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**Islam in Late Antiquity: State-Making, the
Bedouin, and the End of Empires**

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Short Abstract

This thesis addresses two questions. First, why did Arabia become the pivot of world history in the seventh century AD after aeons of relative obscurity? Secondly, do these reasons amount to the ‘ordinary historical processes’ that one recent study of the Islamic Conquests and seventh century claims have no place in the story of the birth of a new civilisation? Both of these questions are important not only to explaining the origins of Islam as a civilizational system, and the attendant final transformation of Late Antiquity, but they also address how we approach what can often seem to be an obscure and challenging period.

Evidence from a range of sources has been used. Extensive use of the Islamic historical tradition has been embraced – and justified – but the thesis’s broader approach to the world into which Muḥammad was born is underpinned by the Greek and Latin sources of the Roman Empire. Comparative approaches are also employed, not least to situate Arabia in a broader late antique context and also to improve our understanding of the development of the early Islamic state.

The Introduction sets out the problem of Arabia and Islam, highlighting the ambiguous way in which the bedouin – the protagonists of the seventh-century conquests – have been perceived throughout history. After grappling with the menagerie of historiographical problems attendant on the period in Chapter One, Chapter Two focuses on Muḥammad’s foundation of a community at Medina. Chapter Three then addresses how the bedouin became part of this state-building enterprise. Chapter Four greatly expands the argument’s perspective, making a maximal case for the transformation of the bedouin world in Late Antiquity. Finally, Chapter Five shows how fragile was the product of this development, suggesting how the drift of Arabia away from the centre of world history was all but a forgone conclusion.

Long Abstract

This thesis explores the final, and arguably the most significant, transformation that took place in Late Antiquity: the rise of Islam and the consequent destruction of the old order of the ancient world. It initially steps-back from the events of the seventh century to acknowledge just how odd and exceptional the rise of Islam can seem. How did an arid and apparently desolate part of the world, which had for centuries been peripheral to the great movements of history, come to generate a militarily powerful and expansionist state? Conversely, unlike the development of states in northern Europe in Late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages, why did Arabia once again become marginal to the location of complex civilisation in the Near East a few centuries after the conquests inspired by Muḥammad? Did such an exceptional development depend upon the entry of the timeless into time, or can we discern ‘ordinary historical processes’ – to respond to one recent, thought-provoking reconstruction of the seventh century – behind events that became so swiftly shrouded in mystery?

In answering these questions, the thesis addresses the problem of early Islam in ways that are either absent from current scholarship or only obliquely addressed by many studies of the phenomenon and the period. The embrace of the study of early Islam by scholars of Late Antiquity, which began in the final quarter of the twentieth century, may have helped to bring into being something akin to a golden age in the study of Islamic origins by Western scholars, but it has also done much to marginalise appreciation of the importance of Islam’s near horizon, Arabia. We now rightly consider the message of Muḥammad as the product of wider cultural and intellectual trends that had gripped the Near East before, and during, the lifetime of the Prophet, but there has been far less concentration on the ways in which he was able to build a strong community around this message in the Ḥijāz. Early Islamic state-building has often been an assumed fact, summarised in a few short paragraphs, rather than an explored and theorised development.

The explanatory possibilities presented by the late antique far horizon of Islam have equally hardly been exhausted. Most significantly, considerable scholarly attention has been paid to the history of the Arabian clients of the great powers of Rome and Persia in the sixth century, but too few direct connections have been drawn between what this thesis terms the transformation of the bedouin world and the success of what became known as the Islamic Conquests. This thesis therefore embraces a survey of both the near and far horizons of early Islam in order to try to come to terms with the greatest transition of Late Antiquity in a way that unites conventional disciplinary boundaries, and in a way that uses a wide variety of evidence and approaches. It unites occasional micro-analysis of the fascinating nuances of the often elliptical and frustrating Islamic

sources with a bold consideration of wider historical movements. This holistic, rather than partial, perspective helps to appreciate the epochal watershed that the seventh century represents in a way that does not sacrifice far-reaching conclusions to constrained study, or incisive source analysis to extensive historical judgement.

The Introduction sets out the chief problem the thesis tackles. It focuses on the bedouin, and the ways in which a panoply of external observers – from Muslims writing under the ‘Abbāsid Caliphs to Sir Richard Burton – have viewed them. Far from bequeathing descriptions of heroic desert warriors, or a discordant variety of insights, the conclusions of all of the authors surveyed are remarkably uniform. They paint the bedouin as cowards and petty-thieves. This is surprising, given that many modern academic accounts of the seventh-century conquests attribute their success, and ultimately the victory of Islam, to the bedouin’s fighting prowess. To anticipate accusations that one cannot rely on such external viewpoints to support a serious analysis, the Introduction then critiques Edward Said’s notion of ‘Orientalism.’ Thenceforward, the Introduction posits that the rise of Islam – an example of what the thesis calls Arabian Maximalisation – should be set against a far longer historical background in order to help identify the kind of factors that could be adduced to explain it. Another, far more recent period of Arabian Maximalisation is therefore briefly explored before particularly fruitful insights are drawn from the comparison that help to frame the perspective of the thesis.

Chapter One addresses another crucial problem attendant on writing the history of early Islam: the nature of the Islamic historical tradition. The chapter explores the evolution of western scholarly opinion on the veracity, or otherwise, of the Islamic sources, charting how credulity was replaced by scepticism, before ever more detailed and nuanced comparative work with a range of non-Islamic sources served to validate many of the underpinnings of Islam’s understanding of its own history. Despite the fact that this debate is hardly at an end, the chapter notes that many of the most extreme challenges to the conventional narrative presented by the sceptical school are now heard with far less sympathy, even if the field remains punctuated by very divergent approaches to Islam’s earliest days. Chapter One stakes a position within this debate, citing the theory of ‘multiple orthodoxies’ to argue that the Islamic sources should not be rarefied into worthlessness, but used with due care and with reference to sources beyond the tradition. Analysis of three Islamic sources follows in order to illustrate the validity of this approach. The chapter concludes by setting out a number of historiographical principles that inform the use of the sources and shape the work that follows.

Chapter Two looks at the career of the Prophet Muḥammad and the foundation of the community at Yathrib. It subjects the Qur'ān, the only genuinely primary source for Islam, to intense scrutiny. First, in an effort to 'crack the nut' of Muḥammad, the chapter advances a social, anthropological explanation for the Prophet's power in which Weber's notion of charismatic leadership takes centre stage. Secondly, the nature of the Qur'ān as an historical source is explored, in which it is shown to be a text that witnesses the very act of the creation of the community around the Prophet, rather than being a product of later redaction. The discussion then moves on to the message of the Qur'ān and its milieu, revealing a community gripped by an eschatological fascination, who were exhorted to a purified belief in the one God, and whose righteousness was measured through acts of piety. Significantly, however, a sensitive reading of the Qur'ān shows that this community did not exist as a godly island amidst a sand-sea of atavistic polytheistic idolatry, but in an ocean of established monotheism. Muḥammad's message was therefore hardly novel: it resonated with his Ḥijāzi audience because it was familiar.

The most important aspect of Chapter Two, however, emerges from a discussion of the so-called 'Believers Thesis.' The chapter develops this notion by posing a hitherto unasked question: if the Qur'ān's overwhelming use of 'believers' to address its audience is evidence of primordial confessional nomenclature, then who or what was meant by 'Muslim,' a term that is also contained in the Qur'ān, and that seems to have had more than a hint of negativity? The answer is to be found in the nature of Arabian society. 'Muslim' did not refer to the oasis-based followers of the Prophet, who passionately believed in his preaching, but to the bedouin, the *a'rāb* of the surrounding desert, whose 'submission' to Muḥammad was more a political and opportunistic choice than an ideological embrace of his message.

This discovery underpins Chapter Three. The chapter starts with a deeper investigation into the bedouin than was pursued in the Introduction, appreciating the extent to which their lifestyle was conditioned by the nature of the Arabian Peninsula and the ways in which this led to the existence of structural economic interdependence between desert nomads and oasis dwellers. This argument is made using comparative, anthropological evidence as well as evidence peculiar to Arabia. It presents a realistic appreciation of the extent to which the lifestyles of pre-industrial peoples have been constrained by their environment, rather than a simplistic homage to notions of geographic determinism.

Chapter Three then looks at what the Islamic historical tradition has to say about the relationship between Muḥammad, his oasis-based community, and the bedouin. The *Sīrah* is found to be

remarkably revealing. It suggests that contact between the Prophet and the bedouin was both early and sustained, and was underscored by the ways in which Muḥammad stepped into the role of the *kāhin*, the pre-Islamic Arabian soothsayer, a figure of mediation that appears to have existed in a spiritual and physical location between the bedouin and the oasis. Contrary to widely-held notions that Muḥammad's nascent state was only able to unlock the manpower of the desert after the capitulation of Mecca – relying on the putatively extensive, pre-existing contacts the Qurasyh had developed with the bedouin tribes – Chapter Three also charts how it was in fact Medinan state-building, not Meccan trade, that saw the tribes fall under the Prophet's sway. This has further implications for what *al-islām*, as opposed to *al-ʿimān*, meant in the earliest days. Finally, the chapter ends by presenting a diachronic theory of Arabian state development. The insights offered by the Islamic sources for the appearance of a state in Yathrib are compared with better-attested examples of state development in Arabia – a historically generally stateless area – in order to show how the events of the early seventh century are not without some kind of regional historical parallel.

Chapter Four expands the scope of the thesis considerably. Building on the causes of Arabian Maximalisation identified in the Introduction, the chapter casts its gaze to the far horizon of early Islam: the wider world of Late Antiquity. It situates what would come to be the earthshattering events of the rise of Islam and the seventh-century conquests in their correct, longer-term historical context, namely the renewed rivalry between Rome and Persia that defines the Near East in the sixth century.

The bedouin are once again the crucial protagonists of the story, but now as clients of the great powers, with the focus resting on Rome. The transformation of the bedouin world that the sixth century saw is explored through an opening discussion of Roman frontier policy in the East in the first three decades of the sixth century, which led to the unprecedented creation of a single client power, the Ghassān. 'Ghassān' is employed as the descriptive term for Rome's Arabian clients, rather than the current preference for 'Jafnid,' as there are good grounds to believe that it was used contemporaneously. It anyway captures the need to consider mass as well as elite in exploring the rise of peripheral peoples. This new policy, moreover, had profound ramifications for pre-existing defensive arrangements, and contributed to the Emperor Justinian's decision effectively to reform the *limitanei* of the Palestinian frontier out of existence. These frontier developments bear comparison with the kind of transitions experienced by the Roman West in the previous century, appreciation of which offers a thought-provoking touchstone to assess the nature and significance of the development of client Arabian powers in the age before Islam.

Use of a range of sources shows these client powers to have become formidable military entities as the sixth century wore on. They evolved from clients to allies who were progressively more integrated into the high politics of the world beyond the Arabian borderlands: a potentially threatening pattern of development that helps to explain why Rome would come to move against them. Fundamentally, Arabia on the cusp of the Last Great War of Antiquity had become home to larger, more powerful bedouin coalitions, habituated to leadership beyond the tribe and to largescale military action, well aware of the rewards to be had by alternatively fighting for, and plundering, the lands of the great powers of the Fertile Crescent. These northern bedouin coalitions were precisely the groups that Chapter Three saw fall under the control of Yathrib.

Chapter Four ends by placing Muḥammad's wars within the Last Great War of Antiquity before charting the collapse of the Roman frontier to armies loyal to the Prophet's successors. The Prophet is suggested to have been a 'natural ally' of Christian bedouin with a history of service to Rome, and memories of some kind of Ghassānid connection are to be found within the Islamic historical tradition. Finally, the conquest of Roman Palestine – for which there are highly credible sources – reveals the ultimate importance of the transformation of the bedouin world to the final transformation of Late Antiquity. The defection of Rome's federates to the invading armies shows how the clients of the sixth century had become the conquerors of the seventh.

The fifth and final chapter argues that the end of the importance of the bedouin to the Islamic state – and the end of this first age of Arabian Maximalisation – was implicit in their conquests' success. Bearing in mind that recent research suggests that the early Islamic state was a complex and consciously ambitious entity from a very early stage, the indications in the source tradition that show Mu'āwiyā building on conquest practices of recruiting on the march to recruit his armies from the settled lands of the Fertile Crescent should be given due regard. This may well have been driven by the politics and division of the early state, but it was nonetheless an indication of what was to come over the subsequent centuries of the Caliphate. Before the rivalry of Rome and Persia had brought Arabian groups into the great events of the late antique Near East, they had been peripheral. Once the factors that had prompted their development were no more after the union of the old world effected by Islam, they became marginal again.

The Conclusion draws together the findings of the thesis, reiterates its novel contributions to the field, and offers suggestions for further research. Above all, it highlights how the rise of Islam and the greatest transition of Late Antiquity can indeed be explained with reference to 'ordinary historical processes,' using evidence from within and without the Islamic historical tradition, and uniting both the near and far horizons of Islamic origins into a single perspective. Muḥammad

was certainly a figure of exceptional charismatic power, whose message was the product of, and resonated with, the wider religious culture of the age. He also possessed an incisive understanding of how best to manipulate the social relations of Arabia to his advantage. The Prophet was also very lucky. The transformative effect of great power politics on the bedouin world had made the warriors of Arabia a martial force far more powerful than their ancestors, well able to take-on the armies of empires exhausted after years of struggle. The success of Islam was therefore the product of both accident and design, a phenomenon that charted a new course in world history, but that was ultimately the product of the world it destroyed.

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Introduction: They are constrained to be robbers...

On Dhū al-Ḥijjah 22, 302 (July 6, 915) the Arab tribesmen (a' rāb) went out from al-Ḥājjir, three farsakhs (eighteen km) from the desert, against the pilgrims returning from Mecca. They waylaid them and seized all their cash and whatever goods they wanted. They also drove away all their camels that they wanted and reportedly seized two hundred and eighty free women, not counting the male and female slaves seized.

(al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, Vol. III 4, p.2294)¹

This rather sorry episode is the conclusion to one of the most boldly ambitious projects of history ever written. The *History of the Prophets and Kings* of Abū Ja'fār Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī stretches from Creation to the author's own day, from Moses to Muḥammad, to his successors and beyond. It begins with reflections on the nature of the divine, transmits the tales of the men entrusted with God's message before Muḥammad, and contains memories of the Near East before the coming of the final apostle prior to moving on to tell the great story of Islam. Al-Ṭabarī recounts Muḥammad's revelation, his foundation of a community around that revelation, and its subsequent conquest of most of the known world. As the title of the work suggests, al-Ṭabarī is interested in the high politics of state, of kings and caliphs, of the men who make history. The fascinating, often intimate, insights he transmits on the dawn of Islam and its dominance of the West Eurasian stage make his chronicle invaluable for understanding the epochal transformation of the ancient world and the birth of a new civilisation.

It is almost impossible, therefore, bearing in mind the scope of al-Ṭabarī's work, not to feel something approaching a sense of disappointment at the end. There is no grand conclusion summarising the achievements of past generations of Muslims, or a bold anticipation of the glories their descendants no doubt would win. It is an anti-climax. The caliphate, an imperial project, the scope of which was not foreshadowed even in the conquests of Alexander, is unable to protect the pilgrims of the Ḥajj from the marauders of the desert on a well-trodden route not too far from Kūfa.² Alongside disappointment, knowledge of the broad history of Arabia also leads one to feel something else: a lack of surprise.

¹ *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, de Goeje, M.J., (ed.), 1879-1901, Leiden: Brill. The translation has been taken from Rosenthal, F., 1985, *The History of al-Ṭabarī Volume XXXVIII: The Return of the Caliphate to Baghdad*, State University of New York Press, p.207.

² Al-Ḥājjir, despite apparently being a den of robbers in 915, was one of the stations on the Darb Zubayda, the 'official' pilgrim route named after the wife of Hārūn al-Rashīd. See al-Rashid, S.A. & Young M.J.L., 2012,

The bedouin, the *a‘rāb* of al-Ṭabarī, are often presented as a similar combination of the cruel and concupiscent in the writings of the European travellers who started to explore the *terra incognita* of Arabia from the nineteenth century. Charles Montagu Doughty’s verdict on the nature of the dwellers of the desert as inveterate thieves that headlines this Introduction – ‘they are constrained to be robbers’ – is a confirmation of the insights of an earlier English traveller to the region, Sir Richard Burton.³ Burton recounts how ‘it is told of the Lahabah, a sept of the Auf near Rabigh, that a girl will refuse even her cousin (in marriage) unless, in the absence of other opportunities, he plunder some article from the Hajj Caravan.’⁴ The entirety of his journey is dominated by a concern for basic security as he makes his way through the lawless deserts. The Ḥajj caravan in which he travels to the holy cities is indeed no safer than the caravan of 915. Burton does not, however, have to wend his way to northern Najd actually to be attacked, but is ambushed in the heart of the Ḥijāz itself.

A number of Badawin were to be seen swarming like hornets over the crests of the hills, boys as well as men carrying huge weapons, and climbing with the agility of cats. They took up comfortable places on the cut-throat eminence, and began firing upon us with perfect convenience to themselves.

...

*We had therefore nothing to do but to blaze away as much powder, and to veil ourselves in as much smoke, as possible; the result of the affair is that we lost twelve men, besides camels and other beasts of burden.*⁵

The only substantive differences between 915 and 1853, the year in which Sir Richard made the pilgrimage, is that the caravan’s assailants enjoy the use of matchlock muskets and are somewhat less effective in their theft of women.

‘Darb Zubayda,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., & Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 12th of April 2018. The location’s only other two appearances in al-Ṭabarī fall in the year 60, when al-Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī passed through on his ill-fated journey from Mecca (*Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, Vol. I 2, p.288) and in the year 785, when another member of the ‘Alid clan died there whilst on pilgrimage to Mecca (*Tārīkh al-rusul wa al-mulūk*, Vol III 4, p.2518). When Ibn Baṭṭūṭa came to rest at al-Ḥājir in 1325-26, he noted that the wells had dried up, *Riḥlat Ibn Baṭṭūṭah* 1980, Dār Bayrūt, p.173-74. The tendency of bedouin tribes to attack caravans or to cause chaos in general is hardly limited to the final year of al-Ṭabarī’s narrative. The ninth century is dominated by the campaigns of generals sent south by the government of Sāmarrā’ to quell the restive tribes of the desert.

³ Doughty, C.M., 1926, *Travels in Arabia Deserta*, Jonathan Cape Ltd & The Medici Society Limited: London, p.244. The first edition was published in 1888 and Doughty himself explored Arabia between 1876 and 1878.

⁴ Burton, Sir R., 1893, *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah*, Tylston & Edwards: London, Vol. 2 p.101.

⁵ *Ibid*, Vol 1., p.273-74.

Dangerous though the bedouin undoubtedly could be to pilgrims making their way to and from Mecca, another characteristic that anthropological pioneers like Doughty and Burton comment upon is the cowardice and military ineffectiveness of the desert highwaymen. For all that the ambush Burton experienced was not without bloodshed, he nonetheless recognised that his bedouin attackers and others like them were mere ‘cautious freebooters who safely fire down upon Caravans from their eyries.’ In great contrast to the near contemporary Crimean War, in which Burton just missed serving and during which rifled firearms and modern artillery resulted in horrendous casualties, ‘Arab wars...are a succession of skirmishes, in which five hundred men will retreat after losing a dozen of their number.’⁶

This judgement cannot be dismissed as the superior assessment and dismissive exaggeration of an English officer familiar with modern European warfare and all that such warfare meant. Johann Ludwig Burckhardt, a Swiss philologist and explorer who spent years in the Levant before finally settling and dying in Cairo in 1817, was even more disparaging. He stated that he ‘could adduce numerous instances of caravan-travellers and peasants putting to flight three times their number of Arabs (bedouin) who had attacked them: hence, throughout Syria, they are reckoned miserable cowards, and their contests with the peasants always prove them such.’⁷

Convincing proof of Burckhardt’s assertion can be found in the account of William Gifford Palgrave, who explored Najd a decade after Burton’s sojourn to the Ḥijāz. He had a far happier encounter with bedouin bandits than did his predecessor. Even though he was travelling as part of a group far smaller than the Ḥajj caravan, and consequently far more vulnerable, Palgrave’s troop blithely saw off an attempt to rob them on the road between Ḥā‘il and Burayda. He tells how a band of Ḥarb tribesmen were easily frightened away when four of his fellows rode towards them, brandishing their muskets above their heads.⁸ The bedouin of Najd, of the borderlands of Syria, and of the Ḥijāz are as one in their pathetic lack of martial prowess. Wilfred Thesiger’s descriptions of raiding in Oman and the Yemen in his enthralling account of his crossing of Arabia’s Empty Quarter show similar tendencies in southern Arabian bedouin.⁹

⁶ Both quotes are from *ibid*, Vol 2., p.88

⁷ Burckhardt, J. L., 1831, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahābys*, Henry Colburn & Richard Bentley: London, Vol. 1., p.134.

⁸ Palgrave, W.G., 1868, *Personal Narrative of a Year’s Journey Through Central and Eastern Arabia (1862-63)*, MacMillan & Co.: London, p.137-138.

⁹ Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, Penguin Classics: London, p.73-74 for a description of raiding by the Dahm on the Manāhil in what is now the northern border area between Oman and Yemen. Small scale and often bloodless though such raiding may have been, Thesiger certainly communicates the peril in which even the theft of one or two camels could plunge a bedouin family in that barren land.

One of the most striking things about the descriptions of the bedouin as given by the nineteenth and twentieth century explorers of Arabia is their strong resonance with ancient testimony. For St Jerome, who settled in Bethlehem in 386 after spending about a year touring the Holy Land, ‘Arab’ was all but synonymous with ‘thief.’ He noted that, ‘instead of “thief” and “crow,” “Arab” is written in Hebrew, though it can also mean “provincial Arabs,” because this people are given up to thievery and even today penetrate the borders of Palestine and, after falling down upon them, besiege the roads between Jerusalem and Jericho’ (*On Jeremiah the Prophet*, 6.40).¹⁰

The bedouin take a starring role as the villains in a short yet fascinating *Life* composed by the saint towards the end of the fourth century. The *Life of Malchus* tells the tale of a troubled young monk enslaved by marauding bedouin after they, characteristically it would seem, attack a caravan travelling across the desert. In a vivid first-person account, which Jerome claims to have taken down after meeting the aged Malchus himself, half-naked, camel and horse-riding nomads are said to have come out of nowhere and to have descended upon the group of travellers, ‘not to fight, but to plunder’ (*Life of Malchus*, 4.2).¹¹ Malchus’ fate as a captive carried away on camel back and condemned to pasture his master’s flocks strikes the reader as a story that could be as old as that of Joseph, son of Jacob (*Genesis*, 37:25-28).¹²

Perhaps antiquity’s most famous description of whom Jerome, in the *Life of Malchus*, chooses to term the ‘Saracens’ (*Saraceni*) is that given by his close contemporary, the Roman officer and historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Even though the term itself is of contested origins and may connote more than a simple equalisation with bedouin, Ammianus is clear whom he means when he uses what had evidently become the common term for Near Eastern desert nomads by the fourth century. The ‘Saracens’ are ‘tent Arabs’ (*History*, 22.15.2).¹³

¹⁰ *Sancti Eusebii Hieronymi In Hieremiam Prophetam libri sex*, Reiter, S., (ed.), 1913, Vienna: F. Tempsky. There is considerable debate about what exactly ‘Arab’ could mean in Late Antiquity, as Jerome himself appears to acknowledge and which will be explored in a later chapter. For present purposes, it is sufficient to recognise that the fact Jerome uses the term to describe thieves who enter Palestine – from the deserts beyond the eastern frontier (where else?) – makes it hard to deny that he is not referring to bedouin.

¹¹ *Jerome, ‘Vita Malchi,’ Introduction, Text, Translation, Commentary*, Gray, C., 2015, Oxford University Press, p.78-93. Gray dates the composition of the text to 391-92 (p.5-6) and judges it ‘plausible’ that Jerome did not write a work of fiction (p.7-10). Even were the *Vita* to be fictitious, its realistic details and the fact that Jerome would have wanted the story to be plausible to his contemporary audience to demonstrate the rewards God would give to those who maintain their chastity ensures that it cannot be considered a work of fantasy.

¹² The Septuagint describes the men to whom Joseph is sold by his brothers as ‘Ishmaelites,’ (*Ismaēlitai*) riding camels and carrying spices (*The Septuagint Version of The Old Testament, with an English Translation and with various readings and critical notes*, London: Samuel Bagster and Sons.) As with ‘Arab,’ ‘Ishmaelite’ is a term hardly without its complexities but the desert location and the evident nomadism and camel-riding of the passing traders places them in the same world as later bedouin.

¹³ *Ammiani Marcellini rerum gestarum libri qui supersunt*, Seyfarth, W., (ed.), 1978, Leipzig: Teubner (*Scenitas Arabes, quos Saracenos nunc appellamus*).

Ammianus' digression upon them – unfortunately so short given that he reminds the reader he had already given a fuller description in a now lost book – vividly pictures the nature and habits of the kind of men who seized Malchus at roughly the same time Ammianus was writing. They 'are just like grasping kites, who, when they espy prey from on high, take it quickly in a swoop, or if they do not obtain it, do not delay to run away' (*History*, 14.4.1). They are nomads, who wander across the Near East on slender camels and swift horses, without any settled home or formal laws (14.4.3). Their conjugal customs are shockingly liberal (14.4.4). The food of the Saracens bears no resemblance to what would have graced Ammianus' own plate. Saracens simply eat meat, milk, forage, and whatever birds they can catch (14.4.6). They are an odd, foreign, and 'ruinous people' (14.4.7).

Dangerous and threatening though Ammianus may present the Saracens to be, his ethnographic digression also hints at their fundamental marginality to the great events of his day. Tellingly, even if it would be troublesome to have the Saracens as one's enemy, they are not really worth being one's ally either: 'the Saracens, moreover, we have never desired as friends or enemies,' as Ammianus begins his description (*History*, 14.4.1). This sentiment is confirmed in Ammianus' account of the Emperor Julian's unsuccessful invasion of Persia. Rather than actively seeking to recruit the raiders of the desert, Julian has the services of some Saracens pressed upon him when their leaders – referred to using the diminutive term 'princeling' (*regulus*) – come and offer their submission at his camp (23.3.8).

Written histories from the ancient world, the 'Abbāsīd Caliphate, and the accounts of modern travellers to Arabia, therefore, are strikingly united on their treatment and presentation of the bedouin. The Saracens of Ammianus and St Jerome, the *a'rab* of al-Ṭabarī, and the 'Badawin' of Sir Richard Burton are uniformly inveterate thieves and wanton brigands, who nonetheless have no stomach or muscle for a proper fight. So much for the contention of the most enduringly fascinating historical thinker to have been produced by the medieval Islamic world, Ibn Khaldūn, that the bedouin are the embodiment of courage and fortitude.¹⁴ Even Ammianus' description of the ease of marriage and divorce among the desert nomads rings true to the impressions gathered and stories told by the nineteenth century travellers, as well as to well-recognised, and indeed

¹⁴ *Ibn Khaldūn*, 'The Muqaddimah:' *An Introduction to History*, Rosenthal, F., (trans.), Dawood, N.J., (ed.), and Lawrence, B. B., 2015, Princeton University Press, p.94-97 for comments on the alleged virtues of the bedouin.

canonised, later Arabian and Islamic practice.¹⁵ We are presented, it would seem, with inhabitants of the desert as timeless as the sands within which they live.

Combatting the ‘Orientalist’ Critique

For many who adhere to a certain, hardly influential trend in scholarship, this terrible and timeless, essentialising verdict would be considered nothing but a hostile mirage arising out of a fundamentally prejudiced literary tradition. Both our ancient and our more modern observers are open to the baleful charge of ‘colonialism.’ As outsiders looking in on a foreign world populated by a wildly different people whom they putatively seek to dominate, they cannot but paint portraits as skewed and as unsympathetic as they are negative and patronising. Our ancient witnesses, furthermore, are open to the more specialised accusation that they are constrained by the perspectives of classical ethnography: a literary genre obsessed with the perpetuation of basic national stereotypes in order to add drama to a narrative and to display the author’s erudition.¹⁶ Thus can one recent study of the relationships between Rome and the nomads of the Sinai Peninsula come to the conclusion that ‘it may not be possible to use Greco-Roman sources to understand the culture of the historical Near Eastern nomads,’ despite, in some respects, ironically trying to do just that.¹⁷

The precise variation on the post-colonialist theme to which ‘western’ accounts of the Near East are alleged to be wedded is, of course, the discourse of ‘orientalism.’ The shadow cast over recent study of the Near East by Edward Said’s eponymous tract – one of the founding texts of post-colonialism – has been almost as profound as the prejudices it allegedly exposed in the western scholarly tradition were said to be deep and all-embracing.¹⁸ For Said, at least since Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt – or the eleventh-century, or earlier – western scholars have uniformly marched in line with their countries’ imperial ambitions to dominate and subject the East. The accounts

¹⁵ Doughty gives a typically lucid series of anecdotes on the nature of bedouin marriage when he is asked by one of his hosts to marry one of the host’s own wives: “‘See, I have two wives, and, billah, I will give thee to choose between them; say which hast thou rather, and I will leave her and she shall become thy wife.’” (1926, *Travels*, p.320-21, p.321-22 for the further material). For a detailed summary of marriage customs and divorce in the Islamic world, see respectively Heffening, W., 2012, ‘‘Urs,’ and Schacht, J., & Layish, A., 2012, ‘Ṭalāk,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., & Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 19th of April 2018.

¹⁶ See Woolf, G., 2011, *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West*, Wiley-Blackwell for an often sophisticated and subtle analysis of classical ethnography that nonetheless takes the post-colonialist approach as its starting point.

¹⁷ Ward, W.D., 2015, *The Mirage of the Saracen: Christians and Nomads in the Sinai Peninsula in Late Antiquity*, University of California Press, p.8.

¹⁸ Said, E., 1978, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books. It has been reissued under the auspices of different publishers several times. One quote above all sums up Said’s sweeping assertions: ‘every European, in what he could say about the Orient, was consequently a racist, an imperialist, and almost totally ethnocentric’ (p.204).

they wrote of the lands and peoples east of the Bosphorus were not sensitive scholarly articles or thoughtful travelogues and histories, but polemics masked by high prose, which themselves became textual artefacts of domination.

In Burton's writing, for instance, Said says, 'we are never directly *given* the Orient; everything about it is presented to us by way of Burton's knowledgeable (and often prurient) interventions, which remind us repeatedly how he had taken over the management of Oriental life for the purposes of his narrative.'¹⁹ The names of westerners who travelled in and wrote about the Near East are listed one after another, regardless of precise temporal context, and said to have without exception 'expressed the traditional Western hostility to and fear of the Orient.'²⁰ Their own personal experiences and authorial motivations, if Said takes any account of them, are insinuated to be allusions, their claims to personal encounters with the East a mere smoke-screen for the simple recycling of their intrinsic prejudices.²¹

The analysis of Said, his followers and fellow-travellers, influences how most etic texts that concern themselves with the Near East, from any age, are read.²² There has been a remarkable tendency in scholarship, therefore, to impute onto texts notions of prejudice and predetermined purpose solely on the basis of the identity class to which a text's author is thought to have belonged. This somewhat dogmatic approach risks entirely neglecting the rigorous analysis of source material and the sensitive appreciation of authorial idiosyncrasy. The existence of such a tendency is all the more unsettling owing to the weak foundations on which Said's criticism actually rests.

Book length studies now exist that take apart Said's poor grasp of history and egregious factual errors.²³ In short, his litany of mistakes amount to an 'alternative universe' in which history is rewritten to aid the simplification of complex phenomena into a specious narrative, the appeal of which owes more to late twentieth and twenty first-century politics than it does to the accuracy of its source analysis.²⁴ It is clear, above all, that Said did not deign to become familiar with the

¹⁹ Ibid, p.196.

²⁰ Ibid, p.237.

²¹ See, for example, p.223 for such comments on Doughty, and p.237 for wider-ranging allegations.

²² Ward, W.D., 2015, *The Mirage of the Saracen*, p.6 explicitly states that his source approach is determined by 'the framework of postcolonial studies.'

²³ See Irwin, R., 2006, *For Lust of Knowing: The Orientalists and Their Enemies*, Allen Lane, and the admittedly stringently polemical and wider-ranging work of the author known as Ibn Warraq, 2007, *Defending the West*, Prometheus Books, esp. p.245-272.

²⁴ Lewis, B., 1982/1993, 'The Question of Orientalism,' reprinted in *Islam and the West*, Oxford University Press, p.99-118, p.109 for the quote, p.114 for the contemporary appeal of Said's 'science fiction history.'

biographies and detailed work of many of his ‘Orientalists,’ lest they as individuals undermine what he claimed to be their nature as a group.²⁵

Rather than agents of empire engaged in a vast conspiracy uniting the scholar’s desk with the corridors of power, the overwhelming majority of the authors he surveys operated at a disconnect to the European empires of their day. Many of the most influential orientalist figures, being German and Dutch, did not actually belong to the dominant powers of the age, Britain and France. The pedantic philologists, learned historians, and assiduous – if not occasionally romantic – anthropological adventurers involved in the hard scholarship that actually defined orientalism did not share the postmodernist’s grim obsession with power. To impute malign designs onto them and to see them as nothing but the cadres of a grand historical movement is revealing more of the Marxist and Foucauldian roots of Said’s own thought than of the careers of the Orientalists he attacks. Indeed, the final lines of a short book that offers a genuinely informative history of some western Orientalists, which was written three decades before Said put pen to paper, suggests that many eastern scholars nurtured far more generous and humane aspirations than merely to become the pliant intellectuals of power. Arthur Arberry ends *British Orientalists* by deploring barriers between peoples and cultures, arguing that the hard work of generations of British Orientalists has ‘played a most important part in promoting that true respect and sympathy between peoples which alone can form the foundation of a better society and a more lasting peace.’²⁶

Once one escapes the ideological straightjacket that *Orientalism* has imposed, and consequently refuses to see all etic texts as intrinsically compromised, it becomes clear that the questions posed by Said’s criticism can be quite convincingly answered. His above comments on Burton, for example, essentially equate to the bland point that his account, like any account, offers a partial representation of what he witnessed, and is of course the product of his ‘interventions’ because it was he who wrote it. The value of his writings on Arabia, therefore, should be assessed in the light of as many sources as possible, culled from as many perspectives as possible. If Said could discount a text’s value on the basis of who its author was, then surely we should be bold enough to credit a text if its author’s purposes and designs can be ascertained.

Indeed, all of the modern European observers of nomadic Arabian ways that have been surveyed were hardly unsympathetic to the subjects of their enquiry. A critical thinker would be wrong to

²⁵ Irwin, R., 2006, *For Lust of Knowing*, p.277-309.

²⁶ Arberry, A.J., 1943, *British Orientalists*, William Collins of London, p.47. The wartime date of publication may imply a subtle need to accentuate the intellectual achievements of the British as a fair and peace loving people, but does nothing to explain what strikes the reader as Arberry’s genuine fascination and admiration for a panoply of eastern civilisations.

consider their portraits of the desert Arabs as nothing more than a stereotype. Doughty, for example, immersed himself in the world of the bedouin, earning the respect even of an old Arabia-hand like Burton.²⁷ Doughty travelled as a pauper, an Englishman, and was honest about his Christian faith, sufficiently respecting his bedouin hosts and trusting to their hospitality to risk being disagreeable to them, and even vociferously disagreeing with them, as in his discussions of slavery.²⁸ It was with very good reason that Colonel T.E. Lawrence, *the* English Arabist of the next generation, wrote that Doughty's 'tall and impressive figure' combined with his 'wise and gentle' nature had such an effect upon the bedouin that '(h)e predisposed them to give a chance to other men of his race, because they had found him honourable and good.'²⁹

Perhaps a more acute degree of care, however, needs to be applied to our classical authorities. It is almost otiose to recognise that, in antiquity, ethnographic digressions could be employed in a text for reasons other than to give an accurate impression of a certain people. It is also noteworthy just how static the classical ethnographic tradition could be – embedded as it was in histories that are dominated by political change – leading at least one contemporary scholar to explain this 'balkanisation of knowledge' by arguing that ethnography became a foil to the bland homogenisation of the provinces of the empire.³⁰ Yet paying due accord to the appearance of certain repeated tropes and the way in which ethnographic digressions are used within a narrative framework should not become reasons for dismissing ancient evidence out of hand.³¹

Ammianus Marcellinus, like Doughty, Burton and others, was no armchair ethnographer. He was a native of Antioch who served on the Roman Empire's eastern marches for most of his career, fighting, for example, with Julian in the Persian campaign of 363.³² It is highly likely, therefore, that his impressions of the Saracens were influenced by first-hand experience. Ammianus may also have been writing in the classical tradition of ethnography, but to banish his testimony to the realms of form and literary allusion is surely going too far.³³ Ammianus was both a practical man

²⁷ Burton, Sir R., 28th July 1888, 'Mr Doughty's Travels in Arabia,' *The Academy*, p.47-48. Sir Richard, evidently speaking on behalf of all who had travelled into Arabia, says that 'we all can vouch for its truth' when discussing Doughty's impressions of the bedouin (p.47).

²⁸ Doughty, C.M., 1926, *Travels*, p.290.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.xix. Colonel Lawrence wrote the Introduction to the 1926 reprint of Doughty's *Travels*, a rare use of his fame to promote what he considered a neglected work, suggestive of the high quality of Doughty's account.

³⁰ Woolf, G., 2011, *Tales of the Barbarians*, p.110-114.

³¹ *Ibid.* Woolf accepts that at least some individual authors contributed genuinely new and probably quite correct information – see for instance p.60 or p.114 – despite their embrace of fictionalised generalisations.

³² Matthews, J. F., 1974, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire*, Vol 1., Oxford University Press, p.547-48.

³³ For a reading of Ammianus' treatment of the various barbarian peoples that appear in his *History* as largely a literary exercise, however, see Wiedemann, T.E.J., 1986, 'Between Men and beasts: barbarians in Ammianus Marcellinus' in Moxon, I.S., Smart, J.D., and Woodman, A.J., (eds.), *Past Perspectives: studies in Greek and*

and a very sensitive observer of the world around him, as elsewhere demonstrated by the care he takes to digress upon the technical details of elements of the soldier's craft other than the enemies he faces, like the war machines used by the Roman army (*History*, 23.4.1-15). At most, Ammianus can be accused of 'over-simplification.'³⁴

Considering the limits of the orientalist critique, therefore, the use of etic authorities should not be discounted. The fact that such a variety of evidence – from different periods and from different literary and cultural traditions – paints remarkably similar pictures militates for the essential truth of those images. All of the above sources, selected from periods in which the source base for Arabia is relatively rich, pertain to men who inhabited an ecologically particular and, in general, unchanging region that could only ever enable certain patterns of life to emerge, assuming stability in outside influences. Terrain like steppes, deserts and even mountainous zones are well recognised in scholarship as presenting perennial challenges to pre-modern man, which lead to the evolution and long-term stability of certain structural ecological relationships.³⁵ Finding similar modes of existence across time, therefore, should in some respects be unsurprising. This is not to say, of course, that there was no change or internal variety at all over the centuries, but merely that such differences and changes have tended to be few, far between, and limited.³⁶

From Robbers to World Conquerors

A long view of history, therefore, should provoke the student of early Islam to ask one fundamental question above all. How, in the seventh century, did the petty robbers of the desert become a force so powerful that they were able to erupt out of their impoverished peninsula to destroy the august order of the ancient world, and to refashion the Near East and lands far beyond it in accordance to the teachings of a prophet called Muḥammad? What was, to quote Ibn Khaldūn, the 'general change of conditions' between Ammianus and Muḥammad that gave rise to a situation whereby 'the entire creation had changed and the whole world been altered, as if it were

Roman historical writing, papers presented at a conference in Leeds, 6-8 April 1983, Cambridge University Press, p.189-201.

³⁴ Matthews, J., 1989, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, London: Duckworth, p.353; see p.304-82 for a wider review of Ammianus' treatment of barbarians and bandits, p.332-55 for comments on nomads specifically. Matthews correctly points out that, even if elements of what Ammianus has to say about nomad peoples could be considered 'stereotypes,' they nonetheless conform to the realities of nomad existence, like the copious drinking of milk.

³⁵ This theme will be further explored in Chapter Three.

³⁶ Graf, D.F., 1989, 'Rome and the Saracens: Reassessing the Nomadic Menace,' in *L'Arabie préislamique et son environnement historique et culturel, Actes de Colloque de Strasbourg 24 – 27 Juin 1987, Travaux du Centre de Recherche sur le Proche-Orient et la Grèce Antiques 10*, Fahid T. (ed.), Leiden : Brill, p.341 – 400. At p.356, Graf identifies the Thamudic and Safaitic epigraphic habit evident in northern Arabia before the third century as perhaps the one thing that distinguished the desert nomads of that age from later, and earlier, generations.

a new and repeated creation?³⁷ This is a question that may have been pondered and asked before, but it is a question that can, and should, be extended. How and why, after conquering the known world, did the Arabians who inhabited the same lands as the tribesmen of the armies of the seventh century drift back, in a few short centuries, to becoming a marginal collection of peoples in a land once again on the periphery of the cultural and economic heartlands of the Near East, namely Mesopotamia, the Levant, and Egypt?

These are questions that can be asked not only about Arabians, but also about Arabia itself. It is almost superfluous to point out what a hostile environment the peninsula is to all but its own inhabitants. Arabia is essentially little more than the eastern quarter of the Sahara desert, cut-off in permanent exile from Africa by the Red Sea. Most of the peninsula receives only 100-350mm of rainfall per year.³⁸ The overwhelming majority of Arabia's landmass is therefore arid and barren, offering a habitat to only very select groups of flora and fauna.

Ammianus' Saracens were so marginal to the world in which he lived largely because they came from a land that offered so little, and in which state structures, as a consequence, had not taken root among the dry sands. Rome and Persia, the great empires of Late Antiquity, which a later Roman historian would refer to as the 'two eyes' shining out upon the world, were fundamentally sustained by the agriculture of the Fertile Crescent that millennia previously had originally made the evolution of cities, states, and complex cultures possible.³⁹ The land between the two rivers of the Tigris and the Euphrates financed the armies of the Persian Shah – even if the Sassanian inflection on the Persian vocabulary of empire owed its origins to the Iranian plateau – and Rome's strength was maintained above all by Egypt, and by the productive lands of the Mediterranean littoral and Anatolia.⁴⁰

³⁷ *Ibn Khaldūn*, 'The Muqaddimah,' Rosenthal, F., 2015, p.30. Ibn Khaldūn makes these comments as part of a discussion exploring how there are some periods of history, often separated by cataclysmic events like the Black Death, that bear so little resemblance to one another that it may be difficult in the extreme for men of a later age fully to understand them.

³⁸ Lewis, N., 1987, *Nomads and Settlers in Syria and Jordan: 1800-1980*, University of Cambridge, p.1. Parts of the southernmost tip of the Arabian peninsula, notably the highlands of modern day Yemen, enjoy a monsoon season courtesy of proximity to the Indian Ocean.

³⁹ The evocative image of the two empires as the world's two eyes illuminating the world in their rival yet twin majesty is taken from the *History* of Theophylact Simocatta, 4.11.2-3. *Theophylacti Simocattae Historiae*, de Boor, C., (ed.), 1887, Leipzig: Teubner. See Crone, P., 1994, 'The Tribe and the State,' in Hall, J.A., (ed.), *The State: Critical Concepts*, Routledge: London, p.446-473, esp., p.450-456 for a short and incisive analysis of early state formation in southern Mesopotamia, the first area of the Fertile Crescent to develop the state, and perhaps one of only two areas in world history in which state development was genuinely and wholly autochthonous (the other area being Mesoamerica).

⁴⁰ It is well recognised that Late Antiquity witnessed economic expansion across the eastern Mediterranean, underwriting the exchequer of the Roman Empire even if some would contend that the state's tax raising efforts were often frustrated. See Banaji, J., 2001, *Agrarian Change in Late Antiquity: Gold, Labour and Aristocratic*

There was a good reason why the Arabian interior was such an enticing and unknown quantity to the gentlemen adventurers of the nineteenth century, regardless even of the confessional divide and the constraints of contemporary communication and logistical technologies. For much of human history, there has been little reason for outsiders to show much of an interest in Arabia. The Ḥajj, an attraction open only to believers and one that takes them no more than just over forty miles from the sea, is the exception that proves the rule. Even many Muslim scholars have historically directed little attention towards the homeland of their faith, making reconstruction of the history of Arabia before the nineteenth century difficult in the extreme. Modern historians have had to content themselves with the realisation that this lack of interest is probably nothing if not understandable, given the ‘largely tribal, cyclical and trivial’ nature of Arabian history.⁴¹

Yet, for all of Arabia’s generally peripheral and trifling role in world history, the peninsula has demonstrated a remarkable tendency, in certain exceptional ages, to find itself the very pivot on which events of global and epochal significance turn. The seventh century is of course the first and obvious example. It is worth surveying another such period, however, in order to see whether it could offer any potential interpretative insights for the seventh century.

Arabian Maximalisation in the Modern World

After 1498, following Vasco da Gama’s discovery of the sea route to India, Arabia’s nodal position in routes of trade and communication between the Mediterranean and the Orient fell to a very poor second place to those pioneered by European seafarers. From 1869, however, with the completion of the Suez Canal, the peninsula’s strategic position as a bridge between West and East once again created the foundations of a new age of Arabian maximalisation.⁴²

Dominance, University of Oxford, esp. p.6-22. For the fiscal significance of Mesopotamia, relative to the Iranian heartland, to Sassanian Persia, see Howard-Johnston, J., 1995, ‘The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: a Comparison,’ in Cameron, A., (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, III States, Resources and Armies*, Princeton University Press, p. 157-226, esp. p. 180-182. Michael Cook offers a variation on the Fertile Crescent theme. He places one of what he calls the two ‘potential imperial heartlands’ of the Middle East in Mesopotamia and the other in Anatolia and the Balkans; see Cook, M., 2016, ‘The long-term geopolitics of the pre-modern Middle East,’ *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 3.26.1-2, p.33-41. Highlighting the role of Anatolia and the Balkans as an imperial breadbasket certainly makes sense with respect to the Ottoman Empire, but the inability of Byzantium to push the frontier with the Caliphate permanently south of the Taurus is suggestive of the economically crucial role of Egypt and the Levant to the Roman Empire’s strength.

⁴¹ Landau-Tasserion, E., 2010, ‘Arabia,’ in Robinson, C., (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I – the Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, University of Cambridge, p.397-447, p.397 for the quote. Landau-Tasserion’s article is sensitive to regional and temporal variation, but she makes clear at the outset that all such differentiation took place within severely constrained developmental parameters.

⁴² Leatherdale, C., 1983, *Britain and Saudi Arabia, 1925-1939: The Imperial Oasis*, London: Totowa, N.J., p.9 for the significance of 1498 and 1869.

The strategic importance of Arabia's geography was sensed, and needed, above all by the British Empire. In the words of her own high command, 'The British Empire (was) pre-eminently a great Naval, Indian, and Colonial power.'⁴³ Western Arabia's position astride the flanks of the sea route to India via Suez, and her north-eastern coastline's astride the alternative Mesopotamian route via the Persian Gulf, ensured that the peninsula was bound to enter into ever greater degrees of interest to administrators and soldiers in London, Delhi, and, from 1882 and the British occupation of Egypt, in Cairo. Yet it was not imperial need alone that sparked what Elizabeth Monroe evocatively and suitably dubbed 'Britain's Moment in the Middle East,' but the exigencies of imperial competition.⁴⁴

The Ottoman Empire's entry into the First World War on the side of the Central Powers forced a radical reversal of British policy. Previously, Britain had aimed to support the tottering Turkish state as a means of ensuring stability on land and safe passage on the seas. With the Sultan an ally of the Kaiser, and an ally whose religious claims as Caliph risked exciting the Muslim population of India into insurrection, Britain had to look to military means to knock-out a power which, when strengthened by German military advisors and technology, threatened to divide the world of the *Pax Britannica* in two.⁴⁵ Britain's first attempt at finding a soft underbelly failed at Gallipoli. It was to Arabia, therefore, that British attention shifted, not least because some Arabs had already brought British attention to themselves. A certain set of imperial visionaries and dreamers even began to conceive of a new Arab Empire – under British tutelage, naturally – that could replace the Turkish Sultan in Constantinople.⁴⁶

The Arab Revolt, as it became known, broke out on the 15th of June, 1916. It gained the crucial political support of London – despite many generals' concern that it was a wasteful distraction – because of what the peninsula's strategic position could do for the British Empire once the war in

⁴³ The quote is taken from the First Report of the Committee of Imperial Defence, in Hankey, Lord M., *The Supreme Command: 1914-1918*, Vol. 1, London: Allen & Unwin, p.46.

⁴⁴ Monroe, E., 1981, *Britain's Moment in the Middle East: 1914-1971*, London: Chatto & Windus. The book was originally released in 1963 but was reissued with revisions and a Foreword by Peter Mansfield in 1981 to take account of new evidence that had emerged surrounding the Suez Crisis, the end of Britain's 'moment.'

⁴⁵ See Barr, J., 2006, *Setting the Desert on Fire: T. E. Lawrence and Britain's Secret War in Arabia, 1916-1918*, London: Bloomsbury, p.16 for British fear upon gathering intelligence on the Ottomans' development of military infrastructure and supply bases around Gaza. Sir Henry McMahon, then High Commissioner in Egypt, recalled that, 'I was begged by the Foreign Office to take immediate action and draw the Arabs out of the war' (a nationalist revolt in the Middle East being thought of as a means to prompt ethnically Arab units within the Ottoman army to mutiny) (p.12).

⁴⁶ See Monroe, E., 1981, *Britain's Moment*, p.20 for the pre-war visit of Abdullah, a son of the Sharif of Mecca, to Lord Kitchener. No description of the 'wild men' who, once war had broken out, started to devise plans for a rising of the Arabs against the Turks can match that of T.E. Lawrence for its sense of adventure and romance, 1926/2000, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom: A Triumph*, Penguin Classics, p.54-60.

the West was won.⁴⁷ It was not simply a taste for rhetorical exaggeration that prompted David Lloyd George, Prime Minister by the end of 1916, to say to Parliament late in the following year that ‘these events in Mesopotamia and Palestine will hold a much more conspicuous place in the minds and the memories of people than many an event which looms much larger for the moment in our sight.’⁴⁸ Among the many consequences of the Arab Revolt was the creation of a Middle East dominated by Britain and her client states, in some of which lay a resource whose importance would eventually come to compete with considerations of geography in the minds of Western statesmen: oil.

Securing reliable supplies of oil was without doubt a central British war aim, conditioned by the decision to convert the Royal Navy from solid to liquid fuel in 1912. It was for this reason that the line in the sand dividing the French from the British sphere of influence in the Near East had to be adjusted to include the oil fields of Mosul within British Iraq.⁴⁹ Ensuring access to these oil fields was such a high priority for the British that it came to dominate plans for imperial defence by the outbreak of the Second World War. It is telling that the British Army in India and elsewhere in the East was trained and equipped not to fight in the jungles, mountains, and paddy fields of the Subcontinent, or of other British possessions like Malaya, but to wage war in the desert. The disastrous collapse in the wake of the Japanese advance into Burma, therefore, was at least partially the result of an imperial fascination with the Near East.⁵⁰

Oil has, however, been a more important strategic consideration for Britain’s successor as the dominant world power, America, than it was in the days when Britain really did rule the waves.⁵¹ This has largely been the result of the sharp increase in Middle Eastern oil production from the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century. It reached a quarter of all world output by 1960 and sat at over one third by 1972, the year before the international embargo launched by what was then called the Organisation of Arab Petroleum Exporting Countries.⁵² The price rises and subsequent economic pressure that the embargo exerted on the West revealed the global

⁴⁷ Hughes, M., 1999, *Allenby and British Strategy in the Middle East, 1917-1919*, London: F. Cass, p.23-42 for an exploration of the divergent perspectives on the value, or otherwise, of the Arab Revolt to British interests.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, p.27-28.

⁴⁹ *Ibid*, p.120-22.

⁵⁰ Slim, Field Marshall the Viscount, 1956/2009, *Defeat into Victory*, Pan Military Classics, p.16-17. Viscount Slim’s eventual ability to turn the tide against the Japanese had its roots in the fact that he had previously commanded one of the few British battalions (2/7th Gurkhas) that had actually received some jungle training.

⁵¹ See Monroe, E., 1981, *Britain’s Moment*, p.95-115 for a balanced assessment of the role of oil in British policy towards Arabia in the twentieth century. Monroe stresses that it took some decades for the Arab states to become major oil producers. Even as late as 1948, the Middle East – Arabia and Mesopotamia – still accounted for only an eighth of global oil output and America had remained the British Empire’s chief supplier of oil throughout the Second World War.

⁵² Statistics sourced from <http://tools.bp.com/energy-charting-tool>, accessed on the 3rd of May 2018.

ramifications of displeasing the group of countries that had come together to form the world's single greatest oil producer.

Maintaining the friendship of countries like Saudi Arabia, by far the biggest producer in what is now called OPEC, therefore became a lodestar of American foreign policy. Ensuring the security of the shipping lanes through which Arabian oil flows – the Straits of Hormuz, which separates Iran from Oman, sees about one fifth of the world's oil flow through it in any given year – became a necessary complimentary objective.⁵³ American competition with the Soviet Union for influence in the Middle East during the Cold War, moreover, gave Western policy-makers another reason to obsess about Arabia, in a manner recalling British anxiety about Tsarist Russia's ambitions in the wider region in the previous century.

This is not the place to explore and debate the consequences of America's moment in the Middle East in any detail. Unlike Britain's, America's moment is not yet history. It is sufficient to say, however, that American interest in the region has helped to ensure that its politics have a global resonance and that the Middle East has become something akin to the world's tinderbox. Arabia and the surrounding Arab lands indeed often seem to dominate international affairs: in any given year of the past decade, only Africa can compete as a region that has consumed the attentions of the United Nations to a similar extent, as measured by the number of Security Council Resolutions.⁵⁴ Scenes of war and destruction from countries like Palestine, Iraq and Syria have been staples of news broadcasts for years. Radical Islamist ideologies have flowed out of the region, found justification in the structure of its politics, and have infected Muslim communities from Philadelphia to the Philippines.⁵⁵

⁵³ The United States' Energy Information Administration has identified the Straits of Hormuz as the most important of seven oil 'chokepoints' found across the world, another being the Bab el-Mandab, between the Yemen and Somalia, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=7830>, accessed on the 8th of May 2018.

⁵⁴ In 2014, for example, out of a total of 63 Security Council Resolutions, 12 pertained to the Arab Middle East and North Africa, and 15 to sub-Saharan Africa; <http://www.un.org/en/sc/documents/resolutions/> accessed on the 3rd of July 2018.

⁵⁵ The now classic example of an extremist tract whose composition was motivated by contemporary politics but has since become considered a timeless exposition of Islamism is Sayyid Qutb's *Milestones*, originally published in Arabic as *Ma'ālim fī al-tarīq* in 1964 and widely available in translation in various languages. Philadelphia experienced an Islamic State-inspired 'lone wolf' terror attack in January 2016 and the long-running domestic insurgency (the Moro Conflict) in the Mindanao region of the Philippines, which possesses a sizeable Muslim minority, has also recently been influenced and exacerbated by Middle Eastern terror groups. See, for instance, Heydarian, R.J., November 9th 2017, 'After ISIS, What's next for Marawi?' *Foreign Affairs*, accessed on the 3rd of July 2018: <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/philippines/2017-11-09/after-isis-whats-next-marawi>.

Arabian Maximalisation in the Seventh Century

What, however, can the current age of Arabian maximalisation tell us about the first such age, the seventh century? Despite the vast temporal gulf that separates both periods, is it possible to identify parallel historical phenomena, similar trends, or political and social developments that can be all the better understood only if one dares to relate one to another? Above all, can the emergence of Islam, and the development of the state that cast the revelations of a prophet into civilizational form, be understood ‘in terms of ordinary historical processes,’ be they processes peculiar to Late Antiquity or phenomena discernible in other ages?⁵⁶

Comparing the ancient evidence for the context into which the early Islamic state appeared with the current age of Arabian maximalisation immediately points to three, by now familiar, factors that prepared the inhabitants of the peninsula for their original age of pre-eminence. In the sixth and the seventh centuries these forces were closely dependent on one another. The first factor was the intense rivalry between the two great powers of the ancient world, Rome and Persia. After the relative peace of the fifth century, this enmity exploded into a new and progressively more intractable series of conflicts from 502, culminating in what has been dubbed the Last Great War of Antiquity, between 603 and 628.⁵⁷ Both stalemate and the loss of advantage to one side on the Syrian and heavily fortified Caucasian fronts encouraged the empires to look to Arabia – the land between and to the south – as an area of new strategic significance. This tendency of Arabia’s geographic position to become, on occasion, unusually important to external powers was the second factor.

Imperial competition and strategic geography led Rome and Persia to become ever more interested in the third element, the resources of the Arabian peninsula. These were not its petroleum products, but its fighting men. The empires came to place an ever higher value on their client relationships with Arabian groups on and beyond the immediate frontier. The great powers invested more in federates like the Ghassān and the Lakhm, creating powerful coalitions of bedouin warriors. The preaching of Muḥammad, and the fact that it so naturally led to the creation of a new political entity, moreover, would have been impossible without the weaponization of

⁵⁶ In his *magnum opus*, James Howard-Johnston makes the tantalisingly contestable claim that the success of the early Islamic conquests and state ‘cannot possibly be explained in terms of ordinary historical processes.’ Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*, University of Oxford, p.448.

⁵⁷ The term was coined by Howard-Johnston, J., 2006, ‘Al-Tabari on the Last Great War of Antiquity,’ in Howard-Johnston, J., *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity. Historiographical and Historical Studies*, Aldershot: Ashgate, p.1-22.

competing strands of monotheism by the empires. Likewise, the conquests of his successors would have been inconceivable without imperial rivalry bequeathing to the peninsula a tradition of largescale military action beyond the defence of the tribe.

The role of the world to the north in preparing the ground for the emergence of Islam has, over recent years, become well recognised. The faith founded by Muḥammad is now generally seen by specialists as the fulfilment of many of the intellectual trends of Late Antiquity – not least the increased fusing of faith and state identities – and the bibliography on the Arabian clients of Rome and Persia grows ever longer.⁵⁸ The sheer extent to which the Arabia of Muḥammad was politically structured in response to the demands of the empires has not, however, been fully appreciated, nor has the pivotal role of imperial clientage in opening at least the Roman frontier to conquest from the Ḥijāz. Indeed, much of what is confusing about the story of Muḥammad’s life and the victory of his nascent Medinan state can be made to make sense when placed fully in the context of the Last Great War of Antiquity.

Arabians and Muḥammad especially, however, were hardly little more than rudderless ships carried to new and exciting shores by waves of history blown into a storm by great and ancient empires. The creation of a state in the oasis of Yathrib was a novel development contingent upon clever politicking but that also, interestingly, seems to conform to a pattern of state development visible in Arabia in other periods, and a pattern inseparable from the peninsula’s ecology and consequent social relations. Placing the career of Muḥammad in such a uniquely Arabian context not only helps to inform analysis of the source material, but also balances the tendency of much recent scholarship to discuss Muḥammad solely in relation to the wider world rather than in the context of his immediate surroundings. One can see the origins of Islam on the misty far horizon of Late Antiquity or on the mysterious near horizon of Arabia. This study will combine both perspectives to try to see through the mist and the mystery.

What follows is not, however, by any means wholly or largely a comparative study. The evidence peculiar to any period must always be allowed to speak for itself and be permitted to divulge insights that the historian can entertain as entirely unique and without precedent or later resonance. Historical change depends upon the exceptional. Yet the historian should always be mindful of the advice of Ibn Khaldūn not simply to accept evidence ‘in its plain transmitted form,’ but to seek

⁵⁸ See Fowden, G., 1993, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton University Press, for a persuasive picture of Islam as the philosophical culmination of traditions of late antique empire and monotheism. For the recent explosion in studies on Arabian imperial federates, see Chapter One.

to understand it against ‘the principles resulting from custom, the fundamental facts of politics, the nature of civilisation’ and to ‘evaluate remote or ancient material through comparison with near or contemporary material, (to) avoid stumbling and slipping and deviating from the path of truth.’⁵⁹ One has to ask oneself what is conceivably possible, given relatively unchanging forces like geography; what the evidence is failing to include, and how subtle hints or sparse clues fit together into coherent and significant patterns. This need is especially acute for one dealing with a period like early Islam, for which the source material can often, one senses, hint at underlying truths operating behind the late, partial, even disinterested words on the page.

Chapter One largely concerns this source material. It discusses the past and present state of the scholarship on early Islam before trying to find a way to use the sources of the Islamic historical tradition alongside sources external to that tradition. The chapter concludes that the conceits of the Islamic sources should not, of course, be entirely accepted, but that the sources themselves can and should be used to write the history of early Islam if a certain set of rules are remembered when so doing. Basic questions of plausibility should be asked with an unfailing rigour, the multiple appearance of the same or similar stories from different original sources should be seen as evidence that they were widely accepted as true, and extreme scepticism should only be directed to elements of ideological importance.

Chapter Two overcomes many of the source critical problems identified in Chapter One by focusing solely on the one genuine seventh century written source for the history of Islam: the Qur’ān. The Qur’ān is analysed as an active witness to the creation of the early Islamic community, alluding to the true nature of Muḥammad’s genius and leading to a conclusion that prompts a deeper investigation of the human mechanics behind the development of the early Medinan state.

The third chapter explores these mechanics, drawing on sources beyond the Qur’ān as well as comparative evidence. It traces how Muḥammad harnessed the manpower of the desert to defeat his Meccan rivals. This conflict was not, however, solely the parochial Ḥijāzi affair that it can be all too easy to imagine it was. It was a war within the Last Great War of Antiquity, and was characterised by religious rivalries and tribal alliances that had their roots in the previous century, as Chapter Four will explore.

⁵⁹ *Ibn Khaldūn*, ‘The Muqaddimah,’ Rosenthal, F., 2015, p.11.

Chapter Four will also look at the transformation of the Arabian world before the birth of Muḥammad. It steps back from the story of the early Islamic community to analyse the considerable extent to which the social and political world of Arabia was altered by the interest shown in it by the great powers. Chiefly, it will focus on the evolution of Arabian fighting groups into forces far more deadly than those present in the peninsula in previous centuries. The chapter will end by focusing on the Byzantine sources for the collapse of the Roman frontier in the early 630s to demonstrate the critical role of federate defection to the victory of the community of Muḥammad.

Chapter Five will extend the chronological scope of the study to consider a further social and political transition evident in the early medieval Near East. It will investigate why the Arabian groups that made the conquests of Islam possible became surplus to the requirements of the new Caliphate. This process has of course been explored before, and has even been seen as an inevitable product of Islam as a political and philosophical system, but the argument here will in some respects be far simpler. After Islam had united the previously competing worlds of Persia and Rome – completely destroying the former, stealing the richest provinces of the latter and containing the power of Constantinople to Anatolia and the Aegean – Arabia lost its strategic geographical position. An empire based either in Damascus or Baghdad and controlling the resources of the Fertile Crescent simply no longer needed the warriors of the desert. The Arabian tribes were so successful in establishing a new empire that they rendered the men who inhabited the lands they left useless.

The argument that underscores most of the chapters that follow is one of structural change. It is a commentary on a series of experiments in what could be called three ‘bedouin laboratories’: that of the imperial federates; of the oasis of Yathrib, and of the early Islamic empire. It focuses on the consequences of largescale shifts in the political and social dynamics of Arabia whilst trying not to neglect the determining role of individuals or of specific events. It seeks to unite the products of recent decades of research on the early Islamic world and Late Antiquity with new evidence and novel insights, whilst using a comparative approach to add thought-provoking depth to a period for which more evidence will always be desired.

Above all, this study tries to explain what made the seventh century victory of Islam possible and why, after a century of pre-eminence, the kind of men who made that victory a reality reverted to patterns of life as timeless as the sands in which they dwelt.

Chapter One: The Historian's Dilemma: Writing the History of Early Islam

He (Muḥammad) lived through a period of growing Meccan prosperity and influence; he is said to have taken part in the war of Fijār to secure the Quraysh hold over the trade route of western Arabia...

(Hugh Kennedy, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*)¹

...the Qurashī trade in incense, spices, and related luxury goods is a fiction...

(Patricia Crone, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*)²

Today, few western historians would agree with the now infamous assessment of the nineteenth century philologist Ernest Renan that Islam was born in the full light of history.³ Western orientalism, taking inspiration from the sophisticated techniques of biblical scholarship, started to develop the critical tools to reassess the Islamic sources on which Renan's contemporaries had based their work within decades of his article's publication. What had once seemed a solid edifice of historically reliable tradition, which earlier western scholars had previously been content to mine and manipulate for various reasons, soon found itself on the path to piecemeal, and eventually to total destruction.

Yet, devastating for the credibility of the conventional Islamic historical narrative as many of the critical developments of the last one hundred and fifty years can seem, the writing of Islamic history has often shown a remarkable tendency to resist the implications of such criticism. Some scholars have written books that others within and without the field would consider stillborn at their very conception. Possible though it is to trace the evolution of certain critical concepts over time, the impact of the historiographical advances made in one generation has not always continued seamlessly into that generation's successors.

¹ Kennedy, H., 1986, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*, Harlow: Pearson Education Ltd, p.30.

² Crone, P., 1987, *Meccan Trade and the Rise of Islam*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, p.50

³ Renan, E., 1851, 'Mahomet et les origines de l'islamisme', *Revue des Deux Mondes*, tome 12, p.1063-1101, p.1065 for the expression that requires a more elaborate English translation ('celle-ci naît en pleine histoire'). Renan was reviewing a number of then recently published studies on Muḥammad and the early history of Islam so his judgement stands as a useful indication of contemporary prevailing opinion as well as of his own.

The dramatic differences in the ways in which the history of the earliest years of Islamic civilisation can be reconstructed presents a dilemma for the historian. This dilemma is all the more acute given that historiographical debate has tended to focus not only on what the sources say, but also – if not primarily – on whether they are, in fact, worth being thought of as historical sources. In order to try to understand the origins of the Islamic world, some kind of solution has to be found to this problem.

This chapter, therefore, will identify a number of principles for investigating the history of early Islam, through surveying recent historiographical trends and analysing a selection of Islamic sources. It will suggest that the Islamic historical tradition is hardly worthless as history: it contains the genuine memory of events and people, even if the presentation of some such events and people may well be suspect. Consensus within the tradition, furthermore, will be shown to be an important guide to credibility, and the application of sound, empirical historical reasoning should also never be neglected. Finally, as already outlined in the Introduction, it will be argued that recourse to comparative evidence and broader historical frameworks should also be applied to the tradition in order to entice meaning out of suggestive but superficially confusing or marginal details.

The Growth of Scepticism: Law without a Prophet

Great strides in the western understanding of the Islamic tradition took place in the fifty years after Renan's article was published. Detailed study of the sources revealed them to have been written centuries after the events they claimed to describe, and based on information that was not as early as purported to be. They were also shown to be highly polemical and internally contradictory. It was even demonstrated that the originally aural way in which these sources were generated was perhaps the greatest evidence of their questionable nature. The historical narratives and law books of the Islamic tradition were not, in short, what they claimed to be.

Such critical advances in the understanding of Islamic history benefited greatly from the production of edited versions of a number of ninth-century texts, notably al-Balādhurī's (died 278-279 AH/892) *Futūḥ al-Buldān* and the encyclopaedic history of al-Ṭabarī (died 310 AH/923), the *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk*.⁴ Scholars like M.J. de Goeje, Julius Wellhausen, and Leone Caetani, by the simple technique of recognising the number of variant accounts within and between each historical narrative, could not but deduce that the tradition was riddled with inaccuracies and

⁴ *Liber expugnationis regionum auctore Imámo Ahmed ibn Jahja ibn Djábir al-Beládsorí*, de Goeje, M.J., (ed.), 1866, Leiden: Brill; *Annales quos scripsit Abu Djafar Mohammed ibn Djarir at-Tabari*, de Goeje, M.J., (ed.), 1879-1901, Leiden: Brill.

inventions.⁵ This prompted them to sift ‘good’ internal evidence from the ‘bad,’ emphasising the reliability of some of the authorities quoted in the chains of tradition (that is, the *isnād*, which accompanies each individual narrative segment, the *khabar* – *akbbār* in the plural – or *matn*). Thus, it was imagined, one could write history from the Islamic tradition purely through internal criticism.

Not every critic of the Islamic tradition who adopted this methodology, however, has been entirely confident that the tradition offers material that can easily and simply be called ‘historical.’ Albrecht Noth, for example, working in the mid-to-late-twentieth century, purposefully avoided ‘combining source criticism with historical description,’ preferring to deconstruct the sources based on their themes and forms.⁶ Noth argued that the Islamic histories should be seen as literary documents, preoccupied with particular concerns of significance to the community in its formative stages. He argued that it was the ‘historical value’ of such themes that pointed to history by providing insights into what mattered to the early Muslims.⁷

What Fred Donner has usefully called the ‘source-critical approach,’ however, depended to an extent on the notion that the *isnād* tradition was a secure means of communicating and preserving historical memory. Scholarship that focused on Islamic law and legal practice almost a century before modern source critics like Noth suggested that this was, in fact, hardly the case. Ignaz Goldziher, the pioneer of this discovery, asked important questions about the very means through which the source material of the Islamic tradition came into being. He demonstrated convincingly that the sayings, *aḥādīth* (*ḥadīth* in the singular), of the Prophet that form the basis of Islamic law – and that come complete with an *isnād* as proof of their alleged veracity – were not quotations from the mouth of Muḥammad, but reflections of much later political, social and religious interests.⁸ The *aḥādīth* were an important means to understand Islam, but only with respect to the concerns that occupied the community in its more mature stages of development (*reiferen Entwicklungsstadien*) during the ‘Abbāsīd Caliphate rather than in its early days (*Kindheitsgeschichte*).⁹

⁵ Donner, F. M., 1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press Inc., p.5-25, offers a concise analysis of the increasing sophistication of western Islamic studies since the nineteenth century; p.9-13 for the work of de Goeje, Wellhausen, and Caetani. Humphreys, R.S., 1991, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry*, London, p.69-91 also presents a balanced survey of historiographical trends.

⁶ Noth, A., in collaboration with Conrad, L.I., 1994, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition: A Source-Critical Study*, trans. Bonner, M., Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press Inc., p.4.

⁷ *Ibid*, esp.p.24-25.

⁸ Goldziher, I., 1890, *Muhammedanische Studien II*, Halle: Max Niemeyer, p.1-274.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.5.

The realisation that the doctrines, ideology, and guidance contained within *ḥadīth* were generated centuries after they were supposed to have come into being naturally cast doubt on the reliability of the *isnād*. Many of the authorities contained within an *isnād* simply had to have been falsely attributed, even invented. The tradition was one of forgery. Goldziher even found support for what still comes across as his excitingly iconoclastic insights in the Islamic tradition itself. Medieval Muslim scholars were hardly unaware that their tradition contained much spurious material.¹⁰ It remains telling in the extreme, for example, that one famous collector of *ḥadīth*, al-Bukhārī (died 256 AH/810), felt able to accept only 2,762 alleged sayings of the Prophet, out of over 600,000, based on analysis of the respective traditions' *isnāds*.¹¹

Goldziher's work on Islamic law equipped a later student of *ḥadīth*, Joseph Schacht, to suggest that the penetrating approach applied to law should also be applied to history and prophetic biography (*Sīrah*). Schacht noticed that Classical Islamic history-writing not only presented itself in the same way as the medieval texts of law, with narrative segments attached to an *isnād*, but also that some of the authorities cited in texts of law and of history are the same.¹² Both genres should therefore be subject to the same level of scepticism. He additionally argued that 'the more perfect the *isnād*, the later the tradition,' and that this tendency was an indication that citing Muḥammad as the ultimate authority of a legal ruling was a technique of jurisprudence that only originated in the second quarter of the second century of Islam.¹³ Even the practice of citing the Prophet's Companions did not seem to be older than the very beginning of the second century. Scholarship on the *isnād* since Schacht, notably the work of G.H.A. Juynboll, may have pushed the *terminus post quem* for the articulation of the tradition back by several decades, but the spirit of Schacht's findings very much endures.¹⁴

This is partly because of the realisation that, even if prophetic *ḥadīth* or historical *akhbār* may have been born in the first century of Islam – on the basis of the actual memory of events – they have nonetheless been transmitted through a highly mercurial medium. The transmission of

¹⁰ Ibid, p.131-145 for examples of the extent to which Muslim jurists knew they had to look at the legal precedents with which they were working with a discerning eye.

¹¹ Robson, J., 2015, 'al-Bukhārī, Muḥammad b. Ismā'īl' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., & Heinrichs. W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 10th January 2017.

¹² Schacht, J., 1949, 'A Revaluation of Islamic Traditions', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Vol. 81, Issue 3-4, p.143-154.

¹³ Ibid, esp. p.144-146. See also Schacht, J., 1964, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, Oxford University Press, for a more detailed exposition of his theses.

¹⁴ Juynboll, G.H.A., 1983, *Muslim Tradition: Studies in chronology, provenance, and authorship of early ḥadīth*, Cambridge University Press. Juynboll dates the substantive development of the *isnād* tradition to the 690s A.D.; see p.70-76 for a concise summary of his arguments.

information by word of mouth, rather than through the circulation of more stable, written texts, is open not only to the natural fallibility of human memory, but also to the progressive invention, distortion, and exaggeration of the information transmitted.

Indeed, it has become almost a cliché of historiography to recognise that the oral retelling of past events functions not as a means to relate information, but as a way of making sense of the world as experienced by the present audience of the information recited.¹⁵ Contemporary norms, prejudices, and concerns are retrojected into the past to win legitimacy by being associated with time and tradition. This process may not necessarily be consciously mendacious. What was normal in the youth of one generation's grandparents can become odd to that generation's parents and unbelievable to the eyes of the generation in question. This is especially the case if those generations have been through a period of extreme social, political, or cultural dislocation, much like the rise of a new power in Arabia and the collapse of two great empires and all that such a transformation means for established political, cultural, and economic norms.¹⁶

By the third quarter of the twentieth century, in light of the dramatic extent to which the very fabric of the Islamic tradition had been torn asunder, to rewrite the history of the faith and its first centuries was to accept an open invitation. Many established figures in oriental scholarship declined to take up the task.¹⁷ To this challenge, however, rose Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, the authors of *Hagarism*.¹⁸ Banishing the Muslim sources entirely, they used sources outside the tradition to paint what would develop into Islam as a messianic Jewish sect that had its origin somewhere in the environs of the Jordan Valley rather than the Ḥijāz. Everything that everyone, western orientalist and believing Muslim alike, thought they knew about the origins of Islam was apparently false.

Crone, to a greater extent than Cook, continued this critical work in a manner that relegated the sources of the Islamic tradition to a dustbin that was not even of history. The vast majority of historical information, she held, not least biographical material on the Prophet, was either

¹⁵ See Goody, J., & Watt, I., 1968, 'The Consequences of Literacy', in Goody, J., (ed.), *Literacy in Traditional Societies*, Cambridge University Press, p.27-68, esp.28-34, for what has become a classic statement of this thesis. Robinson, C., 2003, *Islamic Historiography*, Cambridge University Press, p.3-17 offers detailed comments on the development and nature of oral history in the early Islamic context.

¹⁶ The 2016 controversy surrounding the statue of Cecil Rhodes in Oriel College, Oxford, is perhaps an extreme example from recent experience of the extent to which the constrained perspective and contemporary ideological motivations of some people at certain times can limit an understanding of history and seek to provoke its erasure.

¹⁷ Robinson, C., 2015, 'Crone and the End of Orientalism', in Sadeghi, B., Ahmed, A. Q., Silverstein A., and Hoyland, R., (eds.), *Islamic Cultures, Islamic Contexts: Essays in Honor of Patricia Crone*, Leiden: Brill, p.597-620, esp. 599-602 on the 'Orientalist establishment's' tendency to ignore the previous generation of critical work.

¹⁸ Crone, P., & Cook, M., 1977, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press. Crone and Cook were heavily influenced by the work of John Wansbrough, which will be addressed in the next chapter.

essentially little more than Qur'ānic exegesis or historical romance.¹⁹ Overall, it was what could be termed – to borrow a term from German-language biblical studies – ‘salvation history’ (*Heilsgeschichte*). Crone argued that even the earliest literate Muslims struggled to understand the Qur'ān and therefore tried to write histories that would create a plausible context for the text. Crone's scepticism of her sources was also rooted in a recognition that the very assignment of the medieval Muslim scholar was ‘not to give boring lectures on history, but rather to evoke an emotional response to the great deeds of the prophet and his companions so as to commit people to Islam.’²⁰ Ultimately, for Crone, the stories of the founding years of the faith bequeathed by medieval Muslim authors of *ṣirah* and *tāriḫ* were little more than ‘fictitious versions of an event that never took place,’ a mere ‘mass of detailed information, none of which represents straightforward *facts*.’²¹

Current Approaches: the Enduring Janus face

Were anyone to explore the increasing mass of modern western writing on early Islam after being introduced to the subject by a fellow traveller of Crone, however, they would be struck by the ‘schizophrenia’ that can often pervade the field.²² They would find that mutually incompatible approaches to the sources can be followed simultaneously. What could be called the enduring Janus face of history writing on early Islam reveals itself in two ways: both individual authors and the entire discipline can seem to have a split personality. Historians who are all too ready to acknowledge at least the thrust of the scepticism of Crone and others can nonetheless be found to have written reconstructions of the events of the seventh century that are largely faithful to the Islamic tradition, based on conventional sources and familiar interpretations of them.²³

Such internal contradictions are a testimony to the dramatic divisions within the field. These divisions may be long lived and well known, but their dogged persistence after over a quarter

¹⁹ See Crone, P., 1987, *Meccan Trade*, p.203-230, which builds on her earlier programmatic arguments in Crone, P., 1980, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity*, Cambridge University Press, p.3-17. The idea that so little was known of the Qur'ān at even an early date was itself part of Crone's thesis that the chasm between events and how they came to be understood was too wide to bridge using the Islamic tradition.

²⁰ Crone, P., 1987, *Meccan Trade*, p.218.

²¹ *Ibid* p.220 and p.222. The first quote may refer to a specific example, but it is nonetheless an accurate assessment of her overall approach.

²² The description of much secondary scholarship as having a split personality is owed to Carole Hillenbrand and can be found in Hillenbrand, C., 2005, ‘Muhammad and the Rise of Islam’, in Fouracre, P., (ed.), *The New Cambridge Medieval History I, c.500 – 700*, Cambridge, p.317-345; p.330 for the quote.

²³ This is a criticism that has, for instance, been made by Robert Hoyland of Maxime Rodinson's *Muḥammad*, in his 2007 article ‘Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad: Problems and Sources’, *History Compass*, p.581-602, p.598, footnote 25. The first edition of Rodinson's biography was admittedly written before Crone's major works appeared, but he should hardly have been unaware of sophisticated approaches to the Islamic sources; the second English edition has also not been rewritten to reflect critical developments (Rodinson, M., 2002, *Muḥammad*, New Press: New York).

century of hyper-critical scholarship is striking.²⁴ Books published within a year of one another, like Patricia Crone's deconstruction of the notion of Meccan trade and Hugh Kennedy's accessible yet academic narrative history of the Prophet and his successors that provided the quotes opening this chapter, are underscored by wholly divergent assumptions and assessments of the source material. Their results and arguments are mutually exclusive, and often speak across, rather than to, one another.

It is even possible to find biographies of Muḥammad written for a popular yet mature audience that agree with Renan's verdict that one can use the Islamic sources to look inside Muḥammad's mind, tracing the yearly fluctuations of his thought.²⁵ Such publications may be found next to other modern biographies that eschew a detailed narrative reconstruction altogether, preferring to offer only a thematic study of the prophet's possible career set against a loose chronology and broad contextualisation.²⁶ Divergent interpretations are of course the norm in the study of the history of any period. Yet students of early Islam are perhaps uniquely vulnerable to finding themselves lost in what has become an almost irreconcilably divided, and profoundly important, historiographical debate, in which a 'fact' picked up from one scholarly study can evaporate into the ether under the piercing light shone upon it in another.

All, however, is not lost. One of the enduring and far more positive legacies of *Hagarism* has been an emphasis on the need to use sources external to the Islamic tradition when writing the history of the seventh century to try to tease actual events out of legend. The philosophy of this approach is simple. If information contained within the late, polemical, and contradictory Islamic tradition is mirrored in sources more contemporary to the events they describe and foreign to the virulent debates of the nascent Islamic community, then it may well be genuine historical information. Robert Hoyland's magisterial work, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, represents perhaps the major

²⁴ Donner, F. M., 1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p.5-9, also notes, but without expressing much surprise or concern, the longevity of what he terms the 'descriptive approach' – a highly positivistic use of the Islamic sources – despite the critical developments he surveys. Examples additional to the more recent career of historians like Hugh Kennedy would of course include the work of William Montgomery Watt, notably his 1953 book, *Muhammad at Mecca*, Oxford University Press, and his 1956, *Muhammad at Medina*, Oxford University Press.

²⁵ An example would be Karen Armstrong's 1991/2001 *Muḥammad: A Biography of the Prophet*, Phoenix Press. Armstrong's credence in the veracity of the Islamic tradition – defended on p.47 – seems to be underscored by her almost evangelical desire to improve the perception of Islam among western audiences, which she somewhat simplistically suggests is dominated by prejudice towards the faith and its adherents (p.15). Armstrong was a major contributor to a three part 2011 BBC documentary about the Prophet, which critics noted was both presented and written by practising Muslims, that set out to discover 'the real Muḥammad' and that, despite giving airtime to some sceptical voices, asserted that a plethora of detailed 'facts' are indeed known of his life.

²⁶ Cook, M., 1996, *Muḥammad*, Oxford University Press.

contribution to this development, accomplishing the systematic source criticism to which *Hagarism* never aspired.²⁷

Hoyland was able convincingly to support several crucial elements underpinning the Islamic tradition, even if he nonetheless gave a date of c.780 for the crystallisation of Islam into something recognisable to its modern form.²⁸ First, it was clear that the groups of warriors marauding around the Near East in the 630s and 640s had their roots in Arabia. Secondly, they had given themselves a name, which was previously unheard of, a new calendar, and were acting under some form of unified direction. This unified direction had its origins in the career of a man called Muḥammad, who purported to have been some kind of prophet, and who brought a distinct religious message. The more precise nature of this message, a matter, it would seem, of profound importance to the identity and self-image of the conquerors, became ever more significant, not least from the 690s, when it started to be proclaimed consistently on public media like inscriptions and coinage.²⁹

Hoyland's book is significant as an example of a more sophisticated and fruitful historiography in another respect. It begins with a detailed and perceptive study of the late antique context of Islam, following yet another legacy of *Hagarism* and one that, importantly, has decisively brought the early history of Islam into the embrace of scholars more familiar with the world of the later Roman Empire, as broadly understood and defined in the paradigmatic manner pioneered by Peter Brown.³⁰ The difference between the *Cambridge History of Islam*, published in 1970, and the *New Cambridge History of Islam*, published in 2010, plainly reveals the extent to which this is now the case. The first two chapters of the former are entitled 'Pre-Islamic Arabia' and 'Muḥammad.'³¹ The first volume of the latter, however, is divided into four parts, the first of which contains four chapters under the heading 'The Late Antique Context.'³²

²⁷ Hoyland, R.G., 1997, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press Inc.

²⁸ Ibid, p.4.

²⁹ Ibid, esp. p.545-559.

³⁰ Ibid, p.11-31. The intellectual debt owed to Peter Brown, and to others, in developing the now familiar and well-received notion of 'Late Antiquity' cannot be summarised in a footnote. The usual starting point is Brown, P., 1971, *The World of Late Antiquity: A.D. 150 – 750*, London: Thames & Hudson.

³¹ Holt, P., Lambton, A., & Lewis, B., (eds.), 1970, *The Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I*, Cambridge University Press. Some scholars actually found *The Cambridge History of Islam* passé at the time of its publication: 'The Cambridge History of Islam n'est pas responsables d'être un ouvrage de notre temps,' Roux, J., 1971, Review of CHI, *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 180, p.178-186. It nonetheless remained illustrative of the leading scholarly approach for decades.

³² Robinson, C., (ed.), 2010, *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I – The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, Cambridge University Press. The late antique inheritance and consideration of both the Sasanian and Roman Empires are given full, even greater attention alongside pre-Islamic Arabia in chapters written by specialists in the respective fields.

There are two especially insightful aspects of what could be termed the late antiquarian approach. The first is the acceptance that the religious movement inspired by Muḥammad would have been impossible without the longer-term development of monotheism, and monotheisms, across the late antique world and the related way in which religion became an ever more important aspect of politics and identity. Islam, as a movement that presents itself as rigorously monotheist and that closely identifies worldly political with religious authority, may therefore be thought of as something approaching the natural fulfilment of trends in motion in the Mediterranean and Near East even before the third century. An ambitious and original statement of this thesis can be found in the work of Garth Fowden.³³

The second piercing insight of the late antiquarian approach is the ever greater appreciation of the important impact of the rivalry between Rome and Persia on the Arabian Peninsula. In some respects, western historiography has long been aware of the influence of the wars between the two ancient empires in creating the conditions for the ascendancy of Islam, not least by materially weakening their near eastern provinces and their ability to defend them. Edward Gibbon, for instance, waxed in his usual eloquence on the ways in which the early seventh century war of the Emperor Heraclius had eviscerated Roman agriculture, arts and population, with even his victorious army finding its strength exhausted rather than exercised on the eve of the conquests.³⁴ An important novelty, however, is to be found in the increasing awareness that the longer term penetration of great power concerns into the peninsula had far deeper effects on the politics, belief structures, and the social life of Arabian groups.

This insight has been developed in conjunction with an understanding that phenomena like the politics, belief structures, and the social life of Arabian groups should not be drawn as simplistically or as schematically as they have been in the past. At least in part, this more subtle and complex approach to the human social and political experience has come under the influence of theoretical

³³ Fowden, G., 1993, *Empire to Commonwealth: Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, see esp. p.138-175. A very similar and more specialised example of this approach is to study the debt owed by Islamic civilisation, both in its opaque early stages and in its more mature form, to Hellenism. See, for example, Bowersock, G.W., 1990, *Hellenism in Late Antiquity*, Cambridge University Press, esp. p.71-82 and Cameron, A., 1991, 'The eastern provinces in the seventh century A.D.: Hellenism and the emergence of Islam', in Said, E., (ed.) *'Hellenismos': quelques jalons pour une histoire de l'identité grecque, Actes du Colloque de Strasbourg, 25-26 octobre 1989*, Leiden: Brill, p.287-313.

³⁴ Gibbon, E., 1896, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire: edited in seven volumes with introduction, notes, appendices and index by J.B. Bury*, London: Methuen & Co., Vol. 5, p.95. The idea that Rome was fatally weakened by war at the same time that Heraclius was celebrating his triumph in Constantinople is of course wholly in keeping with Gibbon's overall historical scheme. He later writes that 'The birth of Mahomet was fortunately placed in the most degenerate and disorderly period of the Persians, the Romans, and the barbarians of Europe: the empire of Trajan, or even of Constantine or Charlemagne, would have repelled the assault of the naked Saracens and the torrent of fanaticism might have been obscurely lost in the sands of Arabia' (Vol. 5, p.401).

approaches to ethnicity that have long been doctrine to students of the late Roman world in Western Europe. Combined with astute study of the Arabian frontiers of the two great empires of Late Antiquity, the seeds of an exciting crop of far more sophisticated scholarship on pre-Islamic Arabia have been fertilised. Two recently published volumes edited by Greg Fisher are salient examples of this growing trend.³⁵

Reconstructions of pre-Islamic Arabia have also benefitted from Glen Bowersock's readable and thought-provoking publications on the Red Sea world.³⁶ In order to try to fill the chasm presented by the lack of firm written or archaeological evidence from the seventh century Ḥijāz, Bowersock has investigated what the genesis of Islam may have owed to the religious politics of ancient Yemen and Ethiopia, regions that the later Islamic tradition seems to suggest played a significant, if somewhat opaque, role in the faith's foundation. Approximately the first third of Ibn Hishām's (died 218 AH/833) recension of the canonical biography of the Prophet composed by Ibn Isḥāq (died c.150-159 AH/761-770), for example, is interspersed by tales from south Arabia. A history of the kings of Yemen essentially begins the *Sīrah*, excepting the short genealogy of the Prophet himself.³⁷ The fact, moreover, that both the Qur'ān and the peculiar form of Christianity adopted in the kingdom of Ḥimyar in the century of Muḥammad's birth shared some religious vocabulary certainly helps to bring into a sharper focus the likely religious influences on the Ḥijāz.³⁸

The extent to which a broader perspective and ever greater degrees of nuance cannot now be avoided in the study of early Islam can perhaps best be grasped by comparing two books written by the same scholar, almost three decades apart. Fred Donner's *The Early Islamic Conquests* presents a detailed narrative reconstruction of the development of the nascent Islamic state and its conquests of Syria and Iraq.³⁹ He begins by situating Islam in a purely Arabian context, gives a summary of Muḥammad's career and teaching that would be familiar to anyone aware of the conventional Islamic narrative, and explains the victory of the armies loyal to the Prophet through

³⁵Dijkstra, J.H.F., & Fisher G., (eds.), 2014, *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, Leuven: Peeters, and Fisher, G., (ed.), 2015, *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, Oxford University Press. Robert Hoyland seems to have played an important role in explicitly calling for the far greater use of theoretical approaches customarily applied to the early medieval West to the East: 'no one has used these to produce a narrative/discursive study à la Geary or Pohl' (Hoyland, R. G., 2009, 'Arab kings, Arab tribes, and the beginnings of Arab historical memory in Late Roman Epigraphy', in Cotton, H., Hoyland, R., Price, J., & Wasserstein, D., (eds.), *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East*, Cambridge, p.374-400; quote p.374).

³⁶ Bowersock, G.W., 2013, *The Throne of Adulis: Red Sea Wars on the Eve of Islam*, Oxford University Press, is his first book on the topic.

³⁷ Guillaume, A., 1955, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq's Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Oxford University Press, p.4-35. Far greater attention to the life of Muḥammad is given in Chapter 2.

³⁸ Bowersock, G. W., 2017, *The Crucible of Islam*, Harvard University Press, p.58-63.

³⁹ Donner, F.M., 1981, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

insights gleaned solely from the Islamic sources.⁴⁰ The book is certainly not without its nuances, but its overriding and barely questioning debt to tradition, at a time when Crone was on the verge of making her most profound sceptical arguments, speaks plainly to the narrower perspectives and scholarly lines formerly seared across the discipline's Janus face.

A survey merely of the contents pages of Donner's recent and highly engaging work, *Muḥammad and the Believers*, however, demonstrates that scholarship on early Islam now exists in a different academic universe.⁴¹ He situates the beginnings of Islamic civilisation squarely in the world of Late Antiquity and looks at its Arabian context chiefly through the lens of rivalry between Rome and Persia.⁴² *Muḥammad and the Believers*, moreover, is notable in another respect: contrary to his earlier work in which he accepts the essentially fully-formed nature of what he unhesitatingly calls 'Islam' – and its adherents, whom he calls 'Muslims' – Donner puts forward what has become known as the 'Believers Thesis.' This idea, which will be explored in greater detail, suggests that the articulation of Islam as a faith wholly distinct from the other great monotheistic religions took generations to complete and was not intrinsic to the original preaching of Muḥammad.⁴³ The 'Believers Thesis,' even though Donner does not make its intellectual pedigree clear, cannot but have been provoked by the sceptical approach, and its tendency to separate Islam as it is now known from its possible primordial nature.

It is fair to say, therefore, that the serious study of early Islamic history is now characterised by increasing sophistication, broader perspectives, greater complexity and exciting novelty. Few indeed are the western historians who would now seek to agree with many of the minute details of the Islamic tradition, even if they may be content to follow its broader contours, with varying degrees of qualification. Yet this does not necessarily mean that something approaching a consensus on the important questions of early Islamic history exists, or that debate is any less polemic, even if the boldest ideas of the sceptical school are generally and quite reasonably heard

⁴⁰ Ibid, p.3-49 for the Arabian context; p.51-90 for Muḥammad and the early state, and p.91-250 for the conquests of Syria and Iraq. See p.267-271 for a summary essay on the causes of the conquests, in which Donner tellingly writes 'The many factors traditionally adduced to explain the military successes of the Islamic conquest movement are generally quite plausible and can be accepted without much hesitation' (p.268-269).

⁴¹ Donner, F.M., 2010, *Muḥammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.

⁴² Ibid, p.1-38.

⁴³ Donner first put forward this thesis in an article in a relatively obscure Lebanese journal connected to the American University of Beirut; the article is itself based on a paper he gave in 1994. The book, written with a popular audience in mind, has done a lot to promote the thesis further even if the article remains its more detailed version. See Donner, F.M., 2002-2003, 'From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the early Islamic Community', *Al-Abhath*, Vol.50-51, p.9-53.

with far less sympathy.⁴⁴ If anything, Janus' faces are multiplying, looking in one of an increasing number of directions over a discipline whose recent development has offered the potential for ever more diverse perceptions to evolve, beyond what could be called the 'sceptical' and 'traditionalist' divide.

One example of new divisions in the field would include the reception of the Believers Thesis. Robert Hoyland, for instance, has stridently criticised it both with respect to its details and in relation to its overall scheme.⁴⁵ His recent publication, *In God's Path*, offers a readable yet scholarly introduction to the history of Islam that stands as a ready alternative to *Muḥammad and the Believers*.⁴⁶ Both books are rooted in Late Antiquity, but Hoyland adopts a far broader perspective on the late antique world together with a different set of underlying assumptions and emphases.⁴⁷ One significant emphasis would be his more comparative approach to the birth of Islamic civilisation, as seen as an originally nomad power forming on the fringes of two great empires.⁴⁸ Another would be his presentation of Islam as a more defined phenomenon out of the history of which other confessional groups should nonetheless not be written.⁴⁹ Both interpretative slants go a long way toward explaining Hoyland's loaded choice of the terminology of the 'Arab' – rather than 'Islamic,' or indeed 'Believer' – conquests.

This terminological choice is itself hardly without contention. Donner returned the qualified compliment of Hoyland's review of *Muḥammad and the Believers* in his own on *In God's Path*.⁵⁰ In comments that range from the judiciously critical to the caustic, Donner not only questioned what he saw as Hoyland's stubborn desire to downplay the importance of religion to the emerging community, he also asked whether one can even speak of 'Arabs' existing in the seventh century.⁵¹

⁴⁴ It is revealing that even the late Patricia Crone distanced herself from some of the most iconoclastic aspects of her earlier work. Her willingness to accept that more aspects of the Islamic historical tradition approached history than she previously thought was revealed in an article she wrote online in 2008 about the life of Muḥammad: https://www.opendemocracy.net/faith-europe_islam/mohammed_3866.jsp, accessed on the 12th January 2017.

⁴⁵ See, above all, Hoyland's 2012 review of Donner's book in the *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 3, p.573-576.

⁴⁶ Hoyland, R.G., 2015, *In God's Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, Oxford University Press.

⁴⁷ Ibid, p.1-30.

⁴⁸ Thus does Hoyland begin his narrative of the 630s A.D. by framing the movement from Arabia against the context of earlier attempts to invade Persia by the nomadic Turks; *ibid*, p.31-32.

⁴⁹ This is explicit at several points throughout the book; an example would be his summary of the early conquerors at *ibid* p.57, 'The majority were Muslim, whether emigrants (*muhājirun*) from Mecca or converts from Medina, and Jews, along with possibly a few Christians and monotheists of other hues.'

⁵⁰ Donner, F.M., 2015, Review of *In Gods Path: The Arab Conquests and the Creation of an Islamic Empire*, *Al-Uṣūr al-Wuṣṭā: The Journal of Middle East Medievalists* 23, p.134-140.

⁵¹ One piece of evidence Donner marshals actually comes from Hoyland's own pen. He notes that a comment attributed to the Caliph Sulaymān b. 'Abd al-Malik that Hoyland uses to validate the notion of the importance of Arab ethnicity to the conquerors comes from a Syriac source external to the tradition and uses the problematic term *ṭayyāyē* (*ibid*, p.138).

The conclusions of a recent investigation into the origins of the ‘Arab’ ethnonym would strongly suggest that one cannot.⁵² Just because historians are starting to share wider perspectives anchored in Late Antiquity clearly does not mean that they are any more likely to agree on what exactly this background means for early Islam.

The rehabilitation of the Islamic sources owing to their comparison with more contemporary, non-Islamic evidence, moreover, has also created the basis for further problems to emerge. Despite the fact that such detailed *Quellenkritik* can validate aspects of the Islamic sources, the question arises as to what extent such inevitably partial validation should allow a broader faith in the source tradition to develop. Perhaps the most controversial and significant example would be the way in which this can influence the choice of causal scheme selected to explain the reasons behind, and the success of, the seventh century conquests.

James Howard-Johnston’s *magnum opus*, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, is a case in point.⁵³ The book contains much helpful material on a range of sources for the seventh century, yet Howard-Johnston’s validation of some elements of the Islamic tradition leads him to fall all but entirely into their causal scheme and ideological conceits. Thus, the reader is evocatively told that the men of the conquering armies were not, say, disparate bedouin on the quest for booty or Arabs newly conscious of a shared ethnic identity, but were ‘in essence ordered arrays of suicide fighters, endowed with extraordinary courage and daring’ who were ‘committed unto death.’⁵⁴ Howard-Johnston also sees Islam from its earliest stages as a ‘whole faith’ given its putative ability to exert an all but unprecedented ideological influence over its adherents, who are described by Howard-Johnston without question as ‘Muslims.’⁵⁵ What could be described as a certain rhetorical mystification of early Islamic history is also evident in Howard-Johnston’s intriguing, and never clarified, insistence that the birth of Islam and the conquests cannot be explained in ‘normal human terms.’⁵⁶

This verdict recalls far more conventional interpretations of the seventh century conquests, on which Howard-Johnston seems at certain points to rely.⁵⁷ The joint facts of his comprehensive,

⁵² Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, Edinburgh University Press. Webb sharply criticises Hoyland’s use of ‘Arab,’ for reasons that will be addressed in later chapters.

⁵³ Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century*, Oxford University Press.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.451.

⁵⁵ *Ibid*, p.463.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, p.464.

⁵⁷ It is telling that the whole sentence from which the above quote is taken recognises this: ‘But the obvious sometimes needs restating and emphasising, if only to dissuade historians from striving vainly to explain the almost inexplicable in normal human terms’. For evidence for what may be the underlying influence of Donner’s 1981 *The Early Islamic Conquests*, see the references to it on p.5 and p.464-469. Interestingly, even though

erudite coverage of the source material, and his tendency to speak to such an established tradition, means that Howard-Johnston's arguments have hardly been uninfluential.⁵⁸ On the surface at least, it would appear that even the most cutting-edge western scholarship is starting to fall back on language immediately familiar to the generations before Renan, whose partial access to, and nascent understanding of, the Islamic historical tradition led Gibbon to speak of warriors bursting forth from Arabia with the fanatic cry of "fight, fight, paradise, paradise!"⁵⁹

The Islamic Sources: matters of fact not matters of meaning?

Even though it is possible to identify new as well as enduring problems in the writing of Islamic history, it must nonetheless be recognised that the past fifty years of scholarship on early Islam have gone a long way to producing the critical tools for an astute reconstruction of the earliest decades of the civilisation to be sketched. To an extent, these tools are formed simply from the rigorous imposition of practices common in the historiography of less rarefied subjects: an emphasis on sources closest to the events they purport to describe; the consideration of a broad source-base; the contextualisation of the particular narrative of the rise of Islam against a broader historical background, and a constant awareness of how later concerns affect the memory of earlier ages. Hoyland, moreover, suggests three useful questions that can be asked of the non-Islamic sources – now crucial to the writing of early Islamic history – in order to pinpoint their exact historical utility.⁶⁰

Yet serious concerns remain with respect to how one should treat the information offered in the Islamic historical tradition, especially given emergent hints of a new totalising credulity that risks obfuscating the tradition's lasting limitations. Any attempt to explain the first century of Islam, therefore, must start by setting forth a set of guiding principles with which to approach the Islamic sources, lest they be used without due critical reflection, or indeed not at all, at the risk of missing vital information. Such principles, considering the vastness and diversity of subject matter handled by the tradition, should retain a degree of flexibility and be unafraid of receiving progressive

Donner's *Al-Abhath* article setting out his Believers Thesis is cited in the bibliography, Howard-Johnston does not engage with its arguments, at least explicitly. As has been demonstrated above, Donner's thinking has developed in striking and significant ways since his 1981 publication.

⁵⁸ One gets the sense that Howard-Johnston's thoughts helped to shape Peter Sarris' in his wide-ranging 2011 book on Late Antiquity, *Empires of Faith: The Fall of Rome to the Rise of Islam: 500 – 700*, Oxford University Press; see p.274 for the similarity of language used. *Witnesses to a World Crisis* is indeed the first work suggested in Sarris' summary bibliography for the Byzantine and Islamic Near East (p.381).

⁵⁹ Gibbon, E., 1896, *Decline and Fall*, Vol.5, p.418.

⁶⁰ Hoyland, R.G., 1997, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It*, p.592-597. The three questions are 'What is the source of the observation?'; 'What is the character of the observation?', and 'What is the subject of the observation?'

nuances. Further, their flexibility apart, they should be underpinned by analytical rigour and a quest to root out the patently implausible.

An uncompromising rigour should certainly always pervade the study of the history of periods for which the documentary sources are so totally eclipsed by accounts that are unmistakably literary in their conception. The historian, especially working with a genre so dependent on putative oral accounts, should be unafraid to question the basic practical likelihood of conversations being remembered and passed on, let alone being remembered and transmitted in anything approaching their 'original' state. Asking such obvious and even simple questions may help to reveal certain underlying agendas or literary schemes, suggesting where exactly what could be a factual basis is being consciously fictionalised. To the assertion that a Muslim general in the heat of battle shouted to a certain comrade in arms who was still a Christian 'you are an Arab even though you do not follow our religion,' the historian should ask basic questions like how was this heard over the din of battle and remembered decades afterwards? Is it not better read as evidence of a later social or authorial interest, or maybe a dramatizing literary agenda, rather than harnessed as evidence of the importance of Arab ethnicity in the minds of the conquerors?⁶¹

With such concerns in mind, it is important always to cast an eye on the social and cultural contexts in which the texts of Islamic history were generated. As Chase Robinson, among others, has shown, the written texts themselves are not entirely free from contemporising tendencies rooted in the lifetime of the author and wider declamatory interests, not least because they came into being almost as a bi-product of the vibrant oral tradition.⁶² One does not have to be as sceptical as Crone to recognise that exemplarity and the justification of more current 'truths' is often expressed through history writing.

Considering the contestability and variety of the subject matter, any principles of source approach that could be developed may not be able to aspire to become hard and fast 'rules.' Yet they may nonetheless be useful in determining certain parameters within which the historian should operate, influencing what elements of tradition could be accepted with perhaps more faith than others, and how the later Islamic sources should be integrated into an understanding of the seventh century shaped first by other, earlier accounts and by certain theoretical approaches. Marshalling a number of illuminating principles would also help to give any study of early Islamic history a usefully

⁶¹ For the use of this example in precisely this way, see Hoyland, R.G., 2015, *In God's Path*, p.58.

⁶² Robinson, C., 2003, *Islamic Historiography*, p.103-123 for the social contexts of Islamic historiography and p.171-186 for the close linkage and interdependence of orality and writing. Part of Robinson's argument, namely that the writing of history became ever more closely related to the interests of states and elites, may be more relevant to the later Islamic Middle Ages but it is nonetheless suggestive for earlier periods.

transparent perspective, promoting a consistency in the use of source material, as well as sensible circumspection on it.

Suggested criteria for drawing up such a set of guidelines can readily be gleaned from the current state of scholarship. Donner, in *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, has considered and illuminating response to the sceptical approach to Islamic history that has very much been his career's *bête noir*, sets out the theory of 'multiple orthodoxies'.⁶³ Donner's 'multiple orthodoxies' is a term that describes the various reconstructions of the same event that bedevil the Islamic tradition, which he sees as resulting from the influence of different factional interests vying to establish *the* orthodox account. Rather than being taken as a phenomenon that invalidates the historicity of the event in question, however, the existence of a 'multiple orthodoxy' may actually point to the likely underlying truth of a bare fact like a certain event or the significance of a certain person at a certain time. This is because various factional interests simply could not avoid discussion of it whilst retaining credibility: there were elements in the community's early memory so widely known that they were thought of as facts.

The theory also helps to explain the evolution of historical memory. If some accounts fail to appear in later texts, they may not necessarily have been consciously suppressed, but the 'orthodoxy' to which they spoke may have become defunct, or simply have developed in a way rendering any particular *khabar* irrelevant. As 'orthodoxies' evolved, they would also have subjected the elements of tradition to a considerable degree of reworking, meaning that there may well be some unbridgeable gulfs of understanding between the community's infancy and the heyday of the 'Abbāsid Caliphate'.⁶⁴

Donner's ideas can be tested, nuanced, and developed to see whether or not what in some respects is a return to the practice of source criticism internal to the Islamic tradition is an exercise able to render historically plausible results. Small selections from the work of three authors will serve as a preliminary basis of investigation. A sensitive reading of them will highlight just how difficult the Islamic historical tradition can be to fathom, and the considerable extent to which the texts should be read as literature on a historical theme. Yet it will also point to ways in which they can be used to reconstruct events *wie eigentlich gewesen*.

⁶³ Donner, F.M., 1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p.275-290 for his helpful overall summary of the evolution of Islamic historiography; p.285-290 for 'multiple orthodoxies'.

⁶⁴ The most important such example, for Donner at least, is the tendency of the later historians to obscure Islam's earlier looser confessional boundaries; see *ibid*, p.284.

al-Balādhurī: evidence through discordance?

A simple application of how the theory of ‘multiple orthodoxies’ can be harnessed to write history can be developed from consulting a short string of passages in the *Futūḥ al-Buldān* of al-Balādhurī. Al-Balādhurī’s *Futūḥ* has become a major source for western scholarship on the seventh century conquests and for the growth of the Islamic state. A full English translation was published by Philip Hitti in 1916 and its compact nature, at least relative to the lengthy work of al-Ṭabarī, has ensured that it is fairly accessible.⁶⁵ Despite the considerable degree of reliance on his work, little is actually known of al-Balādhurī himself. He was probably born in the second decade of the ninth century, became a figure of some note in the retinue of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil, and may have died in the year 892.⁶⁶ The *Futūḥ* seems to concern itself with themes like the way in which certain areas were conquered, and their consequent tax status, and the development of administration in the context of the grand narrative of God-given victory and conquest.⁶⁷

Even though it may not have been written for what would now be thought of as straightforwardly historical purposes, the *Futūḥ al-Buldān* is still highly illuminating. One can also imagine that the pressing contemporary need to determine issues of taxation drove al-Balādhurī, as a dedicated servant of the state, to root out as many accounts and opinions as possible, as is indeed demonstrated by the number and variety of *isnāds* in the text. The *Futūḥ* may therefore be thought of as an important repository of historical memory.

It is in this respect that the theory of ‘multiple orthodoxies’ may best be brought to bear on the text. At first sight, al-Balādhurī’s description of the conquest of Palestine can be quite confusing (*Futūḥ al-Buldān*, p.138-144). Different commanders conquer the same areas in different years for the first time. The fall of Caesarea is probably the most confused example: ‘some say Mu‘āwiyah conquered it...others that ‘Iyād b. Ghanm certainly conquered it...others that ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ definitely conquered it’ (p. 140). The dates are also slightly divergent (p. 142). Al-Balādhurī feels able only to indicate that his sources agree that ‘Amr b. al-‘Āṣ was the first to invest the city, so

⁶⁵ Hitti, P.K., 1916, *The Origins of the Islamic State: Being a translation of the Kitāb Futūḥ al-Buldān of Abu-l Abas Ahamd ibn Jabir al-Baladhuri*, Columbia University. For an appreciation of its accessibility, see Kennedy, H., 1986, *The Prophet and the Age*, p.356.

⁶⁶ Becker, C.H. & Rosenthal, F., 2012, ‘al-Balādhurī’, *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), accessed on the 17th January 2017.

⁶⁷ The title of a colloquium held at Oxford University on the 29th-30th April 2016 suggests the extent to which there is far more to be known about al-Balādhurī and the *Futūḥ*: ‘Al-Balādhurī: A Guide for the Perplexed.’ In his address opening the conference, Chase Robinson argued that the *Futūḥ* may best be characterised as ‘an administrative geography tied to the development of the Caliphate.’ Robinson also emphasised al-Balādhurī’s close connection to the ‘Abbāsīd court: this ‘creature of the ‘Abbāsīd state’ calls the dynasty ‘blessed’ at least six times in the course of the *Futūḥ*.’

contradictory are the tales relayed by his authorities. He also makes profound mistakes as to how whosoever first conquered Palestine organised the occupied territories. Islamic judges, *qāḍīs*, are immediately appointed (p. 141), despite the fact that the institution did not yet exist.⁶⁸ The administrative arrangements of the ninth century are simply retrojected to the age of the conquests.

To argue that such partial discrepancies invalidate the whole, however, is surely going too far. It simply neglects to admit the remarkable degree of underlying consistency in the reports transmitted. The various authorities and narrative segments all agree on the basic progression of the invasion of Palestine and essential events like the siege and forceful conquest of cities like Caesarea. These are the kind of events that would easily have become known to multitudes within and without the nascent Islamic community, thus being harder to manipulate or simply to misremember. Some material is even passed on without needing to be qualified by a divergent tradition, such as the report that Yazīd b. Abī Sufyan became governor in Damascus and was succeeded by Mu‘āwiyah after his death (p.141).

The divergence only seems to creep in once such essential events are glossed with longer descriptions, such as the appointment of *qāḍīs*. The principle conclusion to bear in mind, following the idea of ‘multiple orthodoxies,’ is that al-Balādhurī’s informants seemed to agree on a basic foundation of people and events, even if the exact details and significance of such episodes and personages became subjects for debate within the community. Bare though they may be, it is hard not to be persuaded that at least some ‘facts’ can be found.

al-Ṭabarī: evidence despite exemplarity?

The far more expansive *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-’l-mulūk* of al-Ṭabarī presents a far more complex problem than the laconic *Futūḥ* of al-Balādhurī. Far more is known about al-Ṭabarī’s life. He was a rough contemporary of al-Balādhurī, being born in 839 and dying in 923. The son of a moderately wealthy land-owner, al-Ṭabarī seems to have devoted himself to scholarship from what strikes the modern westerner as a precociously early age: he had reportedly memorised the Qur’ān by the age of seven and was considered qualified to lead the prayer from the age of nine.⁶⁹ His earliest years were followed by a youth of travelling across the Islamic world to gain knowledge of *ḥadīth*, as well as and in preference to *tārīkh*, before settling in Baghdad to become one of his

⁶⁸ Schacht, J., 1964, *An Introduction to Islamic Law*, p.24-27.

⁶⁹ Bosworth, C., ‘al-Ṭabarī’, in Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., (eds.), *Encyclopaedia of Islam: Second Edition*, Brill Online, accessed on the 17th January 2017. Such an early start at learning the fundamentals of Islam was of course prevalent among those of means in the medieval Near East, as it still is today in many parts of the Islamic world.

generation's most famous and respected members of the *'ulamā'*. During his lifetime, he was perhaps better known as a jurist and commentator on the Qur'ān than as a historian, a discipline pursued in Classical times largely as an adjunct to the far more immediately relevant fields of *fiqh*, or Islamic law, and *tafsīr*, Qur'ānic exegesis.⁷⁰

It is hard to investigate effectively the methodology, interests and purposes of a writer whose output was so voluminous in a summary style. There is one salient theme, however, which immediately emerges from much of al-Ṭabarī's material on the conquests and that can be used to inform the way in which it is used for the writing of history. Al-Ṭabarī is often preoccupied by an agenda of exemplarity: constructing the Muslim warrior ideal.

This agenda was probably spurred by the age and location in which he lived. The central Islamic lands in the ninth century were the scene of intense literary production and competition. The jurist and historian al-Wāqidī, for example, was said to have bequeathed, upon his death in 823, six hundred trunks of books, requiring two men to carry each one of them, an anecdote that speaks to a fascination with writing and with the circulation and inevitable contesting of knowledge.⁷¹ Men like al-Wāqidī and al-Ṭabarī were, moreover, merely two among a large body of scholars who competed for patronage, students and fame, and whose intellectual battles could be as fierce as their role in developing the full fabric of Islamic civilisation was important. This dynamic is clearly born out in al-Ṭabarī's life. His intellectual rivals as an adult in Baghdad are well known. He is reported to have had long-running legal disputes with Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Dāwūd, the son of the founder of the Zāhirī law school, as well as a dispute with the followers of Ibn Ḥanbal, which occasionally led to violent assaults on al-Ṭabarī's person and property. This scholarly passion testifies to the profoundly important impact scholarship produced in this period exerted on Islamic society, existing in a milieu in which history, like Islamic jurisprudence and Qur'ānic exegesis, was a discipline that could not escape the intensely ontological concerns of the age.

To make a version of history both relevant and acceptable to contemporary *mores*, therefore, it is highly likely that compilers like al-Ṭabarī were conditioned by a need to underline the Islamic nature of the various stories of the conquests that they gathered or encountered in earlier written sources. There is a further reason why this was probably so. It has been suggested that the generation previous to that of al-Ṭabarī was the first in which a 'bandwagon effect' of conversion

⁷⁰ Robinson, C., *Islamic Historiography*, p.159-170.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, p.6-8.

to Islam started to grip the peoples living under the Caliphate.⁷² As Richard Bulliet has argued, conversion to Islam was at its most rapid between 791 and 975 in Iraq, by which time it has been suggested that almost 70% of people living in Mesopotamia and its surrounds were Muslim. In al-Ṭabari's Iranian homeland, interestingly, the same proportion of the total population accounted by Muslims was perhaps attained a century earlier, thereby placing the birth of the author of Islam's great conquest narrative in a veritable hotbed of Islamisation.

It is likely, therefore, that the authors of Islamic history were responding to a society that had only recently become Islamic in a majoritarian sense, or at least a society in which there existed a new critical mass of Muslims, were one not to agree with Bulliet's findings. It was a society that needed to be told what a Muslim was, and that needed a version of history that could both construct and consolidate a sense of pride in this identity. The clearly idealised presentation of some of the warriors in al-Ṭabari's *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk* may therefore not without good reason be read as an example of the construction of the exemplary warrior Muslim. The deeds of Ṭulayḥah b. Khuwaylid al-Asadī, who first fought against the Muslims during the wars of the so-called Apostasy before joining them, offers an instructive example.

Before the battle of al-Qādisiyyah, traditionally dated to 636, Ṭulayḥah was ordered to make a series of raids upon the Persians. These raids are said to have been conducted at night and provide set-piece scenes for inspiring acts of valour, which may have been transmitted in the tradition as much for their entertainment value as for their simple exemplarity. One is worth citing in full.

Ṭulayḥah went out and came to the Persian camp on a moonlit night and he watched it closely. He cut the ropes of a man's tent and led his horse away. Then he went out until he passed by the camp of Dhū 'l-Ḥāḥib and he destroyed another man's tent and untied his horse. Then, he came to the camp of al-Jālnūs, destroyed another man's tent and untied his horse. Then he went out and came to al-Kharrārah and the man who was at al-Najaf and the man who was at the camp of Dhū al-Ḥāḥib came out and the man from the camp of al-Jālnūs followed Ṭulayḥah. And the first man to fall upon Ṭulayḥah was the Jālnūsī, then the Ḥāḥibī, and Ṭulayḥah killed these first two. And he captured the last man and he brought him to Sa'd.

(*Tārīkh al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk*, p.2260)

⁷² Bulliet, R., 1979, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge Mass. & London: Harvard University Press, p.82.

Other accounts recycle many of the features of this first raid, not least the theme of the night attack, which appears to be a literary trope offering a stage for heroic display in a manner that brings to mind the Iliad. In a similar raid (p.2262-2263), for instance, Ṭulayḥah again attacks a camp alone and causes a minor degree of chaos within it. This prompts his pursuit, during which he slays two of his pursuers before taking the third captive.

These deeds are often given a deeply Islamic colouring. Shortly after yet another night raid on a Persian camp, Ṭulayḥah brings back a further prisoner, who converts to Islam and who receives the somewhat unimaginative name of ‘Muslim’ from his new master. This man is then used as a mouthpiece for the propagation of a set of pious Islamic values.

And he returned to Ṭulayḥah and said: “By God, you will not be defeated so long as you are as I see you, (people of) faithfulness, truth, peace-making and sympathy (wa-’llāhi lā tuhzimūna mā dumtum ‘alā mā ārā min al-wafā’ wa-’l-ṣidq wa-’l-iṣlāḥ wa-’l-mū’āsāt). There is no need for me of association with Persia.” And he was among the people of excellent behaviour on that day.

(Ṭāriḫ al-rusul wa-’l-mulūk, p.2264)

The actual historical plausibility of such an episode as this is, of course, quite low. Even if al-Ṭabarī’s assumption, that Islam was pretty-much fully formed during the lifetime of the Prophet, and understood by the men of the conquering armies, is accepted – which it should not be – it is extremely doubtful that a convert to a new faith could have internalised and communicated its values in such a manner. Episodes such as this, therefore, are comprehensible less as an echo of what was remembered from the distant days of the conquest, and more as a means of contemporary instruction. They create an inspiring ideal designed to exhort and edify the audience with reference to a past made ever more glorious.

This tendency is perhaps more subtle but still quite powerful in the *ḵhabar* of the visit of a certain envoy from the conquering army, Rib‘ī b. ‘Āmir, to the Persian commander Rustam (p.2269-2273). Rib‘ī comes to be characterised as the very model of an austere, peculiarly Islamic warrior, in contradistinction to godless, Persian luxury. The *ḵhabar*, after telling of Rib‘ī’s selection as envoy, describes Rustam’s tent in fulsome terms: it is replete with soft cushions, beautiful fabrics and bright colours (p.2270). Rib‘ī enters the scene as a man with no need for such material embellishments. He enters the tent, ‘on a horse of his, which was hairy and small (*ḡabbā’ qaṣīra*); he had a polished sword with him and its scabbard was made of rough cloth (*lifāfa taūbin kalaqin*)’ (p.2270). After he dismounts and starts to walk toward the Persian delegation, Rib‘ī makes a

somewhat discourteous point of piercing the tent's cushions with his spear. When asked why, he simply replies, 'indeed, we do not like to sit upon this finery of yours (*innanā lā nastahhibbu 'l-qu'ūd 'alā zīnatikim hādhibi*)' (p.2271).

The ideological opposition between Persian luxury and austere, peculiarly Islamic warrior virtue is made explicit in the exhortation Rib'ī gives to the Persians to encourage them to convert to Islam. The message of divinely-ordained, Islamic conquest is clear: 'God sent us (*allāh ibta'athana*)...(to grant) the justice of Islam (*'adl al-islām*) and he has sent us in his religion to his creatures, to call them to it (*linada'ūbim ilayhi*)' (p.2271). This rhetoric, combined with Rib'ī's austere appearance, shows him to be an exemplary warrior Muslim, rejecting the superficial luxuries of this world to fight in the path of God. It is exactly the kind of historical romance that one can imagine a leisurely ninth-century Baghdadi audience needed to hear, either for pious purposes or for the simple enjoyment of hearing about the dangerous and exciting deeds of the ancestors in a world made so different by their deeds.

The underlying message of the above passages, that victory will naturally follow if the mandates of Islam are obeyed, is set out dramatically in an encounter between Rustam and a prisoner from the conquering army. Rustam has the captured man brought before him, whom he then interrogates.

And so Rustam said to him: "What brought you and what do you want?" The man said: "We have come to seek that promised by God (maw'ūd allāh)...Your land and your sons and your blood, if you refuse to embrace Islam." Rustam said: "And if you are killed before this?" The man replied: "As part of God's promise, anyone of us killed before this He will send to Paradise and He will fulfil for who is left of us what I have said to you. Of that we are certain". Rustam said: "So have we been placed in your hands?" The man replied: "Poor Rustam! Indeed your deeds have done this to you and so God has made you submit because of them (fa-islamakum allāh bihā). And let not what you see around you beguile you, for indeed arrayed against you are not human beings but irrevocable fate (fa-innaka lasta tujāwala al-inas innamā tujāwala al-qaḍa')".

(Tārikh al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk, p.2254)

This neat passage accurately explains the fundamentals of *jihād* as well as feeding the necessary teleological tendency intrinsic to al-Ṭabarī's great conquest narrative. The society to which the history of al-Ṭabarī speaks can be assured of divine support and inevitable victory. The prisoner,

moreover, comes across as a model of rectitude and of faith in adversity: an exemplary warrior Muslim.

These few selections from the voluminous *Tāriḫ al-rusul w-ʿl-mulūk* demonstrate the significant extent to which the texts of Islamic history are dominated by rhetorical, literary and exemplary concerns. The stories of men like Ṭulayḥah and Ribʿī are built on literary tropes and are used to construct a peculiarly Muslim identity through narrative, a medium that is increasingly studied for the defining social role it can indeed play.⁷³ When the texts use terms of identity like ‘Muslim,’ or ‘Arab,’ therefore, one must be intensely cautious about the social power of such terms in the age in which the text was generated, rather than plainly reading identity as history.

al-Azdī: evidence in spite of apologetic?

The scheme of Islamic exemplarity that runs through so much of al-Ṭabarī’s dramatic narrative retelling of the conquests should not, moreover, necessarily be taken as an argument to invalidate the events described as bare facts. In order to suggest how this may be the case, and building on the reading of al-Balādhurī given above, it will be helpful to bring into consideration another work of *tāriḫ*, the *Futūḥ al-Shām* of Abū Ismāʿīl Muḥammad b. ʿAbdullāh al-Azdī.

Al-Azdī’s *Futūḥ* is a history with a controversial past. It was first brought to the attention of western scholarship in the mid-nineteenth century by William Nassau Lees, a soldier and linguist in the service of the East India Company, who owed his single manuscript copy to the ‘indefatigable work of the learned Dr. Sprenger.’⁷⁴ Lees dated the text on the basis of *isnād* analysis, arguing that the *isnāds* the text contained strongly suggested that it had to be extremely early, placing al-Azdī’s death in 794 (178 A.H.). He further suggested that the authorities from whom al-Azdī took his information must have died around the middle of the second century of the *hijra*, the earliest passing away in the year of the triumph of the ʿAbbāsids, 750 (133 AH).⁷⁵

Profound doubt, however, was cast upon Lees’ interpretations by de Goeje. In an article published a decade after the text had been allowed to circulate, and whose findings Lees came to accept, de

⁷³ See, for example, Sommers, M.R., 1994, ‘The narrative construction of identity: A relational and network approach’ in *Theory and Society* 23, p.605-649; ‘social life is itself storied and...narrative is an ontological condition of social life...stories guide action...people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories’ (p.613-614).

⁷⁴ *The Fotooh al-Shām: being an account of the Moslim conquests in Syria*, Lees, W.N. (ed.), 1854, Calcutta: Asiatic Society of Bengal, p.iii. For a disappointingly short account of what must have been Lees’ fascinating life, see his entry in the *Dictionary of National Biography*: Chichester, H.M., 2004, ‘Lees, William Nassau (1825–1889)’, rev. Parvin Loloi, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford University Press. The learned doctor to whom Lees refers was the Austrian orientalist Aloys Sprenger, who became a British subject and latterly served the government of India as a translator in the 1850s.

⁷⁵ *Ibid*, p.v.

Goeje argued that al-Azdī was an entirely fictional author and that his history was nothing more than a pious fabrication written during the Crusades to exhort the believers to *jihad* against the Christian invader.⁷⁶ De Goeje emphasised the text's relatively few *isnāds* and overall flowing narrative structure, which struck him as lacking the sophistication and intellectual arrangement of material found in other and better attested historians like al-Ṭabarī, whose work he was then in the process of editing. De Goeje's influence ensured that al-Azdī was banished from serious scholarly study for over a century.

Recent years have witnessed a rehabilitation of the *Futūḥ al-Shām*, even if it is fair to say that the text has not yet become an essential reference point for the history of the seventh century conquests. This rehabilitation was inaugurated by Lawrence Conrad using evidence unknown to de Goeje as well as a more perceptive reading of the text itself.⁷⁷ Conrad, for instance, highlighted the work of the modern Iraqi scholar Akram Diyā al-'Umārī, who demonstrated that de Goeje's belief that al-Azdī was a fictional character was not shared by medieval Muslim scholars, of whose opinions de Goeje was not aware.⁷⁸ Further, partly through comparing the text with the *Futūḥ al-Shām* of pseudo-al-Wāqidī, a well-known forgery, Conrad revealed that the language used in the text would not have made sense in the era of the Crusades, and that there were umpteen other hints that the language was early, such as al-Azdī's failure to connect Khālīd b. al-Walīd's title of *sayf allāh* to the battle of Mu'ta.⁷⁹ A further indication of the text's actual early date is its striking lack of interest in prophetic tradition. Only six *aḥādīth* are cited, all without an *isnād*, and al-Azdī seems far more concerned with the example of the Companions, whose authority, joined with that of the Qur'ān, seems to be his principle concern. In line with Schacht's theories of the evolution of Islamic jurisprudence, this tendency makes a second century AH date hard to resist.⁸⁰

Additional work on the text has all but confirmed Conrad's dating. Solutions have been found to the problematic *isnāds* and further external evidence for the historical existence of al-Azdī has also come to light.⁸¹ Aspects of the text nonetheless remain uncertain: its likely geographical provenance, perhaps most importantly, is a matter of continued debate, given Suleiman Mourad's

⁷⁶ de Goeje, M.J., 1864, *Mémoire sur le Fotouho 's-Sham attribué à Abou Ismail al-Baḡri*, in *Mémoires d'histoire et de géographie orientales*, no.2, Leiden, p.i-li.

⁷⁷ Conrad, L.I., 1987, 'Al-Azdī's History of the Arab Conquests in Bilād al-Shām: Some Historiographical Observations' in Bakhit, M.A., (ed.) *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilad al-Sham During The Early Islamic Period Up to 40 A.H./640 A.D.*, Amman, p.28-62.

⁷⁸ Ibid, p.30.

⁷⁹ Ibid, p.33-42. The connection of the title *sayf Allāh* to Mu'ta is a tradition that only came into circulation in the third century after the *hijra*, and which was contested for several centuries thereafter.

⁸⁰ Ibid, p.42-46.

⁸¹ See above all Mourad, S.A., 2000, 'On Early Islamic Historiography: Abū Ismā'īl Al-Azdī and His Futūḥ al-Shām' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, Vol. 120, No.4, p.577-593.

belief that it is ultimately based on a *Futūḥ al-Shām* composed by the Kūfan scholar Abū Mikhnaf.⁸² It is indeed a text that demands further attention. At this juncture, however, it is sufficient to note that scholarship is now generally agreed that the text was generated at some point in the eighth century, making the *Futūḥ al-Shām* ‘the oldest surviving conquest-work that we possess.’⁸³

This early date provokes a number of immediate thoughts about the text. First, one may suspect that it could contain some interesting material on the Umayyads, especially if one follows Conrad on its composition within a Syrian milieu. Secondly, and in close relation to the first suspicion, such material may be used to qualify the way in which members of the Umayyad family are presented in later texts, thereby revealing the influence of factional interest or simply the evolution of historical memory over time. Thirdly, its earlier date could act as a simple check on the chronology and pattern of events as they are presented in later works, to see whether or not they were established by the second century of the *hijra*. The way in which the evidence of the text interacts with these first thoughts can be used to inform the broader principles of approach to the sources.

One short episode in al-Ṭabarī that resonates with the *Futūḥ al-Shām* of al-Azdī may help to provide an informative example. During the various narrative accounts of the dispatch of the armies to Syria by Abū Bakr, al-Ṭabarī gives the following *isnād* and *ḵhabar*:

We are told on the authority of Ibn Ḥumayd – Salamah - Muḥammad b. Ishāq - Ṣalīḥ b. Kaysān that, when the army set out, Abū Bakr went forth with Yazīd b. Abī Sufyan to admonish him. Abū Bakr walked while Yazīd was riding, and when he had completed his admonition, he said: ‘Peace be upon you; may God keep you.’ Then he left while Yazīd continued and took the Tabūk road.

⁸² Ibid, p.584-593. Conrad argued that the text came from Syria (‘Al-Azdī’s History’, p.48-54). The discordance may at least in part result from the different methodologies employed. Mourad develops the connection to Abū Mikhnaf primarily on the basis of *isnād* and biography, whereas Conrad stresses internal textual evidence.

⁸³ Scheiner, J., 2007, ‘Grundlegendes zu al-Azdī’s *Futūḥ aš-Šām*,’ *Der Islam* 84, p.1-16, quote p.12. For an example of agreement, see Donner, F.M., 1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p.175, and also Scheiner’s further comments in Scheiner, J., 2012, ‘Writing the History of the Futūḥ: The Futūḥ-works by al-Azdī, Ibn A‘tham, and al-Wāqidī, in Cobb, P.M., (ed.), *The Lineaments of Islam: Studies in Honor of Fred McGraw Donner*, Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2012, p.151-176. An example of resistance to the early dating can be found in Pyrovolaki, M.A., 2008, *Futūḥ al-Shām and other futūḥ texts: a study of the perception of marginal conquest narratives in Arabic in medieval and modern times*, unpublished D.Phil in the University of Oxford, Trinity Term 2008, p.51-72. Pyrovolaki accuses Conrad of failing to consider all of de Goeje’s objections and finds Mourad’s analysis verging on the ‘far-fetched’ (p.69). This is not the place for a full reply to her arguments, but it can be observed that her own agenda – a literary study of the conquest texts – stands to benefit from seeing the *Futūḥ al-Shām* as a text written for the kind of purposes suspected by de Goeje. She also seems to have a vested interest in attacking the very endeavour of dating a text: ‘The present study...is based on the principle that the text has a value regardless because people read it, and if it is marginal or “pseudo-historical” this forms part of its value’ (p.66).

This short episode is one of the longest in which Yazīd, a paternal brother of the later Umayyad Caliph Mu‘āwiyah, actually features (for his relative absence in the story of the conquests, at least at this juncture, see *Tārīkh al-rusul wa-’l-mulūk*, p.2079-2107). This absence from the narrative of an important Companion of the Prophet with such a strong blood tie to the Umayyads is an immediate cause of suspicion. Is the omission perhaps the result of the later centuries’ disdain for the Umayyads, through a conscious reduction in their importance to the grand scheme of conquest, or simply through the decline in the tradition’s interest in them given the ascent of the ‘Abbāsids? Can any evidence be found to address such concerns?

The curious, throw-away comment that Yazīd was riding whilst Abū Bakr walked connects this short story to a far longer segment in al-Azdī. Far from being a minor figure in the dispatch of the armies to Syria, Yazīd receives pride of place in the narrative, being the first of the generals whom Abū Bakr chooses to address, and is named by him in an unmistakably laudatory manner as ‘the first of my commanders’ (*innaka amwal umarā’ī*; *Futūḥ al-Shām*, p.92).⁸⁴ The narrative of al-Azdī even closes with Yazīd’s death shortly after the conquest of Caesarea (*Futūḥ al-Shām*, p.401-403). The passage, lengthy even when edited down to its essentials, is a striking contrast to the same event as presented in al-Ṭabarī:

And so he (Abū Bakr) called Yazīd b. Abī Sufyan and appointed him to command.

(...)

Then indeed he went out walking with him. And so Yazīd said: ‘Oh Successor of the Messenger of God, you should either ride or listen to me that I should walk with you, for indeed I would hate that I ride and you walk.’ And so Abū Bakr said to him: ‘I am not going to ride and you are not going to dismount; indeed I reckon that these my steps are in the path of God.’ Then he admonished him, and said: ‘O Yazīd, indeed I charge you in the fearful reverence of God and in his obedience, and in love for him, and in fear for him, that when you meet the enemy, if God makes you victorious over them, do not shackle them, do not treat them harshly, do not double-cross them, do not accuse them of cowardice, and do not kill the children, the elders and the women, and do not burn the palms, and do not explore them, do not cut the fruitful trees, do not kill the animals save for food.

⁸⁴ *Kitāb Futūḥ al-Shām ta’līf Abī Ismā’īl Muḥammad b. ‘Abd Allāh al-Azdī al-Baṣrī*, ‘Uqlah, I.M., & Banī Yāsīn, Y.A. (eds.), 2005, Irbid. ‘Uqlah and Banī Yāsīn’s edition of the text has now superseded that of Lees as well as the 1970 edition of the text edited by ‘Abd al-Mun‘im ‘Āmir, which was essentially that of Lees (Mourad, S.A., 2000, ‘On Early Islamic Historiography,’ p.578).

(...)

Then (Abū Bakr) took (Yazīd's) hand, and said: 'indeed I commend you to God's protection; on you be the peace of God and his mercy.' Then he bade him farewell and said: 'you indeed are the first of my commanders, and I have appointed you in command over the persons of the eminent Muslims...and so be good to their companions, and set down upon them your shadow, and lower upon them your protection, and consult them concerning your orders; God has made a good choice of companions for you, and on me he has placed the succession (to the Prophet).' And so Yazīd set out for Syria with his army.

(Futuḥ al-Shām, p.91-92)

Contrary to the laconic version of this episode in al-Ṭabarī, al-Azdī puts an entire, and highly elaborate, admonition into Abū Bakr's mouth. He also provides more material on why he apparently consciously chose to walk – seemingly as a declamatory demonstration of pious modesty – and further takes the opportunity to reaffirm the importance of collective decision-making (*shūrā*) by having Abū Bakr order Yazīd to consult his companions when making decisions.⁸⁵ Above all, Yazīd emerges as a heroic and important figure, essentially as the commander-in-chief of the early conquests of Syria. It is, therefore, tempting to imagine that this *khabar* was shaped in a context in which the demonstration of the legitimacy of the Umayyad family was very much still a significant concern. Such a demonstration is achieved in this passage not only through its presentation of Yazīd, but also through the insistence on the kind of collective decision-making that tradition relates was the justification of Umayyad power vis-à-vis the claims of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭalib.

The failure of such a detailed and loaded account to enter the *Tārīkh al-rusul w-'l-mulūk* of al-Ṭabarī shows how such a solicitation on the behalf of the Umayyad family was no longer a suitable or relevant theme for history by the middle of the ninth century, evidence that belief in the later historical tradition's tendency to denigrate the Umayyads may be more than a scholarly cliché. Yet the existence of a 'multiple orthodoxy,' and the concordance between the two very different accounts, points to how they may both be used to try to write history, if only in the sparsest of terms. On a very basic level, they both confirm that Yazīd b. Abī Sufyan was one of the most important commanders of the Syrian campaigns from their beginning. Yazīd's role cannot be denied even in the later, more hostile age and al-Ṭabarī and al-Azdī rely on wholly different chains

⁸⁵ The significance of *shūrā* to al-Azdī as a salient theme of the entire text has already been noticed by Conrad; see Conrad, L.I., 1987, 'Al-Azdī's History', p.44-46.

of transmitters, implying that Yazīd's role was significant as it must have been known throughout the community.⁸⁶ The role of Abū Bakr in directly initiating the campaign also receives mutual support. Interestingly, al-Ṭabarī's contention that Yazīd set out 'on the Ṭabūk road' is absent from the earlier and more sympathetic text, suggesting that it may be a detail added by a later mind that sought in some way better to explain the early campaigns.

The writing of history, it is fair to say, may not have advanced far if all that can really be gleaned from these examples is that a man named Yazīd led an army under the orders of Abū Bakr to Syria. As was the case with the two other historians given consideration, al-Azdī transmits material influenced by a series of secondary concerns so it is only the bare facts and outline of events in which one should have some faith. Validating such basic details is nonetheless a useful exercise. It not only constructively responds to the nihilism of the extreme sceptical school, but it also offers the basis to establish some kind of kernel of truth: a skeleton of hard facts that is often assumed rather than explicitly demonstrated.⁸⁷ From such a foundation, it becomes possible to apply astute historical judgement to more contestable details, thereby beginning to write history.

Conclusion

Reconstructing the story of early Islam and the seminal conquests of the seventh century is a dilemma of history. Some of the most sophisticated scholarship on the subject, in the space of the last fifty years, has gone from obliterating the Islamic historical tradition from any serious consideration as fact to all but entirely rehabilitating it. Various approaches to the sources and divergent reconstructions, which still speak across one another, have also come into existence, even if there is now less of a rigid division between putative 'sceptics' and 'traditionalists.' The expansion of the evidence base accepted within the discipline and the growth of theoretical approaches holds much promise in helping to make sense of what can often seem, at least on the surface, to be the all but unfathomable material of the tradition.

Above all, there is now good reason to have faith in the major contours of the conventional narrative. As has been discussed, sources external to the tradition have provided credible validation of the progress of events and have shown that the early community articulated a self-conception of themselves that attests to novel ideological inspiration. Juynboll's suggestion that the *isnād* tradition probably originated in the 690s implies that the Arabian conquerors of the Near

⁸⁶ The *isnād* for this *khbar* in al-Azdī is given at a considerable remove (p.89: *Muḥammad b. Yūsuf – Thābit al-Bunānī – 'Anas b. Mālik*) and covers a large section of narrative.

⁸⁷ See, for instance, al-Azmeh, A., 2014, *The Arabs and Islam in Late Antiquity: A Critique of Approaches to Arabic Sources*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, esp. p.83-86 for the academic quest for – and defence of the notion of – a kernel of truth, referred to by the German *Grundschrift*.

East recognised the importance of preserving and transmitting their history from an early date, making it possible to imagine that genuine historical details can be unearthed in the tradition. In light of the historiographical debates and advances of the past decades, moreover, it is reasonable to agree with Bowersock's call for no source or kind of evidence to be excluded from consideration: 'Rigid methodologies have run their course by now...Minimalism is not the way to throw light on a dark age.'⁸⁸

An illustrative consideration of three sources from the Islamic historical tradition, the *Futūḥ al-Buldān* of al-Balādhurī, the *Tāriḫ al-rusul wa-'l-mulūk* of al-Ṭabarī, and the *Futūḥ al-Shām* of al-Azdī, have confirmed how valuable the Islamic sources can be and together show how the tradition communicates the historicity of matters of fact rather than matters of meaning. One may start to approach the Islamic sources on their own, therefore, on the principle that what could be referred to as simple details – events, places, people, even aspects of their relation – remember history, whereas the overall message that they communicate is open to doubt. Thus do certain points of reference start to appear on the landscape of the seventh century that demand further investigation and additional methodologies to help the historian make sense of them.

A second principle that analysis of the three sources suggest is that profound scepticism should be directed towards any material that relates to identity. All of the three histories, especially the two composed in the ninth century, were written at such a remove from the events they describe that the society of the conquerors, and the world that they came to remake in their image, must have been irrevocably foreign. The mental gulf that separated the ninth from the seventh century was probably even greater than the usual psychological chasm between the centuries given the birth and ascent of a new religion and the new patterns of life and thought that it came to initiate. The histories were, moreover, written at a time when this new evolving society was still coming to terms with itself, constructing and consolidating its own identity and looking to validate the conceits of the present through the legitimacy to be won only through reference to the past. It may be difficult in the extreme to try to find echoes of the real society of the seventh century conquerors in sources that probably could not but destroy in order to create. Other evidence for such a task must be used, as the next chapter will explore.

A third and final principle inspired by consideration of the sources arises from how limited they are. In order to try to use them, the historian must still use material from beyond the Islamic tradition as more than a starting point. Sensible and qualified recourse to theoretical and

⁸⁸ Bowersock, G. W., 2017, *The Crucible of Islam*, p.12.

comparative models should also be accepted as unavoidable, on the understanding that some framework must be found within which to make most sense of the points of reference given by the tradition.

All pre-industrial societies – as Patricia Crone has argued in one of her few works that seems to be under-cited by specialist scholars of Islam – shared the same kind of fundamental constraints. Human responses to the problems of social organisation have been conditioned by these basic constraints, making comparison between different pre-industrial societies able to provide mutually enlightening background assumptions or even suggestive details.⁸⁹ A fundamental constraint peculiar to the history of early Islam, moreover, namely the nature of the Arabian peninsula – which remained essentially unchanged until the twin discovery of oil and the unavoidable economic need for it in the twentieth century – implies that diachronic comparison with Arabian societies over time could also be informative, as already noted in the Introduction. Finally, the quest for basic plausibility should be maintained, not least by asking the many questions as yet unasked by western scholarship and testing assumptions either to their breaking, or validating, point.

One such question that much western scholarship seems to have avoided, or at least to have answered solely with reference to the material of the tradition, concerns the very start of Islamic society. How did a powerful state, capable of world conquest, apparently arise in the middle of the western flank of the Arabian Peninsula, where no state had arisen before? Can such a development only be explained through recourse to mystification, or are there in fact ‘normal human terms,’ to borrow James Howard-Johnston’s phraseology, which are capable of managing it? To see whether or not this is the case, close attention must be paid to the man Muḥammad and to the oasis of Yathrib, and the further source problems that such an investigation must first encounter.

⁸⁹ Crone, P., 1989, *Pre-Industrial Societies*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell. Crone seeks to remove the unconscious assumptions unavoidable to the modern student living in a world so paradigmatically different from that of the pre-industrial through the explication of a set of ‘identikits’ justified and further explained by recourse to examples drawn from ‘the Sumerians to the Manchus’ (p.xi).

Chapter Two: Muḥammad at Medina

Strive hard for God as is His due: He has chosen you and placed no hardship in your religion, the faith of your forefather Abraham. God has called you Muslims (huwa sammākum al-muslimīna) – both in the past and in this [message] (min qablu wa-fī hādihā) – so that the Messenger can bear witness about you and so that you can bear witness about other people. So keep up the prayer, give the prescribed alms, and seek refuge in God: He is your protector – an excellent protector and an excellent helper.

(Qur’ān 22:78)¹

The previous chapter explored the difficulty of writing the early history of Islam solely from the great narratives of the age of the ‘Abbāsids. Insights from generations of sophisticated western scholarship have led to the conclusion that the sources of the Islamic historical tradition contain only the skeleton of historical memory: basic facts often overlaid with anachronistic interpretations and later concerns. They also amount to the literary hammers by which a new world was forged, retro-projecting and idealising more contemporary notions of identity. In order to start to understand the birth of Islamic civilisation in ‘normal human terms,’ therefore, one must follow the principles of historical reconstruction that the investigation of the sources has produced. Early material must be emphasised, profound scepticism directed towards anything regarding identity, and recourse must be made to the exercise of sound historical sense, not least through finding and applying comparative evidence. It then becomes possible to work forwards to the Islamic tradition, reading it sensitively to identify information that has a bearing on history.

How, then, should this endeavour start? The title of this chapter points to the two factors fundamental to the rise and development of the new power: Muḥammad and the oasis that became his city, Medina. The title is taken from the second volume of W. Montgomery Watt’s biography of the Prophet, a biography that has been characterised as ‘historically obsolete’ owing to Watt’s general faith in the narrative contained in the *Sīrah* of Ibn Ishāq.² Yet this judgement, though

¹ The translation of the Qur’ān used, for ease of cross-reference, is that by M.A.S. Abdel Haleem in the Oxford World’s Classics series (*The Qur’ān*, Haleem, A.M.A.S., trans., Oxford University Press, 2004). Emendations to his translation have been made, when deemed necessary and relevant, from the Arabic text of the ‘standard’ 1924 Egyptian Qur’ān accessed via the website www.quranexplorer.com.

² Robinson, C., 2010, ‘The rise of Islam, 600 – 705’, in Robinson, C., (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I – The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, Cambridge University Press, p.187, footnote 35.

accurate in many respects, neglects to mention that Watt *did* ask deeper questions of the source material. He was not just a translator. Watt sought to look for the ‘material factors underlying history’ to see how the man Muḥammad was able to forge a powerful state in a part of the world that had previously lacked solid state structures.³ His overweening stress on economics and materiality may now strike the twenty-first century mind as too much the product of the fascinations of an earlier age, but Watt was certainly right to go beyond the religious framework of the Islamic historical tradition in order to advance some kind of meta-theory of state development. It is an approach currently lacking in study of the earliest years of Islam.⁴

Attention will first be directed towards the founder of the new state, Muḥammad, and then to the community he founded. The Prophet will be suggested to have been a figure of exceptional charismatic power whose message had an impact because it spoke to pre-existing religious trends and concerns. This message, however, resonated first and foremost with the oasis dwellers of Medina, the community of Believers, who welcomed the Prophet into their midst but who then became curiously marginalised in the life of the new state vis-à-vis Muḥammad’s original Meccan followers and later adherents, as will be briefly touched-upon in the next chapter. Delving into the text of the Qur’ān will reveal that the other major constituents of Muḥammad’s nascent state were far less enamoured of the Prophet. They were the bedouin, the original ‘Muslims,’ whose vital role in the formation of the Islamic state will be further explored in the following chapters.

The Historical Muḥammad

The sources for the life of Muḥammad evince the problems associated with the Islamic historical tradition that have already been outlined in Chapter One. What is conventionally referred to as the canonical biography of the Prophet written by Ibn Ishāq, the *Sīrah*, is in fact a later recension by his student, Ibn Hishām. It dates to no earlier than the first quarter of the ninth century.⁵ Comparison with material attributed to Ibn Ishāq by al-Ṭabarī within the *History of the Prophets and Kings* demonstrates the not insignificant extent to which Ibn Hishām was an editor rather than

³ Watt, W.M., *Muḥammad at Mecca*, Oxford University Press, 1953, p.xi.

⁴ Analyses of the growth of the early Islamic state tend to focus – not unwisely yet at the expense of investigating the very earliest years – on the conquest period after Muḥammad and the consequent rapid accumulation of wealth and appropriation of existing systems of government that helped to make the Umayyad empire possible. A concise example of this propensity is Robinson, C., 2013, ‘The First Islamic Empire’, in Bang, F., and Scheidel, W., *The Oxford Handbook of the State in the Ancient Near East and Mediterranean*, Oxford University Press, p.519-538, esp. p.523-529.

⁵ Watt, W. M., “Ibn Hishām”, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 24th of February 2018.

merely a transmitter.⁶ Even if the text composed by Ibn Ishāq had survived, the temporal gulf separating his generation from the Prophet – Ibn Ishāq died in 767 – and the unreliable nature of oral transmission, would have done little to recommend the historicity of his biography. Biographic material survives in the work of other early authors like Ibn Sa‘d who, like many of the traditions given by Ibn Hishām, claim some of the first known scholars of Islam as their ultimate sources. The fragmentary nature of the stories they transmit, combined with the profound uncertainty as to whether their chains of transmitters are what they claim to be, means that they cannot assist the historian who seeks to move beyond Ibn Ishāq.⁷

Late dates of recension and the quality of oral tradition are not the only accusations to be levelled at the *Sīrah*. The biography of the Prophet Muḥammad is suffused with the numinous. The womb of Muḥammad’s mother, for example, is said to have glowed so brightly that it allowed her to see the Roman city of Bostra hundreds of miles to the north. The Devil reportedly moved among the Quraysh to advise them how best to rid themselves of the troublesome holy man in their midst, and the angel Gabriel persistently intervened in human affairs to advise the Prophet or to attack his enemies on his behalf.⁸

The *Sīrah* also goes to considerable lengths to locate Muḥammad in a broader religious context to try to demonstrate that he is indeed the last and greatest of God’s prophets. Several stories of the ways in which his sanctity was recognised by established monotheist communities are given in the first third of the text. This is clearly an attempt to legitimise his prophecy and, one imagines, to reply to accusations that, unlike Jesus, his coming was not preordained. Christians from Abyssinia, who just happen to be visiting Mecca shortly after Muḥammad’s birth, become fascinated by him and try to take him away. The monk Baḥīrā pronounces his prophecy when, as a young man, Muḥammad journeys to Syria, and is even said to have found evidence for Muḥammad in his holy books, no quotes from which are offered.⁹ It is left to Ibn Hishām directly to cite biblical evidence for Muḥammad. It is alleged that he is none other than the Holy Spirit, whom Jesus in the Gospel of John says will be sent after him: ‘(t)he *Munahḥamana* (God bless and preserve him!) in Syriac is

⁶ See above all the excellent translation of the *Sīrah* by Alfred Guillaume, who inserts the material surviving in al-Ṭabarī into his rendition of what is still primarily Ibn Hishām’s text. Guillaume, A., 1955, *The Life of Muhammad: A Translation of Ishāq’s Sīrat Rasūl Allāh*, Oxford University Press.

⁷ Shoemaker, S.J., 2012, *The Death of a Prophet: The End of Muhammad’s Life and the Beginnings of Islam*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia, p.75-80.

⁸ Guillaume, A., 1955, *The Life of Muhammad*, p.69, p.222, and, for instance, p.461-469 (Gabriel intervenes against the Banū Qurayza) respectively.

⁹ *Ibid*, p.73 and p.79-81.

Muhammad; in Greek he is the paraclete.¹⁰ Thus does a single specious homonym come to assert the superiority of Islam.

Quite simply, the Muḥammad given to posterity by the *Sīrah* is the prophet of an established, self-confident religious movement whose contemporary conceits received vindication in the memory of the conquests of the seventh century and the faith's resulting political hegemony. Even if one accepts some of the *Sīrah*'s material as fundamentally historical – as many historians do his rivalry with the Quraysh or the Hijra – one must still recognise the ahistorical nature in which this material is communicated: '(e)vents and human actions are interpreted in the light of their ultimate significance, not their immediate cause...we are seldom given a more life-like portrait of any character or a mundane explanation of any happening.'¹¹ The *Sīrah* should not, therefore, be the historian's first or only guide to the historical Muḥammad.

For many historians, it nonetheless has been precisely that. Yet different historians, regardless of the degree of scepticism with which they view the *Sīrah*, have painted their own images of Muḥammad, which are as *sui generis* as they are historical. Generally, he has been characterised as either some kind of social reformer or as an eschatological prophet closer to some reconstructions of the historical Jesus than to a social democrat.¹² Some recent contributions to the debate have preferred to avoid making definitive statements on Muḥammad the man, preferring to concentrate on showing how a more detailed and nuanced reconstruction of his context could indicate what kind of Muḥammad may be most plausible.¹³

Yet such contextual approaches should not preclude a recognition that there are certain bare facts about the historical Muḥammad that can be said for sure. It is also possible to develop a means to understand the historical Muḥammad in a way that can both make sense of the claims made for him by the Islamic tradition and that also maintains a distance from the mystical. This can be

¹⁰ Ibid, p.104.

¹¹ Hoyland, R.G., 1997, *Seeing Islam as Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish, and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam*, Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press Inc, p.34; Hoyland is summarising a tendency inherent to the religious texts of Late Antiquity, an inclination he sees exacerbated in the *Sīrah* (p.36-38).

¹² For a survey of these two competing versions of the historical Muḥammad, see Shoemaker, S.J., 2012, *The Death of a Prophet*, p.121-127. Shoemaker explicitly draws on the techniques of New Testament scholarship to inform his approach to early Islam. F.E. Peters' 1991 article, 'The Quest of the Historical Muhammad', in *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 23, p.291-315, remains a useful reference point for demonstrating the considerable extent to which, by 1991 at least, research into the historical Jesus was still far in advance of research into the historical Muḥammad.

¹³ Examples include Hoyland, R.G., 2007, 'Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muḥammad: Problems and Sources', *History Compass*, p.581-602, said explicitly on p.593, and Bowersock, G. W., 2017, *The Crucible of Islam*, Harvard University Press.

achieved through considering the sociological resources on which he must have drawn to gain power, explicit recognition of which is currently absent from the study of early Islam.

The Muḥammad that emerges from the more contemporary, non-Islamic sources adduced to prove the basic fact of his historical existence is in general simply the leader of fighting men. Some of the earliest reports to record the raids of Arabian tribesmen into the provinces of Rome and Persia show no awareness of Muḥammad's religious claims and imply that he is merely a troublesome tribal leader. A note scrawled in the margins of a Syriac manuscript containing the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, for instance, gives Muḥammad as the name of the leader of some Arabians who reportedly ravaged the region around the Sea of Galilee in 635.¹⁴

Even when an early witness was aware of Muḥammad's prophetic claims, it is impossible to escape the sense that his authority manifested itself through what could principally be classed as the political control of groups of warriors. This is, of course, unsurprising in the light of the later tradition – and is not meant to imply that such authority is intrinsically alien to more mystical forms – but it is still important to underline the ways in which the Prophet's power was felt by contemporaries to provide insights into how the early Islamic state came into being. The *Doctrina Jacobi*, for instance, underscores the essential fact of Muḥammad's leadership of armed bands of Arabian raiders.¹⁵ Justus, the cousin of the eponymous Jacob, who has joined his relative in Carthage where the action of the text takes place, reports word of a prophet who has arisen among the Saracens. This prophet is said to be false as there is nothing to him, save 'the shedding of men's blood.' Even though the presentation of this prophet is coloured by the text's desire to denigrate the Jews through creating some kind of association between them and the Saracens' violent deeds, the *Doctrina Jacobi* is nonetheless clear evidence that, if nothing else, Muḥammad appeared to contemporaries as some kind of Arabian warrior king.

The quest for the historical Muḥammad may not have advanced too far if all that can be said about him is that he could command sufficient numbers of fighting men to start to unnerve contemporaries in the Roman Near East in the early 630s. This sparse impression leaves a great

¹⁴ See Hoyland, R.G., 1997, *Seeing Islam*, p.116-124 for notes on the text and an English translation. Nöldeke, T., 1875, 'Zur Geschichte der Araber im 1. Jahrh.d. H. aus syrischen Quellen,' in *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 29, p.76-97, is still useful and offers a perhaps more cautious translation, avoiding ethnic terminology (Muḥammad's men are 'Anhängern', not 'Arabs').

¹⁵ An edited version of the *Doctrina Jacobi*, complete with notes and commentary, can be found in Dagon, G., and Déroche, V., 1991, 'Juifs et chrétiens dans l'Orient du VIIe siècle', *Travaux et Mémoires* 11, p.17-273; text p.47-299. See however Hoyland, R. G., *Seeing Islam*, p.55-61, for a convincing case that the text dates to 634 rather than to the 640s, and Shoemaker, S.J., 2012, *The Death of a Prophet*, p.20-27, for additional commentary on the text's significance as an early source.

gap between the seventh century and the detailed portrait painted of the Prophet by the later Islamic tradition. It is not, however, a gap that cannot be bridged in some way.

Given the lack of evidence for state structures in the seventh century Ḥijāz, and the consequent absence of institutions enabling the articulation of power, one must consider how it was possible for a man like the Prophet to exercise so much influence over so many people. Max Weber's theorisation of the different kinds of authority offers a basis for understanding what must have been the power of Muḥammad's sovereign self.¹⁶ As are all men reported to have made a claim to prophecy, Muḥammad was probably a figure of exceptional charismatic power.¹⁷ Obedience was due to him 'by virtue of personal trust in his revelation, his heroism or his exemplary qualities so far as they fall within the scope of the (subject) individual's belief in his charisma.'¹⁸ Charisma is a personal quality not to be underestimated, given that Weber's insistence that it is 'the great revolutionary force' in 'traditionalist periods' is vindicated by the achievements of the Arabian conquest movement that came to see Muḥammad as its inspiration.¹⁹

There is one crucial aspect to the expression of charismatic authority, moreover, that points to a more useful means to understand the career of the Prophet. It is the recognition of the audience of a charismatic figure like a prophet that their revelation or exemplary character is genuine that validates their claims and turns an individual into a leader: 'where charisma is genuine, it is not this which is the basis of the claim to legitimacy. This basis lies rather in the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognise its genuineness and to act accordingly.'²⁰ In order to start to appreciate why and how Muḥammad's words and deeds had the impact on his contemporaries that they did, it is necessary to explore the world of belief in which they lived. Fortunately, there is a source from the Islamic tradition of unique value that can be used for this investigation.

¹⁶ Weber, M., *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretative Sociology*, Roth, G. and Wittich, C., (eds. And trans.) University of California Press: Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1978, p.212-301. Originally published in 1920-1922 under the working title of *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft*. The term 'sovereign self' – and the sense of exceptional personal influence it connotes – is taken from Steinberg, J., 2011, *Bismarck: A Life*, Oxford University Press, p.1-12. Steinberg develops the notion as an extension of Weber's three types of authority – rational/legal, traditional and charismatic – none of which seem precisely to describe Bismarck's idiosyncratic personal power and unique constitutional position.

¹⁷ In Weberian terms, a prophet is 'a purely individual bearer of charisma, who by virtue of his mission proclaims a religious doctrine or divine commandment' (Weber, M., *Economy and Society*, p.439). Weber's discussion of the 'prophet' (p.439-451) includes some brief comments on Muḥammad as a 'lawgiver', much in the manner of Moses, who graduated from leading 'pietistic bourgeois conventicles in Mecca' to exhorting the 'warrior clans' of Arabia to conquest once he realised that such a project would more easily spread his message (p.444).

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.215-216.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p.245.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p.242.

The Qur'ān as an historical source

The non-Islamic sources for the career of Muḥammad, though hardly without their own difficulties, demonstrate clearly that, whatever else he may have been, Muḥammad was a powerful political leader able to bend large groups of warriors to his will. According to the Prophet's biography as written by Ibn Isḥāq, these warriors were all Muslims receptive to his message, hailing either from the community of Meccan exiles and their Medinese 'helpers' (*anṣār*), or eventually from the desert tribes that became convinced of the veracity of Muḥammad's revelation. As has been noted, however, much of the *Sīrah* material is fabulous and subject to the same kind of reworking as the rest of the Islamic historical tradition. It should not, therefore, be the first point of departure for reconstructing the community founded by Muḥammad, as much as it was abandoned to sketch the outlines of the Prophet himself.

The only genuinely early text that could act as the first point of departure is the Qur'ān. Composed of one hundred and fourteen *ṣuwar* (*sūra* in the singular), which are themselves divided into any number of *āyāt* (*āya* in the singular) of various lengths, it is believed to be not simply an account of the teachings of a prophet, but the very word of God. The Qur'ān is therefore perhaps best compared to the Christian conception of Jesus as the logos, rather than to the Bible, with respect to its status as the embodiment of the divine message. According to tradition, the Qur'ān was revealed by God to Muḥammad in stages, in both Mecca and Medina, as the final and most perfect revelation of the divine to mankind. Muḥammad's Companions wrote the revelations down on a disparate range of media from the prophet's own recitations and it was only in the reign of the Caliph 'Uthmān that the text was consolidated and a 'standard' edition of the *rasm* – the unvowelled skeleton text of Arabic – was produced.²¹

Upon reading the Qur'ān, one finds that God speaks in a very allusive, dissonant, and mysterious manner. At least three broad categories of text seem to exist within it: short, sharp, exhortations to belief in certain essential aspects of God, not least in his unitary and singular nature, or in the Final Judgement; legal injunctions governing righteous action in this world, and narrative accounts

²¹ Welch, A.T., Paret, R. and Pearson, J.D., "al-Ḳur'ān", in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 1st February 2017. The traditions concerning the Qur'ān are actually far more diverse than the short summary of the basic modern Sunnī position. Even though the tradition would contend that the *rasm* was settled at a very early date, Muslims have historically accepted seven different types of vowelling, and therefore of reading, the text. The Arabic Qur'ān now most widely available is that standardised by an Egyptian committee in 1924, whose work led to the first mass-produced version of the text.

of past prophets seemingly taken, in some cases, from the wider monotheistic tradition of the Near East.²² It is a text so internally heterogeneous, and tantalisingly oblique, that it begs deconstruction.

Some western scholars of a sceptical persuasion have indeed been unafraid to deconstruct the text out of all recognition from the Islamic understanding of it. One important voice that escaped mention in the opening chapter, owing to its particular focus, is that of John Wansbrough, whose controversial work on the Qur'ān heralded the birth of the sceptical school of Islamic history.²³ Wansbrough, whose approach to the text is inseparable from his postmodernist literary persuasion and belief that it is impossible to write history in a manner that goes beyond reconstructing merely what subsequent generations thought of the past, argued that the Qur'ān did not come into being in the Ḥijāz of the time of the Prophet. Rather, it emerged gradually from the nexus of monotheistic groups engaged in mutual polemic – the 'sectarian milieu' – which were presumably located in the heartlands of the new, ethnically Arab empire that had sprung out of Arabia to conquer the known world. This process took some centuries, over the course of which the religious elite involved in the redaction and canonisation of the Qur'ān became ever more closely identified with the rulers of the Arab state. The process of developing the Qur'ān, and therefore of Islam as a whole faith, was thus a cumulative and progressively exegetical project that apparently depended on both broad and mysterious patterns within the thoughts of various monotheistic communities in the Near East.²⁴

It is now fair to say after two generations of reflection upon them that Wansbrough's iconoclastic theses have served far more as a means to spur serious study of the Qur'ān than as a way to replace the more conventional understanding of the text's origin.²⁵ The criticisms that have been directed

²² For the definition of these three categories, see Donner, F. M., 1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing*, Princeton, New Jersey: The Darwin Press Inc., p.64-67. Donner uses the terms 'paraenetic' for the exhortatory material, 'legal' for the second category, and 'anecdotal' for the narrative segments, preferring this term owing to the brief and disjointed nature of many of the prophetic stories. There are, of course, other potential ways of breaking down the Qur'ānic text. Nicolai Sinai, for instance, suggests a tripartite division very similar to Donner's, based not only on theme, but also length of *sūra*: the shorter *suwar* tend to equate to the exhortatory material, and prophetic stories and legal rulings fall both into Sinai's second category of long texts with a three-part structure, and his third homiletic category comprising the longest *suwar*. See Sinai, N., 2010, 'The Qur'ān as Process,' in Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M., (eds.) *The Qur'ān in Context: Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur'ānic Milieu*, Brill: Leiden & Boston, p.407-439.

²³ See above all Wansbrough, J.E., 1977, *Quranic Studies: Sources and Methods of Scriptural Interpretation*, Oxford University Press, and Wansbrough, J.E., 1978, *The Sectarian Milieu: Content and Composition of Islamic Salvation History*, Oxford University Press.

²⁴ For a summary of Wansbrough's arguments, see Wansbrough, J.E., 1978, *The Sectarian Milieu*, p.138-140.

²⁵ Many volumes on various aspects of the Qur'ān continue to cite Wansbrough's theses as a point of departure for the articles they contain, most of which use them as a strawman to advance analyses far more in keeping with the traditional understanding of the text's development. See, for instance, Reynolds, G.S. (ed) 2008, *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, Routledge, London & New York; Reynolds, G.S. (ed.) 2011, *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān: The Qur'ān in its historical context 2*, Routledge, London & New York, as well as Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M., (eds.) 2010 *The Qur'ān in Context*.

towards his work have been many and profound, encompassing matters both of substance and of Wansbrough's idiosyncratic writing style that demands as much exegesis as the text on which he is commenting.²⁶ It is, however, in some respects superfluous to rehearse these criticisms, given the solid evidence that has emerged since the 1970s that presents physical, rather than philosophical, challenges to Wansbrough's contentions.

In 1972, a vast collection of ancient Arabic manuscript folios was discovered in the roof-space of the Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā' in Yemen. The collection was found to include 12,000 parchment fragments, all but around 1,500 of which have been assigned to 926 distinct manuscripts of both the Qur'ān and other material.²⁷ The body of text that the most diligent students of the find, Behnam Sadeghi and Mohsen Goudarzi, call 'Ṣan'ā' 1' is without doubt the most important documentary find for the history of the holy book of Islam. It is a palimpsest, the upper text of which conforms to the standard *rasm* attributed to the reign of 'Uthmān – and that has been dated on the basis of style to the late seventh or early eighth centuries A.D. – but the lower text of which is an entirely different text type. Carbon-14 dating of the parchment makes it clear that this text type, referred to by Sadeghi and Goudarzi as 'C-1,' must be earlier than the upper text: it is 99% certain that the parchment predates 671, and 75% sure that it is as early as 646.²⁸ The text is therefore not evidence of a divergent version of the Qur'ān flitting through the sectarian milieu alongside a version eventually accepted as correct, but a chronologically earlier text that is understandably characterised as a 'Companion Codex' by its editors.²⁹

Convincing though the evidence of carbon-14 may be, caution should perhaps still be exercised over endorsing the notion that the text had finally and completely stabilised under 'Uthmān. A similar circumspection should also be directed towards the idea that the version produced in the 640s was exclusively accepted throughout the rapidly expanding territories of the Caliphate. The reign of 'Abd al-Malik shines through the Islamic sources as being a period of comparable significance to that of 'Uthmān with respect to the codification of the Qur'ān. His reign was one of the consolidation of political authority and the development of state structures.³⁰ 'Abd al-

²⁶ See for example Donner, F.M., 1998, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, p.35-40.

²⁷ Sadeghi, B., & Goudarzi, M., 2010, 'Ṣan'ā' 1 and the Origins of the Qur'ān', *Der Islam* 87, no.1-2, p.1-129, p.9.

²⁸ *Ibid*, p.8.

²⁹ *Ibid*, p.17-26. See p.41-115 for a critical edition of the lower text, noting where it varies from the standard; no variation alters the meaning of the text in a revolutionary manner. The choice of the terminology of 'Companion Codex' refers to the traditional accounts of Muḥammad's Companions possessing their own, individual and varying versions of the Qur'ānic text, which 'Uthmān's project sought to standardise and thereby supersede.

³⁰ See Robinson, C., 2005, *Makers of the Muslim World: 'Abd al-Malik*, Oneworld Publications, esp.81-104. Robinson goes so far even to say that 'The task of producing, distributing an enforcing a uniform Qur'ānic text fits as neatly into 'Abd al-Malik's reign as it fits awkwardly into 'Uthmān's or Mu'awiya's' (p.104).

Malik's governor of Iraq, al-Ḥajjāj b. Yūsuf al-Thaqafī, potentially as part of a scheme to impress Umayyad authority upon a territory historically hostile to the government of Damascus, seems to have initiated a programme of adding diacritical marks to manuscripts that previously lacked them. This so-called 'second *maṣāḥif* project' amounted to a clarification of an already established text, with some versions of the Qur'ān that could not be easily corrected being destroyed.³¹ This process of destruction perhaps explains why the lower text of Ṣan 'ā' 1 is apparently so unique.

Yet even if the nascent Islamic world had to wait until the reign of 'Abd al-Malik for the more perfect standardisation and wide dissemination of its principal text, it is nonetheless clear that the Qur'ān existed in a stable form by the middle of the seventh century.³² It is therefore unique as a genuinely early Islamic text. Could it even be more suitable consequently to speak not of a history of the Qur'ān in the manner of Wansbrough, but of a *pre-history* of the text? Such a reading, naturally controversial in its own way, is not entirely novel. Perhaps the most *outré* example of the quest for some kind of Ur-Qur'ān is that pursued by the pseudonymous Christoph Luxenberg.³³ Luxenberg contended that the Qur'ān has been misread and misunderstood for most of its history. Its true language was not even Arabic, but a so-called 'Syro-Aramaic' dialect spoken by the originally Aramaean Quraysh, for whom the text that apparently underpins the Qur'ān functioned as a lectionary for their Christian faith. Recognising what he terms the 'historical error' frees Luxenberg to find Syriac approximations for obscure Qur'ānic passages, perhaps the most famous being his reinterpretation of the *ḥūrīs* – the virgins of paradise – as a reference to the far more prosaic fruit to be enjoyed in heaven.³⁴

Luxenberg's radical reinterpretation of the Qur'ān suffers from a host of flaws. Above all, he fails to explain how and why the original dialect of the Qur'ān – that surely should have been the subject of a programme of pious preservation – was forgotten. It has also been noted that his narrowly philological approach, which focuses largely on reconstructing individual words, has never succeeded in producing 'a single short *sūra* in its actual Arabic wording that can be set side by side

³¹ See Hamdan, O., 2010, 'The Second *Maṣāḥif* Project: A Step Towards the Canonisation of the Qur'ānic Text', in Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M., (eds.) 2010 *The Qur'ān in Context*, p.795-835.

³² Wansbrough is however not without a small band of recusant followers. The integrity of his methodology has often been defended by the late Andrew Rippin (see for instance Rippin, A., 1985, 'Literary Analysis of Qur'ān, Tafsīr, and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough' in *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies*, Martin, R.C., (ed.) The University of Arizona Press, Tucson, 1985, p.151-163) and Gerald Hawting has written a defensive preface to the 2006 reprint of *The Sectarian Milieu* that entirely ignores the evidence of Ṣan 'ā' 1.

³³ See above all the English translation of his German original that attracted a media frenzy upon its release, Luxenberg, C., 2007, *The Syro-Aramaic Reading of the Koran: A Contribution to the Decoding of the Language of the Koran*, Verlag Hans Schiler: Berlin.

³⁴ *Ibid*, p.109-126 for the notion of the 'historical error'; p.247-257 for the re-reading of *ḥūrīs*; p.236-333 for an overall summary.

its supposedly Syriac substratum.³⁵ In some respects like Wansbrough, Luxenberg relies more on intriguing suggestion based on selective evidence than systematic argumentation. The idea of a Syro-Aramaic Ur-Qur'ān therefore remains speculative, at very best.

The likelihood that there probably is not something approaching a complete, singular hidden text beneath the Qur'ān is not to say that the quest for a pre-history is completely futile. The remarkable heterogeneity of the text cannot but suggest to the critical mind that its many layers may be more than the product of the career of one man, however exceptionally charismatic a character he may have been. The final three *surat*, Q.112, 113, and 114, for example, have been read by some scholars as forming a neat group of prayers separate from the rest of the text, which at some point in their history were artificially morphed into divine speech through the addition of the imperative 'say!' (*qul*) at their beginning.³⁶ This notion is made even more suggestive were one to separate *sūra al-Ikhlāṣ* (Q.112) from the group, on the basis that it is more a confession of faith pointing to the unity of God, leaving the others to stand alone as apotropaic injunctions against supernatural foes, which fail strongly to resonate with later understandings of Islam in the same way. The final two *surat* of the Qur'ān may, therefore, in fact be the first.

Given the difficulty and endlessly speculative nature of delving into the Qur'ān to excavate earlier texts, however, and in addition to its proven early date of codification, it is perhaps best to revert to reading the text simply as one that comes from, and speaks to, the circumstances of the early seventh century. Many *surat* are indeed highly suggestive of such a time-limited context. The Prophet is addressed directly at multiple instances in the text by the divine voice (for example Q.60:12) – and referred to at several places as *rasūl Allāh* (Q.33.21) – and Muḥammad is even named specifically at four points (Q.3:144; 33:40; 47:2; 48:29). It is hard to see, moreover, how Q.111 has much more of a role other than attacking a specific enemy of the Prophet. Further, Muḥammad's wives are discussed in a manner so specific that it is hard to see how the regulations governing them have anything approaching an eternal relevance at Q. 33:28-34 – the Prophet's wives are actually described as being unlike other women – showing how Muḥammad used the tool of divine revelation to govern even his own household. The Qur'ān, therefore, can occasionally be tied directly to a very clear context solely on the surface evidence of its own verses.

³⁵ Bowering, G., 2008, 'Recent Research on the Construction of the Qur'ān' in Reynolds, G.S. (ed) *The Qur'ān in its Historical Context*, p.70-87; p.79.

³⁶ Kropp, M., 2011, 'Tripartite, but anti-Trinitarian formulas in the Qur'ānic corpus, possibly pre-Qur'ānic' in Reynolds, G.S. (ed.) *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*, p.247-264.

That is hardly to say, however, that the entirety of the Qur’ān should be read as a single document speaking to easily defined, ossified circumstances. In order to try to prise as much insight as possible from this often illusive, as well as allusive, text, it has to be recognised to be the eventual product of a progressive development: ‘even on a superficial reading, the Qur’ān is not a systematic, gospel-type codification of the essential message of a religious movement that has already established itself on the historical scene, but rather a live transcript of this very act of entering the scene.’³⁷

Even if one may reject the tight classification of some *suwar* as belonging either to the Meccan or to the Medinan stages of the Prophet’s career, as accepted by most Muslims and even by Patricia Crone, there is still good reason to follow the traditional scheme, at least in outline.³⁸ The Qur’ān, when read from back to front, tends to grow in length and complexity of subject matter, with some later *suwar* apparently being exegesis of earlier revelations. Short, prayer-like verses are followed by longer material covering aspects of righteous behaviour or providing inspiring stories of earlier instances of God’s manifestation to mankind. One easily gets the sense of chronological development and the growth of a community around the subject matter of the book, which needed ever more detailed guidance and its own legitimising mythology.³⁹ What, therefore, can the text that became the focus of a new religion start to reveal about its earliest followers?

The Message of the Qur’ān and its Milieu

Above all, the Qur’ān demonstrates that the community that formed around its message was gripped by an eschatological fascination. It is almost a superfluous task to list the *suwar* that contain some kind of reference to the Day of Judgment (*yaum al-dīn*), called alternatively The Hour (*al-sā‘a*), the Crashing Blow (*al-qāri‘a*) or variations on such names.⁴⁰ Terrifying, sudden mentions are made to it in the earliest, shortest *suwar* like Q.101. The stories concerning previous prophets that dominate the middle of the Qur’ān, like Q.34, are littered with frequent references to it (Q.34:3; 23; 40) and even the lengthier, more legalistic *suwar*, such as Q.6, cannot escape its inevitability (Q6:57). If nothing else, one comes away from a reading of the Qur’ān with the distinct impression

³⁷ Neuwirth, A., & Sinai, N., 2010, ‘Introduction’ in Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M., (eds.) *The Qur’ān in Context*, p.1-24; quote p.10.

³⁸ Crone, P., 2010, ‘The Religion of the Qur’ānic Pagans: God and the Lesser Deities,’ *Arabica* 57, Brill: Leiden, p.151-200, p.153 for her acceptance of the conventional classification.

³⁹ For a sophisticated defence of a processual reading of the Qur’ān based on formal, lexical, and thematic considerations, see Sinai, N., 2010, ‘The Qur’ān as Process’, in Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M., (eds.) *The Qur’ān in Context*, esp. p.416-439.

⁴⁰ The *suwar* in which the Day of Judgement makes an extended appearance include at least the following: Q.101; 100; 99; 95; 92; 90; 88; 86; 84; 82; 81; 80; 79; 78; 77; 76; 75; 74; 70; 69; 68; 56; 55; 54; 53; 52; 51; 50; 47; 46; 45; 44; 43; 42; 40; 39; 38; 37; 36; 35; 34; 33; 32; 30; 27; 25; 22; 21; 16; 14; 12; 7; 6; 3 and 1.

that the coming of the end of time and the divine judgement represented an existential concern, even an approaching reality for the text's immediate audience.

The exact moment of the Day of Judgement, however, is something that the Qur'ān as a whole takes pains to obfuscate. At times, generally but not necessarily in the shorter and earlier *ṣūwar*, the Qur'ān appears to maintain that the world is on the very cusp of the eschaton: 'The Hour draws near (*'iqtarabat al-sā'a*), the moon is split' (Q.54:1). The imagery of the end of the world is gripping and its intensity seems to speak to something approaching the near horizon:

When the sky cracks, obeying its Lord as it rightly must, when the earth is levelled out, casts out its contents, and becomes empty, obeying its Lord as it rightly must, you humans, toiling laboriously towards your Lord, will meet Him: whoever is given his record in his right hand will have an easy reckoning and return to his people well pleased, but whoever is given his record from behind his back will cry out for destruction – he will burn in the blazing Fire. He used to live among his people well pleased. He thought he would never return [to his Lord] – indeed he will! His Lord was watching him. I swear by the twilight, by the night and what it covers, by the full moon, you will progress from stage to stage.

(Q.84: 1-19)

Not only is the rhetoric of this *sūra* powerful in its insistence on the reality of judgement, it also asserts that its coming is definite and, one senses, soon: 'you will progress from stage to stage' (*la-tarkabunna ṭabaqān 'an ṭabaqin*).

Many other *ṣūwar*, however, contain verses that explicitly deny the immediacy of The Hour. Such denials appear throughout the Qur'ān, in both the *ṣūwar* traditionally seen as Meccan as well as those considered Medinan, hinting at the likelihood that the community forming around the preaching of the Qur'ānic message really did expect to see the end of times owing to their palpable surprise that it had not yet come to pass. This tendency also points to the development of a more stable community from what one can imagine to have been an initial group fascinated by a pious need to prepare itself to meet its maker. The final *āyāt* of Q.79 are a very obvious example of the Qur'ān's engagement with its audience in this way: 'They ask you [Prophet] about The Hour, saying "When will it arrive?"', but how can you tell [them] that? Its time is known only to your Lord; you are only sent to warn those who fear it. On the day they see it, it will seem they lingered [in this life] an evening or its morning' (Q.79:42-46). This kind of dialectic can also be found at Q.33:63-68, Q.22:42, Q.21:109, Q.16:1-19, and Q.6:57.

The emphasis on eschatology is consonant with what is the principal way in which the voice of the Qur’ān describes itself. Despite the fact that the non-Islamic sources which mention Muḥammad show that he became known as a powerful political leader, as has already been demonstrated, his chief role using solely the text of the Qur’ān as a guide seems to have been very much that of an ‘eschatological herald.’⁴¹ The terminology that the voice tends to use to affirm this identity is that of being a ‘warner’ (*nadbīr*): ‘You are only here to warn them – We have sent you with the Truth as a bearer of good news and warning – every community has been sent a warner’ (Q.35:23-24). Another *sūra* is more explicit: ‘Say [Prophet], “Oh people, indeed what I am to you is a clear warner”’ (Q.22.49).⁴²

This description of Muḥammad as a ‘warner’ connects him to the past messengers of God mentioned in the Qur’ān, like Noah or Moses, the former of whom, for example, is called a ‘clear warner’ at Q.11:25. Thus is Muḥammad able to say that he is ‘from the warners’ (Q.27:92). This apparent quest for legitimacy through comparing himself to past prophets may help to reveal the nature of the milieu in which the Qur’ānic community formed, as will soon be explored.

The second salient spiritual concern with which the early community appears to have been preoccupied is that of a need for righteous guidance. Exhortations to, and descriptions of, pious behaviour dominate a host of the Qur’ān’s *suwar*.⁴³ When such exhortations appear in a general sense, citing only the formulaic need to do ‘good deeds’ (*ṣāliḥāt*) alongside the need to believe, they are often linked to the theme of The Last Day:

By the fig, by the olive, by Mount Sinai, by this safe city, We created man in the finest state then reduced him to the lowest of the low but those who believe and do good deeds will have an unfailing reward. After this, what makes you [man] deny the Judgement? Is God not the most decisive of judges?

(Q.95:1-8)

⁴¹ The dominant role of Muḥammad as such a herald, rather than as a ‘lawgiver’ or anything else, is the focal point of Stephen Shoemaker’s work on his career. See, above all, Shoemaker, S.J., 2012, *The Death of a Prophet*, esp. p.118-196. For a more concise exposition, see Shoemaker, S.J., 2012, ‘Muḥammad and the Qur’ān’ in Johnson, S.F., (ed) *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, Oxford University Press, p.1078-1108.

⁴² The translation of this *aya* is my own as Abdel Haleem’s – ‘Say [Prophet], “People, I am sent only to give you a clear warning”’ – varies too much from the Arabic by converting Muḥammad’s description of himself into a description of his message.

⁴³ See at least Q.103; 102; 96; 95; 92; 90; 73; 66; 65; 58; 33; 24; 22; 21; 15; 9; 8; 6; 5; 4 and 2.

Beyond such generic calls to righteousness, the guidance offered by the Qur’ān covers a host of intimate and societal concerns, both categories naturally hardly being mutually exclusive. Divorce, for instance, is a frequent issue on which the voice of the Qur’ān sees fit to pronounce. In addition to the *sūra* entitled ‘Divorce’ (*al-ṭalāq*) (Q.65), the subject reappears in Q.58:1-3 and is inescapable in other *sumar* that deal with marriage in a far more general sense, for example Q.33:4 and Q.24:6-9.

The guidance that is offered on marital relations and the treatment of women is in fact probably the most detailed and lengthy in the whole Qur’ān. One of the longest *sumar* is devoted entirely to the matter of women – Q.4, a *sūra* of 176 *āyāt* – and the advice it gives covers everything from how to discipline a recalcitrant wife (Q.4:34), how to purify oneself after sexual relations (Q.4:43), and how to treat a wife during a potential divorce process (Q.4:129), to the kind of wider social concerns that arise because of marriage and reproduction, notably how to deal with adultery (Q.4:15-18) and inheritance (Q.4:11-14, and elsewhere). The Qur’ān, therefore, clearly seeks to order its community in the most fundamental and important respects.

Diet is a further matter on which the Qur’ān gives guidance. Dietary laws are set out principally in Q.6, with one *āya* in particular offering a simple touchstone for correct practice: ‘[Prophet], say, “In all that has been revealed to me, I find nothing forbidden for people to eat, except for carrion, flowing blood, pig’s meat – it is loathsome – or a sinful offering over which any name other than God’s has been invoked.” But if someone is forced by hunger, rather than by desire or excess, then your Lord is most forgiving and merciful’ (Q.6:145). The subsequent *sūra* also presents developed guidance on dietary law in a very similar manner (Q.5:1-5), as does Q.2:173.

The *sūra* ‘The Feast’ (*al-mā’i-‘da*) (Q.5) is also significant with respect to the guidance it offers on prayer and pilgrimage. The necessary purification required for prayer is set out at Q.5:6-7 – elaborating on the calls to perform at least two daily prayers set out at Q.11:114, Q.17:78-79, Q.20:130, Q.76:25-26 – and the justification for pilgrimage at Q.5:94-99. Part of the pilgrimage rite itself is set out at Q.22:25-30 and further regulations are given at Q.2:196-203. The far more detailed guidance that is set out at Q.2, whose references to the major and minor pilgrimages, when to shave one’s head, and what exactly to do and how to do it is immediately recognisable to anyone with even a passing knowledge of the Ḥajj and ‘Umra, seems to speak to a far more developed community with a greater self-consciousness than do the other verses. The greater elaboration of pious behaviour one finds in the longer *sumar* is not limited to the pilgrimage, but can also be found with respect to other aspects of righteous action, such as the far more detailed rules concerning women in Q.4 that in some respects seems to bring together and expand the briefer and less

comprehensive guidance given in other *suwar*. This tendency resonates with the Qur’ān’s progressive denial of the imminence of The Hour: more legalistic concerns become ever more paramount as Muḥammad’s career develops and as his following clearly grows.

The third overriding spiritual concern that must have motivated the original audience of the Qur’ān alongside their eschatological fascination and appetite for righteous guidance is the call to believe in the singular nature of the divine. The simple oneness of God is, without doubt, fundamental to the message of the Qur’ān: ‘He is God the One, God the eternal. He begot no one nor was he begotten. No one is comparable to him’ (Q.112:1-4). This essential nature of God is asserted throughout the text and is implicit whenever not obviously stated.⁴⁴ The God of the Qur’ān is all powerful, the undeniable Lord of the universe and creator:

Everything that is in the heavens and the earth glorifies God; all control and all praise belong to Him; He has power over everything. It is He who created you, yet some of you disbelieve and some of you believe: God sees everything you do. He created the heavens and the earth for a true purpose; He formed you and made your forms good: you will all return to Him. He knows what is in the heavens and earth; He knows what you conceal and what you reveal; God knows fully what is in every heart.

(Q.64:1-4)

The insistence on the oneness of God, as is already implicit in Q.112, is often presented in a context of polemic against other monotheists who deny what the Qur’ān maintains is the true nature of the divine. One of the most powerful examples can be found in the *sūra* that takes its name from the mother of its target, the *Sūrat Maryam* (Q.19). The infant Jesus is presented as speaking miraculously, after which the voice of the Qur’ān interjects to deny that he was a living manifestation of God: ‘[This is] a statement of the Truth about which they are in doubt: it would not befit God to have a child. He is far above that: when He decrees something, He says only “Be,” and it is’ (Q.19:34-35).

Intra-monotheist polemic is indeed a major concern of the Qur’ān. It is not only the Christians who are the target of its occasional attacks, the Jews – named either explicitly or using the clear allusion ‘Children of Israel’ (*banū Isrā’īl*) – also come in for considerable criticism (for example Q.4:46). Sometimes, both groups appear to be addressed as if they were the same, using the

⁴⁴ Examples of *suwar* in which the singular nature of God is explicitly declared and the audience is invited to believe in it include Q.87; 77; 73; 72; 67; 64; 59; 45; 43; 40; 39; 31; 30; 29; 27; 25; 19 and 7. The other chief ways in which God can be characterised in the Qur’ān are neatly summarised in the *sūra al-fātiḥa*: ‘In the name of God, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy! Praise belongs to God, Lord of all worlds, the Lord of Mercy, the Giver of Mercy, Master of the Day of Judgement’ (Q.1:1-4).

summary term *ahl al-kitāb* (for instance at Q.29:46).⁴⁵ Apparent representatives of the other two great Abrahamic faiths are not, however, alone as groups recognised in the Qur’ānic milieu.

The Qur’ān also makes reference to far more mysterious religious identities, which have been the subjects of occasionally daring speculation. Several mentions are made of the *ḥunafā’* (*ḥanīf* in the singular), who appear to function as adherents of the original religion of mankind as established by God with Abraham, in contradistinction to other forms of monotheism: “They say, “Become Jews or Christians, and you will be rightly guided.” Say [Prophet], “No, [ours is] the religion of Abraham the *ḥanīf*, and he was not of the *mushrikūn*”” (Q.2:135).⁴⁶ The obscurity of the identity of the *ḥunafā’* is perhaps matched only by the enigmatic nature of the *ṣābi’ūn*, another band of apparent monotheists mentioned only three times in the Qur’ān (Q.2:62; Q.5:69 and Q.22:17).⁴⁷ Perhaps the most significant of these cryptic groups, however – and one of the more important in the Qur’ān as they are explicitly mentioned forty-two times in the text – are the so-called *mushrikūn*: a term conventionally taken to refer to the idol-worshipping polytheists of Mecca and other Arabian pagans.⁴⁸

Superficially, there may appear to be little need to question the conventional interpretation of the term. It is derived from the Arabic root *sh-r-k*, meaning ‘to partner,’ as some verses in the Qur’ān appear to make explicit when employing the active form of the verb rather than the participle (Q.4:48). Three figures traditionally interpreted as the goddesses that inhabited the Ka’ba, al-Manāt, Allāt, and al-‘Uzzā, appear within the text (notably Q.53:19) and one could even argue that the Qur’ān’s call to simple monotheism would be at its most revolutionary in a polytheistic context. Yet, on a deeper reading of the text, other possibilities become apparent, possibilities that help dramatically to inform the picture of the original community of Muḥammad, and possibilities that resonate powerfully with the intensely monotheistic wider context of the Qur’ān, Late Antiquity.

⁴⁵ For a discussion of the term, see Vajda, G., ‘Ahl al-Kitāb’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on 7th February 2017.

⁴⁶ The translation has again had to be altered from that of Abdel Haleem, whose interpretation of the religious vocabulary of the Qur’ān depends on a highly contestable acceptance of the tradition and its polemical interests. See Watt, W. M., ‘Hanīf’, in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on 7th February 2017.

⁴⁷ Blois, F.C. de, ‘Ṣābi’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on 7th February 2017.

⁴⁸ This is the preferred translation given by Gimaret, D., ‘Shirk’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition* Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on 7th February 2017. Abdel Haleem uses alternatively terms like ‘pagan,’ ‘polytheist’ or ‘those who worship gods other than God’.

The myth of the mushrikūn

Arguing that the Qur'ānic *mushrikūn* are not what the tradition would have them be is not entirely novel, even if it is fair to say that many western scholars still adhere to the conventional Islamic understanding of them.⁴⁹ Gerald Hawting set out perhaps the most detailed and sustained critique of the tradition in his book, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*.⁵⁰ Patricia Crone has also made an important contribution to the debate, which generally endorses Hawting. Her study, however, reaches slightly different conclusions and, in her willingness to read the Qur'ān as a fair account of the *mushrikūn* rather than as an impression of them mediated by the not disinterested words of a polemicist, very occasionally risks being seduced by the voice of the Qur'ān.⁵¹

Hawting's arguments are essentially fourfold. One, the Qur'ān does not support the notion that the *mushrikūn* are polytheists in the accurate use of the term. Two, the term is used in the Qur'ān for polemical purposes. Three, the idea of a pagan Arabian 'age of ignorance', the *jāhiliyya*, is a later literary construct, and, four, the archaeological evidence often used to support the reality of seventh century Arabian polytheism has been dangerously misconstrued.⁵²

Hawting points to the importance of one of the usual concerns of writing anything about the early Islamic community: the late date of the evidence. Much of what Islam thinks it knows about the alleged polytheistic practices of the Ḥijāz comes from the *Kitāb al-Aṣnām* of Hishām b. Muḥammad al-Kalbī, who died towards the end of the first quarter of the ninth century. Hawting persuasively argues that it should not be read as an important historical source, but as a distillation of a host of stories and anti-polytheistic polemic recast in a manner to make the old material of interest and relevance to the newly crystallising Muslim community. He tracks how Ibn al-Kalbī recycles the same kind of monotheistic tropes found in Christian and Jewish works of the pagan world, demonstrating how 'Muslim literature about the idols of the Arabs appears as a continuation of a tradition well attested in the Middle East before Islam.'⁵³

⁴⁹ Bowersock, G.W., 2017, *The Crucible of Islam*, p.33-47 is a recent example.

⁵⁰ Hawting, G.R., 1999, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History*, Cambridge University Press.

⁵¹ Crone, P., 2010, 'The Religion of the Qur'ānic Pagans'; at p. 157, for example, she seems to accept the Qur'ān's eccentric charge that the Jews of the Ḥijāz worshipped Ezra as the Son of God.

⁵² Hawting, G.R., 1999, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, p.5.

⁵³ *Ibid*, p.88-110; p.110 for the quote. See also p.111-129 for a closely related deconstruction of the archaeological evidence often used to support the notion of seventh century Arabian polytheism. The evidence turns out not to come from the Ḥijāz, nor from the seventh century, but from across the central Middle East and from times sometimes far removed from the lifetime of Muḥammad.

The most powerful evidence for the contention that the *musbrikūn* were not polytheists, however, comes from the text of the Qur’ān itself. Even without considering the far from clear identity of the three purported goddesses as goddesses, and the traditional account of the so-called ‘Satanic verses,’ the characterisation of the *musbrikūn* not as real polytheists, but as people viewed by the Qur’ānic community as tantamount to such by being monotheists of a less rigorous nature, becomes startlingly apparent.⁵⁴ In order to appreciate how this is so, it is first necessary to explore the dramatic extent to which the Qur’ān engages in intense and sometimes confused polemic to demonstrate the significant degree to which the text is prepared to misrepresent Muḥammad’s opponents.

The text’s complex relation to the Jews is a case in point. On a superficial reading, the Qur’ān not only condemns the Jews but encourages the Qur’ānic community to have as little to do with them as possible. They are presented as dishonest – ‘the Jews who listen eagerly to lies and to those who have not even met you, who distort the meanings of [revealed] words’ (Q.5:41) – and dangerous given their alleged ability to guide people away from the right path: ‘anyone who takes them as an ally becomes one of them – God does not guide such wrongdoers’ (Q.5:51). Yet, on a closer reading, it becomes clear that the occasional examples of broad-brush anti-Jewish polemic in the Qur’ān are in fact the rare generalisations of criticism more specifically directed against a certain element within the Jewish community. At times, it appears that the religious authorities within the community are the true target of the Qur’ān’s invective, even if the criticism moves to embrace those whom they mislead:

Why do their rabbis and scholars (al-rabbāniyyūna wa-l-aḥbār) not forbid them to speak sinfully and consume what is unlawful? How evil their practices are! The Jews have said, “God is tight-fisted,” but it is they who are tight-fisted, and they are rejected for what they have said.

(...)

If they had upheld the Torah and the Gospel and what was sent down to them from their Lord, they would have been given abundance from above and from below: some of them are on the right course (minhum ‘umma muqtaṣida), but many of them – how evil is what they do!

⁵⁴ See *ibid*, p.130-149 for a discussion of al-Manāt, Allāt and al-‘Uzzā as angels, not goddesses (in relation to Q.53:19-23). Hawting also challenges the notion that the case of the Satanic verses must recall an actual event as it is at least implicitly critical of the prophet: ‘The story could be understood as a guarantee that the totality of the revelation is of divine origin, directed at opponents who asked how that could be known. It shows the futility of possible satanic attempts to subvert the word of God since God would always intervene to remove any corruptions and restore true revelation. The implications of the story for the figure of the Prophet would only become evident as the doctrine of his infallibility evolved’ (p.136).

It is even clear from the above passage that, despite the fallibility of their religious leaders, some of the Jews – as well as the Christians – are ‘on the right course’, or at least ‘aiming for the right course.’⁵⁵ They are even rhetorically contrasted with a section of their community who are explicitly said to be evil doers, thereby further encouraging the interpretation that those on the right course are indeed good men.

The partitive nature of the polemic against the Jews is again evident at Q.4:46. In a passage that similarly relies on the trope of Jews knowing yet rejecting the word of God, it is nonetheless clear that it is only some of them who are actually guilty of this:

Some Jews (min alladhīna hādū) distort the meaning of [revealed] words: they say, “We hear and disobey,” and Rā‘inā [Look at us],” twisting it abusively with their tongues so as to disparage religion. If they had said, “We hear and obey,” “Listen,” and ‘Unẓurnā [Look at us],” that would have been better and more proper for them. But God has spurned them for their defiance; they believe very little.

(Q.4:46)

Despite the actually quite targeted nature of the Qur’ān’s attacks on the Jews, it should still be stressed that the Qur’ān is unafraid to generalise from the particular for polemical purposes and that it actively mischaracterises the Jews for its own purposes. Did any Jew really say that they heard, and yet disobeyed? Further, and perhaps most daringly, the Qur’ān also calls into question the Jews’ commitment to the one God by attributing to them a palpably incorrect and baseless belief: ‘The Jews (*al-yahūd*) said, “Ezra is the son of God” (Q.9.30). Given that no evidence has come to light from antiquity for any obscure Jewish group professing such a belief, joined with a recognition of the Qur’ān’s polemical nature, it is surely wiser to read this surprising accusation as one of the most daringly disingenuous within the text, rather than to imagine that such an idiosyncratic Jewish sect was uniquely to be found in the seventh century Hijāz.’⁵⁶

⁵⁵ The participle in question is built from the eighth form of the verb *q-ṣ-d*, which has a sense of moving in a correct or desired direction, if not already being on it. Abdul Haleem’s translation captures the meaning of this passage, but is perhaps more accurately translated as, ‘of them there is a community (*umma*) on the right path.’

⁵⁶ Abdul Haleem explains this *aya* with reference to such an imaginary sect – ‘Clearly this refers to a certain group who, possibly at the time of the Prophet or earlier, made this claim’ – and the apparent need to conceive of obscure and otherwise non-attested Jewish groups in seventh century Arabia is something of a perennially sprouting tendency in the field of Qur’ānic studies. See, for instance, de Blois, F., 2002, ‘*Naṣrānī* and *Ḥanīf*: Studies on the Religious Vocabulary of Christianity and of Islam,’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 65, p.1-30, and, more recently, de Blois, F., 2010, ‘Islam in Its Arabian Context’ in Neuwirth, A., Sinai, N., & Marx, M.,

With an awareness of the extent to which the Qur’ān is willing to misconstrue the nature of the Jews, a sharper analytical light can be shined on the *mushrikūn*. At first sight, the *mushrikūn* do indeed seem to be the people most hateful to the strict monotheism of the community forming around Muḥammad: those who have gods other than He. Why else would they be the subject of violent *āyāt* that exhort the believers to war against them and their malign influence (Q.9:1-4)? As with the Jews, however, not all is as it seems or as it may be remembered by the later community. In one of the earlier *sūwar*, the *mushrikūn* are actually equated to the far more undeniably monotheist *abl al-kitāb*: “Those who disbelieve (*alladhīna kufarū min*) among the People of the Book and the *mushrikūn* were not about to change their ways until they were sent clear evidence... Those who disbelieve (*alladhīna kufarū min*) among the People of the Book and the *mushrikūn* will have the Fire of Hell, there to remain. ‘They are the worst of people’ (Q.98:1 and 6).⁵⁷ In a manner similar to the partitive nature of some of the polemic against the Jews, the real people at fault in these verses are not the *abl al-kitāb* and *mushrikūn* as *abl al-kitāb* and *mushrikūn*, but merely ‘disbelieving’ groups from among them.

The chief factor that seems to differentiate the *mushrikūn* from groups like the *abl al-kitāb*, however, is that they have some kind of relationship to entities referred to by such terms as *awliyā’* or *andād*, respectively translated as ‘protectors’ or ‘peers.’⁵⁸ These figures are clearly not exactly gods – the *mushrikūn* are, importantly, never said to appeal to an *ilāh* that is other than *Allāh* – and are presented as figures to which the *mushrikūn* make appeals besides, or in addition to, God (*min dūn allāh*). The Qur’ān is actually quite clear that the *mushrikūn* call upon the name of the one God. At their moment of the most intense personal crisis, tellingly, the Qur’ān admits that, “When death comes to one of them, he cries, “My Lord (*rabbi*), let me return so as to make amends for the things I neglected” (Q.23:99-100). Verses prior to these, moreover, leave no ambiguity that the *mushrikūn* openly acknowledge many of the kinds of characteristics one would expect believers to attribute to a single and all powerful God: ‘Say [Prophet]. “Who owns the earth and all who live in it, if you know [so much]?” And they will reply, “God,”’ (Q.23:84-85).⁵⁹

(eds.) *The Qur’ān in Context*, p.615-624. De Blois argues for the presence of a Christian-Jewish sect at Mecca – the Qur’ānic *naṣārā* – who may either have been Ebionites or Elchasaites, the latter of whom are attested in southern Iraq as late as the 10th century A.D and so who, de Blois maintains, may well have been found at Mecca three centuries earlier. This kind of argumentation suffers from the same flaws as the external evidence often cited for Hījāzī polytheism: it is taken from a late source, which refers to somewhere else at a later time.

⁵⁷ Abdel Haleem, sticking to the traditional interpretation as has already been noted, tends to translate *mushrikūn* as ‘idolaters’. The Arabic will always be transcribed to highlight the contestability of the term.

⁵⁸ See Q.42:6; 41:9; 40:68; 39:8; 39:64; 39:3; 36:3; 29:41; 14:30; 11:109; 6:56, and 2:165 for examples.

⁵⁹ In the same *sūra*, the *mushrikūn* also refer to God as ‘Lord of the Mighty Throne’ (Q.23:86), an epithet the Qur’ān attributes to *Allāh* elsewhere, for example at Q.40:15, Q.27:26, and Q.21:22.

It is, significantly, far from clear whether the *mushrikūn* actually worshipped the *awliyā'* and *andād* in the same manner as one would reverence God. Such an accusation may be the result of the beholder's biased eyes.

Scripture is sent down from God, who has the power to decide. It is We who sent down the Scripture to you [Prophet] with the Truth, so worship God with your total devotion: true devotion is to God alone. [As for] those who choose other protectors (awliyā') beside Him, saying, "We only worship them (na'budūhum) because they bring us nearer to God (li-yuqarribūnā-'ilā 'llāh)," God Himself will judge between them regarding their differences. God does not guide any ungrateful liar.

(Q.39:1-3)

The 'worship' of the *awliyā'* is put into the mouths of the *mushrikūn* in exactly the same way in which the Jews are accused of thinking that Ezra is the son of God. The invented quote, therefore, is probably nothing more than a seductive rhetorical device to undermine the *mushrikūn* by attributing to them a form of words ultimately false, but a form of words that may have struck the Qur'ānic community as plausible. Something that strikes one group as 'worship' in a manner that should be reserved solely to God may not be understood as such by its practitioners.⁶⁰ Not even the disingenuous nature of the Qur'ānic voice, however, can conceal the fact that veneration of the *awliyā'* does not replace the veneration of God for the *mushrikūn*. Showing devotion to the *awliyā'* is not an end in itself: it is a means to get nearer to the one God whom the *mushrikūn* clearly do not deny and whom they clearly worship.

This sense is also apparent in some fascinating *āyāt* that seem to allude to the community of the Qur'ān and the *mushrikūn* sharing a place of worship. In the same *sūra* in which the followers of Muḥammad are exhorted to war against those they are encouraged to think do not reverence the one God correctly, two verses suggest shared sacred space:

It is not right for the mushrikūn to tend God's places of worship (masājid Allāh) while testifying to their own disbelief: the deeds of such people will come to nothing and they will abide in Hell.

(...)

⁶⁰ Hawting, G.R., 1999, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam*, p.45-46, usefully cites Carlos M. N. Eire's discussion of Protestant attitudes to some Catholic practices – not least the use of statues of saints and of the Virgin Mary as foci for meditation on the divine – in Reformation Europe: 'one man's devotion was another man's idolatry.'

Believers, the mushrikūn are truly unclean: do not let them come near the Sacred Mosque (al-masjid al-ḥarām) after this year

(Q.9:17; 28)

As elsewhere, the overriding sense that one gets from reading these *āyāt* is that the *mushrikūn* are in fact far closer to the community of the Qur’ān than the community, or at least its leader, would like them to be.

If not polytheism in the full and proper sense of the term, of what did *shirk* – the only sin that the Qur’ān asserts its merciful God will not forgive (Q.4:48) – actually consist? Crone has argued that it consisted of calling on certain angels who had inherited the names of ancient Arabian goddesses for divine intercession, and, at least according to the voice of the Qur’ān, thereby imputing an undue godly nature to them.⁶¹ Yet a later *āya* from Q.9 appears to suggest another possible answer:

They take their scholars and their monks as lords beside God (aḥbāruhum wa- ruhbānāhum- arbāban min dūn Allāh), as well as the Messiah, the son of Mary. But they were commanded to serve only one God: there is no God but Him. He is far above whatever they set up as His partners (yushrikūna)!

(Q.9:31)⁶²

The *mushrikūn*, therefore, appear to be people whom Muḥammad essentially thought deferred far too much to holy figures other than him. One of the Qur’ānic words conventionally translated as ‘idol,’ *ṭāghūt*, moreover, may itself actually refer to these other holy figures, given that at least in some *ṣuwar* some of those said to believe in the *ṭāghūt* are from the People of the Book (Q.4:51). The *ṭāghūt* are also said to be recipients of petitions and hypocrites (Q. 4:60-61), an odd role and accusation to make to mute objects of devotion.⁶³

There are at least two major interpretations that could be drawn from this discovery. One, this sentiment could be read as an extension of the Qur’ānic voice’s interest in pious behaviour as a means to develop a relationship with God: holy figures simply risk creating a barrier between the individual and the divine. Two, a far more political reading of the verse could be advanced, of which one should be unafraid owing to the Qur’ān’s status as the founding text of what would

⁶¹ Crone, P., 2010, ‘The Religion of the Qur’ānic Pagans’, esp. p.197-198.

⁶² Abdel Haleem chooses to translate the word for ‘scholars’ far more loosely as ‘rabbis,’ despite accurately translating the term elsewhere.

⁶³ Crone, P., 2010, ‘The Religion of the Qur’ānic Pagans’, p.170-171.

become the Islamic state. The *aya* may serve simply as a means to assert Muḥammad's own leadership over the nascent community by attacking potential rivals as figures of religious guidance. *Mushrikūn*, therefore, receive such polemical treatment in the Qur'ān because they fail to recognise the prophet's political and religious authority, not because their beliefs strongly conflict with those starting to be professed by the community of the Qur'ān.⁶⁴

A warner from the warners

The Qur'ān's religious invective, through its willingness to attack other monotheist groups and its tendency actively to mislead its audience about their nature, attests to its generation in a deeply monotheist milieu. Its original audience simply had to have been surrounded by Jews, Christians, and certain other monotheists whose recalcitrant attitude to the Prophet earned them the title of *mushrikūn*, for its – hardly original – message to resonate and make sense. Seventh century Hijāzi polytheism is consequently more legend than reality. Further evidence for this contention, which could strike someone enamoured with the Islamic tradition as bordering upon the scandalous, can be offered by examining what seems to have been the most important way in which Muḥammad asserted his authority: justification through prophetic parallels.⁶⁵

The Qur'ān does nothing to conceal that Muḥammad faced considerable opposition to his prophetic claims. It is clear that doubts were expressed about the veracity of his revelation, as is evident in the replies offered to such doubts at Q.16:100-105, and the text frequently cites Muḥammad's opponents dismissing him as a mere 'poet' (*shā'ir*), a dangerous 'sorcerer' (*sāḥir*), or a purveyor of 'ancient fables' (- '*asāṭir al-'ammalīn*').⁶⁶ One is prompted to ask why, if the milieu in which Muḥammad operated was indeed dominated by polytheists, his opponents apparently never took him on in his own terms, by, for example, denying the reality or supremacy of his God, or simply the ability of a man to become the vessel of divine speech. These accusations, therefore, seem to have been designed to deny Muḥammad the status of a biblical prophet, a status that the use of such polemical terms acknowledges their users' sense that biblical figures are indeed the only legitimate paragons of religious authority. In order effectively to combat them, Muḥammad

⁶⁴ In addition to Crone's suggestions, it is hardly impossible to advance other more concrete identities for the *mushrikūn*. For the suggestion that they are, in fact, Trinitarian Christians confessing the Creeds of Nicaea and Chalcedon, see Kropp, M., 2011, 'Tripartite, but anti-Trinitarian formulas' in Reynolds, G.S. (ed.) *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*, esp. p.261.

⁶⁵ In addition to this relatively more subtle scheme, the Qur'ān is often unafraid to claim direct and simple divine consent for Muḥammad and his actions, as is the case at Q.33:36-40, a passage that contains one of the four *āyāt* that mention Muḥammad by name.

⁶⁶ See 52:30; 51:38; 37:15; 36:2-12; 36:69-70; 25:5; 10:2; 6:7 and 6:25 for examples.

had to find some way to assimilate himself to biblical models of prophecy, which must have been well known to his audience in order for them to serve as a means to legitimise his claims.

One of the ways in which this programme of legitimisation is enacted is to have Moses accused of sorcery in the same manner as is the voice of the Qurʾān. When Moses tried to bring the knowledge and worship of the one God to Pharaoh and the people of Egypt, his ‘clear signs’ are dismissed as ‘mere conjuring tricks’ (*bādhā - ‘illā siḥrun muftarā*) (Q.28:36). Not only is the noun used for ‘conjuring’ built from the same root as the active participle used to designate Muḥammad as a sorcerer (*s-ḥ-r*), Muḥammad’s revelation is itself said likely to be described in almost identical terms by those who deny him (*alladhīna kafarū*): ‘this is nothing except clear magic’ (*bādhā - ‘illā siḥrun mubīnun*) (Q.6:7).

Beyond such a detailed analogy, however, it is enough to recognise that the central *sumar* of the text of the Qurʾān are so dominated by stories of the prophets that one has to ask oneself why they are there. They surely serve to attach the revelation of the Qurʾān to ideas of religious legitimacy already very present in Muḥammad’s milieu and that benefitted from the support of time, prior familiarity, and tradition. The Prophet, as has already been noted, presented himself as ‘from the warners’ (Q.27:92), so therefore had to offer examples of past prophets to allow him to elaborate on his claim to be the successor of such august men.

Stories of the prophets dominate a whole host of Qurʾānic *sumar*. They concern a number of both biblical and extra-biblical figures. The apparently Arabian figures of Hūd and Ṣāliḥ sit alongside Moses, Noah, Abraham, David, Solomon, Job, Jesus and Mary.⁶⁷ The presence of such a panoply of monotheistic heroes puts Muḥammad and the message of the Qurʾān in a truly godly and legitimate light. On occasion, similar to the analogy drawn between the accusations Moses faced and those hurled at Muḥammad, the prophetic figures are presented as making the same kind of claims as made by the voice of the Qurʾān, receiving the same kind of response as that offered by those who denied Muḥammad.

We sent Noah to his people to say, “I have come to you to give a clear warning: worship no one but God. I fear you will have torment on a painful Day.” But the prominent disbelievers among his people said, “We can see that you are nothing but a mortal like ourselves, and it is clear to see that

⁶⁷ For appearances of the prophet Hūd, see for example Q.26; 11, and 7; for Ṣāliḥ, Q.27; 26; 11 and 7; for Moses Q.79; 71; 54; 40; 28; 27; 26; 23; 20; 18; 10; 7; 5, and 2; for Noah, Q.71; 54; 37; 26; 23; 11; 10, and 7; for Jesus, see at least Q. 61; 43; 13; 5; 3, and 2; for a variety of other figures, like David, Solomon, Job, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Ishmael, Elisha, Dhū ’l-Kifl, see Q.38:17ff, Abraham also appears at Q.26:69ff and in Q.15.

only the lowest among us follow you. We cannot see how you are any better than we are. In fact, we think you are a liar.” He said, “My people, think: if I did have a clear sign (bayyina) from my Lord, and He had given me grace of His own, though it was hidden from you, could we force you to accept it against your will?

(Q.11:25-28)

Not only is Noah presented as an eschatological herald in a way that resonates with the Qur’ān’s emphasis on The Hour, the ‘clear sign’ to which he refers picks up the ‘clear signs’ (*bayyināt*) with which Muḥammad often claims to have come (for example Q.3:86). The same language is used for many other prophets – and even attributed to all of God’s messengers as a group at Q.35:25 – thereby helping to write Muḥammad into this very select cadre of mankind by giving him genuinely prophetic vocabulary.

The prophetic parallels also give the Qur’ān an especially powerful means to assert the consequences of failing to heed the message of Muḥammad. The failure of putative earlier communities to adhere to the warnings of their messengers is related at several instances using terrifying imagery.

The people of ‘Ad also rejected the truth. How [terrible] My punishment was and [the fulfilment of] of My warnings! We released a howling wind against them on a day of terrible disaster; it swept people away like uprooted palm trunks. How [terrible] My punishment was and [the fulfilment of] My warnings! We have made it easy to learn lessons from the Qur’ān: will anyone take heed?

(Q.54:18-22)

For an audience fascinated by the coming of the end of time, who seem to have responded eagerly to claims that the eschaton was indeed upon them – the above imagery of the destruction of ‘Ad is taken from a *sūra* that begins ‘The Hour draws near’ (Q.54:1) – descriptions such as these must have served as a powerful tool to concentrate minds. Given the Qur’ān’s interest in painting Muḥammad as the latest in a long line of God’s prophets, the doom experienced by people such as the ‘Ad sharpened what was meant by the ‘warning’ they themselves were receiving. The terror of such scenes constituted a whip to the acceptance of Muḥammad’s claims, as much as the Qur’ān’s promises of paradise equalled the more enticing inducement.

Born in the full light of monotheism

The community that formed around the Qur'ān was above all gripped by a fascination in the coming of the Last Day. They were receptive to calls to righteous action and behaviour and to a belief in one God, simple, pure, and undivided. The occasionally hyperbolic nature of the Qur'ān's polemic against other faith groups further suggests that Muḥammad's community was intimately familiar with Jews, Christians, and other, more mysterious groups who seem to have been monotheists of some kind. Even the *musbrikūn*, as has been demonstrated, do not appear to have been the idol-worshipping polytheists of Islamic tradition. A sensitive and un-prejudiced reading of the Qur'ān shows that they were in fact far closer to the Qur'ānic community than the community would have liked, but that they nurtured reservations regarding the veracity of the claims made by the self-proclaimed prophet in their midst. This prophet, perhaps originally in response to such criticism, appears to have been at pains to manufacture both obvious and more subtle analogies between himself and other prophetic figures who simply must have been known, respected, and believed in by his audience for such a scheme to work. In short, the Qur'ān and what would become the state that formed around it were born in the full light of late antique monotheism.⁶⁸

This reconstruction of the message of the Qur'ān and its milieu gives the impression that Muḥammad's community, to offer a very simple formulation, were at root pious monotheists critical of the behaviour of certain groups within existing monotheistic confessions. They accepted Muḥammad as a messenger of God, but only because he enjoyed a prophetic pedigree rooted in familiar tradition. What more can be said of these people? What did they call themselves and how did their political power develop into the rudiments of statehood?

Muḥammad and the Believers?

One of the most surprising tendencies of the Qur'ān is its failure to address its adherents as 'Muslims,' as any contemporary reader could be forgiven to expect. The passage that opened this chapter, Q.22:78, is one of the few exceptions that proves the rule. Rather, the original audience of its verses are overwhelmingly referred to as, 'you who believe!' (*yā ayyuhā 'lādhibīna āmanū*).⁶⁹ The relatively new *Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, the first such work to have appeared since John Prentice's 1875 *A Dictionary and Glossary of the Kor'ān*, explains that the Arabic root 'm-n', from

⁶⁸ In some respects, therefore, Wansbrough's notion of the 'sectarian milieu' has something to recommend it. Much of the Qur'ān does indeed appear to be the product of intra-monotheist polemic. The evidence of Ṣan'ā' 1 simply goes to show that it is unnecessary to place this milieu outside of the seventh-century Hijāz.

⁶⁹ A search using www.quranexplorer.com for the Arabic text of 'oh you who believe' reveals that this exact phrase is used on no fewer than 819 separate occasions.

which the word ‘to believe’ is built, functions, when used as an active participle of the fourth form, ‘as a synonym of “Moslem”.’⁷⁰ A ‘Moslem’, a noun constructed from the fourth form of the verb *s-l-m*, the basic meaning of which is ‘to submit,’ is defined simply as an adherent of the religion of Islam.⁷¹ Entirely unproblematic though these definitions will seem to the modern eye, one is led to question why the followers of a new faith apparently chose to use two terms to define the members of a movement that was surely singular in its conception. One can also wonder why one term, Muslim, became so dominant that it replaced Believer. Is there perhaps something more to the appearance of both ‘Muslims’ and ‘Believers’ in the Qur’ān?

This striking curiosity of terminology has already formed the basis of a novel and controversial reconstruction of the early Qur’ānic community by Fred Donner, as has already been mentioned in passing in Chapter One.⁷² Donner argues that the members of the movement that formed around Muḥammad did not call themselves ‘Muslims’ until at the earliest the very end of the seventh century. As is strongly implied by the exhortative language of the Qur’ān, they called themselves ‘Believers.’ The Believers, importantly, did not conceive of themselves as constituting a confessional identity separate from the other monotheists by whom they were surrounded, but saw themselves as an especially pious and pure sect open to all those who believed in the One God, the Last Day, and who did good deeds. ‘What mattered to the Believers was not a person’s confessional identity, but whether he or she shared their belief in the One God, Creator of the World and Judge at the End of Time, and their conviction that the Day of Judgement was near, or at least rapidly nearing.’⁷³

There are several strands to Donner’s case. First, he highlights the considerable number of Qur’ānic verses that fail to draw distinctions between different monotheist confessions, and which in fact equate them to the Believers, claiming that they are all saved and are all, therefore, in some sense the same and thus able collectively to be addressed as ‘believers.’⁷⁴ One of the most telling examples comes from Q.2:

⁷⁰ Ambros, A.A. with Procházka, S., 2004, *A Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, Reichert Verlag: Wiesbaden, p.29. The same definition is made in the companion volume, Ambros, A.A. & Procházka, S., 2006, *The Nouns of Koranic Arabic Arranged by Topics: A Companion Volume to the Concise Dictionary of Koranic Arabic*, Reichert Verlag, Wiesbaden, p.63: ‘believing, (true) believer, i.e. Muslim’.

⁷¹ Ambros, A.A. with Procházka, S., 2004, *A Concise Dictionary*, p.137.

⁷² See Donner, F.M., 2002-2003, ‘From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the early Islamic Community’, *Al-Abhath*, Vol.50-51, p.9-53. The thesis is set out, albeit in less detail and with fewer reservations, as part of a more general history of early Islam in Donner, F.M., 2010, *Muḥammad and the Believers at the Origins of Islam*, Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, esp. p.39-89.

⁷³ Donner, F.M., 2002-2003, ‘From Believers to Muslims’, p.11.

⁷⁴ See *ibid*, p.17-24.

Those who believe, and those who are Jews, and the Christians, and the Sabians – whosoever believe in God and the Last Day and do good – will have their rewards with their Lord. No fear for them, nor will they grieve.

(Q.2:62)⁷⁵

Secondly, he develops a convincing understanding of those verses that seem to contradict what he calls the ‘ecumenism’ of *āyāt* like the above. There are in fact only six verses in the entire Qur’ān that Donner finds question his thesis, all of which he understands as simply the most rhetorically blunt of the Qur’ān’s criticism of some members of other confessions.⁷⁶ These six verses, such as Q.5:51, should perhaps best be understood in the light of the Qur’ān’s occasional tendency to generalise what is really a partitive polemical scheme – as has been suggested above – even though Donner does not use the terminology, nor develop the notion to any great extent. Further, by making an analogy between the United States of America’s constitutional assertion of the equality of man originally co-existing with the reality of slavery, Donner suggests that theological ideals – in this instance the embryonic distinctiveness of the Qur’ān as a new, rigorously monotheist revelation – do not always march in step with social realities, but take time to reach what hindsight suggests is their logical conclusion.

Beyond the Qur’ān, support for the ‘Believers Thesis’ can be found in the so-called *Constitution of Medina*, the manner in which the early community seems to have projected the status of Muḥammad, and other circumstantial evidence like *amīr al-mu’minīn* constituting the first caliphal title.⁷⁷ This very example makes it clear if nothing else that the term ‘believer’ had a social and political currency outside of the Qur’ān and its very use begs the question as to why the caliphal title was not *amīr al-muslimīn*. Shoemaker, one of the scholars who has accepted Donner’s conclusions, also cites further supportive circumstantial evidence pertaining to the first century of Islam, such as the well-attested presence of men who made no secret of their Christianity fighting in the ‘Muslim’ armies.⁷⁸ Donner is nonetheless aware that the nature of the evidence means that

⁷⁵ Even though all groups are grammatically distinct, as they are separated by ‘and’ (*wa*), the *aya* makes a collective plural out of them all. The translation of this passage has had to be altered from that offered by Abdel Haleem to bring it closer to the Arabic original. Haleem finds it necessary to translate *inna ’lladhīna āmanū* as ‘The [Muslim] believers,’ in a gloss that arguably testifies not only to modern Muslims’ predetermined reading of the text, but that is also suggestive for how the faithful a few generations after the death of the Prophet came to interpret what was before their eyes.

⁷⁶ Donner, F.M., 2002-2003, ‘From Believers to Muslims’, p.24-28.

⁷⁷ Ibid, p.28-52.

⁷⁸ Shoemaker, S.J., 2012, *The Death of a Prophet*, p.199-218. He also highlights the later fury with which the likes of the jurist Ibn Ḥanbal reacted to claims of Jews and Christians in the community of Muḥammad as a case of the Islamic tradition protesting too much.

no reconstruction of the early Islamic community can be completely watertight, but the weight of evidence that he marshals permits him reasonably to claim that the Believers Thesis ‘fits more smoothly with some other evidence about the early Islamic period than does the traditional interpretation of the origins of Islam.’⁷⁹

The Believers Thesis is not without its critics and, indeed, criticisms. Robert Hoyland, as already mentioned in Chapter One, wrote a review of Donner’s 2010 book in which he drew attention, above all, to what could be called Donner’s narrow focus and tendency, even subconsciously, to reflect the later Islamic sources’ desire to project the early community as the model of piety.⁸⁰ It is important, however, to note that Hoyland focused his criticism not on Donner’s reconstruction of the community as it came into being during the Prophet’s lifetime in Medina, but on the way in which Donner retold the story of the conquests that took place after the Prophet’s death.⁸¹ On the Qur’ānic community before the conquests, the context in which the Believers Thesis is actually developed and to which it is most applicable, Hoyland was noticeably silent. He even acknowledged that the terminological enigma of *mu’minūn* and *muslimūn* is certainly thought-provoking and should be investigated, but stopped short of consideration of the question on the basis that ‘the popular format of the book (*Muḥammad and the Believers*) means that the proposition is not academically presented and so cannot be reviewed here.’⁸²

Other critics have raised concerns similar and in addition to Hoyland’s. Patricia Crone was the first to suggest that the Believers Thesis may have been conceived with more than a nod to contemporary political concerns, by drawing attention to the problem that it ‘appeals deeply to American liberals: here they find the nice, tolerant, and open Islam that they hanker for.’⁸³ Jack Tannous has likewise noted how Donner’s insistence that the movement of Muḥammad was heedless of sharp confessional boundaries bears ‘an uncanny resemblance in certain respects to a contemporary mainline Protestant church.’⁸⁴ Both Crone and Tannous also take Donner to task for drawing false distinctions between the ‘religious,’ ‘political,’ and ‘social’ spheres, in order to isolate consideration of the meaning of the Qur’ān from contextual historical concerns. They

⁷⁹ Donner, F.M., 2002-2003, ‘From Believers to Muslims’, p.48. Donner also suggests that the ease of conversion to Islam, the mere pronouncement of a witness statement, compared to the more elaborate rituals of the other monotheist faiths implies that Islam was not conceived as the mutually exclusive rival to those faiths that it became.

⁸⁰ Hoyland, R.G., 2012, ‘Review’, *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, Vol. 44, Issue 3, p.573-576.

⁸¹ See especially *ibid*, p.574.

⁸² *Ibid*, p.574.

⁸³ Crone, P., 2010, ‘Among the Believers’, in *Tablet Magazine*: <http://www.tabletmag.com/jewish-news-and-politics/42023/among-the-believers>; accessed on the 28th of February 2018.

⁸⁴ Tannous, J., 2011 ‘Review’, *Expositions*, 5.2.p.126-141; quote p.131.

both make good points that at least some of the phenomena that Donner sees as supporting his thesis, such as the cooperation of some Christians with the Arabian conquerors, can be explained in terms far simpler than ones that demand a radical modification of the conventional narrative.

Crone and Tannous are certainly right to criticise Donner for trying to take the violence out of the seventh century conquests. Yet it is not inevitable that what may indeed be Donner's desire subtly to engage with the politics of his own age neutralises the outline of the Believers Thesis. A group attracting adherents from various sectarian bases and that unites them, in part, through an intense belief in pious practice could conceivably have been very violent toward those – of any and all confessions – who failed to demonstrate similarly rigorous pious practices, and whom, as has already been argued, the Qur'ān maligned with the polemical term *mushrikūn*.

Just because a movement could be called 'ecumenical' does not mean that it could not have been hostile to those whom it saw as lacking the foundation of basic faith and practices that united those within it. Hoyland, interestingly, reached a conclusion not too dissimilar from such a more worldly interpretation of the Believers Thesis in an analysis of a collection of documentary sources from within and without the boundaries of the early Islamic community: 'we might envisage the first caliphs as...effectively running a "*jihād* state," a politico-religious entity comprising fighting men of different religious affiliations whose overriding aim was the expansion of the state in the name of God and who shared a belief in the One God and the Last Day. Muslim sources tend to assume that non-Muslims who participated in the conquests must have converted at an early stage, but the prosopographical evidence suggests rather that many remained in their own religion until much later.'⁸⁵

Fresh qualifications to the Believers Thesis can, however, be raised in addition to the published criticisms. Donner's survey of Qur'ānic verses that question his notion is, for instance, incomplete. He fails to cite Q.22:78 which, although exceptional as has already been mentioned, nevertheless appears explicitly to assert that members of the community are called Muslims: 'God has called you Muslims' (*huwa sammākum al-muslimīna*). This resonates with other, far less explicit though arguably suggestive verses in the Qur'ān that connect 'Muslim' to membership of the saved community. When Solomon, for example, calls the Queen of Sheba to come to him in the name of God, he asks her and her people to come to him as Muslims (*wa-'tūnī muslimīna*) (Q.27:31).

⁸⁵ Hoyland, R.G., 2006, 'New Documentary Texts and the Early Islamic State', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 69, p.395-416; quote p.409.

Yet the use of term with respect to the Queen of Sheba and elsewhere is not as simple as a first reading may suggest, as will soon be explored. There is also something about Q.22:78 that demands closer investigation. The verse comes at the very end of the *sūra*. It is noticeably one of the longest in the chapter and follows a number of far shorter, simple exhortatory verses that emphasise the power and might of God: ‘God chooses messengers from among the angels and from among humans. God is all hearing, all seeing: He knows what lies before and behind them. All matters return to Him. Believers (*yā ayyuhā ’lladhīna āmanū*), bow down, prostrate yourselves, worship your Lord, and do good that you may succeed’ (Q.22:75-77). These *āyāt* are of the short, declamatory style that tend to end other middle Qur’ānic *sumar*, like the following *sūra* Q.23. The long verse that succeeds them therefore seems structurally out of place. It is also odd in its insistence that *al-muslimīna* is what God has called the Believers ‘from before’ (*min qablu*) which one is tempted to imagine could have the sense of ‘since time immemorial.’ Elsewhere, the Qur’ān demonstrates that *ḥanīf* was the preferred term for an archaic monotheist like Abraham (Q.2:135). Given the incongruent nature of Q.22:78, on both a structural and thematic level, is it beyond the realms of possibility to suggest that the verse is a later interpolation or reinterpretation, speaking to the time at which ‘Muslim’ was starting to become the more widely-used term for the faithful?

This is not too daring a proposition, bearing in mind the tendency of modern exegetes and translators to ‘clarify’ the text of the Qur’ān by inserting the term ‘Muslim’ when it is not in the Arabic original. There are, moreover, many other verses in the Qur’ān that support the Believers Thesis but which Donner himself has not highlighted. At Q.62:5, for example, Muḥammad rebukes Jews who fail to abide by the Torah (*al-tawrāt*), invective that only makes sense if following the Torah is considered to be a worthy thing to do. The following verses, interestingly, criticise some Jews who ‘claim that out of all people (they) are friends of God’ (*annakum awliya’ allabi min dūn al-nās... ’in kuntum ṣādiqīn*) (Q.62:6), an *āya* that apparently attacks the very claim that one monotheistic group can be the ‘correct’ confession. The final verses of the *sūra* move on from criticising exclusivist Jews to criticising Believers (*alladhīna āmanū*) who fail in their duty to pray (Q.62:9-11). Together, the verses of this *sūra* strongly imply that it is, above all, pious behaviour, rather than the distinctiveness of a new confession, that the Qur’ān is keen to promote.

Believer phraseology is hardly limited to the Jews. The sense that many Christians act righteously and can thus be counted among the believers, whereas some of them have allegedly moved away from what was revealed by Jesus, is apparent in Q.57. One *āya* in particular is worth quoting in full:

We sent other messengers to follow in their footsteps. After those we sent Jesus, son of Mary: We gave him the Gospel (al-‘injīl) and put compassion and mercy into the hearts of his followers. But monasticism (rahbāniyya) was something they invented – We did not ordain it for them – only to seek God’s pleasure, and even so, they did not observe it properly. So we gave a reward to those of them who believed (alladhīna āmanū minhum ajrahum), but many of them were law breakers (fāsiqūna).

(Q.57: 27)

The partitive nature of this polemic, as ever, clearly preserves an element of a monotheist confession that is not Islam for salvation and demonstrates that this group – just like the addressees of the Qur’ān – can be referred to as Believers.

Once one reads the Qur’ān with eyes unwilling to read what the text says into an assertion of a new, strictly delimited confession, the examples of believer language proliferate. Evidence for just how open the category could be to anyone of a good monotheist persuasion, and who did good deeds, may be found in the person of a man from the people of Pharaoh who defended Moses, and who is called a Believer at Q.40:28 (*mu’minūn*). The Believers’ own desire, moreover, to appeal to existing monotheists and to stress to them that the new movement should not be seen as an assault on their confession is strikingly apparent in Q.29:

‘Say, “We believe in what was revealed to us and in what was revealed to you; our God and your God is one; It is to him we submit (lahu muslimūna).” Thus did we reveal the Scripture to you, and there are those to whom we gave the Scripture who believe in it, and there are some [other] people who believe in it (fa-’lladhīna ataynāhum al-kitāba yu’minūna bihi wa-min hā’ulā’ man yu’minu bihi).’⁸⁶

(Q.29:46-47)

A third further example of the openness of the new movement can also be gleaned from the Qur’ān’s scheme, and clear vested interest, in back-projecting believer phraseology into the speech of past prophets. The followers of Noah, for example, are called Believers at Q.26:144, and Jesus also refers to those who come to have faith in his signs as Believers at Q.3:49. This is also another

⁸⁶ The translation is my own. The wider context makes, as well as the appositional nature of the two final verbal clauses, make it clear that the discussion is of older *ahl al-kitāb* and those who have started to define themselves as Believers.

way in which the Qur'ān seeks to appeal to the religious history of monotheism to assert its own legitimacy, yet further evidence of the intensely monotheist milieu in which the text was born.

Even though the open nature of the Believers movement is attested throughout the Qur'ān, one sometimes gets a sense that the external barriers implicit to any new movement, however open it may want to be, are ready to be raised. Social realities may, therefore, have started to move in the direction of theological hindsight from an early date, even though the evidence additional to the Qur'ān that Donner and Shoemaker muster shows that such a project certainly took time to complete. At Q.3:65-78, the appeals to the *ahl al-kitāb* become somewhat more pained and frustrated than they are at Q.29:46-47. Some of the People of the Book are still held to conform to the rightful belief and righteous action of the Believers (Q.29:75), but the polemic tends towards the more generalising of the Qur'ān.

Further, Q.5:82 breaks from the Qur'ān's overall harmonising attitude towards the monotheistic faiths to equate Jews – the catch-all term *al-yahūd* is used – with the *musbrikūn*, saying that 'the closest (*aqrabahum*) in affection towards the believers are those who say, "Indeed we are Christians (*inanā naṣarā*)"'. Read in the broader context of neighbouring verses, however, the Qur'ān cannot but help making these Christians not merely close to the Believers, but all but one and the same: "They say, "Our Lord, we believe (-*āmannā*)"...For saying this, God has rewarded them with Gardens graced with flowing streams, and there they will stay: that is the reward for those who do good' (Q.5:83-85).

However the open attitude towards pious monotheists of a variety of particular hues may have developed over the course of the Prophet's career, and even if one does not accept the Believers Thesis, it is hard to maintain that the community of the Qur'ān called themselves 'Muslims.' They are not only addressed as 'you who believe' by the voice of the Qur'ān on almost one thousand separate occasions, they are also presented as using the terminology themselves. A conscious choice is therefore made to express religious identity on words built from the root *'-m-n* rather than *s-l-m*. Perhaps most explicitly, Q.3:15-16 defines God's slaves as 'those who say, "Our Lord, we believe (*alladhīna yaqūlūna rabbanā-āmannā*)"' not 'those who say, "Our Lord, we submit (*aslammā*)"'. Similarly, those who seek salvation on the Last Day are presented as doing so by declaring that they believe, not that they submit (Q.44:12). The Qur'ān even genders the term by speaking specifically of 'Believer women' (*al-mu'mināt*) at Q.24:23, highly suggestive evidence that it was as Believers that the movement which coalesced around Muḥammad defined their religious and social identity, if this terminology could extend into the domestic space.

The community at Medina, therefore, saw itself as one of Believers (*mu'minūn*), not as one consisting, originally, of 'Muslims.' The Believers movement was open to anyone who believed in God, who was prepared to live by certain pious injunctions, and who felt that the Last Day was near at hand. The movement legitimised itself on the basis of monotheistic precedent and called for an end to rivalry between those who had more in common with one another than they liked to admit, even though the preaching of their leader did contain elements that would become the foundation stones of new walls between the movement and other confessions, not least the denial of the divinity of Jesus (most explicit at Q.4:171).⁸⁷

Yet 'Muslims' do appear in the Qur'ān, and do seem to have some kind of relationship to the text's principal audience. Given that adherents of the prophet Muḥammad came to call themselves Muslims, any case made in support, qualification or elaboration of the Believers Thesis must also try to answer how this profound terminological shift came about. If the community originally picked the name 'Believers,' who were the first 'Muslims'?

Outsiders who submit

If God so willed, he would have made you all one people...

(Q.16:93)

The need to define an element within the community of Believers as 'Muslims', according to Donner, arose from the very nature of the community as an 'ecumenical' movement. All were Believers, but some underpinned their religious and legal practices on the Torah and others on what the Qur'ān calls in the singular the Gospel. New monotheists – erstwhile *mushrikūn* in

⁸⁷ Donner's relative reticence on how this language could have been received by contemporary Christians is perhaps the major unanswered question of the Believers Thesis. The attitude of the Qur'ān towards Jesus is both interesting and complex. Even though his divinity, as any Orthodox Christian would understand it, is denied, the reality of the Immaculate Conception is not: 'Remember the one who guarded her chastity. We breathed into her from Our Spirit (*min rūḥinā*) and made her and her son a sign for all people' (Q.21:91; see also Q.3:46-47). Jesus' death, bodily resurrection and subsequent ascent into heaven also receives Qur'ānic confirmation (Q.3:55-57; 19:33; see also Mourad, S.A., 2011, 'Does the Qur'ān deny or assert Jesus's crucifixion and death?' in Reynolds, G.S. (ed.) 2011, *New Perspectives on the Qur'ān*, p.349-357). Reference is likewise made to his miracles (Q.3:49). The Qur'ān, therefore, seems to confirm so much of the Christian understanding of Jesus that he should not be said to be presented in the text merely as yet another prophet: he appears as a far more special figure than a character like Ṣāliḥ, Noah, or even Moses. Despite the Qur'ān's eventual anti-Trinitarian rhetoric, it is hardly inconceivable that the overall sense of the attitude of Muḥammad to Jesus would have been sufficiently congenial to some Christians. One of the great unanswered questions of the Qur'ān, namely the nature in which it may originally have circulated, should also be asked in this regard. The extent to which recipients of Muḥammad's message may have been able to consider his preaching as a whole, rather than in a (purposefully?) selective and fragmentary form, is an open question. The implications of his message as a totality may therefore simply have not been apparent before the conquest community settled and its leadership became able to promulgate the Qur'ān in a consistent manner – a problem that even the earliest possible date of codification would not necessarily have solved.

Donner's formulation – who did not possess a scripture, and who therefore drew entirely upon the revelations of Muḥammad, needed some way in which to be identified. Considering that the Qur'ān shows that the term *muslim* can be used adjectivally to elaborate on the nature of monotheist belief as submission to the will of God – the sense that the word seems to possess when Abraham is referred to as a *ḥanīfan musliman* at Q.3:67 – one can perhaps imagine how the word became associated with the law (*dīn*) of the Qur'ān as an expression of God's will. The eventual appropriation of the term as a noun would thereby have allowed Qur'ānic Believers to respond to those who may have defined themselves as, for example, 'a Believer and a Jew,' as 'a Believer and a Muslim.'⁸⁸

At least two challenges can be made to Donner's notion that prompt a quest for an alternative explanation. First, as has already been explored, the Qur'ānic *mushrikūn* were not polytheists as the polemical rhetoric of the text would have us believe. The term *mushrik* is one of religious and political invective, hurled at any opponent of the Prophet, or anyone judged to be impure in their practices, to discredit their commitment to the one God despite what they may have in fact believed. Despite his fresh and daring engagement with the riddles presented by many of the enigmatic terms of the Qur'ān, it is indeed a little odd that Donner fails to problematize and explore the nature of the *mushrikūn*, preferring to accept the conventional interpretation.⁸⁹

Secondly, the Qur'ān occasionally makes explicit connections between the Believers, in a total rather than a partitive sense, and the legal injunctions of the prophet as expressed in the text.

This is a sūra We have sent down and made obligatory: We have sent down clear revelations in it, so that you may take heed. Strike the adulteress and the adulterer one hundred times. Do not let compassion for them keep you from carrying out God's law (dīn Allāh) – if you believe in God and the Last Day (tu'minūna bi-'llāh wa-'l-yawm al-ākhir) – and ensure that a group of believers witnesses the punishment. The adulterer is only [fit] to marry an adulteress or a (female) mushrik,

⁸⁸ See Donner, F.M., 2002-2003, 'From Believers to Muslims', p.15-16 and Donner, F.M., 2010, *Muḥammad and the Believers*, p.71-72: 'Those Believers who were Christians or Jews could always be identified as such, but a Believer who had formally been a polytheist could no longer be called *mushrik*, so the only term that was applicable to her, once she had embraced monotheism and observed Qur'anic law, was *muslim*. And, with time, the term *muslim*, came to be used exclusively for these "new monotheist" Believers who followed Qur'anic law' (p.72).

⁸⁹ Donner, F.M., 2010, *Muḥammad and the Believers*, p.59 acknowledges the problems presented by the term but dismisses them lest, one is tempted to suggest, they create difficulties for his overall thesis: 'it has been plausibly suggested that the Qur'an's frequent invective against "polytheists" may actually be directed at Trinitarian Christians and anyone else whom Muhammad considered only lukewarm monotheists. Be that as it may...'

and the adulteress is only [fit] to marry an adulterer or a (male) mushrik: such behaviour is forbidden to believers (ḥurrima dhālika ‘alā ’l-mu’minīna).

(Q.24:1-3)

This passage clearly makes an equation between the *dīn* of the Qur’ān and only putative ‘new monotheists’ hard to sustain. Those who keep God’s law as expressed in the Qur’ān are identified using the simple and most essential qualifications of Believer status – belief in God and the Last Day – and the adulterous behaviour described is hardly made illicit to just one segment of the community.⁹⁰ In order to try to understand what ‘Muslim’ originally meant, therefore, it is necessary to part ways with Donner and once again to explore the text of the Qur’ān.

The most striking aspect of the use of words built on the root *s-l-m* in the Qur’ān is that they are used with reference to groups or individuals that are, in some sense, ‘outsiders’ or ‘others’ to the text’s principal actors or saved community. The case of the jinn offers a first example. Even though they express belief in God using the expected term, *āmannā* (Q.72:13), they also pointedly develop their precise relationship to Him by using the term *muslimūn*: ‘Some of us are *muslimūn* and some of us are deviants (*al-qāsītūn*); and whoever has submitted (*aslama*) has found wise guidance’ (Q.72:14). In this context, it makes most sense to take *aslama* in its pure and original meaning as ‘submit’, owing to the wider context demonstrating the jinn’s willingness to make themselves subservient to God’s will (Q.72:1-12), thereby receiving good guidance. This sense is amplified were one to read *al-qāsītūn* not as ‘deviants’ but ‘those who act tyrannously’ – another possible meaning of *q-s-ṭ* in the first form – a meaning that would create a pleasing antithesis between those jinn who know their place, the submissive *muslimūn*, and those who fail to recognise God’s rightful authority over them and their subservient status. The jinn who receive praise in this *sūra* are, therefore, best translated into English simply as ‘the submitters’.

The story of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba also evinces a similar use of *aslama*. As has already been briefly mentioned, Solomon, upon hearing that the people of Sheba and their Queen worship the Sun (Q.27:24), writes to them to request that they come to him as *muslimīna* (Q.27:31). This request, despite the tendency of some modern translators and exegetes to simplify the situation by implying that it is a call merely to accept the One God, carries with it the sense of ‘submission’ in

⁹⁰ The passage is also interesting with respect to its effective comparison of *mushrikūn* with sexual deviants: again, evidence of the way in which the term connotes perceived deviancy in a generic and polemical sense, not polytheism.

a far more basic and even brutal respect.⁹¹ Later on in the *sūra*, after the Queen of Sheba has sent Solomon a gift that he interprets as a bribe, Solomon explains that he wants to conquer Sheba, to ‘come upon them with irresistible forces, and drive them, disgraced and humbled, from their land’ (Q.27:37). The next *aya* again uses the phrase *atūnī muslimīna* to describe the state in which this conquered people will be. Clearly, the logical conclusion given the context is that the nature of this submission will be wholly profane and political. The people of Sheba are described as *muslimīna* not because they accept God, but because of their historical rejection of Him.

When the Queen of Sheba, moreover, is eventually made to accept God, her choice of language to do so is interesting. After Solomon has humbled her by confiscating her throne and embarrassed her in his hall paved with glass, she says, ‘My Lord, I have wronged myself and I submit (*aslamtū*) with Solomon to God, the Lord of all the worlds’ (Q.27:44).⁹² She does not, curiously, say that she believes. Her choice of language contrasts remarkably with that chosen by Solomon earlier in the *sūra* to describe his status and identity alongside that of David: they are both of the Lord’s ‘believing slaves’ (*min ‘ibādihī al-mu’minīna*) (Q.27:15). ‘Muslim’, therefore, appears to be the term used by an outsider – and an outsider brought forcibly into the saved community – whereas *mu’min* is the term chosen by ‘insiders’ to define themselves. It is also striking that the Queen of Sheba sees fit to qualify her submission to God in relation to Solomon, implying a political loyalty to him as a man alongside her new acknowledgment of the divine.

A similarly secular and political sense to the meaning of submission described using *aslama* is likewise to be found in Q.9. In a passage attacking certain members of the Qur’ānic community whose loyalty to Muḥammad is superficial, at very best, the verb is used to communicate the apparently reluctant manner in which they first came to adhere to him.

Prophet, strive against the deniers (al-kuffār) and the hypocrites (al-munāfiqīna), and be tough with them. Hell is their final home – an evil destination! They swear by God that they did not, but they certainly did speak words of defiance and became defiant after their submission (islāmihim); they tried to do something, though they did not achieve it – being spiteful was their only response to God and His Messenger enriching them out of His bounty.

(Q.9:73-74)⁹³

⁹¹ An example would be Abdel Haleem. He elaborates on the Arabic *wa-atūnī muslimīna* to produce the translation, ‘and come to me in submission to God’.

⁹² The translation is my own.

⁹³ Again, the translation has been altered from that of Abdel Haleem to bring it closer to the Arabic original. A choice has also been made to define *al-kuffār* as the ‘deniers’ rather than the ‘disbelievers’ in order not to assume

One gets the sense that these Muslims never really wanted to submit to the purported messenger of God, nor took the substance of his preaching to heart. Rather, the verses seem to speak to people who were in some way brought into the religious and political structures of the emergent community but who were hardly committed to them in a serious or voluntary manner.

Who, one is prompted to ask, could these recalcitrant members of the community possibly have been? A number of other verses in the Qur'ān allow a strongly suggestive identification to be made. It is an identification that will eventually allow the community of the Qur'ān, the earliest members of what became the Islamic state, to be mapped against diachronic phenomena in the social history and fabric of Arabia in the next Chapter. Such a comparative contextualisation will help to give rise to an improved understanding of the ways in which the community of Muḥammad became as important and as powerful as it did.

The people of Medina and their Bedouin neighbours

You who believe, be mindful of God: stand with those who are true. The people of Medina (ahl al-madīna) and their neighbouring desert Arabs (man hawlahum min al-a' rāb) should not have held back from following God's Messenger...

(Q.9:119-120)

In addition to mythical and legendary groups like the jinn or the people of Sheba, there is another, far more physical and factual group that are also presented as outsiders in the Qur'ān. They are the bedouin: the nomads of the Arabian Desert, the *al-a' rāb*.⁹⁴ Several verses paint them as an 'other,' a human society known to, but removed from, the community of the prophet at Medina.

They think the joint forces have not gone, and if the joint forces did come again they would wish they were wondering in the desert (bādūna) among the bedouin (fi 'l-a' rāb) and seeking news about you. Even if they were with you, they would hardly fight at all.

the more defined and polemical interpretation of the term to describe those who reject the Qur'ānic conception of right belief. The denial may be directed towards Muḥammad rather than the substance of his message.

⁹⁴ For the etymology of *a' rāb*, see Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam*, Edinburgh University Press, p.120-124. Webb, in a manner not too dissimilar from the present discussion, yet as part of a wider argument, sees the term as one specifically descriptive of desert-dwelling 'outsiders.' Interestingly, William Montgomery Watt was also sensitive to this distinction in the Qur'ān – and prefigures Webb's argument that the adjective *arabī* describes a mode of speech and not an ethnicity – even if he did see some kind of pan-Arabian ethnic unity implicit in the vocabulary of Muḥammad's message: 'Though there is no word for 'Arabs' in the Qur'ān and the form *al-a' rāb*, which does occur in some later passages, means the nomadic tribes as distinct from the Medinans and other town-dwellers, the conception of 'Arabs' as a separate ethnological or cultural unit is implicit in the use of the word "Arabic"' (Watt, W. M., 1956, *Muḥammad at Medina*, Oxford University Press, p.143).

In this example, distance from the community appears to be communicated through the idea of residence among the bedouin. One gets the impression that the bedouin, consequently, must have been an entity somewhat alien to the townspeople of Medina.

This sense is further implicit in the invective directed against them in the Qur'ān. Indeed, the very fact that they are singled out for polemical treatment demonstrates that they were thought of as a separate entity, rather than as another element of Medinan, or wider Ḥijāzi, society that could be subsumed beneath the polemic directed at one or more confessional group. The ninth *sūra* is perhaps the most vitriolic.

Some of the bedouin (min al-a' rāb), too, came to make excuses, asking to be granted exemption. Those who lied to God and His Messenger stayed behind at home. A painful torment will afflict those of them who disbelieved.

(...)

The bedouin (al-a' rāb) are the most stubborn of all peoples in their denial and hypocrisy. They are the least likely to recognise the limits that God has sent down to His Messenger. God has the knowledge to decide. Some of the bedouin (min al-a' rāb) consider what they give to be an imposition; they are waiting for fortune to turn against you, but fortune will turn against them. God is all hearing and all knowing.

(...)

Some of the bedouin around (wa-mimman hawlakum min al-a' rāb) you are hypocrites...

(Q.9:90; 97-98; 101)

The insights one gets from these passages are twofold. First, it is clear that the bedouin are lacking in their religious devotion. At least some of them are labelled 'hypocrites' (*munāfiqūna*) and the reference to their unwillingness to accept the limits placed upon them by God, via his messenger, imply an antipathy to righteous action as codified in the law of the Qur'ān and other scripture. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, the bedouin seem to be the people whom the prophet finds defiant even after their 'submission' to him, referred to above and earlier in the *sūra* at Q.9:73-74. These verses reveal what that submission actually entailed. It seems not to have been

⁹⁵ The translation is my own.

conversion to a religious creed, but the forced acceptance of tax payable to Medina: a wholly profane and political submission. This would explain why the bedouin are presented asking for exemptions from what has been imposed on them.

The clear separation that these *āyāt* demonstrate between what one can start to conceptualise as the ‘Muslim’ bedouin and the ‘Believer’ townspeople of Medina is confirmed in a highly explicit manner in another *sūra*. The passage is worth quoting in full.

The bedouin (al-a‘rāb) say, ‘we believe (āmannā).’ Say [Prophet], ‘you do not believe, but you should say, “we have submitted (aslamnā),” for belief (al-īmān) has not entered your hearts. If you obey God and His Messenger, He will not diminish any of your deeds: He is most forgiving and most merciful. Indeed rather the Believers (al-mu‘minūn) are those who believe in God and his Messenger and leave all doubt behind, the ones who have struggled with their possessions and their persons in God’s way: they are the ones who are true. Say, ‘Do you presume to teach God about your religion (dīnikum), when God knows everything in the heavens and the earth, and He has full knowledge of all things?’ They think they have done you a favour by submitting (aslamū). Say, ‘Do not consider your submission (islāmakum) a favour to me; it is God who has done you a favour, by guiding you to belief (al-īmān), if you are truly sincere.

(Q.49:14-17)

The bedouin appear initially to be claiming a level of membership of the community to which they are not entitled, owing to what this passage suggests – and that the above verses from Q.9 show – is their imperfect religious devotion. They are therefore rebuked, and effectively ordered to refer to themselves not as Believers, but as Muslims. Further, the passage implies that the bedouin defined their relationship to the community through a loyalty to Muḥammad as a man and not to God: ‘do not consider your submission a favour to me.’ This confirms both that the nature of ‘submission’ in the Qur’ān must be seen as a political act with respect to Muḥammad and Medina, rather than a religious acceptance of God, and also that the bedouin did not truly understand the spiritual implications of community membership.

Clear though the dichotomy between the believing people of Medina and their Muslim bedouin neighbours may be at Q.49:14-17, if not elsewhere, how is it possible to make sense of some verses in the Qur’ān that do seem to impute *al-islām* with a distinctly religious meaning? At Q.29:46, for example, ‘belief’ and ‘submission’ seem to be equated, and both terms are defined in relation to the divine: ‘Say, “we believe (*āmannā*) in what came down to us and in what came down to you;

our God and your God is one and we are submitters to Him (*naḥnu labu muslimūna*)”.⁹⁶ The verse Q.2:131, moreover, presents God asking Abraham to ‘submit’ to him and Q.5:3 defines the perfected *dīn* – which should be understood less as ‘religion’ in a total sense and more as pious right action given the wider context of dietary stipulations – as *al-islām*.

This apparent problem can be resolved through returning to Q.49:17. The voice of the Qur’ān here also makes an apparent equation between submission and belief but in a manner that does not fail to make some kind of difference implicit. The verse suggests that submission, which should be seen as being directed towards God despite the bedouin’s tendency to consider their submission in relation to Muḥammad, is the *route* that guides one to belief (*hadākum ‘li-’l-īmān*). Similar language appears at Q.6:125: ‘When God wishes to guide someone, He opens their breast to Islam (*fa-man yurid Allāh an yabdiyahu yasbraḥ ṣadrabu li-l-islām*).’ In this instance, it is the very beginning of one’s religious involvement with God that is described using Islam. God first wishes to guide someone, then starts to move them onto the right path through fostering submission, the requisite state for belief to develop. To the earliest members of the community at Medina, therefore, ‘Islam’ merely described the process of becoming one of the saved. ‘Belief’ was the desired end result.

Conclusion

A reading of the Qur’ān, the Islamic tradition’s only genuine primary source, which recognises it to be a witness to, and a tool of, the very act of the formation of the community loyal to Muḥammad has revealed a number of important insights. First, Muḥammad was active in an intensely monotheist milieu. His genius was less that of an innovator, more that of an adapter. This helps to explain why what must have been his peculiar charismatic power had an ability to draw men to him. His message resonated with pre-existing ideas that ensured he was able to win legitimacy in the eyes of those around him: the development for which Weber stressed any political figure, who relies on charisma rather than on inherited structures, needs to hope to be more than a matchstick lit in the wind. In this respect if in no other, Muḥammad’s use of what could be called the defining ideological trend of Late Antiquity, politicised monotheism, makes him a man of his age. Muḥammad’s ability to win minds, rather than to manipulate the material basis of Arabian existence as William Montgomery Watt emphasised, was the first step on the road to the development of the early Islamic state.

⁹⁶ The translation is my own.

The Qur'ān has also revealed another fundamentally important feature of the society and politics of the early community. For Muḥammad's pious 'Believers', the bedouin of the Arabian desert were an alien entity. They were the original 'Muslims': people whose adherence to the leadership of Muḥammad was not the result of voluntary recognition of his religious claims, but subjection to what must have been his growing secular authority. The use of the term 'Muslim' to describe the followers of the prophet's message probably became more common the more bedouin fell under the sway of Muḥammad and his successors over the first century of the faith. Given that Qur'ānic terminology built on the root *s-l-m* does occasionally seem to have a spiritual, rather than a political meaning, however, the extension of the meaning of 'Muslim' to connote a deeper loyalty to the new movement would hardly have been without some scriptural rationalisation.

Overall, the impressions drawn from the non-Islamic sources for Muḥammad and the Qur'ān point to three phenomena that may help to explain early Islamic state development. First, the charismatic leadership of a figure based in a sedentary situation. Secondly, the adherence of the dwellers of this oasis to his message and, thirdly, their combined ability to subject the bedouin of the desert to the settled community, thereby, one can imagine, starting to unlock the material and manpower resources of Arabia.

This schematic triad is not without deeper implications. As the next Chapter will demonstrate, instances of state development in other periods in the history of the Arabian Peninsula have tended to evince the same combination of factors. Throughout history, there seems to have been something particularly powerful about oases in the grip of strong leaders, whose ambitions embraced the control of the warriors and resources of the desert.

Chapter Three: The Early Submission State

The Apostle of God used to say to his companions, 'I am the most Arab of you all. I am of Quraysh, and I was suckled among the B. Sa'd b. Bakr.'

(ana 'arabukum ana qurayshī wa asturđi' tu fi banī sa'd bin bakr)

(Sīrat Rasūl Allāh, p.106)¹

The previous chapter recognised the historical value of the Qur'ān as a witness to the creation of the early Islamic community. Not only does a sensitive reading of it demonstrate that Muḥammad's message came into being in an intensely monotheistic milieu, it also provides precious insights into the demographic composition of the early community. Perhaps the most important of these insights is the divide the Qur'ān specifically highlights between the dwellers of the oasis of Yathrib and the bedouin tribes of the desert. Even when both groups are alleged to act in the same way, as at Q. 9:119-120, they are nonetheless separately named: 'the people of Medina and their neighbouring desert Arabs.' These 'neighbouring desert Arabs' are, moreover, clearly external to the more receptive elements of the Qur'ān's principal audience given the degree of polemic to which they are subjected: 'the bedouin are the most stubborn of all peoples in their denial and hypocrisy' (Q. 9:97).

Approaching the Bedouin

Striking though this may be to anyone who automatically identifies the message of Muḥammad with the bedouin, that image of the Arab *par excellence*, it should not, in fact, be surprising. As has already been mentioned in passing in Chapters One and Two, the very word *a'rab* itself connotes notions of the desert 'outsider' and its use as an ethnonym, not least in the early Islamic period, is a matter of intense debate.² By acknowledging the divide between the bedouin and the townsman, the nomad and the sedentary, moreover, the Qur'ān simply recognises a perennial feature of life

¹ The Arabic text of the *Sīrat Rasūl Allāh* is that of *Das Leben Mohammad's nach Mohammad ibn Ishak*, Wüstenfeld, F., (ed.), 1859-1860, Göttingen: J. B. Metzler. In many cases, as in this, translations have been adapted from Guillaume, A., 1955, *The Life of Muhammad*, whose English tends to be strictly loyal to the Arabic in most cases.

² Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs*, esp. p. 23-109 for the history of the use of a term to describe 'outsider' nomads of the desert and for a highly convincing case that the term should not be used as an ethnonym in the period before the developed articulation of Islamic civilisation.

in the Arabian Peninsula. It is a feature that needs to be surveyed in some detail in order to set the arguments about early Islamic state development in the correct context.

Two examples of this divide, thousands of years apart, will first serve to demonstrate just how profound this division is. Implicit in the comments offered on the bedouin by the modern travellers surveyed in the Introduction was how they differ from the Arabians who lived in the towns and oases of the Near East, a comparison explicit in the words of Burckhardt. Wilfred Thesiger, to give a more detailed example, frequently makes a point of separating the bedouin he so admired from their somewhat less admirable urban brethren. He even described a hostility between the two groups that recalls the mutual animosity suggested in the Qur'ān.

Valuing freedom far above ease or comfort, careless of suffering, taking indeed a fierce pride in the hardship of their lives, the Bedu forced an unwilling recognition of their superiority on the villagers and townsmen who hated and affected to despise them. In the Hajaḡ I had heard men, sitting full-fed round the coffee hearths of great halls, disparage the Bedu as uncouth and lawless savages and curse them as infidels who neither prayed nor fasted. They had spoken scornfully of their poverty, marvelling that any human beings could endure this desert life.³

Thesiger's words make it clear that the different set of values and lifestyles of the townsman and bedouin are no mere artificial divides attributed to the residents of the Arabian Peninsula by outside observers blind to unseen subtleties.⁴ They are images and realities alive in the minds of the men around him. He gives another telling set of comments that confirms the extent of social separation between the settled and the nomadic. Thesiger, citing Colonel Lawrence's rather transparent hints at the homosexual practices of his own bodyguard that opens *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, convincingly argues that homosexuality is all but unknown among the bedouin, common though it may be among the Arabs of the towns and oases.⁵

The parallel lives of townsmen and bedouin in antiquity are recorded in stone, to offer the second example. Funeral reliefs from southern Arabia from before the coming of Islam show a marked divergence in the ways in which they portray nomads and urban dwellers. Nomads are invariably

³ Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, p.93.

⁴ This is not necessarily to say that there were no unseen subtleties. When used rhetorically, 'bedouin' connoted a sense of pure descent and noble behaviour, meaning that certain town dwellers who considered themselves descended from great lineages could make the ideological claim to nomadism. See Al-Rasheed, M., 1991, *Politics in an Arabian Oasis: The Rashidi Tribal Dynasty*, I.B. Taurus & Co. Ltd.: London and New York, p.118-122.

⁵ Ibid, p.125-126. Thesiger quite correctly says that Lawrence's retainers were 'villagers from the oasis, not Bedu,' and that, in all of his five years living side-by-side with the Rashid, homosexuality was mentioned only twice – and only in the context of contact with town dwellers – and in a manner that showed the practice to be considered 'ridiculous and obscene.'

depicted as either wholly without garb or clothed in nothing more than a loincloth, whereas townsmen are portrayed wearing tunics and mantles. Thus does a third-century alabaster relief from the Hadramawt show a lone camel rider stark naked whereas another, Sabaeen relief from the same century not only depicts the deceased in a long robe while sitting with his family at a table, a clear indication of sedentary life, but also shows him dressed in the same manner in another scene while riding a camel.⁶ The dress sense of a urbanite, therefore, stays with him when he enters the world of the bedouin, demonstrating that choice of clothing was socially, not situationally, determined, at least for the purposes of self-representation. The two different modes of existence and the distance between the townsman and the inveterate nomad are clear to behold.⁷

Advancing notions of long-term stability in certain patterns of life in a certain, admittedly quite extensive geographical location is not, of course, without its dangers. No human society is static, and Arabians should not, in any age, be thought in the words of Arnold Toynbee to have been ‘enslaved’ in the ‘formidable physical environment’ in which they dwelt, locked in a social and economic system that was ‘arrested after birth.’⁸ Both steppe societies analogous to those found in Arabia and Arabian societies themselves have evinced sometimes dramatic degrees of internal change and development. It is evident, for example, that the peoples who have historically inhabited Mongolia have oscillated between existing in tribal groups of varying sizes, and have adopted and adapted some of the cultural features of neighbouring forest and sedentary peoples, making them their own.⁹ In what may be an extreme formulation of the creation and nature of great nomadic coalitions on the steppe, some have even argued that the largely pastoralist, nomadic societies of Central Asia developed a sophisticated imperial tradition that provided the ideological and institutional impetus for occasional bouts of political centralisation.¹⁰

⁶ Crone, P., 2008, “‘Barefoot and naked’”: What did the Bedouin of the Arab Conquests look like?, *Muqarnas* 25, p.1-10, 4-5 for discussion of the images mentioned.

⁷ Crone supports the notion that bedouin were scantily dressed in antiquity with a raft of further examples from across the peninsula and from different ages, noting that ‘the desert Arabs dressed in much the same way for over a millennium before the rise of Islam,’ (ibid p.6), another of the many apparently timeless features of the bedouin before the twentieth century. Interestingly, one of the tropes of ancient depictions of bedouin, their long, flowing hair, can be seen in the hairstyles of Thesiger’s travelling companions; Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, plate 16.

⁸ Toynbee, A.J., 1934/1962, *A Study of History: Volume III – The Growths of Civilisations*, p.15 and p.1 respectively for the quotes. Toynbee includes the Arabs in his survey of nomadism at p.7-22 – referring to Arabia as ‘Nomadic Civilization’s innermost citadel’ at p.20 – seeing them, like all nomads, as incapable of internal social, economic and political development. He argues that the only way in which nomadic society experiences change is in its occasional conquests of the sedentary world, caused either by the desiccation of its pasturelands, or by the lure of a neighbouring settled society’s decline.

⁹ Lattimore, O., 1962, ‘The Geographical Factor in Mongol History,’ in *Studies in Frontier History: Collected Papers, 1928-1958*, Oxford University Press, p.241-258, p.252 for Mongol society ‘experiencing cycles of concentration and cycles of dispersion’ and p.251 for the surprising history of the typical Mongol tent, correctly called the *ger*.

¹⁰ See most recently Kim, H.J. 2016, *The Huns*, Routledge: London and New York, p.1-36.

Near Eastern tribal groupings have similarly never stood still. Indeed, modern anthropological work has convincingly shown that tribal structures, far from being the immutable products of pure patrilineal descent, can in fact be highly malleable.¹¹ Despite the undoubted importance of descent and blood relationship, effective membership of a tribe can also arise from relations of proximity or economic interaction. In order retrospectively to justify and explain why these relationships exist, biological connections are invented and retrojected to a time just beyond living memory.¹² In the words of one anthropologist, the practical relationships of the present are given genealogical gloss on the basis that the relationships work so well that the parties simply ‘must be’ related by blood.¹³ Thus, tribal groupings whose members may insist are based on age-old bonds of kinship may actually be an expression of more modern and mundane relationships, being ‘dynamic, flexible and fluid over time and space.’¹⁴

Yet, that said, it would nonetheless be an over-reaction against ideas of geographic determinism and defunct notions of the ‘primitive’ to fail to recognise that the environment in which certain societies exist constrain and structure the parameters within which they develop. The environment also largely decides the strategies pre-modern societies evolve to exploit the land itself. Acknowledging the pivotal importance of what could be called the ‘friction of terrain,’ moreover, can lead to the formulation of important conceptual insights on the societies inhabiting certain areas, which can form the basis of a credible and thought-provoking reconstruction of their history.¹⁵ Regions like Arabia, where agriculture is only possible in a few scattered oases or on the margins of the Fertile Crescent and where pastoral nomadism has been attested since ancient times, are almost by definition prime examples of landscapes that lead to ecological conditioning. Pastoral nomadism, as will shortly be explained in greater depth, is an adaptation secondary to the development of farming and a subsistence choice structured by the very land on which it is

¹¹ See Lancaster, W., 1981, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, Cambridge University Press, p.24-35 and 36-42 and Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads: The Āl Murrah Bedouin of the Empty Quarter*, Arlington Heights, p.82-104 for telling accounts of how fictionalised supposedly genetic relationships can in fact be.

¹² Eickelman, D. F., 1981, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., p.85-134 for a detailed exposition with examples.

¹³ Lancaster, W., 1981, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, p.32. Lancaster points to the fact that his presence among the Rwala was generally understood as a result of him being, in fact, a half-brother of the sheikh who hosted him (p.4-5; 32-33). The Āl Murrah similarly deemed Cole the son of one of their amirs (Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.12).

¹⁴ Lancaster, W., and Lancaster F., 2015, ‘Concepts of tribe, tribal confederation and tribal leadership,’ in Genequand, D., and Robin, C., (eds.), *Les Jafnides : des rois arabes au service de Byzance : VIe siècle de l'ère chrétienne : actes du colloque de Paris, 24-25 novembre 2008*, Paris: Éditions de Boccard, p.53-77, p.59 for the quote.

¹⁵ The term ‘friction of terrain’ is James C. Scott’s. See Scott, J. C., 2009, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland South East Asia*, New Haven: Yale, p.xi. Scott convincingly argues that the region he calls ‘Zomia’ – the highlands of South East Asia, which stretch from India to Vietnam, Thailand to China – constitutes a single ecological and social zone, which has led to its menagerie of peoples adopting very similar social and political strategies throughout history, from ancient times to the arrival of modernity in the 1950s.

practiced in complementary contradistinction to settled agriculture. The extreme degree of specialisation pastoral nomadism presupposes sets the parameters for certain patterns of existence and necessary structural relationships with sedentary producers.

Sensitive students of nomadic peoples like Owen Lattimore – whose life exploring the frontiers of China gave him an excellent insight into pastoral nomadism – have accepted the inescapable power of landscape over pre-modern peoples. In what was written as an empirically-reasoned response to understandings of nomadism like that held by Toynbee, Lattimore compellingly concluded that, although the steppe did not preclude social evolution, it ‘strongly condition(ed)’ the social structures of those who dwelt therein, leading to ‘spirals’ of development, in which cyclical change could conquer permanent evolution.¹⁶ One should focus, therefore, not on how geography determines the functions of a certain society, but on ‘society as it functions in a geographical environment.’¹⁷ Lattimore, however, saw the greatest potential for change and development in nomadic societies sitting at the margins: where nomadic societies interact with sedentary, agricultural groups or most particularly states.¹⁸ It is indeed at the juncture of the bedouin and the townsman that profound change came to seventh-century Arabia, as this Chapter will explore.

Fundamentally, the social separation between the nomad and the sedentary revealed in the above two examples – together with its ideological consequences as evident in stone as in the pen of Thesiger – should not be allowed to conceal the crucial interdependence of the settled and the nomadic Arabian. As has already been suggested, far from being a hangover from truly primordial patterns of survival, the very existence of nomadism presupposes socio-economic development and economic specialisation between different types of producers.¹⁹ The evolution of pastoral nomadism followed the appearance of settled agriculture: Abel was, after all, born after Cain (*Genesis* 4: 1-2). Nomadism is not a route to economic self-sufficiency. Indeed, in the words of the scholar who has perhaps done the most to explain the development and functioning of nomadism through time and space, Anatoly Khazanov, ‘economic instability and non-autarky can be considered as almost indispensable attributes of a pastoral nomadic economy.’²⁰

¹⁶ Lattimore, O., 1962, ‘The Geographical Factor in Mongol History,’ esp. p.252 and p.241: ‘My own opinion is that the relation of history to geography is much more complicated; that steppe society has been modified by both evolution and devolution, and also by shifts between extremely extensive forms of economy and relatively intensive forms. I believe that while the environment strongly conditions a primitive society, it does not always make social evolution impossible.’

¹⁷ *Ibid*, p.244.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.246-247 again at p.254-256.

¹⁹ Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.15-25, esp. 18-19.

²⁰ Khazanov, A. M., 1983/1994, *Nomads and the Outside World*, Cambridge University Press, p.83.

The nomad is simply unable to provide for all of his subsistence needs. His family's diet, and that indeed of his livestock, must be supplemented by the products of agriculture – be they relative necessities like grain-based carbohydrates or luxuries like coffee and sugar – and other essential items like clothing and weaponry must be purchased from settled specialists. This general and predictable dependence may become all the more acute on fairly frequent occasions when poor weather or epizootic diseases ravage the nomad's herds, destroying his only source of income. Records from the nineteenth century, for example, show that Kazakh nomads suffered, on average, the loss of as much as three quarters of their livestock every ten years from recurrent bouts of disease.²¹

Prone to poverty and crisis though the nomadic life may be, it nonetheless offers the only way to exploit desiccated land on the margins of conventional, pre-modern agriculture.²² The emergence of pastoral nomadism in the Arabian peninsula can, indeed, be traced to an increase in aridity evident around 2,500 BC, which made unviable the agricultural practices that appear even in the heart of the peninsula on Neolithic petroglyphs.²³ Nomadic pastoralists are able to provide arable farmers with animal products like meat, milk, butter, hides and wool and can also offer transport capabilities and the chance to fertilise harvested fields if their livestock are permitted to graze them. Both sedentary agriculturalists and nomads, therefore, are able to benefit from each others' productive strategies, even if, as Ibn Khaldūn implied centuries before Khazanov, the nomad will typically be more economically dependent on, and consequently at risk of subjection to, the settled.²⁴

Historically, Arabian nomadism is something of a special case.²⁵ There is more to the relationship between farmers and herders than the interaction of two such schematically drawn groups, for there are in fact at least three groups that can be sketched-out. In addition to the perennially settled farmers of the oases or those found in the Fertile Crescent to the north and in the extreme south of the Arabian Peninsula, where rainfall tends to be in excess of the 100-350 mm experienced

²¹ Ibid, p.73-74.

²² See ibid, p.85-118 for the origins of pastoral nomadism and p.53-84 for an outline of it as a food-producing system. Khazanov points out that areas in which nomadism has tended to be practiced, like the great Mongolian steppe or sub-Saharan Africa, did not really offer any alternative ways of existence to their inhabitants before the twentieth century.

²³ Ibid, p.99

²⁴ *Ibn Khaldūn*, 'The Muqaddimah,' Rosenthal, F., 2015, p.122. Ibn Khaldūn notes that an urban ruler's ability to shut-out neighbouring nomads from 'the necessities they need from his city, which enables their civilisation to subsist' can be a deadly effective tactic in controlling the bedouin.

²⁵ For a good summary of Arabian nomadism as it is known from the ancient evidence, see Hoyland, R. G., 2001, *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, Routledge: London, p.96-102. A good modern anthropological account spanning the Near East and North Africa can be found in Eickelman, D. F., 1981, *The Middle East*, Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., p.63-83.

elsewhere, pastoralists rearing sheep and goats were conventionally to be found. They occupied the marginal zone transitional between land that could be farmed and the high steppe where only camel rearing was possible.

Such nomads, whose predominant interest in caprids did not of course preclude the keeping of some camels, had to stay far closer to reliable sources of water, given that sheep and goats need to be watered at least every four days.²⁶ These groups therefore tended to move within a far more confined space, never seeking to brave the deep desert. Sections of the Rwala who kept sheep and goats, for example, were reported to have never strayed from the Golan, unlike their camel-herding fellow tribesmen who ranged over as much as 500,000 square kilometres in a year.²⁷ The Manāhīl or Duru tribes of Oman, the latter of whom Thesiger encountered on his travels and who were deeply hostile to the notion of an infidel such as him passing through their territory, would be further modern examples of this kind of nomad. He encountered the Duru in the Wadi al Amairi with flocks of sheep, goats, camels and donkeys, but their camels were said by his own Rashidi companions to be unable to cope with the rigours of desert travel.²⁸ It should also be acknowledged, furthermore, that the numbers engaged in this kind of pastoralism could ebb and flow with circumstance. Alois Musil, who travelled among the Rwala bedouin in the north of the Arabian Peninsula at the beginning of the twentieth century, noted that sheep and goat herders tended to become more settled the more stable were the political circumstances, and revert more intensively to nomadism in times of trouble.²⁹

The camel nomads' pure specialisation on camel rearing allowed them to access the inner desert. Camels' capacity to go for weeks without being taken to water and to subsist on mere wisps of desiccated vegetation enabled them to roam huge distances over the sands and the steppe going sometimes for months without contact with oasis or urban dwellers.³⁰ This mode of living, importantly, caused groups of camel nomads to become intimately familiar with other groups – be they nomadic or sedentary – hundreds of miles away from their own home pastures. The Āl 'Azab

²⁶ Khazanov, A. M., 1983/1994, *Nomads*, p.55; Khazanov concludes that sheep and goats can therefore never be moved more than 30 km from trustworthy sources of water (p.98).

²⁷ Lancaster, W., 1981, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, p.9.

²⁸ Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, p.175 for their various types of livestock and p.267 for criticism of their camels. See p.88 for a meeting with the Manāhīl, where Thesiger, when mentioning the various kinds of livestock owned by different tribes, states that he never saw sheep held by the Rashīd or Bayt Kathīr, true tribes of the deep desert, and the tribes that provided his guides across the Yemen and the Empty Quarter.

²⁹ Musil, A., 1928, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*, New York: The American Geographic Society, p.44-45. Musil also correctly distinguishes those who practice caprid herding into bedouin and farmers who had taken to it as a diversification strategy.

³⁰ Cole reports that camels generally drink once every four days in summer, once every ten days in autumn and spring, and as little as once a month in winter (Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.21).

section of the Āl Murrah, for instance, migrated as much as 1,200 miles every year across Arabia.³¹ Impelled by the need to secure access to distant wells and known areas of good grazing, the apparently asocial life of individual bedouin family groups actually had to be lived as a life of interdependent enterprise. It is in this respect that the close relationship between the Rashīd of modern day Oman and Yemen and the Āl bū Falāḥ of what in Thesiger's day was still called the Trucial Coast can be understood. Despite living leagues apart, both groups enjoyed mutual advantages from one another, the Rashīd who travelled with Thesiger disguising their purpose of escorting an infidel through the desert by claiming that they were heading north to fight for the Āl bū Falāḥ.³² The famous generosity of the bedouin probably also has its roots in the need of desert travellers constantly to share resources in order to make life more bearable.³³

Independent in spirit though the bedouin of the deep desert were known to be, they were probably more dependent on oasis and urban dwellers than were herders of goats and sheep. A diet largely of camel's milk and what meat could occasionally be hunted always needed to be supplemented by flour, dates and, in more recent centuries at least, the coffee and tobacco beloved of the campfire.³⁴ Bedouin even needed contact with sedentary producers to provide fodder for their camels beyond seeking to graze their fields. Thesiger records how dried sardines bought from towns on the coast would be stored and fed to the camels when there was no grazing available.³⁵

Determinedly separate from one another though sedentary and nomadic groups may appear to be, they were in fact closely interlinked. The constant, necessary contact between oasis dweller, sheep herder, and camel nomad has been an incontrovertible law of Arabian life up until the twentieth century. It brought various groups living far apart into contact with one another, allowing them to share and exchange material and other resources, even if the degree of economic specialisation on which these relationships depended ultimately necessitated separate lifestyles. The age of Muḥammad was no different from this general rule. Alongside the evidence of the Qur'ān, one can turn to the *Sīrah* to get a better sense of the extent and ways in which the divide between the desert and the oasis structured the world into which the Prophet was born.

³¹ Ibid, p.39.

³² Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, esp. p.114 and p.124.

³³ The bedouin culture of generosity should not be dismissed as a romantic myth. Thesiger's account of crossing the Empty Quarter is replete with examples of this behaviour, perhaps the most telling one being the story of a very poor looking old man received into the camp one night, whom Thesiger was told was ruined by his generosity: '(n)o one ever came to his tents but he killed a camel to feed them' (ibid, p.71). Likewise, for the Āl Murrah, 'the greatest praise they bestow on a person is to say that he is a man who is generous and who kills an animal – whatever he has – for his guests' (Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.66).

³⁴ Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.26-28.

³⁵ Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, p.79 and p.193-194.

The Sīrah, the Bedouin and Muḥammad

As was discussed in Chapter Two, however, the evidence of the *Sīrah* is hardly without its complications. Ibn Hishām’s recension of the biography of Muḥammad is late, exegetical, and interspersed with the tropes of myth and legend to prove the overriding authorial scheme of the reality of Muḥammad’s prophecy. Many of these tropes were invoked to speak to the concerns of wider monotheistic history and the demands placed on the Muslim community by the older and more established faiths Islam saw itself as succeeding.³⁶ Important episodes in the life of Muḥammad were twisted and reworked to suit evolving understandings of the Prophet and his message, or to support one side or the other in later sectarian controversy. A substantial degree of the material that the *Sīrah* transmits, therefore, will only ever be able to be said to be what later generations of Muslims imagined was their history – and what *had* to be in their history – rather than the genuine recollections of the Prophet’s contemporaries.

Yet the generation or more of western scholars who have been raised to read and to deconstruct the *Sīrah* almost solely according to the demands of literary analysis have arguably been at risk of missing as much as they may discover. The *Sīrah* is a vast and heterogenous work, which contains some stories and incidental, background details that do not appear to have a direct bearing on the claims of Muḥammad and Islam. The manipulation and re-working of such elements, over successive generations, for religious and sectarian reasons is unproven, even if the motives behind their presence in the narrative remains satisfactorily to be explained. Much of the fascinating material the *Sīrah* provides on the history of the Yemen in the fifty years before the life of the Prophet (*Sīrah*, p. 25-38) falls into this category, despite the fact that part of it is admittedly used to provide the context of Q.105. Similarly, the account of Yathrib being afflicted by some kind of plague (*Sīrah*, p.413-415), besides giving the biographical tradition an easy way to assert Muḥammad’s special nature by noting that he never caught the fever, offers little in the way of material for sectarian tussle or biblical allusion.

Concentrating on the use of the history of the Yemen as exegetical material for Q.105, or on the plague as nothing but a way to prove divine protection of Muḥammad – as many would be tempted to do – obscures the insights historical reflection on the *Sīrah* could provide. Scholarship on the *Sīrah* seems to be suffused with what could be called a ‘self-denying ordinance’ that prioritises how

³⁶ Rubin, U., 1995, *The Eye of the Beholder: the Life of Muḥammad as viewed by the early Muslims – a textual analysis*, Princeton, NJ: Darwin Press, p.21-185. Rubin surveys five religious themes he unearths in the *Sīrah* – attestation, preparation, revelation, persecution, and salvation – to explore how the Islamic tradition shaped itself through biblical paradigms.

the text works as literature to the loss of thinking about how it could record history. Uri Rubin's attitude to Muḥammad's negotiations with the men of Yathrib at al-ʿAqaba is a prime example of this tendency: 'Our concern here...is not with the facts of the ʿAqaba meetings *per se*, but rather with the story itself.'³⁷ Rubin avoids direct reflection on whether or not the meetings at al-ʿAqaba took place – his phraseology suggests that he accepts their underlying reality yet exculpates him from making so bold a suggestion – to concentrate on the ways in which retellings of the meetings function as literature, speaking to later sectarian concerns. As often in modern Islamicist scholarship, the shadow cast over the discipline by the hyper-critical school can lead to great advances in literary appreciation and in understanding how later Islamic scholars conceived of the origins of their faith, at the risk of silence on perhaps the more daring and important work of identifying early historical information.

As was argued in Chapter One, the sources of the Islamic historical tradition like the *Sīrah* should be recognised as recording matters of fact, rather than matters of meaning. The ways in which successive generations and different sectarian interests manipulated and added material to the basic fact of an event or person should not, in many instances at least, preclude a recognition of the underlying historical nature of the event or person. Further, it is worth remembering that some of the most potent objections to the historicity of the Islamic tradition – the late formulation of the *isnād* tradition and the late adoption of writing – have been convincingly qualified by work that dates the development of the *isnād* to the late seventh century and the use of writing concurrent to oral transmission from the earliest days.³⁸ It is thus harder to sustain the notion that entire narrative frameworks and basic propositions could have been invented and inserted into the tradition centuries after they were supposed to have taken place. Such putative inventions would have been all the more difficult to sustain as they would have had to overcome long-established understandings of history, implied in the existence of 'multiple orthodoxies' throughout the tradition.

To turn to the issue of the relationship between the settled and the nomadic, two further specific arguments can be made in defence of the historical nature of the depiction of the bedouin in the *Sīrah*. First, their presence is part of the background detail of Muḥammad's prophecy, material having only a sideways bearing on the story the *Sīrah* had to tell. It is hard to fathom, therefore,

³⁷ Ibid, p.170.

³⁸ See Chapter One for the dating of the *isnad* tradition and Schoeler, G., 2002/2009, *The Genesis of Literature in Islam: From the Aural to the Read*, Edinburgh University Press for compelling arguments showing the early use of written historical information to act as aides-memoires for performative, oral transmission. As well as numerous references to scholars using writing contained in the tradition, Schoeler points out that the audience of the Qur'ān was familiar with the written recording of information (Q. 2:282).

why indications of the nature of their relationship with oasis dwellers could have been altered for exegetical reasons. Secondly, in the age when the *Sīrah* started to take the form in which it survives, the Arabian tribes were rapidly losing political significance in the Caliphate, a development probably in place by the end of the reign of al-Walīd I in 715 and that culminated in the dominance of armies raised from the Turkish fringes of the Islamic world in the ninth century.³⁹ There consequently would have been little contemporary political pressure for Islamic authorities to invent their earlier significance to the construction of the early Islamic state.

It is indeed striking that the *Sīrah* resonates so strongly with the Qur'ān and with the comparative evidence of other ages with respect to its depiction of the bedouin. It is within the realms of the plausible, therefore, to accept that it can reveal a little more about Muḥammad's relationship with the nomads of the desert, and their place within the early community. Doing so has the virtue of acknowledging the importance of Muḥammad's immediate Arabian context to the story of early Islam, something which has perhaps been marginalised in much recent historiography owing to the emphasis of locating Islam in the broader context of Late Antiquity.⁴⁰ The near horizon can often be a safer destination than faraway shores.

One telling example of the way in which the *Sīrah* captures the divide between nomad and settled comes from a story concerning Abū 'Āmir 'Abdu 'Amr b. Ṣayfī b. al-Nu'mān, a companion of 'Abdullāh b. Ubayy b. Salūl al-'Aufī, the man said to have been set to become the ruler of Medina before the arrival of Muḥammad. Abū 'Āmir eventually leaves Yathrib after falling out with the Prophet – whom he, fascinatingly, accuses of innovation in religion – and heads to Mecca and Ṭā'if before finally dying in Syria after both towns fall to Muḥammad's new state. Abū 'Āmir did not, however, die alone as Muḥammad desired, but was accompanied by two followers who argued about which of them should inherit the deceased's property. The *Sīrah* says that they turned to Syria's ultimate authority to resolve this dispute, the Roman Emperor. Caesar simply pronounces that town-dwellers (*abl al-madar*) should inherit the property of town-dwellers, and bedouin (*abl al-*

³⁹ Kennedy, H., 2002, 'Military Pay and the Economy of the Early Islamic State,' in *Historical Research* 75, p.155-169; p.162 on the importance of the reign of al-Walīd. See Chapter Five for further comments on the later development of the Islamic armies.

⁴⁰ I owe the notion that the Arabian context of early Islam has received less attention than it probably should have done in many recent secondary histories to Dr Philip Booth. Late Antiquity is of course the correct wider context in which to situate early Islam, but it does seem to be the case that this broad context has overshadowed the more local, Arabian context in which the movement was born. Hoyland, R.G., 2015, *In God's Path*, for example, gives 'Arabia and the Arabs' slightly over five and a half pages in an opening chapter of thirty-one entitled 'The Setting.' This diminution of Arabia is probably also an over-reaction to the work of mid-twentieth century Islamicists, like Montgomery Watt, who concentrated on the Arabian context with little regard to the world beyond.

wabar) the property of bedouin (*Sīrah*, p.411-412).⁴¹ The worlds of both types of Arabian are together – one of Abū ‘Āmir’s companions is bedouin, the other a townsman – yet distinct from one another. The almost throwaway, common sense nature of this verdict is striking.

The Qur’ān’s sense that the bedouin are not merely separate from the settled community of the Prophet, but also, as a result of their distance, ignorant and irreligious is present in a casual encounter between a nomad and the advancing soldiers of Muḥammad before the Battle of Badr. The bedouin (*rajulan min al-a‘rāb*) is questioned as to his knowledge of the whereabouts of the Meccans before Muḥammad’s companions demand that he show suitable reverence to the Apostle of God. The nomad says that he was entirely unaware that he was in the presence of God’s messenger and, when Muḥammad is made known to him, he does not simply accept what he is told but asks him for proof of his prophecy (*Sīrah*, p.433). The doubting bedouin, despite wandering in the environs of Medina, is presented as being either foreign to and cut-off from the events of the oasis, or deliberately sarcastic and recalcitrant.

The first and most profound instance of Muḥammad’s contact with the bedouin takes place at the very beginning of his life. Shortly after he was born, his mother Āmina looked for a bedouin wet-nurse to suckle him, a practice that appears to have been both genuinely contemporary to the time of Muḥammad and widespread at least in the Ḥijāz, given that the compensation to be paid to a wet nurse is directly stated in the Qur’ān (Q. 2: 233) and that reference is made to it in the context of relationships that prevent marriage (Q. 4:23).⁴² At first, Āmina struggles to find a wet nurse for the young boy as he is an orphan, with no father to pay the due compensation. Fortunately for Āmina, frustration at being the only woman of her tribe, the Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr, without a suckling prompts Ḥalīma bt. Abī Dhu‘ayb to take Muḥammad (*Sīrah*, p.102-107). The Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr were a small tribe that, at least according to the account given in the *Sīrah*, were then pasturing their sheep and camels on the scanty grazing to be found in the environs of Mecca.⁴³ Muḥammad’s stay with Ḥalīma naturally leads to some minor miracles. Her family’s previously barren flock produce milk in abundance, as does her own breast the very minute she takes Muḥammad into

⁴¹ The terms Ibn Ishāq uses literally mean ‘people of clay’ and ‘people of hair,’ referring to the respective building materials of townsman and nomad. See Creswell, K.A.C, ‘Architecture,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 15th of August 2018.

⁴² For more information on the antiquity and social importance of ‘milk-kinship,’ see Chelhod, J., ‘Raḍā’ or Riḍā’,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), accessed on the 16th of August 2018. See also Parkes, P., 2005, ‘Milk kinship in Islam: substance, structure, history,’ *Social Anthropology* 13 (3), p.307-329.

⁴³ Watt, W. M., ‘Sa‘d b. Bakr,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), accessed on the 16th of August 2018.

her bosom. The *Sīrah* relates that Muḥammad was weaned among the Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr for a period of two years (*Sīrah*, p.105).

A further example of Muḥammad’s at least implied interaction with the bedouin takes place at a fair held in Mecca. Al-Walīd b. al-Mughīra, a Meccan opponent of Muḥammad, receives a delegation of other members of Quraysh, whom he encourages to warn visiting bedouin of the false claims of the Prophet who has arisen among them (*Sīrah*, p.171-173). The Quraysh were certainly right to seek to take pre-emptive action. The *Sīrah* later alleges that Muḥammad sought to use the fairs (*al-aswāq*) to try to spread his message to visiting bedouin:

The apostle offered himself to the tribes of the Arabs (qabā’il al-‘arab) at the fairs whenever opportunity came, summoning them to God and telling them that he was a prophet who has been sent. He used to ask them to believe in him and protect him until God should make clear to them the message with which he had charged his prophet.

(*Sīrah*, p.281-282)⁴⁴

This general statement is followed by a more specific story that is given a separate *isnād*. It tells how Muḥammad made a habit of visiting bedouin encamped in the vicinity of Minā, located a short walk away from Mecca, to try to encourage them to believe in his message (*Sīrah*, p.282). The *Sīrah* then specifically names a number of the tribes who received Muḥammad’s – at this point as yet unsuccessful – evangelism. He is said to have visited the ‘tents’ of the Kinda, the Banū ‘Abdullah clan of the Kalb, and the Banū Ḥanīfa (*Sīrah*, p.283).

The importance of stories such as these lies less in debating or determining the exact factual accuracy of every detail, but more in what their very inclusion in the *Sīrah* implies.⁴⁵ Clearly, for the generations of Muslims who remembered, transmitted, and elaborated upon the stories of the

⁴⁴ The precise nature of the ‘fairs’ mentioned in the *Sīrah* and also cited in the Qur’ān, for instance at Q. 25:8, is a matter of dispute. Given the need of both bedouin and oasis dweller occasionally to meet to exchange the goods produced by their specialised economies, their existence is credible, however one wants to understand the role of Mecca in Arabian trade-networks. See Bianquis, Th., Guichard, P., Raymond, A., Atassi, Sarab, Pascual, J.P., David, J.-C., Gaube, H., Faroqi, Suraiya and Nizami, K.A., ‘Sūk,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), accessed on the 20th August 2018.

⁴⁵ As so often with the texts of the Islamic historical tradition, one is caught between trying to make sense of what is related as history or conforming to the ‘self-denying ordinance’ by concentrating on their exegetical and legitimising scheme. Muḥammad’s suckling among the Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr, for example, resonates with Arabian custom as attested in the Qur’ān, in the Islamic law governing milk-kinship, and in modern anthropological accounts – making the story credible – but also creates the grounds for the justification of Muḥammad’s prophecy. The account concludes by explaining that Muḥammad’s time among the bedouin allowed him to answer in the affirmative when asked whether, like other prophets, he had shepherded a flock. The *Sīrah* seems unconcerned that Muḥammad was surely a little too young – only two – to have been of much use as a shepherd.

life of the Prophet passed down by his immediate companions, his early contact with the bedouin was recognised as significant. The strong probability that there was something more to this recognition than merely intuition or outright though early invention can be deduced by briefly turning once more to the Qur'ān.

From Soothsayers to Prophet

The previous chapter mentioned the ways in which the Qur'ān recalls Muḥammad's opponents trying to blacken his name. They denied that he was a messenger of the divine by instead claiming that his prophetic speech was little more than the rhyming of a dangerous 'sorcerer' (*saḥīr*), a purveyor of 'the fables of the ancients' (*asāṭīr al-'awwālīn*), or that Muḥammad was simply nothing more than a mere poet (*shā'ir*). Another term that appears in the Qur'ān is *kāhin*: soothsayer. Like 'poet' or 'sorcerer,' the Qur'ān is clear that a 'soothsayer' is what Muḥammad is not.

By the grace of your Lord, you are not a soothsayer (kāhin) or a madman (majnūn).

(Q. 52:29)

So I swear by what you can see and by what you cannot see: this is the speech of an honoured messenger (rasūl karīm), not the words of a poet (shā'ir) – how little you believe! – nor the words of a soothsayer (kāhin) – how little you reflect!

(Q. 69:38-42)

Yet, despite the fact that the Qur'ān places 'soothsayer' alongside 'poet' and 'madman,' it is important that these are the only two instances in the Qur'ān where the text seems to be replying to accusations that Muḥammad is a soothsayer. As detailed in Chapter Two, 'poet' and 'sorcerer' occur far more often.

The more numerous references to soothsaying in the *Sīrah* suggest why this might be the case. Fundamentally, soothsayers, much like the occasional appearances of Christians or appeals to holy scripture, turn up in the narrative to help legitimise Muḥammad's claims to divine revelation.⁴⁶ Contrary to the role played by Christian figures, like the Abyssinians who meet and become fascinated with the infant Muḥammad when he is returned to his mother after being weaned (*Sīrah*,

⁴⁶ For an example of the justificatory role of Christian figures beyond the more well-known stories of characters like the monk Baḥīrā, see *Sīrah* p.280-281: a Christian slave taken from Nineveh recognises the manner of Muḥammad's speech to be that of a prophet.

p.107), the soothsayers connect Muḥammad not to the wider world of Late Antiquity, but to the closer yet equally significant – if not more so – horizons of bedouin Arabia.

Much like the *a‘rāb*, the *kāhin* (plural *kubhān*), is a figure largely external to the world of the Arabian town and oasis. In a manner not too far removed from the image of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity, the *kāhin* tends to live apart from a community in the desert.⁴⁷ The *Sīrah*, for instance, relates that the Janb, a tribe of the Yaman, possessed a soothsayer who lived separately from them on the top of a mountain, to where he would retire after descending to share his wisdom with them (*Sīrah*, p.133). This episode is placed shortly after a longer description of the *kubhān*, which places them in the mystical context of *jinn* and *shaytans*: clear evidence of their otherworldly and therefore ‘outsider’ nature (*Sīrah*, p.130-131).⁴⁸

The status of the *kubhān* as figures foreign to the intimate affairs of the settled communities of Arabia made them ideally placed to act as fair and frank arbitrators. This is indeed the pre-eminent social role they are recorded as playing throughout the *Sīrah*. When ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib exposes the well of Zamzam, for example, men of the Quraysh come to him to demand a share in it, which he disputes. They therefore agree to submit to the arbitration of a female soothsayer, a *kāhina*, associated with the Banū Sa‘d Hudhaym, a nomadic tribe wondering in the Syrian uplands (*Sīrah*, p.92).⁴⁹ The *Sīrah* is unfortunately silent on the reasons as to why the fame of this particular *kāhina* had penetrated the Ḥijāz. The fact that it was remembered in the tradition as having done so is powerfully suggestive of the influence such figures could wield, tying, in effect, various groups over vast distances into the same kind of social and religious practices. Owing to the ability of ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib miraculously to find water when the travelling disputants are at risk of dying from thirst in the desert, however, the Quraysh actually relent before they reach the famed *kāhina*. It is interesting to note that resort was not only made to the *kubhān* in matters of such significance. The *Sīrah* also mentions them resolving far more mundane disputes such as those over ownership of camels (*Sīrah*, p.284).

It would be wrong, however, to consider the *kubhān* solely as weird and wonderful dwellers of the desert. Despite the fact that they tended to be found on the edge of oasis and settled communities,

⁴⁷ The literature on the Holy Man in Late Antiquity is of course vast. For his physical, as well as social and ideological, location at the margins of society, see the originally pioneering work of Brown, P., 1971, ‘The Rise and Function of the Holy Man in Late Antiquity,’ in *The Journal of Roman Studies*, Vol. 61, p.80-101, esp. p.83.

⁴⁸ See also Fahd, T., ‘Kāhin,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), accessed on the 20th August 2018. Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs*, p.125 likewise sees the *kubhān* as external, bedouin figures for reasons that will shortly be addressed.

⁴⁹ For the likely location of the B. Sa‘d Hudhaym, see Donner, F.M., 1981, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, p.102-103.

this is not an exclusive rule. The Banū Sahn clan of Quraysh, for instance, are presented as having a *kābina* among their own ranks (*Sīrah*, p.132). The appearance of a *kābina* who was born into a settled community – or at least apparently dwelled within one – is important as it not only highlights that the figure of the *kābin* was something that could operate between and even bridge the world of the settled and the desert – as the other examples of Quraysh seeking to access the judgement of bedouin *kubhān* reveal – but it is also something of a precedent for Muḥammad.

It is something of a precedent because, like the Syrian *kābina* approached by the Quraysh, Muḥammad is originally encouraged to relocate to Yathrib to act as an arbitrator. Despite the fact that the *Sīrah* is at pains to underscore the appeal of Muḥammad's religious message to the men from Yathrib with whom he first came into contact, it is nonetheless clear that he was also seen as a figure able to mediate between the tribes of what the tradition describes as a fractious and unhappy oasis.⁵⁰ Indeed, when Muḥammad first meets men from the tribe of Khazraj at a fair in the environs of Mecca, they describe the enmity that exists between them and the Jews, which often brought both groups to blows (*Sīrah*, p.286-287). Other incidental references in the *Sīrah* to candidates for leadership in Yathrib – like ‘Abdullāh b. Ubayy b. Salūl al-‘Awfī mentioned above – show that the settlement was essentially a courtroom in want of a judge.

The clearest indication of Muḥammad's role as arbitrator can be found in the surest historical evidence to be transmitted by the *Sīrah*: the so-called ‘Constitution of Medina,’ or ‘*Umma* Document.’⁵¹ Almost exceptionally within the field of Islamic studies, there is broad agreement that the *Constitution of Medina* is a genuine early seventh century text.⁵² The language, significantly, is strikingly archaic. Like the Qur’ān, the term ‘believers’ rather than ‘Muslims’ is preferred to describe the community of Muḥammad: *mu’min* or *mu’minūn* appear twenty-eight times in the text whereas reference is made to *muslimūn* on a mere four occasions. The Constitution even confirms what a believer is in terms that resonate perfectly with the Qur’ān: someone who believes in the

⁵⁰ For a reconstruction of the politics of Yathrib faithful to the tradition, see Watt, W. M., 1956, *Muhammad at Medina*, p.151-191. Even though Yathrib is often described in shorthand as ‘an oasis,’ it should be remembered that settlement was actually quite scattered owing to the number of fertile patches of land and wells spread throughout the valley, creating the conditions for different clans to concentrate in different areas and to compete for the best ground.

⁵¹ The ‘Constitution of Medina’ is the conventional translation of the various Arabic names – *dustūr al-madīna*, *ṣaḥīfat al-madīna*, *sunna jāmi‘a* – and ‘*Umma* Document’ appears to have been coined by Donner, see Donner, F.M., 2010, *Muhammad and the Believers*, esp. p.227-232. Ibn Hishām simply introduces it as ‘the document (*kitāb*) of the Prophet of God which he wrote between the *muhājirūn* and the *anṣār*’ in the *Sīrah* (p.341).

⁵² For detailed studies, see Serjeant, R. B., 1964, ‘The “Constitution of Medina”,’ *The Islamic Quarterly* VIII, p.3-16; Serjeant, R. B., 1978, ‘The *Sunnah Jāmi‘ah*, pacts with the Yathrib Jews, and the *tahrīm* of Yathrib: Analysis and Translation of the Documents comprised in the so-called “Constitution of Medina”,’ *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies* XLI, p.1-42. For a further detailed textual study see Lecker, M., 2004, *The “Constitution of Medina”: Muḥammad’s First Legal Document*, The Darwin Press: Princeton, N.J.

one God and in the Day of Judgment (*Sīrah*, p.342).⁵³ No such religious language is used in reference to the *muslimūn*. Indeed, on the one occasion in the text where it may seem that the *muslimūn* are closely identified with the devout emigrant community of Muḥammad, namely in the opening clause (*Sīrah*, p.341), the phrase ‘the believers and Muslims of Quraysh and Yathrib’ (*al-mu’minin wa-l-muslimūn min Quraysh wa-Yathrib*) is probably nothing more than a stylistic parallelism.⁵⁴

Even if one were to accept arguments that the text, as transmitted, is in fact a compilation of a series of pacts made in the 620s, significant chunks of the *Constitution* probably nonetheless date from the immediate aftermath of Muḥammad’s relocation to Yathrib.⁵⁵ The clauses of the document set out the nature of the political and social codes by which the various groups resident in the oasis were to abide, regulating, above all, the payment of blood money and promoting social solidarity between the factions in Yathrib. The very existence of the *Constitution* speaks to a need to regulate and arbitrate. Most importantly, however, the document establishes Muḥammad in a peculiarly important legal position. The *Constitution* states that all of the differences between and within the communities of Yathrib are to ‘be referred to God and to Muḥammad’ (*wa-innakum mabmā ikhtalaftum fībi min shay’in fa-inna maraddahu ilā ’llāh wa-ilā muḥammad ‘alayhi al-salām*) (*Sīrah*, p.342).

It is at least arguable that the office of arbitrator that this clause claims for Muḥammad is parallel to, rather than wholly dependent on, his leadership of a devout following and wider religious campaign. As Robert Serjeant has noted, the *Constitution*’s treatment of Muḥammad is ambiguous. He is both referred to as simply ‘Muḥammad,’ and, eventually, as ‘Muḥammad the Messenger of God.’⁵⁶ One does not necessarily have to follow Serjeant in seeing the *Constitution* as a collection

⁵³ The full phrase in which this qualification occurs translates as, ‘indeed it is not lawful to a believer who stands by what is in this document and believes in God and the last day to help a murderer or to shelter him’ (*wa-innahu lā yaḥillu li-mu’min aqarra bi-mā fi hādhihi l-ṣaḥīfa wa-āmana bi-llāh wa-l-yawmi l-ākhir an yanṣura muḥdithan wa-lā yu’wiyahu*).

⁵⁴ Lecker uses further evidence from the text to support this notion, whilst also arguing that it does not exclude the possibility of believers also being found in Yathrib; see Lecker, M., 2004, *The “Constitution of Medina,”* p.43-45. Lecker somewhat interestingly suggests that the meaning of *muslim*, in this instance at least, may mean ‘someone who makes peace,’ an interpretation that is hardly discordant with the proposition put forward in Chapter Two that the first *muslimūn* were bedouin who had fallen under the sway of Muḥammad’s community – therefore making ‘peace’ with it – but who did not accept his religious message. Lecker, a scholar notable for his general faith in the Islamic historical tradition, does not explore any further implications of what this meaning of *muslim* could reveal about the early Islamic community.

⁵⁵ Lecker sees the *Constitution* as a unity, despite arguing that it has two substantive halves, and dates it to the year after Muḥammad moved to Yathrib; see *ibid* p.182. Serjeant proposes that the *Constitution* in fact comprises eight separate documents, and can therefore be used to help to chart Muḥammad’s career; see esp. Serjeant, R. B., 1964, ‘The “Constitution of Medina,”’ p.12-16.

⁵⁶ Serjeant, R. B., 1964, ‘The “Constitution of Medina,”’ p.10-11.

of as many as eight pacts made in distinct chronological phases to discern a reason and purpose behind this ambiguity. The document's early unwillingness plainly to assert Muḥammad's claims to revelation suggests a politick, temporary downplaying of the true nature of his cause to help the Prophet consolidate his position. Many of those bound by the *Constitution* were no doubt aware of Muḥammad's assertions of divine revelation, but, for other inhabitants of Yathrib, it was perhaps his role as arbitrator that was in the first instance more significant.

Interestingly, the fact that Muḥammad explicitly occupied the same social space as the *kubhān* is all but clearly stated in the tradition. Indeed, despite his presence at Yathrib, the tradition reveals that it took some time for the Prophet's final and exclusive authority to become recognised by the denizens of the oasis, only a faction of whom, it should be remembered, had actually invited him to move there from Mecca (*Sīrah*, p.198-199). In the roll-call of a not inconsiderable number of Medinan *munāfiqūn*, said to have aided the Jews of Yathrib in their eventual opposition to Muḥammad, four men are recorded as having made their enmity to the Prophet plain by refusing to go to him for arbitration, and instead opting to find a *kābin*.

...before his repentance Julās together with Mu'attib, Rāfi', and Bisr used to make false profession of Islam. Some Muslims asked them to go to the apostle to settle a matter in dispute between them, while they wanted to refer it to the kuhhān who acted as arbitrators in the age of ignorance.

(*Sīrah*, p.360)

This telling episode not only shows that it took some time for Muḥammad to consolidate his position in the oasis – evidence that the muted claim to his revelation in the first dozen clauses of the *Constitution* was indeed more than the product of scribal error – but captures quite clearly the way in which Muḥammad had stepped into, and attempted to displace, a familiar Arabian social institution.⁵⁷

The *kābin* was, however, hardly only a worldly social institution and the role of Muḥammad as arbitrator is not the sole, nor even perhaps the most important, feature he and the *kubhān* share. As has already been demonstrated, the *kubhān* are located in the *Sīrah* not only in socially marginal but also in otherworldly and ethereal contexts. They have contact, most notably, with *jinn* and *shaytans* who apparently live amidst the stars (*Sīrah*, p.130-132). The consequent ability of the

⁵⁷ See Lecker, M., 2004, *The "Constitution of Medina,"* p.183-190 for the suggestion that the differing treatment of Muḥammad in the text of the *Constitution* is indeed nothing more than scribal error, as part of a defence of the unity of the text.

kubbān to access the wisdom and insight of a higher plane close to the divine, as a result of this contact, is reflected and expressed in their mode of speech.

As part of the account of the Battle of Mu'ta, dated to 629, the *Sīrah* relates that a *kāhina* connected to the Banū Ghanm warned them of the approach of Muḥammad's army. The warning she gave certainly reads like advice to avoid fighting, to which the Banū Ghanm paid heed, even if the nature of the threat and the consequences of meeting it are not explicitly set out. To communicate this allusive message, she uses the medium of poetry, specifically versification in *saj'*.

*I warn you of a narrow-eyed people,
Who are gazing askance,
And they lead their horses in open order,
And they shed thick blood.*

(undhirukum qawman khuzran,
yanzīrūna shazran
wa-yaqūdūna al-khayla nathran
wa-yuharīqūna daman 'akran.)

(*Sīrah*, p.797)⁵⁸

The short verse uses four simple, concise, parallel phrases connected by a single rhyme scheme. It therefore corresponds exactly to what is expected of the *saj'* metre, which has been identified as the oldest form of poetry in Arabic and that was habitually used for such oracular pronouncements.⁵⁹ The imagery is illusive as well as allusive, helping to give the words precisely the kind of supernatural awe and power generated by their unnatural rhythm and rhyme.

The *kubbān* are not the only numinous figures who employ this mode of speech.⁶⁰ Mystical poetry is likewise the way in which their familiar spirits – the Arabic used is the general term for 'companion,' *ṣāhib* – communicate with them. Al-Ghayṭala, for example, the soothsayer of the Banū Sahm, is visited by her *ṣāhib* one night, who 'chirps' into her ear two short lines one night, and two more another night, which together are later understood to have predicted the defeat of Muḥammad's opponents at the Battle of Badr.

*I know what I know,
A day of slaughter and of slaying*

⁵⁸ The translation is my own. Guillaume makes some odd choices of language in his rendering of the verse that do not concord accurately with the Arabic text. He translates *al-khayla nathran* as 'horses in single file,' but *nathran* comes from the root *n-th-r*, which connotes dispersion and spreading, making 'open order' a suitably militaristic translation.

⁵⁹ See Fahd, T., 'Sadj', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P. (eds.), accessed on the 24th August 2018.

⁶⁰ For an additional example of a *kāhin* speaking in *saj'*, see *Sīrah*, p.133: the soothsayer of the Janb.

...
Death, what is death?
In it, bones are thrown here and there.

(adrī mā adrī,
yawma ‘aqrin wa-naḥri
...
sha‘ūb mā sha‘ūb,
tuṣra‘u fihi ka‘b li-junūb.)

(*Sīrah*, p.132)⁶¹

In this instance, the *saj‘* versification is divided into two separate rhyming couplets. The actual meaning of the couplets is naturally opaque, and the Arabic difficult to the point of baffling. It is thus, once again, typically oracular and mystical. Another variation on the typical *saj‘* structure, but this time involving a longer single verse, spoken by yet another supernatural figure can be found at *Sīrah*, p.91, when an angel comes to ‘Abd al-Muṭṭalib to instruct him to dig the well of Zamzam.

Another voice that employs such a chant-like, rhyming metre using words as allusive as they can occasionally be illusive to the translator, is of course the voice of the Qur’ān. What are probably the earliest *suwar* – as described in the previous chapter, the shortest, now the last in the text as edited and approved by the seventh-century process of redaction and transmission – are the best examples.

Say, I seek refuge with the Lord of people, the Controller of people, the God of people, against the evil of the slinking whisperer – who whispers into the hearts of people – whether they be jinn or people.

(qul a‘ūdhu bi-rabbi ‘l-nāsi,
maliki ‘l-nāsi,
ilāhi ‘l-nāsi,
min sharri ‘l-waswāsi al-khannāsi,
allādhī yuwaswisu fī ṣudūri ‘l-nāsi,
min al-jinnati wa ‘l-nāsi.)

(Q. 114:1-6)⁶²

Sūrat al-ikblāṣ is another good example.

⁶¹ The translation of the second couplet is notoriously difficult. See Guillaume, A., 1955, *The Life of Muhammad*, p.92 footnote 1 for the by-no-means certain justification of his rendering.

⁶² The individual six *āyāt*, and the four of the following *sūra*, have been placed on different lines in order to make the *saj‘* structure more apparent.

Say, 'He is God the One, God the eternal. He fathered no one nor was he fathered. No one is comparable to him.

(qul huwa 'llāhu aḥadun,
allāhu 'l-ṣamadu,
lam yalid wa-lam yūlad
wa-lam yakun lahu kufuwan aḥadun.)

(Q. 112: 1-4)

The words of Muḥammad's revelation, therefore, as recorded in the Qur'ān, are structurally no different from the utterances of the *kubhān*. Despite the fact that Muḥammad and the *kubhān* – from what can at least be gathered from the surviving sources – to some degree addressed themselves to different subjects (the *kubhān* seem to say nothing on the nature of God), their speech nonetheless shared the same function of transmitting messages from supernatural powers to those around them. Muḥammad consequently resembled the *kubhān* in ways more profound than in his role as social arbitrator. This resemblance certainly helps to 'crack' the 'nut' of explaining why Muḥammad was accepted as a vessel of revelation by some of his contemporaries.⁶³ As the story of the *kāhin* of the Janb shows, Mount Ḥirā' was not the only mountain frequented by Arabian Holy Men in Late Antiquity.

Gaining an understanding of the ways in which the Prophet's career and self-presentation at first had far more in common with that of a *kāhin* than may be immediately apparent even from the Qur'ān is important for two reasons. First, it helps to explain the ways in which Muḥammad legitimised his claims, in addition to the techniques explored in Chapter 2, which explicitly wrote him into traditions of monotheism clearly well known to his original audience. Secondly, and more pertinently to explaining the growth of the state in Yathrib, it helps to explain his connection to the world of the bedouin, the *a'rāb*.

As has been set out in great and enlightening detail by Peter Webb, the Qur'ānic adjective '*arabī*' does not refer to a people, but to the nature of the medium of the revelation of Muḥammad: pure or 'clarion' speech.⁶⁴ It was only over the course of the century after the death of the Prophet and

⁶³ See Robinson, C., 1999, 'Prophecy and holy men in early Islam,' in Howard-Johnston, J., and Hayward, P.A., (eds.), *The Cult of Saints in Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages: Essays on the Contribution of Peter Brown*, Oxford University Press, p.241-262, p.243 for the terminology ('Precisely why Qurashi tribesmen of north-western Arabia came to believe that an otherwise undistinguished kinsman named Muhammad should serve as the locus of the supernatural remains unclear...the "problem of Muhammad"...is a nut that Islamicists have so far been unable to crack.'). Robinson emphasises the uniqueness of Muḥammad – largely seen as self-evident in the achievements of the community he founded – at the cost of neglecting possible comparisons with the Holy Man.

⁶⁴ Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs*, esp. p.110-124. The word '*arabī*' appears eleven times in the text of the Qur'ān, in all instances in a manner closely connected to speech, the nature of God's judgement or as an adjective

in the wake of the sudden success of the conquests led by the community he founded that the adjective started to apply to people faithful to the revelation of the Qur’ān and latterly to their ancestors.⁶⁵ Thus were the medieval Muslim ‘Arabs’ born. Yet, convincing though this case may be, the homophony between *‘arabī* and *a‘rāb* – bedouin – is surely a little more than coincidental. Webb tentatively suggests how this may be so: ‘(w)e could propose that the Qur’an’s *‘arabī* may be a development from the long Semitic-language tradition of referring to Bedouin as *a‘rāb* on the hypothesis that Qur’anic *‘arabī*’s novel meaning of “clarity” derived from notions of ritual practice, divination and the respected clarion *koine* of pre-Islamic *kubhān* desert soothsayers.⁶⁶ Considering the above closer investigation of the striking similarities between Muḥammad and the *kubhān*, this notion is all the more convincing. Oasis dweller and Prophet of an allegedly restored monotheism though he may have been, the linguistic mode of the Qur’ān and Muḥammad’s career nonetheless make him a figure with striking connections to the desert, the world of the *a‘rāb*.⁶⁷

This connection has thought-provoking ramifications for the interpretation of the quote with which this chapter opened: Muḥammad proclaiming to his companions, ‘I am the most Arab of you all. I am of Quraysh, and I was suckled among the Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr.’ In the first instance, one is minded to read it as nothing more than a late literary device seeking to emphasise the roots and pedigree of the Prophet. This interpretation can become more sophisticated bearing in mind Webb’s conclusions on the literary ethnogenesis of the ‘Arabs.’ From his investigation, the use of ‘Arab’ as an ethnonym to describe the seventh-century conquerors of the Near East was a long process that took place only *after* the creation of the Islamic state. The originally heterogenous bands of Arabians who joined the conquests organised from Medina had no sense of themselves as ethnically ‘Arab.’ It was rather their descendants who, faced with the influx of non-Arabians into Islam, needed to cast onto their forebears a common origin and a claim to superiority separate from their adherence to the new faith in order to try to maintain their privileged position in a rapidly socially evolving society.⁶⁸ Seen in this context, Muḥammad’s claim to be the ‘most Arab’

additional to and qualifying another adjective used to describe notions of clarity, like *mubīn*. It never describes a social group. *‘Arabī* is, therefore, an idiom of transcendence, proof of divine revelation, ‘a language which “contains no crookedness” (*‘iwaj*)’ (p.118).

⁶⁵ Ibid, p.126ff.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.125.

⁶⁷ For Webb, notably, the importance of the connection between the Qur’ān and the pre-Islamic clairvoyant statements of the *kubhān* lies in the grounds it gave to later generations fully to embrace the bedouin as the foundational element of the Muslim community, rather than to continue to see them as backward ‘outsiders.’ Investigating how his theory may be relevant to early Islamic state-building is beyond his study.

⁶⁸ See references above, and also ibid p.155; p.177-224 for the invention of supporting genealogies, and p.270-278 for an illustration of how intellectual interest in discussing the ‘Arabs’ and in proving one’s ‘Arab’ identity declined after Arabs were removed from the *dīwān al-‘aṭā* in 833 and the Arabian Peninsula fell into a state of lawlessness beyond the control of the Caliphal government.

(*a‘rabukum*) of those around him comes across as a projection of this freshly conceived identity into the past, underscoring ethnic Arabs’ right to a privileged political and social position as they are bound by blood to the Prophet.

Considering the early, Qur’ānic connotations of *‘arabi*, however, the statement may even have at its origin a garbled recollection of a claim to Muḥammad’s possession of a peculiarly eloquent mode of speech. The translation would therefore be not ‘I am the most Arab of you all,’ but, ‘I am more eloquent than you.’ When read alongside the accompanying assertions of membership of Quraysh and, more importantly, milk-kinship with the Banū Sa‘d b. Bakr, another interpretation of this fascinating assertion becomes possible. It is perhaps more than an eighth-century invention to support fairly new and politically significant conceptions of identity, but a reflection of the importance of the bedouin to the construction of the early Islamic state, and evidence that this importance had been well recognised in the traditions of the early Islamic community.

This proposal has consequences for the philological understanding of both *‘arab* and *a‘rāb*. Thus far, the precise etymological distinction between the two terms has not been highlighted. They are, however, different. As has been well acknowledged, *a‘rāb* is a term of great antiquity and refers to bedouin – strictly defined as dwelling in the deserts of the Arabian Peninsula and nomadic – whereas the *‘arab* are Arabs as has been conventionally understood in history: namely the masters of the Islamic Empire, speakers of the Arabic language wherever they may be found, and their descendants. *A‘rāb* is not the correct plural form of *‘arab*, as *‘arab* is itself already plural, one Arab in Arabic being *‘arabi*.

The two terms, however, were elided into one another in history. According to Webb, this process took place over the course of the ninth to the eleventh centuries. In the *Muruj al-dhabab* of al-Mas‘ūdī, for example, which was composed between 943 and 944, it is the *‘arab* and not the *a‘rāb* who are described as the ‘quintessential people of the desert steppe,’ a denomination applicable surely only to the *a‘rāb* in previous ages. In the introduction to the *Tabdhīb al-luġha* of al-Azharī, moreover, which was compiled in the middle of the tenth century, al-Azharī recounts his captivity amongst the Hawāzin, whom he terms not *a‘rāb*, but *‘arab*. Like other philologists active at the same time, al-Azharī not only neglects the earlier distinction between the two terms, but alleges that the bedouin amongst whom he was forced to live had a unique purity and power of speech.

By the next century, Islamic etymologists had even accepted the false morphology of *a'rab* as a plural form of *'arab*, as evinced in the *Adab al-khawāṣṣ* of al-Wazīr al-Maghribī.⁶⁹

There is good reason to believe, however, that this elision took place far earlier. As has already been seen, the terms *a'rab* and *'arab* are used ambiguously and interchangeably in the *Sīrah*, a text around a century and a half older than the *Murrij al-dhabab*. In the tale of the doubting bedouin (*Sīrah*, p.433), for instance, Muḥammad's Doubting Thomas is called 'a man from the *a'rab*' (*rajulan min al-a'rab*) whereas, elsewhere, the term *'arab* is used for the desert tribes (as at *Sīrah* p.281-282, where Muḥammad approaches the 'tribes of the Arabs' – *qabā'il al-'arab* – for support). Both *a'rab* and *'arab* are presented as desert dwelling, presumably nomadic, and external to the primordial community of Muḥammad. It is evident, therefore, that Islamic writers were far more ambivalent about distinguishing between themselves as *'arab* and the bedouin of the desert as *a'rab* far earlier than the middle 'Abbāsīd centuries.⁷⁰ This strongly suggests that the later Islamic community's self-identification with the bedouin had a more ancient pedigree than has recently been proposed, perhaps hinting at a recognition of the important role bedouin groups played in the creation of the Islamic state, rather than being solely an example of early medieval 'orientalism.'⁷¹

Bedouin Power

The question remains as to why Muḥammad, who, as Chapter Two discussed, was principally concerned with the eschaton and with the leadership of a pious group of followers, was interested in co-opting the bedouin, in some way, shape or form, into his movement. Certain suggestive passages in the *Sīrah* seem to have the answer. As the prophet tours the fairs around Mecca seeking to ingratiate himself with the bedouin, he comes across the tents of the Banū 'Āmir b. Ṣa'ṣa'a. One member of the tribe, Bayḥara b. Firās, realises what uniting the charisma of Muḥammad with the menfolk of his tribe could achieve: 'By God, if I could take this man from Quraysh, I could consume the Arabs with him' (*Sīrah*, p.283). Similarly, the Devil himself appears to an assembly of elders of Quraysh shortly before Muḥammad moves to Yathrib to give them a warning that reflects Bayḥara b. Firās's ambitions.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p.321-332.

⁷⁰ There are a number of other telling examples. At *Sīrah*, p.325, for example, any given bedouin tribe is referred to as *hayy min al-'arab* and, at *Sīrah*, p.435, a bedouin elder is called *shaykh min al-'arab*. Interestingly, what has been identified as the later link Islamic scholars made between the bedouin and excellence of speech may even be suggested soon afterwards at *Sīrah*, p.330, where *shi'righinā al-'arab* ('singing in the Arab fashion') is used to describe the poetry of a jinn.

⁷¹ See Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs*, p.358-359 for the case that the way in which 'Abbāsīd-era scholars portrayed the bedouin amounted to something conforming to Edward Said's notion of 'Orientalism.'

His fine speech and beautiful diction and the compelling force of his message were such that if he settled with some bedouin tribe he would win them over so that they would follow him and come and attack them (Quraysh) in their land and rob them of their position and authority...

(*Sirah*, p.325)

Elaborate and fantastical though the Devil's appearance to the Quraysh in the form of an old *shaykh* from the hills may be, it nonetheless speaks to a more mundane truth. In however mythical a manner the tradition chose to record it, it is clear that it was nonetheless aware that bedouin manpower, when controlled by the Prophet, had enormous potential. It could give the leaders of a small pious sect the means to become the masters of Arabia.

Bringing the Bedouin into the state

The role played by bedouin manpower in projecting the power of Muḥammad's movement in Yathrib across Arabia and beyond has not, of course, been unrecognised. It is the verdict of the *New Cambridge Medieval History*, for example, that the success of the conquests spearheaded by the community after the Prophet's death was fundamentally rooted in 'nomad power.'⁷² In most cases, this 'nomad power' is seen as having been annexed by and to Muḥammad only after his eventual triumph over Quraysh. For Howard-Johnston, to give an example of a relatively fresh defence of this case, the spread of Muḥammad's power over Arabia was the result of two factors above all. First, the intrinsic 'force' of his message, and secondly 'the platform provided by Mecca's regional hegemony,' which allowed Muḥammad to co-opt a bedouin coalition already amenable to, and accustomed with, direction from a sedentary elite.⁷³ Donner's earlier detailed study likewise supported the notion that the bedouin played an important role in Muḥammad's community only after 628 and the Treaty of Ḥudaybiya.⁷⁴

Other discussions of the birth of the early state tend either to assume or even arguably to sidestep the question of the integration of the bedouin. Hoyland's readable recent synthesis of early Islamic history actually emphasises the greater significance of Muḥammad's control over sedentary oasis dwellers – originally just Yathrib, Mecca, and al-Ṭā'if – assuming that this also naturally meant the

⁷² Hillenbrand, C., 2005, 'Muhammad and the Rise of Islam,' p.325. This comment comes after a brief discussion on the shifting balance of power in the Near East after the Last Great War of Antiquity, in which Hillenbrand interestingly asserts rather than proves that power had structurally shifted to the 'nomads' and away from the sedentary powers.

⁷³ Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.448.

⁷⁴ Donner, F.M., 1981, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, p.62, p.62-75 for a broader synthesis of Muḥammad's consolidation of power and interaction with the bedouin.

adherence of the oasis peoples' 'allied tribes'.⁷⁵ Sarris' treatment of the early years of the Islamic state in his admittedly wide-ranging yet influential textbook on Late Antiquity mentions the military potency of 'bedouin mobility' to the conquests, but does not explore the recruitment of the nomads in any depth.⁷⁶ Kennedy comes closest to arguing that nomad groups played a significant role in the life of the Islamic state from its earliest days, but offers few details and does not dwell on the mechanics of their recruitment. He also argues that their acceptance of Muḥammad as a leader went hand-in-hand with an acceptance of Islam, a proposition that is by no means certain, as will be discussed below.⁷⁷

A number of challenges can be raised to the apparently generally accepted notion that Muḥammad recruited the bedouin relatively late in his career and as a result of hijacking already existing arrangements made by Quraysh. First, these arguments tend to depend on certain answers to the much-vexed question of the extent, nature, and significance of 'Meccan trade.' Following what could be called the traditional Orientalist approach, Quraysh are thought to have forged alliances with bedouin tribes the length of Arabia in order to enable the safe passage of their trading caravans across the desert, the caravans invariably transporting high-status, expensive, luxury goods. This trade was allegedly considerable in both quantity as well as quality, and the success of Quraysh in corralling the bedouin to protect it evidence of the uniquely influential 'Meccan statecraft' that conditioned social and political relationships across the peninsula at the time at which Muḥammad was born.⁷⁸

One does not necessarily have to accept all of Crone's earthshattering ripostes to this idea in order to recognise that this maximal and trans-regional understanding of Meccan trade as a politically pivotal force in Arabian affairs is deeply suspect. Indeed, it is telling in the first instance just how little evidence serious scholars well-versed in the Islamic tradition have been able to muster to support quite sweeping statements on the trade's nature and importance. Donner, for example, has written of a 'tremendous burst of economic activity in Mecca,' a 'thriving' and 'flourishing' trade organised by men who 'had developed from mere merchants into true financiers.'⁷⁹ Yet no

⁷⁵ Hoyland, R.G., 2015, *In God's Path*, p.37. Hoyland also wisely questions the conventional assumption that all of the Arabian Peninsula accepted the sovereignty of Muḥammad after 630, the so-called 'Year of Deputies' (p.38-39).

⁷⁶ Sarris, P., 2011, *Empires of Faith*, p.273.

⁷⁷ Kennedy, H., 1986, *The Prophet and the Age*, p.35, p.38, and p.39 for a recognition that Muḥammad attempted to recruit nomadic groups to his cause shortly after his arrival in Yathrib; p.41 for the notion that loyalty to Muḥammad presupposed acceptance of Islam.

⁷⁸ Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.471.

⁷⁹ Donner, F.M., 1981, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, p.51-52.

primary evidence to buttress these contentions is cited, not least because Donner fairly admits that the whole business of Meccan trade is ‘obscure.’

This is to say the least. As Crone has demonstrated, what traditions there are concerning Meccan trade not only do not give credence to a high-level, premium trade in luxury goods, but contain so many contradictions that it is unlikely any of the stories transmitted allude to anything approaching the historical truth.⁸⁰ Challenges far simpler than a detailed appreciation of the ambiguous and absent nature of the traditional evidence for the trade can be made, moreover. In the *Sīrah*, for instance, Muḥammad interdicts only three Quraysh caravans, apparently all coming from the same location, Syria. Would this really have been enough to break an oligarchy whose commercial interests allegedly stretched so widely? After the unification of Mecca with Muḥammad’s Medina and during the first decades of the Caliphate, furthermore, why is there no echo in the sources of the trade intensifying, as Mecca would surely have been able to exert a monopoly power over the conquered lands?⁸¹ Finally, sources from the wider late antique world that are far less contestable than those of the later Islamic tradition do not support the conventional Orientalist image. Lucrative, trans-regional trade in the Near East was maritime. The caravan trade in spices and luxuries had died centuries before Muḥammad.⁸²

Dead though the spice caravan trade may have been, there are at least two interesting possibilities for the nature of Meccan trade given that its mention in the sources – occasional and scanty though they may be – makes it unwise to dismiss it as entirely mythical. Crone’s critiques of the notion have lately been read as no longer possessing the strength they once did given her more recent comments on the possibility that the trade may have been one in leather.⁸³ Crone certainly modifies her position by suggesting that an upsurge in the leather trade precipitated by the demand of the Roman army solves a number of the questions associated with Meccan trade. Leather is also mentioned in the early Islamic sources as having been traded by Quraysh.

Problems nonetheless remain. Despite the plausibility of the notion that the Roman army’s demand for leather goods could extend beyond the immediate frontier, Crone does not answer the unasked question of production. Could inner Arabia really have produced a viable surplus?

⁸⁰ Crone, P., 1987, *Meccan Trade*, esp. p.12-108 for the main argument followed by an item-by-item investigation of alleged trade goods; p.203-250 for one of her magnificent philippics on the Islamic historical tradition.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.165 for the first point, p.10-11 for the second.

⁸² *Ibid*, p.10-50.

⁸³ Crone, P., 2007, ‘Quraysh and the Roman army: Making sense of the Meccan leather trade,’ *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 70, 1, p.63-88. See Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.451-452 and Bowersock, G. W., 2017, *The Crucible of Islam*, p.51-53 for its use to undermine her 1987 study.

Further, the reconstruction of Quraysh as primarily dealers in leather and secondly as opportunistic traders selling a variety of goods along the southern tip of the Roman frontier is structurally different from the notion that the Quraysh dominated caravan routes across Arabia. It would not have necessitated alliances with the menagerie of bedouin tribes previously supposed. Finally, a number of the pertinent questions Crone asked in 1987 retain their relevance. Why did the lucrative leather trade disappear in the wake of the seventh century conquests, rather than continue to provide for the needs of the new Islamic armies? That said, Crone is probably right that some of Muḥammad's contemporaries traded with the Roman provinces to the north, but this more specialised and minimal reconstruction of Meccan trade cannot sustain the burden of crucial historical importance placed upon the traditional Orientalist image.

The second possibility for the nature of Meccan trade that potentially approaches more conventional understandings of its importance is based on study of Arabia's mineral wealth. The peninsula is undoubtedly blessed with generous deposits of precious metal. Modern exploration has identified around 800 occurrences of gold, with many estimated to hold hundreds of kilograms of ore with gold content per ton far higher than the world average.⁸⁴ Contrary to previous archaeological research that seemed to show that, before modern mining, historical exploitation of this wealth was limited to the Bronze Age – the famed mines of King Solomon – and the 'Abbāsid Caliphate, it is apparent that the age of the Prophet Muḥammad witnessed renewed mining activity.⁸⁵ It is plausible, therefore, that the large amounts of cash cited in the sources as being held by seventh-century Ḥijāzīs came from these mines. Transporting ore to the north would have been lucrative and perhaps was the source of the trading activity and consequent regional prominence of the Quraysh, of whom Muḥammad and his Meccan followers remained a part even after they left for Yathrib. Indeed, accepting the possibility that Qurayshīs like Muḥammad were influential beyond Mecca because of trading activity also helps to explain the curious marginalisation of those who welcomed the Prophet to Yathrib – the *anṢār* – by Meccans in the early days of the community. Further, the potential importance of mineral wealth to the foundation of the state in Yathrib is perhaps glimpsed in the targets of some the Prophet's first raids, as will soon be seen. Control of mining activity in the Ḥijāz would certainly have aided the Prophet's ability to attract and reward followers.

⁸⁴ Heck, G. W., 1999, 'Gold Mining in Arabia and the Rise of the Islamic State,' in *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 42.3, p.364-395, esp. p.364-367 for the findings of modern exploration.

⁸⁵ *Ibid*, p.381-385.

Yet one does not have to dismiss or debate the notion of Meccan trade to undermine the idea that it was only late in his career and as a result of the defeat of Quraysh that Muḥammad sought and was able to co-opt the bedouin.⁸⁶ Indeed, a close reading of the traditions associated with Muḥammad's career in Medina as preserved in the *Sīrah* reveals that bringing surrounding nomadic tribes under his influence and direction was crucial to the early state's development and eventual success. The argument with which this chapter opened, namely the diachronic and fundamental importance to Arabian life of the interdependence between the nomad and the oasis farmer, indicates the essential reason why it was only from Medina that Muḥammad was able to project his influence across the deserts of the Ḥijāz.

Unlike the barren environs of Mecca, the oases of Yathrib were both expansive and productive. The area possesses a high water table – meaning that a number of wells could relatively easily be dug – and a temporary lake would appear in the centre of the Yathrib area after heavy rain. Yathrib is located at the junction of two tributaries of the Wadi Ḥamḍ, meaning that the area can benefit from rain even when it is not immediately local. Date palms, cereals and, in more recent times, fruits like oranges, lemons, pomegranates and bananas can be cultivated in its fertile soil.⁸⁷ Throwaway, everyday references to the fruitful nature of Medina are to be found in the tradition. In the manoeuvres preceding the Battle of Badr, for example, Abū Sufyān was able to identify that the riders who had earlier stopped at a well he was reconnoitring were Muḥammad's scouts because the dung of their camels contained date stones, 'the fodder of Yathrib' (*Sīrah*, p.437). Abū Sufyān again mentions that camels are fed on dates in Medina shortly before Muḥammad occupies Mecca (*Sīrah*, p.807).

Tellingly, a poem attributed to al-Ḥārith b. Hishām b. al-Mughīra and associated with Badr indeed refers to Yathrib as 'palmy Medina' (*Sīrah*, p.519). The Jewish Banū 'l-Naḍīr, moreover, were driven out of their oasis home when the Prophet ordered their palm groves to be felled, presupposing that their livelihoods were based on the intensive, specialised and presumably profitable production of dates (*Sīrah*, p.653). When Abū Sufyān tried to raid Yathrib in revenge for Badr shortly after the battle, his party reached an outlying area of the oasis called al-'Urayd, where they burned some palm trees and murdered two men working in the fields (*Sīrah*, p.543).

⁸⁶ One is also prompted to ask why, if the web of alliances forged by the Quraysh were so vast and well-established, the death of Muḥammad was followed by the widespread rejection by the tribes of continued loyalty to his state and successor rather than continued adherence to apparently established conventions.

⁸⁷ Watt, W.M., 'al-Madīna,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 30th August 2018. It is perhaps telling of the differences between Mecca and Medina that no well in the latter was seen as exceptional and precious enough to attract the kind of interest and traditions as did the well of Zamzam in the former.

Overall, the tradition gives Medina a plentiful number of agricultural references. These kinds of references are never ascribed to Mecca, or elsewhere.

Maps of Arabia produced by British Naval Intelligence during the first half of the twentieth century show why this is so. On a map depicting the distribution and various types of agriculture practiced in Arabia before the peninsula was transformed by oil drilling, Medina and its hinterland represent the largest area of oasis cultivation in the Ḥijāz, excluding the coastal lands of the Ṭihāmah.⁸⁸ The extent of cultivation around other Ḥijāzi oases like Khaybar, al-‘Ulā and Ṭabūk are all far smaller. The relatively fertile nature of the lands around Medina are confirmed in the account of Colonel Lawrence, who travelled in the city’s vicinity during the winter of 1916, the time of year meaning he saw the desert at its most verdant. His recollection of this part of his great adventure is peppered with references to the small villages of the Wadi Safrā, where terraced agriculture was practiced, and the similar hamlets of the Wadi Yanbu‘.⁸⁹ Medina and its surrounds possessed enough water, food, and pasturage to sustain the concentration of tribesmen massing for the war against the Turks. When the Arab army set out to move north to al-Wajh, however, Lawrence feared that some of Fayṣal’s men would die of thirst before they got there, so barren and waterless were the lands north of Medina.⁹⁰

An ability to access the water, agricultural products, and grazing of Yathrib, therefore, was probably of prime importance to the nomadic tribes of the Ḥijāz and possibly of further afield. For the tribes of the desert, in consequence, accepting the authority of Muḥammad was not only a response to direct and immediate coercion – and far less a matter of opening their hearts to belief in his message, as the Qur’ān says (Q. 49:14) – but also a recognition that they simply could not afford to be cut-off from exchange opportunities in the oasis. They needed its cereals, dates, and presumably also crafts. It is likely that Muḥammad and the men around him were sensitive to this dependency, knowing that they could exploit it to bind more fighting men to their community.

⁸⁸ Great Britain, Naval Intelligence Division, 1946, *Western Arabia and the Red Sea*, London: Naval Intelligence Division, p.476. See also p.11-57 for a good survey of the geology and physical geography of the Arabian Peninsula as an entirety.

⁸⁹ Lawrence, Col. T.E., 1926/2000, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, p.88-89; p.129.

⁹⁰ *Ibid*, p.147; the problem of sustaining the army in such territory was of course exacerbated by its growing size. It is also relevant to note that, in the second half of the twentieth century, the high water table and fertile soil of Medina enabled the Sa‘ūdī authorities to increase the amount of land under cultivation substantially. In 1965, for example, there were 4,482 ha in Medina given over to productive agriculture, fed, *inter alia*, by 33 artesian wells. Mecca, including Jidda, by contrast, possessed a mere three artesian wells and far less land under cultivation. See Stevens, J.H., 1972, ‘Oasis Agriculture in the Central and Eastern Arabian Peninsula,’ *Geography* Vol. 47:4, p.321-326, table on p.322.

It should perhaps be unsurprising, then, that when the Prophet starts launching raids from his new base, which are ostensibly aimed at Quraysh, he nonetheless seems content merely to subdue and force into alliance the bedouin tribes of the Ḥijāz. The very first raid from Medina, for example, was launched towards al-Abwā' – a location almost equidistant between the prophet's new city and the one he had left – against an unspecified Qurashī interest.⁹¹ No fighting is recorded as having occurred, but the chief of the Banū Ḍamra, a section of the nomadic Kināna, is brought to heel and comes to acknowledge the authority of Muḥammad (*Sīrah*, p.415-416).⁹²

Another instance of this tendency is the raid on al-'Ushayra. Muḥammad again supposedly heads out against Quraysh, but, from what actually is said to have happened, one is forced to question whether looking for a fight with the Meccans was really his objective. Rather than heading off in the direction of Mecca, he embarks upon a circuitous tour of what seems to be the immediate environs of Yathrib, given that his manoeuvres come to an end at al-'Ushayra, in the vicinity of Yanbu', the port associated with Medina (*Sīrah*, p.421).⁹³ There, he forges an alliance with the Banū Mudlij – another section of Kināna – and reaffirms his friendship with the Banū Ḍamra.

The next raid recorded is said to have been led by Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ. It is a small affair, comprising of a raiding party of a mere eight men. It is also apparently pointless, given that they reach a destination called al-Kharrār, a place somewhere in the Ḥijāz, do not seem to do any fighting, and do not seem to meet any bedouin (*Sīrah*, p.422-423). The lack of information and activity aside, however, this minor demonstration can nonetheless be seen as part of a pattern of Muḥammad dispatching small war bands from Medina to intimidate and overawe the local nomadic tribes.

This pattern resumes after the Battle of Badr. Rather than press his advantage against Quraysh, Muḥammad rests for a week in Yathrib and then mounts an operation against the Banū Sulaym, a nomadic tribe recorded as having lived in the basalt desert between Mecca and Medina and, interestingly, reputed to have controlled a number of mines in the area.⁹⁴ His force camps in the

⁹¹ Watt, W.M., 'al-Abwā', in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 30th August 2018. The site is closer to Medina than to Mecca.

⁹² Watt, W. M., 'Kināna,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 30th August 2018 for the Banū Ḍamra.

⁹³ The waypoints that Ibn Ishāq records do not seem to have been important, or at least latterly well known, locations, given that they are not recorded in the *Encyclopaedia of Islam*.

⁹⁴ Lecker, M., 'Sulaym,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 31th August 2018. Heck, G.W., 1999, 'Gold Mining in Arabia,' p.373 for the involvement of Banū Sulaym in mining.

desert for three nights but, as with the raid of Sa‘d b. Abī Waqqāṣ, does not do any fighting or, in this case, actually succeed in gaining the submission of the Banū Sulaym (*Sīrah*, p.540).

Likewise, in the adventure to Dhū Amarr, which follows shortly after the raid on the Banū Sulaym, no fighting is done and no submission achieved (*Sīrah*, p.544). The destination is, however, interesting. Dhū Amarr is in the Najd, and the objective of the raid was to corral Ghatafān, or probably at least a section of Ghatafān owing to the coalition’s reputed size.⁹⁵ Striking out to the Najd and to members of a nomadic grouping beyond the more local Kināna is not only suggestive of the growing ambitions of Muḥammad’s nascent state, benefitting no doubt from the prestige won on the field at Badr, but also of the success of Muḥammad’s strategy to win-over the bedouin. He had gained the support of local groups, whose addition to his sphere of influence could protect Yathrib whilst he was away, and whose men could help to enable raids further afield.

Raiding again extends into Najd after the Battle of Uḥud, for which both Muḥammad and the Meccans call upon their allies from the sections of the nomadic Kināna (*Sīrah*, p.556). In the raid of Dhāt al-Riqā‘, Muḥammad targets the Ghatafān sections of Banū Muḥārib and Banū Tha‘laba (*Sīrah*, p.661-662). The raid does not go as desired – a large group of Ghatafān block Muḥammad’s progress but both sides back down from actually crossing swords – but Muḥammad again raids the Najd after returning from this unsuccessful venture shortly thereafter (*Sīrah*, p.668).

The often sparse accounts of the above, largely apparently inconclusive raids launched from Yathrib can lead to the impression that, even though some nomadic groups were brought under the influence of Medina, the Prophet’s success in coercing the bedouin into his project was actually quite partial. What the *Sīrah* reveals about the composition of the army with which Muḥammad eventually occupied Mecca, however, suggests the opposite. According to an account ultimately attributed to ‘Abdullāh b. ‘Abbās, Muḥammad enters Mecca with a force of ten thousand men. Alongside all of the emigrants from Mecca who accompanied Muḥammad in his move to Yathrib and all of the men of Medina who first welcomed the Prophet themselves, the only groups for whom numbers are given are the nomadic tribes. Sulaym are said to have numbered either seven hundred or one thousand and Muzayna one thousand.⁹⁶ Other tribes are said to have contributed similarly considerable numbers (*Sīrah*, p.810; 814-815).

⁹⁵ Fück, J.W., ‘Ghatafān,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 31th August 2018.

⁹⁶ The Muzayna were a nomadic tribe found in the immediate vicinity of Medina; see Donner, F.M., ‘Muzayna,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 31th August 2018.

A further account of Muḥammad's seizure of his home city attributed to a different chain of traditions likewise attests to the large bodies of nomadic tribesmen to be found in his army. One of the columns that enters Mecca according ultimately to 'Abdullāh b. Abī Najīḥ was comprised not of the townsmen of Medina, but entirely of tribesmen: Aslam, Sulaym, Ghifār, Muzayna, Juhayna, and other 'tribes of the Arabs' (*Sīrah*, p.817). Yet another record of the army lists large contingents being supplied from Banū Sulaym, Banū Ghifār, Aslam, Muzayna and others (*Sīrah*, p.828).

The important early role that the *Sīrah* ascribes to the bedouin in the conquest of Mecca is reflected in the *ḥadīth*. A tradition contained in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī – one of the canonical collections of *ḥadīth* and reputedly a product of an intensely critical mind – explains how Abū Sufyān watched the army of Muḥammad advance to Mecca. He identified its various components, noticing contingents from the Ghifār, Juhayna, Banū Sulaym and others (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* 4280).⁹⁷ These and other tribes appear elsewhere in al-Bukhārī's collection as important actors or elements of incidental detail in a manner that confirms the Prophet's close and early interest in bringing them into his community. The raid of Dhāt al-Riqā' and Muḥammad's attempt to overawe sections of the Ghatafān, for example, appears in al-Bukhārī's Book of the Prophet's Campaigns (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4127). In the immediate aftermath of the defence of Yathrib known as the Battle of the Trench in 627, members of the Ghifār are mentioned as having erected a tent in the Prophet's Mosque, attesting to the presence of bedouin allies in the defence of the oasis (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 4122). Similarly, a man from Aslam briefly appears to pass a message in a *ḥadīth* concerning non-attendance in a raid, again showing the presence of nomad allies in and around Yathrib (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, p.4418).

A further source that has actually nothing to say on Yathrib in the days of the Prophet is nonetheless obliquely suggestive of the importance of the nomadic contribution to the early Islamic state. Al-Azdī's *Futūḥ al-Shām* seems to suggest that mass military recruitment of the sedentary population of southern Arabia only took place in the Caliphate of Abū Bakr, after the so-called 'Apostasy Wars.' In order to ensure the success of his armies against Rome, Abū Bakr is said to have written to the people of Yemen (*abl al-yaman*), calling them to his standard (*Futūḥ al-Shām*, p.88). Al-Azdī presents this as a major innovation, preceded by a council of war in which recruiting from the Yemen is debated, implying that it is not already practiced (*Futūḥ al-Shām*, p.86-

⁹⁷ *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī: The translations of the meanings of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, Khan, M.M., (ed. & trans.), 1979, Lahore: Kazi Publications, via the website www.sunnah.com.

87). One is left to assume that Medina's manpower previously came from elsewhere, namely from the tribes of the 'arab recorded as having left the Prophet's community upon his death at the opening of the *Futūḥ al-Shām* (*Futūḥ al-Shām*, p.77).

The testimony of the *Sīrah* – through various chains of transmitters – and other sources ultimately show that there was a widespread consensus in early Islamic tradition that the Prophet's foundational military triumphs depended on nomadic warriors. It is evident, therefore, that Muḥammad had managed to bring the bedouin tribes of the Ḥijāz under his sway years before he apparently inherited the fruits of alliances centred on Mecca.⁹⁸ Indeed, one is prompted to ask why, if Quraysh had an exceptional degree of influence over the tribes, they were unable to counter Muḥammad's nomad confederacy with a more powerful one of their own. In short, the foundations of the later military victories of the early Islamic community were laid not on 'Meccan statecraft,' but on Medinan state building.

The Submission of the Bedouin

One crucial question remains with respect to the manner in which the bedouin were corralled into alliance with Yathrib. To what extent was their adherence to Muḥammad the result of an embrace of his message of piety and belief in the One God?

As suggested in the previous chapter, the treatment of the bedouin in the Qur'ān would imply that the answer to this question is 'very little,' or 'not at all.' The often sparse accounts of Muḥammad's raids on the nomadic tribes in the *Sīrah* appear to confirm this impression: they record nothing approaching any missionary activities. The bedouin are not even condemned for alleged polytheism or unbelief, which would allow some kind of undertone of religious mission to be read into the Prophet's interactions with them. The desert *a'rāb* have no belief (*al-'imān*), they merely submit to the power of the leader of an important oasis (Q. 49:14-17). They have *al-islām*.

The notion that there is a tension in the Qur'ān between those who seem to be the closest to Muḥammad's mission – the oasis town dwelling 'believers' – and those under his sway yet criticised for their lack of any real belief at all – the bedouin, the original 'muslims' – was surely a fundamental social divide in the early Islamic community. One would be forgiven, therefore, for expecting some echo of it in the early, non-Qur'ānic Islamic sources, an echo that recalls the age before

⁹⁸ There are a number of other indicative anecdotes in the *Sīrah* beyond Muḥammad's raids and the breakdown of the army that conquered Mecca that attest to the early integration of bedouin groups into the state. The prophet's own camels, for example, are said to have been pastured by a man of the Banū Ghifār (*Sīrah*, p.719), a section of the Banū Ḍamra b. Bakr (Fück, J.W., 'Banū Ghifār,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 31th August 2018).

other considerations intervened and resulted in a major shift in terminology and in the way in which the community conceived of itself. There is indeed such an echo in the *Sīrah*. It unfortunately may not pertain to an interaction between Muḥammad and a bedouin group, but the language used and the context in which it is found is nonetheless instructive.

Shortly after Muḥammad relocates to Yathrib, he receives a delegation of Christians (*naṣārā*) from the town of Najrān. After some fascinating asides the *Sīrah* provides about the nature of their faith and, intriguingly, their connections to the Roman world to the north, two of the delegation of sixty are addressed directly by Muḥammad. The exchange is worth citing at length.

And so when the two divines (al-ḥabrān) spoke to Muḥammad, the prophet of God said to them both, 'submit (aslimā).' They said, 'we have submitted (aslamnā).' He said, 'indeed you have not submitted, so submit!' They replied, 'no, we have submitted before you.' He said, 'You lie. What is restraining you from submission (al-islām) is your call that God has a son (walad^{am}), your abasement before the Cross, and the fact that you eat pork.'

(*Sīrah*, p.403)

This short passage is intriguing. The men of Najrān appear to believe that they have 'submitted' to Muḥammad as they have accepted his authority – as is learned at the conclusion to the episode of the embassy – to appoint an arbitrator over them to return with them to their city and to manage their affairs (*Sīrah*, p.410). The Prophet, however, is insistent that they have not submitted to him. In answer to their palpable confusion when they again insist that they have, in fact, submitted to him, Muḥammad glosses what he perceives their failure really to submit in distinctly religious, peculiarly Islamic, terms. He accuses them of rejecting his call that God is One, who neither begets nor was begotten (Q. 112). He highlights their consumption of the flesh of the pig, in contravention of Q. 6:145. Finally, he accuses them of worship (*'ibād*) of the cross, something which resonates strongly with the Qur'ān's overweening message of worshipping nothing other than God, even if the Qur'ān contains no explicitly staurophobic polemic.

There are two main ways in which this exchange can be read. First, one could take the passage quite simply as a confirmation of the message and meaning of Islam. Muḥammad is showing that God's religion was more than merely acknowledging the charismatic authority of his messenger, it had far wider and deeper implications. The clearly Qur'ānic nature of two of the three qualifications he places on *al-islām* – we hear nothing about prayer or pilgrimage, for instance, now

essential elements of the faith on which the Qur'ān is notoriously taciturn – gives Muḥammad's riposte an archaic and perhaps therefore genuine quality.

Yet one is forced to ask why the tradition chose to remember an entirely plausible embassy from Najrān in this way. By calling attention to the confusion surrounding the meaning and ramifications of 'submission,' in a way that has a striking resonance with the term's ambiguity and negative relationship to 'believer' in the Qur'ān, this episode appears to be answering a question that the later Islamic community would leave entirely unasked. In their insistence that 'submission' means only an acceptance of Muḥammad's political authority, the ambassadors of Najrān are giving voice to a time when entering the orbit of Yathrib meant simply that, when the *muslimūn* were members of Muḥammad's community, but not members of his pious sect of *mu'minūn*. The use of Qur'ānic qualifications to insist that becoming submitters to the community carries with it the same kind of obligations formerly associated solely with becoming believers is a device to retroject the later understanding of the term *muslim* to the very age of the Prophet. It echoes a time when the political community created around Medina and the Prophet's followers was starting to understand itself as the bearer of the religious message and identity promulgated by the Prophet.

The tension that the tradition recognises surrounding what membership of the early community could actually mean is similarly apparent in the *ḥadīth*. One tale in particular, which is less elaborate than that of the ambassadors of Najrān but explicitly concerns the bedouin, is suggestive. Al-Bukhārī's Book of Judgements (*kitāb al-ʿaḥkām*) contains an account of a bedouin (*a'rābī^m*) who pledges loyalty (*bayʿa*) to the Prophet, only to ask Muḥammad to cancel his pledge after he caught fever in Medina to allow him to escape to the more salubrious desert (*Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 7211). The bedouin eventually leaves the oasis without receiving a formal dismissal, giving rise to the *ḥadīth* that Medina is a furnace that expels impurities. The presentation of loyalty to the Prophet as a purely personal bond, empty of wider ideological meaning, together with the fact that the kind of man bound to the Prophet in this manner is explicitly a bedouin, resonates strongly with the notion that 'submission,' for the nomads, originally meant acceptance of Muḥammad's profane leadership, not acceptance of his message.

With this in mind, it is possible to sense the social importance of another verse from the Qur'ān. In the *sūra* conventionally associated with the Treaty of Ḥudaybiya, Q. 48 (*Sūrah*, p.749-750), the audience is reminded that loyalty professed to Muḥammad is in fact loyalty professed to God: 'Those who pledge loyalty (*yubāyʿūnā*) to you (oh Prophet) are actually pledging loyalty to God himself – God's hand is placed on theirs – and anyone who breaks his pledge does so to his own

detriment: God will give a great reward to the one who fulfils his pledge to Him' (Q. 48:10). For the bedouin, a 'rab tribesmen who found themselves falling into the power of Muḥammad, however, this plea fell on deaf ears. Just like the *Sīrah*'s portrayal of the ambassadors of Najrān, or the ill a 'rabī^m in al-Bukḥārī, their submission was only to Muḥammad, not to God.

Towards a Theory of Arabian State Development

Thus far, the discussion over this and the previous chapter has basically focused on Muḥammad and the nature and composition of his early community. Three schematic and essential foundations supporting the construction of the early Islamic state can now be identified. First, the charismatic leader, a man able to convince and compel those around him to participate in a new and unusual project, in Muḥammad's case a man whose charismatic appeal was rooted in the numinous authority of the *kāhin*. Secondly, the location of this man in a large and fertile oasis. Thirdly, the exploitation of this location to exert influence over the nomads in dependence on it, in order to expand the pool of fighting men and to amass financial resources through the taking of booty or, latterly, through taxation.

No fiscal documentation from the earliest phase of the Medinan state of course survives, but the fiscal interests of the early Islamic state are evident. Indeed, the reservation of the fifth for Muḥammad and for the community as a whole should be seen as little more than a nascent state treasury. The first direct reference to the imposition of taxes on dependent territories, moreover, is recorded in the *Sīrah* shortly after the conquest of Mecca (*Sīrah*, p.965). It is also telling that the burden of paying the *zakāt* is presented as the chief reason motivating the so-called 'Apostasy' by al-Azdī in the *Futūḥ al-Shām*. The collective voice of 'many of the Arabs' (*kathīr min al-'arab*) complains how reluctant they were to hand over a part of their wealth even to Muḥammad, so there is no way that they would hand it over to Abū Bakr (*Futūḥ al-Shām*, p.77).⁹⁹

Importantly, the same three factors of leadership, location, and lucre are in evidence in other, better attested periods of Arabian history. As earlier promised in Chapter Two, it is now time diachronically to survey some examples of what could be termed 'Arabian state development,' in order to help illustrate how what can be gleaned from the pages of the *Sīrah* and the impression

⁹⁹ The fiscal issue is clear even when one acknowledges that the text mentions withdrawal from Islam: 'When Allāh, Blessed and Most High, took possession of his Prophet, many of the Arabs withdrew from Islam after the passing of the Messenger of God and renounced the *zakāt*. And they said, "We were forced to hand over our wealth to Muḥammad, and now Ibn Abī Quḥāfa asks us our wealth and, by God, we will not give him anything at all from it." And so they withheld the *zakāt* from Abū Bakr and withdrew from it.' Like the a 'rabī^m in al-Bukḥārī's *ḥadīth*, it is telling that the 'arab seem to have felt themselves bound only to Muḥammad, and not to his successors or religious message.

that resonates from the Qur'ān speaks to patterns of development found in other ages, elsewhere in Arabia. As has been argued by Mark Whittow with respect to using such evidence better to understand the politics of the imperial Arabian federates, such an approach is less about using a mirror to identify exactly repeating patterns, but more an effective tool for creating a suggestive model.¹⁰⁰

The evolution and nature of the Rashīdī emirate centred on the town of Hā'il in the second quarter of the nineteenth century is the first thought-provoking, though in many respects imperfect, case study. The Rashīd were originally a desert-based, nomadic dynasty of the Shammar tribal coalition, which migrated in and around the Great Nafūd desert – just to the north of Najd – and the eponymous Jabal Shammar.¹⁰¹ It seems likely that the Rashīd already had some influence and assets in the oasis of Hā'il before 'Abdullāh b. Rashīd managed to establish himself as the town's master in 1836, doing so by relying on the muscle of his bedouin kin. Hā'il was not only an extensive oasis with many wells, but, by virtue of its location astride the main route from Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf to the holy cities of the Ḥijāz, it was also an important node on trans-regional trade and pilgrim roads.¹⁰²

The Rashīd used Hā'il's location to good effect. Their dominance of the oasis not only compelled continuing loyalty from their closest Shammar kin for subsistence purposes – a relationship they also cultivated by ostentatiously living for some weeks each year in the desert as a visible sign of their Shammar descent – it also allowed them to extend their influence by dominating trade. The considerable revenues earned through protecting pilgrims and caravans gave the Rashīdī emirs both prestige and hard cash to maintain a trickling down of wealth to the Shammar, and to other groups further afield, that prevented them from raiding the caravans and ensured that their sheikhs were always keen to visit Hā'il to pay their respects.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Whittow, M., 1998, 'Rome and the Jafnids: Writing the History of a Sixth-Century Tribal Dynasty,' in Humphrey, J., (ed.), *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, Ann Arbor, p.215-233. The Arabian Peninsula has not, of course, been without change between the sixth, seventh, and nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Islam has fundamentally changed the ideological context within which Arabians operate, but, as explored in the Introduction as well as in this chapter, other patterns of existence did not radically shift until the largescale exploitation of the peninsula's petroleum resources in the latter half of the twentieth century. As also outlined in the Introduction, the emergence of Arabian politics in the shadow of competing external empires – Rome and Persia in the sixth and seventh centuries, the Ottomans and British in the twentieth – provides another reason as to why comparison may prove enlightening.

¹⁰¹ Al-Rasheed, M., 1991, *Politics in an Arabian Oasis*, p.9-13.

¹⁰² See *ibid*, p. 95-117 for Hā'il's fortuitous geography.

¹⁰³ Rosenfeld, H., 1965, 'The Social Composition of the Military in the Process of State Formation in the Arabian Desert: Part I,' *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 95:1, p.75-86, p.82-84 for the growth of Rashīdī influence and the protection of the pilgrims.

Despite the fact that Rashīdī power was originally the product of the family's ability to appeal to kinship allegiances to help establish their position in the oasis, the coercive strength of the emirate came to rest only secondarily with the bedouin. In much the same manner as the early Islamic state, which was able to corral the bedouin into Muḥammad's coalition by using the manpower of Medina, the princes of Hā'il, by the mid-nineteenth century, had come to depend upon townsmen, mercenaries and slaves.¹⁰⁴ The latter two classes at least were the kind of men whose dependency on the dynasty was more total than simply needing their acquiescence for watering rights or their generosity to access some of the wealth of the caravan trade. A number of eyewitnesses, for example, recall the emir's possession of a bodyguard of as many as two thousand, largely African slaves, and a system of military service by the townsmen of Hā'il was in place during the reign of Talal b. Rashīd (1847-1868). Bedouin within Hā'il's sphere of influence would join one of the emir's raids only after it had set out, and even enjoyed a lower level of access rights to plunder than their town-dwelling comrades.¹⁰⁵ The control of the Rashīd over their Shammar kin and other nomads could also be quite fitful. Much like the progresses through the Ḥijāz that the *Sīrah* seems to show Muḥammad making, the rulers of Hā'il had to mount expeditions every year to intimidate the bedouin supposedly loyal to them, and to stop allied groups raiding one another, meaning that their state was, in effect, re-founded every year.¹⁰⁶

The other reason, besides the diffident statelessness of the bedouin, that the Rashīds found themselves having constantly to recreate their state beyond their centre at Hā'il offers another illustrative example of Arabian state development: the Sa'ūdīs.¹⁰⁷ The ascent of 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Sa'ūd to supremacy in Arabia in the first decades of the twentieth century embraces all of the fundamental factors behind Arabian state development so far adduced: the charismatic figure; the sedentary basis of his power, and the effective mobilisation of the bedouin.

One does not need to be an admirer of 'Abd al-'Azīz b. Sa'ūd of the calibre of Harry St. John Philby to gain an impression of his peculiarly powerful personality. British officials who came into contact with him were all but uniformly struck by his driving desire to restore his family to what he saw as their natural dominant position in the peninsula and by the intelligent way in which he

¹⁰⁴ Rosenfeld, H., 1965, 'The Social Composition of the Military in the Process of State Formation in the Arabian Desert: Part I,' *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland* 95:2, p.174-194, p.174-175.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, p.178-182.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, p.185.

¹⁰⁷ Sa'ūdī weakness after the collapse of what is often called the 'First Sa'ūdī State' in 1818 was in fact one of the developments that make the rise of the Rashīd possible. See Al-Rasheed, M., 1991, *Politics in an Arabian Oasis*, p.29-48.

pursued this aim. In January 1919, for instance, Sir Reginald Wingate, the then British High Commissioner in Cairo, informed London that Ibn Sa‘ūd’s ambitions to imitate the conquests of his forbears was bound to shape the next few years of regional politics.¹⁰⁸ A few years later, Lord Balfour noted that, in his pursuit of these ambitions, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sa‘ūd was the only Arabian prince to have ‘shown signs of statesmanship.’ Minimal praise though this may seem, it nonetheless hints at his exceptional nature.¹⁰⁹ It was indeed the force of his personality that allowed him to influence and restrain certain hot-headed members of his coalition in the later 1920s when their zeal to continue to expand the borders of the new Sa‘ūdī state risked causing conflicts Ibn Sa‘ūd knew he would lose.¹¹⁰

Rooted though his military power was in the townsmen of Najd, it was Ibn Sa‘ūd’s ability not only to compel bedouin tribes to join him, but also to transform their world in a manner analogous to the early Islamic state by encouraging their settlement that ensured he triumphed over his peninsula rivals. Towards the end of the First World War, it is evident that Ibn Sa‘ūd intensified the indoctrination of the bedouin into the teachings of the Wahhābī sect and their associated settlement in new urban foundations, the *hujar*.¹¹¹ This scheme not only created new ranks of men newly devoted to the Wahhābī interpretation of their faith. It also created concentrated groups of fighting-age men in more easily controlled locations and in close dependency on Ibn Sa‘ūd, given that migration to the *hujar* presupposed the sale of at least part of the bedouin’s flocks and their receipt of salaries from Riyāḍ. The new settlements allowed raiding parties to be raised rapidly, and indoctrination to be constant, thereby removing the two main barriers to bedouin mobilisation previous rulers had faced: dispersion of manpower and the need to coerce or persuade the nomads to fall into line.

Even though one should avoid dwelling on the contribution of the Ikhwān to the Sa‘ūdī victory at the expense of other groups, it is nonetheless clear that they were, in the main, responsible for the relatively rapid final phases of the Sa‘ūdī consolidation. Bearing in mind the gradual speed of

¹⁰⁸ Habib, J.S., 1978, *Ibn Sa‘ūd’s Warriors of Islam: The Ikhwan of Najd and Their Role in The Creation of the Sa‘ūdī Kingdom, 1910-1930*, Leiden: Brill, p.19-20, citing a Foreign Office telegram. Habib gives other examples of witnesses, European and otherwise, to Ibn Sa‘ūd’s desire not to be the lesser son of greater fathers.

¹⁰⁹ Kostiner, J., 1993, *The Making of Saudi Arabia 1916-1936: From Chieftaincy to Monarchical State*, Oxford University Press: Oxford & New York, p.54. In part, Lord Balfour’s comment was the product of comparing him to his rivals: the less ambitious Rashīd, who backed the losing side in World War I by remaining clients of the Ottomans, and the frustrating, avaricious, and incompetent Sharif Hussain of the Ḥijāz. Capable man though he was, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sa‘ūd was also lucky in his choice of enemies.

¹¹⁰ Habib, J.S., 1978, *Ibn Sa‘ūd’s Warriors of Islam*, p.79-86.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p.23-24. The first *hijra* settlement, al-Ghat Ghat, was founded in 1912. Habib has identified a total of two hundred and twenty two *hujar*, the precise foundational dates of some of which are unknown owing to conflicting accounts and their proximity to, or descent from, closely neighbouring settlements.

the reassertion of Sa‘ūdī power in the region around Riyāḍ before the First World War and the quick gains Ibn Sa‘ūd made in the early 1920s, one can sympathise with the somewhat hyperbolic assessments of some foreign observers that their role on the battlefield was comparable to ‘Cromwell’s “Ironsides” or the German Storm Troops.’¹¹² The conquest of the Ḥijāz presents the most telling example. As has already been mentioned, Ibn Sa‘ūd was unafraid to let it be known that he sought to imitate the example of his ancestors by spreading his power across Arabia. Yet this ambition did not preclude a recognition that he could only do so once circumstances were propitious and the opportunity open. It is consequently likely that Ibn Sa‘ūd only conceived of moving to seize the holy cities once the Sharif had succeeded in alienating both his British backers and the Muslim world by the beginning of 1924.¹¹³ The Sa‘ūdī forces spearheaded by the Ikhwān poured over the border in the same year, took Mecca by October, and Medina the next year.

Comparing the rise of the early Islamic state with the Rashīd and the armies of Ibn Sa‘ūd make it possible to investigate another aspect of the early state that often passes with no comment whatsoever: the likely numbers of warriors controlled by Yathrib. Speculative a process though this may be, failing to try to find a reasonable way in which to reconstruct the hard, physical reality of something so important to world history as the birth of the Islamic state would simply leave room open for looser assumption. Even attaining reliable figures for the numbers of fighting age men in Arabia in the twentieth century, however, is not without its problems. Foreign observers noted that figures for men, sheep, and camels were habitually massively inflated, prompting the adoption of a rule devised by Charles Doughty during his journeys through the peninsula: whatever number an Arab supplies, ten percent of it is likely to be closer to the truth.¹¹⁴ On this basis, Harry St. John Philby calculated that the number of Ikhwān Ibn Sa‘ūd could muster from Najd was probably in the region of thirty thousand, bearing in mind his oral sources had reported a figure of three hundred thousand.¹¹⁵

Numbers gleaned from a range of sources for the warrior strength contained in the *hujar* offer perhaps a better indication of the size of the forces loyal to Ibn Sa‘ūd. Taking *hijra* settlement by tribe, and judging ‘fighting-age men’ as those between sixteen and sixty, the more reliable estimates suggest that the larger villages could muster one thousand men, with the smaller mobilising as few

¹¹² Ibid, p.22, quoting Lt. Colonel H.R.P. Dickson, a British political agent operating in Kuwait in the late 1920s.

¹¹³ Kostiner, J., 1993, *The Making of Saudi Arabia 1916-1936*, p.62-65. The British had become frustrated with the Sharif not least for the intransigence he demonstrated at a conference in Kuwait designed to settle the borders of Arabia. Muslim opinion became alienated from the Sharif after his assumption of the title of Caliph in 1924.

¹¹⁴ Habib, J.S., 1978, *Ibn Sa‘ud’s Warriors of Islam*, p.73.

¹¹⁵ Ibid, p.73.

as two hundred. A large tribe like the Muṭayr, who inhabited northern Najd, supplied Ibn Sa‘ūd with as many as ten thousand, four hundred men, with the smaller Āl Murra of the south managing barely two thousand.¹¹⁶ This reserve of manpower tended to translate into armies in the region of five thousand men, considering that the need to secure sufficient grazing for camels and horses, let alone water for men and animals, created a check on troop concentrations that only the kind of modern logistics operation Ibn Sa‘ūd then lacked could remedy.¹¹⁷ Possible figures for the forces that could be raised by Hā’il from across the smaller expanse of the Jabal Shammar fit the pattern of settlements making a major contribution if they could produce a thousand or more men, with tribal sections offering a few hundred at most.¹¹⁸

The figures supplied in the *Sīrah* for Muḥammad’s early armies are not, therefore, strikingly implausible. The various accounts of the army that occupied Mecca after Ḥudaybiya, for example, give one thousand as the upper limit of the tribal contingents commanded by Muḥammad (*Sīrah*, p.810; 828). Many of the tribal groups are said to have fielded about four hundred men: a perhaps even more credible claim (*Sīrah*, p.828). Similarly, the army that set out on the unsuccessful raid of Mu’ta is reported as having numbered three thousand men (*Sīrah*, p.791). This, again, is concordant with the size of armies inner Arabia could be expected to raise before the consolidation and development of modern states after the 1920s, and is anyway far more plausible than the hundreds of thousands of Romans and allied Arabian federates the raiding party apparently encountered (*Sīrah*, p.792). The great discrepancy in the figures of the two sides may be attributable to an ideological scheme that seeks to show how the favour of God inspired Muḥammad to send so few against so many, but that does not necessarily mean that the size of his army is inconceivable, without any historical basis.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁶ Ibid, p.177-179.

¹¹⁷ The army that toppled the Rashīd in 1921 reportedly numbered five thousand, six hundred and twenty eight men, with an uncertain mix of cavalry and infantry. Camels could carry more than one man into battle, meaning the numbers of mounts never accurately translates into numbers of men. See *ibid*, p.74.

¹¹⁸ Rosenfeld, H., 1965, ‘The Social Composition of the Military,’ p.181.

¹¹⁹ Two objections could perhaps be raised to comparing the first Islamic armies with those formed in Arabia in the twentieth century: the figures for the Ikhwān come from the Najd, not the Ḥijāz, and were recorded after Ibn Sa‘ūd had received considerable financial subsidies from the British, allowing him to expand his influence over the tribes and to recruit. The *Sīrah*, however, does show Muḥammad striking out into Najd at an early date and, if anything, parts of the Ḥijāz are more conducive to sustaining life than the Najd, suggesting the smaller area could support as many people. The material conditions of Arabia in the grip of great power rivalry in the early twentieth century was not also not too different from the situation that prevailed in Late Antiquity, as has already been mentioned and as will be explored in the next chapter.

Conclusion

The previous chapter, like most contemporary scholarship on the origins of Islam, implicitly and explicitly emphasised the extent to which Muḥammad and his mission was very much a part of Late Antiquity. It argued that he could best be understood as a peculiarly charismatic figure drawing on the chief intellectual movement of his time – monotheism – to lay the foundations of a new confession. As the spirit of an age in which states had become closely associated with a single religion would have it, the foundations of this new confession went hand-in-hand with the construction of a new state. The only contemporary written record of this truly pivotal moment in history is the Qur’ān, a sensitive reading of which reveals that the early community seemed to have been composed of two different castes: the Believers and the Muslims, the latter of whom can be identified with the nomads of the desert, the *a’rāb*.

This chapter has tried to explore the ramifications of this dichotomy. It has shown what has perhaps become of late an unfashionable regard for the near horizon of early Islam, Arabia, and analysed evidence from the Islamic historical tradition that speaks to this context and that offers plausible insights into the foundation of the early state at Yathrib. At the very least, it is remarkable that early Islamic traditionists – whose world was that of the thriving cities of the Fertile Crescent and the Caliphate – placed such a degree of importance on the desert, and on the Prophet’s connections to those who dwelt within it. Contrary to a belief that defeating Quraysh and Meccan trade were the keys to unlocking the military power of the bedouin, the tradition in fact implies that recruitment from the nomads took place shortly after Muḥammad’s arrival in Yathrib, and probably because of the oasis resources he controlled, even if his and his Meccan followers’ involvement in trading activity based on mining gave them some kind of existing regional network. This fits a pattern evident in more recent ages of Arabian history of charismatic leaders subduing bedouin using sedentary soldiers, only further to expand their power using nomadic manpower.

What has been identified as the early and quite conscientious nature of Muḥammad’s state building activities is important within itself. Above all, it reveals the ambition of the Prophet’s project. Just as the Qur’ān’s call to belief in the one God and to pious action represented a profound appeal for the reform of men’s souls, so the creation of a space within which such right action and belief could be practiced equalled a deliberate attempt to start to shape the world around the message and leadership of a man who claimed extraordinary spiritual authority. Islamic civilisation was, fundamentally, no accident of history. Its earliest days were marked by purpose, intent, and direction. This conclusion has significant consequences for how the decades following Muḥammad’s death should be approached. The conquests of the lands of the Near East by the

community the Prophet founded did not happen by chance, even though they may have been marked by elements of contingency and good fortune, and had something of the tenor of the revolt of federate Arabian groups against the great empires, as will shortly be explored.

Accepting such a degree of agency behind the early Islamic state also has some historiographical implications. It is suggestive of communal self-awareness from an early date, something that probably provided a social imperative to remember the past. As the very inclusion of the *Constitution of Medina* in the *Sīrah* implies, the community was able to preserve genuine historical evidence from the days of the Prophet. The treatment of the bedouin and episodes like the coming of the ambassadors of Najrān further suggests that the tradition contains clear echoes of the earliest days, even if the presentation of Muḥammad and of certain other men and events of great political import to the later community were undoubtedly twisted and manipulated to suit sectarian and generational conceits. As was argued in Chapter One, sound reasoning, the consensus of tradition, and any validation that can be found in comparative analysis can be sensitively applied to entice the tradition to reveal the secrets that do exist within it.

Overall, it is clear that Muḥammad, in the 620s, had succeeded in starting to build a powerful polity in a land where such a development was unprecedented. One question, however, has so far gone unasked. Was there anything particular about the bedouin of the early seventh century that perhaps made them a more significant force in the great movements of their age than they were in previous centuries? A further aspect of the comparison between the early Islamic state and other instances of state formation in the Arabian peninsula alludes to the answer. The state of Ibn Saʿūd would not have come into being as rapidly as it did and reached the size it attained without British subsidies and diplomatic influence over the peninsula creating the conditions for Saʿūdī dominance. The sixth century was similarly a period of great power interest in Arabia. It had witnessed the great powers of Rome and Persia show an unparalleled degree of interest in the desert lands to their south, which fomented tensions in the very tip of the peninsula and social and political development in the centre and north.

The next chapter, therefore, will explore the impact of this imperial interest. It will investigate the transformation of the Arabian world in the sixth century, looking at how imperial inducements to social development interacted with tribal structures to connect the desert like never before. It will also bring into consideration the world of southern Arabia. Finally, despite acknowledging the role of Muḥammad, Yathrib and inner Arabia in the formation of the armies that conquered the Near East from the 630s, the next chapter will also show how the two great empires had a hand in their own downfall.

Chapter Four: The Transformation of the Bedouin World and the Collapse of the Imperial Frontier

You are fighting me with my brothers and my own people...

(Ghurak, King of Sogdia, c.710, al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2.1244)¹

The previous two chapters surveyed the near horizon of the origin of Islam: Arabia. Chapter Two focused on using the only genuinely early written source for the creation of the new movement, the Qur'ān, to try to gain an understanding of whom Muḥammad's community was actually composed. The Qur'ān's principal audience – called here and of course elsewhere the 'Believers' – seems to have been made up of town dwellers, originally the Meccan intimates of the Prophet, but latterly and largely those among the oasis dwellers of Yathrib who accepted him as their leader. Revealed in the Qur'ān's invective, however, is a secondary audience: the *a'rab*, the desert-dwelling bedouin of the Ḥijāz and north Arabia. They initially encountered the Prophet not as a vessel of divine revelation, but as a figure of awesome political authority able to control their access to the vital resources of the Yathrib oasis. As Chapter Three explored, it is at this juncture of settled, charismatic leader, verdant oasis, and bedouin inclination – coerced though initially it may have been – to exchange access to oasis resources for military service, that Arabian states are made.

The integration of bedouin groups into an ideologically-motivated and ambitious state in the Ḥijāz was hardly the only revolutionary development to have effected the *a'rab* in Late Antiquity. The world of the bedouin had been transformed over the course of the previous century. Both the Roman and Persian empires had found reason to cast their gaze southwards to the deserts in a manner previously unknown, and to foster, through their patronage of client groups, significant social and political changes that decisively altered the parameters of political and military activity in Arabia. Contrary to some current scholarly understandings of these client groups, there is good reason to believe that the leading Arabian federate powers of Late Antiquity were significant regional forces. They were not merely disparate bands of bedouin corralled into fighting for a distant emperor or shah, but state-like entities controlling significant military muscle that

¹ Ghurak's words are also quoted in Hoyland, R.G., 2015, *In God's Path*, p.151, as evidence that the success of the conquest of what became known as Khurasan can partially be explained by the failure of the local elite to offer united resistance to the invading armies of the Caliphate. As this chapter will reveal, Ghurak's complaint that his own people are fighting against him also reveals a deeper truth behind the success of the Islamic conquests, attested far earlier than the first decade of the eighth century.

habituated the desert to complex forms of political organisation. The new state in Medina, therefore, was not entirely unprecedented in its ability to integrate nomad groups into a higher form of direction, and bedouin leaders had similarly become accustomed to the advantages of linking themselves to a strong power bent on warfare and the booty and prestige such warfare could bring.

So it is time to look to the far horizon of early Islam: to the world beyond Arabia, of wider Late Antiquity, in order to appreciate how the early Islamic community's achievements were dependent on far deeper and longer-term transformations. This chapter will consequently cover the creation of a tradition of largescale military action by nomad groups – through imperial clientage – and survey the structural, social and political changes that effected the peninsula, which should not be allowed to hide behind a focus on the activities of the client groups' elites. Insights from the comparative case of the transformation of barbarian Europe in the centuries either side of the rise of Islam will play a crucial role in contextualising these transformations' significance.² The bold suggestion that Muḥammad's rivalry with Mecca may have owed something to the wider politics of the seventh-century conflict between Rome and Persia will then be made. Finally, the process of the collapse of the Roman frontier to what history came to understand as the armies of Islam will then be studied in some detail, to show how Arabian clientage not only managed to prepare Arabia for Muḥammad, but also to underline how imperial outsourcing helped to write the death warrant of the ancient empires, and to usher in a new world.

A New Century of War

All of these developments, however, must first be set against the context of great power rivalry and the wider events of the century before Islam. As suggested in the Introduction, the sixth century witnessed an intensification of the rivalry between Rome and Persia, manifested in the outbreak of a string of destructive wars.³ This was a dramatic change from the peace that had prevailed between the two great powers in the previous century, in large part the product of pressure both empires had experienced from the Huns and the resulting military threat to the Roman West and the Persian North East.⁴ That said, according to Procopius of Caesarea, Persia's

² 'Barbarian' is used purely as a convenient, descriptive term to denote the peoples hailing from beyond the frontiers of the Roman Empire in Classical and Late Antiquity. It is not meant to connote the moral and cultural meanings the term possessed in the Classical mind.

³ This rivalry has become widely seen as the definitive phenomenon of the sixth century; see, for example, Bowersock, G., 2012, *Empires in Collision in Late Antiquity*, Brandeis University Press: Waltham, Mass.

⁴ Rome and Persia agreed a formal peace treaty in 387, which endured despite occasional tension. See Sarris, P., 2011, *Empires of Faith*, p.125-127 for a concise synthesis of the way in which a shared threat from the steppe brought about a rapprochement between the two imperial rivals.

need to satisfy Hephthalite Hun demands for tribute eventually forced the Shah Kavād to launch an attack on Roman Armenia in 502 (*Wars*, 1.7.1-3), beginning a war that lasted until 506.⁵ This was but the first instance of what would prove to be a series of largescale conflicts. Major fighting took place between 525-532; 540-562, and 572-591. The latter two wars especially led to considerable regional dislocation – the second war of Justinian’s reign beginning with the pitiless sack of Antioch in 540 – and tended towards a pattern of one side making minor gains before a bloody and expensive stalemate ensued on the Caucasian and Mesopotamian fronts.⁶ This century of warfare then culminated in the existential battle for supremacy that took place in the first quarter of the seventh century, known as the Last Great War of Antiquity.

Conflict did not, of course, break out like some kind of natural disaster without the guiding hand of human agency. The sixth century is exceptional not only for the renewed intensity of imperial struggle in the Near East, but also for the impact of two men who number among the most ambitious and remarkable rulers ever to have sat on the great powers’ thrones: Justinian and Khosrow I Anushiruwān. The ‘number, variety, and importance’ of the events of the reign of Justinian have long been recognised as amounting to a pivotal period in history – if for uncertain and contested reasons – and the unfortunately slighter or at least less accessible evidence for his Persian rival similarly suggests a boldness and significance of both internal as well as external policy.⁷

Justinian’s reign certainly did not fail to make a deep mark on contemporaries. One only has to contrast the effusive and lengthy praise of Procopius’ *Buildings* – the proem of which announces him as the saviour of the Roman realm (*Buildings*, 1.1.1-19; 2.1.3) – with the same author’s invective at the gargantuan loss of life and great disturbance caused by the demon-king’s wars (*Secret History*,

⁵ *Procopius: History of the Wars in Six Volumes*, Dewing, H., 1914, (ed. & trans.), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. Kavād was also the son-in-law of the Hephthalite ruler, to whose support during a period of civil war he also owed his throne.

⁶ For a detailed account of the wars between Rome and Persia in the fifth century based on a comprehensive selection of primary sources, see Greatrex, G., & Lieu, S.N.C., 2002, *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars: A Narrative Sourcebook*, London: Routledge.

⁷ Gibbon, E., 1896, *Decline and Fall*, Vol.4, p.290. For a discussion of Khosrow I that highlights the ways in which his regime paralleled the energy and reforming zeal of Justinian’s, see Howard-Johnston, J., 2006, ‘The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: a Comparison’ in *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity*, Ashgate, p.157-226. The case that Justinian’s reign saw the fragmentation of Roman fiscal structures and the concomitant failure of central reforms to reverse the control of provincial aristocracies over taxation is made in Sarris, P., 2006, *Economy and Society in the Age of Justinian*, Cambridge University Press. Sarris sees increased aristocratic autonomy not only as a centrifugal force within itself, but also as a major cause of Roman military weakness in the late sixth and early seventh centuries (the state was rendered unable to pay for the army). Peter Heather suggests a different reason why the advances of Justinian’s reign set the scene for future reverses: his aggressive stance made it politically impossible for succeeding Roman emperors to do anything other than wage war with foreign powers, setting in store overstretch and exhaustion. See Heather, P., 2018, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian*, Oxford University Press, esp. p.303-331; p.1-18 for a summary of the debate on the long-term consequences of Justinian’s reign.

18.1ff) to get the sense that Justinian's was a reign like few others.⁸ His wars and domestic policies also left a strong impression on the outlying lands they effected, even when these lands ceased, once again, to be a part of the Roman Empire. Paul the Deacon, for example, praised Justinian as the conqueror of nations, the wise reformer of laws, and the embodiment of Orthodoxy (*History of the Lombards*, 1.25): telling praise given that he was writing two centuries after Justinian's death in what had by then become permanently post-Roman central Italy.⁹

Paul the Deacon understandably concentrates his acclaim of Justinian's wars on his western campaigns, anticipating generations of later scholars whose imaginations have similarly been captured by the notion of a *Reconquista*. These campaigns were certainly materially and politically significant, and arguably represented a high watermark in the late antique empire's use of military victory as an ideological strategy. Justinian embarked upon a decisive shift from the largely defensive posture of previous decades and launched the first (temporarily) successful major Roman offensive actions since the reigns of Trajan and Hadrian (98-138). The contemporary sources for the reign of Justinian, however, show that advances in the West, beginning with the invasion of Africa in 533, were anticipated by important strategic calculations in the East in the late 520s. This marked the start of a series of further reforms that would have a direct impact on the denizens of the Arabian Peninsula, which helped to set in motion the transformation of the bedouin world.

Securing the East

One does not have to resort in the first instance to the panegyric books of Procopius's *Buildings* to learn that the start of Justinian's reign kicked-off moves to provide Roman armies in Mesopotamia and the Caucasus with new defensive positions. The Near East had not seen such a campaign of construction since the days of Diocletian (284-305), even if some of Justinian's works had been anticipated by the Emperor Anastasius (491-518), notably the fortification of the operationally important city of Dara. The independent and far less-confected *Chronicle* of John Malalas opens its account of Justinian's rule with passages on the refortification of the Persian border. Palmyra was rebuilt and garrisoned, as was Martyropolis (*Chronicle*, 18.2, 18.5).¹⁰

The *Buildings* is, however, far more detailed as well as effusive. As a highly polished, albeit unfinished, work of panegyric rather than a history, it is no doubt prone to exaggeration and unfortunately fails to give much precise information about dates of construction, but Malalas' early

⁸ *Procopius: Buildings*, Dewing, H., 1940, (ed. & trans.), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; *Procopius: The Anecdota or Secret History*, Dewing, H., 1935, (ed. & trans.), Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.

⁹ *Paulus Diaconus: Historia Langobardorum*, Waitz, G., (ed.), 1878, Hannover.

¹⁰ *Ioannis Malalae Chronographiai*, Thurn, H., (ed.), 2000, Berlin.

dating of major fortification projects implies that at least some of the building work Procopius mentions was begun in the first few years of Justinian's reign, as well as that it actually took place.¹¹ *Wars* similarly contains mention of Justinian ordering fortress construction in the East in 527 (*Wars*, 1.13.2). Dara – whose existence a few miles from the border opposite Nisibis was a constant source of concern to Persia – was refortified, as was Amida and a string of locations between the two cities, a programme that extended to the construction of entirely new forts (*Buildings*, 2.1.14ff; 2.3.27-28; 2.4.14).

Archaeology lends credence to Procopius' work of praise. What survives of the curtain wall of Martyropolis attests the kind of improvements Procopius attributes to Justinian, as does that of Sergiopolis.¹² Likewise, photographs taken of the ruins of Dara in the early twentieth century show two distinct phases of wall building – matching Procopius' description of Justinian's heightening and elaboration of the Anastasian defences – as well as outer cladding being added to the wall's towers. Dara, as a site of crucial importance, receives the most detailed treatment in *Buildings*, making it a good test case of Procopius' veracity. It is not unreasonable, therefore, to accept the evidence of Justinian's work on the city as an indication that there is a factual basis to the other projects Procopius mentions.¹³ It is consequently understandable, given that Procopius says that there was barely a city or existing defensive site that did not benefit from Justinian's attention, that he theoretically managed to secure the provinces of the Near East from Persian invasion (*Buildings*, 2.4.21).

John Malalas and Procopius also agree, moreover, that fortification was accompanied by military reforms designed to strengthen Rome's north east frontier. Malalas explains that Armenia received a supreme military commander (*magister militum per Armeniam*) whose army was composed not only of the local forces commanded by the previous *duces*, but at least four *numeri* reassigned from the command of the *magister militum per Orientem* (*Chronicle*, 18.10; see also the less detailed account at *Buildings*, 3.1.16). There is, furthermore, reason to see the creation of this new office as being the subject of especially detailed thought and concern. Sittas, the first *magister militum per Armeniam*, was not only an old comrade of Justinian who had served with him during the reign of his uncle,

¹¹ Cameron, A., 1985, *Procopius and the Sixth Century*, London: Duckworth, p.104-110 gives a cautious assessment of the extent to which the defensive infrastructure set out in *Buildings* Book Two reflected reality.

¹² Whitby, M., 1986a, 'Procopius and the Development of Roman Defences in Upper Mesopotamia,' in Freeman, P., & Kennedy, D., (eds.), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine Near East: Proceedings of a colloquium held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, Oxford; B.A.R., p.717-783.

¹³ Whitby, M., 1986b, 'Procopius' Descriptions of Dara (*Buildings* II.1-3),' in *ibid*, p.737-783. Whitby's two articles were written in part to respond to accusations that there was very truth to the *Buildings*, a suggest made by Croke, B., & Crow, J., 1983, 'Procopius and Dara,' *Journal of Roman Studies* 73, p.143-159. Croke and Crow's refuted conclusions underscore the caution shown in Cameron's account of the reliability of *Buildings* as a guide to the forts of the eastern frontier.

but also the husband of the Empress Theodora's sister Comito: a man bound by marriage to the imperial family, and therefore a loyalist who could be trusted with what was clearly considered to be a strategically vital command.¹⁴

Rome's calculations in the Caucasus in the late 520s and early 530s extended to influencing the neighbouring peoples of the steppe. The experience of the past few generations had after all suggested what war between Persia and the northern nomads could do for peace in the Near East. Through despatching prestige gifts accompanied by what was probably a considerable sum of money – something that probably contributed to Procopius' laments at the amount of cash squandered, in his eyes, on barbarians (for example *Secret History*, 8.5-6) – Malalas tells how Constantinople managed to forge an alliance with the queen of the Sabir Huns (*Chronicle*, 18.13).

This Hunnic confederation defeated two other Hunnic groups allied to Persia. Malalas records that the surviving king of one of these groups was sent to Constantinople, where he was executed. This may have been on Rome's request, suggesting that Roman authorities recognised that removing Persia's client kings – rather than just fighting their client confederations – was likely to unleash bitter struggles for power among the leading men of the steppe tribes, and even the breakdown of nomad coalitions. Both of these developments would have increased the risk of Persia coming under attack from a new king, hungry for prestige and plunder. Roman diplomacy on the steppe also clearly had longer-term objectives than merely fomenting a period of chaos. Justinian sought to win-over another Hunnic group by sponsoring the baptism of its ruler, a move that, were it to have been successful, would have made the Persians cultural enemies of these Huns rather than alternative patrons (*Chronicle*, 18.14).

The fact that the first half decade of Justinian's reign was evidently dominated by a programme of fortification and reform on the Mesopotamian and Caucasian frontier, combined with clever diplomacy on the steppe, indicates that his regime had the capacity to think strategically.¹⁵

¹⁴ Martindale, J., 1992, *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Volume IIIB, A.D. 527-641*, Cambridge University Press, p.1160-1163.

¹⁵ There is of course a long-running debate on the extent to which the Roman Empire could be said to have thought 'strategically' or even to have employed a 'grand strategy.' The works of Edward Luttwak are the classic cases for the prosecution: Luttwak, E. N., 1975, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third*, Baltimore, and Luttwak, E. N., 2009, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press. Contemporary sources that perhaps could be expected to discuss strategy, however, in fact resemble modern military tactical aide memoirs, like the *Strategikon* attributed to the Emperor Maurice (*Das Strategikon des Maurikios*, Dennis, G.T., & Gamillscheg, (eds.), 1981, Vienna). Rather than embracing notions of grand strategy of centuries' duration, it is wiser – not least owing to the dislocation Roman government could experience upon the death of an emperor – to see different regimes engaging in their own, often *ad hoc*, strategic calculations and the Roman Army as being the repository of operational-level knowledge won from experience. See Heather, P., 2018, *Rome Resurgent*, p.322-331 for a different but similarly balanced perspective.

Justinian's actions could also be seen as a sensible if not somewhat delayed reaction to the experience of the war of 502-506, when the Persians invaded via Armenia before laying siege to Amida (Procopius, *Wars*, 1.7.3-4). If such dramatic measures were wisely taken to the north of the Roman Near East, what did experience, resources and ingenuity make advisable to the south?

Justinian and the limitanei

One region that receives no mention in the fortification-heavy second book of the *Buildings* is the section of the eastern frontier south of Palmyra. Readers of Procopius must wait until Book Five to hear about Justinian's works in the southern region of Syria and the Palestinian provinces. This book is overwhelmingly dominated by descriptions of civic architecture rather than defensive works, and the sections that pay most attention to the southern stretch of the frontier (*Buildings*, 5.7-8) contain a lot of interesting detail about the region and events like the Samaritan revolts, but fail to mention a programme of refortification or the construction of new outposts.

The striking discrepancy between the northern and southern sections of the frontier hints at a deeper truth. Forts are of little use without a garrison, and there is good reason to believe that the 520s and 530s saw the development of a frontier policy peculiar to the Arabian frontier. According to Procopius, the Emperor Justinian abolished the entire branch of the Roman Army tasked with garrisoning the frontier, the *limitanei* (*Secret History* 24.12-14).¹⁶ This dramatic allegation has generally received ambiguous treatment in studies of the East Roman Army in Late Antiquity. A.H.M. Jones, for example, addresses the accusation obliquely in his masterly and massive survey of the later Roman Empire, preferring to marshal a host of evidence from across the empire to show that the *limitanei* remained in existence through to the beginning of the seventh century.¹⁷ This does not stop him, however, from entertaining the prospect that Procopius was in fact right, when discussing low estimates of the size of the sixth-century military establishment.¹⁸ Michael Whitby similarly states both that the *limitanei* remained a component of the army until the end of the sixth century, but also that Justinian may indeed have done what Procopius says he did, and abolish them.¹⁹

¹⁶ Procopius effectively describes a gradual process of abolition, alleging that pay was allowed to fall into arrears of four or five years, then saying that peace with the Persians – probably referring to the seven years of the so-called 'Eternal Peace' (533-540) – was used to claw back other allowances, before Justinian disbanded them through no longer classifying them as soldiers (*auto to tēs strateias onoma autous apheileto*) thereby leaving the frontiers unguarded (*ta men horia tēs Rōmaiōn archēs phulaktēriōn ektos emeinen*).

¹⁷ Jones, A.H.M., 1964, *The Later Roman Empire 284-602: a social, economic, and administrative survey*, Oxford: Blackwell, p.661-662; 669-672.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p.684.

¹⁹ Whitby, M., 1995, 'Recruitment in Roman Armies from Justinian to Heraclius (ca. 565-615),' in Cameron, A., (ed.), *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East Volume III: States, Resources, and Armies*, The Darwin Press: Princeton, N.J., p.61-155; contrast p.73 (footnote 44) with p.112.

Reading what Procopius suggests in the wider context of the *Secret History* and analysing archaeological evidence for the *limitanei* offers a plausible way to solve what clearly has been seen as an elusive problem. This is not the place to present a detailed deconstruction of the *Secret History*, a work as fascinating as it is unusual. Suffice to say, however, many of Procopius' complaints against the Emperor Justinian and his regime come across as exaggerated protests against what, when the invective is stripped-away, was a programme not of outright and deliberate imperial abuse, but of imperial reform and the expansion of the government's fiscal ambitions.²⁰ The combination of the overturning of established custom and putative greed can also be seen as causes and symptoms of another of Procopius' leading polemical concerns, namely Justinian's abuse of the Rule of Law, as suggested by Anthony Kaldellis.²¹

The overwhelming accusation levelled at Justinian, quite tellingly, is that of innovation (for instance *Secret History*, 8.26; 11.1, and 14.1) and Procopius obsesses over denouncing the emperor's alleged avarice (for example 8.31; 11.3, and 25.12). In passages either side of his denunciation of Justinian's policy towards the *limitanei*, moreover, Procopius complains about an intensification of taxation no doubt necessitated by the wars which he once welcomed. What would potentially in modern parlance be termed the restriction of ways to avoid or evade tax (*Secret History*, 23.1-24) makes perfect sense in this context, as does the invention of new ways to collect customs duties (*Secret History*, 25.1-10). Likewise, moving on to Justinian's military policy, it is telling that Procopius notes that soldiers in both the palace guard and the army in Italy were discharged if unfit for service (*Secret History*, 24.8-10), a deed he associates with Justinian's financial officers, the *Logothetes*, and that resonates with the need to alleviate the state's fiscal pressures as well as making sound military sense.

It is against this background of wider military and fiscal adjustment that changes to the status of the *limitanei* should be seen. Removing the 'name of soldier' from them disqualified the *limitanei* from receiving imperial stipends and donatives – representing a significant saving – and Procopius' accusation that pay had been allowed to fall into arrears is hardly an unsurprising fault to be levelled at any premodern military-fiscal administration, especially one trying to cope with the ambitions

²⁰ Cameron, A., 1985, *Procopius*, p.242-260 for the ways in which Procopius' writings and those of contemporaries like John Lydus can be understood as responses to what certainly was a reign of innovation and ambition, with all the shock and dislocation that such reforming energy can cause to established elites. See Sarris, 2006, *Economy and Society*, p.202-217 for Justinian's reform programme, and the extent to which it represented an attack on the East Roman aristocracy, the class to which Procopius belonged.

²¹ Kaldellis, A., 2004, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity*, University of Pennsylvania Press: Philadelphia. Kaldellis argues that the various abuses detailed in the third section of the *Secret History* equates to a commentary on a series of individual edicts (p.150-154), making this section 'a distorting mirror of the emperor's own propaganda' (p.152).

of a ruler like Justinian. Indeed, as the sixth century wore on, problems with pay would bedevil the Roman military establishment. In 540, Procopius records that the majority of the garrison of Beroea elected to defect to the invading Persians because they were in want of pay (*Wars*, 2.7.37) and Theophylact Simocatta tells how the army experienced a major mutiny in 588 when the Emperor Maurice was forced to try to reduce his soldiers' stipends (*History*, 3.1-5). Justinian's alleged attempt to make cuts to the *limitanei* therefore hardly seems out of keeping with the problems of the age. There is, however, clear evidence for the continued existence of *limitanei* after c.551, evidence that of course undermines Procopius' assertions. That said, the evidence for the continued existence of *limitanei* in the Roman Empire of the sixth century is not total.

Study of coin depositions in forts and other sites that can be associated with the *limitanei* from southern Mesopotamia to the Jordanian steppe shows a remarkable disappearance of the coinage minted under Justinian after the reform of 538/539. In one survey of six hoards and two site-finds, post-reform Justinianic coinage was either absent or minimal: Jerash produced only two such coins, and hoards found in the Palestinian locations of Rafah, Khirbet Deir Dassawi and Khirbet Fandaqumiye contained no coins later than 538 despite being deposited well after Justinian's reign.²² This disappearance is unique to the Syria-Palestine region. Forts on the Danubian frontier and elsewhere show no interruption of the coin supply and there seems to be no indication that the *limitanei* of the Arabian frontier were uniquely paid in kind rather than cash.²³

This exceptional trend suggests that Procopius was right, but only in the case of the Arabian frontier. Once one returns to the text of the *Secret History*, the apparent geographic particularity of the abolition of the *limitanei* starts to make a bit more sense. Despite the fact that Procopius is often read as issuing all-embracing critiques of Justinian's regime, his protests against Justinian's military policies actually appear to be set in a geographic scheme. The abuse of the *Logothetes* that proceeds the passage on the *limitanei* is localised to Italy (*Secret History*, 24.9-11) and the passage on the imperial guard, the *Scholarii*, that follows it is naturally focused on the city of Constantinople itself (24.15; 25, at which point their residence is specified as either 'Byzantium or Galatia').

²² Casey, P.J., 1996, 'Justinian, the *limitanei*, and Arab-Byzantine relations in the 6th c.' *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Vol. 9, 1996, p.214-222; p.218-219.

²³ *Ibid*, p.218. Casey also uses a number of non-frontier sites from across the empire as controls; they similarly show no interruption in the flow of coinage. The findings of Casey's study, which strongly implies that the *limitanei* disappeared from the Arabian border at some point after 538, is a powerful qualification on Fisher's otherwise persuasive case that the *limitanei* were removed from the frontier far earlier (Fisher, G., 2004, 'A New Perspective on Rome's Desert Frontier,' *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 336, p.49-60). Fisher does not cite Casey.

Such localisation is also evident in the discussion of the *limitanei*. Procopius may well say that guards were once set at many points on the empire's frontier, but he is then more specific and notes that this was especially the case in the East, to ward-off the inroads of the Persians and Saracens (24.12). It is these men who are the immediate antecedents of the men in the next sentence who are effected by Justinian's actions. Procopius, a native of Caesarea in Palestine, may have heard about reforms to the border guards in his home area and thus included this passage as the kernel of truth behind what may well have been meant as a universalising criticism.²⁴ Exaggeration is hardly absent even from the third, arguably quite forensic section of the *Secret History*.²⁵ Moving from Italy, to the Arabian frontier, then finally to the palace guard in his attacks on the emperor's approach to the army amounts to a subtle rhetorical scheme that suggests that the individual problems Procopius identifies equate to a general rule, revealing a regime rotten from West, to East, to the very centre of empire.

It is not hard to suggest why the *limitanei* of the Arabian frontier were the subjects of a specific policy of reorganisation. As the experience of the war under Anastasius showed, northern Mesopotamia and the southern Caucasus remained the main theatre of operations for great power conflict. The Palestinian provinces were separated from Persia by leagues of desert, the kind of terrain that presents a genuinely natural, relatively impassable frontier.²⁶ The need to move troops around the empire to meet more present threats and to provide manpower for the wars in Africa and Italy may also have taken their toll on the region's garrisons by the mid-530s. Rome's resources were, after all, limited.

Yet despite what Procopius would have his reader believe in the *Secret History*, Justinian did not leave the southern frontier unguarded. Alongside programmes of fortification and ambitious diplomatic adventures, another central tool of foreign policy used by Justinian – as well as by his predecessors and successors – was the outsourcing of imperial defence to peripheral, client groups. Hunnic groups were employed in the far north east, as has been discussed, and efforts to secure the west were made by appointing the Gepid King Moundos *magister militum per Illyricum* in 529

²⁴ Ibid, p.220.

²⁵ Kaldellis, A., 2009, 'The Date and Structure of Procopius' *Secret History* and His Projected Work on Church History,' *Greek, Roman and Byzantine Studies* 49, p.585-616, esp. p.592ff.

²⁶ Curzon of Kedleston, the Rt. Hon., 1907, *Frontiers: The 1907 Romanes Lecture*, University of Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.15-17. Lord Curzon points out how China was always effectively isolated by the Gobi Desert and how the Atlas Mountains, rather than the Mediterranean Sea, have functioned as the frontier of Europe in antiquity as well as in his own age. He also quotes Napoleon's account of the difficulty of traversing the Sinai Desert with an army. It is revealing that even today the Sinai functions as something of a buffer zone between Israel and Egypt, the latter of which has difficulty asserting state authority over the region, the former of which abandoned it in preference for a more narrow, easily-defensible – and admittedly also more politically prudent – line running from Gaza to Eilat in 1982.

(Malalas, *Chronicle*, 18.46) before spending the following decades alternating employment of the Gepids with the Lombards to constrain client pretensions.²⁷ Procopius' angry laments at the sheer extent of cash Justinian spent on winning-over and sustaining such client groups – gold being needed not only to secure allegiance and service, but also to be used by group leaders as a tool to consolidate and maintain their personal prestige and power – indicates that Justinian put perhaps more effort into client politics than previous regimes. Indeed, reports that Justinian's subventions reached even as far as Britain is highly suggestive of outstanding ambition and activity (*Secret History*, 19.13).²⁸

It is through the use of clients that Constantinople sought to defend the southern sector of the eastern frontier. Rome had long recruited bedouin groups into the army and also had a history of showing an interest in the border lands of Arabia, but the sixth century witnessed a dramatic intensification of the relationship between the empire and certain bedouin groups. Like the programme of military reform to the north, this intensification was the product of deliberate imperial policy – forced though in this case was Justinian's hand – and it received continued momentum through the reality or threat of war with Persia. The century of war that rocked the Near East in Late Antiquity would prove to have dramatic effects deep into the deserts that separated the two warring empires.

Arabians and Empires in Late Antiquity

For the millennia previous to Late Antiquity, bedouin groups had been on the margins of the great civilisations that had dominated the Fertile Crescent. When they had come to the attention of sedentary powers, it had generally been as little more than bandits or occasional tributaries. One only has to glance at depictions of bedouin on Assyrian reliefs to be reminded of the portraits painted by al-Ṭabarī or Sir Richard Burton in the Introduction.²⁹ Potentially starting as early as the creation of the Roman province of Arabia in 106, however, bedouin groups began to encounter the political, social, and economic advantages that service in the armies of the great empires could offer.³⁰ By the fourth and fifth centuries, it is apparent that this process of recruitment was well

²⁷ Sarris, P., 2011, *Empires of Faith*, p.170-183 for sixth century Roman policy on the Balkan frontier.

²⁸ Such reports may reflect reality. The archaeology of post-Roman Britain has revealed concentrations of East Roman material culture of sufficient kind and quantity to suggest direct and official links, which were only severed in the seventh century. See Harris, A., 2003, *Byzantium, Britain, and the West*, Stroud: Tempus, esp. p.139-194.

²⁹ Hoyland, R. G., 2001, *Arabia and the Arabs*, p.173 and p.191. The reliefs depict what seems to be a punitive expedition – Assyrian soldiers are seen burning tents and killing both men and women – and a skirmish between Assyrian infantry and half-naked men on camelback in headlong retreat.

³⁰ For the creation and history of the Roman province, see Bowersock, G.W., 1983, *Roman Arabia*, Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press. See p.90-98 for early Roman encounters with the bedouin, including their recruitment for military service as attested in the inscription at Ruwwāfa. Bowersock's, and others',

under way. Bedouin had found themselves either in regular Roman service – as members of units like the *Equites Saraceni indigenae* or the *Equites Saraceni Thamudeni* who are recorded in the *Notitia Dignitatum* – or hired as ad-hoc auxiliaries when the demands of individual campaigns warranted it.³¹

The terminology used by the Roman military machine, *Saraceni*, makes it clear that these men came from a nomadic background. They were probably born to groups that inhabited the frontier steppe lands of Syria and Jordan just beyond the boundary where conventional farming – and conventional sedentary administration – was possible, or the similarly liminal deserts of Sinai and eastern Egypt.³² ‘Saracen,’ as was noted in the Introduction, was the term Ammianus Marcellinus states was used specifically for nomadic tent-dwellers (*History*, 22.15.2). The word’s likely etymology, on which Ammianus is unfortunately silent, cements this clear and definite association. The root of ‘Saracen’ is, however, contested. Given that one of the first instances of its Semitic root appears in a context that refers to an Arabian group serving Rome, it has been argued that it was derived from the Nabataean Aramaic for ‘company’ or ‘confederation,’ incidentally hinting that the unit was raised from a number of different groups.³³

Plausible though this may seem, it has been pointed out that the inscription at Ruwwāfa, which is the inspiration for this explanation, is quite unique in deploying the term. It does so to translate the Greek term *ethnos*, which makes ‘company’ an odd rendering. It also bears no relation to then-current emic group terminology and begs the question as to why an entire people should have been named after a single group who are also explicitly said to have belonged to the tribe of Thamūd.³⁴ It is more convincing, therefore, to find the root of ‘Saracen’ in the Arabic verb meaning ‘to migrate to the inner desert’ (*sharraqa*)³⁵

The term probably entered the Roman lexicon from local dialects, whose speakers used it to refer to bedouin who seasonally wandered into the settled zone, before leaving it again for the deep

discussion of the Ruwwāfa inscription has now been superseded by Macdonald, M.C.A. et al., ‘Arabs and Empires before the Sixth Century’ in Fisher, G., (ed.), 2015, *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, p.11-89, esp. p.44-56.

³¹ *Notitia Dignitatum in partibus orientis occidentus*, Seeck, O., (ed.), 1876, Berlin, *Or.* 28 for the *Thamudeni* (under the *comes limitis Aegypti*) and *Or.* 32 for the *indigenae* (serving under the command of the *dux phoenicis*). See the Introduction for Ammianus Marcellinus’ account of the Emperor Julian hiring Arabian tribal mercenaries, who seem to have operated under their own leaders, for his Persian campaign.

³² This boundary runs along the 200 mm isohyet that essentially delimits the Arabian peninsula; see the useful map at Hoyland, R. G., 2001, *Arabia and the Arabs*, p.4.

³³ Graf, D., 1997, ‘The Saracens and the Defence of the Arabian Frontier,’ in Graf, D., (ed.), *Rome and the Arabian Frontier: From the Nabataeans to the Severans*, Farnham: Ashgate, p.1-26, p.14 for the etymology.

³⁴ Macdonald, M.C.A., 2009, ‘On Saracens, the Rawwāfah Inscription, and the Roman Army,’ in Macdonald, M.C.A., (ed.), *Literacy and Identity in Pre-Islamic Arabia*, Farnham: Ashgate, p.1-26, p.6-7.

³⁵ *Ibid*, p.4-5. Macdonald credits Alois Musil with originally devising this etymology.

desert. It must have become a convenient way for Roman administrators and soldiers to differentiate federates hailing from nomadic populations from those recruited from the settled peoples of the Near East. Even if one were to forget Rome's especially post-third century history of recruiting client groups, the fact that the empire had an interest in raising men from nomadic populations should not be surprising.³⁶ Recruiting from an external, wandering group was beneficial to the Roman state in a number of ways: it did not drag able-bodied men away from productive, taxable agriculture, and it offered the army born horse or camel cavalymen with expert knowledge of the frontier zone.

Indeed, the tendency of nomadic peoples to produce fighters superior to those raised from sedentary groups – Abel in this instance killing Cain – is something of a shibboleth in the anthropological literature on nomadism.³⁷ This notion is hardly just received wisdom. The experience of medieval sedentary powers that abutted the Great Asian Steppe shows that it was only the introduction of gunpowder that gave them the edge over their nomad foes.³⁸ One of the factors explaining nomad prowess, and a factor that also probably both motivated and enabled Rome to recruit effectively from bedouin groups, is the high mobilisation rate of nomadic populations. Studies of pastoralists and agriculturalists in Central Asia have shown that sedentary farming populations can only generally afford to lose one man in ten before production starts to suffer, whereas nomadic populations can see more than a quarter of their manpower disappear to fight before subsistence encounters difficulties.³⁹

Roman armies by Late Antiquity, furthermore, had also developed a far larger and tactically significant cavalry arm than was the case in earlier centuries. Procopius often records that entire armies in the Near East consisted entirely of horsemen (for instance, *Wars*, 1.15.15 and 2.3.19-20). This development gave imperial administrators further reasons to show an interest in bedouin recruitment. The greater emphasis on cavalry was prompted by the devastating defeats Roman

³⁶ See 'The Imperial Frontier and the Rise of the Periphery,' below, for further comments on federate recruitment.

³⁷ For a classic example, see Sinor, D., 1981, 'The Inner Asian Warriors,' in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 101, p.133-144. Sinor marshals evidence from across the Great Steppe – quoting from sources as diverse as Herodotus, the ancient Chinese historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, and the Russian *Primary Chronicle* – to show how effective, and terrifying, ancient and medieval nomad armies were.

³⁸ Paul, J., 2003, 'The State and the Military – A Nomadic Perspective,' in *Orientalwissenschaftliche Hefte* 12, p.25-68; p.25-26.

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.47-48. When discussing nomadic mobilisation rates with Professor Robert Hoyland, he noted that, in the course of his travels in Asia, he had once seen a small boy mounted on a pony pasture a herd of a hundred or more sheep, freeing the rest of his family's menfolk for other activities. This strikes a chord with Cole's account of pasturing camels amongst the Āl Murrah, who would habitually leave a single teenager – male or female – in charge of a family's camels (Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.37).

armies suffered at the hands of the Huns in the fifth century.⁴⁰ The Hunnic combination of mounted-archers, who wielded a new kind of longer, asymmetric, more powerful recurve bow, and heavy cavalry able to exploit any gaps in an infantry line caused by the archers' firepower – or provoked by their ability rapidly to withdraw if charged – was a devastating challenge to conventional Roman armies.⁴¹ As Procopius makes clear at the outset of the *Wars*, the mounted-archer was the king of the late antique battlefield (1.1.6-17).

By the sixth century, therefore, Roman tactics, equipment, and the composition of armies in the field had become unrecognisable to the legionary armies of the Republic and High Empire (whose experiences fighting the Parthians had provided an earlier indication of the vulnerability of heavy infantry to complex cavalry tactics).⁴² It is certainly telling that the *Strategikon* attributed to the Emperor Maurice places a discussion of cavalry tactics before mentioning infantry, and also contains lengthy sections on ambushes and how to mount surprise attacks utilising the mobility and range of horsemen (Books 1, 2, 4, and 9). The cavalry-heavy armies of the sixth century also required a more agile logistics capability, so it is unsurprising that camels – more flexible and hardier than oxen, mules, or horses – are recorded as playing a role in the military supply chain, another factor that must have interested the Roman Army in desert nomads (for example Procopius, *Secret History*, 30.15; Theophylact Simocatta records camels in service with the Persian army, *History*, 2.2.4).

The increased presence of bedouin manpower in sixth century Roman armies – the product of more intense imperial rivalry and the developments outlined above – was accompanied by an important change of the way in which these Arabians served. This policy shift has conventionally been under-appreciated in studies of the Roman Army in the East and was truly significant for the region, as following sections will show.⁴³ Before the first quarter of the sixth century, Rome – and probably also Persia – appears to have formed military alliances with a multiplicity of different Arabian tribal groups. Such a policy wisely ensured that state patronage was distributed in a way that counteracted the potential rise of a single, over-mighty client confederation on the frontier.

⁴⁰ Heather, P., 2018, *Rome Resurgent*, p.50-55 draws an analogy between the impact of the Huns on the tactics of the Roman Army with the impact of the Persian invasions on the Roman state in the third century.

⁴¹ Janniard, S., 2016, 'Les adaptations de l'armée romaine aux modes de combat des peuples des steppes (fin IVe-début VIe siècle apr. J.-C.)' in Roberto, U., & Mecella, L., (eds.), *Governare e riformare l'impero al momento della sua divisione: Oriente, Occidente, Illirico*, École Française de Rome, p.247-288, esp. p.250-264.

⁴² Ibid, p.266-279. The Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C. is the classic example of this tendency.

⁴³ For a detailed such study of the sixth-century Roman Army that is rooted in the Greco-Latin sources, see Whitby, M., 1995, 'Recruitment in Roman Armies.'

This policy seems to have been firmly in place before the reign of Justinian, contrary to suggestions that Rome, at least, had long possessed a tendency to contract a single bedouin group as a client power. Such assertions have been based solely on later Islamic sources and do not resonate with evidence hailing from the earlier Roman tradition.⁴⁴ If anything, when the Roman tradition touches upon the eastern frontier before the sixth century, it is clear that Roman generals found themselves dealing with a number of tribal groups, who alternately raided the Palestinian provinces or sought subsidies and federate alliance. In the account of the frontier disturbances of 497/498 that survives in the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor, for example, the general Eugenius and the *dux* of Palestine, Romanus, find themselves dealing with at least four identifiably separate bedouin groups (*Chronicle*, A.M. 5990).⁴⁵

Indeed, Joshua the Stylite's contemporary account of the Anastasian war shows that the conventional pattern of using many federate groups was very much still in place at the beginning of the sixth century. Despite the fact that Joshua identifies a prominent Persian Arabian federate, al-Nu'mān, for example, he is nonetheless able to name another leader, 'Adīd – apparently no subject of or lieutenant to al-Nu'mān – whose sizeable following defected to Rome (*Chronicle*, 75).⁴⁶ The similar assortment of Arabian groups allied to Persia's rival is implicit in Joshua's recollection that unlicensed raiding by Rome's federates necessitated the execution of a number of different Arabian leaders by Timostratus, the *dux* of Callinicus, to get the situation back under control (*Chronicle*, 88). A similar diversity of client groups is still evident in the late 520s, as John Malalas is able to name four different phylarchs of apparently equal status active on the Palestinian and south-Syrian frontier alongside the commanders of regular Roman forces (*Chronicle*, 18.16).

Shortly after the beginning of the reign of the Emperor Justinian, however, both empires came to prefer to sponsor a single, leading client group. Procopius, whose position as the secretary of the general Belisarius gave him excellent, albeit hardly constant, insights into imperial policy-making

⁴⁴ See for the leading example of this claim Shahīd, I., 1989, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, p.233-253. Shahīd's notion that the Salīhids constituted Rome's federate ally in the fifth century is entirely based upon material that he admits may descend (p.233-242) from Hishām al-Kalbī. Sources closer to the time give the names of some leading Arabian clients, but do not seem to think of them as belonging to a dynasty or a single entity. For further reservations on Shahīd, see Fisher, G., 2011, *Between Empires*, esp. p.79.

⁴⁵ *Theophanis Chronographia*, Classen, J., (ed.), 1839-1841, Bonn.

⁴⁶ *The Chronicle of Joshua the Stylite composed in Syriac A.D. 507 with a translation into English and notes by W. Wright*, Wright, W., 1882, Cambridge University Press. It is important to note that Joshua provides the names of Arabian (*ṭayyāyē*) federate leaders but does not offer such detailed information about other barbarian federate groups allied to the empires, like Huns and Goths. This is probably an indication of the established local fame and repute such men enjoyed amongst Joshua's contemporaries in the Levant, but may also hint at their greater political importance to the empires relative to the leaders of other allied contingents, at least locally. It is unclear whether the leader of the Persian *ṭayyāyē* whom Joshua calls al-Nu'mān was any relation to the Naṣrid family, which would produce a famous leader of the same name later in the sixth century.

in the first two decades of Justinian's rule – as he himself makes a point of stating (*Wars*, 1.1.3) – makes plain the reason behind the reform. It was the direct result of a desire to create a more formidable federate force, necessary given the new intensity of imperial rivalry.

And, in a word, this man (al-Mundhir, the leader of the Persian federates) proved himself the most difficult and dangerous enemy of all to the Romans. The reason was this (aition de en): that Alamoundaras, as he held the position of king, alone ruled over all of the Saracens in Persia (apantōn monos tōn en Persais Sarakēnōn ērxe). With the whole army he was able to make his inroad into the Roman domain wherever he wished; neither any commander of the Roman soldiers, who are called duces, nor any leader of the Saracens bound in treaty to the Romans, who are titled phylarchs, were strong enough to array themselves with their men against Alamoundaras, for the troops in the different districts were no match for the enemy.

On account of this, therefore (dio dē), the Emperor Justinian put Arethas the son of Gabalas – who ruled over the Saracens in the Arabias – in command of as many tribes as possible, putting upon him the dignity of king (axiōma basileus), a thing that had never before been done among the Romans.

(Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.45-47)⁴⁷

The empires had patently realised that building a larger client group and investing in a more stable and potent structure of leadership offered them military advantages that relying on a number of disparate, politically weak, and presumably quite small and potentially mutually-hostile federate groups could not.

This policy innovation, as Procopius reveals, came from Persia, whose preeminent client al-Mundhir had clearly created so much chaos on the frontier that Rome was forced to recognise that the old system of employing multiple federate groups had to change. In 531, Justinian therefore selected one phylarch, al-Ḥārith, for preferment, apparently establishing him over all of the tribes on the southern frontier by endowing him with an unprecedented degree of prestige – the ‘dignity of king’ – that probably was also accompanied by increased subsidies to ensure he possessed more

⁴⁷ The translation has been adapted to catch the Greek more closely. See Cameron, A., 1985, *Procopius*, esp. p.134-170 for a critical appreciation of Procopius' value as a historian. Cameron concludes that the trustworthiness of the *Wars* and his other works varies considerably owing both to the constraints of form and its (evolving) purpose. Early sections of *Wars* that fail to deal directly with his patron Belisarius, like 1.17.45-47, and that merely record events are among the most accurate.

material means to extend his influence and attract followers.⁴⁸ Despite the fact that Procopius supplies no firm evidence in this respect, he probably did not use the phrase ‘dignity of king’ lightly. A comparative case of the crowning of a favoured client, that of Ztathios of the Laz in the Caucasus, by Justinian’s predecessor Justin, shows what a significant ideological and material investment such a move was for the Roman state (Malalas, *Chronicle*, 17.9).⁴⁹ Finally, a graffito found at Jabal Usays, which was written by one of al-Ḥārith’s followers, shows that Procopius’s language reflected reality: al-Ḥārith is indeed explicitly called ‘the king’ (*al-malik*).⁵⁰ The viability of this policy of outsourcing defence to al-Ḥārith must have influenced the later removal of the local *limitanei*, as expensive, static garrisons were rendered somewhat surplus to requirements.

It is worth thinking briefly about how a man such as al-Ḥārith could have been made a contender for this new position in the first place. Anthropological study of the bedouin and of other nomadic, pastoralist peoples – whose lifestyle, segmentary lineage organisation and ethos of social egalitarianism closely resemble those of the bedouin – suggest that such groups only start to develop pronounced and permanent forms of political hierarchy through interaction with state powers. Simply put, in order to exercise influence and control over nomadic groups, states need a man with whom they can do business. This man, usually a figure with some kind of pre-existing mediating or spokesman-like role, can be given access to physical resources from the state, or can be imbued with authority directly by state agents, both of which catalyse a process of social stratification through creating a leader of a kind previously unknown. An example from early twentieth-century Arabia would be the exceptional eminence of men like the Rwala sheikh Nuri Sha’alan, who benefitted from the Ottoman policy of granting tribal leaders land and formal tax-raising powers. This allowed him to finance permanent bodies of retainers and gave him a power beyond and in excess of that which he had formerly enjoyed as little more than a first-among-equals.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Al-Ḥārith was probably chosen by Justinian owing to the vital role he played in suppressing the Samaritan revolt of 529-531, which showed him to be a competent, fearsome, and dependable force in the region (Malalas, *Chronicle*, 18.35).

⁴⁹ It was clearly designed not only to reward a client and to bind him ever more closely to Constantinople, but also to help him consolidate his regional power. Ztathios not only received recognition of royal status, he also gained a Roman wife, prestige-clothing, and gifts to distribute to his followers.

⁵⁰ Shahīd, I., 1995, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century: Volume 1 Part 1*, Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, p.117-124 for the graffito.

⁵¹ Lancaster, W., 1981, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, p.83-85. Lancaster similarly opines that the reported tendency of some twentieth-century sheikhs to put on declamatory displays of power – huge feasts staffed by robotically obedient servants – was a charade developed to impress Ottoman administrators and other outsiders, suggesting how the appearance of power, as well as its actuality, can be a product of interaction with states.

This process has also been tracked in the case of the development of the *malik* of Pashtun nomads in Afghanistan from mediator to leader, and likewise in the case of the *sardar* of nomads in Iranian Baluchistan.⁵² This development, and the consequent extent of tribal stratification and the power of tribal leaders over their tribes, is more pronounced the closer the tribe physically is to locations of state power. It is hardly impossible, therefore, that the very notion of the kind of military and political leadership that is implicit within the office of phylarch held by Arabian figures in Late Antiquity was introduced to the region in the first place by the actions of the Roman Empire. Al-Ḥārith's further promotion therefore represents a well-documented culmination of the role of the great powers in planting structures of leadership in the sands of the Arabian deserts.

Following the promotion of al-Ḥārith, Rome became closely associated with the Jafnid lineage of a group traditionally called the Ghassān, which mirrored Persia's already established links to the Naṣrid dynasty, conventionally understood to have been the ruling family of the Lakhm. As was noted in Chapter One, recent years have seen a considerable degree of interest directed at these two groups and to the phenomenon of imperial Arabian clientage.

Jafnid or Ghassān?

This attention has produced a number of significant insights into late antique Arabian groups, not least the way in which closer political association with the sedentary empires contributed to broader and often pre-existing processes of acculturation. Greg Fisher, most notably, has argued that both the Jafnid and Naṣrid lines were neither wholly foreign to, but nor a fully integrated part of, the Roman and Persian empires. They were groups 'in between,' who should be seen as only 'occasional participants in the religious, political, and cultural world of Late Antiquity.'⁵³

Fisher's choice of the language of 'Jafnid' and 'Naṣrid' is deliberate. It reflects his underlying contention that writing the history of the imperial Arabian clients has to be restricted to writing the history of their leaders.⁵⁴ This constrained perspective is in many respects quite reasonable, owing to the nature of the source material. The overwhelming majority of the written evidence that survives from the ancient world – as well as what did not survive – was composed by members

⁵² For the case of the Pashtun *malik*, see Glatzer, B., 1983, 'Political Organisation of Pashtun Nomads and the State,' in Tapper, R., (ed.), *The Conflict of Tribe and State in Iran and Afghanistan*, London: Croom Helm, p.212-232, and the *sardar* of the Yaramadzai Salzman, P., 1983, 'Why Tribes have Chiefs: A Case from Baluchistan,' in the same volume, p.262-283. See also Salzman, P., 1974, 'Tribal Chiefs as Middlemen: The Politics of Encapsulation in the Middle East,' *Anthropological Quarterly* 47:2, p.203-210. It has also been observed that tribal mediators can grow into leaders through the need of a tribe for a more powerful system of leadership to resist the encroachments of the state, as well as to act as the conscious, or unconscious, means of that encroachment.

⁵³ Fisher, G., 2011, *Between Empires*, p.ix.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p.3-7.

of the elite for the elite, reflecting elite concerns like personal and political relationships between members of domestic and foreign elite groups. More specifically, such influential literate elites tended to be members of the highest tier of the urban aristocracies – if they were not churchmen – with, in the case of Rome, the elite of Constantinople often speaking for the whole empire. It is hardly an exaggeration to say that history has never been able to hear the voices of over ninety-nine percent of the men and women who lived in Late Antiquity.

Thus, it is unsurprising that the sources often offer only occasional and heavily inflected glances of the leaders of federate groups rather than detailed descriptions of them and the people they commanded. This tendency helps to explain Fisher's cautious assessment of the nature and significance of groups like the one led by the Jafnids, as well as his hardly unrelated insistence that the relationships Rome cultivated with federate leaders were deeply personal affairs rather than alliances between groups.⁵⁵ Fisher's studies of the imperial clients are of course not limited simply to tracking the vicissitudes of the interactions between men like the Emperor Justinian and the Jafnid al-Ḥārith, given his wider discussions on acculturation, but the strict focus on elite leadership risks obscuring deeper and more important consideration of what the existence of those elite relationships presupposed.

Above all, Arabian elites were a target for Roman and Persian cultivation for one overriding reason. They could control mass. It was access to a mass of fighting men that prompted imperial administrators to develop relationships with men like al-Ḥārith in the first place, and it was the maintenance and expansion of this mass that ensured their continued importance in the eyes of their overlords, which itself helped them to win prestige and therefore influence to expand in a positively reinforcing cycle of social and political power.⁵⁶

Secondly, the tendency of empire-Arabian client associations to manifest themselves as personal relationships should not be singled-out as something peculiar to imperial dealings with Arabian federates and cited as unique evidence for their lack of importance. Assuming that the alternatives to ties of personally-expressed support and reciprocity between leaders could either be agreements

⁵⁵ Ibid, for instance p.13, p.180 and p.212. Fisher argues that the expression of Rome's relations with her Arabian federates through personal relationships with federate elites implies that the federate groups themselves were relatively insignificant entities.

⁵⁶ This consideration is naturally assumed by Fisher, but his 2011 study rarely touches on the mass concealed by the sources' focus on their leaders in an explicit manner. The underlying importance of mass to elite Arabian power is stated more clearly in Fisher, G., 2018, 'Reflections on Arab Leadership in Late Antiquity,' in Nehmé, L., and Al-Jallad, A., (eds.), *To the Madbar and Back Again: Studies in the Languages, Archaeology, and Cultures of Arabia dedicated to Michael C.A. MacDonald*, Leiden: Brill, p.489-521.

between oligarchies acting as corporate persons or between depersonalised institutions, it is unclear whether Roman diplomacy in this period ever expressed itself in either of these ways.

Interaction with the Germanic peoples of the Roman world's western riverine frontiers often took the form of intensely personal dealings between imperial patrons and barbarian kings. Roman emperors of the fourth century used a combination of tools like prestige gifts, banquets, and personal threats alternatively to overawe and to cajole individual barbarian rulers, casting them aside when necessary and cultivating their rivals in order to prevent one king becoming all powerful.⁵⁷ This personal dynamic is even more in evidence in the fifth century, when Roman emperors in the West found themselves under increasing and ultimately fatal pressure from a number of new barbarian confederations that were causing chaos on imperial soil. In 442, for instance, Valentinian III betrothed his daughter Eudocia to the son of the Vandal ruler of what had formerly been Roman North Africa in an attempt to bind the Vandal royal line to the empire.⁵⁸

Diplomatic relations between Rome and Persia, moreover, likewise tended to take the form of undertakings given and expressed between the heads of the two ruling dynasties. Procopius records that the Emperor Arcadius decided to make the Sassanian Shah Yazdgerd the guardian of his infant son Theodosius in 408, in a cunning move to ensure Theodosius' easy ascent to the throne and domestic stability during his minority (*Wars*, 1.2.1-10). Almost two centuries later, when the Shah Khusro II had been deposed by the usurper Vahram, it was the Persian dynast's turn to ask the Roman Emperor Maurice for help in restoring his throne, by appealing to the emperor's interest in defending the principle of legitimate succession. The purportedly verbatim copy of the letter sent from Khusro to Maurice that Theophylact Simocatta includes in his history is dominated by the personalised language of monarchy, not the words of abstract inter-state relations (*History*, 4.11.1-11). Khusro waxes lyrical on the virtues of a good king, alludes to the shared interest both rulers have in supporting the ideology of legitimate monarchy, and ends with Khusro signing-off as Maurice's 'son' (*γίος*) as well as his 'suppliant' (*iketēs*) (4.11.11).

It was, therefore, simply in the nature of late antique diplomacy for interactions between states and state-like entities to take the form of relationships between rulers. The manifestation of the

⁵⁷ The paradigmatic study of the nature of the relationships between federate allies and Rome remains Heather, P., 2001, 'The Late Roman Art of Client Management: Imperial Defence in the Fourth Century West,' in Pohl, W., Wood, I., and Reimitz (eds.), *The Transformation of Frontiers: From Late Antiquity to the Carolingians*, Leiden: Brill, p.15-68, see esp. p.56 for a telling passage on the personal risks routinely run by client kings.

⁵⁸ See Sarris, P., 2011, *Empires of Faith*, p.43 for a short description of the politics of Eudocia's betrothal. Other Germanic leaders, like Athaulf, who became king of the Visigoths in the second decade of the fifth century, had sought a marriage alliance with the imperial family in order to help secure a long-term political and territorial settlement for the peoples they led on imperial soil.

Roman alliance with the Jafnids as a series of personal relations should consequently not be seen as evidence for the federates' marginality. There are, furthermore, other reasons to look beyond structures of elite leadership. There is also sufficiently suggestive evidence, and ways of approaching that evidence, that encourages a renewed effort to expand the study of Arabian federates beyond the Jafnid line.

Importantly, there is reason to use the language of 'Ghassān.' Fisher's insistence on using 'Jafnid' in preference to Ghassān, on the partial basis that 'Ghassān' is not used by sixth century writers, is not a perfect solution to the naming problem, given that 'Jafnid' is also not employed by contemporary authors as Fisher himself acknowledges.⁵⁹ 'Ghassān,' as the name of some kind of group of bedouin operating somewhere in north Arabia, is hardly a modern coinage. Ammianus Marcellinus uses it to refer to a group of *Saraceni* led by a certain Podosaces, who operated on the Persian side during the Emperor Julian's invasion of 363 (*History*, 24.2.4).⁶⁰

As Christian Robin has shown, moreover, 'Ghassān' is widely attested in Ḥijāzi epigraphy of the third and fourth centuries in a way that implies the group was present in a territory stretching southwards from al-'Ulā in the northern Ḥijāz and possibly including Yathrib.⁶¹ The vast distances it is possible to travel by camel and the social contacts such travel can sustain means that is hardly inconceivable for a single, self-identifying group to be found across such a large area.⁶² Significantly, the name of Ghassān may also not be entirely absent in the sixth century. A letter attributed to the Bishop Simeon of Bēth-Arshām, written in response to the massacre of Christians at Najrān in the 520s, refers to a member of the Jafnid line as 'king of the *my*,' which has been accepted as a rendering of Ghassān by both Robin and Robert Hoyland.⁶³

There is also a veritable explosion in the use of Ghassān to describe tribal groupings present in north Arabia in the Islamic historical tradition. In the poetry preserved in the *Sīrah*, which the last chapter revealed to be quite an insightful source, the name abounds. In the poetry associated with

⁵⁹ Fisher, G., 2011, *Between Empires*, p.3; p.83. Fisher nonetheless prefers the term as it reflects his emphasis on the elite nature of the relationship between empire and Arabian federates.

⁶⁰ Podosaces is described as a 'bandit of notorious name' (*famosi nominis latro*) the phylarch of the Ghassānid Saracens (*phylarchus Saracenorum Assanitarum*).

⁶¹ Robin, C., 2015, 'Ghassān en Arabie,' in Genequand, D., & Robin, C., (eds.), *Les Jafnides: des rois arabes au service de Byzance: VI^e siècle de l'ère chrétienne: actes du colloque de Paris, 24-25 novembre 2008*, Paris: Éditions de Boccard, p.79-120; p. 95-102.

⁶² Crone, P., 1994, 'The Tribe and the State,' p.449. Crone contrasts the huge geographic spread of tribal identities in Arabia with the smaller areas inhabited by East African nomadic tribes, who are cattle, not camel, nomads, and thus cannot range as far.

⁶³ Robin, C., 2015, 'Ghassān en Arabie,' p. 103. Hoyland, R., 2009, 'Late Roman *Provincia Arabia*, Monophysite Monk and Arab tribes: a problem of centre and periphery,' in *Semitica et Classica* 2, p.117-139; p.118. For the text of the letter, see Shahīd, I., 1971, *The Martyrs of Najrān: New Documents*, Brussels: Société des Bollandistes.

the Battle of Badr, for example, the Meccan al-Ḥārith b. Hishām b. al-Mughīra accuses Muḥammad of seeking an alliance with the Ghassān instead of staying true to the bonds of kinship (*Sīrah*, p.519). Likewise, in a poem attributed to one of the Anṣār, Ka‘b b. Mālīk, he rhetorically asks whether Ghassān have heard news of the battle, and how valiantly Muḥammad’s men acquitted themselves (p.527). Further examples are to be found in the poetry associated with the Battle of Uḥud. Ka‘b again asks whether or not Ghassān have heard of the battle (p. 613) and, in a later poem, praises the valour and fighting prowess of Ghassān in response to Meccan boasting at their victory (p.624).

It is not solely in the *Sīrah* that Ghassān are to be found. The earliest surviving work of Islamic history, the *Book of History* (*Kitāb al-Ta’rīkh*) of Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ al-‘Uṣfurī, locates Ghassān in southern Syria during the early years of the seventh-century conquests.⁶⁴ In the Account of the Year Thirteen, Khālīd b. al-Walīd is recorded as having fought Ghassān in the environs of Marj Rāhiṭ where, interestingly, it is also mentioned that they have their villages (*qurā*) (*Book of History*, p.119). This appears to be the first attestation of a tradition of locating Ghassān in the area that was followed by later historians, such as al-Ṭabarī, who notes that a number of the tribes that fought on the Roman side at the Battle of Yarmouk belonged to Ghassān (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, p.1.2347).

The high incidence of the appearance of Ghassān in the Islamic historical tradition admittedly contrasts with the term’s relative scarcity in the contemporaneous sources for the sixth century. It is unclear, however, why any early Islamic author would have introduced the coinage, not least since Ghassān’s appearance as allies of the Roman enemies of Islam implies that there was little to gain from trying to assert such a tribal affiliation. Another tribal name, which appears to be some kind of equivalent to Ghassān, that is very well attested in early Islamic sources like the *Sīrah* is Ma‘add (for instance, p.527, p. 612, p.652). It is also to be found in Procopius, though only once (*Saraceni...Maddēnoi kalountai, Wars*, 1.19.14), something that shows the Islamic tradition did remember ancient tribal names. The greater proximity of members of Ghassān to Rome – the

⁶⁴ For a short biography of Khalīfa, see Zakkar, S., ‘Ibn Khayyāṭ al-‘Uṣfurī,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, R., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., & Heinrichs, W.P., (eds.) accessed on the 6th January 2019. Khalīfa died in 854 and his Book of History probably dates to the turn of the eighth and ninth centuries. His text is available in *Tārīkh Khalīfa ibn Khayyāṭ*, al-‘Umarī, A., (ed.), 1977, Damascus & Beirut: Dār al-Qalam.

Maddēnoi are placed far to the south – may perversely have prompted them to be addressed in more specific, individual terms than in general, robbing the surviving sources of much mention.⁶⁵

Al-Ṭabarī's description of a number of tribes – Lakhm, Judhām, Balqayn, Balī, and 'Āmila – as being affiliated to Ghassān resonates with the contention of Ibn al-Kalbī that 'Ghassān' described a tribal confederation, a *jimā*.⁶⁶ Considering the name's survival from at least the age of Ammianus Marcellinus and into the pages of later Islamic history, and the apparent tendency of tribes with their own name to claim affiliation as 'Ghassān,' Robin is perhaps right to see the name functioning in Late Antiquity as a term of prestige. It was probably originally established by one line of leaders, then adopted by later lineages like the 'Jafnids' to identify themselves with a noble people, a distinguished heritage, and to add to the glory of their own followers.⁶⁷ This could be seen as a simple political strategy that did not require the actual existence of a people who thought of themselves as Ghassān, but it is hard to believe that generations of leaders would have promoted it unless it spoke to some kind of pre-existing identity among their followers, or a sense of identity that could be brought into new life.⁶⁸ The groups the Jafnids controlled may have had other social self-conceptions as well as Ghassān, but the balance of evidence, and the basic consideration that elite power means nothing without the ability to appeal to and control mass, makes it highly likely that 'Ghassān' was a genuine term of social identity for Rome's sixth-century Arabian federates, as well as a useful tool of analysis to extend study of such federate groups beyond their leaders.

There is a final consideration that further encourages the use of the wider, tribal term, and that helps to explain the federates', and later Arabian conquerors', potency. As mentioned above, history is replete with examples of nomadic armies swiftly overcoming and destroying sedentary foes. At least one of the explanations behind this phenomenon has less to do with the nature of nomadism, and more to do with the nature of the tribe.

Tribal groups, as one telling account from Menander the Guardsman will later show with relation to the Ghassān, possess a higher degree of political egalitarianism than do states. Even though this can often frustrate decisive political action through neutering the power of whatever hierarchy

⁶⁵ In the *Sīrah*, the Ma'add are said to be allies of Mecca (p.612) and enemies of Muḥammad, an allegiance that supports Procopius' location of them just north of the Yemen.

⁶⁶ Robin., 2015, 'Ghassān en Arabie,' p.84-85. Robin does not identify this concordance.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.110.

⁶⁸ Were one to reject the sixth-century attestation of Ghassān, and to see a gulf between the fourth century and Islamic-era appearances of the term, one would do well to be reminded that gaps in a social group's name's attestation does not necessarily mean the actual disappearance of that group, as Peter Heather has shown with respect to certain Germanic groups in Late Antiquity (Heather, P., 1998, 'Disappearing and Reappearing Tribes,' in Pohl, W., & Reimitz, H., (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*, Leiden: Brill, p.95-111).

the tribe may possess, it can also enhance it. Once the tribe has agreed on a course of action, it is gripped by a sense of common purpose that translates decisions into spontaneous, effective action, enacted by all members of the tribe. As Crone has explained, the tribe does not need to raise soldiers, tax a population, or overcome the manifold private interests that habitually work against central state policy.⁶⁹ Such a horizontal political structure has been identified as one of the underpinnings of the martial potency of the Huns, for instance.⁷⁰ Roman sources may have been interested in powerful individuals, but their power was ultimately the product of a collective that had the capacity to act as one.

The Imperial Frontier and The Rise of the Periphery

It is only relatively recently, as noted in Chapter One, that the world of Late Antiquity and, more specifically, the emergence of the Arabian clients of the great empires, has become important to the study of early Islam. Yet, when one stands back from the narrow parameters of conventional Islamic history and surveys the broad history of early medieval Eurasia, one is struck by a phenomenon that makes both the role of imperial Arabian federates in the late antique empires and even the rise of Islam seem almost natural. This phenomenon is what could be called the ‘rise of the periphery’: the emergence of states and patterns of quite profound social, cultural, political and economic development in areas that were previously the poor, unknown, and undeveloped hinterlands of the ancient civilisations of the Mediterranean and Fertile Crescent.⁷¹

This truly transformational trend has become accepted as fundamental to explaining both the fall of the Western Roman Empire and the emergence of a Europe, the linguistic and even political outlines of which are still discernible today. Peter Heather’s lengthy, wide-ranging and perceptive book on the birth of medieval Europe, *Empires and Barbarians*, for example, sees the peripheral peoples of northern and eastern Europe – groups largely falling under the catch-all names of Germans, Slavs, and Scandinavians – experiencing the same kind of political and social developments through contact with the Roman Empire and its Byzantine and Carolingian successors.⁷² The frontiers between empires and peripheral peoples were less gulfs of separation, more the petri dishes of cultural evolution and new states.

⁶⁹ Crone, P., 1994, ‘The Tribe and the State,’ p.458-459.

⁷⁰ Janniard, S., 2016, ‘Les adaptations de l’armée romaine,’ p.264-266. The Hunnic castes of *logades* were able rapidly to mobilise Hun warriors, creating a clear and effective chain of command from leaders like Attila to his fighters.

⁷¹ Hoyland, R.G., 2015, *In God’s Path*, p.16-21 offers a concise yet telling global perspective on what he calls ‘The Rise of the Peripheral Peoples.’

⁷² Heather, P., 2009, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development, and The Birth of Europe*, London: Pan Books. See also Heather, P., 2006, *The Fall of the Roman Empire: A New History of Rome and the Barbarians*,

Indeed, it is now widely recognised that frontiers in the pre-modern world tended to be zones of intense communication and interaction. Scholarship need not have waited for Dick Whittaker's programmatic book on the subject to recognise this propensity.⁷³ One of the British Empire's closest analogues to a Roman proconsul, Lord Curzon of Kedleston, demonstrated an appreciation of the nature of pre-modern borderlands in an insightful lecture he gave in Oxford in 1907: 'the idea of a demarcated Frontier is itself an essentially modern conception, and finds little or no place in the ancient world.'⁷⁴

In the case of the Roman Empire, this is suggested by the very Latin word used for the frontier. *Limes* refers not to a barrier, or to a line that strictly demarcated Roman civilisation from the world of the barbarian, but rather to a zone of land bridging the gap between the imperial heartland and the world beyond, which was defined by routes of communication.⁷⁵ The ideology of a sharply-drawn frontier may nonetheless have existed in the Roman mind, but, as so often, 'ideology is no guide to the reality.'⁷⁶

The frontier covered wide tracts of land within and beyond the convenient lines on the map that strictly define modern diagrams of the Roman Empire. Imperial power ebbed and flowed far beyond static fortifications controlling lines of communication like rivers or roads, such as the *Via Nova Traiana* in Arabia.⁷⁷ The *limes* could also occasionally represent a band of intense Romanisation between external and internal frontiers, given the tendency of rural populations either side of the frontier to resemble one another more than their own elite groups.⁷⁸ This

Oxford University Press, esp. p.46-99 for the transformation of the Germanic world of the Rhenish and Danubian hinterlands in the first to fourth centuries.

⁷³ Whittaker, C.R., 1994, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study*, The Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore and London. Whittaker's book is often cited as the chief work that undermined the notion of a rigid, accurately-delimited, and fortified frontier. Whittaker nonetheless owed a lot to Isaac, B., 1992, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, Oxford University Press.

⁷⁴ Curzon of Kedleston, 1907, *Frontiers*, p.49. Lord Curzon essentially suggests that the ability to police and control rolling, relatively low-lying landscapes and rivers abutting another power's sphere of influence, thereby making a frontier, was unknown before the development of the modern state. He nonetheless identifies three types of terrain as 'natural frontiers' owing to the extreme challenges they pose to movement and communication: mountains, seas – admitting that the Mediterranean in Antiquity was no such natural frontier – and deserts (p.11-13).

⁷⁵ Whittaker, C.R., 1994, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, esp. 49-59 and p.200-202. The term *limes* itself may actually never have been in official use beyond North Africa in antiquity despite its modern blanket use. *The Oxford Latin Dictionary* defines *limes* first as a 'strip of uncultivated ground used to mark the division of land,' then as a boundary, and finally gives three other definitions all of which refer to roads, lines of travel, and ground marked by the passage of travellers (p.1031).

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p.69; see also p.1-30.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p.56-59. There is considerable debate concerning almost every aspect of the fortifications straddling the *Via Nova Traiana*, such as who precisely built them, when, for what purpose, and for how long they were actually occupied. See Isaac, B., 1992, *The Limits of Empire*, for a detailed discussion of frontier fortifications in Roman Arabia.

⁷⁸ Whittaker, C.R., 1994, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, p.121-130.

tendency was hardly limited to late antique Roman frontiers. Even the sixteenth century Anglo-Scottish border was remarkable to contemporaries for being home to families and communities far closer in speech, manner, and customs to their opposite numbers just across the legal frontier than to their ostensible countrymen.⁷⁹

Fundamentally, the natural proximity bred of geography encouraged barbarians and Romans to interact at the frontier frequently and in a number of ways that eventually served to bring the two worlds closer together. The subsistence requirements of troops stationed in the frontier zone, for instance, gave barbarian producers a ready market, a structural economic relationship that led to the flow of wealth and well-made manufactured items like weaponry into barbarian lands. An awareness of this relationship has, incidentally, already been adduced to explain the mysteries of Meccan trade.⁸⁰ More significantly, as has been implied above, contact and acculturation between populations internal and external to the Roman Empire possessed a pronounced military dynamic.

Simply put, interaction either through raiding the rich provinces of the empire or by exchanging military service for subsidies as clients of the empire catalysed increased complexity beyond the frontier. Bordering barbarian societies had previously existed in small, scattered groups with limited hierarchies and a productive potential sitting at subsistence level. Increased development – the evolution of larger groups, social differentiation, and surplus wealth – seems to have both followed and been engendered by the evolution of ever more pronounced military hierarchies, led by men able to access the wealth and prestige associated with the empires. Especially once these military hierarchies stabilised into royal families able to maintain the loyalty of their retainers across the generations, their adoption of the other trappings of Mediterranean civilisation – literacy and bureaucratic administration, estate-level production, and what could often be the helpfully centralising institutions of Christianity – transformed vast swathes of Europe beyond recognition.⁸¹

Scholarship's awareness of the deep structural transformations that would eventually see northern Europe eclipse the Mediterranean as the centre of cultural and political activity from the first millennium onwards owes much to a closely-related though somewhat separate approach to the barbarians. Namely, that is to study these peoples as ethnic groups: as self-identifying peoples

⁷⁹ MacDonal, G.F., 1971, *The Steel Bonnets: The Story of the Anglo-Scottish Border Reivers*, Barrie and Jenkins: London, p.42-49.

⁸⁰ Crone, P., 2007, 'Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan leather trade,' *Bulletin of the School of African and Oriental Studies*, 70.1, p.63-88.

⁸¹ For an exemplary discussion of the development of what became the Slavic lands – historically the least complex parts of Europe – and the ways in which groups that appear to have been little more than warbands grew into states, see Heather, P., 2009, *Empires and Barbarians*, p.531-576.

expressing subjective consciousness largely through a set of social signifiers like language, notions of descent, and customs. In the aftermath of World War Two, Germanophone scholarship on the ancient German world found itself driven to investigate anew the origins of peoples like the Goths and Franks, not least to question the notion that ethnicity – what made those peoples who they were – is biological, primordial, and immutable. This crusade has been, and continues to be, pursued by scholars adhering to what could be called the ‘Vienna School,’ and has led to an ever-greater and more nuanced appreciation of the construction of peoples beyond the geographic boundaries, and then within the collapsed frontiers, of the Western Roman Empire.⁸² This process is now known universally as ‘ethnogenesis.’

Crucial to ethnogenesis was the experience of war. Barbarian peoples like the Visigoths, who eventually established a kingdom in south-western Gaul in the fifth century, had come into being on the march. They were forged from various constituent groups – whose origins were both internal as well as external to the empire – and tempered through conflict with Rome. War caused both the social dislocation and created the opportunities that combined to form the fire for this forging. Old bonds and identities could melt away as the coercive power and ideological legitimacy that gave them life turned to ash amidst the wreckage of defeat, and the opportunities for personal advancement and material gain through connecting oneself to the banner of a successful warband could be considerable. Emotional ties born on the battlefield solidified these new connections, consolidating a group’s identity with victory giving the group its own mythology, political power and social status. Eventually, it would become very difficult to draw the line between what should be called an ‘army’ and what should be termed a ‘people.’⁸³

⁸² The term is used in this sense, and perhaps coined, by Walter Pohl in Pohl, W., 1997, ‘Ethnic Names and Identities in the British Isles: A Comparative Perspective,’ in Hines, J., (ed.), *Anglo-Saxons from the Migration Period to the Eighth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, Woodbridge: Boydell Press, p.7-40, p.7. The foundational tome of the Vienna School is Wenskus, R., 1961, *Stammesbildung und Verfassung: das Werden der frühmittelalterlichen Gentes*, Böhlau: Cologne. See Gillet, A., 2002, ‘Introduction: Ethnicity, History, and Methodology,’ in Gillet, A., (ed.), *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages*, Brepols: Turnhout, p.1-18 and Pohl, W., 2002, ‘Ethnicity, Theory, and Tradition: A Response,’ in *ibid*, p.221-239, for summaries of the nature and impact of the approach pioneered by Wenskus and pursued by his successors at the University of Vienna and beyond. Another useful account is Noble, T., 2006, ‘Introduction: Romans, barbarians, and the transformation of the Roman Empire,’ in Noble, T., (ed.), *From Roman Provinces to Medieval Kingdoms*, Routledge: London and New York, p.1-27. The insights of Wenskus and his followers in many respects prefigured other late twentieth century responses to the national idea, like that of Anderson, B., 1983, *Imagined Communities*, Verso: London and New York. For the notion of ethnicity as a system of social signifiers with detailed examples from Germanic antiquity, see Pohl, W., 1998, ‘Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity,’ in Pohl, W., and Reimitz, (eds.), *Strategies of Distinction: The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300-800*, Brill: Leiden, p.17-69.

⁸³ For a somewhat poetic description of this process, see Wolfram, H., 1990, ‘Einleitung oder Überlegungen’, in Wolfram, H., & Pohl, W., (eds.), *Typen der Ethnogenese unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der Bayern I*, Der Österreichischen Akademie Der Wissenschaften: Vienna, 1990, 19–31, esp. p. 22 (Wolfram commits a minor anachronism in the use of the term ‘Ostrogoth’ in this passage, otherwise his reconstruction is accurate).

It generally seems to have been normal in early medieval Europe for the kind of structural social and political changes that led to the rise of states in formerly stateless areas, or new states on erstwhile imperial soil, to have been articulated through the language and ideology of the *ethnos* (or at least for both processes to have been closely related). Whether this necessarily was the case beyond the world of the Roman West is an open question. It is a question that has arisen – and that is kept open – because of the disciplinary boundaries between scholars of the Roman West and students of Islam. Islam has also made the history of the barbarians of the East seem so foreign to that of the successors of the barbarians of the West – the ancestors, putative or otherwise of modern European scholars – that comparisons seem inapposite.⁸⁴

It is also a somewhat tangential question to the ways in which contextualising the development of the Arabian federates, in a structural sense, against the broader background of the late antique rise of the periphery, can add to an understanding of the early Islamic state.⁸⁵ Identifying significant shifts in the parameters of military and political activity is a sufficiently important task, and indications from the study of ethnogenesis in Europe anyway suggest that the mature articulation of an ethnic consciousness tends to follow, rather than to fertilise, mass movements of watershed collective political and military action like the seventh-century conquests.⁸⁶

Before investigating the evidence for these significant shifts, it is worth dwelling a little longer on one further particular insight from the transformations that shattered the Roman West in the fourth and fifth centuries that is particularly relevant to the Arabian *limes* in the sixth century. It used to be a widely-held position that the fall of the Roman West was, in part, caused by the long-term ‘Germanisation’ of the Roman Army. From the reign of Constantine, it was alleged, the need of the imperial exchequer to keep tax-paying Roman peasants on the land rather than in the ranks, combined with moral decline amongst the Roman aristocracy, led to the wholesale ‘barbarisation’ of the Roman field armies, a process that led to a precipitous decline in standards and the fatal

⁸⁴ There is similarly an entrenched tendency to end study of the Roman world in 476, with the fall of ‘our’ Roman Empire, the very terminology of ‘Byzantine’ creating a further barrier to continued study (‘a suitably exotic name...difficult to pronounce with confidence, and redolent of incense and mosaics’ as argued by Ward-Perkins, B., September 2009, ‘The Decline and Fall Industry’, *Standpoint*, accessed on the 28th February 2019 www.standpointmag.co.uk/node/2038/full).

⁸⁵ See earlier discussions on the arguments of Webb, P., 2016, *Imagining the Arabs*, for the controversy surrounding the use of ‘Arab’ as an ethnonym.

⁸⁶ An important example is to be found in the making of Anglo-Saxon England. It seems to have taken about five or six generations for the continental migrants who moved to Britain in the fifth and early sixth centuries to coalesce into large groups resembling the Venerable Bede’s original and primordial Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. See, for example, Fleming, R., 2010, *Britain after Rome: The Fall and Rise, 400-1070*, London: Allen Lane, p.61-119 and Härke, H., 2011, ‘Anglo-Saxon Immigration and Ethnogenesis,’ *Medieval Archaeology* 55:1, p.1-28.

undermining of the army's loyalty to the state.⁸⁷ Detailed study of a range of sources for the late Roman Army – ranging from a more nuanced appreciation of the literary sources' complaints of barbarians in uniform and more direct epigraphic evidence for a barbarian presence – has undermined the strength of this case, even if such investigations have shown that about a quarter of the regular imperial army in the fourth and fifth centuries had non-Roman origins.⁸⁸

As Walter Pohl has recently pointed-out, however, 'barbarisation' *was* a pivotal factor that effected the Roman Army, even if it was not as long-term a phenomenon as used to be thought. The growing reliance of the West Roman state on federate recruitment from the first quarter of the fifth century – not least the use of large federate bands led by their native leaders – did lead to the replacement of Roman citizens in the empire's means of coercion. The fragmentation of the state as these federate armies proved themselves to demonstrate a cohesion and sense of purpose beyond what was left of Rome's regular forces swiftly followed.⁸⁹ Imperial outsourcing, fundamentally, led to the localisation of power beyond an imperial structure that had become superfluous.⁹⁰

By the second quarter of the sixth century, along the marches of the Roman East, conditions similar to those that resulted in such a profound change in the Roman West in the previous century were starting to fall into place. A large client group operating under its own leaders had become responsible for frontier security, and the local regular military apparatus had been significantly reduced. War with Persia would give these clients the chance not only to demonstrate their mettle, but also to develop a more enhanced sense of their own status and identity. The conditions were set for truly transformative developments.

The Transformation of the Bedouin World

The transformation of the bedouin world is evident in at least three areas. One, the Arabian clients of both empires became ever more militarily significant in the wars between the great powers, far

⁸⁷ See Elton, H., 1996, *Warfare in Roman Europe, AD 350-425*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, esp. p.136-154 for an overview and response to this position.

⁸⁸ *Ibid*, p.152; p.272-277 for statistics of officers and men respectively divided by rank and regiment. It is also worth noting that just because large proportions of Roman soldiers were born beyond the frontier does not mean that this origin underscored their identity or influenced their political allegiance during years of Roman service and consequent acculturation.

⁸⁹ Pohl, W., 2015, 'Migrations, Ethnic Groups, and State Building,' in Maas, M., (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, Cambridge University Press, p.247-263, esp.249-251. It is telling that Elton stops his study in 425.

⁹⁰ In what is perhaps too-dramatic an interpretation of this phenomenon, Patrick Geary has said that the creation of the Germanic successor kingdoms was 'perhaps the greatest and most enduring creation of Roman political and military genius' (Geary, P., 1988, *Before France and Germany: The Creation and Transformation of the Merovingian World*, Oxford University Press, p.vi).

more so than seems to have been the case in earlier conflicts. Such a development bespeaks a likelihood that the client groups were now larger, better organised, and more permanent, probably cross-tribal coalitions. Two, the leaders of these coalitions became important beyond the confines of their own groups, and presided over complex, arguably state-level structures of leadership, demonstrating an increased degree of political complexity directly comparable with other, powerful barbarian coalitions in Late Antiquity. Three, the greater military importance of the clients combined with their greater degree of political significance became played-out in relations with the great powers beyond the battlefield. They were involved in high-level diplomacy, hinting at how dependent clients had started to become closer to independent allies and equals, something attested by their ever-increasing political autonomy.

Forcing the Great Powers to bend the knee

One of the most histrionic passages in Procopius is his description of the havoc wreaked upon the eastern frontier, ‘from the boundaries of Egypt and as far as Mesopotamia,’ by al-Mundhir, the leader of Persia’s client Arabians (*Wars*, 1.17.40-46). Procopius leaves little doubt that al-Mundhir was a force with which to be reckoned: experienced in warfare, proactive, and a man who ‘for the space of fifty years, forced the Roman state to bend the knee’ (1.17.40). Procopius gives a highly evocative sense of the impact of his *chevauchées*. Buildings were burned, Roman provincials killed or taken off into captivity in their tens of thousands, and his movements were so swift that Roman forces in the region were unable to mobilise in time to stop him (1.17.41-42). On one occasion that local Roman garrisons did manage to muster to oppose him, they were apparently outmanoeuvred and surprised, and were taken captive by al-Mundhir together with their generals, whom Procopius identifies by name (1.17.43-44). Given al-Mundhir’s potency, it is no surprise that the Persian Emperor Kāvād chose him and his men to spearhead the invasion of Euphratesia in 531 (1.18.1).

Procopius’ panegyric on Rome’s enemy is of course highly rhetorical, summoning the conventional image of the suppliant, bent-down on one knee, to underscore al-Mundhir’s impact. Yet this is no reason to deny the general credibility of his assessment. He surely could not have identified the captured generals, Timostratus and John, if they were not in fact taken by al-Mundhir in the embarrassing manner he describes. Furthermore, at least the first seven books of Procopius’ *Wars* were published in his own lifetime – as the author mentions at the beginning of Book Eight (8.1.1-2) – and read widely by his contemporaries. He could not, therefore, have written anything that would have struck his audience as wrong or beyond the boundaries of the possible. In order for his inevitably partial version of some events, like the role of Belisarius at the Battle of Callinicum,

to be persuasive, moreover, he had to ensure that the rest of his history rang true to reality. In this he seems to have been largely successful. Agathias, who wrote as the continuator of Procopius – a move that itself is implicit of Procopius’ wide circulation and positive reception – says that he recorded the events of the reign of Justinian ‘accurately’ (*akeribes*) and tells his reader that he may learn most excellent knowledge of the wars with Persia from Procopius’ account (*tous persikous polemous...arista an diagnoies*) (*Histories*, Preface, 22;24).⁹¹ Menander the Guardsman, Agathias’ continuator, is similarly complementary (*Fragments*, 14.2).⁹²

It is tempting, however, to identify Procopius’ claim that al-Mundhir took tens of thousands of Roman provincials into captivity as an exaggeration. The number is certainly an approximation, meant only to give a sense of scale. Yet it is revealing that John Malalas also mentions al-Mundhir’s slave-raiding at some length, telling how the Patriarch of Antioch, Ephraim, received a petition from those in captivity, requesting that he organise a ransom. The clergy and leading men of the city reportedly gave generously, as did the citizenry at large, with their money being collected on carpets spread in the public spaces, allowing Ephraim to liberate his fellow Romans (*Chronicle*, 59). Malalas is, in fact, in agreement with Procopius’ general impression of the power of the Persian Saracens. He tells of a devastating raid launched by al-Mundhir in 528 that penetrated as far as the environs of Antioch (32). This attack appears to have made such an impact on Constantinople that it encouraged Justinian to remove the *magister militum per Orientem*, Hypatios, and to replace him with Belisarius (34).

Malalas places this vignette of the ransoming of captives before his account of the Battle of Callinicum, which occurred in 531. Even though Malalas’ version of events differs from what reception of Procopius has made the crucial issue of whom to blame for the Roman defeat, both accounts agree on the important role of Arabian clients. According to Malalas, it was al-Mundhir who provoked the battle, by moving his forces to Callinicum in the first place. Belisarius then set out against him with his field army, supported by the forces of the local *duces*, an army of 8,000 men in total. Al-Ḥārith, who had just been empowered by the grant of the ‘dignity of king,’ joined him with what Malalas reports was another 5,000 men: a considerable number indeed. These figures are inevitably inaccurate approximations, but they give some idea of the relative order of magnitude of the armies led by regular Roman officers and the federate forces. Al-Ḥārith’s contribution was hardly minor (*Chronicle*, 60).

⁹¹ *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum Libri Quinque*, Keydell, R., (eds.), 1967, Walter De Gruyter: Berlin.

⁹² *The History of Menander the Guardsman: Introductory Essay, Text, Translation, and Historiographical Notes*, Blockley, R.C., (ed. & trans.) 1985, Francis Cairns.

It was entirely plausible, with this in mind, for Procopius to have attributed Belisarius' defeat to the inability of al-Ḥārith and his Saracens to hold their ground (*Wars*, 1.17.35-36).⁹³ They reportedly constituted the entire Roman right flank, meaning that any failure on their part would have had dramatic tactical repercussions, as Procopius claims. Whatever the truth of the matter, Callinicum shows that the Ghassān had become an integral element of the Roman military establishment, and a significant force in their own right.

This is reflected by the very language that Procopius chooses to use to describe the men led by al-Ḥārith. They are unambiguously called an 'army' (for example, *strateumatōs*, *Wars*, 1.18.7; *stratos*, 2.16.5). Had Procopius wanted either to suggest that the Ghassān were a minor contingent, a small band of warriors who followed al-Ḥārith, or to belittle them as a disorganised rabble of barbarians, he certainly had the linguistic means to do so. He often, for instance, simply underscores the barbarian nature of some contingents in both the Roman and Persian armies by referring to them simply by their ethnonym (for instance 'the Huns' at 1.8.19, or 'the Alans' at 1.15.1).

More significantly, stand-alone contingents within the Roman military machine that are something less than what one would expect of an 'army' receive specific and accurate titles. The men whom Belisarius used to suppress the so-called Nika Revolt in 532, for example, are presented as his personal following, a *therapeia*, not an army (*Wars*, 1.24.40-41). Likewise, when Justinian was forced to send his nephew Germanus to the East at short notice in 540 owing to the Persian invasion, Procopius says that he took with him only three hundred 'followers' (*epomenoi*), a formation that is explicitly contrasted with the army (*stratos*) that Justinian promises will follow him (2.6.9).

The forces controlled by al-Mundhir are also called an 'army' (for instance, *Wars*, 2.19.39), a fact that helps to explain why Khosrau's attempt to use al-Mundhir to provoke war with Rome in 540 in the first place risked amounting to a genuine *causus belli*. Khosrau clearly imagined that Rome would not have been able to dismiss al-Mundhir's deeds as mere raiding, given that they were the actions of a large, cohesive body of men.⁹⁴ The events of the ensuing war (540-545) provide yet

⁹³ Procopius frames this using the language of betrayal (*proudosan*), a tradition that also appears in Malalas, but Malalas seems to doubt it. He says merely that 'some' (*tines*) allege that the Saracens fled because of the treachery of their leaders and makes a point of remarking that al-Ḥārith stood his ground and fought when the line began to buckle (*Chronicle*, 60).

⁹⁴ In the event, however, Rome proved itself at pains to avoid rising to this particular provocation given Constantinople's concurrent military commitments in the West. Justinian cleverly manipulated the Persian insistence that al-Mundhir's attacks on al-Ḥārith did not amount to a breach of the Eternal Peace as the Arabian clients were not included in it by agreeing with his mediator in the matter, Strategius', conclusion that the pasture-land over which the Arabians were fighting was not worth a war (*Wars*, 2.1.1-15).

further evidence for the military potency of the Arabian clients and their structural importance to both great powers. Procopius' assertion that Khosrau mocked Rome for being afraid of the Saracen menace (2.10.23) was indeed hardly baseless, since the *duces* of northern Syria proved themselves reluctant in the extreme to commit their forces to Belisarius' army for a planned counter-offensive, on the basis that all of Syria would then be made vulnerable to al-Mundhir (2.16.17-19).

One of the most important insights that can be gleaned from Procopius' account of the second war of Justinian's reign is the tactically and operationally significant role of the Arabian clients on the battlefield. As was also apparent in his description of al-Mundhir and in John Malalas' account of the lead-up to the Battle of Callinicum, Arabian federates seemed to have excelled at reconnaissance and in the kind of surprise attacks that are treated as operationally important actions in the *Strategikon* (see above). This is hardly a retrospective analysis: it was recognised by contemporaries (*Wars*, 2.19.12). It explains why Saracen formations formed the vanguard of any major offensive launched by the great powers' into one another's territories, and also why they were sent on raids deep into enemy lands: to cause chaos; to probe for weaknesses, and presumably also to encourage enemy commanders to divide their forces, thereby weakening and delaying their offensive actions or defensive positions (in addition to al-Mundhir leading the Persian assault on Euphratesia, above, see 2.19.17-19 and *Secret History*, 2.23 for an account of al-Ḥārith penetrating deep into Persia, south across the Tigris).

This specialist role, however, did not stop Saracens serving in a more general capacity. Malalas notes that Saracens formed part of a Persian army that besieged the fortress of Abgersaton near Osrhoene in 530 (*Chronicle*, 61) and Procopius records that Arabians were similarly part of the force that Khosrau planned to use to seize Sergiopolis in 542 (*Wars*, 2.20.10). This particular episode, which involved one of al-Mundhir's Saracens betraying the Persian plans to the citizens of Sergiopolis, is especially interesting. It provides very personal evidence for the extent to which bedouin and Roman provincials had grown closer together in Late Antiquity. It was the Saracen's Christian faith that encouraged him to try to save his Roman fellow-believers, and the whole story presupposes an ability to communicate in a shared language.

The wars of the later half of the sixth century offer more testimony for the important role of the Arabian clients in the empires' military establishments. According to Menander the Guardsman, the Persian army that was put together to launch an attack on Dara in 578 contained a large Saracen contingent. The army is said to have numbered 20,000, a total of 8,000 of whom were either Sabir

Huns or Saracens, a proportion for federate forces relative to regulars that recalls the figures given for Rome in John Malalas (*Fragments*, 23.1.28-30).

The likelihood that federate manpower remained as important to Rome as it did to Persia can be gleaned from the failure of Maurice's campaign along the Euphrates of summer, 581. Theophylact Simocatta, in a manner that recalls Procopius' treatment of the Battle of Callinicum, blamed the leader of the Ghassān, al-Mundhir, for betraying Rome's plans to Persia: the old trope of Saracen treachery being used to excuse Roman failure (*History*, 3.17.6-11). The *Ecclesiastical History* of Evagrius Scholasticus provides a little more detail on the event. Even though he also recycles the trope of barbarian betrayal, he does not directly accuse al-Mundhir of revealing Maurice's plans to the Persians. He rather alleges that al-Mundhir simply refused to participate in the campaign, thereby depriving Maurice of what he implies was an important as well as probably sizeable component of his force, given that 'on account of the speed of their horses, these people (the Arabian federates) are invincible' (*Ecclesiastical History*, 5.20).⁹⁵ John of Ephesus' account, which explicitly exculpates al-Mundhir, essentially suggests that the Persians destroyed an important bridge over the Euphrates because they knew that Maurice was coming and would probably seek to use it (*Ecclesiastical History*, 6.16).⁹⁶

The fallout from 581, which saw al-Mundhir arrested and Constantinople drop its support for the traditional ruling line of the Ghassān confederacy, did not mark the end of the use of Arabian federates in Roman armies.⁹⁷ They are recorded as acting as the vanguard of Roman offensive actions in northern Mesopotamia in 586, under native leaders Theophylact calls Ogyrus and Zogomos (*History*, 2.2.5). Similarly, they are attested as still forming a part of the Roman army the next year, serving under the overall command of Heraclius the Senior (2.10.6).

These mentions are admittedly quite fleeting, but it is unreasonable to expect much more of the source material. Theophylact was certainly not without his own innovative idiosyncrasies as an historian, but he remained generally loyal to the interests of classicising history, namely a concentration on the high politics of state and great men, rather than seeking to offer detailed breakdowns of the barbarian contingents that fought alongside them.⁹⁸ Unlike Procopius, whose experience of war in the Near East gave him telling insights and greater descriptive flair,

⁹⁵ *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus*, Whitby, M., (trans.), 2000, Liverpool University Press.

⁹⁶ *Johannis Ephesini Historiae Ecclesiasticae Pars Tertia*, Brooks, E.W., 1952, (ed & trans.) Louvain: Durbecq. John's sympathy with al-Mundhir is at least partly explained through their shared Miaphysite confession.

⁹⁷ See Fisher, G., 2011, *Between Empires*, p.173-184 for a description and assessment of the politics surrounding the arrest of al-Mundhir.

⁹⁸ Whitby, M., 1988, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare*, Clarendon Press: Oxford, p.39-51 for the nature of the *History*.

Theophylact also does not seem to have had first-hand experience of the events he described, something that perhaps helps to explain his more laconic tendency. Nevertheless, the very fact that he does mention apparently large Saracen contingents in Roman armies in the 580s – even after the defenestration of the Jafnid line – strongly suggests that the trend towards larger, more militarily effective bedouin coalitions, whose service was of potentially decisive operational importance to the great powers, was very much still in motion.

Structures of Leadership

The evidence for the significance of Arabian clients on the battlefields of the Near East in the sixth century unfortunately provides little direct insight into how these client groups were organised, and of whom exactly they were comprised. The fact that the sources insist that the forces fielded by men like al-Ḥārith were large contingents, however, suggests that they must have been composed of a number of sub-groups, attracted to the standard of one leader or another for the benefits on offer and relying on complex structures of leadership and loyalty to function for the length of time that they did. The nature and extent of warfare in this period probably also forced bedouin groups to choose sides. It is perhaps telling that Procopius' account of Khosrau's attempt to provoke war in 539 revolved around manufacturing a dispute over pasture land: territory valued as worthless by Rome, but land Procopius explicitly records as supporting flocks, whose herders both al-Mundhir and al-Ḥārith claim owe them tribute (*Wars*, 2.1.6-11). Bedouin groups across northern Arabia probably found themselves sucked into participating in the wars, if only on occasion.

Yet there is evidence that offers some impression of how the client confederations functioned, which also implies that they were cross-tribal coalitions – justifying the way in which later Muslim authors remembered the Ghassān – that potentially encompassed groups based leagues distant from the imperial frontier. The graffito found at Jabal Usays, located approximately one hundred kilometres southeast of Damascus, mentioned above, is one such piece of evidence.

Ibrāhīm ibn Mughīra al-Awsī arsalanī al-Ḥārith al-malik 'alā Sulaymān msyḥt/ b sanat 423

(‘Al-Ḥārith the King sent me, Ibrāhīm bin Mughīra al-Awsī, to fort Sulayman in the year 423’)⁹⁹

⁹⁹ The transcription is taken from Shahīd, I., 1995, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, p.118. The date used is that of the local calendar of Bostra.

The graffito provides several important insights on the nature of the confederation al-Ḥārith controlled. First, its location beyond the borders of the Palestinian provinces – al-Ḥārith’s primary area of operations given his role in suppressing the Samaritan Revolt – in Phoenicia Libanensis demonstrates the considerable geographic reach of his power. It is further strong evidence for the impact of Justinian’s decision to endow him with a super-phylarchy. Al-Ḥārith’s confederation therefore must have extended over previously separate federate Arabian groups along the length of the frontier south of the Euphrates, whose leaders acknowledged him as their overlord.

Secondly, the author’s tribal *nisba*, al-Awsī, is particularly interesting. It implies that the Ibrāhīm in question belonged to the al-Aws tribe, which the Islamic tradition locates in Yathrib in the Ḥijāz.¹⁰⁰ Ibrāhīm could have operated so far to the north of Yathrib for one of two reasons. Men of the al-Aws may have been attracted to serve under al-Ḥārith once news spread of the rewards to be had, a good example of the phenomenon of the wars and politics of the great empires pulling groups far from the *limes* into the world of the frontier.¹⁰¹ Conversely, and in keeping with the likely nature of Ghassān, Ibrāhīm’s presence could simply be a demonstration of the super-tribal loyalties that helped to underpin al-Ḥārith’s coalition, and its reach deep into the heart of Arabia.

Indeed, the tendency of imperial commanders to send their Arabian clients on long-distance raids deep into enemy territory presupposes an ability to range widely. There are also direct attestations of the client groups retreating deep into Arabia on certain occasions. Before al-Ḥārith received the ‘dignity of king,’ in the year 528, for example, one of the Arabian phylarchs on the Palestinian frontier is said to have quarrelled with the local *dux*, and to have retreated into the ‘inner *limes*’ (Malalas, *Chronicle*, 18.16). The fact that this rendered the phylarch in question vulnerable to al-Mundhir, as well as beyond the Roman sphere of authority, implies that the ‘inner *limes*’ in this instance perhaps approximated to the northern Najd. Likewise, when al-Ḥārith’s son and successor, the Ghassānid al-Mundhir, withdrew his services from the Emperor Justin II in 572-575 after Justin refused to increase his subsidies, he similarly appears to have relocated beyond the immediate frontier, potentially to the same region or to somewhere in the Ḥijāz (John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.4).

¹⁰⁰ Watt, W.M., ‘al-Aws,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 4th of March 2019.

¹⁰¹ Whittaker, C.R., 1994, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, p.121-130 for the phenomena of ‘frontier-pull’ and ‘frontier-push.’ Possible movement of al-Aws north to fight recalls the willingness of Thesiger’s travelling companions to travel for weeks across the desert to fight for the Āl bū Falāḥ of Dubai (Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, esp. p.114 and p.124) and the far-ranging and diverse origins of the Arabs who fought the Turks during the Revolt in World War One, once British subsidies and weapons helped to make the cause attractive.

Further insights can be taken from the Jabal Usays graffito. The very fact that Ibrāhīm wrote it implies the existence of a sophisticated and literate system of organisation. The well-formed characters on the rockface were simply not invented on the day of the inscription, and reveal a culture of writing used for administrative purposes. Other epigraphic finds from the region attest to this culture's growth over the course of the sixth century.¹⁰² The Ghassān, therefore, were clearly capable of the effective and planned management of frontier defence, using written instructions and relying on men like Ibrāhīm, who had developed a loyalty to a super-tribal figure of authority like al-Ḥārith.

Persia's Arabian clients also seem to have been able to muster, and to have relied upon, a broad base of support. A fascinating vignette from the *Fragments* of Menander the Guardsman implies that the Lakhm's power fundamentally rested upon the adherence of the leaders of other, smaller groups. In either 570 or 571, a Persian embassy led by a man Menander calls Mebod arrived at Constantinople in order to discuss the respective great powers' spheres of influence in the Caucasus (*Fragments*, 9.3.29-30). He was accompanied by a delegation sent by 'Amr, leader of the Lakhm, whose members, tellingly, were not a mere appendage to Mebod's embassy, but were in the Roman capital on their own business (9.3.44-45). They numbered approximately forty men (9.3.44).

After Mebod had failed to open-up negotiations on the Caucasus with an intractable Emperor Justin, and once he realised that he had to try to secure something in the Persian interest, he asked the emperor to admit the Saracens to his presence (*Fragments*, 9.3.48-50). Justin, evidently familiar with how groups like the Lakhm behaved, permitted only the leader of their delegation to come into his presence, prompting Menander to make the following observation.

For he (Justin) knew that the envoy out of pride would refuse to approach the emperor without his followers, but just as when the Saracen envoys had come before Justinian with all their companions, he would wish to do the same and maintain the custom.

(9.3.53-57)

The fact that Menander highlights this practice of mass-presentation at court as a Saracen peculiarity opens a window on the client confederations' internal mechanics. It was perhaps less 'out of pride' that the leading envoy – whose direct affiliation to 'Amr is unfortunately not stated

¹⁰² Hoyland, R., 2009, 'Late Roman *Provincia Arabia*,' p.131-133 for a discussion of the Arabic inscription on the lintel of the martyrium of St John at Harran, dated to 568.

but who may well have been a close relative – would refuse to accept Justin’s invitation, but more out of necessity. The particular aim of this embassy may have been to try to secure cash of the kind previously given to them by Justinian (9.3.47), but the very act of being received at the Roman court was a demonstration of the prestige and power of the Lakhm coalition. The ambassador therefore had a vested interest in ensuring that his reception was witnessed by the forty men accompanying him, both so that they may witness the dignity accorded to ‘Amr’s dynasty at first-hand, but also so that they may share this prestige themselves. The ideological importance of this act to the Lakhm, of course combined with the obvious potential benefits of gaining some gold, may account for Mebod’s continued insistence that Justin admit the Saracens, at the obvious and likely risk of destabilising relations further (9.3.75-76).

Justin, however, remained unpersuaded. He resorted to the traditional language of invective against the barbarian to dismiss Mebod’s protestations (*Fragments*, 9.3.102-109). Rome’s unwillingness to negotiate resulted in ‘Amr taking the decision to re-open hostilities, and Menander records that he launched an attack on the Ghassān (9.3.118-123). This is presented as a simple reaction to the insults sustained in Constantinople, but it is highly likely that far more complex calculations lay behind ‘Amr’s decision.

The failure of the embassy represented a blow both to ‘Amr’s prestige and to his treasury. He had clearly hoped to win the same kind of cash that the Lakhm had received from Justinian as part of the negotiations of 561, money that he could distribute to lower-level commanders in order to maintain the strength of his coalition. Without this cash, and after suffering the Roman emperor’s insults, ‘Amr’s position was weaker than it previously was, making war – and the plunder and prestige that could be won on the battlefield – the only viable option to maintain internal cohesion.

The tendency of a nomad coalition to raid if they are not paid calls to mind one or two other telling episodes from the *Fragments* of Menander. Shortly after Justin II’s accession, he received an embassy from the Avars, the leading power north of the Danube, which had subjected other peoples in the region in a manner recalling the empire of Attila the Hun. The embassy demonstrates a good grasp of Roman frontier policy, as the Avar ambassadors tell Justin that his predecessor’s subsidy regime ensured that the Avar polity essentially acted as a federate power, protecting Rome’s borders by waging war against other barbarian peoples (8.12-34). Though they are not afraid to threaten war if the subsidies are discontinued, the importance of this guaranteed flow of wealth, which did not involve the uncertainty of conflict with a power like Rome, is clearly evident in the severely downbeat manner in which the Avar ambassadors receive Justin’s refusal to pay (8.57-68).

An even more revealing story is found concerning the Avar retreat from Sirmium in 582. Once the Avar Khagan, Baian, realises that he will not be able to seize the city, he opens peace negotiations with the Roman commander, Bonus. Baian's appeal to Bonus presents an exceptionally clear statement of the concerns governing large, barbarian coalitions in Late Antiquity.

'I am shamed and dishonoured before the tribes who follow me in alliance if I should withdraw from this place having achieved nothing at all and having brought myself no profit. In order that I shall not appear to have made the assault to no purpose and benefit, send me some small gifts. For when I passed through Scythia I brought nothing, and it is impossible for me to leave here too without some gain.'

(*Fragments*, 12.5.57-63)

From Clients to Allies

Perhaps the most telling indication of the transformation of the bedouin world is the appearance of men like al-Ḥārith and al-Mundhir in high-level diplomatic exchanges between, and with, the great empires, and the degree of political acculturation that this may presuppose. Even in the early decades of the sixth century, there is evidence that the client kings were a part of wider late antique elite culture, as implied by the quantities of silk found in the tents of al-Mundhir in 528/529 after a successful Roman raid on his camp (Theophanes, *Chronicle*, A.M. 6021). In their role in great power politics, their visits to imperial capitals, and the increasing need felt by Rome and Persia to give their clients what approached a co-equal existence in the treaties between them, however, it is apparent that the leaders of the Ghassān and Lakhm became ever more integrated into the world beyond Arabia and its political culture and expectations. The boundary between dependent client and independent, though admittedly still junior, ally, became increasingly indistinctly drawn.

This boundary, however, remained fixed in the ideology of the great powers in the so-called Eternal Peace of 532, the provisions of which are summarised by Malalas (*Chronicle*, 18.76). As Procopius makes plain, the Saracen clients of the empires had not been explicitly included in the treaty, on the basis that 'no mention of Saracens was ever made in treaties, on the ground that they were included under the names of Persians and Romans' (*Wars*, 2.1.5). This technicality not only allowed Khosrau to try to use al-Mundhir to provoke a renewal of hostilities, it also bespeaks the fundamentally dependent status of the Arabian client groups, and their lack of an articulated, political and diplomatic existence in the eyes of the great powers.

Events occurring in the aftermath of the armistice of 545 reveal that this dependent status had started to change. Procopius follows his description of the ceasefire negotiations with a passage recounting how al-Ḥārith and al-Mundhir continued fighting (*Wars*, 2.28.12-14). The details imply that their rivalry had become very bitter: al-Mundhir ambushed al-Ḥārith's son whilst he was pasturing his horses, leading to al-Ḥārith mounting a major assault in which Procopius pointedly recalls that he tried similarly to kill his rival's heirs. The obvious implication is that both client groups had developed mutually hostile identities separate from their imperial loyalties, and a sufficient degree of internal cohesion to continue fighting on their own behalf, without, it can fairly be supposed, material assistance from their patrons to do so. The likelihood, moreover, that the armistice of 545 had excluded Lazica, the kingdom occupying what had previously been called Colchis in the Caucasus, suggests something else.¹⁰³ Given that the negotiations had made special arrangement for the Lazican theatre, it is hardly beyond the boundaries of the possible that special arrangements had likewise been made for the Ghassān and Lakhm, giving the clients an independent diplomatic existence for the first time.

This likelihood seems to be reflected in the negotiations of 551. The two matters of dispute between the great powers are said to have been 'Lazica and the Saracens' (Procopius, *Wars*, 2.8.2). These twin concerns are likely to have arisen not only because of continued fighting, but also on the basis that they were problems unresolved in 545 and still awaiting a permanent solution. Another temporary settlement was eventually reached in 557, provoked, at least according to Agathias, by the sheer exhaustion of the Persian forces that had found themselves launching a series of largely unsuccessful offensives in the difficult terrain of the Caucasian mountains (*Histories*, 4.30.7-10).

The apogee of the trend towards the client confederations having their own diplomatic existence in treaties between the great powers was reached in the settlement of 561, which is preserved in wonderful detail by Menander. The second stipulation of the treaty – its very place in the text implying its importance – explicitly states that the respective Saracen groups are to abide by the conditions of the agreement, and that they are not to enter into hostilities with either the Romans or the Persians (*Fragments*, 6.1.320-322).¹⁰⁴ Importantly, the Saracens are called 'allies' (*symmaxoi*), a word that connotes the notion that they fight with their respective imperial backers more out of

¹⁰³ Fighting broke out in Lazica in 548, without resulting in a full-scale war, and Agathias, *Histories*, 2.18.3, speaks of a truce in which Lazica had been excluded from an armistice, that may refer to the agreement of 545.

¹⁰⁴ The wording of this clause makes it possible that war between the two clients was still technically possible – given that 'Romans' and 'Persians' take the genitive after *kata* (against) rather than because a formulation like *tous symmaxous* (their allies) is understood – but the fact that the clause binds the Arabians to the entirety of the treaty, which above all demands peace and mutual reparation, makes this is unlikely.

choice, as almost-equals, than out of a sense of dependence or obligation, which the earlier tendency of Procopius to describe them as ‘bound by treaty’ (*enspondos*) suggests (for example, *Wars*, 1.17.46). This linguistic shift seeps into the Roman tradition beyond the treaty of 561. The Saracens who appear in Theophylact Simocatta are similarly described as ‘allies’ (for instance, *History*, 8.1.1-3): a use of terminology that tellingly captures the contemporary situation in a work prone to archaism.

Menander’s account offers further insights into the growing assertiveness and international importance of the supposedly client powers. During the discussions prior to the agreement of the treaty, the Persian ambassador, the Zikh, tried and failed to secure Roman subsidies for ‘Amr, leader of the Lakhm, on the basis of past practice (*Fragments*, 6.1.288-303). The subject is again raised by Khosrau himself to the Roman representative at his court after the signing of the treaty (6.1.515-544). Khosrau states that ‘Amr had complained to him about the Zikh’s failure, and the Persian King-of-Kings shows that he was not above doing what he could for his ally.

Indeed, Khosrau was probably aware of how important it was to ‘Amr to keep wealth flowing downwards to his own dependents to maintain his position, and thus the Lakhm as effective Persian allies and guarantors of stability on the desert frontier. By the 560s, the Arabian clients of the empires may still have been junior allies, but they were clearly junior allies who justified and required the prosecution of what could be called their domestic interests by their patrons. This is also evident in the visit to Constantinople by al-Ḥārith in 563, during which he discussed his choice of heir with Justinian (Malalas, *Chronicle*, 18.148). The space that Malalas devotes to this visit in the often brief, episodic and scanty final segment of Book 18 is perhaps an indication of the importance Constantinople attached to the visit of the aged king of their strategically significant Arabian allies.

Recognition of this importance, however, was not without negative consequences. Subsequent events showed that al-Mundhir, al-Ḥārith’s chosen successor, was not immune to the impact of regime changes at Constantinople. The first rupture between the Roman Empire and its Arabian allies took place in 572, as mentioned above. After winning a great victory over the Lakhm, al-Mundhir requested an increase in subsidies from Rome – in order to capitalise on his success and recruit more groups to his coalition – that Justin II, characteristically when one recalls his response to a similar petition from the Avars, refused (John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 6.3).¹⁰⁵ In

¹⁰⁵ Heather, P., 2018, *Rome Resurgent*, p.330-331, identifies a tendency of Roman rulers after Justinian to eschew barbarian alliances – the product of Justinian’s propagandistic emphasis on victory – as a ‘highly toxic political legacy’ that over-exposed the empire to external threats, setting in store the disasters of the seventh century. One

retaliation, al-Mundhir withdrew his services from the empire by disappearing into the desert, which exposed the Roman East even as far as Antioch to Lakhm depredations. The local *duces*, who had been begging al-Mundhir to come to their aid for some time, eventually managed to petition Constantinople successfully and effect a reconciliation in 575 (*Ecclesiastical History*, 6.4).

A far more serious breach occurred in the aftermath of the failed offensive along the Euphrates of 582. As previously mentioned, the future emperor Maurice had tried to blame al-Mundhir for the operation's failure, accusing him of betraying his plans, resulting in the Persian destruction of an important river crossing. Despite al-Mundhir's protests and appeals to the reigning Tiberias, he was tricked into capture and sent in chains to Constantinople, from where he was eventually exiled to Sicily (John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 3.40-41; 54). In his condemnations of a Roman friend of al-Mundhir, Magnus, who had offered to help him appeal to the emperor only to betray him, John of Ephesus suggests that al-Mundhir had excited the dormant hostility of men other than Maurice.

It is not hard to suggest reasons why. First, though a proven friend and ally of Rome, al-Mundhir remained an Arabian barbarian and a Miaphysite, facts well able to stir the prejudice of the Chalcedonian Roman elite. Secondly, al-Mundhir's regional power and influence, which no doubt came with control over land on the *limes* that the Ghassān used to pasture their flocks, challenged the economic position of the local elite, representing a competitive force that probably caused resentment.¹⁰⁶ Perhaps above all, though, bearing in mind the past century or more of Roman history, which had seen barbarian groups that occasionally wore the mask of federates and allies destroy the Western Empire and repeatedly ravage the Balkan frontiers of the East, there was a fear among Roman commanders and administrators that they had become a little too reliant on the Ghassān. Clients had become conquerors before, so an excuse to decapitate the leadership of the Ghassān may have been embraced when it arose for reasons beyond salvaging Maurice's reputation.

North Arabia before the Last Great War of Antiquity

The immediate aftermath of the removal of al-Mundhir certainly suggests that such a fear was justified. John of Ephesus records how the four sons of al-Mundhir, led by the eldest, Nu'mān, ravished the countryside of Palestine and Syria before departing for the inner desert. The

could also suggest that this tendency was a reaction to Justinian's willingness to buttress external alliances with huge financial subventions, something that the *Secret History* of Procopius suggests was anathema to sections of the Roman elite.

¹⁰⁶ Whittow, M., 2015, 'Rethinking the Jafnids: New Approaches to Rome's Arab Allies' in Genequand, D., & Robin, C., (eds.), *Les Jafnides*, p.11-36, esp. p.25-27 for this suggestion.

disaffected Ghassān then emerged again from the desert, laid siege to Bostra, and defeated the army of a Roman *dux* outside the city walls and spread terror throughout the East (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.42). Nu‘mān, however, was eventually tricked into entering negotiations, which saw him follow directly in his father’s footsteps: a journey to Constantinople under guard and exile (3.43; 56). With the loss of Nu‘mān, whose description by John of Ephesus as a man fiercer and more ready for war than his father is evidence of his charismatic power and fighting ability (3.42), the Ghassān federation disintegrated into fifteen sub-groups (3.56; 6.41; 42).

The causes of this fragmentation were most likely twofold. The remaining sons of al-Mundhir probably lacked the personal abilities of their father, grandfather, and elder brother, and potentially quarrelled too much between themselves for supremacy. Secondly, they no longer received the material subventions and prestige-giving support from Rome that had enabled their predecessors to forge and hold-together complex confederations of multiple smaller bedouin groups. It is telling that, in discussions with the Roman *dux* prior to their defeat of his army at Bostra, the sons of al-Mundhir complain not only about the arrest of their father, but also about the cessation of their subsidies (*Ecclesiastical History*, 3.42). The Ghassān, therefore, found themselves lacking two of the fundamental components of bedouin state development identified in the previous chapter: a charismatic leader, and an exceptionally high income from an external imperial power. The Arabian allies that continued in Roman service after the mid-580s, though certainly still important to Roman military calculations, were probably smaller and less complex political entities, not least if John of Ephesus’ claims that the majority of the Ghassānid sub-groups defected to Persia is to be believed (6.41; 42).

Yet this is no reason to disregard the impact and ramifications of the transformation of the bedouin world over the course of the sixth century. Developments had been profound. Wider strategic considerations, leavened by al-Ḥārith’s role in suppressing the Samaritan Revolt of 528, resulted in Rome sponsoring an unprecedentedly large client confederation on the Palestinian and south-Syrian *limes*. This policy proved so successful that it helped to set in store the removal of the local *limitanei*, making the Ghassān the single largest component of Roman security in the southern Near East. Their role in the incessant wars with Persia gave their leaders cash and prestige, factors that no doubt helped their coalition to attract yet more bedouin groups. A range of sources from across the century all suggest that the battlefield role of Arabian federates for both Rome and Persia was often vital for victory, with their power being reflected by their increasing political autonomy and diplomatic independence from their putative patrons.

One way in which the extent of the transformation can be measured is to compare the defenestration of the leaders of Rome's Arabian clients after the Anastasian War and the removal of al-Mundhir and Nu'mān. In 506, once the federates got out of hand, a local *dux* was able simply to round up their leaders and unceremoniously execute them. By 582, such a display of unchallengeable imperial supremacy was unthinkable. Al-Mundhir and Nu'mān fell victim to complex plots orchestrated by members of the highest ranks of the Roman elite and, at least in the case of Nu'mān, by a man he trusted. Their followers, moreover, were able to defeat the forces of a Roman *dux* and to pillage and devastate the East in revenge before their coalition started to fall apart for entirely internal reasons.

By the 580s, fundamentally, northern Arabia had become home to bedouin coalitions far larger and more powerful than ever before in its history. The world of the desert nomads had become accustomed to a series of complex political arrangements: loyalties beyond the tenting-group and tribe; diplomatic exchanges with the great sedentary empires, and lengthy, premeditated military campaigns with strategic-level aims. The latter probably also made the bedouin addicted to the rewards to be won from fighting for a great power and from war itself, namely pay, plunder and prestige. Even though it may be hard to identify the precise location from where the Ghassān and Lakhm sourced their fighting-men, the obvious solution is the most likely: the lands immediately abutting the frontier and the northern Ḥijāz and Najd. These are precisely the regions where the last Chapter suggested Muḥammad recruited the men who made him master of Arabia.

There is, however, a gap of two generations between the fall of Nu'mān and the rise of Muḥammad's state in Yathrib. The nature and scarcity of the source material available to shine a light on events in the Near East after the 580s makes it hard to ascertain what precisely was going on in northern Arabia during the final decades of the sixth century and the years of the Last Great War of Antiquity. That said, mention of Saracens is not entirely absent in the Roman tradition.

Intriguingly, the *Chronicle* of Theophanes the Confessor records Saracens serving under the Emperor Heraclius in the familiar role of a crack strike force to intercept the retinue of the Persian emperor in 621/622 (A.M. 6114). Another Byzantine source, the *Chronicon Paschale*, similarly notes the presence of Saracens fighting for Heraclius in the final stages of the war (*Chronicon Paschale*, s.a. 628).¹⁰⁷ It is of course impossible to determine how these Saracens found themselves fighting in a Roman army in the Caucasus and northern Mesopotamia years after the Persian conquest of most of the Near East. They may have been in federate contingents that withdrew into Anatolia

¹⁰⁷ *Chronicon Paschale*, Dindorf, L., 1823, (ed.), Bonn.

in the wake of the Persian advance, or they may have been men inspired by Heraclius' rhetoric of holy war, committed Christians who escaped north to join his standard.¹⁰⁸ It is also important to note that Theophanes' *Chronicle* attests to the service of federate Arabian cavalry in the Persian armies in Armenia at the same time (A.M. 6113). Arabian cavalry is similarly recorded in the service of the Persian general Shahrbaraz in 629, further evidence that Persia's dominance of the Near East in the first decades of the seventh century had probably led to more intense recruitment from the Arabian Peninsula to feed her armies.¹⁰⁹ Limited though the evidence unfortunately may be, the bedouin of northern Arabia were probably as militarised as they had been in the previous century, if not more so.

Yet despite the fact that few would now probably disagree with the fact that the events of the sixth century exerted some kind of developmental impact on bedouin Arabia, such scanty references make the connection between the transformations of the sixth century and the major transition the Near East experienced in the seventh somewhat opaque.¹¹⁰ There is, however, a way to approach this problem outside of continuing dependence on the Roman sources. That is to look to the Islamic historical tradition, and to the hints that Muḥammad's rivalry with the Jews of Yathrib and with his erstwhile home town of Mecca may have had connections to the far greater war raging just beyond the borders of the Ḥijāz.

Muḥammad's Wars as Wars within the Last Great War of Antiquity

A possibility that there was some form of connection between the wars Muḥammad fought to establish himself and the Last Great War of Antiquity has already been sensed in some quarters. Michael Lecker, notably, has gone so far as to claim that the Ghassān, operating under the direct instructions of Rome, caused Muḥammad to move to Yathrib in the first place.¹¹¹ This intriguing suggestion is underpinned by a reconstruction of the genealogical relationship between tribes and

¹⁰⁸ For a narrative account of Heraclius's use of Christian rhetoric in recruitment, see Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.437-448. The mid-sixth century certainly saw Saracens making such faith-based decisions, as evident in Procopius' account of the betrayal of Persian plans to the defenders of Sergiopolis, mentioned above (*Wars*, 2.20.10).

¹⁰⁹ *The History of the Caucasian Albanians by Movsēs Dasxuranci*, Dowsett, C.J.F., trans., 1961, Oxford University Press, p.105. The fact that Movsēs links Shahrbaraz to Palestine (p.104) hints that his federate Arabians may well have come from lands traditionally identified with the Ghassān.

¹¹⁰ As highlighted in Chapter One, the nature and extent of the development of the Arabian clients of the empires has been a subject of intense recent debate, creating a broad recognition that they, in some way, are part of the prologue of Islam. Whittow, for instance, has recognised that 'the genie could not be put back in the bottle. The inhabitants of the empire's desert periphery were richer, more organised and much more militarily effective than they had been three hundred years earlier' (Whittow, M., 2010, 'The Late Roman/Early Byzantine Near East,' in C. Robinson, (ed.), *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume I*, p.72-97; p.93 for the quote).

¹¹¹ Lecker, M., 2015, 'Were the Ghassānids and the Byzantines behind Muḥammad's *hijra*?' in Genequand, D., & Robin, C., (eds.), *Les Jafnides*, p.277-293.

other contextual considerations that add to the case's plausibility. Lecker argues that the tribe of Khazraj, who played a leading role in the 'Aqaba meetings that first put in motion the possibility of Muḥammad's relocation, were connected to Ghassān, and that other groups in Yathrib were a part of the Ghassānid federation.¹¹² Assuming that links between Constantinople and some form of post-Jafnid Ghassān coalition were still very much alive, Lecker sees the Ghassān as wanting to use Muḥammad to stymie the power of the Jews in Yathrib, natural allies of the Persians.¹¹³ The fact that the *hijra* took place in the same year as the launch of one of Heraclius' major counteroffensives is seen as evidence of this conspiracy, not a mere coincidence.¹¹⁴

Lecker's bold case has been accepted by Bowersock.¹¹⁵ Howard-Johnston posits a similar connection between Muḥammad and the Ghassān, but with certain important differences.¹¹⁶ Rather than acting as agents of Rome, he suggests that the Ghassān sought to act against Mecca, as allegedly the major power in the Ḥijāz, for their own reasons, or potentially under the instruction of their Persian patrons whom Howard-Johnston sees as having contracted the Ghassān in lieu of the Roman authorities. That said, he also shares a suspicion that there was some kind of connection between the *hijra* and the start of Heraclius' campaigning to the north, if only the penetration of the Roman emperor's rhetoric of holy war into the Ḥijāz as an intoxicating idea that moved men's minds throughout the Near East.

It is probably impossible definitively to prove whether or not the Ghassān were behind the *hijra*, or the direct and causal connection – if there was one – between Heraclius' campaign far to the north and Muḥammad's movements in the heart of the Ḥijāz. The source material does not allow it. Nonetheless, the notion is worth exploring, because there are a number of alluring indications in the Islamic historical tradition that Muḥammad's wars were not wholly the parochial events that they can so easily seem to have been. One does not have to advance a case as exacting and specific as Lecker's, the foundations of which are based on genealogical information that many would claim are peppered with the problems of the later Islamic sources, to make a credible case that Muḥammad's wars were wars within the Last Great War of Antiquity.

¹¹² Ibid, p.284-298. Lecker gives the Aws as one such tribe, although does not mention the graffito of Ibrāhīm.

¹¹³ The Jews are said to have assisted the Persian occupation of the Holy Land and to have orchestrated a massacre of the Christians of Jerusalem in 614 upon its seizure by the Persians (for instance Theophanes, *Chronicle*, A.M. 6106).

¹¹⁴ Ibid, p.289-290.

¹¹⁵ Bowersock, G. W., 2017, *The Crucible of Islam*, p.104-114.

¹¹⁶ Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.446-448. Howard-Johnston did not, of course, have access to Lecker's arguments.

Howard-Johnston's point of departure for his suspicions, namely, as mentioned above, the presence of Ghassān in the poetry of the *Sīrah* as a 'lurking, powerful presence in the north,' is certainly intriguing.¹¹⁷ In the aftermath of the Battle of Badr, verses attributed to the Meccan poet al-Ḥārith b. Hishām b. al-Mughīra accuse Muḥammad and his followers of entering into allegiance with Ghassān, sacrificing kinship bonds with fellow Meccans to do so (*Sīrah*, p.519). Ka' b b. Mālik, a poet loyal to Muḥammad, seems to echo this statement, if only lightly, by rhetorically asking whether or not word of Badr had yet reached Ghassān (p.527). Ka' b is recorded as having issued a similar appeal after the setback the Prophet experienced at Uḥud (p.613).

Some further lines attributed to Ka' b are striking both because they continue his theme of appealing to Ghassān, appeals that possess a tangible sense of admiration, with a clear statement that Ghassān were providing direct assistance to Muḥammad. In response to goading by two Meccan versifiers, Ka' b proclaims the following:

*Had you come to the bottom of the torrent bed,
A swift stroke would have met you on the valley side,
Bands of men round the Prophet would have confronted you,
With breastplates prepared for war,
Men of Ghassān stock (min jidhm ghassān) with drawn swords,
No unarmed towards they.*

(*Sīrah*, p.624)

Subsequent verses said to have been spoken by Ḥassān b. Thābit suggest that this connection to Ghassān had some pedigree behind it. Ḥassān utters the following fascinating lines.

*My uncle was orator at Jābiyatu`l-Jaulān,
With al-Nu`mān when he stood up (to speak),
I was the hawk at the door of Ibn Salma,
On the day that Nu`mān was sick in fetters.*

(*Sīrah*, p.625)

These lines resonate with the trials and tribulations of Rome's Arabian clients in the penultimate decade of the sixth century, when any uncle of Ḥassān would quite plausibly have been a man in his prime (the Battle of Uḥud took place in 625).

Jābiyatu`l-Jaulān was a site of strong Ghassānid connections.¹¹⁸ Even if there remains debate as to where it actually was, the possibility that the Ghassān possessed some kind of traditional muster or tenting-ground in the vicinity of the Golan – where the sown and the desert meet – is highly

¹¹⁷ Ibid, p.441.

¹¹⁸ Fisher, G., 2011, *Between Empires*, p.208-209.

likely, were it not anyway widely attested. The Golan is essentially equidistant between the borders of Palestine, along which the Jafnid dynasty seem originally to have been based, and the Mesopotamian epicentre of great power conflict, where the Ghassānid armies were of most use to Rome. The most plausible identification of the poem's al-Nu'mān – a man who is clearly a leader as he stands up to speak but who then also falls into an apparently well-known state of captivity – is Nu'mān, son of al-Mundhir, who fell victim to a Roman plot that saw him hauled to Constantinople and then exiled. One could easily imagine that the fall of Nu'mān must have been an event that sent shockwaves through the Ghassān and the wider Arabian world: shockwaves still clearly pulsating around forty years later in the poetry attributed to a man of the northern Ḥijāz.

The *Sīrah*, therefore, quite strikingly suggests that there was some kind of connection and sympathy between Muḥammad's polity at Yathrib and groups associated with the Ghassān. It is unclear what any later Muslim scholar or factional interest had to gain by inventing such a relationship centuries after the Battle of Uḥud, given the subsequent role of tribes of reputed Ghassānid affiliation as allies of Rome at Yarmouk and thus as enemies of Islam (see above). Similar to the incidental and quite plain way in which Muḥammad's early relationship with the bedouin is revealed in the *Sīrah*, the statements of alliance with the Ghassān, though quite clear, are fleeting and unadorned, without any real surrounding discussion. They do not seem to bear the scars of manipulation or phases of reworking, but to have been ossified at an early date and preserved in poetry.

Were the idea that some form of cooperation between the Prophet and groups that historically had been a part of the Ghassānid coalition to be entertained, the question as to why such an alliance could have existed remains. Fortunately, there are further hints in the *Sīrah* traditions that start to provide an answer. The *Akbbār Makka* of Abu 'l-Walīd al-Azraqī contains a variation on the story of Muḥammad removing the idols and pictures of the Ka'ba after the conquest of Mecca in which a woman of Ghassān visits the sanctuary, notices portraits of Jesus and Mary, and issues an approving exclamation, after which the Prophet removes all pictures from the shrine except those of Jesus and his mother (*Akbbār Makka*, 1.107).¹¹⁹ A poem attributed to 'Abbās b. Mirdās al-Sulamī and connected to the Battle of Ḥunayn, moreover, when describing the Prophet's forces,

¹¹⁹ *Die Chroniken der Stadt Mecca*, Wüstenfeld, F., (ed.), 1857, Leipzig: In Commission bei F.A. Brockhaus. Guillaume includes the story in his version of the *Sīrah*, Guillaume, A., 1955, *The Life of Muhammad*, p.552.

calls the Ghassān ‘God’s servants’ (*’ibād allāh*), and even conflates them directly with Muslims (*wa muslimūn ’ibād allāh ghassān*) (*Sīrah*, p.843).¹²⁰

The *Sīrah*, therefore, seems to contain some kind of religiously-motivated approval of the Ghassān that complements the endorsement of the Ghassān’s martial prowess evident elsewhere in its poetry. As the story of the woman of Ghassān reveals, the Ghassān confederation was closely associated with Christianity. The Jafnid dynasty was, for example, a great patron of the Miaphysite church. Laudatory mosaics and inscriptions at sites like the shrine of St. Sergius at Resāfa attest to the involvement of the Ghassān in church building.¹²¹ They were also a significant force in the institutional development of the Miaphysite confession relative to Chalcedonian Orthodoxy. The famous request of al-Ḥārith for bishops to minister to his people in the early 540s gave the Miaphysite leaders Theodore of Arabia and James Bar’adai a secure base and the political protection of an important federate people. They used this foundation of support to ordain other Miaphysite bishops throughout the East, far beyond their ostensible remit, thereby helping to restore the hierarchy and institutional structures of their persecuted confession.¹²²

Something else that the *Sīrah* seems to demonstrate is a recognition that there was a link between Christian faith and Roman political allegiance or at least influence. A Meccan who anticipated Muḥammad’s rejection of *shirk*, ‘Uthmān b. al-Ḥuwayrith, is said to have adopted Christianity, moved north, and entered into the service of the Emperor of Rome (*Sīrah*, p.144). The deputation from Najrān, who visited the Prophet in Yathrib, furthermore, were specifically reported to have been of the Chalcedonian creed (p.402-403). One of their number even had the exquisitely Roman name of John. Finally, in poetry attributed to the Meccan Umayya b. Abū’l-Ṣalt, he chooses to describe some of the leading men of Mecca as ‘patricians’ (*biṭriq*), a word that suggests the penetration of Roman political and honorific culture deep into Arabia (p.531).

Christianity, ideally but not necessarily of the Chalcedonian variety, did indeed have a close link to political affiliation with Rome in the sixth and seventh centuries. In many respects, Christian faith and Roman political alignment were simply the same thing. When the Ṭzani, a Caucasian people, started to serve alongside the Roman army during Justinian’s Persian Wars, for instance, Procopius records that they naturally converted to the imperial faith (*Wars*, 1.15.25). The Emperor Maurice

¹²⁰ It is further interesting to note that the poet follows this opening description of Muḥammad’s army by naming a selection of other tribes, a context that suggests *muslimūn* could be glossing the tribes as bedouin.

¹²¹ Fisher, G., 2011, *Between Empires*, p.36-71 . See also Hoyland, R., 2009, ‘Late Roman *Provincia Arabia*,’ p. 118–120 for Ghassānid church building.

¹²² Frend, W., 1972, *The Rise of the Monophysite Movement: Chapters in the History of the Church in the Fifth and Sixth Centuries*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.284–295.

decreed that all imperial documents should begin with a Christian foreshadowing of and equivalent to the *bismillah* and the introductory segment of his *Strategikon* reads almost like one long hymn.

Most pertinently, as noted above, Heraclius developed a rhetoric of holy war during the Last Great War of Antiquity to mobilise Christian manpower in the defence of Rome. The very beginning of his great offensive into the Caucasus was marked by religious ceremony and exhortation: a celebration of Easter; the brandishing of icons before the army on exercise, and an identification of the Roman cause as that of God (Theophanes, *Chronicle*, A.M. 6113). Fighting the Persians was said to be to nothing less than avenging ‘the insult done to God,’ on account of the many terrible things that they had done to Christians (A.M. 6114). Khusrau is recorded as having replied in kind. His response to Roman requests for peace was to call on Rome to abandon faith in Jesus Christ (A.M. 6109).

One final, crucial point to consider, bearing in mind the apparent cooperation between Muḥammad and Ghassānid groups and the Ghassān’s Christian affiliation, is to review the way in which the Prophet’s approach to Christianity could have been perceived by contemporaries. As the above story preserved in the *Akbbār Makkah* implies, there are hints within the tradition that Muḥammad was far less hostile to Christians than he was to Jews, and even that he was amenable to them. These hints resonate strongly with the Qur’ān. As explored in Chapter Two, when the Qur’ān engages in totalising polemic against other monotheistic groups – rather than just the elements among them that refuse to endorse the Qur’ān’s pious scheme – it is far more condemnatory of Jews than it is of Christians (the best example being Q.5:82-85). Christians are even said to be the closest to the Believers. Further, the Qur’ān asserts the truth of the Immaculate Conception (Q.21:91), makes validating references to Jesus’ miracles (Q.3:49), and also confirms his death, bodily resurrection, and ascent into heaven (Q.3:55-57; 19:33). The Qur’ān essentially confirms so much of the Christian understanding of Jesus that it would potentially be very easy to miss its actual denial of Jesus’ divinity (Q.4.171), not least as it is unclear to what extent the Qur’ān circulated as a complete text – rather than as scattered revelations and exhortations – before the middle or end of the seventh century.

To the Christian bedouin of north Arabia, whose groups had historically been a part of the Ghassān coalition, Muḥammad could easily have been seen as a Christian figure. His eventual attacks on the Jewish tribes of Yathrib further put him in the Christian camp, when set against the wider context of a Persian invasion of the Holy Land assisted by Palestinian Jews. In an age in

which there was barely a hair's breadth between political affiliation and religious faith, Ghassānid groups and the polity of the Prophet appear to have been something approaching natural allies.

The experience of the previous century had habituated these groups to fighting as a part of a far wider coalition and to complex political alliances in which fellow-believers became fellow-travellers. The rewards of a successful war were also well known. The speed at which news could travel across the desert – a phenomenon well attested by Thesiger – would have brought news of Muḥammad northward, prompting war-hungry, believing bedouin to rally to the standard of the leader of a prosperous oasis, whose message appeared to endorse their faith.¹²³ In light of Heraclius' propaganda, men may well have seen themselves as warriors in a wider struggle against the enemies of God, a struggle apparently endorsed by a holy-man in Yathrib who was an enemy of the Jews and who wanted to stamp-out *shirk*, whatever that was. This dynamic, in addition to the economic dependence of more local bedouin groups on the oasis of Yathrib, helps to explain why Muḥammad was able to recruit from the bedouin of northern Arabia, and why he was ultimately successful in his war with Mecca.

The possible connections between the new state coming into being at Yathrib and the nomadic warriors of northern Arabia does not end with the victory of Heraclius in the Last Great War of Antiquity in 628. Even if trying the divine cooperation between Ghassānid groups with a history of loyalty to the Christian Roman Empire and Muḥammad will inevitably involve speculation of a lesser or greater degree, there is firm evidence from demonstrably good sources that shows that the outbreak of what became known as the Islamic Conquests was accompanied by the defection of Roman client forces to armies loyal to the new power in the Ḥijāz. This had less to do with the numinous power of a prophet's preaching, more with the hard realities of the conventional pattern of relationships between Rome and barbarian federates. This chapter has already outlined how groups like the Ghassān had evolved from clients to allies of a more equal status in the sixth century. The immediate aftermath of the Last Great War of Antiquity in the seventh century shows the evolution of clients into conquerors.

¹²³ Thesiger, W., 2007, *Arabian Sands*, p.124; p.169-170: 'It had not taken long for this news (of Thesiger's own arrival in the region) to arrive, although here we were near the Persian Gulf, far from the Hadhramaut; but I was not surprised. I knew how interested Bedu always are in "the news," how concerned to get the latest information about their kinsmen, about raids and tribal movements and grazing. I knew from experience how far they would go out of their way to ask for news...What is "the news"? It is the question which follows every encounter in the desert even between strangers.'

The Collapse of the Imperial Frontier

Causal connections between the Last Great War of Antiquity and the subsequent success of the seventh century conquests have long been deduced and, to varying degrees and for different reasons, been accepted.¹²⁴ It is plausible to imagine that the progress of any army invading from Arabia faced imperial forces far smaller, and perhaps less able to resist, than would have been the case without the last Romano-Persian war. A generation, moreover, would have come to maturity in the former Roman provinces with no direct experience of central Roman rule and an uncertain appetite for it. Local elites may well have drifted away from an empire that recent experience had taught them was not a secure guarantor of stability, as was the case during the crisis years of the third century and in the Roman West in the fifth century. Doctrinal divisions have also been cited as reasons explaining the potential, even likely, disloyalty of the provincials to the re-imposition of Heraclius' proudly Chalcedonian regime.¹²⁵

The significance of the last Romano-Persian war, however, has recently been under-played by some scholars who have demonstrated a tendency to emphasise the religious zeal of invading armies raised exclusively from inner Arabia.¹²⁶ This is undoubtedly a major part of the story. There is, however, one element of the impact of the war that deserves detailed investigation and that speaks to the importance of the developments of the previous century to explaining the rise and success of the new power based at Yathrib: the attitude of Roman Arabian clients to the invading armies in the early 630s.

The two chief Byzantine sources for the seventh century, Theophanes the Confessor's *Chronicle* and the *Short History* of the Patriarch Nicephorus, contain a striking concordance in what they record to have happened with respect to Rome's Arabian clients on the Palestinian frontier. The events they describe are strikingly plausible, and resonate suggestively with the kind of phenomena often attested across the centuries of Roman-federate relations from the Rhine to the River Jordan, and in some respects already played-out in the 580s during the breakdown of relations with the Jafnid dynasty. Both Nicephorus and Theophanes record a dramatic breakdown in relations

¹²⁴ Whittow, M., 2010, 'The Late Roman/Early Byzantine Near East,' p.73.

¹²⁵ One of the more strident examples of this interpretation can be found in Fiey, J., 1987, 'The last Byzantine campaign into Persia and its influence on the attitude of the local populations to the Muslim conquerors, 7-16A.H./628-636 A.D.,' in Bakhit, M., (ed.), *Proceedings on the Second Symposium on the History of Bilād al-Shām During the Early Islamic Period Up to 40 A.H./640 A.D.: The Fourth International Conference On the History of Bilād al-Shām*, Amman, p.96-103.

¹²⁶ Sarris, as well as Howard-Johnston, has demonstrated a tendency to prioritise 'zeal' over the ramifications of the recent, devastating war; see Sarris, P., 2011, *Empires of Faith*, p.274.

between the Roman authorities and their Arabian clients. The events recorded are worth quoting at length.

Now some of the neighbouring Arabs were receiving small payments from the emperors for guarding the approaches to the desert (pros to phulaxai ta stomia tēs erēmou). At that time, a certain eunuch arrived to distribute the wages of the soldiers, and when the Arabs came to receive their wages according to custom, the eunuch drove them away, saying, 'The emperor can barely pay his soldiers their wages, much less these dogs (tois kusi toutois)!' Distressed, therefore, the Arabs went over to their fellow tribesmen (apēlthon pros tous omophulous), and they led them (their 'fellow tribesmen') to the rich country of Gaza (kai autoi ōdēgēsan autous epī tēn chōran Gazēs), which is the gateway to the desert in the direction of Mount Sinai.

(*Chronicle*, A.M. 6123)

Nicephorus bears witness to a very similar situation.

For Sergius kata Niketan met his end in the following way. The Saracens, after flaying a camel, shut him up in its hide and sewed it up...The charge against him was that he had encouraged Heraclius not to permit the Saracens to engage in commerce from the Roman land and send out of the Roman state the 30 lbs. of gold which they normally achieved through trade; and for this reason they began to cause ruin to the Roman land (enteuthen te autous apzai tē Rōmaiōn lumainesthai chōra).

(*Short History*, 20)¹²⁷

Both sources are admittedly as late as some of the sources of the Islamic tradition. Theophanes probably composed his work at some point late in the eighth or in the early ninth century and Nicephorus wrote maybe slightly earlier in the last half of the eighth century.¹²⁸ There is good reason, however, to place faith in the evidence of these two texts.

The *Chronicle* of Theophanes is a boldly ambitious work of history that covers events within and beyond the borders of Rome from the reign of Diocletian to the early ninth century. Theophanes' scope, as well as the remarkable lack of stylistic uniformity in his language, demonstrates that the

¹²⁷ Nikephoros Patriarch of Constantinople *Short History*, Mango, C., 1990, (ed. & trans.), Dumbarton Oaks: Washington D.C.

¹²⁸ For Theophanes, see primarily Mango, C., & Scott, R., (ed. & trans.), 1997, *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor: Byzantine and Near Eastern History A.D. 284 – 813*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, p.xliii-lxiii; for Nicephorus, Mango, C., 1990, *Nikephoros*, p.1-2; p.8-12. Understanding of Theophanes has recently been improved by the papers published in Jankowiak, M., and Montinaro, F., 2015, *Studies in Theophanes: Travaux et Mémoires* 19.

Chronicle is far more than the product of one man or a single source and should 'best be viewed as a file of extracts borrowed from earlier sources.'¹²⁹ Study of Theophanes, therefore, is essentially the study of the menagerie of earlier written material that was collated, edited, paraphrased or even simply transcribed into a single document.¹³⁰ It is accordingly likely that earlier, more intrinsically reliable accounts are readily discoverable within the *Chronicle*, preserved in a written medium that was far more stable and far less open to the kind of presentist revision to which the early Arabic oral accounts were prone, for comparison.

Theophanes gives a clear indication concerning from whom he received such a collection of earlier material. The *Chronicle's* preface reveals that Theophanes' project of writing a history was not the result of his own invention and intellectual drive, but a commission bequeathed to him by a friend, George, the cell-mate (*synkellos*) of Tarasios, Patriarch of Constantinople (784-806). George had already completed a chronicle that stretched from The Creation to Diocletian and is reported to have also gathered material to continue the chronicle to his own age.¹³¹ He however died before he could do so, leaving the task to Theophanes, to whom he left not only his completed work, but also the materials (*aphormas*) for its continuation. Theophanes may admit to consulting material beyond what he received from George, but the thoroughness with which George pursued his intellectual endeavour – evident in the half of his chronicle that bears his name – and Theophanes' reported, as well as admitted, lack of advanced learning, implies that most of "The "Chronicle of Theophanes" is in fact a lightly-touched final version of George's work."¹³²

George, importantly, had spent a considerable amount of time working and living in Palestine. He was probably based at the Old Lavra of St. Chariton near Tekoa, under twenty kilometres south

¹²⁹ Mango, C., & Scott, R., 1997, *The Chronicle of Theophanes the Confessor*, p.lxxiv.

¹³⁰ Mango and Scott present a list of twenty potential underlying sources, which they describe as 'neither exhaustive nor certain' in *ibid*, p.lxxiv-lxxxviii. The papers presented in Jankowiak, M., and Montinaro, F., 2015, *Studies in Theophanes* similarly accept a diversity of underlying source material.

¹³¹ *Georgii Syncelli Ecloga Chronographica*, Mosshammer, A., (ed.) 1984, Leipzig: Teubner. Treadgold, W., 2015, 'The Life and Wider Significance of George Syncellus,' in Jankowiak, M., and Montinaro, F., 2015, *Studies in Theophanes*, p.9-30 believes that this project was well advanced upon George's death in 813, the year in which – not coincidentally as Treadgold argues – the *Chronicle* of Theophanes comes to an end.

¹³² Theodore the Studite's panegyric on Theophanes, for instance, records that he was 'unacquainted with deep wisdom'; see Efthymiadis, S., 1993, 'Le panégyrique de S. Théophane Le Confesseur par S. Théodore Stoudite (BHG 1729b): Edition critique du texte intégral,' *Analecta Bollandiana* 111, p.259-290. Treadgold, W., 2015, 'The Life and Wider Significance' essentially sees George as the real author of Theophanes' *Chronicle*, not least as his career suited him to gathering the range of source material on which the *Chronicle* appears to rely. Jankowiak, M., 2015, 'Framing Universal History: Syncellus' Canon and Theophanes Rubrics,' in Jankowiak, M., and Montinaro, F., 2015, *Studies in Theophanes*, p.53-72, however, gives Theophanes far more agency and intellectual credit and Debić, M., 2015, 'Theophanes' "Oriental Source": What can we learn from Syriac Historiography?' in *ibid*, p.365-382 likewise envisages Theophanes, and his alleged committee of scholars (p.375-377), playing a far more active authorial role.

of Jerusalem.¹³³ It is therefore unsurprising that eastern sources are thought to have made a great contribution to his work and consequently to Theophanes' *Chronicle*, not least the lost annalistic history attributed to Theophilus of Edessa. This history is generally thought to underpin most of what Theophanes preserves for the years 630 to the mid-eighth century, something that explains the detail that the *Chronicle* offers for eastern affairs.¹³⁴ Other later historians as well as Theophanes also relied on Theophilus, a progeny that allows an essence of the original to be reconstructed. Importantly, Theophanes' account of the defection of Rome's Arabian clients is not to be found in Theophilus' other dependents.¹³⁵ It is a unique nugget of information that consequently must have come down from at least one other source.

It is, of course, impossible definitely to identify from where this report originated. Various vague attributions are possible.¹³⁶ It is both tempting and plausible, however, to suggest that the account of the defection of the Arabian federates accurately preserves an essentially eyewitness report contemporary to the events it describes.

First, as has already been noted, the report is inherently plausible. Compensating for the end of Roman subsidies by raiding was common federate practice on all of Rome's frontiers in Late Antiquity. Secondly, the preface of George's *Chronography* reveals a particular interest in capturing the history of Islam, noticeable and perhaps unusual in a Byzantine churchman. He closes his statement of intent for the *Chronography* by announcing, 'I shall describe, as far as I am able, the covenant abominable to Christ and our people, that which the tents of the Idumaeans and the Ishmaelites brought forth' (*tēn kata Christou kai tou genous ēmōn theobdelukton diathēkēn, ēn dietheto ta skēgōmata tōn Idoumaion kai oi Ismaēlitai...diagrapso kata dunamin*). One can imagine, therefore, that George would have been keen to unearth and transmit any fascinating little local tale that could be connected to the ascent of Islamic power that he could find. Thirdly, he lived in what may have

¹³³ For a reconstruction of George's life, see Adler, W., & Tuffin, P., (ed. & trans.), 2002, *The Chronography of George Synkellos: A Byzantine Chronicle of Universal History from the Creation*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.xxix-lxxxviii and Treadgold, W., 2015, 'The Life and Wider Significance,' esp.24-30.

¹³⁴ Hoyland, R., 2011, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle and the Circulation of Historical Knowledge in Late Antiquity and Early Islam*, Liverpool University Press, p.10, suggests that Theophanes is dependent on a version of Theophilus to c.740. Mango and Scott extend this dependency to c.780, a notion with which Treadgold agrees and argues that George in fact continued Theophilus – in a Greek translation of the work that he also made – to 813. The debate on Theophilus and the eastern sources of Theophanes is hardly settled, however. Debié, M., 2015, 'Theophanes' "Oriental Source"' considers Theophilus as little more than a 'ghost of Syriac historiography' (p.369), a perspective generally shared by Conterno, M., 2015, 'Theophilus, "the more likely candidate"'? Towards a reappraisal of the question of Theophanes' "Oriental source(s)"; in Jankowiak, M., and Montinaro, F., 2015, *Studies in Theophanes*, p.383-400.

¹³⁵ Hoyland, R., 2011, *Theophilus of Edessa's Chronicle*, p.90-94, for a comparison of material descended from Theophilus treating the early conquests in Palestine.

¹³⁶ Hoyland, for example, sees two separate 'Greek reports' – one on the defection, one on the Battle of Mu'ta – and an Arabic account lying behind the year's entry (ibid, p.92). He does not speculate from where the 'Greek reports' may have come.

been a perfect location for discovering such accounts: a monastery in southern Palestine whose seventh century brethren would have experienced the conquests at first hand. It is hardly impossible, therefore, that the report of the defection of Roman federates in Theophanes' *Chronicle* is taken from an eyewitness monastic account dating to the 630s.¹³⁷

It is also probable that a seventh century source contemporary to the events described likewise hides beneath the surface of Nicephorus' late eighth century text.¹³⁸ In some respects, the *Short History* is an odd document. It appears to be unfinished and falls into two seemingly self-contained sections, offering a continuous narrative beginning with a summary of the usurpation of Phocas in 602 and his subsequent rule, then entirely omitting the reign of Emperor Constans II (641-668) – the circumstances of his death get a brief mention (*Short History*, 33) – only finally to give another century of narrative, closing with the marriage of Emperor Leo IV to Eirene of Athens in 769. The peculiar nature of the *Short History* perhaps explains this disjointed structure. The high calibre of the Greek, combined with a generally profane concentration on the high politics of state, demonstrate that Nicephorus was writing a self-consciously classicising history. It was perhaps intended as a continuation of the *History* of Theophylact Simocatta.¹³⁹

The literary, rather than solely historical, imperatives that drove the composition of the text, combined with the fact of the two neat sections, imply that Nicephorus did little more than artistically paraphrase two earlier vulgar Greek sources into a higher style.¹⁴⁰ Considering that the first section ends in 641, and the fact that, from the immediate aftermath of the fall of Phocas in 610 (*Short History*, 2), events move along in chronological progression, the suggestion that the source of the first section is some kind of 'Constantinopolitan chronicle' covering most of the first half of the seventh century, has received some acceptance.¹⁴¹ Nicephorus makes no citation or even allusion to the potential nature of this source – so as to maintain a pretence of the classical ideal of autopsy – but its apparent thirty-year span does not make a single hand covering events in a single author's lifetime unlikely. Another theory, that the source was in fact a 'historical

¹³⁷ Petersen, L., 2013, *Siege Warfare and Military Organisation in the Successor States (400 – 800 AD): Byzantium, the West and Islam*, Brill: Leiden, p.430 seems also to have come to the same conclusion – 'probably dates back to a near-contemporary account' – without explaining why or how. The ongoing debate concerning what should perhaps rather be termed Theophanes' eastern *sources* – rather than source – also does not seem to have offered an explanation for the origins of this account. Treadgold's reconstruction of George's life, however, supports the notion that George researched widely across Syria and Palestine, gathering source material, and making 'extensive notes' (Treadgold, W., 2015, 'The Life and Wider Significance,' p.25).

¹³⁸ Mango, C., 1990, *Nikephoros*, p.8-12, settles on the 780s as the likely period of the text's composition based upon internal criticism and knowledge of Nicephorus' career.

¹³⁹ Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.242; p.237-263 for a broader analysis.

¹⁴⁰ It should, however, be noted that Mango, C., 1990, *Nikephoros*, p.12-13, argues that the first paragraph of the first section descends from a third source.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid*, p.14. Howard-Johnston, J., 2010, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, p.248.

pamphlet' composed either by Pyrrhus, Patriarch of Constantinople (638-641 and again in 654), or by a close ally of his, around 650 similarly supports the notion of the source's generation in a single lifetime.¹⁴² It is, therefore, quite reasonable to suggest that the dramatic account of the death of Sergius *kata Niketan*, and the ensuing federate attacks, were written down within months of taking place, having reached Constantinople as a macabre and fascinating eyewitness account of the deteriorating situation in the East that the chronicle's author could not ignore.¹⁴³

This implication is significant beyond the actual proximity to seventh century events that it would suggest of Nicephorus' later text. Principally, it offers further proof for the mutual independence of the source traditions behind Theophanes' and Nicephorus' histories.¹⁴⁴ This consequently suggests that the collapse of relations between Rome and her Arabian clients in the aftermath of the great war with Persia was a serious, even widespread phenomenon, as two different versions of essentially the same kind of event reached two separate authors independently. The breakdown of Rome's network of federate alliances on the Palestinian marches must indeed have been perceived as important at the time, as word of it crossed the seas to reach Nicephorus' chronicler in Constantinople.

What the accounts of both authors suggest is that the Arabian frontier was in crisis. In the immediate aftermath of the Last Great War of Antiquity, Rome seems to have found herself no longer able to offer the kind of incentives to frontier groups to serve the empire, to which they had become accustomed over previous generations. State coffers were empty. Theophanes even records how Heraclius was forced to confiscate the funds of religious institutions and to melt-down church plate to fund the war effort (*Chronicle*, A.M. 6113). Such an indication that the situation had become so severe that the empire had been forced to convert its precious metal reserves to liquid capital is confirmed by the more contemporary *Chronicon Paschale* (s.a. 615). Already, by the second decade of the war, the weight of the coinage was reduced, and imperial salaries has been slashed by half. The likelihood that the authorities in the newly reoccupied East

¹⁴² Zuckerman, C., 2013, 'Heraclius and the Return of the Holy Cross,' in *Travaux et Mémoires* 17, p.197-218; p.204-209 for Nikephorus, p.207 for the conclusion regarding the underlying source.

¹⁴³ This possibility is particularly powerful if one follows Zuckerman's suggestion that Pyrrhus, or his apologist, composed the 'historical pamphlet' from memory rather than following a period of text-based research. The story about Sergius must have stuck in the author's mind for twenty years, so may well have been reported officially to the court or disseminated widely as rumour on the streets of Constantinople. It must, therefore, have been recognised as a particularly significant event.

¹⁴⁴ Mango, C., 1990, *Nikephorus*, p.12, notes that there seems to have been no contact between the work of both authors, even though they were contemporaries of one another, and suggests that this may be because of the iconodule colouring of both texts, which would have advised their authors and later possessors against circulation until 843.

were short, not just of coin, but also of precious metal, would appear to be confirmed by the remarkably precise reference given to bullion by Nicephorus.

This would appear to be the proximate reason why the Arabian federates recorded by Theophanes and Nicephorus start to raid the frontier lands and defect to ‘their fellow tribesmen.’ The suggestion that these tribesmen were the followers of Muḥammad is the natural assumption to make. This supposition has received acceptance. Whittow, for instance, follows this line of analysis and cites Theophanes’ version of events as an intriguing coda to the end of Roman power in the Near East. He does not, however, explore any possible deeper or further ramifications.¹⁴⁵

Other scholars appear conventionally to have been resistant to giving detailed consideration to the Byzantine sources. Kennedy cites neither Theophanes nor Nicephorus in his narrative of the conquest of Palestine. Donner, intriguingly, fails to note the defection of federates as attested in Theophanes, even though he refers to the exact same passage as evidence for the end of Roman subsidies being given to groups on the frontier.¹⁴⁶ There is, however, good reason to believe that the defection of Roman federates was significant and that it deserves full integration into narratives of the seventh century conquests. One only has to look a little earlier in the passage of Theophanes to understand why. Before announcing the defection of the federate Arabians to the invaders, Theophanes talks of the comprehensive earlier defeat of a hostile invading force at a village he calls Mouthous. This is clearly a reference to what the Islamic tradition knows as the Battle of Mu’ta, which took place towards the end of 629, and which is recorded as a crushing defeat for Yathrib (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, p.1.1610-1619).

It is striking, therefore, that the invaders appear to break through the Roman frontier and go on to conquer the Roman Near East only after the defection of Roman federates. In Theophanes, the year after the federate defection sees the invading army raid southern Palestine at will and defeat a Roman force in the field outside Caesarea (A.M. 6124). The next year witnesses the fall of Bostra, among other cities, and the defeat of a further Roman army under the emperor’s brother, Theodore (A.M. 6125). Theophanes’ *Chronicle* may suggest that imperial resistance was not entirely futile: the entry that records the defeat of the emperor’s brother also notes the subsequent defeat of an invading Arabian force (who interestingly flee towards the Damascus area rather than away from the Roman provinces). The invaders, however, are able to press on, do not experience a reversal as considerable as Mu’ta again, and, by 635, are attested as controlling broad swathes of

¹⁴⁵ Whittow, M., 2010, ‘The Late Roman/Early Byzantine Near East,’ p.96-97.

¹⁴⁶ Kennedy, H., 1987, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphates*; Donner, F., 1981, *The Early Islamic Conquests*, p.100.

Egypt, Palestine and Syria (A.M. 6127). The *Short History* implies the same basic outline of events, and, like Theophanes, records that Heraclius left the region for Constantinople soon after the invaders' power came to be felt from Alexandria to Damascus (23-24).

There is, of course, very good reason to explain this success beyond attributing it to the addition of erstwhile Roman federates to the armies controlled by Yathrib. As the previous Chapter explored, the Prophet had already started successfully to recruit bedouin from the Ḥijāz and beyond to his cause. The conquest of Mecca shortly after the defeat at Mu'ta consolidated his prestige and power, and removed his main rival. This watershed moment precipitated the so-called 'year of deputations' in 631, when tribes from across Arabia are said to have acknowledged Muḥammad's sovereignty, a development that expanded Muḥammad's access to bedouin manpower (*Sīrah*, p.933). The attempt of some of these tribes to escape the sway of Yathrib after the Prophet's death had also come to an end by 634, ostensibly uniting broad swathes of the Arabian Peninsula, thereby consolidating the access of the successors of Muḥammad to a large reserve of fighting men.

There are, however, good reasons to emphasise the particular significance of Roman Arabian federates to the success of the conquest of Palestine. First, the particular groups that Rome had been able to contract in the immediate wake of the Last Great War of Antiquity were probably battle-hardened and experienced, with some perhaps having served the occupying Persian authorities in a similar capacity (as Theophanes' attestation of Saracens serving in the Persia armies in Armenia in 620/621 could suggest). Secondly, given the extent of the task of re-asserting Roman authority that faced the imperial army, these federates may also have been numerically large relative to local Roman regulars. Further, they would have been deeply familiar with the land they were invading. Theophanes, after all, explicitly states that it was they who had the ability to lead their 'fellow tribesmen' into southern Palestine. Finally, defecting federates may also have been better able to achieve the acquiescence of provincials to an invading force, owing to potential prior familiarity. It is not too hard to imagine, therefore, that the Arabians hired by Rome as federates in the 620s – probably members of groups that were previously a part of Ghassān, with memories of Roman service – were largely responsible for the successful break-in to Palestine of what came to be known by their descendants as the armies of Islam.

Conclusion

Bringing the tales of the collapse of Rome's relationship with client tribes on the frontier into the grand narrative of the seventh century conquests combines the near and far horizons of early Islam

into a single perspective. The great empires' need for manpower in a new century of war had catalysed the development of bedouin coalitions that were larger, more accustomed to complex political behaviour, and that were a far more potent force on the battlefield than were their ancestors. This created a set of traditions and a reserve of fighting men whose ambitions were excited by a nascent state based in the rich oasis of Yathrib, and whose spirits were perhaps moved by a charismatic, prophetic figure whose teaching did not come across as entirely dissimilar to what they already believed. The impact of the great power politics of the sixth and seventh centuries on the Near East therefore set the conditions for the success of the early Islamic state, an impact whose almost natural conclusion – bearing in mind the earthshattering events of the fall of Rome in the West – is glimpsed in revealing detail in the accounts contained in Theophanes and Nicephorus.

The decades of scholarship on the transformation of the Western Roman Empire certainly help to put the developments of the century previous to Islam into a truly enlightening context. Just as Roman frontier policy east of the Rhine and north of the Danube had led to an influx of wealth into the barbarian lands, together with an habituation to complex political structures and integration into wider political networks, thereby creating more powerful barbarian coalitions, so did frontier policy east of the Jordan have the same kind of effects. The experience of warfare, which was so crucial to ethnogenesis in Europe, probably also played a vital role in building the Ghassān – and indeed the Lakhm – as an identity group, bound together by connections deeper than the chance for material gain. Warfare probably similarly helped to create cohesion in Muḥammad's early coalition. Fundamentally, when set against a broader, Eurasian perspective stretching back to Rome's third century crisis and forward to the birth of states in Slavic Europe in the shadow of the Carolingian Empire, the development of a state in Yathrib and the very birth of Islam seem far less extraordinary phenomena.

The role of the bedouin in the creation and battlefield success of the early Islamic state was a result of processes that had been at work in the Near East for some time, and that depended, above all, on great power rivalry and the geographic location of Arabia between two great powers. In the early 630s, Yathrib stepped into a power vacuum created by the defeat of Persia and the inability of a weakened Rome to re-establish Constantinople's authority in the eastern provinces. The previous decades had seen bedouin groups fight in both the Persian and Roman armies and they found themselves in need of a new paymaster and susceptible to the kind of vigorous, expansionist direction that had come to condition their social and political perspectives. In his early days in the Ḥijāz, Muḥammad's ability to corral bedouin groups into the political ambitions of his pietistic sect

was similarly dependent on certain contingent forces. These were above all his personal ability to appeal to the traditional bedouin understanding of the *kāhin*, or soothsayer, and the ecological dependence of nomadic groups on the resources of Yathrib.

The world brought into being by what became known as the Islamic Conquests destroyed the factors that had brought the new state into being. One ancient empire was wiped-off the map, the other was irrevocably humbled, and the successors to the Prophet found the resources of the Fertile Crescent open to them in a way that surely must have proved that the righteous would indeed inherit the earth. With a changed world, the role of the bedouin in the great events of the seventh and subsequent centuries would also change, as the next, concluding Chapter will explore.

Chapter Five: Towards the End of Arabian Maximalisation

The people of Jordan and others said to Marwān, 'You are a great sheikh, while the son of Yazīd is a boy and Ibn al-Zubayr is in middle age. Only iron will strike iron, so do not challenge him with this boy. Meet him head on and we will give you the oath of allegiance. Hold out your hand!' So he held out his hand and they gave him the oath of allegiance at al-Jābiya...

(al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2.473)

The last chapter explored the fundamental importance of the sixth-century transformation of the bedouin world in making what became known as the Islamic Conquests possible. A century of warfare between the two great powers of the ancient world, Rome and Persia, had catalysed the formation of large bedouin client coalitions, whose members had become accustomed to military action beyond the confines of the tribe and who were led by powerful elites well integrated into the politics of the wider world. The horizons of the bedouin of northern Arabia had been expanded, and the nomads of the desert had become well aware of the prizes and prestige to be won by joining together to attack the lands of one empire or another. By the 620s, north Arabia had been made ready for Islam. The timing of Muḥammad's revelation was nothing if not propitious, and the Prophet's state-making religious campaign found what has been called its 'extraordinary intersection of historical opportunity and accident.'¹

The conquests ushered in a further epochal transformation. The near eastern lands of the two great empires of Late Antiquity were united into one, controlled by new masters hailing from Arabia rather than native elites. Permanent though the impact of these conquests were in reshaping the social, cultural, religious and political nature of the ancient world, the dominance of Arabians, not least the bedouin tribes, proved to be more ephemeral. By 750, sovereignty in the Islamic Empire may still have been held by a caliph whose line stretched back to Mecca, but power was very much in the hands of men hailing from the frontiers of the Persian world. Later centuries similarly saw Turkish groups come to the forefront of political life.

This eventual transition from an empire ruled by Arabians to an Islamic world controlled by men who had often been born outside it is well known. This chapter, however, will look at the early roots of the end of the first period of Arabian maximalisation. A range of factors conspired to ensure the progressive marginalisation of bedouin groups as early as the seventh century. There

¹ Crone, P., 1980, *Slaves on Horses*, p.25.

was an inevitable tension between the customs of the tribe and the demands of the state, not least as the early state was more sophisticated than has often previously been supposed and consequently did not have to rely totally on the caprices of the nomads. The armies of the new state were also hardly closed to willing warriors who were not bedouin. Finally, the civil wars that blighted the middle and late seventh century prompted the Umayyads to seek an ever more formal separation between their armies and the tribes, whose treatment at the hands of some later caliphs is foreshadowed even in the reign of Mu'āwiya.

Arabia: from Centre to Periphery

As revealed in Chapter Three, the early Islamic state was an ambitious entity, well able to marshal men and materiel for expansion. It was led by a fairly narrow elite whose legitimacy depended on proximity to the Prophet and to each other – often solidified through marriage – and who had the most to gain politically and materially by continuing the community founded by Muḥammad. The men who did so much to realise their imperial designs, however, and who effectively made Arabia the centre of the early medieval world, were the bedouin of the Ḥijāz, Najd, and northern Arabia, who 'submitted' to the political authority of the new Medinese state rather than necessarily 'believing' in the message of that state's founder.

The significance of the bedouin tribes to the new state is clearly apparent in the events that surround the passage that opened this chapter. The passage itself is taken from the 'last grand tribal *majlis*' that bestowed the caliphate upon Marwān b. al-Ḥakam in 684, at which the leading men of the Kalb, Ghassān, Sakāsik and other tribes assembled at the old Ghassānid mustering ground of al-Jābiya to decide the destiny of the nascent Islamic world.² It is tempting to consider al-Ṭabarī's account of the acclamation of Marwān as plausibly historical in part because this demonstration of tribal, bedouin importance was so foreign to the world that al-Ṭabarī himself inhabited that it probably could not have been a later invention.

During al-Ṭabarī's lifetime, bedouin Arabia was no longer an integral part of the Caliphate. The peninsula was once again peripheral to the great movements of history. The Arabian deserts lay beyond the control of the government of Sāmarrā' and the bedouin, far from being the central props of the caliphal regime, were the menace of the central Islamic lands, as noted in the

² Ibid, p.35. See *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 2.467-479 for accounts of the swearing of allegiance to Marwān. The fact that al-Jābiya was chosen as the site for this act speaks to the lasting memory of the Ghassān coalition – it was clearly where northern Arabian bedouin met to decide matters of importance – as well as to the politics of the day (it was also where the local partisans of Ibn al-Zubayr had decided to swear the oath, suggesting that both candidates for the caliphate were trying to compete for local bedouin loyalties).

Introduction. The final years of the *History of the Prophets and Kings* – in which al-Ṭabarī cites first-hand accounts rather than chains of transmitters – are dominated by tales of the Caliph’s soldiers being sent south on punitive expeditions against the bedouin.

In 844/845, for instance, the depredations of the Banū Sulaym in the Ḥijāz became so severe that access to the Holy Cities was completely blocked. This forced the Caliph al-Wāthiq to dispatch his leading Turkish general, Bughā ’l-Kabīr, to quell the disturbance (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 3.1335-3.1343). Despite the fact that Bughā managed to suppress the Banū Sulaym, further chaos caused by a number of other bedouin tribes ultimately frustrated his expedition. Bughā was left to try to coax the recalcitrant tribes to swear an oath of allegiance to the Caliph as a face-saving measure, but the tribes simply refused the offer and disappeared into the desert (3.1343). The following year’s expedition against the Banū Numayr saw Bughā’s task force suffer a major defeat before he managed to exact vengeance, taking a reported 2,200 *a’rāb* hostages and publicly whipping one of the Banū Numayr’s sheikhs: a far cry from the role of such bedouin elders in the early years of the Umayyad Caliphate (3.1358-1363).

The gulf in the relationship between the bedouin and the state from the founding decades of the Islamic empire to the lifetime of al-Ṭabarī bespeaks the end of history’s first example of Arabian maximalisation. Rather than being the beating heart of an empire, Arabia, in the 840s, appears once again to have become stateless terrain, effectively dominated by a menagerie of nomadic tribes and hostile to a single authority. The peninsula seems to have reverted back to its pre-Islamic and pre-sixth-century character. As discussed in the Introduction, Arabia north of Yemen is comprised of deserts and steppe lands that forbid largescale settlement and sedentary agriculture, geographical and ecological features that are hardly amenable to pre-modern, settled administration. These features, furthermore, prompt additional comparisons between Arabia and James C. Scott’s understanding of highland South East Asia as ‘nonstate space,’ ‘locations where, owing largely to geographical obstacles, the state has particular difficulty in establishing and maintaining its authority.’³ The exceptional nature of state formation in Arabia, as mentioned in the Introduction and explored in depth in Chapter Three, certainly suggests this to be the case.

Comparing Arabia in the twentieth century to Arabia in the seventh in the Introduction sketched out the reasons why this transition came about. The reasons are implicit within the forces that the

³ Scott, J. C., 2009, *The Art of Not Being Governed*, p.13. Scott’s notion of the ‘friction of terrain,’ used in Chapter Three, is a concept related to that of ‘nonstate space.’ It is also telling to remember that Lord Curzon identified both deserts and mountains as ‘natural frontiers,’ because they presented severe barriers to constant state control in the pre-industrial age.

previous chapter showed to have transformed Arabia in the century of the Prophet's birth. The Islamic armies' victories over Rome and Persia in the second quarter of the seventh century put a quick and definitive end to the causes behind Arabia's geostrategic significance and the exceptional set of historical circumstances that had so profoundly altered the bedouin world. The Holy Cities would of course come to occupy a position of great ideological significance to the new state and civilisation, but, once the caliphal capital moved northwards on the cusp of the first Fitna – to al-Kūfa and later to Damascus – it remained to be seen whether ideology alone could overcome the far more ancient and physical forces of geography and the more muscular demands of *realpolitik*.

Yet almost two centuries separate the anointing of Marwān and the nature of the Arabian Peninsula in the age of al-Ṭabarī. One is prompted, therefore, to ask when as well as how exactly did the bedouin fall out of the state, and Arabia start to move from centre to periphery once again. This question has been asked before, and some answers have already been given. Looking again at the source material, however, and bearing in mind what precipitated the transformation of the Arabian world in the sixth century, leads to the roots of the reversion to the Arabian norm being glimpsed far earlier than has previously been recognised. The bedouin armies that conquered the Near East for their Medinan masters may have changed the world for good in the course of a few short decades, but the empire made by Arabians would not become a geographically Arabian empire.

Echoes of Early Disharmony

There is a palpable sense of tension between the bedouin and the state from the state's earliest days. Bearing in mind that, as suggested in Chapter Three, the bedouin had given their loyalty to Muḥammad as a man for what seem to have been largely secular reasons, it was perhaps to be expected that his death would represent an opportunity for the tribes to escape the control of Medina. Their attempts to do so have become known as the wars of the *Ridda*. Al-Azdī's *Conquest of Syria* begins with a passage that marks the start of these wars, which paints a vivid picture of the bedouin's reluctance to accept rule from Medina and to be a part of the Islamic state.

When Allah, Blessed and Most High, took possession of his Prophet, many of the Arabs (kathīr min al-arab) withdrew from Islam after the passing of the Messenger of God and they renounced the alms-tax (kafarū bi-l-zakāt). And they said, 'We once withheld our wealth from Muhammad and now Ibn Abī Quḥāfa asks us for it! By God, we will not give him anything at all from it.' And so they withheld the alms-tax from Abū Bakr and withdrew from it.

(al-Azdī, *Conquest of Syria*, p.77)

Fundamentally, the problem faced by the early Islamic state was a problem with which other states throughout history have had to contend when attempting to encapsulate tribal nomads into state structures. How can the tribe, a social system intrinsically opposed to the state, which is ideologically underpinned by social equality, interdependence, and independence, be reconciled to hierarchy and central direction?⁴ In addition to the threat of coercion – the tactic first employed by Muḥammad in his earliest state-making days – many Near Eastern states have simply tried to bribe tribal nomads out of their way of life, and secondarily to construct some kind of ideological justification for sedentary lifestyles and obedience to the state.⁵

It is this context that helps to explain why it was so important for the state to develop a system of military pay, *‘aṭā’*, formally recorded in a central state register and latterly in provincial registers, the *diwān*.⁶ By creating a system of regular pay for the army, rather than simply relying on occasional and uncertain hauls of booty, the state effectively reconstituted, in a new guise, the accustomed Roman and Persian tradition of subsidising tribes with revenue from taxation to ensure their compliance and military service.⁷ The genius of the system was that it, in effect, rewarded men for length of service, via the notion of precedence, or *sābiqa* (as made explicit in al-Ṭabarī’s description of the first *diwān*, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2411-2415).⁸ The men

⁴ See Chapter Three for comments on the tribe and Crone, P., 1994, ‘The Tribe and the State,’ in Hall, J.A., (ed.), *The State*, esp. p.450-456 (‘tribe and state are not similar types of organisation distinguished by their level of complexity, but on the contrary *alternative* forms of organisation evolved in response to similar problems,’ p.454) for the opposition between the two types of social and political organisation. Discussing this opposition is the focus of many of the papers contained in Nelson, C., (ed.), 1973, *The Desert and the Sown: Nomads in the Wider Society*, University of California: Berkeley.

⁵ The Āl Murra bedouin of Saudi Arabia, whose lifestyle as wide-ranging camel nomads travelling as much as 1000km between winter and summer pastures made them especially hard to ‘enmesh’ into the state, were paid \$100 per month to serve in the Saudi National Guard in the 1960s (see Cole, D.P., 1973, ‘The Enmeshment of Nomads in Sa‘udi Arabian Society: The Case of Āl Murrah,’ in Nelson, C., (ed.), *The Desert and the Sown*, p.113-128). Modern (pre-1979) Iranian rulers mixed gift-giving with the issuing of formal state titles to try to bring tribes like the Boyr Ahmad, Qashqai, and Basseri closer to the state (Reza Fazel, G., 1973, ‘The Encapsulation of Nomadic Societies in Iran,’ in *ibid*, p.129-142).

⁶ See Cahen, C., ‘*‘Aṭā’*,’ and Duri, A., ‘*Diwān*,’ in in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 22nd August 2019.

⁷ Perhaps the major difference between the Roman, Persian, and Islamic systems was that the former is generally assumed to have been mediated by tribal leaders – who would receive huge imperial subsidies to redistribute among their followers as they saw fit – whereas the *‘aṭā’* was distributed on an individual basis, even if the *diwān* was still organised on the basis of *nasab*, or tribal affiliation and descent. Yet Theophanes’ account of the federate revolt in the previous chapter seems to imply that Arabian allies were, at that juncture at least, receiving individual wages like regular Roman soldiers.

⁸ Kennedy, H., 2001, *The Armies of the Caliphs: Military and Society in the Early Islamic State*, Routledge: London and New York, p.60-65 for the development of the *diwān*. The most detailed account based on thorough, though largely uncritical, reading of the Islamic sources remains Puin, G-R., 1970, *Der Diwān von ‘Umar Ibn al-Haṭṭāb: ein Beitrag zur frühislamischen Verwaltungsgeschichte*, Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität, p.98 for the importance of *sābiqa*. Even though the system certainly functioned to pay the army, it should be noted that it also provided for other members of the community, and originally provided pensions after service as well as annual cash payments to serving fighters. The *‘aṭā’* became narrower in its application under the Umayyads, generally becoming a monthly payment linked exclusively to military service – a wage – by 715. See Kennedy, H., 2002, ‘Military Pay,’ p.162.

closest to Muḥammad certainly got the most out of the system, but tribesmen who had joined the state's armies after the *Ridda* wars must clearly have seen the benefits of staying loyal. It is indeed noteworthy that the organisation of what in effect was a formal system of military pay is attributed to 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, and placed in the year of al-Qādisiyyah (636/637), a period that can still be considered the start of Islam's explosive expansion. It was therefore the early institution of the 'atā' that underwrote the successes that followed.

Later documentary evidence from Egypt shows how the system of military pay became closely linked to the garrison towns of the early Islamic empire, the *amṣār*. A fascinating letter from one Muslim soldier to another, which has been dated to the seventh century, appears to exhort the addressee to return from the countryside to Fustāt, lest he miss-out on his monthly subsistence distribution and annual 'atā'.⁹ A considerable incentive was therefore given to tribesmen to settle in the conquered lands, rather than to return to the desert. Locating the soldiery, in most cases at least, in *amṣār* also created the perfect opportunity to develop their ideological commitment to the state, as well as a sense of cohesion through emphasising the shared experience of conquest that would further strengthen the sinews of loyalty to the new state.¹⁰

There is evidence that this sense of commitment and cohesion was sorely needed, evidence that also points to the difficulty of encapsulating nomads within state structures. Chapter Three briefly discussed the *ḥadīth* of the bedouin who gave his pledge of loyalty to the Prophet in Yathrib only to try to leave for the desert when he became unwell. The Islamic tradition seems to suggest, however, that bedouin sought to escape to the desert even when they were in the rudest of health. As Patricia Crone has argued, 're-bedouinisation' – *ta'arrub ba'd-'l-hijra* – was a major concern to the early Islamic community.¹¹ The term *hijra* itself referred not to Muḥammad's flight from Mecca to Yathrib – the Classical understanding – but to relocation from the desert to the garrison towns as part of the conquest movement, a definition closely linked to the warlike undertones associated with the term in the Qur'ān. The praiseworthy *muhājir* was thus contrasted to the despicable, even traitorous *a'rābī*, who returned to his ancestral deserts rather than continuing to serve in the

⁹ Sijpesteijn, P., 2011, 'Army Economics: An Early Papyrus Letter Related to 'atā' Payments,' in Margariti, R., Sabra, A., & Sijpesteijn, P., (eds.), *Histories of the Middle East: Studies in Middle Eastern Society, Economy and Law in Honor of A.L. Udovitch*, Brill, Leiden & Boston, p.245-267.

¹⁰ It is apparent that some bedouin remained outside of the *amṣār* yet still received payments from the state and therefore presumably could still be called on to fight (see for instance Kennedy, H., 2001, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, p.66 on papyri attesting to requisitions for tribes living in the vicinity of the Negev in southern Palestine).

¹¹ Crone, P., 1994, 'The First Century Concept of *Hiġra*,' in *Arabica*, 41.3, p.352-387, esp. p.367 on the 'reprehensible act' of *ta'arrub ba'd-'l-hijra*.

army. *Hijra*, in its original meaning, was therefore ‘nothing if not a concept of mobilisation,’ and remained as such so long as the Islamic state sought to recruit from the deserts.¹²

The need to praise the act of *hijra* and to condemn withdrawal into the desert – tantamount to an act of desertion and not wildly unlike the ability of Rome’s federates to remove themselves into the desert if politically expedient – clearly implies that maintaining its army as a driven, cohesive force was not without some difficulty for the early Islamic state. Submission to Yathrib and participation in the conquests, not least by removing tribesmen from their accustomed herding grounds and conventional way of life, was a social as much as a political watershed in the lives of those involved in them, which was no doubt as unsettling to some of its participants as it could be rewarding. It is therefore unsurprising that some bedouin, despite the expectation of regular pay, would try to leave the garrison towns, a practice that would have hamstrung the effectiveness of the armies had it been allowed to continue without criticism and to have become widespread. In the original meaning of *hijra* and the exhortations against *ta‘arrub ba‘d-’l-hijra*, it is possible to hear the early, even inevitable echoes of disharmony between the caprices of tribal nomadic warriors and the ambitions of the new Islamic state.

Yet the combination of an established tradition of military service to a sedentary empire, the great – if not unprecedented – rewards on offer, and, no doubt, the preaching and ideological scheme to which the armies were subjected in the *amṣār*, ensured that the Arabian armies did not disperse into the deserts upon opportune impulse. The Islamic state was able to recruit effectively from Arabia and to embark on a series of phenomenal campaigns of conquest with bedouin manpower. The progress of these conquests, and the nature of the lands they opened-up to exploitation, however, would give the state the means to move away from reliance on tribal nomads alone.

Slaves on Horses

The nature and development of the armies Islam has rightly occupied considerable scholarly attention, not least because the structures of the state – in common with all pre-industrial states – essentially existed to pay the army. The nature of the written sources for both the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd Caliphates, however, unfortunately provide few specific details on military organisation and administration.¹³ Nonetheless, the sources do offer sufficient insights for reconstructions and

¹² Ibid, p.383, see also esp. p.378. Crone notes that attestations of the original definition start to disappear after 720.

¹³ Kennedy, H., 2001, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, p.xi-xiv for the limitations of the major written sources like al-Ṭabarī and al-Balādhurī for writing the history of Islamic military institutions. Kennedy complains that this is a peculiarly Islamic problem, and that historians of early medieval Byzantium have far more helpful sources with

assessments to be made, and communicate patterns of change and continuity, evident though these may often be in a somewhat oblique manner.

Perhaps the boldest attempt to set out a definitive history of the army and the nature of the evolution of the Islamic polity remains Patricia Crone's *Slaves on Horses*. Crone attempts to chart how the armies of the seventh-century conquests, bedouin and town-dwellers from Arabia, came eventually to be replaced by the first half of the ninth century by Central-Asian slave-soldiers, who were raised from the margins of the Islamic world and who were kept separate from the rest of Islamic society. The creation of the *mamlūk* system is presented as a watershed moment in the history of the Caliphate, which arguably came to define the nature of the medieval Muslim state in the central Islamic lands.¹⁴ Crone roots the evolution of the *mamlūk* system in the political and ideological failure of the 'Abbāsīd dynasty to gain the allegiance of a free class of fighting men native to the Islamic heartlands. This is seen as a product of the weakness of the dynasty's legitimacy in the eyes of many established social and intellectual groups, forcing the Caliphs to come to rely on the coercive power of alien warriors legally bound to their person and to the state via their total dependence on government salaries.¹⁵

Crone identifies other structural features and moments of significant change before the first half of the ninth century, however. She sees the shift from the post-conquest, or so-called 'Sufyānīd pattern' of relationships between the bedouin tribes and the state beginning in the Caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik (685-705), driven, it would seem, by the exigencies of constant campaigning in Khurasan and the resourcefulness of 'Abd al-Malik's governor, al-Ḥajjāj, who is recorded as hiring soldiers for pay independent of those already registered in the *diwān*.¹⁶ These exigencies, and the greater degree of bureaucratisation generally thought to have been pioneered by 'Abd al-Malik, led to new men entering the ranks of the army and to the relationship between the state, in the person of the Caliph and his administrators, and the army becoming more regular and formal. There was

which to work. See also Gordon, M., 2001, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords: A History of the Turkish Military of Samarra (A.H. 200-275/815-889 C.E.)*, State University of New York Press: Albany, p.10-11.

¹⁴ Crone, P., 1980, *Slaves on Horses*, p.82.

¹⁵ Ibid, p.74-81. For a more detailed reconstruction of the creation of the Central-Asian dominated armies that stresses the proximate political causes behind their appearance, see Gordon, M., 2001, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*, p.26-46. Gordon emphasises the importance of the Fourth Fitna, not least the consequent split in the loyalties of the Iraqī *abnā'* – the pre-existing recruiting ground for 'Abbāsīd armies formed from descendants of the dynasty's original Iranian supporters – and al-Ma'mūn's Central Asian support base. See also Kennedy, H., 2001, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, p.118-147, and concluding remarks at p.196 on the historical importance of the creation of al-Mu'tasim's new army in 833.

¹⁶ Crone, P., 1980, *Slaves on Horses*, p.37-41.

consequently less of a need to rely on tribal elders and bedouin nobles, the *asbrāf*: the kind of men who acclaimed ‘Abd al-Malik’s father Marwān Caliph.

Wider social developments, moreover, not least the conversion to Islam of men taken as slaves and peasants fleeing the land in order to avoid taxation, also contributed to widening the social base of the army. The late Umayyad contenders for the Caliphate found themselves able to access groups of potential supporters separate from the north Arabian tribes who had originally made their dynasty’s dominance possible. All of these groups, however, who generally remained associated with the Umayyad heartland of Syria, would find themselves eclipsed by the Khurasani supporters of the ‘Abbāsids from 750.¹⁷

Generally, Crone presents the penetration of non-Arabian groups into the army as a slow process, emphasising the importance of tribal politics to the early Umayyad Caliphate and the failed quest for ‘Abbāsīd legitimacy as causal forces. There has been an increasing recognition in scholarship, however, that the armies of the conquests were quite open to non-Arabian contingents joining their ranks. Michael Morony, to give perhaps a pioneering example, highlighted the various traditions that attest to considerable numbers of Persians defecting to the invading armies from the 640s, before and after the decisive clash at al-Qādisiyya.¹⁸ These men ranged from ethnic units hailing from Daylam – a mountainous area to the south of the Caspian Sea that had a reputation for breeding hardy warriors in antiquity – to the *asāmira*, the elite armoured cavalry that was the pride of the Persian army.¹⁹

The sheer numbers of slaves taken by the Arabian armies as they marauded around the Near East from the 630s also ensured that sizeable groups of bondsmen and clients, *mawālī*, came to fight alongside their masters.²⁰ The absorption of so many men into the ranks of the conquerors, by coercion though initially it may have been, would turn out to have a profoundly transformative effect on the community that did much to undermine the original conquest elite, an important point made extensively by Crone.²¹ In line with her earlier analysis of the entry of non-Arabian elements into the army, however, Crone generally sees large contingents of *mawālī* and converts becoming a part of the military establishment from the 690s.²² Yet some sources suggest that this

¹⁷ Ibid, p.42-60.

¹⁸ Morony, M., 1984, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest*, Princeton University Press: Princeton, p.197-199.

¹⁹ See Minorsky, V., ‘Daylam,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 25th of April 2019.

²⁰ For a detailed discussion on the *mawālī*, see Hasson, I., 1991, ‘Les *mawālī* dans l-armée musulman sous les premiers Umayyads,’ *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 14, p.176-213.

²¹ Crone, P., 2012, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge and New York, p.1-28.

²² Ibid, esp. p.15. Crone does acknowledge some earlier limited instances, however.

development can be witnessed far earlier. The army ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib raised from al-Kūfa during the First Fitna, for example, was said to have included 8,000 slaves and *mawālī* (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.3371-3372). It is certainly not without good reason that some have speculated that the role of non-Arabian groups in the conquering armies of the seventh century was far greater than both many modern and ‘Abbāsīd-era scholars have generally realised.²³ Some recent scholarship has done much to support this suspicion with diligently-argued witnesses statements from both within and without the Islamic historical tradition.²⁴

One of the chief considerations that has affected assessments of the ability of the early Islamic state to muster, supply, and field an army beyond cajoling and bribing the bedouin tribes, moreover, is the nature and extent of the development of governmental systems. Indeed, Crone’s reconstruction of the Sufyānid state as being exclusively tribal was underpinned by a sense that it did not possess the means to be anything else.²⁵ This view has prevailed in some quarters, despite the tension within the Islamic tradition that often presents men like Mu‘āwiya b. Abī Sufyān as the model of the tribal leader whilst also accusing him of instituting *mulk*, which somewhat implies that he presided over an intensification of formal administration as well as the introduction of dynastic succession.²⁶ A modern study of the archaeology of early Islam has nonetheless concluded, in answer to voices that claimed the absence of material evidence for the Prophet before the end of the seventh century was evidence for his entirely mythical nature, that no such evidence ever will be found because the state simply did not become capable of materially articulating its ideology before 685.²⁷

It is impossible, however, to maintain the notion that the Islamic state had to wait for ‘Abd al-Malik actually to become a state. In response to such arguments, Robert Hoyland, to give one

²³ Kennedy, H., 2001, *Armies of the Caliphs*, p.5. See ‘Making Muslims on the March,’ below for further discussion.

²⁴ Hoyland, R. G., 2015, *In God’s Path*, p.58-65. Acknowledging the role of groups who knew little of the Prophet, his message, and whose actions were perhaps originally autonomous from Medina is a major theme of Hoyland’s reconstruction of the seventh-century conquests.

²⁵ Crone, P., 1981, *Slaves on Horses*, p.30.

²⁶ Hawting, G., 2000, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate A.D. 661-750*, Routledge: London & New York, p.34-43 for the nature of the Sufyānid state. Hawting follows Crone whilst lamenting the fact that ‘there is no general work devoted to the administration and organisation of the Umayyad state,’ (p.34) something that may conceal its actual complexity. See also Humphreys, R. S., 2006, *Mu‘āwiya ibn Abi Sufyan: From Arabia to Empire*, Oneworld: Oxford, p.3-10 for Mu‘āwiya’s reception in the Islamic tradition. For *mulk* connoting an absolute level of power, see Plessner, M., ‘Mulk,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 25th of April 2019.

²⁷ Johns, J., 2003, ‘Archaeology and the History of Early Islam: The First Seventy Years,’ *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, 46.4, p.411-436. Johns sees state-building efforts like complex written administration and the promotion of a distinct ideology as getting underway immediately upon the accession of ‘Abd al-Malik, in contrast to Mu‘āwiya who allegedly did not trouble himself with ‘the business of government’ (p.424).

example, demonstrated that there is solid material evidence for the existence of complex bureaucratic administration before 685, not least in the form of papyri that point to the presence of intensive and innovative systems of taxation from an early date. The testimony of contemporary non-Muslim authors also does not ring true with the idea that the Sufyānid state was weak and decentralised.²⁸

Further recent research has done much to support this suspicion. Papyri from the archive of Papas found in Apollinopolis – modern-day Edfu, which sits on the Nile almost on the same latitude as Medina – and other archives from Arsinoe in Middle Egypt show that Mu‘āwiya presided over a complex, intensive, and far-reaching system of administration.²⁹ Alongside a general impression of administrative continuity, taxation was far more thorough than it was under Rome – not least owing to the introduction of the poll tax – with a distinct impression that local officials were working harder and under more duress than previously. The land was exploited for tax revenue and subsistence for the armies, with the land’s inhabitants being conscripted to build and man the fleet.³⁰ Overall, Egypt seems to have been exploited somewhat more effectively than under the previous Roman regime.³¹

Despite the fact that the papyri archives are almost exclusively concerned with local and provincial matters, representatives of the central regime do make an appearance, in one instance at least transmitting orders directly from Damascus. These men probably moved via the postal system, which clearly operated in Egypt in the middle of the seventh century given the existence of a postal station in the Fayyūm just south of the Nile Delta that serviced Arabic-using couriers.³² Indeed, despite the fact that the postal system, the *barid*, owed much to the old Roman *cursus publicus* – and to the Sassanian equivalent in the eastern lands – multiple historical traditions exist that claim Mu‘āwiya was the man responsible for keeping the system running and even to developing it further.³³

²⁸ Hoyland, R., 2006, ‘New documentary texts,’ esp. p.398-403. The article was written in part as a response to Johns and Hoyland points out that some of the evidence Johns used in his 2003 article had been incorrectly dated so does not support the notion of 685 as a watershed year.

²⁹ Foss, C., 2009, ‘Egypt under Mu‘āwiya Part I: Flavius Papas and Upper Egypt,’ and ‘Egypt under Mu‘āwiya Part II: Middle Egypt, Fustāt, and Alexandria’ in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 72.1, p.1-24 and 72.2, p.259-278 respectively.

³⁰ Foss, C., 2009, ‘Egypt under Mu‘āwiya Part I,’ p.18-24 for the early and intensive efforts made to develop a navy.

³¹ Foss, C., 2009, ‘Egypt under Mu‘āwiya Part II,’ esp. p.273-277.

³² Papaconstantinou, A., 2010, ‘Administering the Early Islamic Empire: Insights from the Papyri,’ in Haldon, J., (ed.), *Money, Power and Politics in Early Islamic Syria*, Ashgate, p.57-74. Papaconstantinou also notes that the presence of a uniform script across the papyri is implicit of a developed culture of written administration.

³³ Silverstein, A., 2007, *Postal Systems in the Pre-Modern Islamic World*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, p.49-59. Silverstein also makes a persuasive case that pre-conquest Arabians were familiar with the

The very fact that Mu‘āwīya minted coinage for the entire empire likewise suggests centralisation and the ability and willingness of the ruling regime to assert its presence and authority, if not yet Islam in the manner of later generations. This point holds even though the monetary system remained divided between the lands of the old Roman and Sassanian empires.³⁴ Finally, recent archaeological investigations have also suggested that Mu‘āwīya’s gubernatorial years and caliphate witnessed a greater degree of urban planning and associated change than has generally been appreciated. Mu‘āwīya himself may have been responsible for some work on the Temple Mount, for example.³⁵ Full appreciation of this hard material evidence suggests that the Islamic tradition’s insistence that Mu‘āwīya introduced monarchical features like a palace guard, court protocol, and other measures that presented him as a master rather than a first among equals, is more reflective of reality than the inventions of later polemic.³⁶ Despite the fact that Mu‘āwīya appears to have dealt with the militarily important Syrian tribes and fellow members of Quraysh in a personal rather than ‘official’ manner, it nonetheless seems clear that he stood at the head of a complex, bureaucratic system rather than a rickety confederation based on occasional tribute extraction.³⁷

The early Islamic state should therefore be seen as able, from the middle rather than from the end of the seventh century, to engage in sophisticated, empire-wide administration for the fulfilment of centrally-determined aims. This in many respects reflects the impression of the Medinan state as an ambitious and purposeful entity that was painted in Chapter Three, which can also arguably be seen in the early appearance of the *dīmān*.³⁸

Rapid Ethnogenesis and Sufyānid Evolution?

The question of whether this sophistication and administrative reach could encompass recruiting the manpower of the conquered lands for service as soldiers, however, very much remains open. Even though simply accepting the political authority of the state was sufficient to set the tribal

imperial postal systems and were accustomed to sending messages over long distances. Incidentally, these insights make the Islamic sources’ reports of written instructions passing from caliph to field commanders during the conquests quite plausible.

³⁴ Foss, C., 2010, ‘Mu‘āwīya’s State,’ in Haldon, J., (ed.), *Money, Power and Politics*, p.75-96, esp. p.81-82, 85-86. Foss’s article advances and expands the thrust of the arguments he first made in Foss, C., 2002, ‘A Syrian Coinage of Mu‘āwīya?’ *Revue Numismatique* 158, p.353-365.

³⁵ Whitcomb, D., 2016, ‘Notes for an Archaeology of Mu‘āwīya: Material Culture in the Transitional Period of Believers,’ in Borrut A., & Donner, F., (eds.), *Christians and Others in the Umayyad State*, Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago: Chicago, p.11-27.

³⁶ Foss, C., 2010, ‘Mu‘āwīya’s State,’ p.82-86, see also p.76-82 for the similar aggrandising tendencies of Mu‘āwīya’s adopted brother and placeman in the East, Ziyād b. Abī Sufyān, who in many ways foreshadows the energetic, reforming tendencies of al-Ḥajjāj.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.93.

³⁸ Puin, G-R., 1970, *Der Dīwān von ‘Umar Ibn al-Ḥaṭṭāb*, p.34; 93 for the additional contention that the *dīmān* had no precedent.

groups of Arabia on the path to membership of the new community, one would expect the barriers to entry to have become higher once this membership became a privileged fiscal status from 636 as the army itself sought to preserve its special nature and as the multifarious groups from the Arabian Peninsula came into contact with peoples less-relatable to themselves than other denizens of the deserts.³⁹ Yet the Islamic sources have a persistent tendency to mention the addition of non-Arabian groups into the conquering armies, as has already been briefly highlighted, and they also appear to record military recruitment from the conquered lands even after the conquest phase. As so often with the Islamic historical tradition, the sources are not unproblematic, and could be accused of some kind of ‘ecumenical scheme’ – not least when they give a highly religious flavour to the act of joining the armies – but there are records of the same tendency from sources beyond the tradition. The indications of non-Arabians entering the ranks of the army after the conquest phase, moreover, may often be passing and slight but they hint at a pattern of development and a direction of travel that would bring the era of late antique Arabian maximalisation to an end.

Making Muslims on the March

First, it is worth briefly returning to explore in greater depth already-recognised indications in the sources that the bedouin armies of the conquests absorbed men into their ranks on the march. The uniquely Arabian character of the conquering armies was thus adulterated at a very early stage. Tellingly, memory of this phenomenon resonates in later Islamic jurisprudence, which contains discussions of the permissibility, or otherwise, of allowing non-Muslims – and therefore non-Arabians – to fight in the Islamic armies.⁴⁰ Many such groups are certainly attested, and, as earlier noted, scholarship has long accepted that elements of the Persian army defected to the Arabian invaders in the 640s, notably the ethnic contingent from Daylam and members of the *asāwira*.⁴¹ What has conventionally been under-appreciated, however, is the sheer number of accounts that

³⁹ It is worth remembering that there are several examples of the structural exclusion of different groups as much as there are examples of inclusion and ethnogenesis in the Germanic kingdoms of Europe, evinced not least in the kingdoms’ law codes once the travelling armies had settled in a territory and had less of an incentive to welcome new members to their ranks. See the incisive comments of Ward-Perkins, B., 2005, *The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilisation*, Oxford University Press, p.68-72.

⁴⁰ Al-Qāḍī, W., 2017, ‘Non-Muslims in the Muslim Conquest Army in Early Islam,’ in Borrut A., & Donner, F., (eds.), *Christians and Others*, p.83-127, esp.83-88.

⁴¹ See, for example, al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, p.280, in which the defection of a group of 4,000 Persians who may be from Daylam is mentioned followed by an incidental reference to the *asāwira*. Al-Qāḍī’s article, above, offers perhaps the most comprehensive listing of the various non-Muslim and non-Arabian elements that came to be found in the Islamic armies, covering the role of the Christian Arab tribes like the Banū Taghlib (p.88-93), Persian groups, Levantine groups and Slavs previously in Byzantine service (p.94-111), and the role of native Egyptians in Mu‘āwīya’s navy (p.111-121), papyrological records of which show was restricted to service as sailors and rowers. The role of non-Arabians was most exaggerated at the geographical extremities of the expanding empire. The army that crossed into Iberia under the command of Ṭarīq b. Ziyād in 711 was, for example, composed mainly of North African Berbers.

attest to this phenomenon, in which both groups and named individuals cast off their old allegiances to join the conquering armies.

A short selection of a few such stories from al-Ṭabarī's *History of the Prophets and Kings* will suffice to provide detail. In the early stages of the campaign that culminated in the Battle of al-Qādisiyya, in 636, a Sassanian noble by the name of Jushnasmāh is reported to have been told of a prophecy foretelling the end of the Persian Empire, news that encouraged him to help fulfil it by making contact with the Arabian army of Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ and volunteering his services (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2253).⁴² This account is clearly touched by an imaginative narrative hand, with the oracle providing supernatural confirmation of the inevitability of the victory of Islam. Yet the very fact that it records a Persian noble throwing-in his lot with the invading army rings true to the far more prosaic accounts of the defection of elite *asāwira*

Likewise, accounts of Persian prisoners joining the Arabian army ring true when set against a wider body of evidence, recast though they may be in a dramatic narrative form. In the lead-up to al-Qādisiyya, al-Ṭabarī transmits a number of stories telling of the brave deeds of Ṭulayḥah b. Khuwaylid al-Asadī, who is said to have embarked on a series of nocturnal raids of the Persian camp (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2260-2263). Ṭulayḥah is recorded as having engaged in exemplary acts of bravery, killing his foes and taking some of them captive back to his camp, where they are said to have 'submitted' (*aslama*) and fought alongside him against their former comrades. These stories are clearly heroicized, and do much to add drama and excitement to the tale of what became acknowledged as one of Islam's founding victories.

Yet these stories also hint at a deeper truth. The Islamic historical tradition is replete with records of *mawālī* in the years during and after the conquests, many of whom are explicitly said to have been captured in the course of the conquests (important *mawālī* are for instance often to be found among the list of important officials at the end of each year in Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ al-'Uṣfurī's *Book of History*).⁴³ Many non-Islamic sources likewise attest to the conquests being accompanied by mass enslavement. The terrors inflicted on the Near East by the invading armies is a constant feature of the *Secular History* of Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē. Mu'āwiya's reduction of the Levant was said to have been accompanied by occasional mass enslavement, especially in regions that demonstrated resistance, and his forays into Anatolia saw the enslavement of the entire population of cities like

⁴² Hawting, G., 'Sa'd b. Abī Waqqāṣ,' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 30th of April 2019.

⁴³ See again Crone, P., 2012, *Nativist Prophets*, esp. p.7-10.

Euchaita (*Secular History*, 77; 84).⁴⁴ Theophanes the Confessor's *Chronicle*, likewise, records that 5,000 persons were taken from Isauria during a raid in 649/650 (A.M. 6142). Multitudes are similarly recorded as having been taken in raids in 653/654 (A.M. 6146) and 661/662 (A.M. 6154). The probably contemporary *History* attributed to the Armenian bishop Sebeos even seems to have sourced some of its information about the new power to Armenia's south from escaped captives. It also notes that the Arabians took many thousands captive as a matter of course (*History*, 42.138-139).⁴⁵ It may be hard to say with complete certainty what services these captives performed for their new masters. The existence of named *mawālī* of some importance in the historical record, together with the literary presentation of captives fighting in the armies, implies that it is hardly impossible that some captives accompanied their masters into the field, perhaps hoping, by doing so, to escape their servile status and to become assimilated into the winning side.

In addition to named individuals, the historical tradition contains a number of accounts of whole groups beyond the men of Daylam and the *asāmīra* being absorbed into the Arabian army. The al-Qādisiyya campaign again offers many examples. Saʿd b. Abī Waqqāṣ is reported to have attacked the wedding party of the daughter of the Sassanian governor of the old Lakhmid centre of al-Ḥīrā, which he successfully captured (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2233). The guards of the wedding party are said to have joined Saʿd, and to have formed a new unit of the invading army under the command of one of Saʿd's lieutenants. These new recruits joined an army that had already made a point of conscripting other Mesopotamians – or at least men explicitly labelled as non-*aʿrāb* (*al-ḥamrāʾ*) – as a slightly later anecdote records (1.2261). Both of these cases lack the narrative trope of immediate conversion to Islam, which concludes many of the accounts of individual Persians being captured and joining the Arabian army, and al-Ṭabarī even explicitly notes in the account of the *al-ḥamrāʾ* joining the army that some converted to Islam later rather than sooner. It was not without good reason, therefore, that the Persian commander at al-Qādisiyya, Rustam, complained that the army arrayed against him was composed of his neighbours, many of whom had formerly been under the rule of the Persian shah (1.2267-2268).

⁴⁴ *The Secular History of Dionysius of Tel-Mahrē* Palmer, A., (trans.), in *The Seventh Century in the West-Syrian Chronicles*, Palmer, A., Brock, S., & Hoyland, R., 1993, Liverpool University Press. Dionysius pointedly notes that even the governor of Euchaita was taken captive.

⁴⁵ *The Armenian History attributed to Sebeos*, Thomson, R.W., (trans.) with Howard-Johnston, J., & Greenwood, T., 1999, Liverpool University Press.

Accounts such as these may often possess an obviously fabulous nature and are intelligently placed amidst a wider narrative to give a sense of inevitable victory.⁴⁶ Yet they nonetheless ring true to traditions outside the Islamic sources – as well as to less-confected traditions within the Islamic historical tradition – most notably the accounts of the defection of Rome’s Arabian clients that were explored in the previous chapter. Narrow though the ruling elite of the new power certainly was, its armies had much to gain by accepting new recruits and clearly grew on the march.

What modern anthropology suggests is the adaptable nature of tribal membership helps to explain how new members could have been rapidly assimilated and thought of as no different to the groups they joined after the passage of some time. The passage referenced above in which al-Ṭabarī records the recruitment of *al-ḥamrā*’ into the army before al-Qādisiyya (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2261) concludes not only by claiming that *al-ḥamrā*’ received the same share of the booty as the rest of the army, but also that they then ‘asked about the most powerful Arab tribe, and accordingly bound themselves to Tamīm’ (*f-‘addū tamīmān*).⁴⁷ This ease of association is certainly not without parallel in the tribal Middle East. As mentioned in Chapter Three, a tribe’s belief in the purity of their (generally patrilineal) genetic descent and connection conceals the reality of connections between families and groups based on geographic proximity, economic relationships, fairly recent marriage-ties or matrilineal relationship.⁴⁸

The speed at which the myth of blood relationship and descent can be made and accepted is fascinating. One such example from mid-twentieth century Morocco concerns a group of people living in the quarter of a certain town who all claimed descent from a prominent merchant who died a generation before the study was made. One interviewee claimed a connection first through a paternal uncle he never had, then through a half-brother of his grandfather, before putting the link down to a marriage made by his aunt, the existence of which he could not prove. Upon further questioning, the interviewee simply said that all of his neighbours act as if they are related, so therefore they must be.⁴⁹ Similarly, in modern Saudi Arabia, the Bani Sa‘īd of central Najd had,

⁴⁶ The conceit that the victory at al-Qādisiyya was inevitable is openly stated by one of the Arabian army’s emissaries to the Persians, Rib‘ī b. ‘Āmir, who tells Rustam that he and his army are to be consumed by the forces of ‘irrevocable fate’ (*al-qada*’) (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2254).

⁴⁷ De Goeje includes a definition of this verb taken from the margins of one of his manuscripts, defining it as meaning ‘they betook themselves into their number (the tribe of Tamīm) by treaty (*ḥilf*)’.

⁴⁸ Lancaster, W., 1981, *The Rwala Bedouin Today*, shows just how wide this ease of association could stretch: ‘both World Wars are “explained” in terms of relationship – the French and English are *fukhudh* (tribal sections) who are *ibn amm* (within five degrees of genealogical connection) as opposed to the Germans. This gives rise to the belief that the English and the French must be more closely related to the Arabs, their allies, than to the Germans...’ (p.28-29). See also Cole, D.P., 1975, *Nomads of the Nomads*, p.88 for the ease of adoption into a tribal section.

⁴⁹ Eickelman, D. F., 1981, *The Middle East: An Anthropological Approach*, p.113-114 (verbatim proof of Lancaster’s ‘must be’ argument). Eickelman’s review of a number of such studies leads him to conclude that

by the twentieth century, come to claim membership of the ‘Ataybah despite an historical affiliation with Qaḥṭān, probably because the latter had lost control of the central Najd in the previous few generations. This shift highlights not only the fluidity of tribal identity but also the extent to which it can be manipulated to secure social advantages: ‘affiliation ultimately rests on the actions of a group, which largely determine its status...other lineages change from subservient status to equal status if they begin to act like free and independent tribesmen.’⁵⁰

It is possible, therefore, to conceive of what could be termed a process of rapid ethnogenesis in the years of the conquests, during which some individuals and groups like al-Ṭabarī’s *al-ḥamra*’ fought alongside the Muslim armies and eventually became considered members of various constituent tribes. In a manner not unlike the birth of the Germanic peoples in Europe in the fifth century, discussed in the previous chapter, the Arabic names of groups like Tamīm and the Arabic names of individuals may conceal quite diverse origins.

Exploiting the Manpower of the Conquered Lands

Once one appreciates the broader historical context of the conquest period, namely one of profound change and social dislocation, conceiving of groups and individuals adopting new identities becomes all the more tempting. The early years of the Caliphate were similarly ones of dramatic political development, in which the state founded by Muḥammad faced a number of challenges that saw its rulers require fighting manpower to prosecute their aims. Three developments above all seem to be connected to hints in the sources that warriors were sourced from beyond the Arabian tribes at quite an early date: efforts to consolidate the new ruling institutions of the empire; the inability of central-west Arabia to act as the political capital of the Caliphate, and the pressure of the First Fitna.

There are early indications that Mu‘āwīya, within a decade of his appointment as governor of Syria in 639, sought to centralise financial resources in his own hands: resources with the potential to finance an army loyal to him. A series of accounts concerning the trouble Mu‘āwīya had with a man named Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, dating from 650/651, point to this important development. One story in particular is telling.

When Ibn al-Sawdā came to Syria he met Abū Dharr and said, ‘Abū Dharr, are you not astonished at Mu‘āwīya for saying, “The public wealth is God’s wealth (al-māl māl allāh).” Truly, everything

‘kinship relationships should be treated as something which people make and with which they accomplish things’ (p.134). Creating mythical family ties is of course far more credible in more illiterate societies without state-based record-keeping, where ‘facts’ are determined by social consensus.

⁵⁰ Cole, D.P., 1973, ‘The Enmeshment of Nomads,’ in Nelson, C., (ed.), *The Desert and the Sown*, p.116.

belongs to God. It is like he intends to seize it for himself to the exclusion of the Muslims and to efface the Muslims' names from the dīwān.' Abū Dharr came to Mu'āwiya and said, 'What leads you to use the term "God's wealth" for the public wealth of the Muslims?' 'God be merciful to you, Abū Dharr,' responded Mu'āwiya. 'Are we not God's slaves, the public wealth His wealth, the created world His creation, and state authority (al-amr) His authority?'

...

Now Abū Dharr rose up in Syria and began saying, 'Oh men of wealth, show charity to the poor. To "those who treasure up gold and silver and do not expend them in the way of God," declare branding irons from a fire, "and therewith their foreheads and their sides and their backs shall be branded" (Q. 9:34-35).'

...

Mu'āwiya wrote to 'Uthmān, 'Abū Dharr has become a problem for me...'

(al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2859)

Using the language of piety, Abū Dharr castigates Mu'āwiya for what, on the face of it, may simply be considered his alleged financial concupiscence. There may indeed be a partisan game at play here, given that the man who incited Abū Dharr to attack Mu'āwiya in this way, Ibn al-Sawdā, is also known as 'Abdallāh b. Sabā', a devoted and fanatical supporter of Alī who went so far as to claim that the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet was divine.⁵¹

Yet accusing a man like Mu'āwiya of greed can also be read as a way of criticising a figure in authority who seeks to increase the fiscal strength of the state. Rather than enriching himself, it is likely that Mu'āwiya was actually engaged in improving his means to govern. It is also extremely telling that Mu'āwiya does not deny the charges levelled at him, but seeks instead to explain his motives and his actions with reference to Islam.⁵² By equating God's authority with that of the state's – manifested in the administration of which he was in charge – it is apparent that Mu'āwiya

⁵¹ Hodgson, M.G.S., 'Abd Allāh b. Saba' in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 1st of May 2019.

⁵² Mu'āwiya's identification of his power with that of God's is strikingly congruent with the understanding of the Umayyad notion of *khalīfat Allāh* put forward by Patricia Crone and Martin Hinds in Crone, P., and Hinds, M., 1986, *God's Caliph*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge (p.1-3 for a short summary). The Umayyad Caliphs regarded themselves not as successors to the Messenger of God, but as the very deputies of God on earth, entrusted with a power both religious and political: both domains were anyway one and the same. See p.6-7 for records of Mu'āwiya's claim to this status, and p.24-42 for a further elaboration of the Umayyad understanding of the caliphal position.

was attempting to develop some kind of financial reserve for his own ends, probably by confiscating what was left over from taxation once the *‘aṭā*’ had been paid.⁵³ This was evidently a programme that was justified on an ideological level as it concurrently meant supporting a divinely-mandated system of government.

It soon became very evident, moreover, that Arabia could not serve as the centre of the new state. A strong theme in the tradition during the series of events leading to the assassination of ‘Uthmān in 656 is just how unable the Caliph in Medina was to monitor the pulse of the army – the very manifestation of the state – scattered in garrison towns throughout the empire. According to accounts preserved in al-Ṭabarī, for example, ‘Uthmān was blissfully unaware of pro-Alid agitation in the months before his death, news that only reached him once it had percolated to some concerned residents of Medina.

They came to ‘Uthmān and said, ‘Oh Commander of the Believers, have you heard what we hear concerning the people?’ He answered, ‘No, by God. I have only heard about order and security.’ They continued, ‘Affairs have come to our attention,’ and they told him what had been communicated to them. Then he said, ‘You are my associates and the wise men among the Believers, so advise me.’ They replied, ‘We advise you to send men whom you trust to the garrison towns so that they may bring back their reports to you.’

(al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2943)

Sending such agents, however, did not prove to be as successful as ‘Uthmān’s advisors had hoped. The geographical barriers were just too profound. Tellingly, al-Ṭabarī notes that word took so long to come back from a place like Egypt that the Medinese started to suspect that ‘Uthmān’s agents had been murdered (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2943). The Caliph therefore had to try to summon the provincial governors to him (1.2944). Conversely, the conspirators against ‘Uthmān seem generally to have been able to dash around the Near East, moving between Egypt and southern Iraq, with remarkable ease: the legacy, no doubt, of established Roman and Persian road systems that criss-crossed the Fertile Crescent.⁵⁴

⁵³ Kennedy, H., 2001, *The Armies of the Caliphs*, p.63-64; 74-76 for the controversy on whether the fiscal surplus, *faḍl*, was to be distributed to the men on the *dīwān* or kept by the governor or caliph.

⁵⁴ There are also a number of references to the *barīd* in relation to the conspirators’ movements, showing how they were able to exploit accustomed methods of communication to out-manoeuvre an Arabia-based ruler (for example al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2967).

Another reason why Medina could not act as an effective capital was its inability to be anything more than a temporary mustering ground for the new armies. Despite the fact that it was an exceptionally fertile oasis in the context of the northern Ḥijāz, as discussed in Chapter Three, it was hardly a breadbasket able to sustain thousands of additional inhabitants. As mentioned in the Introduction, Arabia was far removed from the natural ‘potential imperial heartlands’ of the Near East and simply could not rival the Fertile Crescent’s productive fertility.⁵⁵ A conversation between Mu‘āwiya and ‘Uthmān shortly before the former returned to Syria after visiting Medina to warn his relative of plots astir against him is revealing.

On the morning that Mu‘āwiya bade farewell to ‘Uthmān and departed, he said to him, ‘Oh Commander of the Believers, come with me to Syria before you are attacked by men against whom you cannot defend yourself, for the Syrians are steadfastly loyal.’ He answered, ‘I will not exchange my closeness to the Messenger of God for anything, even if my throat is slashed because of it.’ Mu‘āwiya said, ‘I will send you an army, which will remain among the Medinese to confront any ill fortune that may befall Medina or you.’ He replied, ‘With an army quartered among them, I will stint the rations allocated to the neighbours of the Messenger of God, and I will create scarcity for the inhabitants...’

(al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2949)

Clearly, there seems to have been some appreciation that Medina could not sustain an army, whose physical closeness to the Caliph – with the influence such proximity would have given to the army’s leaders – would have helped to ensure its loyalty. It is worth noting that the later construction of Baghdad and especially of Sāmarrā’ would go to show how important the collocation of Caliph and army was rightly perceived to be.

Further, it is also evident that there was considerable hostility within the conquest community to Medina artificially sucking resources away from the rich conquered lands. After the conspirators had occupied Medina, one of the complaints that they raised with ‘Uthmān was that they could no longer suffer the inhabitants of Medina being awarded stipends from the *dīmān*. They argued that such distributions should be reserved solely for the active elements of the army and the Companions of the Prophet (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.2964). Al-Ṭabarī makes an unusual editorial intervention in this account, including a conversation between the first two named individuals in the *isnād*, Abū Naḍra and Abū Sa‘īd, in which Abū Naḍra asserts he was

⁵⁵ Cook, M., 2016, ‘The long-term geopolitics of the pre-modern Middle East,’ p.33-41.

thirty at the time of the assassination of ‘Uthmān, and consequently old enough to be considered a trustworthy source. Al-Ṭabarī therefore clearly saw this material tension between Medina and the armies in the conquered lands as a very plausible cause behind the Caliph’s murder.

If the geography of Arabia helps to explain why the state came so rapidly to relocate itself, the exigencies created by the First Fitna seem to have led to a situation whereby Mu‘āwiya, and to a lesser extent ‘Alī, started to recruit men from beyond the bedouin tribes. This process is even evident during ‘Ā’isha’s formation of an army to oppose ‘Alī. Many of the Qurashī nobles had become extremely wealthy from the proceeds of the conquests. Supporters of ‘Ā’isha such as Ya‘lā b. Umayya, for example, were able to provide her with a large war chest and hundreds of camels: one account records him contributing 600,000 dirhams and 600 camels, another 400,000 dirhams and a number of mounts sufficient for seventy men (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.3099; 1.3102). This wealth not only gave ‘Ā’isha the ability to buy the loyalty of freemen, but it also allowed her to buy the fighting power of the unfree: the Battle of the Camel after all began with skirmishing conducted by the ‘slaves of the two armies’ (1.3161).⁵⁶

It is undoubtedly in the case of the Syrian armies raised by Mu‘āwiya, however, for which the source tradition provides the clearest indications of recruitment from new groups. As ever, the evidence may not be as fulsome as would be ideal, but it is revealing nonetheless. In the events culminating in what would become recognised as the decisive turning-point in the First Fitna, the Battle of Ṣiffīn, Mu‘āwiya is said to have ‘conscripted men into the military districts of the Syrians’ (*kattaba fī ajnād abl al-shām*) (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.3257). This language is interesting. *Ajnād*, the singular of which is *jund*, refers to the several military districts of Syria, in which were settled the warriors of the conquests who received stipends, the ‘*aṭā*’, which were funded via taxation.⁵⁷ Conscripting new men – the language of *kattaba* literally suggests the writing of their names into the *dīmān* – surely means that these men had never served in the Arabian armies before and therefore had not participated in the conquests. Who exactly these men were is not stated. They may have been immigrants from the peninsula or from other provinces, who moved to Syria out of sympathy with the Umayyad cause. Given that no tribal identities are listed, however, and that there are no following accounts of bedouin flocking to Mu‘āwiya’s banner for

⁵⁶ A number of the slaves named have explicitly non-Arabic names, like Sarjis – Sergius, who is called a *ghulmān* at *History of the Prophets and Kings*, 1.3185 – a testimony to the social dislocation caused by the conquests.

⁵⁷ Sourdel, D., ‘Djund,’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 2nd of May 2019. It is possible that the word could also be used here in the sense of ‘army;’ it would make no substantive difference to the argument were this the case.

the pay on offer, another conclusion becomes possible. These men may simply have been native Syrians.

Such an ambitious and novel scheme to marshal the manpower resources of his province certainly speaks to what else is known about Mu‘āwīya’s behaviour in Syria. As surveyed above, Mu‘āwīya presided over a complex and far-reaching system of taxation, and maintained much of the infrastructure that his regime had inherited from Rome (the postal system being an important example). He is also remembered in the historical tradition as a great builder. Mu‘āwīya is said to have fortified and garrisoned several towns in Syria (al-Balādhurī, *The Conquest of the Lands*, p.133-134) and also to have constructed a number of staging-posts for future raids in Roman Anatolia (p.185; 188). This programme of fortification also seems to have been accompanied by deliberate acts of social dislocation – moving elements of the subject population around the empire – to undermine any residual loyalties to Rome. In 662/663, for instance, populations from the old Sassanian Empire were settled in the Levant and a community of Jews planted in Tripoli (p.177; 127). The state’s ability to move such groups over great distances and to embark on largescale construction projects clearly implies that it could also organise recruitment of the provincials.

Further evidence is to be found in the large numbers of so-called *qurrā’*, who are found fighting for both Mu‘āwīya and for ‘Alī in the First Fitna (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, p.1.3312 for Mu‘āwīya and p.1.3273 for ‘Alī). Identifying who in fact the *qurrā’* were has not been easy. The term has conventionally been read as referring to ‘Qur’ān-reciters,’ pious Muslims who are thought to have exclusively fought for ‘Alī in the First Fitna before they renounced the arbitration of Ṣiffīn and became something akin to a Kharijite sect.⁵⁸ A sensitive reading of at least al-Ṭabarī’s narrative of the lead-up to the Battle of Ṣiffīn, however, immediately undermines this notion. Groups of *qurrā’* are attested as having fought for Mu‘āwīya, and their numbers – 4,000 in the case of the Syrian *qurrā’* – are so large as to beg the question of practicality. How had so many men, amidst the chaos and excitement of imperial expansion, been able to memorise a text that had only lately been codified, accepting the notion that the Qur’ān had indeed been codified under ‘Uthmān? Would it also not have been wise for the respective commanders to disperse those knowledgeable of the Qur’ān throughout their armies, so as to commit more people to the message of the Prophet?

⁵⁸ Nagel, T., ‘Kurrā’ in *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*, Bearman, P., Bianquis, Th., Bosworth, C.E., van Donzel, E., Heinrichs, W.P., Brill Online, accessed on the 2nd of May 2019.

Problems such as these have prompted alternative proposals for the identity of the *qurrā*'. It has been suggested, for instance, that *qurrā*' refers not to Qur'ān readers, but to people inhabiting certain villages in southern Iraq and that *qurrā*' is therefore some kind of shorthand form for *ahl al-qurā*.⁵⁹ Yet this proposition remains too-much wedded to the incorrect notion that the *qurrā*' were exclusively Alid in political orientation. A further proposal for the meaning of *qurrā*' consequently deserves attention. By following an alternative derivation of the word, Norman Calder has suggested that *qurrā*' has nothing to do with reading, but much to do with recurrent cycles like absence from home.⁶⁰ Given the context in which the word is found, Calder has made the hardly unreasonable proposal that the *qurrā*' were 'temporary or seasonal troops.'⁶¹

This verdict is consonant with the record of Mu'āwiya enlisting new men into the army, even if the *qurrā*', as 'temporary or seasonal troops' may not have been entered into the *diwān* and therefore become eligible for annual payment. Another thought-provoking feature of the accounts of the Battle of Ṣiffīn is the frequency of deeds of declamatory bravery performed by *mawālī*. Al-Ṭabarī for example preserves an account of the skirmishing before the battle that is traced back to a man called Mihrān, probably a Persian, and a *mawlā* of the Alid Yazīd b. Hāni (*History of the Prophets and Kings*, p.1.3267-3268). On the other side, a *rumī mawlā* – clearly a former Roman provincial or soldier – of Mu'āwiya kills the Alid Abū Shaddād (p.1.3302). Vivid insights into the composition of the armies of Ṣiffīn such as these show that the Islamic tradition seems to have accepted that the ranks of the early caliphal armies were open to non-Arabians.

Importantly, there is evidence to be found outside the Islamic historical tradition that also attests to this phenomenon. Dionysius of Tel-Maḥrē's *Secular History*, as preserved in the anonymous *Chronicle of AD 1234*, contains the below account of attempts made by both 'Alī and, more successfully, by Mu'āwiya to recruit the citizens of Ḥarrān into their armies.

At the time of the civil war between 'Alī and Mu'āwiya, 'Alī had sent word to all Mesopotamians that they should be his allies against Mu'āwiya. When he had reached Ṣiffīn on the Euphrates he had sent word to the people of Ḥarrān and they promised to come and help him against Mu'āwiya.

⁵⁹ Juynboll, G.H.A., 1973, 'The *Qurrā* in early Islamic history,' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 16, p.113-129. Juynboll develops an idea made slightly earlier by M.A. Shaban.

⁶⁰ Calder, N., 1991, 'The *Qurrā* and the Arabic Lexicographical Tradition,' *Journal of Semitic Studies* 36.2, p.297-307. Calder identifies the root verbs as *qara'a* and *aqra'a* and traces their use in the *Lisān al-'Arab* in the context of cyclical events like menstruation as well as absences from home.

⁶¹ *Ibid*, p.305. Calder stresses the importance of context and the possibility that the word can mean different things in different contexts; he explicitly mentions the Ṣiffīn campaign as a context in which his novel suggestion is valid.

But when Mu‘āwiya had arrived and the battle had begun, the Ḥarrānites had fought on his side instead. So when Mu‘āwiya had returned to Damascus, ‘Alī had gone to Ḥarrān and put most of the citizens to the sword. There had actually been blood flowing out at the gate of the city. For this reason many Ḥarrānites marched with Mu‘āwiya and fought in that final battle between Mu‘āwiya and the partisans of ‘Alī.

(Chronicle of AD 1234, 112)

The final lines of this account are particularly thought-provoking. Even though both ‘Alī and Mu‘āwiya appear to have tried to win-over the men of Ḥarrān primarily to fight at Ṣiffīn, the bad-blood between Ḥarrān and the followers of ‘Alī may well have given rise to longer-term service and even the permanent absorption of some Ḥarrānites into the army. One reconstruction of the *dīmān* of Egypt for the 640s, for example, which admittedly is based largely on evidence from literary sources, accepts the presence of large groups of non-Arabians, such as Romans (*yanna*) and Persians (*fārisīyūn*), permanently on the army lists, implying that men from Ḥarrān could also have been made a permanent part of the army in Syria.⁶²

Important though identifying evidence for a Sufyānid willingness to broaden the composition of the Islamic armies may be – in some respects a continuation of the openness of the conquest phase – it should nonetheless be recognised that bedouin manpower made an overwhelming contribution to the victory of Mu‘āwiya. There is indeed probably good reason that the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet complained that his army had been undone by ‘rude and evil ones and the bedouins of the Syrians’ (*al-ṭugha’ al-jufa’ w-’l-‘arāb ahl al-sham*) (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, p.1.3301). It is also apparent that recruitment from inner Arabia continued well into the 670s. Khalīfa b. Khayyāt, for example, records in his *Book of History* that Mu‘āwiya ordered a contingent (*ba‘ith*) to be raised in Medina in 670/671 to be sent to the Maghrib (*Book of History*, p.54).

The tradition, moreover, also offers a number of quite clear indications that many of the Syrian bedouin groups who defeated ‘Alī had historically been a part of the Ghassān federation. One of the bedouins fighting for Mu‘āwiya, for example, is said to have charged the Alid line proclaiming himself a ‘son of the great kings of Ghassān’ (p.1.3323). When ‘Alī himself is presented as riding along the line of battle to encourage his men, he is told that Syrian resistance is particularly difficult

⁶² Morimoto, K., 1994, ‘The *Dīmāns* as Registers of the Arab Stipendiaries in Early Islamic Egypt,’ in Curiel, R., and Gyselen, R., (eds.), *Itinéraires d’Orient: Hommages à Claude Cahen*, Bures-sur-Yvette : Groupe pour l’étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, p.353-366.

to overcome where the line is held by groups belonging to Ghassān (p.1.3326). Elite members of Ghassān certainly played a considerable role in the administration of Syria and in the wider Caliphate after Mu‘āwiya had defeated ‘Alī. In the year 676/677, for example, Ḥassān b. an-Nu‘mān al-Ghassāni was despatched to Africa as ‘*amir* and one of Mu‘āwiya’s chief ministers listed in the following year bore the name of ‘Ubayd b. Aws al-Ghassāni (Khalīfa b. Khayyāṭ, *Book of History*, p.88-89). Ḥassān b. an-Nu‘mān al-Ghassāni’s tenure as governor of Africa is also noted by al-Balādhurī (*The Conquest of the Lands*, p.229). The men of the great north Arabian bedouin coalition who played such a significant role in the conquests were therefore able to capitalise on their early contribution to the Islamic state to maintain their status and power in a new world: the best-attested members of pre-existing Roman elites to have done so.⁶³

Winds of Change

By 660, three years after the Battle of Ṣiffīn, the scales of victory in the First Fitna had tipped decisively in favour of Mu‘āwiya. As part of his effort to consolidate power, he started to send men from Syria into territories previously held in the Alid interest, including locations in peninsula Arabia. A force of 1,700 men is recorded as having been sent to ‘Taymā’, in the northern Ḥijāz, to extract the *ṣadaqa* from the local bedouin – as well as to put to the sword all those still loyal to ‘Alī – a column that was followed by another, larger group that was despatched to the Najd to do likewise (al-Ṭabarī, *History of the Prophets and Kings*, p.1.3446-3447).

For the first time in the life of the still-young Islamic state, a ruler, Mu‘āwiya, based in a capital in the Fertile Crescent, Damascus, is seen essentially to be treating Arabia as a subject land in need of a firm governing hand. Armies are sent from the north to keep the bedouin in check and to extract taxes destined to fill a foreign, Syrian treasury. This is the first example of the nature of the relationship between the centre of state power and Arabia that was normal in the lifetime of al-Ṭabarī.

Fundamentally, the events surrounding the assassination of ‘Uthmān and the politics of the First Fitna had contributed to the Islamic state, within decades of its birth, relocating to the traditional location of power in the Near East. As due appreciation of both material and literary evidence has started to show, the system of government over which Mu‘āwiya presided in Syria was ambitious and able to exploit the resources of the conquered lands in the prosecution of state policy. Privileged though the bedouin tribes remained in the *diwān*, and vital though the fighting-power of

⁶³ Kennedy, H., 2010, ‘Syrian Elites from Byzantium to Islam: Survival or Extinction?’ in Haldon, J., (ed.), *Money, Power and Politics*, p.181-200, esp. p.189-198.

the Syrian bedouin undoubtedly was to Umayyad power, there is some evidence that the state's exploitation of the previously Roman and Persian provinces extended to the recruitment of men for the army – be they former Persian cavalry, Egyptian rowers for the navy, or Syrian villagers – at least on a temporary basis.

At the beginning of the sixth century, Arabia had been marginal to the great events of the ancient world. By the second quarter of the seventh century, Arabia was the great event that destroyed the ancient world. Come the end of the same century, however, and the unification of the two imperial centres whose competition had propelled the peninsula into a position of global strategic significance, it was already becoming apparent that Arabia was set on a course that would once again relegate it to the periphery of a world whose response to the revelation of the Prophet Muḥammad would ultimately make Islam the religion and civilisation it is known as today.

Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to show that, despite the crucial role played by bedouin groups in the foundation of the Islamic state as a military power and during the seventh-century conquests, new groups entered the army's ranks from a very early date. 'Re-bedouinisation' – *ta'arrub ba'd- l-bijra* – was a major concern of the early state and non-tribal groups were perhaps even attractive alternatives to independently-minded desert nomads. The notion that the conquering armies grew on the march should not be controversial. The armies that set-out from Yathrib in the 630s were probably small columns of only a few thousand horse and camel-riders – based on the numbers analysed in Chapter Three – and were dominated by bedouin who had merely 'submitted' to the rule of the Prophet and his successors, rather than necessarily being motivated to a man by a new ideology. It is hardly inconceivable that they would have welcomed anyone into their ranks on what were probably tough and intense campaigns. These armies, moreover, were entering territories probably awash with the flotsam of a disorganised Persian army and the absence of effective state power, factors that had most likely led to armed bands of mercurial loyalty wondering around the Near East, ready to make a living by the sword as best they could. The Islamic tradition's memory of Persian groups defecting to the invading armies reflects this dislocation, and resonates strongly with the evidence for Arabian federate defection contained within the Byzantine sources surveyed in the previous chapter.

Similarly, Mu'āwiya's apparent effort to broaden recruitment beyond the bedouin tribes makes perfect sense. He needed men who did not come from a factional or tribal background as they were more reliable in an age of competing claims of legitimacy rooted in the very forging of the

community. It probably helped to give him an advantage over ‘Alī, an advantage sensed even in the Byzantine historical tradition given that Theophanes the Confessor records ‘Alī was supported only by those who dwelt in the desert whereas Mu‘āwiya could count on Egypt and Syria (*Chronicle*, A.M. 6147). The Caliphate’s subsequent centuries would see the structure of the army change to support a new regime – the clearest example being the creation of the Turkish regiments at Sāmarrā’ – and, as in the start of the drift of Arabia back to the world’s periphery, this phenomenon can be found at a very early date following the effective professionalisation of the army in and after the reign of al-Walīd I.⁶⁴

One final thought suggests itself after an appreciation of the complex and various origins of the men who ultimately helped to make the Umayyad Caliphate possible. It is clear that, once the new power had established itself, a number of the previously Roman and Persian provincials voluntarily embarked on a process of accommodating themselves to their new masters by renegotiating their identity around them. Thus are men known to history with Arabised names like Sarjūn b. Maṣūūr al-Rūmī to be found working in the organs of the Umayyad state (for instance Khalīfa b. Khayyāt, *Book of History*, p.89). On one level, this process was only human: to preserve wealth and status, accommodations had to be made. Such processes of renegotiation, eventual Arabisation and Islamisation, have a considerable historiography of their own, but they should first and foremost be seen as a variation on the theme of the making of a post-Roman world in Europe, where not dissimilar patterns of social change can be seen two centuries earlier. In the aftermath of the Last Great War of Antiquity, the armies of Yathrib came upon a world in which social systems and political expectations had been profoundly disturbed, and which was probably more open than it otherwise would have been to shaping itself around powerful new masters.

As the previous chapters have shown, Islam was both a unique and almost an accidental phenomenon: unique owing to the career of the Prophet Muḥammad, but accidental owing to the impact of imperial rivalry on the Arabian Peninsula and what that meant for a state forming at Yathrib. In the way in which it shaped the Near East, however, the rise of the Islamic state can also be considered a very late antique phenomenon: part of the broader, Eurasian story of the transformation, and end, of the ancient world.

⁶⁴ Kennedy, H., 2002, ‘Military Pay,’ p.162. See Kennedy, H., 2004, ‘The Decline and Fall of the First Muslim Empire,’ *Der Islam* 81, p.3-30, p.10 for the point that al-Ma’mūn had no choice other than to change the structure of the army in order to consolidate power.

Conclusion: The Accident of Late Antiquity

And yet the Arabs always seem a special case...

(Tim Mackintosh-Smith, *Arabs: A 3,000-Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires*)¹

The Arabs may indeed be a special case not least because a number of scholars over the past century have decided to make them one. From Philip Hitti's *History of the Arabs*, first published in 1937, to Tim Mackintosh-Smith's most recent contribution to the genre, men who could lay claim to be the heirs of the enlightened Orientalist tradition unfairly traduced by Edward Said have considered the peoples living between the western shores of Morocco and the eastern coasts of Oman as a single entity.² Yet, paradoxically, many of these authors have also come to the conclusion that what really unifies the history of the Arabs is their disunity: 'sometimes it seems that only one thing unites Arabs, and that is their inability to get along with each other.'³ It appears wholly appropriate, therefore, that the Arabs also remain seen as the quintessential bearers of Islam – despite Indonesia being the world's largest Muslim country – as the idealised unity of the *umma* has similarly been a myth since the moment of the death of the Prophet Muḥammad.

In some respects, the previous pages have spoken to the Arab paradox. The Introduction discussed the discordance between unqualified, perennial notions of nomadic military might and the actual potency of the bedouin for most of recorded history. Chapter One veered into the contested ground of the Janus-faced nature of writing the Islamic – and consequently often the Arab – story, coming to the conclusion that the Islamic historical tradition can be used to write history when used sensitively and with due recognition of its enduring problems. The second chapter delved into the Qur'ān, the book that is at the root of all claims to Muslim unity, expressed in the Arabic tongue, only to find that the original, sedentary community founded by the Prophet struggled to deal with its nomadic neighbours, familiar though its monotheistic message may

¹ Mackintosh-Smith, T., 2019, *Arabs: A 3,000-Year History of Peoples, Tribes and Empires*, Yale University Press: New Haven and London, p.xiv.

² Hitti, P. K., 1937, *History of the Arabs: From the Earliest Times to the Present*, MacMillan St Martin's Press. Other notable contributions to the 'Arab' genre include Hourani, A., 1991, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, Warner Books, and Rogan, E., 2009, *The Arabs: A History*, Allen Lane. Rogan's book has been republished several times, most recently in 2018, to cover the vicissitudes of the so-called 'Arab Spring' and the ongoing War on Terror.

³ Mackintosh-Smith, T., 2019, *Arabs*, p.xiii. Rogan explicitly follows the same scheme and Hourani opens his history by retelling the story of the career of Ibn Khaldūn, whose life was a study in the divergence between the cultural unity and political fragmentation of the medieval Islamic world.

actually have been. Chapter Three explored this division in greater depth, a divide that above all else highlights how wrong it may be to speak of ‘Arabs,’ rather than of ‘Arabians,’ in this period of history. The chapter charted how the bedouin, *a‘rāb*, tribes came to submit to Muḥammad’s movement, a development that also made the case for the need to bring the near horizon of Arabia firmly to the centre of early Islamic history, helpful though the wider context of Late Antiquity certainly is.

This wider context underscored Chapter Four. The chapter looked at relations between Arabia and the empires that impinged upon her peripheries, investigating the profound impact of great power rivalry on the bedouin tribes and the first instance of what the Introduction called Arabian Maximalisation, a phenomenon that has also helped to make the modern world. The final chapter drew attention to the early date at which Arabia, briefly the centre of the late antique world, started to drift back to the world’s periphery. Even the later seventh century saw a sedentary emperor, Mu‘āwiya, dispatch columns from the Fertile Crescent to subdue recalcitrant bedouin in a manner recalling Rome’s behaviour before the Ghassānid alliance or the actions of Ottoman administrators in the nineteenth century.

A comparative perspective that has been unafraid to interrogate parallels such as these has provided a sound theoretical basis for approaching late antique Arabia together with thought-provoking depth on a number of other subjects. The Classical accounts and the travelogues of the nineteenth and twentieth century explorers discussed in the Introduction alluded to what has been the reality for Arabia and the bedouin for most of human history: inconsequential marginality. Before the modern age, the environment in which Arabians lived offered a relatively narrow range of life strategies – structured around what could be called the antagonistic interdependence of nomad and sedentary – which showed themselves to become dramatically transformed only by the actions of outside great powers on the peninsula.

This was even the case in relation to the modern examples of Arabian state formation surveyed in Chapter Three, which helped to rationalise their seventh century antecedent as well as to highlight how exceptional a development the early Islamic state was. All of these parallels offered a helpful sounding-board to approach the questions raised by the seventh century anew. Looking to the broader transformation of western Eurasia in Late Antiquity also aided in compensating for the profound gaps in the evidence, as did being mindful of ethnographic insights from as far afield as highland South East Asia and the Great Steppe.

Several factors above all stand out in investigating what made the early Islamic state possible, and what consequently brought into being the civilisation that continues to give a cultural and spiritual unity to the Arabic-speaking and wider Muslim world, despite that world's profound political divisions. To adopt the perspective of the far horizon, competition between Rome and Persia, combined with the strategic geography of the Arabian Peninsula, caused the evolution of larger, far more powerful bedouin coalitions and the creation of a militaristic tradition of serving a sedentary power for pay. The social and political world of northern Arabia was deeply altered in the course of the sixth century, in a manner that echoes what has been referred to as the transformation of the Roman world in the West in the previous two centuries. The impact of imperial policies that unwittingly gave clients the means to become conquerors is strikingly apparent in the two principal Byzantine sources for the seventh century conquests, as much as there are allusions to defections from the Persian side in the Islamic tradition.

Islam cannot, however, be understood without Arabia, the near horizon. The Prophet was a figure of truly exceptional charismatic power, who seems to have occupied a space of extraordinary cultural potency between the settled and the nomadic – a position analogous to the *kāhin* – which helped him to bring the two halves of Arabia together into a powerful new whole. His rule over the fertile oasis of Yathrib was fundamental to the influence he wielded over the neighbouring bedouin, who 'submitted' to his authority rather than, in the first instance, becoming true 'believers.'

As these 'Muslims' became more numerous, so the name of a part spread to the whole. This terminological evolution perhaps found its rationalisation in the Qur'ānic verses that stipulate that it is submission that opens hearts to belief and to the guidance of God (Q. 49:17; 6:125). Given that the caliphal title was that of *amir al-mu'minin*, a name that preserves the foundational believer language, and that Egyptian papyri attest to the conquerors calling themselves emigrants, *muhajirūn*, it must have taken some time for the new community to accept the name of 'Muslim.' If Islam was brought into being by a townsman and became fully articulated in the ancient cities of the Near East, then the bedouin, who conquered those ancient cities, at least gave the faith the name of its adherents.

One does not have to accept the eirenic undertones of the 'Believers Thesis' as originally formulated to use it as a springboard to investigate the composition of the Qur'ānic and conquest community. The history of religion and of modern ideological movements that reject the divine, yet nonetheless demand lifestyle changes and uncompromising commitment to certain tenets, shows how piety can go hand-in-hand with violence. Those who lay claim to the most virtue can

often be the most vicious, their assumed moral superiority giving them *carte blanche* to destroy their morally unforgivable opponents.

Much remains unknown, and unknowable, about the career of Muḥammad, late antique Arabia, and the early decades and centuries of Islam. It is a great regret that, with some fleeting exceptions, the world of the Horn of Africa, ancient Yemen and Ethiopia, has not been given due consideration. The opening sections of the *Sīrah* are fascinated by the turbulent and religiously-charged sixth century history of the lands to Mecca's south, which itself was nothing if not another battleground for imperial competition between the great powers. The message of the Qur'ān and the world of faith inhabited by Muḥammad's parents' generation and his contemporaries was probably shaped by South Arabian influences, something suggested by the similarity of religious and Christological terminology between the Qur'ān and certain earlier inscriptions in Ḥimyar.⁴ The monotheism of Late Antiquity, the *sine qua non* of Muḥammad's message, may even have entered the Ḥijāz from the south rather than the north.

Further, the imperial ambitions of Ḥimyar, and Ḥimyar's use of bedouin client tribes in the same manner as Rome and Persia, may even offer a precedent for Arabian unification before Islam.⁵ This would make Muḥammad's achievement a little less original than generally supposed. Considering Muḥammad in a broader context of the other 'prophets' that appeared in Arabia during the period of the Last Great War of Antiquity, moreover, could also help to understand why he was so successful. Doing so would provide further reason to reflect upon the conjuncture of what would now be termed 'political' and 'religious' power and organisation in the Near East in the age of Heraclius' holy war, offering further insights into what moved men's minds in the lifetime of Muḥammad.⁶

If the long history of Islam and of its Arab – or at least Arabic-speaking – peoples may be characterised by paradox, then so can its origins. Muḥammad led a settled, deeply religious oasis community that expanded in the first case because of its reluctant nomadic adherents. His message was novel, yet familiar, and also inoffensive and ambiguous enough to be acceptable to many Christians and Jews. He was a very Arabian figure, who was nevertheless influenced and motivated by the intellectual movement that had gripped the Mediterranean world and its hinterland:

⁴ Robin, C., 2015, 'Ḥimyar, Aksūm, and *Arabia Deserta* in Late Antiquity: The Epigraphic Evidence,' in Fisher, G., (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, p.127-171, esp. p.154.

⁵ Ibid, p.137-145.

⁶ Patricia Crone briefly discusses these other prophets towards the end of *Meccan Trade*, comparing them with Maori movements in the nineteenth century to posit a theory of millenarian, nativist reaction against outside powers (Crone, P., 1987, *Meccan Trade*, p.248-250).

monotheism. He owed his prominence and social power to his extraordinary personal charisma, yet would probably have been forgotten by history had not the great powers of the age entered into a century of conflict that transformed the bedouin world, and that brought them both to near-destruction in the first decades of the seventh century.

The rise of Islam was a unique departure in human history but also a part of the broader transition from an ancient world of local pagan and temple cults scattered across world empires, to a medieval world of universalist religions existing across fragmented political entities. It was one of the great accidents of Late Antiquity, whose ongoing consequences still help to make the modern world.

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