

Imperial Contests and the Arabs: The World of Late Antiquity on the Eve of Islam*

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The Greeks have been vanquished in the nearer part of the land; and, after their vanquishing; they shall be victors in a few years

(Qur. 30:1–3)

As is reflected by these Qur'anic verses, the "Arabs" (a designation that should be used cautiously and in any case purified of any 'national,' or even proto-national, implications: see Retsö 2003) of the pre-Islamic Middle East lived in a world marked by the antagonism of two great powers: the Byzantine/Roman Empire and the Sasanian Empire (Dignas and Winter 2010). Since antiquity, the rulers of the Greek-Roman world, on the one hand, and of Iran, on the other, had engaged in a continuous competition for hegemony over the Middle East, but after Ardashir I, the first Sasanian Emperor, seized power in 224 CE and deposed the Arsacids, this centuries-old rivalry reached a dramatic climax. The next four centuries would experience phases of heavy and long-lasting military conflicts, culminating in a devastating war (602–630) that completely destroyed the foundations of the then known world system and prepared the path for the emergence of a new power: the Islamic Caliphate. Nevertheless, long-term political rivalries on equal terms like this one do not only provoke violent military conflagrations, but, paradoxically,

* This study originates in the context of the Courant Research Centre on "Education and Religion from Early Imperial Roman Times to the Classical Period of Islam" (EDRIS), University of Göttingen, funded by the German Excellence Initiative.

they also result in emulation and regular interaction, and therefore, generate convergence and parallel developments in many spheres. For instance, both rivals underwent similar and rather synchronous centralizing reforms in the 6th century under Justinian (r. 527–565) and Khosrow Anushirvan (r. 531–579) and both utilized religion as an ideological weapon. The Roman-Sasanian relationship would also undergo phases of peaceful coexistence, diplomacy, commerce, and cultural exchange. Moreover, proxy wars and buffer states contributed to de-escalate the tension. In sum, it was a tense but also close relationship that gave way to a bipolar power constellation that had a profound impact on the destiny of the many Arab tribes dwelling on the margins of the Fertile Crescent since the first millennium BCE.

On the one hand, there were factors that fueled the conflict; both empires claimed universal rule, Rome by referring to the notion of *imperium sine fine*, Persia to the Achaemenid legacy. These ideologies resulted in overlapping territorial demands, particularly in Syria and Armenia. From the early 4th century, another ideological factor came into play: religion. From 313 CE onward Rome gradually developed into a Christian empire, entering into a firm alliance with the Church and intervening actively in dogmatic quarrels; the Sasanians, for their part, established a firm bond with the Zoroastrian clergy and persecuted Christians in their realm, particularly during the 4th century, thus reacting against the aggressive religious policies of their rivals. Furthermore, both empires made increasing use of religion as a weapon in their foreign policies. Rome claimed protectorate over the Christians outside its borders, fostered Christian missions as means of power expansion, and expected from their allies a conversion to Christianity. In contrast, from the early 5th century onward, Sasanian Iran abandoned its policies of persecution and began to favor the institutional and dogmatic independence of the Persian (“Nestorian”) Church. As we will see, this situation induced many Arabs either to convert to Christianity or, at least, to adopt and integrate monotheistic concepts and notions of community and authority. There were also conflicting commercial interests between the two powers; since the Middle East was crossed by very important overland and overseas trade routes, both empires sought to supervise this network in order to benefit from commerce. Here, nomad Arabs also played a key role because they controlled the caravan routes crossing Syria and Arabia. In addition, Arab dynasties ran many key entrepôts in Palmyra and Hatra.

On the other hand, there were factors that favored mutual understanding, and mitigated bellicosity between Romans and Persians. First of all, both great powers were confronted with the same strategic dilemma: if they combated their antagonist, they risked a two-front war, since the Romans were threatened by Germanic peoples in the West and Northwest, and the Sasanians by nomadic populations in the North and Northeast. This circumstance led both sides to have recourse to alternative policies beyond war—for example, payment of cash to secure neutrality as well as the conclusion of bilateral armistices, peace treaties, and commercial agreements. These strategies gave way to a sophisticated culture of diplomacy, which in its turn fostered cultural exchange and mutual respect, but

also espionage. Another very important strategy was to engage in proxy wars that kept the conflict at a lower level. Therefore both powers entered into alliances with Arab tribes dwelling in the frontier zone, and paid stipends, and guaranteed privileges to them. Furthermore, they urged them to act as representatives of their imperial interests, and often induced them to fight each other (see Wiesehöfer 2010; Whittow 2010).

The long-term impact of this bipolar world system on the Arabs of the late antique Middle East cannot be overestimated. On the eve of Islam, the Arab people lived in a world of conflicting monotheistic religions and imperial ideologies where every group had to find its place, but also struggle to keep a certain amount of independence. Given their settlement area in the frontier zone between the empires, Arabs played a key role in this system: as military allies, targets of conflicting missionary efforts, cultural and political brokers, and commercial agents. Among the main Arab players of the 5th and 6th centuries, two groups stand out as especially important: the Jafnids (Ghassanids) as allies of the Romans and the Nasrids (Lakhmids) as allies of the Persians. “Jafnids” and “Nasrids” are nowadays considered by some scholars a more correct designation (Fisher 2015) than the conventional designations (“Ghassanids,” “Lakhmids”) adopted by German scholars in the late 19th century on the basis of the hereditary presumption, reflected by Arabic traditions, of the kingdoms ruled by the two groups (Rothstein 1898; Nöldeke 1887) and that is still in use among Arabists.

Both groups are relatively well attested. In addition, they featured many structural and functional similarities, and were mutually engaged in proxy wars in the frontier zone between Rome and Persia, namely Greater Syria and Mesopotamia. Furthermore, both functioned as mediators between the late antique world and the Arabs of the Peninsula (see Chapter 4), and so played an important role in shaping the Qur’anic milieu in the Hijaz. In what follows, I will first sketch a comparative survey of these two Arab groups, focusing on central aspects of their specific relationships to the two great powers, namely tribal origins, urbanism, religion, and language. I will then conclude with a general evaluation of their respective impact on the history of Islam.

The Great Powers and Their Arab Allies

As mentioned earlier, at the peak of the rivalry between the two great powers of Late Antiquity, the Nasrids were the allies of the Persians and the Jafnids of the Romans (Fisher 2015). The main function of these petty states was not only to wage proxy wars against each other and so keep the imperial conflict at a manageable level, but also to serve as protective shields for the empires vis-à-vis other tribal Arabs that pushed north from the peninsula. For this double service, they received subsidies, privileges, insignia, and military support. It was, though, a precarious

system that could last only as long as these chiefdoms served their rulers' purpose. Both dynasties were deposed at the end of the 6th century, on the eve of the last Great War between Persia and Rome (Edwell 2015: 268–74). This coincidence points to a radical change in the foreign policy of both Romans and Persians in favor of a direct control of the boundaries that, in the long term, would favor the conquests by the caliphate, since the new policy destroyed the well-established protective system in the frontier zone (Fisher 2013: 173–93).

The Jafnids were the most prominent Arab Roman allies in the 6th century, but we do not know for certain the manner in which they came into contact with the Roman Empire. We date their immigration from the Hijaz (East Central Arabia) to Syria in the early 6th century. The first ruler that obtained an official recognition as *phylarchos* (the Greek term for Hebrew and Arab chiefs) was al-Harith ibn Jabala (the *Arethas* of the Greek sources) in 528/9, although there are unclear indications that his father, Jabala, had already formed an alliance with the Romans in 502 (Edwell 2015: 221), which would suggest an earlier formal pact with the Romans. The historian Procopius of Caesarea tells us that in 530 Justinian elevated al-Harith ibn Jabala to the “rank of a king” (*axioma basileos*) in order to make him stand out among the other Arab tribes and so to empower him to fight Mundhir ibn al-Sama from the Nasrids, whose devastating incursions into Syria occasioned serious problems to the Romans:

Mundhir, holding the position of king, ruled alone over all the Saracens in Persia, and he was always able to make his inroad with the whole army wherever he wished in the Roman domain. Neither any commander of the Roman troops, whom they call *duces*, nor any leader of the Saracens allied with the Romans, who are called *phylarchs*, was strong enough with his men to array himself against Mundhir, for the troops stationed in the different districts were not a match (individually) in battle for the enemy. For this reason the Emperor Justinian (527–65) put in command of as many clans as possible Harith the son of Jabala, who ruled over the Saracens of Arabia, and bestowed upon him the dignity of king (*basileus*), a thing which the Romans had never done before.

(Procopius, quoted in Hoyland 2001: 81)

Indeed, in the battle of Callinicum (531) the Nasrid al-Mundhir defeated the Jafnid al-Harith. The following decades were dominated by further tensions, attacks, and proxy wars between the two Arab petty chiefdoms (Edwell 2015: 247–52), which culminated in the peace treaty of 562 between Rome and Iran: in awareness of their importance in the Roman–Iranian conflict, the treaty included a section on the Arab allies (*symmachoi* in Greek).

I shall now detail the provisions set out in the treaty: the Saracen allies of both states shall themselves also abide by these agreements and those of the Persians shall not attack the Romans, nor those of the Romans the Persians.

(Menander Protector in Edwell 2015: 251)

Over time, the Jafnids would receive more titles and insignia, visit the Roman capital (580), and grow in power. They also received monetary subsidies that enabled them to maintain troops and keep a position of wealth and prestige among the Arab tribes. The privileging of the leading clan would foster further social stratification within the tribe (Fisher 2013: 72–80). However, it was this growth in status and prestige that probably made them suspicious of the Romans and led in the end to the dissolution of this bond, so that the Jafnids were deposed in 581. Thus when the last war between Rome and the Sasanians broke out in 602, the Jafnids were no longer part of the Roman defensive system.

The Nasrids were the only long-term Arab allies of the Sasanians but we have scarce information about the origins and formal nature of this bond. Arabic narratives tend to emphasize the political dependence of the Nasrids on the Sasanian Empire. Frequently, we read that the Nasrids were the subordinated “deputies” of the Persians, who were the real rulers of the region. These petty kings, furthermore, wore a crown in the Persian style and other insignia like robes and honorary necklaces conferred by the Sasanians, who apparently elected the Nasrid king and legitimated his authority. In contrast, Greek sources portray the Nasrids as allies (*symmachoi*) of the Persians, which does not suggest subordination, but rather cooperation. The evidence is too slim to make any reliable statement about the formal nature of the bilateral political relationship between the Sasanians and the Nasrids in the period ranging from the 3rd to the 5th centuries CE. We have to suppose a gradual change of patterns: the Nasrid kingdom seems to have emerged soon after the formation of the Sasanian Empire, in the late 3rd century, and both states underwent various changes up until the late 6th century. The degree of decentralization in the Sasanian Empire (a Parthian legacy) has been underestimated until recently (Pourshariati 2008), which means that a fixed, formalized relationship between the empire and the peripheral “barbarian” states, similar to the Roman *foedus*, is highly improbable.

The position of the Nasrid chieftdom probably developed gradually from a looser status of cooperation into a more formal subordination to the Sasanian Empire during the 6th century, partly as a consequence of the centralizing tendency of the late Sasanian state, and partly because of the continuous wars between the great powers. This state of affairs required the Sasanians to have closer control over their Arab allies at the borders and to formalize their status. Sometime in the early 6th century, the Sasanians must have started to support the Nasrids by regularly stationing a fixed armored contingent of the famous, heavily armed Persian cavalry and likely by paying stipends. This support gave them a special prestige vis-à-vis the Arab tribes and strengthened the economic and political position of the dynasty. Thus the Nasrids acted, on the one hand, as a protective shield for the Persians against the nomads of the Arabian Peninsula and the “Roman” Jafnids, and on the other hand, as representatives of Sasanian commercial and political interests among Arab tribes, expanding the Sasanian hegemony over Eastern and Central Arabia and the Hijaz. The following dialogue between

the Sasanian Emperor Khosrow (Kisra in Arabic) and the Nasrid candidate for the throne (later king Nu'man) exemplifies what the former expected from the latter. It took place in 580 during the negotiations to appoint a new king of al-Hira.

When al-Nu'man went into Kisra's presence, the latter perceived an ugly and ill-favoured person. Nevertheless, when Kisra addressed him and asked 'Can you control the Arabs for me?' he answered 'Yes!' Kisra asked, 'How will you deal with your brethren?' Al-Nu'man replied [mockingly], 'If I can't cope with them, then I can't cope with anyone!' Kisra thereupon appointed him ruler, gave him robes of honour and a crown valued at sixty thousand dirhams and set with pearls and gold (al-Tabari, quoted in Munt 2015: 462)

However, the Nasrids' supremacy began to decline with the death of al-Mundhir in 554, and in the following decades the Sasanians started to intervene frequently in the internal affairs of the Nasrids until they finally deposed the dynasty in 602, replacing them with a Persian governor (Toral-Niehoff 2013: 120; Horovitz 1930: 60–3). The reasons for this deposition remain unclear; besides a general shift in the Sasanian foreign policy away from the principle of indirect rule, the main factor was probably that the Nasrids were no longer sufficiently successful at controlling the invading Arab tribes. When the troops led by Khalid ibn al-Walid reached the Middle Euphrates area, the region was controlled by the tribes of the Bakr ibn Wa'il, the Nasrid power having already vanished.

Tribal Origins

Arabic tradition tells that the Ghassan were a tribe belonging to the South Arabian Azd that had previously migrated from Yemen via Yathrib to Greater Syria in the late 5th century: "When the Azd dispersed, and some of them came to Tihama and others to Yathrib, Ghassan came to Syria and arrived in the land of the Balqa" (al-Ya'qubi, quoted in Munt 2015: 468). They appear to have settled in the Roman province of Arabia sometime around 490 CE (Nöldeke 1887: 8; Edwell 2015: 215–28). There they ended up displacing the tribe of Salih, which had been the previous Arab Roman ally in the area (Hoyland 2001: 239–240). The leading dynasty claimed as ancestor a certain Jafna, who is otherwise unknown, hence the alternative name "Jafnids" which I have preferred here (Nöldeke 1887: 5–6; Fisher 2013: 3–7). It is important to underline that the Ghassan, or Jafnids, were rather a tribal elite, or dynasty, that ruled over a confederation of diverse tribes of unknown composition.

Arabic tribal lore also attributes a South Arabian origin to the Nasrids; however, these genealogical legends are more elaborate and reflect a deeper chronology than those of the Jafnids. This dynasty was considered to descend from the eponym

ʿAmr ibn Adi ibn Nasr ibn Rabiʿa from the South Arabian tribe of Lakhm who had defeated Queen Zenobia (Zabba in Arabic) of Palmyra at the end of the 3rd century. Other traditions establish a link to the city of Hatra. However, the Lakhm was a tribe usually located in Syria together with the Judham, so that the connection between the Syrian and the Iraqi Lakhm remains unclear. For this reason, some scholars regard the Nasr-Lakhmid connection as a later fabrication and thus prefer to speak of the “Nasrids” in al-Hira instead of Lakhmids. On the other hand, there is the Arabic myth on the foundation of their capital, the city of al-Hira, which emphasizes the relevance of the Arabic Tanukh. They were a confederation of South Arabian tribes who had left the Tihama region in the early 3rd century, migrating first to East Arabia/Bahrayn, and finally wandering to the Middle Euphrates area where they eventually settled down in an encampment that would later give way to the urban area of al-Hira (whose meaning is “Bedouin encampment”: Toral-Niehoff 2014: 43–9). This last event allegedly took place during the turmoil in the late Parthian and early Sasanian period when the nomadic Tanukh took advantage of the resulting power vacuum to invade the fertile Mesopotamian plain. The complexity of these legends reflects the later need for urbanized ruling elites to configure a communal identity and to establish a legitimizing link that connected them simultaneously to prestigious Arab city-states such as Palmyra and Hatra, and to tribal Arabia.

As we have seen, in both cases the Arabic sources describe an interesting dualism between a foreign clan (of alleged South Arabian ascendancy) dominating a tribal confederation of diverse origins. This and other reasons (related to his understanding of elites and state) have led Greg Fisher to speak here about the Jafnids and the Nasrids as the Arab “elites,” in order to indicate that *they* were the real historical subjects that negotiated with the empires and not the tribes. In the Arabic tradition, the Jafnid kings al-Harith ibn Jabala (r. ca. 529–569) and Mundhir ibn al-Harith (r. 569–581/2) were held responsible for a series of constructions, a list of which can be found in Hamza al-Isfahani (Munt 2015: 470; cf. Genequand 2015: 174, 181–4). Unfortunately, the archaeological identification of these sites has proved to be problematic, so that many scholars regard the list as hardly reliable. Only two of these toponyms appear in other Arabic sources, namely in Arabic poetry: al-Jabiya and Jalliq. They seem to refer to some kind of stable settlements (or cities), but their exact identification and localization is still a matter of debate (Genequand 2015: 174). On the other hand, we have a series of buildings that are attested by epigraphic remains as Jafnid or as sponsored by the dynasty (Genequand 2015: 175–181). According to Genequand, however, these structures do not share enough typological similarities to allow for the establishment of a certain Jafnid style or visual culture (Genequand 2015: 185–207). He proposes, therefore, to study rather the remarkable intensification of settlement perceivable in the area during the 6th century, independently of any Jafnid attribution. This would reflect the interaction between Roman power and the Arab tribes that may also have served as a model for Umayyad settlement

policies such as the building of desert castles. However, he does not see any substantial continuity between these sites and later Umayyad settlement patterns.

Urbanization

All these archaeological remains attest to the Jafnids' remarkable engagement in architecture; however, they do not help establish the extent to which they or the tribes they ruled were urbanized. For this reason, whether they followed a sedentary, semi-sedentary, or nomadic lifestyle is still open to debate (Fisher 2013: 108–16). As such, our knowledge of the basis of the Jafnid's economy and societal patterns is still scarce. The case of the Nasrid city of al-Hira is different in many respects since the evidence points to a deeper history of urbanization and indicates a noticeable political identity. We still do not have any epigraphic remains that would help to attribute buildings to the dynasty with certainty, but the location and urban structure of al-Hira is better known by literary sources and archeology. Located in the southeast of present-day Najaf in Iraq, and only 100 kilometers southwest of the Sasanian capital Ctesiphon, the site probably started to attract settled nomads in the late 3rd century (Toral-Niehoff 2014: 43–9). In addition, synchronous changes in the ecosystem and microclimate, due to a western shift of the Euphrates and to favorable technical innovations, enabled the Nasrids' settlement in an area that had now become fertile and salubrious.

Al-Hira never developed a densely urbanized grid but was composed of family boroughs, built in adobe and bricks, and surrounded by gardens, palm trees and fields that formed the fertile Iraqi lowlands (*al-sawad*) indicating the local importance of horticulture. These buildings were scattered over a vast area of 25 km² and were not enclosed by any wall. In the event of Bedouin attacks, the inhabitants took refuge in their fortified houses. Here, al-Hira followed Arab models of urbanism comparable to those in Yathrib and early Mecca. There were also several more luxurious palaces associated with the dynasty and attested in Arabic poetry which kept their legendary fame well into the Islamic period. Besides these secular buildings, the sources mention numerous churches and monasteries, testifying to the relevance and wealth of the local Christians. The Hiran ecclesiastical architecture indicates an independent, local Babylonian tradition, later enriched by Western Syriac elements. However, only a few of these remnants have been investigated in detail as the archaeological site has never been excavated exhaustively, and a preliminary campaign by Talbot Rice (1934) in the 1930s is still our main reference.

Al-Hira was probably also an important emporium for the Sasanians because of its favorable geographic position. The city lay at the crossroads between important commercial overland routes that parted from Ctesiphon, 100 kilometers to the northeast, and reached the Arabian Peninsula. It was located precisely between the fertile alluvial plain of Babylonia and the caravan routes to Central and Western Arabia (Morony 1984: 127, 137–41). At a later stage, during the Islamic period,

al-Hira played an important role as a station on the pilgrimage road between Baghdad and the Hijaz, which itself followed the old caravan route (Toral-Niehoff 2014: 51–4). In addition, the proximity to the Euphrates converted al-Hira into a commercial hub on the fluvial trade routes between the Persian Gulf, Syria, and Central Arabia. This situation implies a high degree of sedentarization and suggests that al-Hira's economy was based on a combination of commerce, agriculture, stipends given by the Persians, and the tributes of the dependent tribes.

Religion

In the late 5th century Syria and Mesopotamia's ancient Christian communities started to be convulsed by dogmatic and sectarian conflicts. In the context of such severe dissensions, the Jafnids were firm supporters of the Monophysites, whereas the Church in Nasrid al-Hira fell under the tutelage of the Persian ("Nestorian") Church, from which it depended as bishopric. But far beyond this disparity in dogmatic orientation, it is important to emphasize that we can observe deeper structural differences between the Christians under the Jafnids and those under the Nasrids that are rooted in their specific geopolitical contexts. Their geographical location prompted the Jafnids in Syria to seek the protection of the Romans, and the Nasrids in Iraq that of the Sasanians, each following opposite strategies in their religious policies.

The history of Christianity under the Jafnids cannot be separated from the history of institutionalization of the Roman Church. Christianity played a central role in establishing political alliances for Rome since its legalization in 313 CE, a date that initiated the establishment of a powerful alliance between universal monotheism and the Roman state. Defining Christian orthodoxy became the responsibility of the emperor, and sectarian divisions threatened efforts to ensure stability and cohesion to the extent they merged with political conflicts and struggles for cultural autonomy. In this context, Christianization and mission (with a strong emphasis on the Roman "orthodoxy," although the definition of this term changed in the course of time) became a fundamental weapon in the struggle for power and hegemony between Rome and the Sasanians (Fisher 2013: 34–72). Regardless of its political implications, the Christianization of the Roman province of Arabia (the area of Jafnid dominance) was at first a spontaneous long-term process that goes back to the 3rd century, from when records of the first bishops can be found. As in other regions, many early Christians were both urbanized and Hellenized. However, we know that many monks and ascetics were also engaged in conversion and mission in the rural areas, a fact that brought them closer to the lifestyle and values of the nomads and semi-nomads at the fringes of the desert:

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 of God and acknowledged Jesus, and at the word of Simon erected shrines in their tents.

(Simeon Stylites, quoted in Hoyland 2001: 148)

In 530, the Jafnid ruler al-Harith ibn Jabala was appointed Arab “king” and *foederatus* of the Romans, thus entering into close cooperation with the empire then ruled by the pro-Chalcedonian Emperor Justinian (that is, who supported the majority Confession of Chalcedon on the human and divine nature of Christ). Al-Harith was probably already Christian when he entered this alliance, or, at least, strongly engaged in the promotion of Christianity, including by helping build an ecclesiastical structure in his dominion. In 542, al-Harith asked the empress Theodora to send her two bishops to build a church under his supervision and we also find his name as sponsor of several ecclesiastical buildings. Furthermore, he promoted the cult of St Sergius, who was particularly popular among the Bedouins of the “Barbarian Plain” (E.K. Fowden 1999). Like his son al-Mundhir ibn al-Harith, who would chair a Monophysite synod in 580, al-Harith was a convinced supporter of this Christian creed supporting the anti-Chalcedonian doctrine of the one nature of Christ, up to the point that the Jafnids would be regarded as the true promoters of the Monophysite Church in Greater Syria—thus in apparent contradiction with the pro-Chalcedonian policy of their protectors, the Roman emperors. However, members of the Roman establishment such as the empress Theodora still had Monophysite sympathies. Greg Fisher interprets the Jafnid support of the Monophysite creed as a strategy to maintain a semblance of distance from Rome wherever suitable by occupying an ambiguous in-between space (Fisher 2013: 63–4).

In contrast, the history of Nasrid Christianity was marked by its affiliation to the Persian Church, which had emerged outside the jurisdiction of the Roman Church, probably from the 3rd century onward. The Aramean-speaking Christian communities in Mesopotamia and Iran resulted from a combination of factors, the most important being the deportation of Roman captives to Iran, the conversion of members of the Babylonian Jewish communities, and the mission by itinerating Syriac ascetics. The policies of the Zoroastrian Sasanians toward the Christians in their realm were ambiguous and changed over the course of time: they fluctuated between open persecution and acceptance, depending mostly on their respective relationship with the Roman Empire that, since Constantine, claimed to ‘protect’ them. As such, these policies were markedly anti-Christian during the course of the 4th century. On the one hand, this shifting attitude resulted in a strengthening of the self-awareness of the Persian Christians whose ethnic and religious identity overlapped to the point of calling themselves “people of God.” On the other hand, it produced among them a general distrust of political authorities (Asmussen 1983). From the 5th century onward, the Sasanian authorities pursued a new policy, namely, they fostered the establishment of an independent Persian Church (410) with a Patriarch/Catholicos in Ctesiphon under the tutelage of the Sasanians.

Furthermore, they favored the dogmatic independence of the Persian Church, which openly manifested its dissent with Rome in 484 by adopting the Nestorian Christological doctrine. In sum, the relationship between the Sasanian state and the Persian Church was often tense but eventually resulted in a formalized system of mutual, institutionalized tolerance.

The origins of the local Christian community in al-Hira, the so-called Ibad, remain obscure but seem to go back to the 4th century, growing in importance over the course of the 5th and 6th centuries (Toral-Niehoff 2014: 233–41; Hainthaler 2007: 81–110). Since there is no evidence of deported Christian groups in this region, we must consider other factors for their presence in al-Hira, such as, for instance, the importance of the city's international commercial ties, since traders have always functioned as important cultural mediators and religious missions have been intertwined with commerce, to the extent this transcends the exchange of commodities to include the exchange of ideas. The gradual and early Christianization of the Hiran urban elites from the 4th century onward could be considered the result of a continuous contact with Western merchants from Syria and Northern Mesopotamia, who, by introducing religious ideas rooted in late Hellenism such as universalism, monotheism, community, and so on, paved the way for later developments of Christian and Islamic ideas (Toral-Niehoff 2010; 2014: 54–9).

Al-Hira is attested as a bishopric since 410, and the seat seems to have been occupied continuously until the city fell into decline during the 10th century. The Hiran bishop depended directly from the metropolitan in Ctesiphon and this closeness is further expressed by the fact that many patriarchs were buried in al-Hira. Therefore the official Church in the city followed the dogmatic orientation of the Persian Church. However, Syriac sources point to the frequent presence of Monophysite missionaries in the 6th century, besides Western Syriac monks and ascetics, who sought refuge from Roman persecutions in this marginal area. In the *vita* of the 6th-century Syriac monk and missionary Ahudemmeḥ we read:

There were many peoples between the Tigris and the Euphrates in the land of Mesopotamia who lived in tents and were barbarous and warlike. Numerous were their superstitions and they were the most ignorant of all the peoples of the Earth until the moment when the light of Christ came to them. ... The holy Ahudemmeḥ set himself with great patience to visit all the camps of the Arabs, instructing and teaching them in many sermons ... he had priests come from many regions ... in order to establish in every tribe a priest and a deacon. He founded churches and named them after tribal chiefs so that they would support them ... Thus he inclined the hearts of the Arabs to the love of God and particularly to giving to the needy... Nor do they confine their piety to making gifts to churches, monks, poor, and strangers, but they love fasting and ascetic life more than any other Christians.

(Life of Ahudemmeḥ, quoted in Hoyland 2001: 148–9)

In spite of the massive presence of Christians and their increasing social relevance in the city, the Nasrid rulers remained pagan until circa 590, when the

monarch was baptized by the local bishop and embraced Nestorian Christianity. This reluctance to convert was probably to avoid any tensions with their sovereigns, the Sasanians. Furthermore, it reflects an attitude similar to the Jafnids' by following a strategy of distancing from their overlords which provided frontier petty states a degree of flexibility and a semblance of independence. The presence of other religious communities in al-Hira is less frequently attested. The local pagan Arab divinity was al-Zuhra, but we have very contradictory information about cultic traditions (including dubious testimonies about human sacrifices: Toral-Niehoff 2014: 188–90). There are also sources that point to a Manichean mission in the late 3rd century, and we might speculate that the presence of Manicheans fostered the later establishment of Christianity through notions of community and universality. There is only scarce information about Jews in al-Hira but we must consider the massive presence of Jewish communities in the neighboring Babylonian plain; this might have had an impact on the Aramean peasants dwelling in the rich agricultural suburbs of al-Hira on the western bank of the Euphrates.

Languages and People

As was common in the late antique Middle East, we have to suppose the existence of a functional multilingualism among the population under both the Jafnids and the Nasrids:

In Syria and Arabia from 600 BCE to 600 CE, it was the rule rather than the exception that people spoke more than one language (with different degrees of perfection), and used their different languages in different social contexts and for different purposes, especially if they could not only speak, but also write.

(Knauf 2010: 199)

This complexity makes it difficult to establish stable and well-defined ethnicities and suggests a great amount of cultural and linguistic hybridity, what makes it particularly difficult to reconstruct processes of ethnogenesis. This is even more the case for the Jafnids and Nasrids, since both principalities were located in a cultural frontier zone. The ethnic composition of the population in both areas was certainly mixed.

The Jafnid elite and the nomadic tribes under their rule are commonly portrayed in the sources as tribal Arabs, so that we might suppose that they used some vernacular version of Arabic in their everyday life in addition to a more standardized 'koine' version (the so-called early standard Arabic) as a supra-regional idiom to communicate with other Arabs. Besides, the Jafnid court was well known as a meeting place for pre-Islamic poets who used the poetic language simply known as *'arabiyya* for their poetry, a type of language that was also to provide the basis of the Qur'anic language and eventually of the *fusha* or standard Arabic of the Islamic

period. In epigraphy, however, the Jafnids used Greek not only as their prestige language but also as their specifically religious language (Genequand 2015: 175–81). We can here observe that they were well aware of the fact that Greek was still the dominant and most widely known idiom both of power and of religion of the entire region, from which we evince that the Jafnids quite clearly followed late antique patterns.

In Nasrid al-Hira the majority of the population consisted of tribal Arabs who originally immigrated from Central and Eastern Arabia and became sedentary, but there were also Aramaic-speaking peasants living in the agricultural area surrounding the city, and several nomadic Bedouin tribes (many were from the Tamim and Bakr ibn Wa'il tribes) living on the outskirts as well (Toral-Niehoff 2014: 125–33). Persian nobles, knights, and soldiers lived within the city and in rural estates close to the city (Toral-Niehoff 2013).

The languages spoken and written included several variants of spoken and written Arabic. At the same time, Aramaic, the 'world's second language' after Greek, seems to have been used as the *lingua franca* for their communication with the bulk of the settled population, namely the peasants who spoke Eastern Aramaic dialects. In addition, Arabic sources tell us that the Arabic elite used to send their sons to Persian noblemen to learn Pahlavi, the official language of the Sasanians. This practice produced a multilingual and multicultural group of brokers that mediated between the Arabs and the Sasanian bureaucracy. A case in point is the biography of the Arab poet 'Adi ibn Zayd, who frequented the Sasanian court and was a Syriac Christian, which attests to the complexities of a population in a cultural frontier zone:

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

(Abu 'l-Faraj al-Isfahani, quoted in Toral-Niehoff 2013: 121)

Conclusion: The Historical Legacy

A critical evaluation of the historical impact of these frontier Arabs "between empires"—the expression used by Fisher (2013)—should be performed from two perspectives: first, by contemplating their function as acculturated Arab "frontier people" vis-à-vis the great powers, and second, by considering their role in the emergence of Islam.

Regarding the first point, we have seen that the similarities between the Jafnids and the Nasrids appear to be closely connected to their common geostrategic

function as Arab allies of the great powers, dwelling at the fringes of the desert, resulting in their status as 'petty kingdoms' that functioned as buffers and as protective shields against tribal Arabia and the enemy's allies. The resulting continuous contact and interdependency with the empires had several important consequences since it gave way to a further social and economic stratification and to the empowerment of local elites and dynasties. It thus provided an impulse to the creation of monarchic-like structures, acquainted them with late antique notions of political authority, and exposed them to complex bureaucratic structures and administrative practices. In addition, it generated multicultural and multilingual elites who functioned as mediators between the empires.

On a cultural level, the contact introduced innovations such as literacy, which set the basis for the scriptualization of Arabic. It favored the spread of the knowledge of the two main languages of power and religion in the area, Greek and Aramaic, and partly that of Pahlavi. Furthermore, it made the Arabs familiar with a variety of emerging and consolidating religious traditions: Christianity, Judaism, Manichaeism, and Gnosticism, to which many of them converted. They thus contributed to disseminate and elaborate late antique notions of godly authority, holy scripture, community, divine revelation, prophethood, monotheism, and universality that paved the way for the conversion to Islam. Finally, both polities followed a strategy of 'structural disengagement' in their religious policies in order to keep a major margin of action: the Jafnids were Monophysites in opposition to the pro-Chalcedonian orientation of the Romans, and the Nasrids remained pagans until the last decades of the 6th century.

There were also important differences between the Jafnids and the Nasrids. The city of al-Hira and the chiefdom of the Nasrids looked back to a much longer history, probably rooted in the early 3rd century CE. The Nasrid capital was located very close to the political center of the Sasanian Empire, Ctesiphon, and quite near a region credited for its very long history of city-building, intensive agricultural practice, and sophisticated irrigation system: the Babylonian plain. Al-Hira was an urbanized settlement of stable buildings that followed Arabic oasis city models and was surrounded by a green belt of gardens and palm groves. The proximity to Ctesiphon made it easy for the Sasanians to keep close contact and control, and allowed them to intervene in al-Hira's internal affairs. It also fostered the emergence of multicultural and multilingual literate elites who could commute between both centers and gain experience as diplomats and bureaucrats in the Sasanian capital. Persians were also present within the borders of the Nasrid chiefdom: there were Iranian landowning magnates living on the outskirts, and Persian cataphracts (members of the heavy cavalry) stationed in the city. Al-Hira was also the seat of a bishopric that depended directly from the hierarchical center of the Persian Church in Ctesiphon, and there was regular contact with the Nestorian Patriarchs from Ctesiphon, who occasionally came by al-Hira, and who were also regularly buried there. A plethora of ecclesiastical buildings, the existence of a theological school, and the presence of many ascetic and missionary operations

also animated the area. Finally, al-Hira lay at the crossroads of many international trade routes, on the shore of the Euphrates River that connected it to the Persian Gulf as well as at the head of important trans-Arabian routes that linked the central Babylonian plain with Arabia.

In contrast, we know much less about the extent of urbanization among the much more short-lived Jafnids (ca. 500–581), and even the degree of their sedentariness is a matter of debate. We still don't know the exact location and structure of the encampments that are associated with the Jafnids, Jalliq, and al-Jabiya. Apparently, the Jafnids did not develop urban structures nor any 'capital city' that was remembered in a way comparable to al-Hira and that would have a similar long-lasting impact on Islamic memory. The Jafnid area of dominion was very distant not only from the Roman capital Constantinople but also from the closer thriving metropolis Antioch.

The diverse status of Christianity in Rome and in the Sasanian Empire, here as the official religion and a political weapon, there as a 'tolerated' minority religion supervised by non-Christian political authorities, also resulted in different approaches to religion among their respective Arab allies. The Jafnid rulers openly promoted Christianity and Christian mission, participated actively in the construction of a local ecclesiastical structure, sponsored the construction of Christian buildings, and were engaged in dogmatic conflicts—in sum, they closely followed the model of the Roman Empire and the emperor's characteristic involvement in religious and dogmatic affairs also called late antique Caesaropapism. By engaging with Monophysitism, they could maintain a certain independence from pro-Chalcedonian Rome, but we have to remember that the Roman emperors tended to be ambiguous in their policy toward the Monophysites and other non-Chalcedonian creeds outside of Constantinople (given, for instance, their pro-Monophysite policy in Ethiopia and Yemen in contrast to their firm anti-Nestorian policy), so that the 'structural disengagement' of the Jafnids did not go too far. The Nasrids, in contrast, pushed this strategy much further since they remained pagans until the late 6th century but, simultaneously, favored the Christian missions of both the Nestorians and the Monophysites, held close ties to the local Church, and chaired religious disputes. Several reasons might be given for this attitude, but the most important is their adoption of the Sasanian model. We have already mentioned the ambiguities of the Sasanian policy toward the Christians; in a similar way, the Nasrids preferred to remain neutral while keeping an eye on the thriving Christian communities and their sectarian conflicts. The presence of Monophysites in al-Hira is a testimony of this policy since these were not only refugees persecuted by the Roman enemy but also opponents of the Nestorian Persian Church in al-Hira. This peculiar mixture of tolerance and control anticipates later Islamic policies toward Christian communities and other religious minorities. These observations indicate that the Nasrids were rulers of a much more complex, state-like polity than the Jafnids (cf. Fisher 2013: 91–5), and the existence of al-Hira as a thriving and cosmopolitan Arab urban center points to the pre-Islamic Arabic roots of Iraqi urbanism.

This leads us to an evaluation of the historical role played by these acculturated Arabs in the history of early Islam. Since classical Islamic culture came to be the result mainly of the 'Abbasid-Iraqi Islam shaped in the 8th and 9th centuries, the Nasrid legacy in Iraqi al-Hira became much more important as a late antique substratum for Islam than the Jafnid legacy: as a historical reference, as a site of memory, and as a literary *topos*. On the one hand, early historical reports were often based on Iraqi informants, and so information on al-Hira abounds in the Arabic tradition, where we read much less about the Jafnids who, otherwise, are very prominent in Roman sources. On the other hand, there is the remarkable urban continuity of al-Hira, which survived well into the 10th century. The favorable location of the city, salubrious, fertile, and well connected, had made it an ideal settlement place for the Muslim forces when they entered Iraq, so that they laid close to it the foundations of al-Kufa, a remarkable city that, together with its Iraqi 'twin-city' Basra, eventually became a flourishing center under the early caliphate (Chapter 5). So, in a way, the Hiran legacy became part of the Kufan tradition and thus affected Islamic culture as a whole.

At first though, the legacy of these frontier Arab groups would affect Islamic history in a rather indirect way since the events of the early decades of Islam were centered in another geographical setting, namely in the Northwestern Arabian Peninsula—the Hijaz. The Arabs dwelling there had never been direct allies of the two empires, but nevertheless did not fall outside of the late antique world, partly due to their contacts with the Nasrids and the Jafnids (cf. Kister 1968). In the 6th century, Yathrib (later Medina) had fallen under the sovereignty of the Nasrids (Lecker 2008) and thus into the sphere of Sasanian influence, and probably the well-known local hegemony of Jewish tribes in Medina is to be seen in this context (see Chapter 4). The Nasrids also controlled the caravan routes in Central Arabia on behalf of the Sasanians. Mecca and the Quraysh, in contrast, remained independent but had close commercial connections to Syria and to the tribes dwelling there (see Chapter 3). As we have seen, the Qur'anic verses of Surah al-Rum (Qur. 30:1–3) reflect this pro-Roman Meccan perspective (El-Cheikh 2004: 21–33).

The results of this late antique imprint are finally to be felt in our main source for early Islam, that is, in the Qur'an itself. The Qur'anic kerygma does not only claim to constitute a continuation of the earlier revealed religions of Late Antiquity (that is, of Judaism and Christianity), it also reflects the religious language of the Christian Roman Empire by combining late antique notions of universal leadership, unity of language, and monotheism with the birth of a new community that overcomes tribal and ethnical boundaries (G. Fowden 1993; Neuwirth, Marx, and Sinai 2010; Neuwirth 2010). Furthermore, Muhammad's prophethood incarnates values associated with the 'holy man' of Late Antiquity (e.g. individual morality, asceticism) that were further amalgamated with ideas of charismatic political authority modeled according to the concept of imperial rule. In addition, it is clear that the Qur'an addresses an Arabic audience that was not only imbued with a mixture of polytheistic creeds and tribal values, but that was also familiar with

biblical tales, monotheistic ideas, and the concept itself of holy scripture (Neuwirth 2010). Thus we can conclude that the Nasrids and the Jafnids contributed, first, to familiarize the Arabs with late antique cultural and political models, and second, to shape the Hijazi milieu where Prophet Muhammad would proclaim the Qur'anic message.

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