone forth from his mother to “Buṣrā’s castles,” it is near Buṣrā

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62 Cor 17, 1; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 1, p. 396.

63 Cor 17, 1; Ibn Hishām, *Sīra* 1, p. 398.


that Baḥīrā’s esoteric knowledge reveals Muḥammad’s destiny, and al-Isrā’ wa-l-Miʿrāj invokes Jerusalem’s status as a veritable capital of monotheism to situate the climax of Muḥammad’s early prophethood. Together, al-Shām’s remoteness and spiritually potent spatial narrative render its esoteric knowledge tangible yet appropriately out of reach to emphasise its special nature. Muḥammad’s journey narratives to al-Shām symbolically break the barrier of al-Shām’s distance and give the Arabian prophet physical connection with past prophecy.

The Sīra also marshals al-Shām’s dual remoteness/esoteric potency in anecdotes about persons living before Muḥammad who, like Baḥīrā, are accorded special knowledge of Muḥammad’s impending mission. Consider Abū-l-Hayyabān, a Jew “from al-Shām” (note again the generic spatial reference), who immigrated to Arabia and settled amongst the Jews and pagan Arabs in Yathrib (the pre-Islamic name of Medina). He brings magical knowledge that helps the locals summon rain to relieve a drought, and on his deathbed, we read his ‘last words’:

Oh Jewish people! What is it that forced me out of the Land of Wine and Leavened Bread [al-Shām] to come to the Land of Hunger and Hardship [Arabia]?… I came to this land to await the coming of Prophet whose time is near…

The story invokes an essential opposition between pre-Islamic al-Shām and Arabia contrasting (i) al-Shām’s wine and bread with Arabia’s hunger and privation, and (ii) the Shāmī Abū-l-Hayyabān’s powers over the rain and knowledge of Muḥammad’s imminence with Arabian impotence and ignorance. Another example of this trope is the tale of Salmān al-Fārisī, a Persian whose dissatisfaction with his father’s religion reportedly led him to al-Shām where he met devout monks from whom he learned Christianity and learned, in turn, from the most devout monk of all that he must continue his journey to Arabia and await the coming Prophet. And similarly, the Sīra depicts most pre-Islamic Arabians who sought monotheistic enlightenment as travellers to al-Shām: Zayd ibn ‘Amr ibn Nufayl “travelled around all of al-Shām” and finally met a monk in the Balqāʾ near Damascus (again at the borders of al-Shām and Arabia) who “possessed the sum of Christian knowledge” and instructed him to

66 Ibid., Sīra, 1, p. 213.
67 Ibid., 1, pp. 213-214.
68 Ibid., 1, pp. 215-218.
69 Ibid., 1, p. 231.
return to Arabia and await Muḥammad's prophethood;70 and when ʿUthmān ibn al-Ḥuwayrith converted to Christianity, he is said to have quitted Arabia for al-Shām.71

Al-Shām in the Sīra's Meccan chapters thus embodies a conceptual separation of monotheistic traditions from Arabian Jāhiliyya, and al-Shām’s extreme distance from ‘Arab’ quotidian experience enables the Sīra to place pre-Muḥammadic monotheism just ‘out of view’ from the Arabian Arabs, with only tenuous connections borne by long-distance travellers.

**Al-Shām in Medinan-Period Narratives**

Intriguingly, al-Shām loses all of its religious potency in narratives of Muḥammad’s Medinan period. Stories abruptly shift from mentions of monks and prophecy to depictions of al-Shām as a political and commercial centre. In the commercial context, al-Shām appears as the source of cereals,72 wine,73 oil,74 silk and other luxurious textiles,75 but in keeping with the undifferentiated and generalised depiction of al-Shām, the anecdotes never inform us where in al-Shām these products were obtained: they are simply “from al-Shām”. As an interesting comparison, verses which third/ninth century scholars ascribed to pre-Islamic poets sometimes refer to Shāmī produce via names of specific regional manufacture, such as the wine of al-Andarīn mentioned in ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm’s Muʿallaqa,76 or the “Mashrafi”77 and “Buṣrī”78 swords attributed to the towns of Mashraf and Buṣrā. The absence of regional distinctions between generic Shāmī goods in the ḥadīth and Sīra again characterises al-Shām as distant, dimly perceived space in the Prophet and his Companions’ commercial dealings.

70 Ibid., 1, p. 231.
71 Ibid., 1, p. 224.
72 Al-Bukhārī, Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Sila’ p. 3.
73 Ibn Ḥanbal, Musnad, 2, 132.
77 Imruʾ al-Qays, Dīwān, p. 33.
78 Al-Marzūqī, Sharḥ, 3, p. 1258, p. 1803.
Reports of the Prophet’s political interaction with *al-Shām* similarly relate an undifferentiated, distant space. The *Sīra* does not ascribe the Medinan Muḥammad any physical connection to the region: his one expedition towards *al-Shām* (the Tabūk campaign) was abortive, and the *Shāmī* campaign led by his Companions is reported as prematurely defeated at the Battle al-Muʿta.⁷⁹ *Al-Shām* emerges as the bridge too far for Muslim armies during the life of the Prophet, leaving its conquest for another time and enforcing the barrier between *al-Shām* and Muḥammad’s Arabian community. The result leaves *al-Shām* as an empty zone, uncluttered by actual towns and sub-regions, and the narratives re-fill the void with their own portrayals of *al-Shām* suitable for the *Sīra*’s discourses.

One such discourse reliant on ‘othering’ *al-Shām* concerns the Ghassanids. Ḥadīth refer to the Ghassanids as kings, but Ghassanid ‘Arabness’ and their supposed proximity to the Arabians is absent. I found only eleven references to Ghassān in the ḥadīth preserved in the ‘canonical collections’, and, subtracting repetitions, there are only five separate anecdotes. One exchange between ʿUmar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb and his daughter Ḥafṣa describing the events surrounding the issue of divorce amongst the Prophet’s wives offers a pointed portrayal:

[Hafṣa said]: My father [ʿUmar] called me and I went out to him.
He said: “Something serious has happened!”
I said: “What? Have the Ghassanids attacked?”
“No, more serious than that, the Prophet of God has divorced one of his women!”⁸⁰

In another version of the story, Ḥafṣa notes that “we used to scare each other by mentioning that one of the Ghassanid kings was coming for us…”⁸¹ Ghassān appears as a menace from faraway *al-Shām*, not a kin Arab tribe, and in a similar vein, they are also depicted as a nameless foe—the ḥadīth do not record the names of any Ghassanids. These Ghassanids resemble the Rūm: both are depicted as foreign people from *al-Shām* possessing a powerful military force outside of the world of the Muslim community, and like *al-Shām*’s space itself, both Rūm and Ghassān are only generically portrayed, and hence dimly perceptible, stock-character foes.

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⁸¹    Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Tafsīr 53:3. See also al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, al-Malābis 31: “All those who lived [in the land] surrounding the Prophet of God had acquiesced to him, but only the King of Ghassān remained, and we used to fear that he would attack us.”
Another ḥadīth relates the story of the Muslim poet Kaʿb ibn Mālik’s failure to report for military service during the Tabūk campaign and his consequent fifty-day shunning by the Muslim community. During his isolation, Kaʿb received a message from an unnamed “Ghassanid king” written on silk inviting him to al-Shām, promising him a warm reception and an end to his isolation. But Kaʿb ignored it, stayed faithful to Islam and was forgiven by Muḥammad. Whilst the Ghassanids and al-Shām here appear in closer communication with the Muslim community (the Ghassanid king evidently knew of Kaʿb’s plight), al-Shām is nonetheless still the ‘other’. It embodies materialism, a wealthy silken and luxurious preserve of an anonymous but generous king that accords with its association with fine textiles and wine encountered in other ḥadīth. This al-Shām contrasts the Muslim community under Muḥammad’s divinely inspired leadership, and Kaʿb’s shunning of al-Shām was his salvation: it constitutes the story’s explanation for his reintegration into the Muslim community.

The surprising absence of reference to Ghassanid Arabness seems related to the spatial narratives constructed for their homeland: al-Shām is a foil to Arabia, the al-Shām/Arabia dichotomy directs readers to interpret early Islamic history as a devout Arabian community threatened to the north by a hostile, non-Muslim and materialist coalition of Ghassān and Rūm. The apposition resonates with Bachelard’s observation that writers narrate descriptions of outside spaces as a means to display the ‘inside’. The emphasis in Medinan-era narratives on al-Shām’s commercial and political aspects also enables the stories to focus on Medina’s connections to the wider world. Such narratives show readers that Muḥammad’s Medinan community was a viable polity, and al-Shām’s changed persona from spiritually potent Meccan-period narratives to the political/economic Medinan-period portrayal thereby ideally suits the Sīra’s goal to highlight the maturation of Islam into a nascent state. By focusing on al-Shām as a place of ‘external relations’ for Arab Muslims, there is little room for extolling the memories of an Arab Ghassanid al-Shām. Those memories are elided, the Ghassanids are deported to the edge of Arabian memory and the narrative can unambiguously focus on Muḥammad’s prophetic community in Arabia.

83 See also the ḥadīth related by al-Bukhārī in which the Caliph ʿUmar relates his prohibition of the wearing of silk which he said to have announced in al-Jābiya, the former capital of the Ghassanids. The connection of Ghassān, silk and non-Islam seems significant (Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Sīl 3).
84 Bachelard, The Poetics of Space, pp. 213-214.
'A tale of two Jerusalems': Jerusalem and *al-Shām* between Meccan and Medinan ḥadīth

Exploring the characterisation of *al-Shām* as the ‘outside’, ‘othered’ foil to the Meccan/Medinan centre of *Sīra* narratives, Jerusalem’s three appearances in Muḥammad’s biography—at the beginning of prophethood, shortly after the *hijra* and towards the end of Muḥammad’s life—neatly encapsulate *al-Shām*’s role in narratives about the transition from *Jāhiliyya* to Islam.

As noted above, Muḥammad’s first encounter with Jerusalem in *al-Isrāʾ wa-l-Miʿrāj* cast the prophetic/monotheistic rituals of the holy city in opposition to pagan Meccan incredulity. Jerusalem next features in year 2/624:85 the Companion al-Barāʾ ibn ʿĀzib relates

> I prayed with the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the direction of Jerusalem for sixteen months, until the verse from *Sūrat al-Baqara* “And wherever you may be, turn your face in the direction [of Mecca]…” was revealed. It was revealed after the Prophet (peace be upon him) prayed. A man then left and passed by the *Anṣār* while they were praying and informed them of it, and they turned their faces to the *Bayt* [the Kaʿba of Mecca].

Previously facing *al-Shām* in prayer, the story explains how Muslims were instructed to turn their backs to it and face the *qibla* of Mecca. The *Sīra* reports that some queried the turn from the *Shāmī qibla*, the direction associated with “the religion/religious community (*milla*) of Abraham”;87 Qurʾān 2:144-150 decisively confirmed the shift.

Following the turn away from *al-Shām* in the prayer ritual, Muḥammad never is accorded further connection with Jerusalem. Jerusalem is only again mentioned in a ḥadīth about a trading mission which pagan Meccans undertook to *al-Shām* between the truce of al-Hudaybiyya in 6/628 and the Muslim conquest of Mecca in 8/630.88 Instead of stopping in Buṣrā, as almost all other such traders are said to have done, Abū Sufyān, the leader of the Meccan traders, reportedly enters Jerusalem itself. The ensuing account mentions neither holy mosques nor past prophets; instead the pagan Abū Sufyān meets a secular ruler, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (Hiraql) and his court of notables (*ʿuẓamā al-Rūm*). Heraclius asks about Muḥammad, and Abū Sufyān

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86 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Masājid* 2.
describes the basics of Muḥammad’s religious message (the ḥadīth adds that Heraclius had earlier seen a sign in the stars that a circumcised man would become king, and ascertained that this could be Muḥammad). The discussion with Abū Sufyān confirms Heraclius’ fear that Muhammad’s people will conquer al-Shām, but, according to the ḥadīth, the knowledge does not prompt Heraclius’ conversion. Instead, the meeting in Jerusalem ends in uproar amongst the Byzantines, and Abū Sufyān is ushered out. The ḥadīth continues via another narrator, and reads:

[Nāṭūr reports:] “Then Heraclius travelled to Ḥimṣ…He permitted the Byzantine notables to enter a castle of his at Ḥimṣ and ordered the doors locked. Then [Heraclius] appeared and said: ‘Oh Byzantines, should we seek prosperity, guidance and the preservation of our kingship, and choose to follow this prophet?’ The people turned and stampeded like wild asses and made for the doors, but they found them locked. When Heraclius saw their abhorrence and was assured of their faith, he ordered the people back and said: ‘I made that earlier speech to test your faith in your religion, and I have seen it.’ They prostrated to him and were pleased with him.” [al-Bukhārī adds:] “This was the end of the matter of Heraclius.”

Heraclius’ personal faith is unclear, but the ḥadīth closes a short chapter in al-Bukhārī’s al-Ṣaḥīḥ which begins with the famous ḥadīth: “all deeds are judged by their intentions”. Read in that context, the conclusion of the Heraclius anecdote implies the Emperor’s intention was to test his people’s loyalty, not to sincerely urge his subjects to convert to Islam, and al-Bukhārī’s own editorial statement “this was the end of the matter of Heraclius” suggests that he did not believe Heraclius ever again considered embracing Islam.

In sum, the Meccan-period stories’ depiction of Jerusalem as the capital of prophethood transforms in Medinan-period stories into the home of zealous Byzantine secular power wilfully rejecting Muḥammad. The Medinan
narratives' Jerusalem together with its depictions of Ghassanid threat prime al-Shām's transformation from a monotheistic haven into a theatre of conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim. The physical break when the Muslims turned their backs on al-Shām in prayer marks an identical about-face in the region's spatial narratives.

The distinct shift in al-Shām's portrayal between the pre- and post-hijra eras neatly reveals an underlying master narrative in the prophetic biography. The sources' consistent distancing of al-Shām which prevents readers from experiencing the 'inside' of its space leaves al-Shām as a generic stereotype, emptied of actual places and real people which contrasts the detailed, quotidian depictions of the Arab's homeland. The monolithic façade of al-Shām is accordingly 'othered': it becomes a straw man, Arabia's foil which highlights, by its opposition, how readers should conceive of Muḥammad's Arabia. The pre-hijra al-Shām's Judeo-Christian learning engenders the depiction of Muḥammad's nascent Islam as surrounded by Jāhiliyya paganism which explains the slow start of Muḥammad's mission, and this al-Shām also legitimises Islam via its enlightened knowledge contrasting Jāhiliyya. Following the hijra, the shift by which al-Shām's formerly supportive religious traditions become Christian opposition, worldly commerce and conflict suits the new narrative perfectly. Muḥammad's new community can be conceived as the sole embodiment of right-guided life, and the economic-political details show the reader the material, worldly success of Islam too.

The two Shāms within one genre of writing are contradictory: Ghassān makes no appearance in the Meccan narratives, while Jerusalem's past prophets are absent in the Medinan, but the differences spring from the texts' impressions of the past. The master narrative reconstruction of the first Muslim community as an exclusively Arab island of enlightenment was overriding and used the various guises of al-Shām to persuasive effect. As a result, al-Shām loses any autonomous history, it must be the 'opposite' of Arabia, and any 'Arabness' of its population necessarily disappears as its identity is emptied to pave the path of history for Islam. The same role appears in the last chapter of al-Shām's Jāhiliyya narrative: its conquests.

Al-Shām in al-Azdī's Futūḥ

The earliest extant account of the Muslim conquest of al-Shām, al-Azdī's late second/eighth century Futūḥ al-Shām,93 constructs a campaign narrative in

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which the foreignness of the expedition is enhanced both doctrinally and eth-
nically. At the outset, al-Azdī reports that the Caliph Abū Bakr, when decid-
ing to invade al-Shām, announced: “the Arabs are sons of the same mother and father; I wanted to mobilise them against the Rūm in al-Shām”.94 The
conflict is thus constructed as pitting Muslim/Arab-kin against non-Muslim/
Rūm-other, and this is stressed through similar expressions attributed to the
Muslim leaders,95 and Arabs from across Arabia flock to Medina to announce
their preparedness to join their “brothers” (ikhwān) in the fight against Rūm.96
Spatially, the non-Muslim/non-Arab al-Shām is cemented by al-Azdī’s depic-
tion of the Muslim armies bursting into al-Shām from the “Land of the Arabs”
(arḍ al-ʿarab).97 Al-Shām is quintessentially foreign: uniformly non-Muslim
space and, by extension, non-Arab space too which is even more alien to the
Muslim Arabians than al-Shām of the Medinan-period Sīra.

With Arabisation and Islamisation depicted as two sides of the same coin,
the memory of conquest battles in al-Shām render the memory of pre-Islamic
Arabs in al-Shām an uncomfortable tautology. Al-Azdī seems to have been
aware of this, since his Futūḥ makes only slight indication that the Rūm had
any ‘Arab’ allies,98 and al-Azdī only accords those ‘Arabs’ a minor role in the
actual fighting. He relates:

among the [Christian] Arabs [mobilised by the Byzantines], there
were some who protected[?]99 the Arabs and were angry, for the appear-
ance of the Arabs [in al-Shām] was more agreeable to them than the
Rūm’s presence—these were the Arabs who were not firmly rooted in
Christianity.100

94 Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd Allāh al-Azdī, Futūḥ al-Shām, ed. W. N. Lees, Calcutta, Baptist
Mission Press, 1854, 1.
96 Ibid., p. 29.
97 Ibid., p. 20, p. 34.
98 Ibid., p. 28.
99 Word obscured in the manuscript.
100 Al-Azdī, Futūḥ, p. 36.
Pointedly, al-Azdī makes only five references to the Christian Ghassanids,¹⁰¹ and he finesse their history in three of those five cases by portraying Ghassanids as converting to Islam,¹⁰² or entering the Muslim armies before battle.¹⁰³ Only once does he depict them fighting Muslims.¹⁰⁴

By forgetting memories of pre-Islamic ‘Arab’ al-Shām, al-Azdī can construct it as an exclusively non-Muslim, Rūm populated target of invasion. This employs an ‘othered’, ‘outside’ al-Shām to depict Islam as the special Arabian creed of the Arabs, and it leads readers to understand Islamic origin according to the following rubric.

(A) Essentially all Arabs must have the memory of their conversion connected to Muḥammad. Hence the Prophet’s Maghāzī wars assumedly complete a pan-Arabian conquest and conversion of the Arabs.
(B) The Ridda wars accordingly involve no conversion, but rather a confirmation of ‘Arab’ faith.
(C) Finally, the Futūḥ are exclusively ‘foreign’ (non-Arab) exploits of territorial acquisition.

The narrative melds Arabian space, Arab race and Islamic faith into a tidy formula, and again Al-Shām is relegated to the ‘outside’, its ‘history’ must forget both its prophetic legacy and pre-Islamic Christian Ghassanid kings. Al-Azdī’s pre-conquest al-Shām, decidedly non-Muslim and non-Arab, is left the limited role of foil to highlight the construct of pure Arabness and Islamic unity in Arabia.

For more ancient pre-Islamic history, however, when questions about the nexus of Arabness and Islam were less relevant—i.e. in the centuries before Muḥammad was even born, one could expect Arabic narrators to be more indulgent of al-Shām’s ‘Arab qualities’, though when we read the world histories that weave this deep pre-Muḥammadic Levantine history into narratives of the pre-Islamic past, we find al-Shām ‘othered’ yet again, but this time as a foil with different uses.

¹⁰² Ibid., p. 71
¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 97, p. 114.
¹⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 203.
Al-Shām and Iraq: Primordial Enemies in Historical Narrative

The rise of Arabic language universal histories in the late third/ninth century confronted their Muslim authors with historiographical challenges. The horizons of universal history compel authors to place Islam and the Near East in a global story, and they were faced with narrating al-Shām’s pre-Islamic political history of Romans, Byzantines, and possible ‘Arabs’ like Ghassān. Interestingly, the historians again devoted only slight attention to al-Shām. Al-Dinawari’s (d.282/895) al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl is almost entirely silent on pre-Islamic al-Shām, and al-Ya’qūbī’s (d.c.284/897) Tārīkh narrates only a very short, laconic chapter on Ghassān and a brief section on the Roman period. Al-Ṭabarī’s (d.310/923) much expanded world history records less information still, having no chapter for al-Shām under the Ghassanids, and mentioning the Roman Emperors in a bullet-point king-list that only pauses to identify the Jewish Revolts during the reigns of Vespasian and Hadrian. Al-Masʿūdī’s (d.346/957) Murūj al-dhahab briskly sketches pre-Islamic ‘Arab’ rulers of al-Shām, and whilst his al-Tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf contains a detailed section on Roman and Byzantine history, Ghassān, Tanūkh and the other pre Islamic Shāmī ‘Arabs’ are still largely absent.

Collectively, the world histories acknowledge that ‘Arabs’ inhabited al-Shām long before Islam, but they receive only patchy consideration. Above, I noted the absence of an agreed Ghassanid king list, and the various proposals in the few world histories that pause to narrative Ghassanid history seem to be cobbled together from combinations of a limited array of names: al-Ḥārith, Jabala, Jafna and al-Nuʿmān. These names all appear in poems ascribed to the pre-Islamic al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī and the main poet of Muḥammad’s Medina, Ḥassān ibn Thābit: both mention various Ghassanids, but without providing clear genealogies. Nöldeke’s attempts to recover names of specific individuals from the poems are not always successful, as he admits, and it seems that Muslim-era historians concocted a semblance of a king-list merely from creative combinations of the names in the extant poems.

106 Al-Ṭabarī, Tārīkh, 1, pp. 606-608.
107 Al-Masʿūdī, Murūj, §§1076-1085.
109 Nöldeke, Ghassān, pp. 65-68, pp. 72-73.
110 See, for example, Ḥamza al-İṣfahānī, Tārīkh sanı mulûk al-ʿarḍ wa-l-anbiyāʾ, Beirut, Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, n.d., pp. 91-92. Though one could admittedly feel the same when
Why did Muslim world-historians so overlook the apparently important ‘Arab’ kingdom immediately preceding Islam considering that they did write detailed accounts and coherent king-lists for the pre-Islamic Lakhmid Arab kings in Iraq? The discrepancy could be partly explained by the fact that most world histories were compiled by Iraqis, and the old capital of the Lakhmid kingdom, al-Ḥīra, was located near al-Kūfa, the important Islamic-era city and intellectual centre. But the Umayyads occupied Ghassanid territory in the first Islamic century, and we could expect that some information about pre-Islamic al-Shām ought to have entered Arabic historical writing; however, when we consider al-Shām’s spatial narratives in Iraqi world-histories, the reasons behind the pervasive forgetting become clearer.

Al-Ṭabarī, for instance, begins the story of ‘Arabs’ in al-Shām with a mention of ancient migrations from Arabia where some tribes made for al-Shām, whilst others settled Iraq. The Euphrates emerges as a boundary across which conflict erupted from the outset. Al-Ṭabarī opens Shāmī ‘Arab’ history with the reign of ‘Amr ibn Ṣarib al-‘Amlīqī’s wars against the first Iraqi ‘Arab’ king, Jadhīma.

Jadhīma brought a large group of Arabs and headed to [al-Shām] seeking to raid it. ‘Amr ibn Ṣarib came with his group from al-Shām, they met and they fought ferociously. ‘Amr was killed and his band scattered and Jadhīma left with his men, safely and with booty.\textsuperscript{111}

The rest of the narration of pre-Islamic Arab history is dominated by conflict across the East/West divide. Neither side is accorded total victory, but the wars are described in detail, and in the context of these wars we experience the history of al-Shām’s pre-Islamic ‘Arabs’. After ‘Amr’s death, his daughter Queen al-Zabbāʾ (a memory of Zenobia, queen of Palmyra) succeeded the throne of al-Shām and immediately plotted against Jadhīma, marshalling her armies for a counter-strike.\textsuperscript{112} The narrations take an epic, monumental aspect, describing the wars as raging for two generations and involving Trojan horses, deceit, wits and bravery.\textsuperscript{113} Al-Zabbāʾ is eventually defeated by a daring raid organised by the plucky Iraqis, but the binary conflict between Iraq and al-Shām continues by shifting directly to wars between Ghassān and Lakhm. The Ghassān/Lakhm split of al-Shām vs. Iraq is further mirrored in the portrayal of Rūm and the Sasanian Empire as a conflict between Shāmīs and Iraqis/Iranians, as

\textsuperscript{111} Al-Ṭabarī, \textit{Tārīkh}, 1, p. 618.
\textsuperscript{112} \textit{Ibid.}, 1, pp. 618-619.
\textsuperscript{113} Al-Ṭabarī, \textit{Tārīkh}, 1, pp. 620-627; al-Masʿūdī, \textit{Murūj}, §§1039-1058.
the Rūm came to be equated with pre-Islamic al-Shām. Throughout the narratives, all favour the Lakhmids and Sasanians: those on the Eastern side of the Euphrates have the heroes and pre-Islamic war-poetry. The Western Shāmīs, on the other hand, are outsiders, perhaps even intended as villains,114 who have little poetic voice of their own and lack even notable heroes (beyond a handful of Ghassanid kings).115 Classical-era Arabic historians reveal pre-Islamic Shāmī Arab history as a litany of endless wars in which Shāmīs are invariably antagonists.

The impression of pre-Islamic Shāmī/Iraqi history reflects much of what we know about the interaction between al-Shām and Iraq in early Islamic times. Twenty-five years after the Prophet’s death, the third Caliph ‘Uthmān was assassinated and the first inter-Muslim conflict (fitna) irrupted (35-41/656-661), eventually settling into conflict pitting Shāmī Muslim (under the later Umayyad Caliph Mu‘āwiya) against Iraqi Muslim (under the Caliph and character later portrayed as the first Shī‘ī Imam, ‘Alī). Arabic historians remembered this fitna as a regional clash between “Iraqis” (ahl al-Iraq) and “Shāmīs” (ahl al-Shām),116 and Mu‘āwiya’s ultimate victory did not end those regional antagonisms. Upon his death, the succession of his son Yazīd in 60/680 was challenged by ‘Alī’s son, al-Ḥusayn who sought support in Iraq. Al-Ḥusayn was killed, but relations between al-Shām and Iraq remained tense and resulted in more violence and further fitna between the resurgent Umayyad ‘Abd al-Malik, and resistive Iraqis. ‘Abd al-Malik’s general al-Ḥajjāj is portrayed as instituting vehement oppression against Iraqis, quelling their sedition, but adding a new chapter in what, from the perspective of world historical narrative, appeared a very ancient tradition of regional animosity. In the reign of the later Umayyad, Yazīd ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, Yazīd ibn al-Muhallab’s revolt in


116 In support of the regionalised tensions pervasive in the sources describing the First Fitna, John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy consider the interaction of regional identities with tribal in the Umayyad period, and, arguing from an economic perspective, note the “common interest” the militarised elite had with their tax-paying farmers, and hence the enhanced importance of regional identities and the proclivity of power-struggles to take shape on a regional level (“Regional Identities and Military Power: Byzantium and Islam ca. 600–750”, in Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World, ed. Walter Pohl, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 317-333. pp. 341-353).
102/720 brought further Shāmī reprisals in Iraq, Shāmī-appointed governors in Iraq juggled the explosive potential regional antagonism, and the Abbasid ‘revolution’ in 132/750, capitalised on Iraqi aversion to al-Shām and brought, finally, victory—as Iraqi Abbasid historians saw it—for Iraq.

Small-scale pro-Umayyad, anti-Abbasid protests and rebellions smouldered in al-Shām for several more decades, but the great battles across the Euphrates were over when third/ninth century world-history writers took stock of Iraqi historical heritage. For them, the repeated Arab vs. Arab struggle across the Euphrates would loom large in their imaginations. It was the major theme of Iraq’s Islamic-era history, and it seems the historians chose to depict the same pattern of struggle further back, giving it an epic flavour springing from the deepest memories of pre-Islamic Arabica. In this master narrative of world history, al-Sham was not the ‘outside’ north from the perspective of the Arabian focused stories of Muhammad’s biography, but instead the ‘outside’ west, the perennial enemy of Iraq from the perspective of the Iraqi writers.

As the texts were created in Iraq, the Shāmī peoples inevitably lost their autonomous identities in the binary perspective of an East/West divided world. The historians emptied al-Shām so as to fill it with an undifferentiated conception of ‘enemy’ soldiers. This is evident in portrayals of the Battle of Ṣifīn, the major conflict between Muʿāwiya and ‘Alī in 35-36/656: Iraqi world-historians, such as al-Ṭabarī, portray Shāmī soldiers as automatons who, except for their leaders, are usually referred to with the generalised sobriquet ahl al-Shām (the ‘Syrians’), and even in single combats with named Iraqis, Shāmīs are predominantly anonymous.117 Readers of these stories can only dimly perceive personalities amongst the ranks of ahl al-Shām, and, to cite a modern analogy, they are comparable to the faceless ‘storm trooper’ ‘enemies’ of George Lucas’ Star Wars imagination. The undifferentiated approach to these Shāmīs in the fitna stories is identical to the mostly anonymous Shāmīs in the stories of the pre-Islamic wars, and all mirror the undifferentiated portrayals of Shāmī space encountered in the classical narratives explored above.

The ‘othering’ of the Shāmī stereotype naturally bestows a sense of individualised identity for Iraqis, enabling their portrayal as the unambiguous protagonists of the master narrative. Al-Shām’s foil as a perennial threat since time immemorial facilitates the articulation of heroic Iraqi Arabness, and yet again, Ghassān’s memory becomes muffled as its warriors merge under the fog of war

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into a generic foe to serve the literary flourish of Lakhmid, and hence heroic Iraqi memory.

**Al-Shām and Past-Prophets**

In the narratives so far explored, *al-Shām* seemingly cannot escape the ‘outside’: from whatever perspective texts depict it, it is a foil and/or stock ‘enemy’ character peripheral to the centre of the protagonists’ space. Because the Qurʾān expressly incorporates the Prophets of Israel in the story of Islam, however, Muslims could not entirely forget *al-Shām*’s pre-Islamic prophetic tradition. World historians who undertook the wide sweep of history from Creation to their present, and exegetes who elaborated on the stories of past prophets had to confront *al-Shām*’s potent spatial narrative as Canaan, the ‘Promised Land’ of the Judeo-Christian precursors to Islam. But *al-Shām*’s predominant position on the ‘outside’ of so many other important Arabic historical reconstruction, seems to have filtered into these world-historical/exegetical accounts of the past prophets too, and third/ninth century narratives are once again worth closer inspection, though given the quantity of these texts, I here make preliminary observations.

The Biblical nexus of *al-Shām* and Jewish Prophets seems reduced in Arabic texts. Exegesis of Qurʾān 21.71’s reference to Abraham’s departure from his birthplace in Iraq to a “blessed land”, which the Biblical tradition assumes is Canaan, is reinterpreted, according to some Muslim traditions preserved in al-Ṭabarī’s *Tafsīr*, as intending Mecca. Al-Ṭabarī himself reasons that the “blessed land” should be interpreted as *al-Shām*, but the different opinions reveal tension, a pulling of the prophet away from Canaan into Arabian space. In the same vein, al-Ṭabarī’s *Tārīkh* includes reports that Abraham either (a) settled in Madyan in the Ḥijāz, not in *al-Shām*,119 or (b) he initially settled in *al-Shām* but subsequently quit it and moved south following an argument with his pagan neighbours.120 These Abraham stories, therefore *prima facie* accept the Judeo-Christian *al-Shām* as the home of the prophet, but rather than endorsing *al-Shām* as Abraham’s promised land, they dilute the Levantine leanings, adding and promoting Arabian space in Abraham’s biography.

119 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* 1, p. 309.
120 Ibid., 1, p. 249.
The Arabian-centring of Abrahamic narratives is also a function of quantity: following his departure from Iraq and his child ‘sacrifice’, the most detailed accounts concern Abraham's Meccan sojourns with Ishmael; much less attention is paid to the rest of Abraham’s life ‘over there’ in al-Shām.\textsuperscript{121} This resembles Muslim narratives about Moses too: they focus on the flight from Egypt and do not emphasise that the goal of the Exodus was to the pre-ordained ‘Promised Land’ of Canaan: in al-Ṭabarî’s Tārīkh, al-Shām is mentioned only once in over 40 pages of Exodus stories.\textsuperscript{122}

In tandem with disconnecting past prophets from al-Shām, Arabic prophetic history narratives relate lengthy stories about the prophets Hūd, Śāliḥ and Shu‘ayb. These prophets are ‘new’ (they are not mentioned in Judeo-Christian texts\textsuperscript{123}): the Qurʾān is the first extant text to mention them, and it indicates their domiciles were in Arabian space.\textsuperscript{124} Glosses on their stories are well developed in early Tafsīr,\textsuperscript{125} and exegesis and narratives of prophetic history accord them the same status as the Judeo-Christian prophets traditionally associated with Canaan. The literary attention to Arabian prophets further dilutes al-Shām’s claim as a unique space of prophethood, even in ages before Muḥammad.

Third/ninth century Arabic literature does not deny that al-Shām is a holy space, especially given the general agreement that the three Qurʾānic references to “Blessed Land” (al-ard allatī bāraknā fī-hā)\textsuperscript{126} are al-Shām,\textsuperscript{127} but

\textsuperscript{121} Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh narrates Abraham stories from 1, p. 233 to 1, p. 393, references to al-Shām are interspersed throughout, though details of his Shāmī interactions are slight. Similarly, Abū Ishāq al-Tha’labī’s Qīsāṣ al-anbīyā’, Beirut, Dār al-fikr, 2000, pp. 74-103 which divides Abraham stories into nine parts, three concern Abraham’s rejection of paganism and Nimrod’s arrogance, three detail the construction of Mecca and one concerns the child ‘sacrifice’. Reference to al-Shām is sparing, and moreover, the narrative is skewed towards focus on non-Shāmī aspects of the prophet’s life.

\textsuperscript{122} Al-Ṭabarî, Tārīkh, 1, p. 449. He accepts that Moses did settle in al-Shām (see also 1, p. 437), but the virtual absence of its citation in the Exodus stories is intriguing.

\textsuperscript{123} For discussion of Hūd, Śāliḥ and Shu‘ayb, see Brannon Wheeler, “Arab Prophets of the Qurʾān and Bible”, Journal of Qurʾānic Studies, 8.2 (2006), pp. 24-57.

\textsuperscript{124} Cor 15, 80 and 89, 7 refer to the Arabian locations of ʿĀd and Thamūd, Jaroslav Stetkevych, Muḥammad and the golden bough: reconstructing Arab myth, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1996. analyses the spatial Arabian mythification, specifically of Thamūd, at length.

\textsuperscript{125} For example, see the earliest extant exegesis: Muqāṭīl ibn Sulaymān, Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd al-Shaḥāta, Cairo, Al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmm, 1979-1989.

\textsuperscript{126} Cor 21,71; 21, 81; 24, 18.

\textsuperscript{127} I am unaware that exegetes rejected this connection: see Muqāṭīl Tafsīr 3, p. 520 where he interprets Cor 21, 71 without explicitly mentioning al-Shām, though he refers to it as ‘the holy land’ (al-ard al-muqaddasa), which indicates Canaan.
we have seen that Arabic writers, both of Sīra and prophetic history availed themselves of opportunities to chip away at the Judeo-Christian al-Shām’s monopoly on the ‘Holy Land’ by crafting spatial narratives that distance it from the ‘centre’ of their histories of prophethood: their stories gravitate instead towards Mecca. The purpose of the stories about pre-Islamic Shāmī monotheists is also to make tangible the expectation of Muḥammad’s Arabian mission, thus orienting Holy Knowledge traditionally associated with al-Shām towards Arabia. The fact that some fourth/tenth century historians developed positive impression of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius as supportive of Muḥammad’s mission (as El-Cheikh demonstrated), perhaps further reflects the process of turning al-Shām’s status in Judeo-Christianity writing as quintessential sacred space into a mere prelude to the final revelation in Arabia, a passive observer for a ‘holier’ story to come. Classical world-histories, Sīra and exegesis thus combine to leave pre-Islamic al-Shām almost no secular history and a holiness that inexorably gives way to Arabia, prompting the necessity of conquest to ‘convert’ al-Shām to Islam.

Conclusions

Classical Arabic writers had no word for ‘metageography’, neither did their geographers discuss ‘thirdspace’, nor did their topographical directories comment on the ‘characterisation’ of place, but classical Arabic writers did know how to construct effective spatial narratives. By isolating the references to one particular place, and by analysing its situation within wider historical narratives, I have begun to reveal the biography of al-Shām in classical Arabic literature and illustrate how important a character al-Shām was in giving meaning to classical narratives about the pre-Islamic past.

Al-Shām relates the story of the ‘outside’, consistently distanced from the ‘centre’ of history. Its portrayals suggest that when writers invoked “al-Shām”, they conjured specific meanings in their readers’ minds: notions of distance, foreignness, outside-ness, esoteric knowledge and uncertain threat. Al-Shām is a dynamic character that compels readers to seek the security of familiarity on the ‘inside’, either Arabia or Iraq, and reveals to them in negative where their attention and empathy should lie. The literary al-Shām turned physical distance into symbolic othering, and its peculiar spatiality underwrote the depictions of Islam’s rise as an Arabian phenomenon, hermetically sealing nascent Arab-Islam from the wider Near East.

The sophistication and plasticity of *al-Shām*’s portrayals in classical Arabic writing about *al-Jāhiliyya* underline the value of narratological historiography. As Lefebvre observed, deeper appreciation of spatial narratives should prompt us “to look at history itself in a new light”\(^{129}\) and since the Arabic historians were evidently creative in their use of spaces, this study is a case study on the extent to which representations of space shape remembrance of historical events. This exercise also highlights that classical Arabic writings are not one-dimensional relics that can be indiscriminately trawled for facts and ‘kernels of truth’. Each text should be appreciated as a literary creation deserving sensitive reading to understand its messages, and spatial narratives are one such literary component in need of fresh attention to see Islamic history in Lefebvre’s “new light”.\(^{130}\) We should take heart that there is much to be done in Islamic historiography: the sum of the sources’ parts does not equal a monolithic ‘Islamic tradition’—we must rigorously pursue their textual contours to discover how they articulated Islamic, Arabic and regional identities, how they represented the past and present, and, ultimately, how they expressed their conception of the truth.

My emphasis has been the ‘literary *al-Shām*’ as a character in the classical Islamic story of *al-Jāhiliyya*, but I do not intend redundancy of empirical historiography. The consistency of the spatial narratives indicates that Arabic writers knew precisely what sort of history they wanted to construct—they were not filling in a void, but rather rounding a cohesive story. Hence scrutiny of the sources’ construction enables us to move beyond allegations of fabrication or avowals of authenticity, and we can instead listen to the messages the texts are trying to communicate. We can then proceed to judge what Arabic writers had to remember—and what they had to forget—when they left accounts of their society’s origins for posterity.

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\(^{129}\) Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 42.