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Rethinking the Jafnids: new approaches to Rome's Arab allies

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While acknowledging the importance and interest of the Jafnids, the first part of this paper questions how much more current approaches are likely to reveal. Literary sources by their nature will remain open to varied interpretations; archaeology may simply give more detail to a picture we know already; the Arabic sources for the pre-Islamic period are highly controversial and bound to remain so. Part two suggests some new approaches: rereading the Greek and Syriac sources with more attention paid to their biases and less concern with the accuracy of their facts; more use of comparative case studies, whether from as far afield as America or from closer to home in Roman Africa. Seen in the context of the now familiar evidence for the prosperity of the badiya in Late Antiquity, is it possible that the Jafnids were seen by the Roman landowning aristocracy as rivals whom it was convenient not to admit as full members of the Roman elite?

The importance of the Jafnids has been evident to scholars for over one hundred and fifty years. The great French Orientalist, Armand-Pierre Caussin de Perceval published his study of the Arabs before Islam which effectively introduced the Jafnids to modern scholarship in 1847-8, a whole forty years before the appearance of *Die Ghass~nischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafna's* by the equally pioneering German scholar, Theodor Nöldeke, and although the latter remains an essential piece of the current bibliography in a way that Caussin de Perceval's work, written before the Syriac sources became available, does not, the French scholar was fully alert to the significance of Jafnid history.[2] The Jafnids have attracted (and continue to attract) attention because they were a non-Roman dynasty on the boundaries of the empire about whom there is an unusually large body of evidence, much of it relatively contemporary. And not just any such dynasty, but Arabs, who from this point on would play a key role in the history of the Near East. As such their history sheds light on relations between Romans and non-Romans in the context of the frontier, and again not just any frontier, but one in a region that was the cockpit of Eurasian conflict in the sixth and seventh century. On top of this Jafnid history can be read as a prolegomenon to the epoch-

[1]Corpus Christi College, Oxford.
[2]Caussin de Perceval 1847-8: ii.189-258; Nöldeke 1887.

defining fall of the Roman empire in the Levant. Whether as cause or consequence, any narrative of Roman decline is almost bound to give the Jafnids a prominent place in the story. The fact that they are claimed as loyal supporters of the Monophysite cause gives them only added significance, placing them on what has often been seen as the very fault line that divided the sixth-century empire. Finally, study of the Jafnids offers the tantalizing prospect of new light on the origins and early history of Islam. The Jafnids have been presented as ruling a Ghass~nid tribal confederation. We know that Ghass~nids were to be found in pre-Islamic Yathrib. We know that they fought for the Romans at the battle of Yarm©k. We know that they were among the Syrian tribes that supported the Umayyads during the first century of Islam. On top of this they appear in Arabic, Greek, and Syriac sources, thus perhaps offering a way into the key methodological conundrum to face historians of the rise of Islam: how to combine the sources that come to us from these three traditions to write intellectually coherent history. The Ghass~nids, and hence it has seemed tempting to assume, their Jafnid rulers, appear to have straddled cultures and traditions, and so may offer historians a possibly unique chance to see the same events from alternative and independent perspectives.[3]

All this has been evident for some time, not perhaps quite ever since Caussin de Perceval and Nöldeke, but certainly there is nothing in the previous paragraph that might not have been said at any time in the last three decades. Which raises an uncomfortable issue. Is there a danger that the Jafnids, however interesting, are essentially mined out, both in terms of evidence and in terms of ideas?

Jafnid history – a worked out field?

This was the point I made in my paper to the Paris conference, where I suggested that if we had come to find answers to any of the questions traditionally asked of the Jafnids we were likely to be disappointed. The Jafnids are comparatively well-documented, but the material comes from literary sources rather than documents or still less archives. The Jafnids come after the great age of early Arabian epigraphy which ended in the third century A.D., and sixth-century inscriptions put up by the Jafnids themselves or referring to them, whether

[3]Recent studies of the Jafnids include Sartre1982; Shahîd 1995; Whittow 1999; and Shahîd 2002. Greg Fisher is currently preparing his 2008 Oxford thesis for publication. When it appears the Jafnids will be covered for the first time by a modern scholarly and accessible monographic survey. In the meantime see Fisher 2008a and Fisher 2008b.

written in Greek or Arabic, are few in number, brief and in several cases of uncertain meaning.[4] The announcement that among the papyri discovered in 1993 in the church at Petra was one datable to the reign of Justinian after 537 that named an Abu Kherebos, who is clearly Abu Karib ibn Jabala, al-Harith's brother, mentioned by Procopius as the ruler of a region called the Palmtrees in Palestina Tertia, suggested for a moment that we might have stumbled on a rather richer vein of documentary material for the Jafnids, but in fact it turned out to be little more than a bare mention.[5]

It is tempting to treat the texts mentioning the Jafnids preserved in British Library Add. MS 14602, and known since Jean-Baptiste Chabot first published them in 1907 as the *Documenta ad origines Monophysitarum illustrandas*, as if they were archival documents, but it is a temptation that should be resisted. The manuscript itself dates to the eighth century. What it contains is a deliberately compiled dossier completed shortly after 580, but seemingly put together in the first place a decade earlier in the context of the tritheist dispute which divided the anti-Chalcedonian church in the 570s.[6] Bearing in mind that one of the essential innovations of ecclesiastical history as a late antique genre was the inclusion of documentary texts, the *Documenta* are arguably best viewed as ecclesiastical history with the narrative left out.[7] And bearing in mind too the fundamentally polemical nature of late antique ecclesiastical history it would be rash to imagine that the selected texts were not edited to serve their prime purpose. In other words we should be treating these materials as a literary source like any other.

And, as we now know well, literary sources cannot be treated as repositories of uncontroversial fact. They are secondary sources, and as historians of what (in terms of survival) is essentially a pre-documentary world we have learnt to accept that often we cannot know whether a particular story is true, or whether a particular event happened. The hard piece of evidence is not the story but the fact of the author telling it. To take the 531 battle of Callinicum as an example, according to Procopius, Belisarius was a supremely able general who only offered battle to the retreating Persians in April 531 because he was forced to do so by his officers and men. The result was a disaster, as Belisarius had feared. The Persians broke through on the Roman right, rolled up the rest of the Roman position, and pinned the

[4]Macdonald 2009; Hoyland 2007: 229-30; Robin and Gorea 2002.
[5]Koenen 1996:183; Kaimio 2001.
[6]*Documenta*; Van Roey and Allen 1994: 267, 270, 280, 300-01; Ebied, Van Roey, and Wickham 1981:1-2; Wickham 2008.
[7]Momigliano 1990: 137; Liebeschuetz 1993: 161.

survivors against the Euphrates. The first to flee was the Jafnid phylarch, al-Harith, about whom there were at the same time rumours of actual treachery. Belisarius on the other hand had dismounted and carried on fighting until nightfall. Only when all was irretrievably lost did the heroic general make his escape by boat over the river.[8] For most such episodes we would only have Procopius to go on, but in this case we have an account of the battle from Malalas too. The latter acknowledges the accusations of treachery, but says that it was al-Harith who continued fighting to the end, while it was Belisarius who was one of the first abandon to the army to its fate and flee by boat.[9] As early as the 1957 Irfan Shahid argued that Malalas' version made better sense and should be preferred.[10] After all, al-Harith was not dismissed from his post after the battle, while it appears that Belisarius was. An official enquiry was held and Belisarius was replaced as commander in the east.[11] That we know. The obvious inference is that the report found him to blame, and he was sacked, only resurrecting his career thanks to his brutal role in the suppression of the Nika riot. In Shahid's view Procopius account reflects not just its author's closeness to Belisarius, but consistent anti-Arab bias, resulting in a distortion of history. More recently, Geoffrey Greatrex has made the case for preferring Procopius' account.[12] Malalas should be discounted because his account is obviously biased in favour of two other commanders whom he favours, the Hun officers Sunnicas and Simmas. On balance I find Shahid's analysis more convincing, but my purpose is not to argue in favour of one view or the other; rather to make the point that no amount of close reading of these two texts is going to solve the issue. Neither Shahid nor Greatrex can have the last word on Callinicum. Another scholar will appear and see the way to an equally effective alternative argument.

The other main source for Jafnid history is John of Ephesus, and in particular the *Ecclesiastical History* without which we would effectively not have the tragic story of al-Mundhir b. al-Harith's fraught relations with successive Roman regimes and eventual fall; nor would we know of al-Mundhir's role in trying to reconcile the various non-Chalcedonian factions in 580. The degree of our reliance on John's account is obscured by the list of other sources which mention al-Mundhir, but in practice they add up to very little. Al-Mundhir appears in the later Syriac sources, namely Michael the Syrian, the *Chronicle to 1234*, and

[8]Procopius, *Wars* I.xviii.13-50.
[9]John Malalas XVIII.60.
[10]Shahîd 1957: 43-6; Shahîd 1995: 134-42.
[11]John Malalas XVIII.61; Martindale 1992: 186.
[12]Greatrex 1998: 200-07.

Bar Hebraeus, but these twelfth- and thirteenth-century compilations, are for the most part dependent on information from John of Ephesus, and where they are not they are of very uncertain historical value.[13] The Jafnid leader is mentioned briefly by Greek historians, Evagrius, Menander and Theophylact Simocatta. These accounts certainly have the merit of being contemporary and independent but what they say adds up to very little. Even Evagrius, the one with most to say, tells us little more than that al-Mundhir was the leader of Rome's Arab allies, was a traitor, and was exiled by Maurice.[14]

In practice therefore we rely for the story of al-Mundhir, one which very much shapes how we understand Jafnid history, on a single source. And it is a very peculiar source too. John was a non-Chalcedonian, but beyond that he was a far from typical member of the non-Chalcedonian community. Born in the territory of Ingila, about 40 kms north of Amida (modern Diyarbak2r) in the Roman province of Mesopotamia, he became a monk at the age of four, and so in effect he never knew another life. Aged fifteen he joined the monastery of Mar John Urtaya at Amida. Throughout the east, monks formed the backbone of the non-Chalcedonian community, but those of Amida were among the most zealous and committed. Driven out of Amida in the very early 520s, John spent most of his life as a refugee, first in the east, and then eventually in Constantinople, where in a rather different environment from the monasteries of his youth he played an important part in Justinian's unsuccessful attempts to unify the church. After 565, Justin II's regime tried again. A meeting at Callinicum usually dated to 568 foundered on the intransigent opposition of the non-Chalcedonian monks, but negotiations in Constantinople from 569 onwards got further. In 571 Justin was able to issue an edict which it seemed for a short moment would be acceptable "to Christians everywhere". John of Ephesus was among those who took communion from the Chalcedonian patriarch. But he soon realised he had gone too far. Although he recanted, and spent most of the rest of his life in prison or exile, his reputation had been badly damaged with the monks of his youth, the same monks who had stood so much firmer at Callinicum in 568.[15] It was under these circumstances that he returned to writing the *Ecclesiastical History* whose first two books stop shortly before 571. Book III of the *Ecclesiastical History*, which contains the greater part of what he has to say about the Jafnids, serves a variety of purposes; but perhaps

[13]References in Martindale 1992: 34-7; Van Ginkel 1995: 82; Van Ginkel 1998.
[14]References in Martindale 1992: 34-7; Evagrius IV.12-13, VI.2.
[15]For John's career see Van Ginkel 1995: 27-34; Harvey 1990: 28-30. For the negotiations of Justin II's reign, see Evagrius, V.4 and John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* III.i.19-25 with discussion in Frend 1972: 316-25; Allen 1981: 22-6, 212-14.

above all it is an attempt to rebuild his reputation with the eastern monks. To be writing in Syriac, the language of eastern monasticism, rather than Greek, the language of the Roman elite, whatever their views of Chalcedon, makes this plain.[16] An apology, an appeal to stand firm in the last days, an attempt by a man in failing health to secure his salvation, John was writing a highly charged work in very difficult times. Ecclesiastical History in the Eusebian tradition is a genre that by definition aims to convince readers of the correctness of one particular point of view and the orthodoxy of one particular community. Whatever John says is doubly filtered before it reaches us.

Seen from this perspective, what John tells us about the role of the Jafnids as committed protectors of the non-Chalcedonian community, guardians of miaphysite orthodoxy, and ultimately martyrs for the non-Chalcedonian cause, cannot be taken at face value. He portrayed the second half of the sixth century in such grim tones not as a considered view of the current military and political situation, still less because he foresaw military disaster at the hands of the Persians or the Arabs. He was long dead when the wars of the seventh century began.[17] Rather he wrote on the assumption that the end of the world was close.[18] Al-Mundhir's fall may have triggered an inconvenient wave of Arab raids, but these were essentially trivial; the real significance of the event was that a defender of orthodoxy had fallen to the wiles of the unrighteous. The underlying message to the orthodox was that they must endure in faith like al-Mundhir because the end was at hand. John's narrative at best holds up a distorting mirror to sixth-century realities, even that perceived by the Jafnids.

On-going work will gradually transform our understanding of these texts as texts, but whether the question is al-Harith's actions at the battle of Callinicum as portrayed by Procopius and Malalas, or the truth behind al-Mundhir's relationship with Maurice and the downfall of the Jafnids in the 580s as told by John of Ephesus, we are never going to know more than we know now. These are stories with some basis in fact but what basis will remain a matter of speculation and debate. Whether the Jafnids were loyal to Rome, or even how committed they were to the non-Chalcedonian cause, are questions that we have asked, have given various answers to, and do not need to ask again.

A similar point can be made about the Jafnids in the context of frontier studies. Rome's desert frontier has been the focus of highly productive research for more than a

[16] Van Ginkel 1995: 96-7.
[17] Van Ginkel 1995: 78 (commenting on John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History*, III.vi.1); Allen 1979: 251-4.
[18] Van Ginkel 1995: 73, 78, 85, 201; Van Ginkel 1998: 355-6.

hundred years, culminating with the accomplishment and on-going publication of Thomas Parker's *Limes Arabicus* Project.[19] Thanks to Parker and his predecessors we know a lot about this world. The basic arrangement of the system of forts and watch towers is now fairly clear, as is its basic chronology: created in the third, fourth and fifth centuries, gradually abandoned in many sectors that were to form the heartlands of the Jafnids during the late fifth and sixth centuries. It is fair to point out that there is a lot more of the frontier region which would repay the Parker treatment. It is also fair to say that Parker's survey is based on ceramic evidence that developed considerably over the time that he was doing the survey, and has been further refined since. It is clear too, clearer than it was when Parker launched the project, that surface ceramic survey is a pretty rough and ready means of dating occupation of a site.[20] No doubt if we excavated all these forts and towers we would learn more. But how much more? We can continue to argue about the purpose of this system, what led to its abandonment, whether more expenditure in this region would have saved the empire from the armies of Islam. But as with the battle of Callinicum, one can be fairly confident that we are not going to get any more certain answers to these questions than we have now.

Parker, however, was not directly looking for the Jafnids. The significance of his work for Jafnid studies lies in the fact that this was the context in which the dynasty operated and when we hear about the Jafnids it is often in this region of the badiya, the arid margins of the Fertile Crescent, that they are located. What happens then when we look for them directly? The answer, we are now learning, is strikingly little. The list of Jafnid sites and buildings given by the tenth-century Persian historian Hamza al-Isfahani has been known since the mid-ninteenth century, and this has been taken up by Shahid in the most recent volume of *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*.[21] Supplemented by references in Syriac sources, notably the list of non-Chalcedonian monasteries provided in the *Documenta*[22], Shahid is able to describe a landscape filled with Jafnid monuments, the product of a specifically Jafnid building boom. But looked at more closely much of this Jafnid archaeology tends to disappear. Hamza al-Isfahani, an author whose value as a source for the sixth century may be judged by his belief in a sequence of thirty-two Ghassanid kings

[19]Parker 2006; Parker 1986 is still useful. For a survey of the history of research on Rome's desert frontier in the Near East see Kennedy and Riley 1990.
[20]See Sartre 1988: 175; Kennedy 1992: 480-82; Kennedy 2008: 669, 672-3.
[21]Nöldeke 1876; Shahîd 2002: 8-15, 314-41 et passim. (Nöldeke did not have a high opinion of Hamza al-Isfahani's merits: Nöldeke 1887:49-52.)
[22]*Documenta*, text 213-24; trans. 148-56.

ruling for over 580 years, certainly testifies to the continuing attraction of the Jafnid image in the tenth century, but as Julia Bray has shown in a paper given at the Paris conference but published elsewhere, continued interest is no guarantee of truth, almost in fact the reverse.[23] As Denis Genequand has helpfully pointed out, there are only six sites where Jafnid presence can be proved by inscription: the so-called praetorium at Resafa, the tower at al-Burj, the house at Hayyat, Jabal Says, Nitl, and Samma. And of those only Resafa, al-Burj and probably Nitl are evidence for Jafnid construction rather than a case of someone dating something by reference to a Jafnid phylarch. Everything else is speculation.[24]

Not all frontier archaeology is the study of forts, and not all frontier studies are archaeology. The other key to the transformation of the field has been the application of models taken from anthropology, and in particular from the study of the recent history of the relationships between great powers and their tribal clients. The process has gathered pace over the last three decades, but in fact throughout the last century students of Rome's desert frontier have been conscious of these parallels, and vice versa, those studying the bedouin often had what happened in the Roman past in the back of their minds. Norman Lewis in his seminal study, *Nomads and settlers in Syria and Jordan*, published in 1987, makes the point that the Ottoman authorities were persuaded by foreign advisors to build new *limites* across the region with a view to keeping the nomads out of the settled territories on the grounds that the region had been settled and prosperous in Roman times, the Romans had built forts to keep the nomads out, ergo if the Ottomans did the same then Syria and Jordan would soon become prosperous.[25] The results were not happy. More recently historians and archaeologists have been quick to draw on William and Fidelity Lancaster's work on the Rwala bedouin, or other studies that analyse relations between nomads and settled populations, not in terms of inevitable conflict, but in those of symbiosis and shared interests.[26] The lively debate that took place in 1986-7 between Edward Banning and Thomas Parker was implicitly over whether such a model could be applied to the Roman period or not.[27] One can also point to the use of ideas about state formation and the role of great power

[23]Bray forthcoming.
[24]Genequand 2006: 77-82.
[25]Lewis 1987: 23-4, 26.
[26]Lancaster 1981: 73-116; Lancaster and Lancaster 1999: 7-51, 63; Sweet 1965.
[27]Banning1986; Parker 1987; Banning 1987; Mayerson 1989; Banning 1992.

subsidy in the creation of nomad states in a fundamentally poor region.[28] These have all become standard parts of the Jafnid historian's conceptual tool box.

With the exception of Shahîd who is primarily concerned to deny that the Jafnids were nomads, most historians would agree that this approach has been fruitful. My own view has been that the rise of the Jafnids was a product of the peculiar political circumstances that emerged in the Near East in Late Antiquity, when the region was divided between two rival great powers, Rome and Persia. As I understand it, and in this I follow Michael MacDonald's analysis of the so-called Safaitic inscriptions, the evidence for the earlier Roman period is for a world of relatively unmilitarised small nomad groups, who gradually from the third century onwards responded to the opportunities offered by growing great power conflict.[29] On top of that, Rome's desert frontier needed management and protection. Banning's picture of symbiotic consensus seems a little too cosy, but is otherwise on the right lines. The initial attempt to manage this frontier by garrison and fort building must have been far too expensive. The nomads offered a solution by offering military service, and the result was ultimately the winding down of the fortified frontier documented by Parker's survey. The Jafnid dynasty rose as brokers between Rome and the bedouin, a tribal dynasty that could deliver the sort of bedouin manpower attested by the Arabic inscription found at Jabal Usays. "I, Qutam son of Mg♣ra the Awsite / al-Harith the king sent me / to Usays as a garrison, the year / 423 [=528/9 AD]."[30] These few words cut on a Syrian rock would appear to say it all.

In telling Jafnid history this way I have very much been influenced by the anthropological and comparative work just referred to, but specifically I have been struck by the apparent similarities between Roman-Jafnid relations and Ottoman policy towards dynasties like the Rash♣d♣s at Haïl in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Rash♣d♣s made themselves useful and difficult to the Ottomans and were bought off accordingly. In turn Ottoman gold and guns allowed the Rash♣d♣s to create a lasting local hegemony. The Rash♣d♣s' regional rivals, the house of Saud, made similar arrangements with the British, which proved to have been a much better decision when Ottoman power collapsed in 1918.[31] From this perspective, the story told by Procopius of Abu Karib ibn Jabala and the Palmtrees, looks very familiar. An under-resourced tribal chief puts himself

[28]Whittow 1999.
[29]Whittow 2010; Macdonald 1993.
[30]Robin and Gorea 2002.
[31]Whittow 1999: 219-23; see also Toth 2006: 61-2, 64.

under the notional authority of a powerful, rich but distant settled ruler, and reaps rewards for essentially doing no more than further his own ends. Both sides to the arrangement are conscious of what is going on, but it suits both parties. The tribal chief gains the funds to reward his followers, and a legitimation of his authority; the distant ruler solves a security problem at minimal cost, and gains prestige from the widening reach of his rule. The Cold War of the second half of the twentieth century was another era of very much this sort of thing.

> The emperor received these Palmtrees as a present from Abocharabos...who now guarded the land from plunder... In formal terms the emperor holds the Palmtrees, but for him to possess himself of any of the country is in practice utterly impossible... The Palmtrees themselves are worth nothing and Abocharabos only gave the form of a gift, and the emperor accepted it with full knowledge of the fact.[32]

Whether or not Procopius is accurate about the facts, the analysis appears absolutely convincing. But again, as with the archaeology, what more is there to be said? The 1980s and '90s saw the comparative turn in Jafnid studies. It cannot simply be repeated. In terms of new insights hasn't it been mined out?

Turning to the Jafnid role in the fall of the Roman east, similar points can be made. It is one of the ironies of the *Strategikon*, that very interesting discussion of the Roman army and its enemies, conventionally attributed to the emperor Maurice, but certainly written in the late sixth or early seventh century, that it nowhere mentions the Arabs, who in a very few years were going to destroy Sasanian Persia and permanently drive Rome from its Syrian, Palestinian, and Arabian provinces.[33] Is that silence symptomatic of a fundamental failure of Roman policy? Or is this only the perspective of hindsight? Should the Romans have been more generous to the Jafnids? Or less? Parker tends to believe that the mistake was to mothball the frontier fortifications; Shahîd among others tells the story as a tragedy of Rome betraying it best ally, just at the point when such an ally would be needed most.[34] *Quot homines tot sententiae.*

Even trying to move away from the military, diplomatic, and religious concerns of our literary texts and rephrasing the question in terms of economy, society, and culture, trying to bring in a wider range of archaeological evidence, and asking whether Rome's reliance on

[32]Procopius, *Wars* I.xix.10-13.
[33]Maurice, *Strategikon*
[34]Parker 2000; Shahîd 1995: 609-10.

Arab allies was part of a generalised retreat of classical culture in the region, it is hard to see the debate advancing in any significant sense. Thanks to the work of the last thirty years, we now appreciate the fact that the Roman Near East was a thriving world, growing in wealth at least up to the mid-sixth century. But at the point we cease to agree. Some, like me, would see that prosperity carrying on despite plague and war through to the seventh century and beyond; others, like Hugh Kennedy, would see that prosperity fundamentally damaged by those events.[35] What has become clear, however, is how hard it is to assemble anything that amounts to convincing proof one way or the other. The fact that the Roman empire in late antiquity was not a culture in terminal decay has been easy enough to demonstrate; to move beyond that has proved exasperatingly difficult. But if we cannot identify even so basic a trend as whether the sixth century Near East was seriously effected by bubonic plague or not, our chances of being able to narrow that down and answer questions about the place of the Jafnids in this story are negligible – still more negligible when they are phrased as counterfactuals. To carry on asking whether a different policy towards the Jafnids could have saved the empire from the armies of Islam may be fun, but with the evidence we have available it is not a meaningful scholarly endeavour.

Finally Jafnid studies and the rise of Islam. A maximal view would argue that pre-Islamic Arabia, even in the sixth century, was much more complex, developed and integrated into the wider Near Eastern world than even the revised image of the *J~hiliyya* that recognises the vitality of ancient Arabia before the fourth century would suppose.[36] The lack of epigraphy dating to the fifth and sixth centuries has been confused with the lack of other things, and the archaeological evidence for decline that certainly does seem to apply to Eastern Arabia in these centuries has been applied too widely. At the same time a variety of positive evidence for economic and cultural activity could be cited. Apart from the statements of later Islamic histories, such as Samh©d♣'s (d. 911 / 1505) *History of Medina*, one could point to what appears to be a large scale trade in leather that supplied the Roman army, or point to the Qur'an as a text that cannot simply have emerged ex nihilo.[37] If one takes the view, as for example does Fred Donner, that the Qur'an is an early text that takes us fairly close to what was being said and thought in the Prophet's lifetime, then it may still be the

[35]Whittow 1990; Kennedy 1985; Kennedy and Liebeschuetz 1988. For a recent well-informed survey see Wickham 2005: 443-65, 609-26.
[36]For a recent view of the *J~hiliyya* see Robin 2009.
[37]Lecker 2009; Crone 2007.

case that such a sophisticated piece of literature was the product of a long period of maturation in a complex and syncretic religious and literary culture.[38] In other words the Qur'an in some form at least is likely to pre-date the Prophet. The sort of Judaicizing context in which such a proto-Qur'an might have emerged is exactly what Christian Robin has shown us is to be found in the Yemen from the late fourth century up to the Himyarite conquest in the early sixth.[39] Further support for the same thesis can be found in the story told by the fifth-century Greek ecclesiastical historian, Sozomen, who says that the Saracens, or Ishmaelites, are descendants of Abraham, and practise Jewish rites and observances such as abstinence from pork, and circumcision. "If," Sozomen writes, "they deviate in any respect from the observances of the Jews, it must be put down to the lapse of time, and to their contacts with other neighbouring peoples".[40] In other words, Sozomen may be read as describing for the fifth century something close to what Muhammad appears to be doing and thinking in the seventh. And since he is a completely independent source writing more than a century before the Prophet, one might argue that what he has to say should be taken seriously.

To continue in this vein, the Jafnids were leaders of a Ghassanid tribal confederation that had emigrated from South Arabia reaching Roman territory in the fifth century.[41] There were still related Ghassanid tribesmen in the Hijaz in the sixth and early seventh century where they appear in the Constitution of Medina.[42] The Roman empire had a long interest in Arabia, up to the third century maintaining garrisons as far south as Hegra (Mad~in S~lih) and Dumata (Jawf), and the Jafnids as Rome's allies fulfilled this role in the sixth.[43] The Syriac letter published by Shahîd written at the Jafnid court describing the martyrdoms at Najran in 523 demonstrates continuing Jafnid involvement in the politics of Arabia, as does the Jafnid expedition to Khaybar in 567, which is mentioned by Ibn Qutayba (d. 276 / 889) and confirmed by the inscription at Harran dated to one year after the destruction of Khaybar.[44] The career of Uthman ibn al-Huwayrith who tried to take control of Mecca in the later sixth century with Roman backing, and who is said in the *Sira* to have gone to the emperor, become a Christian and been rewarded with high office, is further testimony to

[38]Donner 1998: 35-62.
[39]Robin 2004: 832-4, 844-66, 881.
[40]Sozomen, VI.xxxviii.11
[41]Shahîd 2002: 2-4, 421.
[42]Lecker 2004: 75-80, 86-7.
[43]Speidel 1987.
[44]Shahîd 1971; Shahîd 1995: 322-31.

Roman, and hence Jafnid, interest in the region.[45] From this perspective the Jafnids appear as a key component of the political context from which Islam arose. And the fact that Ibn Qutayba's information about a Jafnid expedition to Khaybar is confirmed by an inscription from the village of Harran in the south of Syria is proof that, whatever the methodological difficulties they pose, the later Islamic sources preserve accurate information about the pre-Islamic past.

A minimal view would read this rather differently. The evidence from Arabian archaeology and epigraphy cannot simply be side stepped. The evidence of later Islamic sources cannot be taken as reliable. Just as the twelfth-century Syriac compiler, Michael the Syrian, is a misleading guide to the sixth-century, so the same applies to the ninth-century Ibn Qutayba or Muhammad ibn Habib (whose *Kitab al-Munammaq* is a source for Uthman ibn al-Huwayrith), the late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-F~s♣ whose history of Mecca also tells the story of Uthman ibn al-Huwayrith, or the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century Samh©d♣. The story of Uthman ibn al-Huwayrith needs to be placed in the context of the other *hanifis*, supposedly followers of the religion of Abraham, but whose historicity can be called into question. That he went to the emperor, became a Christian and planned to seize power in Mecca may be no more than the elaboration of a trope.[46] The presence of Ghassanid tribesmen in the Hijaz is irrelevant. The very title of this conference confirms that we are talking about a Jafnid dynasty that did not involve every Jafnid kinsman let alone everyone imagining fictive kinship with the Banu Ghassan.[47] The migration of the latter from the Yemen has no more basis in fact than the story of Moses leading the Hebrews out of Egypt.[48] Sozomen's story too needs to be treated with more critical rigour. It may simply be a means to explain why some Arabs had some customs he regarded as Jewish. And even if it is more than that, it need apply to no more than the Arabs of Palestine, rather than the Hijaz.[49] Ibn Qutayba's account of a Jafnid expedition to Khaybar is not confirmed by the Harran inscription. What has been read as Khaybar may simply be an anodyne statement about St. John.[50] What we are left with is the Shahîd letter

[45]Crone 1987: 98; Osman 2005: 69; Hamidullah 1958: 97-103.
[46]Hawting 1999: 20-44.
[47]Robin 2008: 191; Trimingham 1979: 6.
[48]Robin 2008: 191 n. 180.
[49]Hawting 1999: 38.
[50]Robin 2006: 332-6.

suggesting a Jafnid interest in news from Najran and a good case for a leather trade for which there is no evidence that the Jafnids took part.

My aim, as with the discussion of the alternative accounts of the battle of Callinicum, is not to judge between these views; rather to point out that although there are good prospects for new work on the literary sources, the archaeology, and the epigraphy of Arabia, it is not going to shed new light on the Jafnids. And if some historians think that not so, let an outsider point out how much the debates over early Islamic history and the value of later Islamic sources are a dialogue of the nearly deaf. Without a shared set of methodological premises it is hard to see how this will change. I have come to suspect that the maximal view does more justice to sixth-century Arabia, but I see no prospect of research in this area changing our view of the Jafnids or of work on the Jafnids altering our view of Arabia on the eve of Islam.

New approaches to Rome's Arab allies

So is there a danger that the Jafnids, however interesting, are essentially mined out, both in terms of evidence and in terms of ideas? No. Not so long as we keep these issues in mind, and make a deliberate point of looking for new approaches.

To some extent this comes at the cost of accepting the limits to our knowledge of the sixth century. If in Arabia , for example, the epigraphic habit had either died out or was expressed in less durable media that do not survive, that is a fact we cannot alter. Similarly if Mecca and Medina were major centres in the sixth century, then too bad, because archaeology is not going to help. But there are a number of underexploited resources for Jafnid history, and more important perhaps, there are new approaches which we can take.

To start with underexploited resources, it is clear there is still much to be done with the Syriac materials, and given how much of what we know about the Jafnids comes from this source that is a major gap. There has been surprisingly little recent work done on sixth-century ecclesiastical controversy either, and given that the Syriac sources are for the most part effectively non-Chalcedonian polemic, and so much of what know about the Jafnids comes to us filtered through that prism, that again is a major gap. It is indicative that no one at the Paris conference was speaking on this theme. New work is certainly appearing. Jan Van Ginkel and Witold Witakowski have blazed a trail with their work on John of Ephesus, Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel-Mahre, and Michael the Syrian, and similarly Volker Menze is among those putting these authors in a new and more secure context with studies of the non-

Chalcedonian community.[51] When we have new editions, translations and commentaries Jafnid history will be on a firmer footing. It will not provide new evidence in the sense of giving us new facts about the fall of al-Mundhir, for example, but it will give us a much more sophisticated understanding of the intellectual and cultural context in which these authors wrote, and begin to tell us why they treated the Jafnids as they did. In turn a crucial step towards interpreting what they say. Particularly important may be new work on the *Documenta* which to date has been treated by historians of the Jafnids principally as evidence for dynasty's commitment to the non-Chalcedonian cause and a quarry for the names of possible Jafnid monasteries. Seen as an ecclesiastical history in its own right, if one only in its raw form, the *Documenta* asks to be approached in a different way. Not as direct evidence for Jafnid attitudes, but as evidence for how the Syriac-speaking non-Chalcedonian community imagined the Jafnids and what they looked for from them.

By comparison, our knowledge of the Greek sources which touch on the Jafnids is considerably further forward, even if Procopius and the other sixth-century historians still lack a detailed commentary, and it is possible to see what similar work on the Syriac sources is likely to give us. As mentioned already, as long ago as the 1950s Shahîd made the point that Procopius reveals a consistent anti-Arab bias, and it remains valid, and indeed applies to the other Greek historians too. At its most basic Saracens are assumed to be treacherous and unreliable. The Jafnids were Saracens, Saracens were known to be treacherous, ergo the Jafnids were treacherous. Even Malalas, giving a different and more positive account to Procopius of the Jafnid role in the battle of Callinicum, cannot avoid mentioning that "some supposed that a number of the Saracens fled because of the treachery of the phylarchs".[52] The same stereotype appears in Menander, Evagrius, and Theophylact Simocatta.[53]

The contrast with how other ethnic identities are treated by the Greek historians is instructive. Not everybody is described with an ethnic label, but especially in Procopius it is common enough to be able to see patterns. Armenians, Huns, Thracians, Goths, Isaurians and Gepids are all at various moments described in positive terms. They are typically good at war, brave, sensible, effective fighters and loyal.[54] And when it is not explicitly stated, the

[51]Van Ginkel 1995; Wittakowski 1987; Pseudo-Dionysius of Tel Mahre; Menze 2008.
[52]Malalas XVIII.60.
[53]Evagrius, V.20; Menander frag 9.1 67-9; 9.3.103, Theophylact Simocatta XVII.7.
[54]Aigan (Hun): Martindale 1992: 32-3; Althias (Hun?): Martindale 1992: 49-50 (commanding Huns in Africa: Procopius, *Wars* III.xi.5-6; c.f. Greatrex 2000: 268); Aratius (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 103-4; Artabanes (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 125-30; Artabazes

fact that so many Armenians, Huns, Thracians, Goths, Isaurians, Gepids, and even Heruls (of whom Procopius tended to disapprove), held high rank in imperial service tells its own tory.[55]

(Armenian): Martindale 1992: 130-31; Asbadus (Gepid): Martindale 1992: 133 (Asbadus 2); Ascan (Hun): Martindale 1992: 133; Babas (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 161-2; Balas (Hun): Martindale 1992: 169; Bassaces (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 177; Belisarius (Thracian?): Martindale 1992: 182; Buzes (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 254-7; Chanaranges (Armenian): Martindale 282 (Chanaranges 3); Chorsamantis (Hun): Martindale 1992: 302-3; Cutzes (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 366-8; Dagisthaeus (Goth?): Martindale 1992: 380-83 (Dagisthaeus 2); Droctulfus (Sueve): Martindale 1992: 425-7 (Droctulfus 1); Germanus (Illyrican): Martindale 1992: 528 (Germanus 4); Gubulgudu (Hun): Martindale 1992: 560; Guntharis (Germanic): Martindale 1992: 574-6 (Guntharis 2); Ioannes (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 635 (Ioannes 14); Ioannes Troglita (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 644, 649 (Ioannes 36); Ioannes Guzes (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 651-2 (Ioannes 44); Leontius (Laz): Martindale 1992: 773 (Leontius 2); Longinus (Isaurian): Martindale 1992: 795 (Longinus 1); Martinus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 839-48 (Martinus 2); Mundus (Gepid): Martindale 1992: 903-4; Narses (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 912-28 (Narses 1); Narses (Armenian?): Martindale 1992: 930-31 (Narses 4); Pappus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 966; Paucaris (Isaurian): Martindale 1992: 972-3; Paulus (Goth): Martindale 1992: 978-9 (Paulus 16); Pharas (Herul): Martindale 1992: 1015-16 – a rare Herul approved of by Procopius; Philegagus (Gepid): Martindale 1992: 1019; Rhecithangus (Thracian): martindale 1992: 1084; Rufinus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 1097-8 (Rufinus 1); Sittas (Goth?): Martindale 1992: 1160-63.

[55]Adolius (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 16-17; Aluith (Herul): Martindale 1992: 50; Amalfridus (Goth): Martindale 1992: 51; Amazaspes (Armenian): Martindale 1992:54; Arsaces (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 123-4; Aruth (Herul): Martindale 1992: 132; Ascum (Hun / Bulgar): Martindale 1992: 136; Barbation (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 170; Barbatus (Thracian?): Martindale 1992: 170-71; Batzas (Germanic): Martindale 1992: 179; Chalazar (Hun): Martindale 1992: 280; Comentiolus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 321 (Comentiolus 1); Conon (Isaurian): Martindale 1992: 331-2 (Conon 1); Constantinus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 341-2 (Constantinus 3); Cours (Hun): Martindale 1992: 360-1; Cutzilas (Hun): Martindale 1992: 365; David Saharuni (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 389-90; Dorotheus (Isaurian): Martindale 1992: 421 (Dorotheus 3); Ebrimuth (Goth): Martindale 1992: 433-4; Elminzur (Hun): Martindale 1992: 440; Ennes (Isaurain): Martindale 1992: 441-2; Euphrtates (Abasgian): Martindale 1992: 465 (Euphratas 2); Faustinus (Samaritan): Martindale 1992: 478-9 (Faustinus 1); Gilacius (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 536; Gregorius (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 547-8 (Gregorius 2); Himerius (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 599-600; Hodolgan (Hun): Martindale 1992: 601; Ioannes (African): Martindale 1992: 668 (Ioannes 68); Ioannes Mystacon (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 679-81 (Ioannes 101); Isaaces (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 718 (Isaaces 1); Marcianus 2 (Thracian?): Martindale 1992: 820 (Marcianus 2); Narses (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 928-30 (Narses 2); Narses (Armenian?): Martindale 1992: 933-5 (Narses 10); Nazares (Illyrican): Martindale 1992: 936-7; Pacurius (Iberian): Martindale 1992: 959; Patricius (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 971 (Patricius 1); Peranius (Iberian): Martindale 1992: 989-90; Petrus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 998-9 (Petrus 7); Simmas (Hun): Martindale 1992: 1152-3; Suartuas (Herul): Martindale 1992: 1205; Sunicas (Hun): Martindale 1992: 1206-7; Terentius (Thracian?): Martindale 1992: 1221-2; Theodorus Cteanus (Thracian?): Martindale 1992: 1245-6 (Theodorus 6); Theodorus (Tzan): Martindale 1992: 1251-2 (Theodorus 21); Thomas

As Marc Abramson has shown for Tang China, stereotyped ethnic identities can serve to link certain qualities with particular ethnicities, and that in turn can open the way for individuals from those groups to receive positive discrimination. In the Tang world the obvious example is Turks and service in the imperial armies. They were certainly barbarians, but barbarians who were positively stereotyped as strong, brave, and warlike. These were barbarian qualities on which the empire would want to draw, and the stereotype of the warrior Turk made it natural for Turks to be appointed to military commands, and for military commanders to emphasise their Turkish identity.[56] The same point could be made for Armenians, Huns, Thracians, Isaurians, Goths and others in the sixth-century Roman world. These identities, as the Greek historians testify, came with positive stereotypes that do much to explain the high numbers from these groups serving and commanding in the imperial army.

What is striking is that for the Greek historians this positive stereotyping did not include the Saracens. And it evidently placed them at a disadvantage. As Greg Fisher points out elsewhere in this volume no Jafnid or any other Saracen was ever appointed to *magister militum* or to hold other high office; or if they were no one so appointed advertised their ethnic identity.[57] As Fisher notes, the highest court title any Jafnid obtained was the largely symbolic *patrikios*.

What made the Jafnid's experience so different? Why do the Greek historians so consistently denigrate the Saracens? These are clearly key questions which should be at the heart of Jafnid studies. Fisher's forthcoming monograph is set to be an important contribution to the debate. His work draws on a variety of comparative studies to frame an answer, but his most novel contribution has been to bring in from America the ideas of the borderland and the middle ground. The former has it roots in Herbert Eugene Bolton's studies of New Spain's northern territories between the Mississippi and the Pacific; a world which he saw needed to be appreciated as a process of cohabitation between natives and newcomers quite

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(Armenian): Martindale 1992:1314 (Thomas 2); Thomas (Goth): Martindale 1992: 1317 (Thomas 11); Valerianus (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 1355-61 (Valerianus 1); Varazes (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 1362 (Varazes 1);Varazes (Armenian): Martindale 1992: 1363 (Varazes 2); Uligagus (Herul): Martindale 1992: 1389-90; Ulimuth (Thracian): Martindale 1992: 1390; Zarter (Hun): Martindale 1992: 1415.

[56]Abramson 2008: xvi-xvii, 47-50.

[57]Procopius mentions a certain Zaidos as an infantry commander in Africa in 533. The name may be Arabic, perhaps Sa'♣d, but Procopius does not give his ethnic identity, and he does not appear again: Procopius, *Wars* III.xi.10; Martindale 1992: 1414.

as much as one of imperial expansion.[58] Over the last thirty years the concept of the borderland has come to mean something close to the frontier with the natives left in. Borderlands are areas where, as Jeremy Alderman and Stephen Aron put it, "ethnic mixing prevailed and in which still independent Indian and mestizo/métis peoples negotiated favourable terms of trade with competing colonial regimes".[59] The world of the Great Lakes is a special case of a borderland where in the eighteenth century French and British imperial interests competed in pursuit of fur, and both had to do business with native American tribes whose own military power could not be ignored. What emerged was what Richard White has dubbed the 'middle ground'.[60] A political and cultural space where newcomers and natives constructed "an elaborate network of economic, political, cultural, and social ties to meet the demands of a particular historical situation".[61] As White explains, "The middle ground depended on the inability of both sides to gain their ends through force. The middle ground grew according to the need of people to find a means, other than force, to gain the cooperation or consent of foreigners. To succeed, those who operated on the middle ground had, of necessity, to attempt to understand the world and the reasoning of others and to assimilate enough of that reasoning to put it to their own purposes."[62]

Applied to the sixth-century Near East these models offer interesting perspectives. The Jafnids too operated in a world where they had to contend with powerful imperial neighbours, but at the time maintained some agency of their own. The margins of the Fertile Crescent were like the Great Lakes a borderland, where in the sixth century Roman and Persian imperial interests competed in pursuit of power and security, and both had to do business with Arab tribes whose military power could not be ignored. What emerged it might be judged was exactly what White thought of as a middle ground. Unable to gain their ends through force, Romans, Persians and Arabs had to find an alternative means to gain the cooperation or consent of others. What emerged was a shared middle ground where two parties could do business, even if they misunderstood and misinterpreted each other. From this perspective it is no surprise that the Jafnids never held high office in Rome's empire. They were always outsiders. Like the native Americans of the Great Lakes region they benefited from a specific era of great power rivalry that allowed leverage to a third force.

[58]Weber 1986.
[59]Adleman, Aron 1999: 817.
[60]White 1991.
[61]White 1991: 33
[62]White 1991: 52. See also the valuable remarks in Deloria 2006.

With the fall of Rome and Persia their age of opportunity came to an end no less completely than did that of the Algonquians on the Great Lakes in 1815, when they were finally left in isolated confrontation with the aggressive and expansionist American Republic.

But this does not seem quite to work, and to me at least the real value of the American models lies more in showing up how different the situation of the Near East in Late Antiquity actually was. The key point about White's middle ground lies in the apparently fundamental cultural differences that one might have assumed would have made cooperation impossible. To the Europeans the Algonquians were savages. They were not Christians; and to contemporary European eyes they had no compatible concepts of property, sovereignty, law, contract, or morality. The very idea of an Algonquian behaving as a French or British subject, founding churches in America, or even more bizarre, being called to London or Paris to facilitate the settlement of a doctrinal dispute was of course inconceivable. But with the Jafnids it was not. Al-Harith and al-Mundhir, just as others who could be described as barbarians in the Roman world, did exactly these things.

And this may be where a new approach to the archaeology of Rome's desert frontiers can come into play. So far historians of the Jafnids have searched for specifically Jafnid sites and found very little. Meanwhile historians of the Late Antique economy have searched the same areas and found a great deal. In fact it has become clear that the period between the fourth and eighth century saw levels of investment in the region not to be matched until the twentieth century. Sites such as Qasr ibn Wardan or al-Anderin that were seen in the context of a fortified desert frontier are now understood as part of a golden age of intensive agricultural exploitation.[63]

In some parts of the world frontier territories like this may be lands of opportunity for small farmers, but in this case it seems that the scale of investment is only to be convincingly explained by aristocratic enterprise. As Jairus Banaji and Peter Sarris have shown, the late Roman empire from the fourth century onwards was quite literally a golden age for Roman aristocrats.[64] Paid in gold coin, which thanks to Constantine's reforms had become the basis of the Roman monetary system, office holding aristocrats had capital in plenty and this they invested, fuelling among other things the agricultural boom of the late antique Near East. Presumably they invested in the traditional settled heartlands of Near Eastern agriculture too. We certainly know this to be the case in Egypt where Peter Sarris has exposed the activities

[63]Decker 2009: 64-5, 174-203; Mango 2008.
[64]Banaji 2001; Sarris 2006.

of the enormously wealthy Apion family, but for those with the capital to invest in the initially hugely labour intensive and consequently expensive task of farming the low rainfall territories on the edge of the desert, this was the great land of opportunity where there was space for great estates and huge ranches, and a market in the cities and the army to buy what they produced.

The point about the Jafnids is that they were rivals. The point about the invisibility of the Jafnids in the archaeology is not that they were not there, but that they invested in exactly the same way as any other aristocratic speculator. On the rare occasions when we can identify a Jafnid site by an inscription it looks like any other complex built by the Roman elite. Had it not been for the inscription in praise of al-Mundhir the so-called praetorium at al-Rusafa would never have been interpreted as anything other than an ordinary extramural church.[65] The tower at al-Dumayr seems to have been of a piece with the numerous other towers that Michael Decker has shown to be a feature of the region's estates.[66] The inscription at Hayyat was part of a large aristocratic house. Although the Jafnids did not build it, and they are simply referred to in a dating clause, the fact remains that they were associated in some way with an unexceptionably aristocratic Roman building of the sort their peers were building too.[67] At Nitl they are similarly associated by inscription with a sixth-century church of exactly the sort that wealthy patrons typically built and decorated. If it was a burial church for the Jafnid family, as Shahîd believes, and as seems quite possible, then as Genequand has pointed out, "Nothing, other than its inscriptions, really differentiates the Nitl church from the numerous other churches of the area, whether in the episcopal city, in villages or in monasteries."[68]

The only thing that differentiated the Jafnids from their peers and rivals, men like Magnus, an aristocratic holder of high office, who built a church like that at Nitl at what was presumably his birth place at Huwwarin (Evaria) in the Syrian steppe, south-east of Hims (Emesa), was the fact that the Jafnids could also play up their Arab identity and draw on bedouin support.[69] For someone like Magnus, who became famous for his role in the 581 arrest of al-Mundhir, there was every incentive to emphasise the Jafnids' Arab identity and exclude them from high office. John of Ephesus calls Magnus al-Mundhir's "friend and

[65]Brands 1998; Fowden 1999, 149-73; Fowden 2000.
[66]Decker 2006.
[67]Butler 1915: 362-3; Shahîd 1995: 489-94; Genequand 2006: 79.
[68]Piccirillo 2001; Shahîd 2001; Genequand 2006: 79.
[69]Martindale 1992: 805-7; Feissel 1985.

patron".[70] Whatever that means exactly it would seem to imply al-Mundhir's exclusion from direct contact with the imperial court. The more the Jafnids were indistinguishable from their peers, the more it was necessary to emphasise and foster difference so as to offset any other advantages they might have in the competition to control these valuable lands. To go back to Fisher's American models, I am inclined to think the most illuminating parallel is not with the middle ground before 1815 but with the fate of the so-called Five Civilized Tribes, namely the Chickasaw, Choctaw, Creek, Seminole, and Cherokee who were still living on territory east of the Mississippi in 1830. The more they conformed to American culture, converted to Christianity, became literate, and entered the commercial economy, the more it was necessary to emphasise their savagery in order to justify their dispossession.[71]

Such a model has the merit of drawing together new approaches to reading the literary texts for Jafnid history with new work on the archaeology of Rome's desert frontiers in the Near East in a way that does not force the evidence. But I am personally most persuaded that this is a useful avenue to take by looking at what was happening on Rome's other desert frontier, namely in Africa, where something very similar to what I have sketched out was taking place too.

African Approaches

Although there has been a long tradition of high quality research focused on Roman Africa, it is only recently that the Moors, the tribal populations who inhabited the margins of Rome's African provinces, have received convincing and detailed monographic treatment. Yves Modéran's 2003 study, *Les Maures et l'Afrique Romaine*, marks a watershed, and for anyone wishing to put the Jafnids into a wider context of Roman relations with similar groups elsewhere in the empire it makes essential reading.

Basic to his approach, and a major advance on previous work, Modéran shows that there is no evidence for major migrations bringing Moors into the Roman province.[72] We are therefore talking about indigenous relationships. Moving on from that he draws an important distinction between the nomadic Laguatan of Tripolitania and the Moorish tribal groups who inhabited the southern edges of Byzacena and Numidia.[73] The sixth-century literary sources, specifically Corippus and Procopius, blur the distinction between the two not because of

[70]John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* III.iii.40.
[71]Howe 2007: 342-7.
[72]Modéran 2003: 127-9, 131-52, 154-207.
[73]Modéran 2003: 313-14.

ignorance (one was a native of Africa, and the other had spent at least a couple of years there in the 530s[74]), but, Modéran argues, because it suits their wider purposes to blacken the reputation of the Byzacena and Numidia Moors by linking them to the utterly unRomanised Laguatan.[75] What appears to lie behind this, and hence the particular relevance of the African comparison here, is competition for the control of valuable agricultural and grazing land. Belisarius and his commanders seem to have arrived in Africa with very little knowledge of its society, and were easily harnessed for what was misleadingly presented to them as a straightforward struggle between civilization and the encroaching barbarian. In fact what they were faced with was a conflict within African society for control of resources, primarily land. Antalas, Koutzinas, and Iaudas found themselves in an uncomfortably liminal position, needing to preserve their position as tribal leaders while at the same time avoid being portrayed by their enemies as barbarians deserving to be expelled from Roman territory.[76]

What evolved in Africa was very similar to what happened in the East, namely a periodically unstable modus vivendi, the raw realities of which can be illustrated through the career of Koutzinas.[77] The Romanised chief of a tribe in Byzacena, he initially came to terms with Belisarius in 533, but on the discovery that this was not going to protect his lands he revolted in the following year. Defeated, Koutzinas took refuge in Numidia but eventually returned to Byzacena as an imperial ally, with the title of magister (presumably magister militum), and he played an important role in John Troglita's victory of 548. In the following years he is described by Malalas as "exarch of his people.., ruling the people of the Moors", and he is said to receive a regular subsidy in gold.[78] Clearly like al-Harith or al-Mundhir, Koutzinas had been built up by the Romans as in effect their chief phylarch. But also like the Jafnids, he was to discover how fragile the position was. In 563, for unknown reasons, the Roman authorities in Africa turned on Koutzinas and had him assassinated.[79] As in the east following al-Mundhir's exile, there was a period of instability and violence until the modus vivendi was eventually reestablished with new beneficiaries.

Comparing Rome's two desert frontiers and the experience of the Jafnids to that of Koutzinas has the effect of making the Jafnids appear much less remarkable. The Roman

[74]Martindale 1992: 1060-61.
[75]Modéran 2003: 37-40, 58-9, 63-5, 417-18.
[76]Modéran 2003: 309, 566–90.
[77]Modéran 2003: 335-50, 665-6.
[78]John Malalas XVIII.145.
[79]Modéran 2003: 665-6.

treatment of al-Mundhir or Koutzinas is recognisably part of a long-standing pattern of client management that can be traced back for centuries. The fall of both clients needs no special explanation. As Peter Heather has documented for the fourth century, Roman practice seems to have worked on the assumption that barbarian clients needed to be reminded at least once a generation of the menace of imperial power.[80] The empire overcame the tyrannies of distance and the ordinary shortages of men and money by playing off barbarian groups against each other, exploiting their rulers' need for Roman subsidies and legitimation, and never willingly allowing any client to become too established or secure. In many ways it was a very cost effective system, and what happened to either Koutzinas or the Jafnids could be cited as a text book example.

But the comparison also and at the same time has the opposite effect of emphasising how the experience of the Moors and Jafnids, taken together, was rather peculiar. Historians have for a long time tended to interpret their failure to be integrated into the Roman state as simply a natural concomitant of their peculiarly irreconcilable ethnic identities. Such a view ignores the experience of the Armenians or Isaurians who to a large extent were able to keep their equally distinctive ethnic group identities while still being admitted to the highest levels of the Roman state. For the Moors, Modéran has shown that any idea of an irreducible Berber identity or the eternal Jugurtha, ever resistant to assimilation by Rome, is a myth.[81] Everything we know about the Jafnids as church building ecclesiastical patrons suggests the same point could be made for them too. I have already suggested that the key factor in the Jafnid's case was actually their position as rivals in an important zone of aristocratic land purchase and investment. That the same factor seems to be at work with the Moors in Byzacena and Numidia reinforces my confidence in this view. The common experience peculiar to the Jafnids and Moors was not some irreducible ethnic resistance to Rome, but their presence in two zones enjoying the late antique economic boom where they were viewed as dangerous competitors.[82] The desert margins they occupied were both the focus of aristocratic investment in a way that Armenia and Isauria were not, let alone the homelands of the Huns, Goths, and Heruls. In a recent paper Elizabeth Fentress made a case for putting

[80]Heather 2001.
[81]Modéran 2003: 313-14.
[82]Modéran 2003: 309.

economics at the heart of our interpretations of Romanization in Africa.[83] Taking the African approach to Jafnid history suggests the economic turn might be effective here too.

Let me draw a final inference from the comparison with Africa. Modéran makes a strong case that the Moors of Byzacena and Numidia need to be understood in the context of Roman provincial history, its economy, culture, and political tensions. The Moors of Tripolitania or Libya were a totally different culture and society. The two groups had next to nothing in common. The intervention of the Laguatan in the politics of the provincial Moors was no more than an occasional alien intrusion. I have said already that it seems to me very unlikely that we are ever going to discover much about the Jafnids' relationship with pre-Islamic Arabia. But with Modéran's interpretation of African history in mind perhaps this does not matter so much. Perhaps the Jafnids had no more to do with the tribes of Arabia than did the provincial Moors with the Laguatan.

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