The issue of pre-Islamic Arabic Christian poetry revisited

Abstract

Why is so little distinctly Christian poetry preserved in Arabic from pre-Islamic times? While distancing myself from Louis Cheikho's (1859–1927) view that almost all pre-Islamic poets were Christians, I contend in this article that some of them were indeed that. I begin by discussing the current evidence (in particular, epigraphic record) on the existence of Arabophone Christians before Islam. The documentation at hand suggests that Christianity had spread to all parts of Arabia. At least hypothetically, I note that Christians formed the majority among Arabic-speaking groups on the eve of Islam. I then proceed to discuss the surviving corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry and pinpoint (often overlooked but explicit) Christian themes in it.

Keywords

jāhiliyya – pre-Islamic poetry – Arabophone Christians – pre-Islamic Arabia

Introduction

Almost all pre-Islamic[1] verse that has come down to us is monotheist: the deity invoked by the poets is almost invariably the One God, called *al-Ilāh*, *Allāh*, or *al-Rabb*; other deities appear only in some rare cases.[2] How we understand this fact is a crucial question and has bearing on how we envision the religious map of pre-Islamic Arabia, the context of the Qur'an, and the rise of Islam.

In a recent key study, Nicolai Sinai interprets pre-Islamic Arabic poetry as evidence for the spread of pagan monotheism – a word pair referring to a phenomenon, well attested in other parts of the late antique Near East, of non-Jews and non-Christians adopting (at least some of) the idea of monotheism without formally converting to Judaism or Christianity.[3] Indeed, and credibly, pagan monotheism has been suggested to be perceivable in the Qur'an, too, which describes its opponents (called *kuffār* and *mushrikūn*) in some verses (e.g., 29:61–65) as semi-monotheists, who accepted God as the Creator while still worshipping other supernatural beings

[1] In this article, I deem much of the Arabic poetry ascribed to pre-Islamic figures authentic. For recent studies bolstering the authenticity of the bulk of the corpus, see, e.g., Jamil 2017; Sinai 2019; El Masri 2020; Miller 2024.
[2] Sinai 2019.
[3] Sinai 2019: 57–63.

as angelic intercessors and while being skeptical of the notion of the afterlife.[4] Indeed, pre-Islamic Arabic poetry rarely invokes the belief in the hereafter.[5] Hence, reading the poetical and Qur'anic prooftexts in tandem, it makes sense to hypothesize the phenomenon of pagan monotheism as spreading in sixth and early seventh-century Arabia.[6]

However, it has to be acknowledged that the available epigraphic evidence, which has been growing in recent years, indicates the strong presence of Jews and Christians in many parts of the Arabian Peninsula.[7] With this in mind, in this article I intend to revisit the question of pre-Islamic Arabic verse and the religious affiliations of the poets who composed the surviving corpus. I argue that the poetical corpus – fully or almost fully monotheist – lends itself to various interpretations: it is very probable, and in some cases provable, that many poets, usually deemed pagan, were actually Christian.

The discussion of pre-Islamic Arabic Jewish poets is beyond the purview of this study. Nevertheless, many of the same points also pertain to them, *mutatis mutandis*. That is to say, there were probably more Jews among the pre-Islamic poets than the Islamic tradition and modern scholarship acknowledge.[8]

Arabophone Christians before Islam

Narrative sources, in various languages and stemming from both pre-Islamic and Islamic times, indicate that Christianity was spreading among Arabophone groups in the centuries preceding Islam.[9] Some of the stories are highly stereotypical and should be treated somewhat cautiously as historical evidence. For instance, the *Life* of the fifth-century Simeon Stylites recounts:

> How many Arabs who have never known what bread is, but feed on the flesh of animals, came and saw the blessed Simeon and became disciples and Christians, abandoned the images of their fathers and served God … It was impossible to count the Arabs, their kings and nobles, who came and received baptism, accepted the belief in God and acknowledged Jesus, and at the word of Simeon erected shrines in their tents.[10]

In any case, the breadth of the sources and the fact that they are often independent of each other suggest that behind the narratives are, in fact, real historical events. Importantly, according to the narrative sources, there were Christians in various parts of the Arabian Peninsula: the north, the south, and the east.

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[4] Crone 2016.
[5] Sinai 2019: 45.
[6] Lindstedt 2024: 129–144.
[7] E.g., Gajda 2009; Gatier 2020; Lindstedt 2024.
[8] On Jewish poetry, see Hoyland 2015; Lindstedt 2024: 62–64.
[9] The literature on the topic is vast. For orientation, see Fisher et al. 2015. As is well known, Christianity spread also in the south, where many people would have been speakers of South Arabian languages rather than Arabic.
[10] Simeon Stylites 1908: 108; transl. Hoyland 2001: 148.

However, the most compelling evidence for the presence of Arabic-speaking and -writing Christians is that which is written on stone: inscriptions. All surviving western Arabian epigraphic evidence from the fifth and sixth centuries CE is monotheist and, in a few instances, explicitly Christian.[11] In light of this, we can acknowledge the existence of Christians in a variety of different Arabian localities, in agreement with what the narrative sources put forward.

To quote Ahmad Al-Jallad and Hythem Sidky, all pre-Islamic Arabic inscriptions in Arabic script 'are so far monotheistic and, when possible to determine further, Christian.'[12] What is more, the pre-Islamic Arabic Christian inscriptions are a burgeoning corpus, with new finds coming to light every year. Recent finds include the following inscriptions, all of which probably stem from the sixth century CE or thereabouts (the text of JorvDA 2 furnishes a date, while the other two inscriptions can be paleographically dated):

Fig. ShThDA 1, tracing by Laïla Nehmé[13]

Location: Shaʿīb al-Thamīla in northern Saudi Arabia (not to be confused with the toponym with the same name south of Riyadh).

Reading and translation: *ʾlḥdʾ br ṯʿlbh*, 'al-Ḥaddāʾ son of Thaʿlaba.'

[11] Al-Jallad and Sidky 2022; Lindstedt 2024.
[12] Al-Jallad and Sidky 2022: 211. Paleo-Arabic inscriptions (a growing set of evidence) number over 40 at the time of writing. Many of them are available through https://diconab.huma-num.fr/ (*The Digital Corpus of the Nabataean and Developing Arabic Inscriptions*, ed. Laïla Nehmé).
[13] https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/122

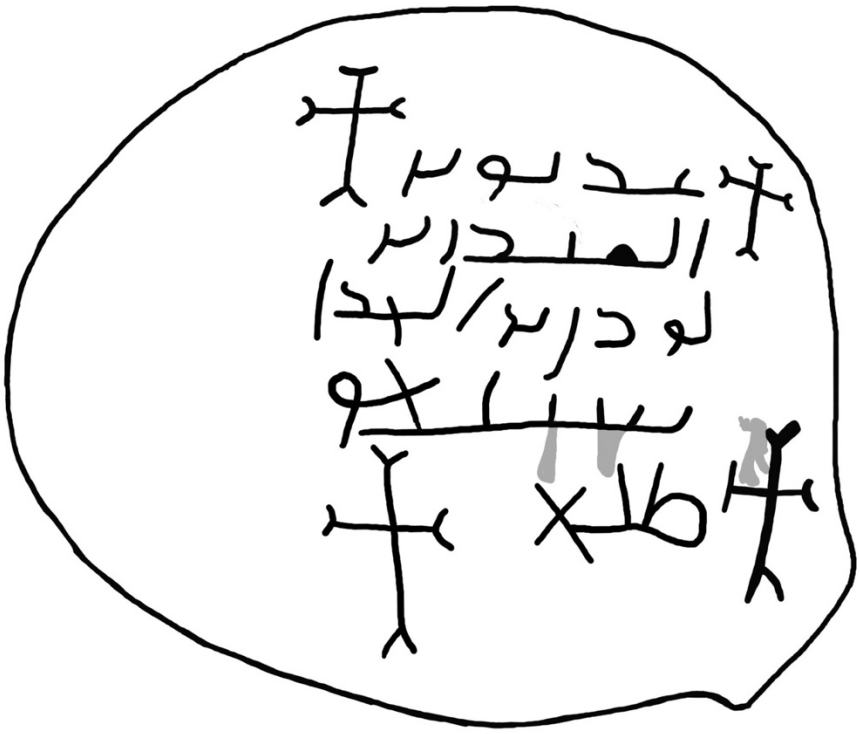

Fig. JorvDA 2, tracing by Laïla Nehmé[14]

Location: Unclear, but probably from near Karak, Jordan.

Reading and translation: *ʿdyw br ʾlmnḏr br lwdn br ʾlḥdʾ snt* 4x100+20+5+4, ‘ʿAdī son of al-Mundhir son of al-Ḥaddāʾ, year 429’ (= 534/535 CE).

[14] https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/523

Fig. BShDA 2, tracing by Laïla Nehmé[15]

Location: Barqā al-Shāʿ or Najid Saḫī (?), in southern Saudi Arabia.

Reading and translation: *ḥmd{w} br ʾb{w}mrʾh*, 'Ḥāmid son of Abū *Mrʾh*.'[16]

Though the pre-Islamic Arabic Christian inscriptions are mostly brief – a name and a cross, with some additional details in some cases – they offer tangible evidence of Arabophone Christians present in various parts of the Peninsula.

From the epigraphic corpus, we also learn about another intriguing facet: namely that Arabophone Christians rarely adopted, or gave their children, markedly Christian names (with the exception of a few ʿAbd al-Masīḥs, mentioned below). For instance, the fifth–sixth century CE Arabic inscriptions from Ḥimā, near Najrān, feature such names as Thawbān son of Mālik, Isḥāq son of ʿUmar/ʿĀmir (written *ʿ-m-r*), Muʿāwiya son of al-Ḥārith, and Ḍabb son of Ghānim;[17] the more recently found Christian inscriptions, discussed above, contain similar common Arabic names. However, we can be all but certain that they self-identified as Christian, since they drew (often huge) crosses next to their names. On the basis of the epigraphic corpus, we can say that it is fully possible that someone called, say, Abū Qays Ṣirma or Maymūn (figures discussed in what follows), could have been Christian.

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[15] https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/126; the writer left also another short inscription, where his name is easier to perceive, see https://diconab.huma-num.fr/inscriptions/129

[16] Nehmé comments on the names: 'The names Ḥmd and ʾb{w}mrʾh are not attested in W. Caskel's index of Arabic names but compare Ḥamda for the former.' However, I think the name Ḥāmid is a rather obvious here, while the father's name appears to me to contain the words Abū (used without declination) + *Mrʾh*, possibly Marʾa or the like.

[17] Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd 2014: 1044; however, Ḍabb wrote his inscriptions in the Ancient South Arabian, rather than Paleo-Arabic, script. The other three used the Paleo-Arabic script.

Taking all this into consideration, it seems to me mathematically probable that the Arabic Christian poets constituted more than a few names before Islam. Since it makes sense to assume that the religious affiliations of the pre-Islamic Arabic poets were broadly similar to those of the Arabic-speaking communities at large, it ensues that at least some of the poets were likely Christian.

The issue of the missing Christian poetry

Famously or infamously, Louis Cheikho's *Kitāb al-shuʿarāʾ al-naṣrāniyya* (in three volumes) categorized a great many pre-Islamic Arabic poets as Christian.[18] Among these poets labeled Christians, we find, for example, the famous al-Muraqqish al-Akbar, Imruʾ al-Qays, Kulayb, Zuhayr ibn Abī Sulmā, ʿAmr ibn Kulthūm, ʿAlqama, Ṭarafa, and so on.[19] This is striking, since these figures are not usually thought to be Christians, nor does classical Arabic literature designate them as such.

Cheikho's interpretation has been criticized: he has been accused of widely misrepresenting the pre-Islamic Arabic literary tradition.[20] Recent denunciations of Cheikho's view include, for instance, a few pertinent remarks by Peter Webb.[21] He notes that 'Cheikho classified poets as "Christian" based on their tribe and a generous assumption about the number of Christian pre-Islamic tribes. However, the poetry across the 800-page collection does not express Christian themes.'[22] Indeed, Webb argues that there is very little explicitly Christian material in the whole surviving corpus of pre-Islamic poetry. As an exception, he gives the following verse, adduced by al-Marzubānī and ascribed to a certain ʿAmr ibn ʿAbd al-Jinn al-Tanūkhī:

> I swear by what the priests sanctify in all those sacristies,
> By the chief monk (*abīl al-abīliyyīn*), by Jesus son of Mary![23]

However, *pace* Webb, the evidence for pre-Islamic Arabic Christian poetry is somewhat larger than a few single verses: it is not only the mathematical probability but actual concrete verses that attest to there having been Christian poets. In what follows, I discuss a few pre-Islamic Christian poets and Christian themes. A more comprehensive study of the pre-Islamic Arabic poetical corpus would probably unearth a number of other Christian aspects; my treatment does not feign to exhaust the available literature.

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[18] Cheikho 1890–1891.
[19] Cheikho 1890–1891, i: 6, 151, 197, ii, 282, 298, 498, 510.
[20] See the thorough study Schmid 2021 on this issue.
[21] Webb 2022: 143–145.
[22] Webb 2022: 144, n. 68.
[23] Al-Marzubānī 2010: 40–41; transl. adapted with some changes from Webb 2022: 144.

Evidence on the Christian poets and Christian themes in the poetical corpus

ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn ʿAsala(s)

To begin with, it is important to note that al-Mufaḍḍal al-Ḍabbī's esteemed poetry collection *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt* includes poetry by one or two figures that are called ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, 'Servant of Christ' (not mentioned by Webb). Both (if they are two different individuals) are named ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn ʿAsala, one being from Bakr ibn Wāʾil, while the other is said to be of the tribe ʿAbd al-Qays, both tribes in eastern Arabia. Altogether, three poems by him/them are adduced in *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*.[24] Almost no biographical information appears to be preserved on the ʿAbd al-Masīḥ ibn ʿAsala(s), but Arabic sources that I have consulted treat him as one individual and state that his brothers were called Ḥarmala and al-Musayyab. ʿAsala was his mother's name, his father being called Ḥakīm ibn ʿUfayr ibn Ṭāriq.[25]

Remarkably, there is no religious topics whatsoever in the three poems: even God is not mentioned, though *Allāh*, *al-Ilāh*, or *al-Rabb* somewhat regularly feature in other pre-Islamic verse. Clearly, on the basis of the name ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, the person(s) in question was/were Christian, though the verses themselves do not contain any distinctly Christian themes.[26] The fact that – at least the surviving versions of – the ʿAbd al-Masīḥ poems do not display any specifically Christian talking points (e.g., mentions of Christ or views on Christology) shows that either it was not common for Christian poets to engage in Christian or Christological content matters in their poetry or, though this is conjectural, that the particularly Christian elements might have been purged during the verses' later transmission history and collection by Muslim authors (both options might be true when taking the larger corpus of Arabic poetry into consideration).

ʿAdī ibn Zayd

ʿAdī ibn Zayd, treated in this subsection, is a somewhat rare example of pre-Islamic Arabic poets who is explicitly identified as Christian in the later Islamic tradition. Because of this identification, it is not surprising that the poetry ascribed to him contains Christian topics. ʿAdī ibn Zayd was active in the Lakhmid capital of Ḥīra and elsewhere and apparently died some

[24] Al-Mufaḍḍal 1918-1921, ii: 220–221, 243 (nos. 72, 73, and 83 in the collection). Lyall identifies the poets of nos. 72–73 and 83 as being one and the same ʿAbd al-Masīḥ, but as Lyall notes (ii, 243), the ʿAbd al-Masīḥ said to be the composer of nos. 72–73 is described as stemming from Bakr ibn Wāʾil, whereas the ʿAbd al-Masīḥ of no. 83 is said to be of the tribe ʿAbd al-Qays. Hence, we might have here two different ʿAbd al-Masīḥs. In this connection, it should be noted that the name ʿAbd al-Masīḥ is attested in a fifth–sixth century CE Arabic inscription from near Najrān; see Robin, al-Ghabbān, and al-Saʿīd 2014: 1125–1127.
[25] Asad 1988: 545; Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb 1972: 94.
[26] For a treatment of one of the ʿAbd al-Masīḥ poems, discussing wine, see Miller 2016: 164–165.

decades before the beginning of Muḥammad's mission.[27] Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī notes that ʿAdī was 'Christian, as was his father, mother, and [whole] family.'[28]

Even though Webb denounces the poetry attributed to ʿAdī ibn Zayd as a later fabrication,[29] this seems hasty or, at least, too categorical.[30] It is true that, in addition to quotations in classical Arabic sources, ʿAdī's poetry survives only in an anonymous anthology titled *Jamharat Shuʿarāʾ al-ʿArab min al-Jāhiliyya*, extant in a sole manuscript copied as late as the 19th century.[31] However, as Tilman Seidensticker notes, the 23 poems in the anthology 'present a fairly homogeneous view of his [ʿAdī's] art.'[32] Hence, it would appear that there is no need to unconditionally reject ʿAdī ibn Zayd's poems as inauthentic, though even the 23 poems of the manuscript – let alone poems ascribed to him in quotations in other works – might contain some later forgeries.

In one poem, ʿAdī underscores his Christian credentials: 'By God – do accept my oath – I am [like] a monk, who raises his voice every time he prays (*innanī wa-llāhi fa-qbil ḥalfatī la-abīlun kulla-mā ṣallā jaʾar*).'[33] ʿAdī's verse contains other explicitly Christian features, such as a reference to the cross (*al-ṣalīb*),[34] so (if deemed authentic) his poems yield evidence for Christian poetry before Islam.[35] The whole poem of ʿAdī ibn Zayd from which this allusion to the cross has been extracted is significant for the purposes of this article.[36] It (poem no. 3 of his collection) is a famous and lengthy poem, though of somewhat debated authenticity.[37] It was, the tradition conveys to us, written in prison; intriguingly, it begins with a reference to Mecca:

> My enemies are on the move. By the Lord of Mecca
> and the Cross, they shrink from no evil against me.

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[27] On him, see Hainthaler 2005; and Dmitriev 2009, who discusses a poem ascribed to ʿAdī about the creation of the cosmos. Dmitriev treats it as an authentic poem, though it was reworked somewhat during its transmission by later Muslim scholars.

[28] Al-Iṣfahānī 2009, ii: 63.

[29] Webb 2022: 144–145.

[30] For a different position, that ʿAdī ibn Zayd's corpus contains at least some authentic poems, see Dmitriev 2009; i Sinai 2019: 7–9, 51–52.

[31] See the editor's description and pictures of the sole surviving manuscript in ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 22–29.

[32] Seidensticker 2009.

[33] ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 61.

[34] Indeed, ʿAdī ibn Zayd also mentions Mecca in this verse (see below). For mentions of pilgrimage to the Kaaba shrine in pre-Islamic poetry, see Webb 2023. Though Webb does not identify any of the poets that he discusses in the article as Christian, I would hypothesize that some of them were, such as al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī.

[35] Lindstedt 2024: 114–116.

[36] ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 37–41.

[37] In his *Dīwān*, there are also other poems that were ostensibly written in prison; see, e.g., ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 33. This could be a common motif for the transmitters of these poems, probably not all of them authentic, to frame them. On this poem and the formula *rabbi makkata wa-l-ṣalībī*, see also Hainthaler 2005: 169: 'Is this formula authentic or due to a later reworking in Islamic times? If authentic then the formula would be a remarkable testimony of broadmindedness within Christian circles – not totally impossible as such since it is reported that Christians took part in the pilgrimage to Mekka (though not at the ʿumra). If a revision, then it could make some contribution to the making of a national sanctuary (= Mekka) for the whole Arabian peninsula.'

Their intention was to put me off from the great man
and that I be imprisoned, or hurled into the pit…

From me to Nuʿmān [the Lakhmid king], who will be the conveyor,
that some advice might reach him from afar?

Would chains and fetters and a collar be my portion
if my case were examined by a judge?

The case they pled before you had a motive.
The interests of their recompenser were well served…

What wrongs I may have done have all been punished.
What's being meted out to me are wrongs.

My destruction will be your loss, and on the day when
speartips clash, you will greet the dire occasion all alone.

Can't you tell what lies before us? Don't let
resistance to insightful counsel be your overthrow.

As for me, my trust is wholly in the Lord
nearby, [the One] Who gives an answer to the prayer.[38]

In another poem, ʿAdī ibn Zayd proclaims his belief in the afterlife and, specifically, God's judgment during the last days:

> On the day when God (*Allāh*) will protect you from His attack and He will greatly humiliate and impoverish His enemies, repent and thank God for His blessings – you will find that your God forgives [even] wrongdoing (*al-ẓulm*).[39]

It should be repeated that there is no scholarly consensus about the authenticity of ʿAdī ibn Zayd's poems. However, if these lines really stem from this sixth-century Christian Arabic poet, they are important evidence of the spread of Christianity, including the belief in the last judgment, among Arabic-speaking people in late antiquity. In these verses, not only is the judgment day mentioned, but it is also emphasized that one should repent before (or, at the very least, on) that day. It is also worth noting that one poem by ʿAdī ibn Zayd mentions that God is forgiving – even as regards blatant wrongdoing. This topic resurfaces in another poem, a verse of which reads: 'May God be merciful to everyone who weeps because of wrong deeds: every

[38] ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 38–41; transl. adapted from Larsen 2016; see commentary in Hainthaler 2005: 166–169.
[39] ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 55.

weeper will find that their sins are forgiven' (*raḥima llāhu man bakā li-l-khaṭāyā kullu bākin fa-dhanbuhu maghfūrū*).[40]

Abū Qays Ṣirma

We now come to the life and verses of Abū Qays Ṣirma ibn abī Anas ibn Ṣirma, a Medinan and, I will argue, probably Christian. Though Ṣirma's poems and religious affiliation (probably, Christianity) are very intriguing, he is scarcely mentioned in modern scholarly literature.[41] Because he is relatively unknown, I will use quite a bit of ink in dealing with his biography.

Our earliest and most important source on his life is Ibn Hishām (who received his information from Ibn Isḥāq); further references to Ṣirma can be found in other historical and literary works. According to Ibn Hishām, Ṣirma came from the tribal group of Banū ʿAdī ibn al-Najjār,[42] a subtribe of the Khazraj.[43] He was from the same tribe and subtribe as Ḥassān ibn Thābit, discussed later in this article. Ibn Isḥāq/Ibn Hishām recounts:

> [Ṣirma] was a man who lived as a monk (*qad tarahhaba*) during the *jāhiliyya* and took up the mantle of a monk (*labisa al-musūḥ*).[44] He gave up idols, washed himself after impurity, and kept himself clean from women during their menses. He thought of adopting Christianity (*hamma bi-l-naṣrāniyya*) but gave it up and went to a house of his and made a place of prayer (*masjid*) of it, allowing no unclean person to enter. He said that he worshipped the Lord of Abraham when he abandoned idols and loathed them. When the Messenger came to Medina, he became a good Muslim. He was an old man (or: a learned sage, *shaykh kabīr*), who always spoke truth and glorified God during the *jāhiliyya*. He composed some excellent poetry.[45]

I argue that the statement that he, though a monk, did not in the end fully embrace Christianity, should be understood as an attempt to forget his Christian affiliation. Also, the narratives of the *jāhiliyya*, 'the age of ignorance,' as a period rife with idolatry are part of the clichés of Islamic-era Arabic literature and do not correspond to the actual material (in particular, epigraphic) evidence. The description of Ṣirma as being keen on following the regulations of

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[40] ʿAdī ibn Zayd 1965: 86.

[41] The exception is Osman 2005: 73, who calls Ṣirma a man who 'had become a Christian monk' and discusses him for one paragraph. Also, Webb 2022: 143 remarks briefly that 'Muslim-era memories of some companions of the Prophet, such as Ṣirma ibn abī Anas, note their shunning of polytheism before Muhammad's mission, alongside some verses with religious tones.' But this somewhat misses the point, since Ṣirma is explicitly connected with Christianity, not merely rejecting polytheism, in the narratives on him and the poems ascribed to him.

[42] Ibn Hishām 1858–1860: 348; transl. Guillaume 1955: 236.

[43] According to Arabic sources, the Prophet himself had a family connection to al-Najjār, since his great grandmother was Salmā bint ʿAmr, who was from al-Najjār and the wife of Hāshim ibn ʿAbd Manāf. Moreover, the Prophet's father ʿAbdallāh is said to have died in Medina among the Banū al-Najjār; Bellahcene 2021: 210.

[44] Osman 2005: 72, rightly notes that, in the case of the Church of the East, monks and priests were not necessarily fully celibate, which explains how it can be that Ṣirma is described as having at least one child, Qays, in classical Arabic sources.

[45] Ibn Hishām 1858–1860: 348; transl. adapted from Guillaume 1955: 236–237, with some changes.

purity could also be understood as a later Muslim framework, but it should be noted that we have evidence of late antique Christians who were followers of purity laws.[46]

Ibn Saʿd offers some more information on Ṣirma. First, he notes that Ṣirma's father Abū Anas ibn Ṣirma was, like his son, a poet. Second, Ibn Saʿd notes that Ṣirma had a son, Qays, with his wife, whose name is given as Umm Qays bint Mālik ibn Ṣirma. This makes Ṣirma and his wife cousins. Lastly, Ibn Saʿd notes that Ṣirma fought at Uḥud.[47] Ṣirma's father Abū Anas is also listed in some other sources as a pre-Islamic poet,[48] but I have not been able to find any poetry ascribed to him. As for Ṣirma's son, Qays, he narrated a few Prophetical traditions, which were quoted by the Sunnī scholars.[49]

The *ism* of Ṣirma's wife is not given in the sources I have consulted, but she appears to have had two sisters, al-Nawār bint Mālik ibn Ṣirma and al-Ghayṭala bint Mālik ibn Ṣirma (both would have been our Ṣirma's cousins). The former was the mother of the famous Zayd ibn Thābit, and the latter the mother of another companion, Qays ibn Mukhallad.[50] Since Zayd is linked to biblical learning (and, sometimes, Judaism) in Arabic literature,[51] we then seem to have not only Ṣirma but also other members of the extended family interested in the Bible and Judeo–Christian tradition.

Ibn Hishām ascribes to Ṣirma three poems.[52] Naturally, the fact that Ṣirma's poems survive only in narrative sources such as Ibn Hishām, and not in specialized poetry collections, is not ideal from a historian's point of view.[53] However, the poetry quoted in Arabic narrative sources cannot be categorically rejected, and I would suggest that Ṣirma's poems are possibly authentic. I will adduce here one of the poems (in translation):[54]

1. Extol God every morning,
when His/its (*scil*. God's/the morning's) sun rises, and at the [beginning] of a new moon.
2. He knows the covert and the overt in us;
there is no error in what our Lord says.
3. To Him belong the birds that come and go and take shelter
in the nests of the dependable mountains.
4. To Him belong the creatures of the desert,
which you can see on the dunes and in the shadows of the sandhills.
5. Him the Jews worship (*lahu hawwadat yahūd*)

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[46] See, in great detail, Zellentin 2022: index, s.v. 'impurity'; 'pure, purity'; 'menses.'
[47] Ibn Saʿd n.d., iv: 327.
[48] Ibn Durayd 1991: 451.
[49] Ibn al-Athīr 1969–1972, xii: 52.
[50] Ibn Saʿd, n.d., iv: 318, 481.
[51] Lecker 1997: 263 mentions Zayd's mother al-Nawār, but does not discuss the connection to Ṣirma's wife or other members of her extended family.
[52] The poems are not present in the surviving parts of Yūnus ibn Bukayr's (1978) recension of Ibn Isḥāq's work.
[53] Sinai 2019: 23–24. See also Arafat 1965.
[54] Ibn Hishām 1858–1860: 348–350; trans. Guillaume 1955: 238 (modified). Ibn Qutayba 1960: 61, specifically notes that this is a pre-Islamic poem of Ṣirma.

and follow every law when you [scil. ?] mention a solemn oath (*wa-dānat kulla dīnin idhā dhakarta ʿuḍāl*).[55]
6. Him worship (*shammasa*)[56] the Christians,
who organize every feast and festival to their Lord.
7. To Him belongs the hermit monk (*al-rāhibu l-ḥabīs*) who you see
a prisoner of [self-inflicted] poverty (*rahna buʾsin*), though he earlier led an easy life.
8. My sons! Sever not the ties of kinship,
be generous to them [relatives], even if [you only have] little [to give].[57]
9. Reverence God [when you are] among the weak orphans,
sometimes what is not licit is deemed such.
10. Know that the orphan has an all-knowing Protector,
who guides without even being asked.
11. Hence, do not spend the wealth of the orphan,
for a Guardian watches over it/him.
12. My sons! Do not transgress the bounds (*al-tukhūm*) [set by God],
transgressing the bounds binds [rather than sets one free].
13. My sons! Do not trust the days –
rather, beware the passage of days and nights.
14. Know that it [the passage of time] consumes everyone,
both old and young.
15. Concentrate on devoutness and reverence (*al-birri wa-l-taqwā*),
abandoning obscenity/fornication (*al-khanā*) and embracing what is licit (*al-ḥalāl*).

Though the author of the poem does not explicitly identify as Christian, the Christians are presented in a very positive manner. They are God's servants, celebrating and commemorating Christian festivals and holidays (verse 6). Monks are described in a revering manner (verse 7). Furthermore, Guillaume notes that the poem contains Syriacisms, such as *shammasa* (verse 6) and *tukhūm* (verse 12).[58]

Of interest is the (probably pejorative) phrase concerning the Jews in verse 5 that they 'follow every law' (*dānat kulla dīnin*). I have argued in another study that, in Qur'anic Arabic, the word *dīn* denotes, in particular, 'judgment' and 'law' (the latter being used especially in the Medinan suras),[59] rather than 'religion,' a meaning that does obtain in later Arabic.[60] In verse 5 the phrase *dānat kulla dīnin* is, I would posit, intelligible only if we translate *dīn* as 'law.' Hence, it can be argued that the usage of the word here is closer to Qur'anic Arabic than the later stages of that language, which buttresses the authenticity of this poem. All in all, I would suggest that

[55] The meaning of the end of the verse is somewhat unclear. The verse might be derogatory toward Jews. Guillaume 1955: 237 translates 'and [Jews] follow every dreary custom you can think of.' The word *ʿuḍāl* means 'severe' (used in the context of diseases), but Lane 1863–1893: 2075 notes the expression *ḥalafa ʿuḍālan*, which signifies 'to swear a severe oath in which there is no exception.'
[56] The word *shammās* denotes a deacon, so the verb *shammasa* might be a pun.
[57] The meaning of hemistich 8b is somewhat unclear to me; the translation is conjectural.
[58] Transl. Guillaume 1955: 238, n. 1.
[59] [Reference removed.]
[60] See the comprehensive study Abbasi 2021.

the ascription of the poem to Ṣirma is credible. What is more, his poetry buttresses the Christian affiliation that I have suggested for him; indeed, in another poem Ṣirma notes that he prays to God in 'every church' (*kull bīʿa*).[61]

The narrative fragments on the life of Ṣirma have to be approached critically and read in tandem with his poetry. Much of his biography is uncertain, but we can say with some confidence that he was a Khazrajī Medinan who had converted to Christianity (or perhaps came from a Christian family) and adopted the ways of the monks. I would suggest that because Ṣirma later joined the Prophet Muhammad's community, the memory of his Christian background was all but obliterated: rather than having been a Christian, he is described as merely contemplating the possibility of converting to Christianity.

Ambiguous cases: al-Aʿshā, al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, and Ḥassān ibn Thābit

The famous poets al-Aʿshā, al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, and Ḥassān ibn Thābit present somewhat ambiguous cases: their verse includes Christian topics, but they are not remembered as having been Christians in later Islamic tradition, and modern scholarship does not often call them that, either.

Let us begin with the poet al-Aʿshā Maymūn. His poetry is thoroughly monotheist and it contains a few Christian aspects.[62] In one verse, for instance, he mentions the celebration of Easter.[63] This is a poem panegyrizing Hawdha b. ʿAlī al-Ḥanafī, the leader of the Banū Ḥanīfa, al-Aʿshā mentions that Hawdha has ransomed a hundred men. Al-Aʿshā notes:

> Through them [the ransomed], he [Hawdha] has offered a sacrifice on the Easter day (*yawm al-fiṣḥ*); he is keeping God (*al-ilāh*) in mind in what he carries out and does.
>
> He [Hawdha] is not seeking by it [the offering] to do a favor that he will be rewarded for [in this life by mortals]; when he says a word of good, he helps [people] with it.[64]

In another poem, al-Aʿshā tells his patron that he has surely found God to be powerful against his enemies (*wajadta l-ilāha ʿalayhim qadīrā*).[65] Addressing (at least according to the lore connected to the poem) Qays b. Maʿdʿkarib, the leader of the central Arabian tribe of Kinda, al-Aʿshā notes: 'God (*al-ilāh*) has guarded you with it [scil. rule, *al-mulk*, mentioned in the previous verse] when

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[61] Ibn Hishām 1858–1860: 350.
[62] On him, see also Shahîd 1995–2009, ii/1: 272–278. Shahîd makes the interesting point that al-Aʿshā refers to God fifteen times and always as *al-ilāh*, which surfaces as a specifically, though probable not exclusively, Christian designation of God in the epigraphic record.
[63] Al-Aʿshā n.d.: 111 (no. 13). Since al-Aʿshā's *Dīwān* has been published in editions with different paginations, I will also include the number of the poem as reference.
[64] Al-Aʿshā n.d.: 111 (no. 13).
[65] Al-Aʿshā n.d.: 97 (no. 12).

the great things were divided among people.'[66] Moreover, al-Aʿshā swears by 'the lord of those who prostrate themselves in the evening' (*wa-rabbi l-sājidīna ʿashiyyatan*), referring, it would seem, to Christian prayer rituals.[67] Taken together, such verse, it seems to me, smacks of somewhat clear affiliation with Christianity rather than merely leaning toward that faith.[68] Naturally, it has to be acknowledged that there does not exist any explicit or definitive self-identification as Christian in al-Aʿshā's poetry: no verse declares 'I am a proud Christian!' or the like.[69] This is true of all the poetry that has survived from before Islam.

Al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, the famous panegyrist of both the Lakhmids and Ghassānids, was active in ca. 570–600 CE.[70] The Ghassānids, in particular, were a staunchly Christian dynasty at the time, having converted to Christianity perhaps already in the fifth century CE.[71] However, their activities in the sixth century are better known. The Ghassānid ruler al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala (r. ca. 528–569) was personally involved, from the 540s onward, in protecting and supporting Christian monks, priests, and scholars. A famous building was the shrine of St Sergius and basilica in al-Ruṣāfa. According to the epigraphic evidence from the site, it was built by the Ghassānid ruler al-Mundhir (r. ca. 569–582).[72] It stands to reason that their main panegyrist, al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī, would have been Christian, too. Regardless, the discussion of the religious leanings and aspects of his poetry are often missing in scholarly literature,[73] though they are far from rare.

Al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī praises his patrons, the Ghassānids, as pious Christians. For examples, one poem, dedicated to the the Ghassānid king al-Nuʿmān ibn al-Mundhir (r. in the late sixth century), includes the following lines:[74]

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[66] Al-Aʿshā n.d.: *Dīwān* 49 (no. 5).

[67] Sinai 2019: 51. Compare this with Q 3:113, which notes that some among the People of the Book are upright, reciting God's words (*āyāt*) while prostrating (*wa-hum yasjudūn*).

[68] For example Stetkevych 1993: 34 calls al-Aʿshā 'a monotheist with Christian leanings.'

[69] Indeed, there is at least one verse in al-Aʿshā's work (n.d.: 21, no. 2), which disparages Christians, mentioning 'Christians' circumambulating the temple of the idol (*ṭawf al-naṣārā bi-bayt al-wathan*).' To me, this seems to be a later forgery by a Muslim scholar transmitting the poems who wanted to claim that Christians' rites include or are tantamount to idolatry (though the exact reference of 'circumambulating the temple of the idol' is opaque). Sinai 2023: 303, treats the verse differently. He reads it as a neutral reference to a church or chapel, 'perhaps on account of the icons or religious statues it contained.'

[70] On him, see Shahîd 1995–2009, ii/1: 221–232; Arazi 2012.

[71] There is archaeological evidence of religious and other buildings built by the dynasty in the sixth century; Genequand 2015.

[72] Fisher 2011: 52–53.

[73] E.g., Arazi 2012 does not mention anything related to religion or Christianity in his entry on al-Nābigha's life and oeuvre.

[74] Ahlwardt (ed.) 1870: 11–12; for a useful lexical commentary, see al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī n.d.: 67–71. Verses from this poem are mentioned by Sinai 2019: 29, 33. The poem was reportedly composed when the king was ailing, though such lore connected to the poems is often unreliable; it might be that the interpretation of a sick king is based on the fact that al-Nābigha asks God for the king's *khuld*.

We[75] are in front of him [al-Nuʿmān], asking God [to confer al-Nuʿmān] eternal life (*khuldahu*); may he/He [the king/God] cause the kingdom to [last?] for us and make the land cultivated.

We [too] hope for the eternal life, if our lot wins; and we fear the lot of death, if it comes overpowering (*naḥnu nurajjī l-khulda in fāza qidḥunā wa-narhabu qidḥa al-mawti in jāʾa qāhirā*).[76]
…
Send me to al-Nuʿmān, wherever I can find him; God has granted him the spring rains (*fa-ahdā lahu Allāhu al-ghuyūtha l-bawākīrā*).

God has arranged for him [the king] the best deeds; He [God] is his [king's] helper over/against the humankind.

In another poem, al-Nābigha notes: 'the recompense of men is in God's hands (*wa-ʿinda llāhi tajziyatu l-rijālī*).'[77] The requiting could naturally be this-worldly, but in the case of al-Nābigha, one suspects that the hereafter is being evoked in the verse. Though God is rewarding (at least to the kings), al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī reminds us elsewhere that no one can hide from Him (literary: 'a human being is not able to go behind God,' *wa-laysa warāʾa llāhi li-l-marʾi madhabū*).[78]

Elsewhere in al-Nābigha's corpus, there is also an interesting phrase concerning the Ghassānids: *majallatuhum dhātu l-ilāhi*,[79] which Nicolai Sinai understands as denoting that 'the Ghassānids possessed a "scripture" bestowed by "the god."'[80] However, I would rather interpret this as meaning, according to the literal understanding of the word *dhāt*, that their (the Ghassānids') scripture 'contained' God (in the sense: it contained God's word, hence God spoke in and through it). It is impossible to say with any certainty what such a book possessed by the Ghassānids might have been, but I would suggest that, since the Ghassānids often used Greek in their official inscriptions and were allied to the Byzantine empire, this could refer to a Greek collection of books, perhaps but not necessarily the New Testament. The verse in question

[75] In the poem, the word 'we' denotes either the poet himself or, in some instances it would seem, the subjects of the king.
[76] The word *qidḥ*, meaning 'an arrow,' specifically those used in the gambling game of *maysir* to draw lots, is here used, interestingly, in a monotheist context and metaphorically to refer to one's lot in the afterlife.
[77] Ahlwardt (ed.) 1870: 21.
[78] Ahlwardt (ed.) 1870: 5.
[79] Ahlwardt (ed.) 1870: 3. Note, in some of the poems discussed in this article, the usage of *al-ilāh* for God, which was common among pre-Islamic Arabic-speaking Christians, as attested in pre-Islamic inscriptions..
[80] Ahlwardt (ed.) 1870: 11; Sinai 2019: 61.

continues: ‘their law is firm; they can expect to get rewards [from God]’ (*wa-dīnuhum qawīmun fa-mā yarjūna ghayra al-ʿawāqibī*).[81]

We can end the survey of (possibly) Christian poetry by looking at some verses by Ḥassān ibn Thābit of the Khazraj, more specifically the Banū al-Najjār, who later became the ‘poet laureate’ of the Prophet Muhammad. However, it should be noted that much of the poetry ascribed to Ḥassān is suspect and clear forgeries have been detected by Walid Arafat, who edited Ḥassān’s *Dīwān*.[82] Arabic historians and antiquarians claim that he lived to the ripe age of 120 years, spanning 60 years in both before Islam and in the Islamic era.[83] This is, of course, very unlikely, and since we do not have much poetry ascribed to him that deals with the post-Muhammadan era,[84] it can be supposed that he died earlier than the year 674 CE, which is given in the sources, and was not born so early as the sources claim.

It would appear that Ḥassān began his career as a poet in pre-Islamic times in the court of the Ghassānids, panegyrizing them.[85] The Ghassānids, as noted above, were devoted Christians, and Ḥassān’s verse from that time evidence some Christian aspects.[86] The most Christian of his verse is poem no. 123 of the *Dīwān* (a poem appearingly reminisching the grandeur, now lost, of the Ghassānids, though the manuscript notes that it was written extolling the last Ghassānid king, Jabala ibn al-Ayham). It reads as follows:

> To whom belongs the abode deserted among the settlements
> from the source of the Yarmūk to al-Khammān?
>
> And the al-Qurayyāt from Bilās, then Dārayyā,
> then Sakāʾ and then the nearby mansions?
>
> Then the hinterlands of Jāsim, then the valleys of al-Ṣuffar [all places located in Syria and Jordan],
> where the herds of horses and noble white camels dwell?
>
> That was the abode of the powerful [king] (*al-ʿazīz*) who always put his guests at ease
> and whose structures possessed imposing pillars.
>
> Their mother lost them – indeed she did,
> on the day when they dismounted at Ḥārith al-Jawlān [i.e., Mount Arethas; possibly a reference to a battle with the Persians]

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[81] Ahlwardt (ed.) 1870: 3. The ending (*fa-mā yarjūna ghayra al-ʿawāqibī*) is open to different interpretations. Perhaps the intended meaning could be that ‘they do not wish for anything but [just] outcomes [for their subjects when administering the law].’
[82] Arafat 1955; 1958; 1966.
[83] Boutz 2009: 23–24.
[84] Ḥassān ibn Thābit 1971, i: 120–121 contain, however, poems in memory of the Caliph ʿUthmān, who was killed in 656 CE.
[85] Boutz 2009.
[86] Boutz 2009: 11–13.

Easter drew near, so the young maidens hastened
to string garlands of coral,

Gathering saffron in white garments,
wearing robes of linen,

Not distracted by resin nor gum,
nor with the extraction of the seeds of the colocynth.

That was the abode of the clan of Jafna at one time.
It is true that times change.

I did consider myself well-respected there.
I sat in my place, by the crowned [king].[87]

Also, it should be noted that, according to another surviving recension, transmitted in the *Kitāb al-Aghānī*, the poem ends differently, containing even more Christian vocabulary:

That was the abode of the clan of Jafna: in the monastery (*al-dayr*).
It is true that times change.

Prayers to Christ (*ṣalawāt al-masīḥ*) [are heard] in that monastery:
the supplications of the priest and the monks.

I did consider myself well-respected there.
I sat in my place, by the crowned [king].[88]

Question now arises: is the latter recension of the ending of the poem more authentic and, related to that, was Ḥassān, at some point of his life, Christian? The answer to both questions is: possibly. Indeed, it is somewhat difficult to suppose that a poet of the Ghassānids would not have at least leaned Christian. Also, I have suggested above that Ḥassān ibn Thābit's contemporary Abū Qays Ṣirma, who hailed from the same town (Medina) and the same sub-tribe of Khazraj (Banū al-Najjār), was Christian. Be that as it may, the verse ascribed to Ḥassān, having a reference to *ṣalawāt al-masīḥ*, 'prayers to/of Christ,' is a rare example of Jesus Christ explicitly mentioned in Arabic poetry.

[87] Ḥassān ibn Thābit 1971, i: 255; transl. adapted from Boutz 2009: 227–237, which also contains an ample commentary on each verse.
[88] Ḥassān ibn Thābit 1971, i: 518.

Conclusions

In this study, I have noted that the Arabian epigraphic record indicates the strong presence of Christians on the eve of Islam. Pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, monotheist as it is, should in my opinion be taken as evidence for the spread of various forms of monotheism, not simply pagan monotheism. In particular, it seems well grounded to suggest that many, or at least some, poets were indeed Christian.

The important issue to note here is that my argument for there having been at least some Christian Arabic poets does not rest on a single figure or verse or the mathematic probability that some poets were Christian. In fact, there are multiple pieces of implicit and explicit evidence bolstering this: first, there are poets (e.g., ʿAdī ibn Zayd) who are categorized as Christian by classical Arabic literature itself; second, there are a few Christian features in the verses of some poets (e.g., al-Aʿshā), though they are not explicitly designated Christian by the later tradition; and, third, we have verses ascribed to one or two ʿAbd al-Masīḥs (clearly a Christian name) in *al-Mufaḍḍaliyyāt*.

Taking the variety of evidence into consideration, then, I would argue that we should acknowledge that Cheikho (who, however, did not have epigraphic studies to buttress his claim) was in some instances right: some of the pre-Islamic Arabic poets were likely Christian, though it is difficult to prove this with certainty in many individual cases. However, Cheikho was in all likelihood wrong to assume, without evidence, that the vast majority of pre-Islamic Arabic poets were Christian. In the future, when more epigraphic evidence of late antique Arabia has come to light and been published, we might be better equipped to gauge what portion of the Arabic-speaking individuals were Christian on the eve of Islam. At the present state of the evidence at least, I would estimate that the majority of them were.

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