

EPIGRAPHY AND THE EMERGENCE OF ARAB IDENTITY

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This article will look at the contribution that epigraphy can make to understanding the phenomenon of Arab identity, in particular, whether the Arabs constituted a people before Islam, and if so, in what respect, questions that evoke very different responses from modern scholars.¹ It is as yet only a preliminary sketch, advancing a few tentative suggestions, in advance of a more in-depth study.

Self-Designation

The first contribution is a negative one. We only have three examples of someone declaring himself to be an Arab in the period before the rise of Islam: (a) "Rufinus, son of Germanus, bird-augurer, Arab (*arabos*), of the city of Septimian Kanotha, for his son Germanus" (epitaph on stone in Greek, third century C.E., from the island of Thasos); (b) "Paratēs, Arab (*arabos*), barber, for Malik regarding his pay" (receipt on papyrus in Greek, dated 220 B.C.E., from Egypt); (c) "Imru' al-Qays son of 'Amr, king of all the Arabs... who ruled both sections of al-Asd, and Nizar and their kings... and Ma'add" (epitaph on stone in Arabic language but Nabataean Aramaic script, dated 328 C.E., from Nemara in southern

¹ E.g. "Before Islam the criteria for identifying Arabs are even more uncertain than after. They certainly cannot depend, for most of the period in question, on any attested self-definition by the groups concerned... Nothing in the extensive epigraphic evidence from Palmyra or Nabataea suggests that either people identified itself as Arab" (Millar 1993: 512) versus: "The Roman period was one of increasing reassertion by the Arabs culminating in the great Arab empires of early Islam... When viewing the spectacular ruins of Petra or Palmyra... it is not often appreciated that one is examining Arab civilisation as much as if one were examining Islamic Damascus or Baghdad" (Ball 2000: 31-2). And "Zu Anfang des 7. Jahrh. kann man noch nicht von einem arabischen Volke im vollen Sinne des Wortes sprechen, nicht einmal für den nördlichen Teil Arabiens, schon gar nicht für die ganze Halbinsel" (Henninger 1966: 857) versus: "Before Islam... the northern Arabs constituted a *Kulturnation*... Expressed in psychological terms, a *Kulturnation* is kept together by common expectations, associations and toolings; community of language and religion" (von Grunebaum 1963: 5-10).

Syria (see plate 13).² In none of these cases is there enough information for us to decide exactly what it meant to be an Arab, and yet these self-designations suggest that it was meaningful to a wider public.

The significance of the term is also likely to have changed over time. Assyrian, Persian and Greco-Roman authors had used the term 'Arabs' to refer to the inhabitants of Arabia and the Syrian steppe, but in the third century the terms 'Saraceni' and 'Tayyayē' began to be used for this designation. These were the names of tribal groups that came into close contact with the empires in the third century, the former already known in northwest Arabia to Ptolemy (second century C.E.), the latter known to Muslim historians as a group that had migrated from southern Arabia. And the term 'Arab' at this time seems to undergo a transformation, apparently now used as a term for Roman citizens of the province of Arabia.³ This might explain the claim of the aforementioned Rufinus to be an Arab, since Kanatha (modern Qanawat in southern Syria) was on the border of Roman Arabia (and his profession, bird-augurer, was deemed an Arab speciality),⁴ and perhaps also the ascription of two-soldiers, both called John, to the "lands of the Arab people" (*apo chōron tou Arabōn ethnous*: funerary inscription from Pella in modern Jordan, dated 522 C.E.).⁵

Arab Kings, Arab Tribes, Arabic Inscriptions

A particularly interesting development in the epigraphic record from the third century C.E. onwards is the appearance of Arab kings, Arab tribes,⁶ and Arabic texts:

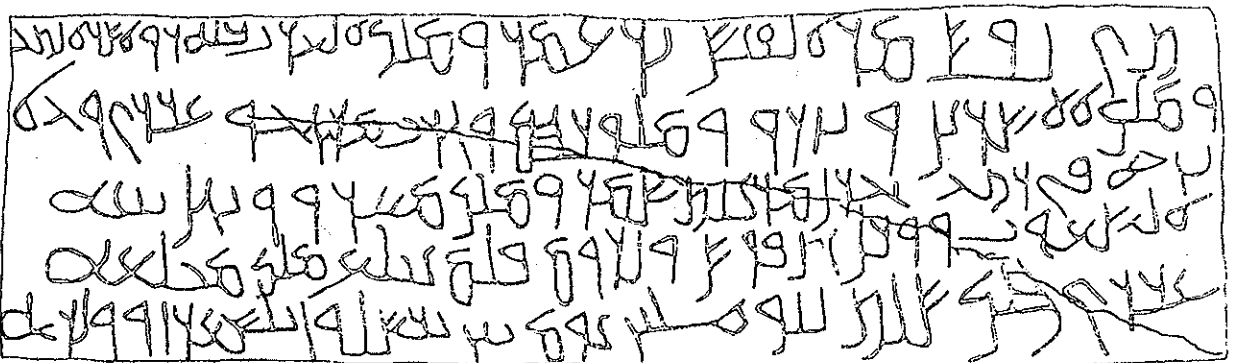
² For these three texts, see Hoyland 2001: 236–7, 255 n. 8.

³ The prooemium of Justinian's *Novella* 102 calls the province of Arabia "the region of the Arabs," and in the east 'Arab' is used as a term for citizens of the province of Arab/Beth 'Arabaye (cf. Zacharias Rhetor, *Historia Ecclesiastica* 2.35: the city of Dara was built "to guard the country of the Arabs [Araboyē] from the marauding bands of Persians and Tayyayē"). See further Shahid 1984–95: 2.192–3, 3.56–9, and Keesö 2003: 305–25.

⁴ E.g. in his *On Destinatio*, Cicero notes that "the Arab people above all heed the signs of birds" (1.41); for further references, see Hoyland 2001: 154–5.

⁵ Smith 1973: 1.188.

⁶ Or at least tribal names familiar to us from Muslim Arab sources. Note that there may be considerable variety in the social organization of these groups labeled 'tribe' (cf. Zweigler 2000, esp. 266–7: Ma'add not a tribal confederation, but an *ethnie*).



ty nfs Mr 'l-Qys br 'mrw mlk 'l-'rb klh...

Plate 13 Nemara Inscription 328 A.D.

Arab Kings

1. "Ġadhimna king of Tanukh" (*Ġadhimathou basileus thanouitoun/Ġadmt mlk thw*) features in a mid-third century, bilingual Greek-Nabataean Aramaic epigraph for his tutor, etched on a stone found at Umm al-Jimal in modern north Jordan (Plate 14).⁷
2. "Amru king of the Lakhmids" (*Amro lhm dhn mlk*) appears in a bilingual Persian-Parthian monumental inscription among the vassals of the Sasanian emperor Narseh (r. 293–302).⁸
3. A "King of al-Asd" is mentioned in a south Arabian inscription recording the dispatch of a delegation from the Himyarite ruler Shanamar Yuharish (ca. 275–310), which also went to the "land of Tanukh."⁹
4. The deeds of "Imru' al-Qays son of Āmr, king of all the Arabs" against al-Asd, Nizar, and Ma'add are commemorated in the aforementioned epigraph found at Nemara, southern Syria, dated 328 C.E. (Plate 13).¹⁰

Arab Tribes

Numerous texts, but in particular see:

1–4 above

5. 'Abadan I, which records Himyar's campaigns against Murad, Iyad, Ma'add, and 'Abd al-Qays to the northeast of Mecca "between the land of Nizar and the land of Ghassan" in the Himyarite year 470 (= 360 C.E.).¹¹

Arabic Inscriptions

4 above

6. Hegra, northwest Arabia: funerary text, with many Aramaicisms, dated 267 C.E. (Plate 15).¹²

⁷ Littmann 1914–49: 4A.41.

⁸ Humbach & Sjögren 1983: 92.

⁹ Müller 1974.

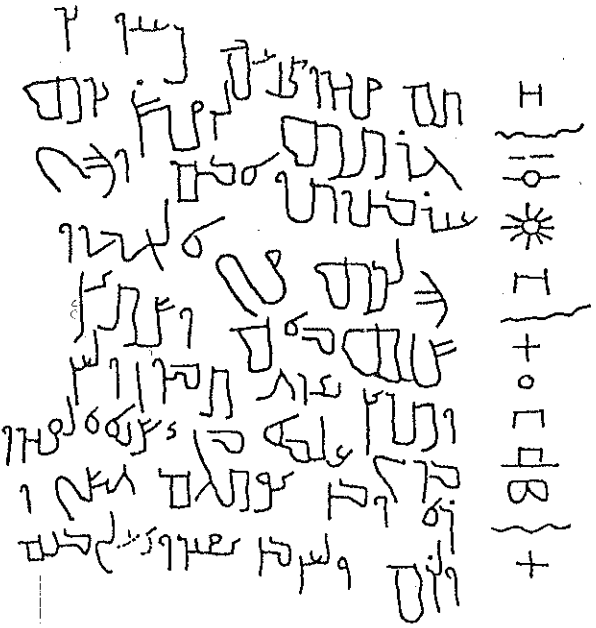
¹⁰ See, most recently, Reisö 2003: 467–76, citing earlier literature.

¹¹ Robin & Gajda 1994.

¹² Healey & Smith 1989.



Plate 14 Umm al-Jimal, Jordan.
Littmann 1914–49: 4A.41.



1. tn gbrw šn'-h K'bw br
2. Ḥrtt l-Rqwsh brt
3. 'bdmnwtw 'm-h w-hy
4. hlkt fy 'l-Hgrw
5. shnt m'h w-shtyn
6. w-tryn b-yrh Tmwz w-l'n
7. mry 'lmw mn yshn' 'l-qbr
8. d'w-mn yfth-h ḥshy w
9. wld-h w-l'n mn yqbr w[y']ly mn-h

Plate 15 Hegra Inscription Northwest Arabia, July 267 A.D.

What Changed?

Völkerveränderung?

The appearance of names of Arab tribes in the epigraphic record does represent a definite change in that the tens of thousands of graffiti in Ancient North Arabian (ANA) dialects (Safaitic, Himaic, 'Thamudic,' etc.), mostly dating to the Roman period, contain no such names.¹³ The explanation of later Muslim historians is that, because of some natural disaster, Arab tribes migrated from southern Arabia to other parts of Arabia and to Syria and Iraq. There are some indications that this may be true. In the first place, the south Arabian kingdom of Saba certainly did suffer some diminution in the first century B.C.—first century C.E., for it lost its sovereign authority and became subject to Himyar. South Arabian inscriptions offer no explanation for this, but behind it may lie some disaster, such as a breakdown of the region's crucial irrigation system, that also impelled neighbouring Arab tribes to leave. In the second place, Arab tribal names begin to crop up in places where they had not previously been attested. For example, Muslim historians relate that "a number of Arab tribes (who had left Yemen) gathered in Bahrain; they became allies known as Tanukh... and pledged themselves to assist and support one another; under the joint name of Tanukh." And in his *Geography*, written ca. 150 C.E., Ptolemy does place Tanukh in the region of Bahrain, whereas Pliny's *Natural History*, completed in 77 C.E., does not know of them there.¹⁴ And in the third place, a host of new tribal names appear in the south Arabian inscriptions of about the second century C.E., such as Madhij, Murad, Kinda and Sufl. That these are Arab tribes (and not Sabaean, Himyarite, etc.) is clear from a number of terms applied to them which are previously unattested in Sabaic and are evidently taken from Arabic, such as tribe (*ʿasīra*), clan or lineage (*āl*), and nomads (*aʿrāb*), which becomes common from the second century C.E. (with one possible earlier attestation). Moreover, the Arabic definite article *al* is used in certain personal and tribal names; thus we read of a king named *al-Harith ibn Kaʿb*, and of "the land of

¹³ The only exception is Tayyī, which appears as a self-designation in Campanelli & von Löwenstern 1983: 16; and as a designation of others in: CIS 5.2795; Littmann 1943: 236; and Clark 1979: 1004. It features in Syriac literary sources, as Tayyayze, from the third century C.E. onwards.

¹⁴ Abart (d. 310/923), *Taʾrīkh*, 1, 746; Ptolemy, *Geography*, 6.7 (*Tamudice*).

al-Asd" (*'al-l-'sd*)¹⁵ and a "king of al-Asd" (*mlk l-'sd*).¹⁶ However, the idea of folk migrations is not very popular these days,¹⁶ and they are perhaps more likely to have been relatively small movements over a long period of time rather than mass migrations within a single generation. And, in particular, they may have been part of regular and continual movements in search of new pastures and so on, rather than indicative of some new large-scale phenomenon.

Bedouinisation?

A number of Middle Eastern specialists of different disciplines have noticed the increased participation by Arab tribes in imperial affairs in the third century and have attributed it to an increase in the numbers and/or strength of Bedouin, Arab nomads, who were therefore able to be more assertive in Middle Eastern affairs, in particular to raid more effectively. Caskel regarded imperial annexation and disbandment of client states as instrumental in this change: "As a result of the dropping-out and collapse of the border states, the caravan roads and, with them, the settlements in the interior began to be deserted... the majority took to the nomad life."¹⁷ Caskel bases himself here on two inscriptions, both of which are of uncertain reading, and otherwise on a generally Gibboneseque feeling that things were going downhill by the third century. However, his article does bring us to a valid point, namely that the demise of client states must have created a power vacuum in the Syrian steppe, which obliged the empires of Rome and Iran around it to deal directly with its inhabitants. This is the most likely explanation for why the terms *Saracens* and *Tayyaye* replaced the generic terms *'Arabs* and *'tent-dwellers*, i.e. the empires now had first-hand experience, and began to use the names, of the steppe peoples closest to them, many of whom may have come in from further away to fill the power vacuum.

Some proponents of Caskel's 'bedouinisation' theory have argued that these Bedouin enjoyed greater power not just because of greater numbers, but also because of the introduction of an improved type of saddle. This, they allege, gave camel-riders greater mobility and led to

the emergence of full Bedouin who were able to redress the balance in their favour in confrontations with settled peoples:

...the general population of predominantly camel-herding Arab Bedouins and Bedouin tribal groups... had come to adopt the *shaduf*-saddle and also, by the third century to utilize it effectively as a means of developing and exploiting within a desert environment the superior military advantages offered by horses and horse cavalry... and to pose an increasingly serious threat to settled communities on the Roman and Persian frontiers, as well as to the Himyarite kingdom.¹⁸

However, this view has been modified of late in the light of Macdonald's comments that "the camel does not make a satisfactory fighting mount since, unlike the horse, it is not easy to manoeuvre in a confined space, and its height, far from giving its rider an advantage, makes it vulnerable to the swords and spears of footsoldiers."¹⁹ Moreover, the date of the introduction of the saddle is uncertain, and what evidence there is would seem to point rather to a much earlier period, perhaps the first century C.E.²⁰

Imperial Expansion and Strife?

The advocates of advances in camel-saddle technology all accept a picture painted much earlier of the Arabs, and of pastoralist peoples in general, as a threat to empire. However, it has been shown that proponents of the aggressive Bedouin theory rely on very slender evidence.²¹ And one should be suspicious when big powers complain about the aggressiveness of small stateless actors, for it is usually the big powers who are doing the aggressing or at least provoking the aggression. If we look at matters from this perspective, then we can see that the empires of Iran and, especially, Rome pushed further into the steppe regions in this period, abolishing client states and extending the limits of agriculture. Their rivalry gave rise to a sort of cold war between them, and both sides strove to win peripheral peoples over to their side. Various Arab groups inevitably became caught up in these power struggles, and one

¹⁵ Doe & Jamme 1968: 15–16 (Ja 2110) (al-Harith ibn Ka'b); Jamme 1962: no. 635, and Sharafaddin 1967: no. 31 (al-Asd).

¹⁶ Curta 2001; Macdonald 2003; Graf 2003.

¹⁷ Caskel 1953: 40–1.

¹⁸ Zwettler 2000: 285, 288. The source of all these ideas is Dostal 1959, made widespread by the influential book of Bulliet 1975.

¹⁹ Macdonald 1995: 1363.

²⁰ Shaw 1979.

²¹ See, for example, the various articles of Mayerson, esp. Mayerson 1989; and Hoyland 2001: 96–102.

might argue that it was in the course of this process of engagement with the great powers of the day that the Arab peoples slowly came to forge their own politics and identities.

In order to manage the tribes on their borders, the empires would appoint chiefs, winning them over with titles and stipends, which gave these chiefs enough prestige to win over others to their leadership. The empires would expect these chiefs to keep their own tribe peaceful and other tribes around them, and would expect them to provide military support when called upon. Thus, "it was desired that the Himyarites should establish Qays, the fugitive, as chief over Ma'add, and with a great army of their own people and of the Ma'add Saracens make an invasion into the land of the Persians," and in order to counter the success of the Arab tribes allied to the Iranians, "the emperor Justinian (r. 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 among the Romans had never been done before."²² As regards the expression "put in command of," Justinian obviously did not have the authority to do this himself; presumably what is meant is that he told Harith to try and win the support of other tribes and probably gave him money as well as the new title to help him achieve this.

This involvement in great power politics inevitably had an effect upon those tribes most caught up in it. In most cases, however, this is difficult to gauge, and it is common for western scholars to dismiss Arab tribes as irrelevant to the powers of the day.²³ Yet in the chronicle of Joshua the Stylite, a contemporary of the events he narrated, the Lakhmids apparently play an important role in Sasanian military affairs. For example, in October 502, Nu'man participated in the siege of Amida with the Iranian emperor Kawad, and he was sent by the latter to plunder the surrounding area, taking captives from the Harran and Edessa region. In August 503, Nu'man fought alongside Iranian troops and defeated the Byzantines at Opadana, and he urged Kawad to proceed against Edessa, which Kawad did. In the same month, the Lakhmids attacked Saryj and reached the Euphrates, plundering and taking captives. And in September 503, the Lakhmids joined in the siege of Edessa in the

capacity of spearmen.²⁴ A chronicle written in the 660s goes so far as to say that Hira "was the seat of king Mundhir, surnamed the 'warrior,'" and that "he is sixth in the line of the Ishmaelite kings," implying the existence of an established and legitimate dynasty.²⁵

For the Ghassanids we can go further, since we have a number of inscriptions that concern them. Their participation in the military and ecclesiastical affairs of the Romans has been meticulously documented by Shahid,²⁶ so there is no need to repeat it here. What is worth re-emphasizing is their mention in the epigraphic record, for this shows very clearly how closely they had come to associate themselves—and to some extent to be associated by others—with the Roman empire:

1. "In the name of our Father Jesus Christ, saviour of the world, who takes away the sins of the world, in the time of... the archimandrite and of the deacon Anastasius and of the phylarchate of the most illustrious Harith (*Arethas*)... To Flavius Harith, *patrikios*, long years, life, great, welcome... year 870" (569 C.E.): Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, between Damascus and Palmyra, on the lintel of a former monastery (*JGIS* 2553bd).
2. "Huwayrith son of al-Harith": Nid, near Madaba in Jordan, on a mosaic in a funerary church, sixth century.²⁷
3. "Flavius Seos, son of Olbanos, *epitropos*, and his son Olbanos at their own expense constructed the entire court from the foundations to the top in the time of Mundhir (*epi tou Alamoundarou*), *paneuphēnos* and *patrikios* in the year 473 of the eparchy" (of Bostra, so 578 C.E.): Hayyat, between Damascus and Bostra, in a house (*JGIS* 2110).
4. "Flavius Mundhir, *paneuphēnos*, *patrikios* and *phylarchos*, erected this tower in gratitude to the Lord God and St. Julian for the safety of himself and his most illustrious offspring": Dumat, northeast of Damascus, on a tower (*JGIS* 2562c).
5. "The Fortune of Mundhir is victorious": Rusafa, on an extramural building (*SEG* 7.188). Note that Yaqut (s.v. "Rusafa") says that Nu'man son of Mundhir repaired the cisterns of Rusafa and built the biggest one there.

²² Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.

²³ E.g. "The lack of detailed information in Greek historians about Arab affairs in the sixth and seventh centuries accurately reflects their lack of importance in contemporary wars and diplomacy" (Whitby 1992: 80; cited approvingly in Whitrow 1999).

²⁴ Joshua the Stylite, *Chronicle*, chapters 51–52, 57–58, 60, 62.

²⁵ Guidi 1903: 39.

²⁶ Shahid 1984–95: vol. 3.

²⁷ Shahid 2001a makes the case for this person being a Ghassanid.

6. "Nu'man (*Namān*), the most illustrious *stratēgēs* and *phylarchos*": Ma'arra al-Nu'man, on a bronze plaque (*JGLS* 4.1550).
7. "Jabala *pathikos*": on a Byzantine seal.²⁸

There are a number of important things to note about these inscriptions. Firstly, they are all in Greek. We know that amongst themselves they did use Arabic; for example, the despatch of a guard unit by "Harith the king" is recorded in an Arabic inscription from Jabal Sayy, some 70 miles southeast of Damascus (fig. 2).²⁹ Yet, for their image as imperial allies, it was important to use Greek in public. Secondly, the titles accorded to the Ghassanid chiefs, in particular *pathikos*, allied them to the Byzantine empire and the person of the emperor in a most intimate way.³⁰ Thirdly, the dating of some of these texts is interesting. In the third text, for example, instead of referring to the reign of the Byzantine emperor or the provincial governor, Flavius Seos and his son refer to the reign of Mundhir.³¹ It does suggest considerable authority for the phylarch; the seal issued by "Jabala" would seem to corroborate this point, the name marking him out as a Ghassanid, possibly Jabala ibn Ayyham, the last Ghassanid chief allied to Byzantium. Fourthly, in the first text, Harith is connected with the Christian church, and in general Ghassanid leaders posed as defenders and patrons of the west Syrian church, which should remind us that it was via Christianity that these tribes were romanized.³² Fifthly, most of the texts were found in the vicinity of Damascus, and there are a number of other indications that this constituted a power base for them. There is, for example, a mid-sixth century Syriac manuscript (BM syr. 14602) containing the signatures of the priests and abbots of the eparchy of Arabia (*ʿaby*). This is very interesting in that the churches and monasteries to which these clergymen are attached are found not only in the Byzantine administrative province of Arabia with its capital at Bostra, but also portions of Phoenicia Libanensis, especially Damascene. In the words of Nöldeke:

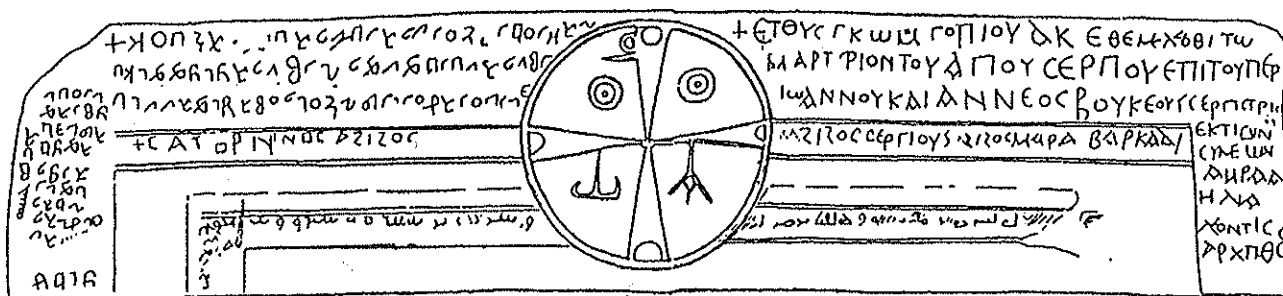
²⁸ Shahid 2001b.

²⁹ Most recently, see Robin & Gorea 2002.

³⁰ However, the title of *pathikos* might have been downgraded somewhat in late Roman times; Jarry 1970: 17 notes that in early seventh-century Egypt even minor functionaries bore (or at least claimed for themselves) this title.

³¹ Similarly, an event in John Moschus' *Pratum Spirituale* (ch. 155) is dated to "when Nu'man (*Namē*), the phylarch of the Saracens, was making raids," and ms. BM syr. 585 of the monastery of Nāp̄ha near Tadmur (Palmyra) is dated to when Abu Karib, a Ghassanid, was king (Wright 1871: 2.468).

³² Shahid 1984–95: 3.691–995; Tringham 1979.



ܕܟܝܠܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ ܕܡܪܝܢܐ
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[dk/b-nš]r 'l-'lh srgw br 'mt-mnfw w-hny' br mr 'l-qys w-srgw br s'dw w-strw w-srgw

Plate 16 Zebed Graffito Northern Syria, 512 A.D. or later

"Dies lässt sich nur so erklären, dass diese monophysitische Kirchenprovinz 'Arabia' so weit gerechnet wurde, wie die Macht der Ghassânischen Phylarchen ging."³³ That is, ecclesiastical 'Arabia' was pretty much coterminous with the Ghassanid sphere of authority. Furthermore, we have numerous Muslim Arab accounts reporting that as well as their camp at al-Jabiya to the southwest of Damascus, Ghassan had residences in Damascus itself.³⁴ All this suggests that Ghassan had, if not a permanent city like the Nabataeans and Palmyrenes, at least a power base, and we can also see from the above inscriptions that they engaged in a certain amount of building activity, so at the very least we should avoid characterising them exclusively as nomads, and more likely we should include them among the "inner core of client kingdoms" that formed the essence of late Roman management of their provinces and border regions.³⁵

Arab Politics?

But to what extent, if at all, should we label Ghassan and other such client kingdoms as Arab, and what should we understand by such a label in this period? The epigraphic record is again important, and though it does not point unequivocally to an Arab identity, it points to the ingredients of such—common language, literature and history—that suggest at least the makings of such an identity.

Arabic Language and Script

From the sixth century C.E. we have a small clutch of Arabic texts, such as those from Zebed, Jabal SAYS, and Harran, all in Syria and dated 512, 529, and 569 respectively.³⁶ That from Zebed is a short Arabic addition to a Greek-Syriac bilingual text commemorating the founding of a martyrion for Saint Sergius (plate 16); the one from Jabal SAYS, mentioned

³³ Nöldeke 1875: 420. See also Shahid 1984–95: 3.821–38.

³⁴ E.g. Ibn Rusta, *al-ʿAṭiq al-muṣṣaṭṭa*: 7.326.

³⁵ See Heather 2000: 32; cf. Heather 1997: 74: "It is quite clear that by the sixth century at the latest *fœderati* had taken on a quite different significance, designating new groups held in a more equal and favourable relationship with the Roman state."

³⁶ Grohmann 1971: 14–17; Gruenfelder 1993: 13–14. For the Zebed text, see also Cumont 1913: 172–75 (no. 145), and for the Jabal SAYS text, see n. 29 above.

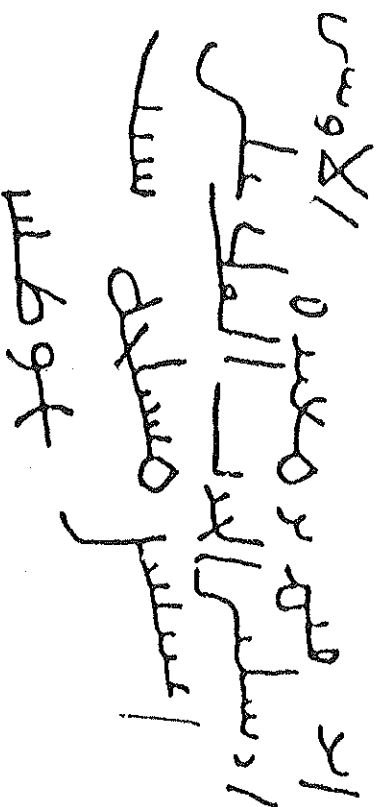


Figure 2 Jabal Usays Graffiti Southeast Syria, 528 A.D.

above, is by a certain Qayyim ibn Mughira sent to guard this important watering hole and waystation on the Bostra-Palmyra road on behalf of the chief of Ghassan (fig. 2); and the Harran text is a bilingual Greek-Arabic inscription, recording the building of a martyrion for a certain Saint John by one Sharahl son of Talemu, evidently an important man in the local Christian community (fig. 3). And there is a fourth text from the grave of Saola in a church in Nebo, which bears his name carved in Greek letters and opposite this the "rest in peace" formula apparently written in Arabic: *bi ʾl-salām* plate 17).³⁷ The wide geographical spread of these inscriptions suggests that Arabic was spoken throughout this region, and this impression seems confirmed by the Greek papyri recently discovered in a church in Petra, which use many Arabic terms,³⁸ and by two lengthy invocatory inscriptions from the Madaba region in Jordan written in Thamnudic script but Arabic language or something very close to it.³⁹

Before Islam, it would seem that Arabic remained primarily a vernacular, employed by non-literate peoples and by those who, for whatever

³⁷ Knauf 1984, though this text needs further study to confirm that it definitely is Arabic.

³⁸ Daniel 2001.

³⁹ Graf & Zwerler 2004. See further Robin 1991: 113–25; Robin 2001: 545–56; Macdonald 2000: 36–7, 48–54.

usual practice for those who wished to compose in Arabic in that time and place. Constant writing of Arabic in the Nabataean script led to changes, as scribes introduced modifications to make their task easier and to eradicate ambiguities, and this gradually gave rise to a distinctive script, i.e. the Arabic script.⁴² Though we now have very little evidence for this development,⁴³ it would seem evident that only frequent repetition of such a practice (i.e. writing Arabic texts in Nabataean Aramaic script) would explain the evolution of the Arabic script, and this tells us that there must have been many such inscriptions, and very possibly documents as well (i.e. a chancery tradition, instigated by the Arab clients of Rome?).

Arabic Poetry

A graffito from the region of Mecca (plate 18), dated 98 A.H. (717 C.E.), quotes two lines of pre-Islamic Arabic wisdom poetry usually attributed to a sixth-century bishop of Najran (in southwest Arabia), Quss ibn Sa'ida al-Iyadi (though also to other pre-Islamic figures).⁴⁴ This lends some small weight to the argument that at least some of the huge corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry that has come down to us (transmitted orally until the eighth century) does genuinely derive from the pre-Islamic period. The craft of Arabic poetry is old—a victory of the Saracen queen Mawia in the 370s was “celebrated in songs (*ūdān*) by the Saracens”—but it perhaps gained greater impetus from the Arab client kings of Rome and Iran, who allegedly sponsored poetry with gusto, many having their own panegyricist. There are many accounts that relate, in a somewhat legendary character, how such kings spent their subsidies in imitating their imperial overlords, establishing luxurious courts and offering patronage to artists, a practice with a long history among imperial vassal states.

⁴² 3rd/early 4th century context in excavations by Tali Gini—shown to me by Tali and soon to be published by J. Naveh), and so there is no obstacle to positing a later date for the En Avdat text.

⁴³ It is possible that the use of diacritical marks in Arabic script, which already feature in Arabic papyri as early as 22 A.H./643 C.E. (Jones 1998) could have occurred before Islam, but it may also have been an innovation of the early Islamic state. Note that a dot is used to distinguish the letters *dal* and *dhal* in a few late Nabataean graffiti.

⁴⁴ On what one can say, see Gruendler 1993: 12–15.
⁴⁵ al-Rashid 1995: no. 17 (with discussion).

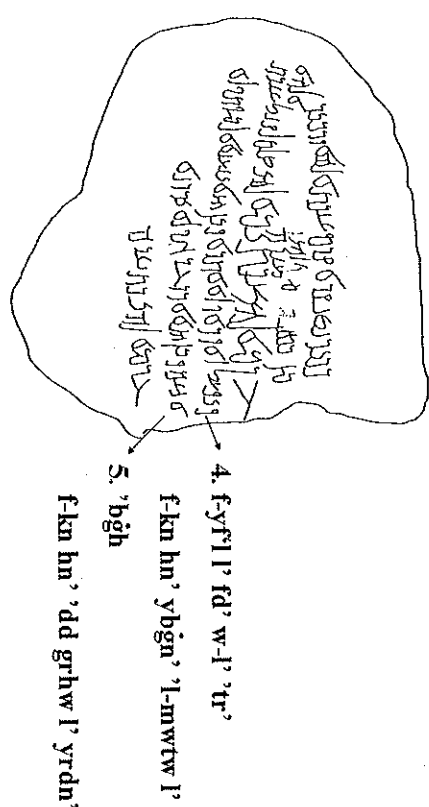


Figure 4 En Avdat Inscription Negev Desert, Approx. 2-3 Century A.D.

This new poetry would have been extremely important in nurturing a sense of Arab identity. Firstly, it promoted and inculcated an ideal of Arabian virtue (*murwana*), for generosity to the needy, courage in battle, fidelity to covenant and loyalty to kin are championed and advocated in almost every poem. Though based on tribal groups and insisting that only ties of blood were sacred, this ideal nevertheless became an invisible bond between diverse clans and laid the foundations, whether consciously or not, for a wider moral community. Secondly, the distinctive Arabic diction in which this poetry was drafted transcended dialects and united those who understood it in a broad linguistic community. Lastly, it served as a tool of collective memory, for “every nation relies on one means or another to preserve and protect its glorious deeds, and the Arabs strove to immortalize theirs by means of poetry, which constituted their public archive.”⁴⁵ And indeed innumerable mighty battles and great events of Arab tribal history are recorded in the surviving corpus of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry, and in the frequent re-telling it became the history of everyone who heard it, creating a historical community.

⁴⁵ Jahniz (d. 255/869), *Hayawān*: 1.72.

the emergence of larger and more coherent tribal groupings, of tribal chiefs with greater access to power and resources, of a dominant dialect (within the Ancient North Arabian language group) that gained its own script, of a common literature and history, and the onset of greater interaction with the Roman world. It is the latter that seems to me to be of the greatest import. And indeed it seems to be agreed that the third-fourth century marks both an end and a new beginning in the history of the Roman Empire's dealings with all the peoples on its borders. Wolfram notes the difference between the various "barbarian chieftains and their hands" who had entered the empire in earlier times in a subordinate position and the "new peoples" (especially Goths, Franks, and Alamanni) who entered in the third-fourth century as conquerors.⁴⁸ In what sounds like a parallel development, Millar suggests, regarding the eastern end of the empire, that there was a change from local exchanges between Greco-Roman officials and nomads in frontier areas *ca.* first to third centuries C.E. to "the formal alliances of the late Empire with major Saracen tribal groupings."⁴⁹ So one might say of the Arabs, to paraphrase Patrick Geary's words, that 'their genesis as a people and gradual transformation into the conquerors of much of the Middle East were from the start part of the Roman experience.'⁵⁰

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⁴⁸ Wolfram 1990: 38–44; Heather & Matthews 1991: 1–2; "such recruitment (of Goths in the Roman army in the third century) is probably a sign that the movement of Goths and other peoples south and east from central Europe into the northern hinterland of the Roman empire was already under way by the beginning of the third century. These movements eventually precipitated conflicts not only between Goths and Romans, but also between Goths and other tribal peoples".

⁴⁹ Millar 1993: 430.

⁵⁰ Geary 1988: vii–viii.

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