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Pre-Islamic *al-Shām* in Classical Arabic Literature

Spatial Narratives and History-Telling

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This paper explores the depiction of one of the most important characters in classical Arabic narratives of pre-Islamic history: *al-Shām*. *Al-Shām* may seem a peculiar protagonist since it is a place, a region that broadly encompasses the modern states of Syria, Lebanon, Jordan and Palestine,[1] and for centuries western historians treated places as ahistorical, inert landmasses. They believed geography was impervious to the passage of time, and hence places could not be actors in historical narratives.[2] But over the past thirty years, the distinction between geography and historiography blurred as theorists began to argue that places are not just passive stages upon which events happen, but are in fact dynamic components in stories about the past.[3] This observation resonated with Hayden White and Paul Ricoeur's investigations into the parallels between writing history and storytelling.[4] By demonstrating that it is

1 *Al-Shām* is the nearest Arabic equivalent to the English Levant, though classical period definitions of *al-Shām* exhibit variation: compare Yāqūt's *Muʿjam al-Buldān*, Beirut, 1993, 3, p. 312 with al-Hamdānī's *Ṣifat Jazīrat al-ʿArab*, ed. Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Akwaʿ, Sana'a, Markaz al-Dirāsāt wa-al-Buḥūth al-Yamanī 1990, pp. 39-41. Broadly, *al-Shām* is the north-south strip of the Fertile Crescent between Gaza in Palestine and Manbij in northern Syria.

2 For a survey of historians' traditional subordination of space in their analysis, see Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1996, pp. 169-174.

3 Kant laid the groundwork for modern spatial studies by observing that space "is not something objective and real, nor a substance, nor an accident, nor a relation; instead, it is subjective and ideal, and originates from the mind's nature" in *Kants gesammelte Schriften* 2, p. 403; translation: Andrew Janiak, "Kant's Views on Space and Time", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta Winter 2012, URL = <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2012/entries/kant-spacetime/>). Kant's thesis that both space and time are the "indispensible forms of any cognition" was revived in the late twentieth century by Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith, Oxford, Blackwell, 1991; Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. Maria Jolas, Boston, Beacon Press, 1994; and Edward Casey, *Getting Back into Place*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1993.

4 See Hayden White, "The value of narrativity in the representation of reality", *Critical Inquiry*, 7.1 (1980), pp. 5-27, p. 8: "real events do not offer themselves as stories", and White's discussion of history as a "symbolic discourse" *The Content of the Form*, Baltimore, The John Hopkins

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essentially impossible to reconstruct the past "as it really happened",[5] White and Ricoeur tarnished the former empirical lustre of the cold, 'hard facts' of history and showed that the past is a messy array of data points which historians creatively reconstruct into literary narratives. As the study of history and storytelling converge, the status of spaces in historical writing also calls for fresh scrutiny: just as storytellers craft spaces in which their narratives take place, historians must also create spaces to reflect how they want their readers to understand how history 'happened'.[6]

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

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

University Press, 1987, pp. 50-52, and Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer, Chicago, Unversity of Chicago Press, 1990.

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

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

7 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 105-135, pp. 211-231.

8 I use 'metageography' in the sense that Martin Lewis and Kären Wigen's *Myth of Continents*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1997 argues that Kantian notions of the arbitrary division of space necessarily bequeath subjective and symbolic meanings to spatial categories.

Al-Shām and the Arab Past: Contemporary and Classical Views

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

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

9 Robert Hoyland, "Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in Late Roman Epigraphy", in *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, ed. H. Cotton, Cambridge, Cambridge Univerity Press, 2009, pp. 374-400; Greg Fisher *Rome and the Arabs Before the Rise of Islam: A Brief Introduction*, CreateSpace, 2013.

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

11 See Michael Macdonald, "Some reflections on epigraphy and identity in the Roman Near East", in Macdonald, *Literacy and Identity*, IV, pp. 177-190, pp. 182-189 for a discussion of the difficulties in connection ethnicity to epigraphic survivals.

12 Lawrence Conrad, "Arabia", *Cambridge Ancient History vol. XIV: Late Antiquity*, ed. Averil Cameron, Cambridge, Cambridge Univeristy Press, 2000, pp. 678-700, and Christian Robin, "Antiquity", in *Roads of Arabia*, ed. Ali Ibrahim al-Ghabban *et al.*, Paris, Louvre

at centre stage, and groups of its inhabitants from the dawn of the Common Era to the rise of Islam—the Nabataeans, Palmyrenes,[13] and especially the fifth-seventh century CE military groups of Salīḥ, Tanūkh and Ghassān/Jafna[14]—star in contemporary reconstructions of Arab history.

In classical Arabic literature, references to *al-Shām* do appear in pre-Islamic poetry preserved in third/ninth century collections. For example, the administrative centre Ḥimṣ (Emessa) is cited by the poets Imruʾ al-Qays and al-Aʿshā,[15] Imruʾ al-Qays mentions Antioch[16] and Ḥamā,[17] and al-Aʿshā cites Jerusalem by the archaic Ūrīshalam.[18] Smaller Levantine villages such as Shayzar,[19] Khamala and Awjar are also attested.[20] Poetry mentions Ghassanid 'Arab kings' from

éditions, Somogy éditions d'art 2010, pp. 81-99 take a broader view than Hoyland and Fisher, including more central Arabian Bedouin within their notion of original Arabness; Christian Robin, 'Les Arabes vus de Ḥimyar', *Topoi* 14 (2006), pp. 121-37, uses South Arabian epigraphy to indentify Arab political development in Central Arabia, specifically; Jan Retsö, *The Arabs in antiquity*, London, Routledge, 2002, is broader still, arguing for the continuous existence of a warrior/religious sect of 'Arabs' in Arabia for 1,500 years before Islam. The above theories and evidence for Arab origins are reappraised with anthropological theories of ethnogenesis in Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh Univerity Press, 2016 (in press).

13 The status of Nabataean and Palmyrene Arabness is debated: Dussaud counts Palmyrenes as 'Arabs' which Macdonald rejects (Michael Macdonald, "'Les Arabes en Syrie' or 'La penetration des Arabes en Syrie': a question of evidence", in Macdonald, *Literacy and Identity*, VI, pp. 303-318, pp. 311-312). For the Nabataeans, common assertions of their Arabness are questioned in Jan Retsö, "Nabataean origins—once again", *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 29 (1999) pp. 115-118, and Jan Retsö, "The Nabataeans: Problems Defining Ethnicity in the Ancient World", in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World*, ed. Werner Pohl, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 73-79; J. F. Healy "Were the Nabataeans Arabs?" *Aram* (1989) pp. 38-44 and Michael Macdonald "Some Reflections", pp. 186-188 are even more critical.

14 For a spirited treatment of these groups within an 'Arab' narrative of Late Antique *al-Shām* see Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, Washington, Dumbarton Oaks, 1995-2009. On the use of Jafna in place of Ghassān, see Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2011.

15 Imruʾ al-Qays, *Dīwān*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, Dār al-Maʾārif, 1990, p. 68, Maymūn ibn Qays al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥammad Ḥusayn, Beirut, al-Maqtaba al-Sharqiyya, 1974, p. 91.

16 Imruʾ al-Qays, *Dīwān*, p. 349.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 62.

18 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān*, p. 91.

19 Imruʾ al-Qays, *Dīwān*, p. 62.

20 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

pre-Islamic *al-Shām* too,[21] and third/ninth- and fourth/tenth-century Arabic histories such as al-Yaʿqūbī's (d.c.284/897) *Tārīkh*, al-Masʿūdī's (d.346/956) *Murūj al-dhahab* and Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī's (d.350/961) *Tārīkh sanī mulūk al-arḍ* each contain chapters on pre-Islamic *Shāmī* 'Arab' history. Genealogical accounts of the tribes Quḍāʿa, Ghassān and Tanūkh in Ibn al-Kalbī's (d.c.204/819) *Nasab Maʿadd wa-l-Yaman* offer another source for finding memories of *al-Shām*.

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

> In search of wealth I journeyed the horizons
> Oman, Ḥimṣ, Jerusalem—
> I met the Najāshī in his Ethiopic land—
> And the Nabaṭīs and *ʿAjam* too.[22]

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

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

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

21 Surveyed in Theodor Nöldeke, *Ghassān*, trans. Bandalī Jawzī and Qusṭanṭīn Razīq, London, 2009, al-Warrāq, pp. 63-80.

22 Al-Aʿshā, *Dīwān*, p. 91.

23 Aḥmad ibn Muḥammad al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*, ed. Aḥmad Amīn and ʿAbd al-Salām Hārūn, Cairo, Maṭbaʿat Lajnat al-Taʾlīf wa-l-Tarjama wa-l-Nashr, 1968, 3, pp. 1477-1478.

[*ʿajam*]".[24] He achieves this not only linguistically, by chiding their dialect, but also ritually, via their non-circumcision, and spatially, through fixing their residence in the Levantine Dīyāf. It is instructive that *Shāmī* space is cited as something incompatible with, or at least deleterious to perceptions of Arabness.

Classical Arabic literary treatment of the Ghassanids is also curious. The three histories cited above do not agree on a Ghassanid king list and provide only scant details of Ghassanid history compared to their narratives of other pre-Islamic 'Arab' kingdoms. Al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* omits the Ghassanids almost entirely, a contrast with its narratives of the pre-Islamic Iraqi 'Arab' kings of Lakhm,[25] and a particularly surprising omission considering al-Ṭabarī's express intention to record the history of "all kings across time".[26] Al-Ṭabarī only mentions Ghassān where they clashed with the Lakhmids, and the Lakhmids receive far more coverage in classical Arabic literature in general.[27] Irfan Shahid praises al-Iṣfahānī's *Tārīkh* for narrating rare gems of Ghassanid lore, particularly their building programs in *al-Shām*,[28] but a wider question could be asked: why is al-Iṣfahānī so unique? It seems that many classical Arabic writers were writing the Ghassanids out of history, reducing their memories to rare finds in scattered manuscripts rather than according them a full place in narratives of the pre-Islamic Arab past.

The disparity between modern theories of Arab origins in *al-Shām* and the almost obliterated *Shāmī* Ghassanid memories in classical Arabic literature is curious. Full exploration of Ghassān's literary portrayal is beyond this paper's scope,[29] but analysis of *al-Shām*'s spatial narratives in classical Arabic writings could provide a first step. Was the downplaying of Ghassān a by-product of a much broader discourse? Did Muslim authors employ *al-Shām* for narrative

24 Al-Marzūqī *Sharḥ* 3, p. 1478. See also al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrīzī, *Sharḥ Dīwān al-Ḥamāsa*, ed. Gharīd al-Shaykh, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Beirut, 2000, 2, p. 882.

25 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū al-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Rawāʾiʿ al-Turāth al-ʿArabi, Beirut, n.d., 2, pp. 88-90, pp. 95-98, pp. 213-218.

26 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* 1, p. 6.

27 Contrary to its frequent citation in Arabic sources, al-Ḥīra has received limited modern scholarly attention: Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *al-Ḥīra*, Leiden, Brill, 2013. is the only major study of prose sources. For evidence from poetry, see Aḥmad al-Najjār, *ʿAlāqāt umarā al-Ḥīrah bi-ʿarab shibh al-jazīrah*, Cairo, Dār al-Nahḍah al-ʿArabīyah, 1979.

28 Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs*, 2.2, pp. 308-310.

29 Julia Bray's careful detective work tracing the story of the last Ghassanid Jabala ibn al-Ayham would be an excellent model to study the Arabic representations of earlier Ghassanid princes ("Christian king, Muslim apostate: depictions of Jabala in the early Arabic sources", in *Writing 'True Stories'. Historians and Hagiographers in Byzantium and the Middle East*, ed. Arietta Papaconstantinou, Turnhout, Brepols, 2010, pp. 175-203.)

purposes which required its depiction as a remote, non-Arab place which consequently left little room for Ghassanid memories to assert themselves? The following sections investigate these questions in an array of narratives about the pre-Islamic past.

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

Collections of pre-Islamic Arab lore such as Ibn al-Kalbī's *al-Aṣnām*, Ibn Ḥabīb's (d.245/859) *al-Muḥabbar*, Ibn Qutayba's (d.276/889) *al-Maʿārif*, and genealogical texts such as Ibn al-Kalbī's *Jamharat al-nasab* and al-Balādhurī's (d.279/892) *Ansāb al-ashrāf* cite *al-Shām* as a destination for Arab travellers, but not as a quotidian Arab environment. We encounter *al-Shām* in these texts as the object of travel, and its visitors are often reported as acquiring special esoteric knowledge. *Al-Muḥabbar*[30] and *al-Maʿārif*[31] relate stories of pre-Islamic Arabian monotheists who, dissatisfied with Arabia's putative paganism, fled to *al-Shām* to commence spiritual wanderings in search of religious enlightenment, and *al-Shām*'s 'special knowledge' extends beyond monotheism too: Ibn al-Kalbī reports that it was the origin of idol worship in Mecca, explaining that the first idol brought to Mecca was procured from *al-Shām* by the Qurashī ʿAmr ibn Luḥayy.[32] *Al-Shām* is also noted as the origin of the statute of Hubal, another pre-Islamic Arabian idol,[33] and it is the home of a soothsayer whom Arab tribes would visit to resolve disputes.[34]

Al-Shām's mysterious knowledge appears in another guise in the fabulous tale of how ʿAbd Allāh ibn Judʿān, a rich Meccan, obtained his wealth.[35] Ibn Ḥabīb describes that ʿAbd Allāh was trading in the "markets of *al-Shām*" when he met a stranger asking for conveyance to Mecca. ʿAbd Allāh agreed to take him, and when the pair neared Mecca, the stranger led ʿAbd Allāh to a

30 Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Muḥabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstadter, Hyderabad, Osmania Publications, 1942, p. 172.

31 ʿAbd Allāh ibn Qutayba, *al-Maʿārif*, ed. Tharwat ʿUkāsha, Qum, al-Sharīf Riḍa, 1994, pp. 59-60.

32 Hishām ibn Muḥammad Ibn al-Kalbī, *al-Aṣnām*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī Bāshā, Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, 1924, p. 8. See also Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq*, ed. Khurshīd Aḥmad Fāriq, Beirut, ʿĀlam al-Kutub, 1985, p. 288.

33 ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, ed. Charles Pellat, Beirut, al- Jāmiʿa al-Lubnāniyya, 1966-1979, §1372.

34 Aḥmad ibn Yaḥyā al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, ed. Maḥmūd al-Firdaws al-ʿAẓam, Damascus, Dār al-Yaqaẓa al-ʿArabiyya, 1997-2004, 1, p. 86; Ibn Ḥabīb, *al-Munammaq*, p. 94.

35 Ibn Ḥabīb, al-Munammaq, pp. 149-150.

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

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

Genealogical accounts also depict *al-Shām* as remote space 'outside' Arabia. Quṣay, one of the most important ancestors of Quraysh, is said to have acquired his name (related to a root connoting 'distance') because his mother "took him far away, to *al-Shām*".[36] Genealogies of Quraysh and other Maʿaddite (Northern Arabian) tribes make limited mention of pre-Islamic *al-Shām*; it has no kin relation to pre-Islamic Maʿaddite roots, and it is only integrated in genealogies of Muslim-era (*i.e.* post-conquest) *Shāmīs*. For instance, Ibn Ḥabīb restricts mention of *al-Shām* in pre-Islamic genealogy to stories of long-distance trade,[37] giving particular mention to Gaza,[38] a commercial centre at the very edge of *al-Shām*. Ibn al-Kalbī's *Jamharat al-nasab* lists the genealogy of Quraysh and Maʿaddite Arabs without any reference to pre-Islamic *al-Shām*. Genealogists record *al-Shām* as the destination of pre-Islamic tribes that 'disappeared' from Arabian history,[39] and as a refuge for social outcasts seeking to escape 'Arab society' in Arabia.[40] Curiously, Southern Arabian '*Yāmānī*' genealogy did claim that pre-Islamic peoples in *al-Shām* were 'Yemeni Arabs'; the mechanics of this genealogical imagination are complex and relate to Yemeni lore outside the scope of this paper,[41] but for present purposes, it is key to note that those tribes

36 *Ibid.*, p. 31.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 100, p. 130, p. 149, p. 219.

38 *Ibid.*, p. 43, p. 44. The story is repeated at pp. 97-98 where Gaza is not mentioned, only *al-Shām*.

39 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 1, p. 21.

40 Al-Balādhurī, *Ansāb*, 1, p. 70. See also the analogous story of the ancient pre-Islamic prophet Ṣāliḥ, who, after his unbelieving Arabian community was destroyed by God, fled the scene of their unbelief and migrated to *al-Shām* (al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, §935).

41 *Yamānī* history is detailed in the early texts *Akhbār al-Yaman* of ʿUbayd ibn Sharya, Cairo, al-Hay'a al-ʿĀmma li-Quṣūr al-Thaqāfa, 1996; *Tārīkh al-ʿarab qabla al-Islām* by

who lived in pre-Islamic northern Arabia chose not to conceptualise/remember a kin linkage with pre-Islamic *Shāmīs*.

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

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

The ḥadīth (collected sayings of the Prophet and his Companions) and the *Sīra* (the Prophet's biography) both contain numerous references to *al-Shām*. The debates over the material's historicity and the relative authenticity of ḥadīth *vs. Sīra* do not concern this study,[42] since I eschew empirical questions of Muḥammad's 'actual' connections with the 'real' Levant in order to focus on the role *al-Shām* plays in the literary memories of the rise of Islam. Because the main collections of ḥadīth and the extant version of the Prophet's biography

pseudo-al-Aṣmaʿī, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan Āl Yāsīn, London, 2009; Diʿbil al-Khuzāʿī's *Waṣāyā al-mulūk*, ed. Nizār Abāẓa, Damascus, Dār al-Bashā'ir, 1997; and the later *Mulūk Ḥimyar* of al-Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī, ed. 'Alī ibn Ismāʿīl al-Mu'ayyad and Ismāʿīl ibn Aḥmad al-Jarāfī, Beirut, Dār al-Tanwīr, 1985. The extant poetry *dīwān* Diʿbil al-Khuzāʿī, ed. 'Abd al-Karīm al-Ashtar, Damascus, Majmaʿ al- Lugha al-'Arabiyya, 1983 also contains pertinent references to *Yamānī* pre-Islamic lore.

42 The past century of ḥadīth scholarship is surveyed in Harold Motzki "Dating Muslim Traditions: A Survey", *Arabica* 52 (2005), pp. 204-253; Wael Hallaq insightfully wonders if the search for authentic ḥadīth is actually a red herring ("The Authenticity of Prophetic Ḥadîth: A Pseudo-Problem", *Studia Islamica*, 89 (1999), pp. 75-90. For a stimulating discussion of the interrelations between ḥadīth and *maghāzī*, see Andreas Görke, "The relationship between *maghāzī* and *ḥadīth* in early Islamic scholarship", *Bulletin of SOAS*, 74 (2011), pp. 171-185.

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

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

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

43 The extant *Sīra* was written by Ibn Hishām (d.218/833); ḥadīth collections I consult begin with Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal (d.241/855) and extend to the 'Six Books' compiled in the second half of the third/ninth century.

44 Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Salām ʿAbd al-Shāfī, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, Beirut, 1993, 1, p. 196.

45 Muslim ibn al-Ḥajjāj, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, Riyadh, Dār al-Salām, 1999, *al-Jumuʿa* 11.

46 ʿAbd al-Malik ibn Hishām *al-Sīrat al-Nabawiyya*, ed. Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Beirut, Dār al-Maʿrifa n.d., 2, p. 279.

47 Muḥammad ibn Ismāʿīl al-Bukhārī *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Riyadh, Dār al-Salām, 1999, *Faḍāʾil al-Madīna* 5.

48 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 5, p. 220.

49 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, *al-Fitan* 110.

50 It is only (very rarely) given more detailed texture via mention of *Filisṭīn*/Palestine (see Abū Dāwūd *Sunan Abī Dāwūd*, Riyadh, Dār al-Salām, 1999, *al-Jihād* p. 83; al-Tirmidhī, *Jāmiʿ*, *al-Fitan* 66), and (more commonly) the town of Buṣrā. I presently discuss Buṣrā's spatial narratives.

as Arabia).[51] The ḥadīth reflect the flipside: from their perspective, beyond Buṣrā lay *al-Shām*. We encounter Buṣrā as the destination of Arab caravans,[52] but in contrast to Buṣrā's relatively frequent citation, we hear nothing of what lay beyond—it is only that undifferentiated *Shāmī* hinterland of the "Rūm"/ Byzantines which the Arabians are not described as exploring. Buṣrā's spatial significance thus marks the furthest edge of the familiar world, the nodal point where the narratives' Arabia transitions to the 'outside' space of *al-Shām*.

Buṣrā's particular spatial narrative manifests in idiomatic expressions repeated in different contexts in the *Sīra* and ten ḥadīth from the 'canonical' collections.[53] For example, Muḥammad describes the vast clap of lightening which will herald the Last Day as extending from "Yemen to Buṣrā",[54] Ibn Hishām relates that the light which shone from Muḥammad's mother when he was conceived lit up the "palaces of Buṣrā",[55] Muḥammad describes his water cistern in Paradise around which his Companions will gather as being equivalent to the distance "between Buṣrā and Ṣanʿā'";[56] and to illustrate the vastness of Paradise, Muḥammad explains that the width of one of its door leaves is

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

52 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Adab* 24; Ibn Ḥanbal *Musnad* 6, p. 316; Muḥammad ibn Mājah, *Sunan Ibn Mājah*, Riyadh, Dār al-Salām, 1999, *al-Adab* 24.

53 By 'canonical', I refer to the collections indexed in the *Concordance et Indicies de la Tradition Musulmane*: the "Six Books" of al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasā'ī, Ibn Mājah and Abū Dāwūd as well as Mālik's Muwaṭṭa' and Ibn Ḥanbal's *Musnad*.

54 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 5, p. 144. See another variation of Buṣrā's spatial narrative and the Last Day in Ibn Abī Shayba *al-Muṣannaf*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAwwāma, Jeddah, Dār al-Qibla, 2010, 21, p. 124. The less well-known ḥadīth collection of Yaʿqūb ibn Sufyān al-Fasawī (d.277/890), *al-Maʿrifa wa-l-Tārīkh*, ed. Akram Ḍiyā' al-ʿUmarī, Medina, Maktabat al-dār bi'l-Madīna l-munawwara, 1410 AH, 1, p. 379, narrates yet another version: "The Final Hour will not come until one of the wadis of al-Ḥijāz overflows with fire, lighting up the necks of camels in Buṣrā".

55 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 1, p. 158. Al-Ḥākim al-Nīsābūrī *al-Mustadrak ʿalā al-Ṣaḥīḥayn*, ed. Muṣṭafā ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1990, 2, p. 656 repeats this Buṣrā metaphor with specific spatial distancing of *al-Shām*.

56 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 5, p. 282.

equal to "the distance between Mecca and Buṣrā".[57] These idioms invoke Buṣrā symbolically, not as a precise measure of distance, but rather a byword for 'far away' or 'the furthest imaginable place'.

The Buṣrā metaphor resembles the Colonial-era English vernacular 'Timbuktu' that communicates the idea of exaggerated distance via a place-name associated with the remotest reaches of the world. The ḥadīth's Buṣrā must be intended as an analagous conceptual trigger for remoteness, and in this vein, the story of Muḥammad's letters to the "kings of the world" is instructive. A ḥadīth reports that Muḥammad's letter to the Byzantines was addressed to the "Grandee [*aẓīm*] of Buṣrā":[58] the Prophet is thus shown to have interacted with the Byzantines via the extreme south of their world. The ḥadīth and *Sīra*'s attention to Buṣrā creates tangible space at the edge of an Arabian-centred worldview which intriguingly renders all the land beyond—*i.e. al-Shām*—unfamiliar and unexplored. Readers are made familiar with Buṣrā's space in order to conceptualise the 'last stop' of Arabian travel, and the resultant outside-ness for the rest of *al-Shām* assisted the narrations of both Muḥammad's Meccan and Medinan periods, though in different ways, which I explore in turn.

Al-Shām in Meccan-Period Narratives

In narratives of Muḥammad's Meccan period, *al-Shām* makes several appearances, two of which concern journeys Muḥammad himself made to *al-Shām*. The first occurs during his childhood, before his prophecy began, when he is reported to have accompanied a Meccan trading caravan that stopped near Buṣrā. The Meccans there meet a Christian monk, Baḥīrā, who, upon seeing Muḥammad and observing in him the signs of prophethood, reveals that the youth is destined to be a prophet.[59] Muḥammad's second *Shāmī* journey, dated during his early prophethood,[60] is the miraculous *al-Isrā'* (the Night Journey). Led by the Angel Gabriel, Muḥammad rides the extraordinary mount al-Burāq

57 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Tafsīr* 17.5.

58 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Bad' al-waḥī* 7.

59 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 1, pp. 180-183.

60 The sources offer various dates, either (i) one year prior to his emigration to Medina; (ii) sixteen months prior to his emigration; (iii) at some point prior to the death of his first wife, Khadīja which occurred either five, four or three years prior to his emigration; or (iv) five (or seven) years after the commencement of his prophetic mission, i.e. seven years prior to his emigration. See Abū al-Fidā' ibn al-Kathīr, *al-Bidāya wa-l-nihāya*, ed. Aḥmad Abū Mulḥim, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyya, n.d., 3, p. 107.

from Mecca to Jerusalem and back in one night. Some narratives report that Muḥammad led a prayer with past prophets in Jerusalem, while other versions, more numerous in later literature, recount that Muḥammad ascended from Jerusalem's holy mosque to the Heavens where he met past prophets and God Himself, a journey known as *al-Miʿrāj*.[61] Irrespective of the precise details, *al-Isrāʾ wa-l-Miʿrāj* are pivotal miracles in the Prophet's early career and highlight the central ritual of prayer and Muḥammad's status as pre-eminent prophet.

The journey narratives portray *al-Shām* with two salient characteristics. Firstly, and in common with the placing of *al-Shām* already noted, the region appears as a distant location on the 'outside' of Arabian space. Baḥīrā's residence near Buṣrā marks the encounter's setting at the proverbial edge of the 'Arab world', and *al-Isrāʾ* narratives expressly invoke spatial remoteness too: Muḥammad's destination, Jerusalem's mosque, is pointedly referred to as "*al-masjid al-aqṣā*" (the "furthest mosque"),[62] and there is particular stress on the fact that the pagan Meccans refused to believe Muḥammad's journey story because *al-Shām* was too impossibly far away. The *Sīra* reports their incredulity:

> This is clear absurdity! By God, the caravan must be driven for a month from Mecca to *al-Shām* and a month back; indeed, this Muḥammad really made the return trip in one night?![63]

We read that only Abū Bakr, the sincerest believer, accepted that Muḥammad traversed such a vast distance in such a short time.[64]

Secondly, and akin to the narratives of pre-Islamic *Arabica, al-Shām* is a font of special religious knowledge: a monotheistic heritage which prophesises and legitimises Muḥammad's mission. Muḥammad is connected to this spiritual space from the moment of his conception via the *Sīra*'s description of the light that shone forth from his mother to "Buṣrā's castles",[65] it is near Buṣrā

61 The stories of *al-Isrāʾ wa-l-Miʿrāj* were much expanded in classical period writing. Ibn Hishām's *Sīra* narrates the Night Journey and Ascension together (1, pp. 397-410), but his near contemporary Ibn Saʿd reports them as separate events, restricting the visit to Jerusalem to the Night Journey narrative (Muḥammad ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-Kubrā*, ed. Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Qādir ʿAṭā, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1997, 1, p. 166). For a survey of the story's development, see Frederick Colby, *Narrating Muḥammad's Night Journey*, Albany, SUNY Press, 2008.

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

63 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 1, p. 398.

64 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 399.

65 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 158.

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

The *Sīra* also marshals *al-Shām*'s dual remoteness/esoteric potency in anecdotes about persons living before Muḥammad who, like Baḥīrā, are accorded special knowledge of Muḥammad's impending mission. Consider Abū-l-Hayyabān, a Jew "from *al-Shām*"[66] (note again the generic spatial reference), who immigrated to Arabia and settled amongst the Jews and pagan Arabs in Yathrib (the pre-Islamic name of Medina). He brings magical knowledge that helps the locals summon rain to relieve a drought, and on his deathbed, we read his 'last words':

> Oh Jewish people! What is it that forced me out of the Land of Wine and Leavened Bread [*al-Shām*] to come to the Land of Hunger and Hardship [Arabia]? . . . I came to this land to await the coming of Prophet whose time is near . . .[67]

The story invokes an essential opposition between pre-Islamic *al-Shām* and Arabia contrasting (i) *al-Shām*'s wine and bread with Arabia's hunger and privation, and (ii) the *Shāmī* Abū-l-Hayyabān's powers over the rain and knowledge of Muḥammad's imminence with Arabian impotence and ignorance. Another example of this trope is the tale of Salmān al-Fārisī, a Persian whose dissatisfaction with his father's religion reportedly led him to *al-Shām* where he met devout monks from whom he learned Christianity and learned, in turn, from the most devout monk of all that he must continue his journey to Arabia and await the coming Prophet.[68] And similarly, the *Sīra* depicts most pre-Islamic Arabians who sought monotheistic enlightenment as travellers to *al-Shām*: Zayd ibn ʿAmr ibn Nufayl "travelled around all of *al-Shām*"[69] and finally met a monk in the Balqā' near Damascus (again at the borders of *al-Shām* and Arabia) who "possessed the sum of Christian knowledge" and instructed him to

66 *Ibid., Sīra*, 1, p. 213.
67 *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 213-214.
68 *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 215-218.
69 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 231.

return to Arabia and await Muḥammad's prophethood;[70] and when ʿUthmān ibn al-Ḥuwayrith converted to Christianity, he is said to have quitted Arabia for *al-Shām*.[71]

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

Al-Shām in Medinan-Period Narratives

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

70 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 231.

71 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 224.

72 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Silaʿ* p. 3.

73 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 2, 132.

74 ʿAbd Allāh ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn al-Akhbār*, Cairo, Dār al-kutub al-miṣriyya 1925, 3, p. 291; Muḥammad ibn ʿUmar al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones, London, Oxford University Press 1966, 3, pp. 989-990; al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Silaʿ* 3.

75 al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Libās*, 28. Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Libās*, 15.

76 Muḥammad ibn al-Qāsim ibn al-Anbārī, *Sharḥ al-qaṣā'iḍ al-sabʿ al-ṭiwāl al-jāhiliyyāt*, ed. ʿAbd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, Cairo, al-Maʿārif, 2005, p. 371.

77 Imruʾ al-Qays, *Dīwān*, p. 33.

78 Al-Marzūqī, *Sharḥ*, 3, p. 1258, p. 1803.

Reports of the Prophet's political interaction with *al-Shām* similarly relate an undifferentiated, distant space. The *Sīra* does not ascribe the Medinan Muḥammad any physical connection to the region: his one expedition towards *al-Shām* (the Tabūk campaign) was abortive, and the *Shāmī* campaign led by his Companions is reported as prematurely defeated at the Battle al-Mu'ta.[79] *Al-Shām* emerges as the bridge too far for Muslim armies during the life of the Prophet, leaving its conquest for another time and enforcing the barrier between *al-Shām* and Muḥammad's Arabian community. The result leaves *al-Shām* as an empty zone, uncluttered by actual towns and sub-regions, and the narratives re-fill the void with their own portrayals of *al-Shām* suitable for the *Sīra*'s discourses.

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

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

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

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79 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 2, pp. 377-380.

80 Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, 1, p. 33.

81 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Tafsīr* 53:3. See also al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Malābis* 31: "All those who lived [in the land] surrounding the Prophet of God had acquiesced to him, but only the King of Ghassān remained, and we used to fear that he would attack us."

Another ḥadīth relates the story of the Muslim poet Kaʿb ibn Mālik's failure to report for military service during the Tabūk campaign and his consequent fifty-day shunning by the Muslim community.[82] During his isolation, Kaʿb received a message from an unnamed "Ghassanid king" written on silk inviting him to *al-Shām*, promising him a warm reception and an end to his isolation. But Kaʿb ignored it, stayed faithful to Islam and was forgiven by Muḥammad. Whilst the Ghassanids and *al-Shām* here appear in closer communication with the Muslim community (the Ghassanid king evidently knew of Kaʿb's plight), *al-Shām* is nonetheless still the 'other'. It embodies materialism, a wealthy silken and luxurious preserve of an anonymous but generous king that accords with its association with fine textiles and wine encountered in other ḥadīth.[83] This *al-Shām* contrasts the Muslim community under Muḥammad's divinely inspired leadership, and Kaʿb's shunning of *al-Shām* was his salvation: it constitutes the story's explanation for his reintegration into the Muslim community.

The surprising absence of reference to Ghassanid Arabness seems related to the spatial narratives constructed for their homeland: *al-Shām* is a foil to Arabia, the *al-Shām*/Arabia dichotomy directs readers to interpret early Islamic history as a devout Arabian community threatened to the north by a hostile, non-Muslim and materialist coalition of Ghassān and Rūm. The apposition resonates with Bachelard's observation that writers narrate descriptions of outside spaces as a means to display the 'inside'.[84] The emphasis in Medinan-era narratives on *al-Shām*'s commercial and political aspects also enables the stories to focus on Medina's connections to the wider world. Such narratives show readers that Muḥammad's Medinan community was a viable polity, and *al-Shām*'s changed persona from spiritually potent Meccan-period narratives to the political/economic Medinan-period portrayal thereby ideally suits the *Sīra*'s goal to highlight the maturation of Islam into a nascent state. By focusing on *al-Shām* as a place of 'external relations' for Arab Muslims, there is little room for extolling the memories of an Arab Ghassanid *al-Shām*. Those memories are elided, the Ghassanids are deported to the edge of Arabian memory and the narrative can unambiguously focus on Muḥammad's prophetic community in Arabia.

82 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Maghāzī* 80. Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 2, pp. 531-535.

83 See also the ḥadīth related by al-Bukhārī in which the Caliph ʿUmar relates his prohibition of the wearing of silk which he said to have announced in al-Jābiya, the former capital of the Ghassanids. The connection of Ghassān, silk and non-Islam seems significant (*Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Silʿ* 3).

84 Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, pp. 213-214.

'A tale of two Jerusalems': Jerusalem and *al-Shām* between Meccan and Medinan ḥadīth

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

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

> I prayed with the Prophet (peace be upon him) in the direction of Jerusalem for sixteen months, until the verse from *Sūrat al-Baqara* "And wherever you may be, turn your face in the direction [of Mecca]…" was revealed. It was revealed after the Prophet (peace be upon him) prayed. A man then left and passed by the *Anṣār* while they were praying and informed them of it, and they turned their faces to the *Bayt* [the Kaʿba of Mecca].[86]

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

Following the turn away from *al-Shām* in the prayer ritual, Muḥammad never is accorded further connection with Jerusalem. Jerusalem is only again mentioned in a ḥadīth about a trading mission which pagan Meccans undertook to *al-Shām* between the truce of al-Hudaybiyya in 6/628 and the Muslim conquest of Mecca in 8/630.[88] Instead of stopping in Buṣrā, as almost all other such traders are said to have done, Abū Sufyān, the leader of the Meccan traders, reportedly enters Jerusalem itself. The ensuing account mentions neither holy mosques nor past prophets; instead the pagan Abū Sufyān meets a secular ruler, the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius (Hiraql) and his court of notables (*ʿuẓamā al-Rūm*). Heraclius asks about Muḥammad, and Abū Sufyān

85 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 1, p. 550; Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Masājid* 2.

86 Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ, al-Masājid* 2.

87 Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, 1, p. 550.

88 Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Badʾ al-waḥī* 6.

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

> [Nāṭūr reports:] "Then Heraclius travelled to Ḥimṣ… He permitted the Byzantine notables to enter a castle of his at Ḥimṣ and ordered the doors locked. Then [Heraclius] appeared and said: 'Oh Byzantines, should we seek prosperity, guidance and the preservation of our kingship, and choose to follow this prophet?' The people turned and stampeded like wild asses and made for the doors, but they found them locked. When Heraclius saw their abhorrence and was assured of their faith, he ordered the people back and said: 'I made that earlier speech to test your faith in your religion, and I have seen it.' They prostrated to him and were pleased with him." [al-Bukhārī adds:] "This was the end of the matter of Heraclius."[89]

Heraclius' personal faith is unclear, but the ḥadīth closes a short chapter in al-Bukhārī's *al-Ṣaḥīḥ* which begins with the famous ḥadīth: "all deeds are judged by their intentions".[90] Read in that context, the conclusion of the Heraclius anecdote implies the Emperor's intention was to test his people's loyalty, not to sincerely urge his subjects to convert to Islam,[91] and al-Bukhārī's own editorial statement "this was the end of the matter of Heraclius" suggests that he did not believe Heraclius ever again considered embracing Islam.[92]

In sum, the Meccan-period stories' depiction of Jerusalem as the capital of prophethood transforms in Medinan-period stories into the home of zealous Byzantine secular power wilfully rejecting Muḥammad. The Medinan

89 *Ibid.*

90 al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ, Badʿ al-Waḥī* 1.

91 This is also the observation of Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī, *Fatḥ al-bārī bi-sharḥ ṣāḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, ed. Abū Qutayba al-Fāryābī, Riyadh, Dār Ṭayba, 2011, 1, p. 90.

92 Nadia Maria El-Cheikh, "Muḥammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy", *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999), pp. 5-21 explored the relationship between Heraclius and Muḥammad, noting that Arabic historiography primarily characterises Heraclius in a legitimising role for Muḥammad's prophetic mission. Her analysis of the Abū Sufyān ḥadīth concludes that Heraclius is portrayed in a more positive light (13, 20), but her sources are primarily drawn from historiography, and she did not analyse the ḥadīth of al-Bukhārī in its specific context in his *Ṣaḥīḥ* which implies that opinion on Heraclius was not universally positive.

narratives' Jerusalem together with its depictions of Ghassanid threat prime *al-Shām*'s transformation from a monotheistic haven into a theatre of conflict between Muslim and non-Muslim. The physical break when the Muslims turned their backs on *al-Shām* in prayer marks an identical about-face in the region's spatial narratives.

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

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

Al-Shām in al-Azdī's *Futūḥ*

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

93 Lawrence Conrad, "Al-Azdī's History of the Arab Conquests in Bilād al-Shām: Some Historiographical Observations", in *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of*

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

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

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

Bilād al-Shām During the Early Islamic Period up to 40 AH/640 AD, ed. Muhammad ʿAdnan Bakhit, Amman, Univerity of Jordan, 1987, 1, pp. 28-62, pp. 33-48 proposes the late second/eighth century date of the extant text, which Suleiman A. Mourad, "On Early Islamic Historiography: Abū Ismāʿīl Al-Azdī and His Futūḥ Al-Shām", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 120 (2000), pp. 577-593, p. 592 confirms, identifying it as representative of the body of Kūfan memories of the conquest.

94 Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd Allāh al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. W. N. Lees, Calcutta, Baptist Mission Press, 1854, 1.

95 See al-Azdī, *Futūḥ*, p. 2, p. 3, p. 4, p. 6, p. 8, p. 11, p. 22, p. 23, p. 34.

96 *Ibid*., p. 29.

97 *Ibid*., p. 20, p. 34.

98 *Ibid*., p. 28.

99 Word obscured in the manuscript.

100 Al-Azdī, *Futūḥ*, p. 36.

Pointedly, al-Azdī makes only five references to the Christian Ghassanids,[101] and he finesses their history in three of those five cases by portraying Ghassanids as converting to Islam,[102] or entering the Muslim armies before battle.[103] Only once does he depict them fighting Muslims.[104]

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

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

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

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

101 *Ibid.*, p. 71, p. 97, p. 114, p. 195, p. 203.
102 *Ibid.*, p. 71
103 *Ibid.*, p. 97, p. 114.
104 *Ibid.*, p. 203.

Al-Shām and Iraq: Primordial Enemies in Historical Narrative

The rise of Arabic language universal histories in the late third/ninth century confronted their Muslim authors with historiographical challenges. The horizons of universal history compel authors to place Islam and the Near East in a global story, and they were faced with narrating *al-Shām*'s pre-Islamic political history of Romans, Byzantines, and possible 'Arabs' like Ghassān. Interestingly, the historians again devoted only slight attention to *al-Shām*. Al-Dīnawarī's (d.282/895) *al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl* is almost entirely silent on pre-Islamic *al-Shām*, and al-Yaʿqūbī's (d.c.284/897) *Tārīkh* narrates only a very short, laconic chapter on Ghassān and a brief section on the Roman period.[105] Al-Ṭabarī's (d.310/923) much expanded world history records less information still, having no chapter for *al-Shām* under the Ghassanids, and mentioning the Roman Emperors in a bullet-point king-list that only pauses to identify the Jewish Revolts during the reigns of Vespasian and Hadrian.[106] Al-Masʿūdī's (d.346/957) *Murūj al-dhahab* briskly sketches pre-Islamic 'Arab' rulers of *al-Shām*,[107] and whilst his *al-Tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf* contains a detailed section on Roman and Byzantine history,[108] Ghassān, Tanūkh and the other pre Islamic *Shāmī* 'Arabs' are still largely absent.

Collectively, the world histories acknowledge that 'Arabs' inhabited *al-Shām* long before Islam, but they receive only patchy consideration. Above, I noted the absence of an agreed Ghassanid king list, and the various proposals in the few world histories that pause to narrative Ghassanid history seem to be cobbled together from combinations of a limited array of names: al-Ḥārith, Jabala, Jafna and al-Nuʿmān. These names all appear in poems ascribed to the pre-Islamic al-Nābigha al-Dhubyānī and the main poet of Muḥammad's Medina, Ḥassān ibn Thābit: both mention various Ghassanids, but without providing clear genealogies. Nöldeke's attempts to recover names of specific individuals from the poems are not always successful, as he admits,[109] and it seems that Muslim-era historians concocted a semblance of a king-list merely from creative combinations of the names in the extant poems.[110]

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105 Aḥmad ibn Abī Yaʿqūb al-Yaʿqūbī *Tārīkh al-Yaʿqūbī*, Dār Ṣādir, Beirut, n.d., 1, pp. 206-207 (for Ghassān) and 1, pp. 146-157 (for Rome/Byzantium).

106 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1, pp. 606-608.

107 Al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, §§1076-1085.

108 ʿAlī ibn al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, *al-Tanbīh wa-l-ishrāf*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Beirut, Dār Ṭayba, n.d., pp. 111-176.

109 Nöldeke, *Ghassān*, pp. 65-68, pp. 72-73.

110 See, for example, Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Tārīkh sanī mulūk al-ʿarḍ wa-l-anbiyāʾ*, Beirut, Maktabat al-Ḥayāt, n.d., pp. 91-92. Though one could admittedly feel the same when

Why did Muslim world-historians so overlook the apparently important 'Arab' kingdom immediately preceding Islam considering that they did write detailed accounts and coherent king-lists for the pre-Islamic Lakhmid Arab kings in Iraq? The discrepancy could be partly explained by the fact that most world histories were complied by Iraqis, and the old capital of the Lakhmid kingdom, al-Ḥīra, was located near al-Kūfa, the important Islamic-era city and intellectual centre. But the Umayyads occupied Ghassanid territory in the first Islamic century, and we could expect that some information about pre-Islamic *al-Shām* ought to have entered Arabic historical writing; however, when we consider *al-Shām*'s spatial narratives in Iraqi world-histories, the reasons behind the pervasive forgetting become clearer.

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

> Jadhīma brought a large group of Arabs and headed to [*al-Shām*] seeking to raid it. 'Amr ibn Ẓarib came with his group from *al-Shām*, they met and they fought ferociously. 'Amr was killed and his band scattered and Jadhīma left with his men, safely and with booty.[111]

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

confronted by the Williams, Edwards, Richards and Henrys that fill almost the entire first half-millennium of English regal history!

111 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1, p. 618.

112 *Ibid.*, 1, pp. 618-619.

113 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1, pp. 620-627; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj*, §§1039-1058.

the Rūm came to be equated with pre-Islamic *al-Shām*. Throughout the narratives, all favour the Lakhmids and Sasanians: those on the Eastern side of the Euphrates have the heroes and pre-Islamic war-poetry. The Western *Shāmīs*, on the other hand, are outsiders, perhaps even intended as villains,[114] who have little poetic voice of their own and lack even notable heroes (beyond a handful of Ghassanid kings).[115] Classical-era Arabic historians reveal pre-Islamic *Shāmī* Arab history as a litany of endless wars in which *Shāmīs* are invariably antagonists.

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

114 Consider the depiction of Zenobia as "demonic", analysed by David S. Powers, "Demonizing Zenobia: the Legend of al-Zabbāʾ in Islamic Sources" in *Histories of the Middle East: Studies in Middle Eastern Society, Economy and Law in honour of A. L. Udovitch*, ed. R. E. Margariti, Leiden, Brill, 2011.

115 See Abū Ḥanīfa Aḥmad al-Dīnawarī, *al-Akhbār al-ṭiwāl*, ed. ʿIṣām Muḥammad al-Ḥājj ʿAlī, Beirut, Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya 2001, pp. 100-120; al-Yaʿqūbī, *Tārīkh* 1, pp. 208-216 (and compare with his treatment of Ghassān (1, pp. 206-208).

116 In support of the regionalised tensions pervasive in the sources describing the First *Fitna*, John Haldon and Hugh Kennedy consider the interaction of regional identities with tribal in the Umayyad period, and, arguing from an economic perspective, note the "common interest" the militarised elite had with their tax-paying farmers, and hence the enhanced importance of regional identities and the proclivity of power-struggles to take shape on a regional level ("Regional Identities and Military Power: Byzantium and Islam ca. 600-750", in *Visions of Community in the Post-Roman World*, ed. Walter Pohl, Farnham, Ashgate, 2012, pp. 317-353, pp. 341-353).

102/720 brought further *Shāmī* reprisals in Iraq, *Shāmī*-appointed governors in Iraq juggled the explosive potential regional antagonism, and the Abbasid 'revolution' in 132/750, capitalised on Iraqi aversion to *al-Shām* and brought, finally, victory—as Iraqi Abbasid historians saw it—for Iraq.

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

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

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

117 See Peter Webb, "Poetry and the Early Islamic Historical Tradition: Poetry and narratives of the Battle of Ṣiffīn", in *Warfare and Poetry in Middle Eastern Literatures*, ed. Hugh Kennedy, London, IB Tauris, 2013, pp. 119-148, pp. 137-139.

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

Al-Shām and Past-Prophets

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

The Biblical nexus of *al-Shām* and Jewish Prophets seems reduced in Arabic texts. Exegesis of Qur'ān 21.71's reference to Abraham's departure from his birthplace in Iraq to a "blessed land", which the Biblical tradition assumes is Canaan, is reinterpreted, according to some Muslim traditions preserved in al-Ṭabarī's *Tafsīr*, as intending Mecca.[118] Al-Ṭabarī himself reasons that the "blessed land" should be interpreted as *al-Shām*, but the different opinions reveal tension, a pulling of the prophet away from Canaan into Arabian space. In the same vein, al-Ṭabarī's *Tārīkh* includes reports that Abraham either (a) settled in Madyan in the Ḥijāz, not in *al-Shām*,[119] or (b) he initially settled in *al-Shām* but subsequently quit it and moved south following an argument with his pagan neighbours.[120] These Abraham stories, therefore *prima facie* accept the Judeo-Christian *al-Shām* as the home of the prophet, but rather than endorsing *al-Shām* as Abraham's promised land, they dilute the Levantine leanings, adding and promoting Arabian space in Abraham's biography.

118 Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-Bayān*, ed. Ṣidqī Jamīl al-ʿAṭṭār, Beirut, Dār al-Fikr, 1999, 17, pp. 62-63.

119 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* 1, p. 309.

120 *Ibid.*, 1, p. 249.

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

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

Third/ninth century Arabic literature does not *deny* that *al-Shām* is a holy space, especially given the general agreement that the three Qurʾānic references to "Blessed Land" (*al-arḍ allatī bāraknā fī-hā*)[126] are *al-Shām*,[127] but

121 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* narrates Abraham stories from 1, p. 233 to 1, p. 313, references to *al-Shām* are interspersed throughout, though details of his *Shāmī* interactions are slight. Similarly, Abū Isḥāq al-Thaʿlabī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, Beirut, Dār al-fikr, 2000, pp. 74-103 which divides Abraham stories into nine parts, three concern Abraham's rejection of paganism and Nimrod's arrogance, three detail the construction of Mecca and one concerns the child 'sacrifice'. Reference to *al-Shām* is sparing, and moreover, the narrative is skewed towards focus on non-*Shāmī* aspects of the prophet's life.

122 Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1, p. 419. He accepts that Moses did settle in *al-Shām* (see also 1, p. 437), but the virtual absence of its citation in the Exodus stories is intriguing.

123 For discussion of Hūd, Ṣāliḥ and Shuʿayb, see Brannon Wheeler, "Arab Prophets of the Qur'an and Bible", *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies*, 8.2 (2006), pp. 24-57.

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

125 For example, see the earliest extant exegesis: Muqātil ibn Sulaymān, *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm*, ed. ʿAbd Allāh Maḥmūd al-Shaḥāta, Cairo, Al-Hayʾa al-Miṣriyya al-ʿĀmma li-l-Kutub, 1979-1989.

126 Cor 21,71; 21, 81; 24, 18.

127 I am unaware that exegetes rejected this connection: see Muqātil *Tafsīr* 3, p. 520 where he interprets Cor 21, 71 without explicitly mentioning *al-Shām*, though he refers to it as 'the holy land" (*al-arḍ al-muqaddasa*), which indicates Canaan.

we have seen that Arabic writers, both of *Sīra* and prophetic history availed themselves of opportunities to chip away at the Judeo-Christian *al-Shām*'s monopoly on the 'Holy Land' by crafting spatial narratives that distance it from the 'centre' of their histories of prophethood: their stories gravitate instead towards Mecca. The purpose of the stories about pre-Islamic *Shāmī* monotheists is also to make tangible the expectation of Muḥammad's Arabian mission, thus orienting Holy Knowledge traditionally associated with *al-Shām* towards Arabia. The fact that some fourth/tenth century historians developed positive impression of the Byzantine Emperor Heraclius as supportive of Muḥammad's mission (as El-Cheikh demonstrated),[128] perhaps further reflects the process of turning *al-Shām*'s status in Judeo-Christianity writing as quintessential sacred space into a mere prelude to the final revelation in Arabia, a passive observer for a 'holier' story to come. Classical world-histories, *Sīra* and exegesis thus combine to leave pre-Islamic *al-Shām* almost no secular history and a holiness that inexorably gives way to Arabia, prompting the necessity of conquest to 'convert' *al-Shām* to Islam.

Conclusions

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

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

128 El-Cheikh, "Muḥammad and Heraclius", pp. 20-21.

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

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

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129 Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, p. 42.

130 The literary approach to Islamic history writing has been gaining momentum. See Stefan Leder's pioneering "The Literary Use of the Khabar: A Basic Form of Historical Writing", in *Studies in Arabic and Islam*, ed. Stefan Leder, Leuven, Peeters, 2002, pp. 277-315, the collection of essays in *On Fiction and Adab in Medieval Arabic Literature*, ed. Philip Kennedy, Wiesbaden, Verlag, 2005, and the employment of White's narratology to stories about the death of the Caliph 'Uthmān in Heather Keaney, "Confronting the Caliph: 'Uthman ibn 'Affan in three 'Abbasid Chronicles", *Studia Islamica* (2011), pp. 37-65.