

ANCIENT ARABIC HISTORY

Devin J Stewart, Ph.D.

Pre-Islamic Arabs.

Reading: Hitti, *History of the Arabs*, pp. 1- 111; Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*.

Censored Pagan Legacy. In Arabic, a rainbow is *qaws quzah* "the bow of Quzah," a reference to the pre-Islamic thunder-god, Quzah, and a genius is *`abqari*, which derives from the Valley of `Abqar, an area in Central Arabia famed as a favorite haunt of genies, the muses of pre-Islamic poetry. Few modern Arabs, however, recognize these as relics of pagan beliefs, something that points to a particular historical problem regarding the pre-Islamic history of Arabs. Because Islam arose in opposition to the pagan traditions of the Arabs, they are regularly denounced in Islamic literature and, unlike the pagan Greeks and Romans in Christian, European culture, they were not recuperated and accorded exalted standing in Islamic culture. The result is that many aspects of pre-Islamic Arab history, culture, and especially religious traditions were regularly suppressed during the Islamic period.

Arabia in Ancient History. Although it is often supposed that the Arabian Peninsula has been home only to nomadic tribes since time immemorial, the truth is that it and its geographical extension, the Syrian Desert, which reaches far into northern Syria and Iraq, covering the entire region between the Euphrates River and the eastern borders of what is now Israel, Lebanon, and Syria, have been the site of numerous civilizations, many of which controlled vast areas and far-reaching trade networks, supported complex societies, and built impressive temples, palaces, and other monuments. One of the main things that enabled the Arabs to gain long-lasting power and influence in the region was their effectiveness as long-distance traders. The domestication of the camel enabled them both to survive in relatively harsh environments and to travel and transport goods great distances over land. Combined with the relative difficulty of maritime transport, particularly in the Red Sea, this gave them a near-monopoly on trade in certain commodities such as the aromatics of South Arabia. For convenience, one may divide the area into three main regions: East Arabia, South Arabia, and North and Central Arabia.

East Arabia. The region from which the historical and archaeological record provides the oldest material is East Arabia. Records from nearby Mesopotamia provides information about regions of the Persian Gulf, termed Dilmun and Magan, which were stops along an important maritime trade route to Meluhha, a region further afield and probably located in what is now the Indus River valley. Dilmun was apparently located in Bahrain and the adjacent region of what is now the Saudi-Arabian coast. It appears in the sources as a major trade depot already in the third millennium B.C. One of the main items traded there was copper from mines in Magan, present-day Oman. Dilmun continued to be named in the sources of the second and first millennia B.C. The neo-Babylonians gained influence in the region in the sixth century B.C.E. In the time of Alexander the Great, it was called Tylos, and later, the Greeks referred to a town called Gerrha in northeast Arabia that had apparently taken over the lead as the main center of trade in the region.

South Arabia. Archaeology reveals important civilizations in South Arabia from the late second millennium on, including Yemen and the Hadramawt to the east. There were four main ancient groups: the Sabaeans, with their main center in Ma'rib, the Qatabanians at

Timna, the Minaeans at Qarnaw on the Red Sea coast, and the Hadramites to the west. The income of the region came from long-distance trade of luxury items from India and Africa that the locals transported to Egypt and Syria, agriculture, primarily by terraced farming, and production and trade of incense and perfume from the aromatic sap of local plants, the famous frankincense and myrrh of the Ancient Near East. The longest lasting of these civilizations was the Sabaean, the capital of which, Ma'rib, was continuously occupied from ca. 1200 B.C.E. until ca. 275 C.E. This civilization appears in the Hebrew Bible in the person of the Queen of Sheba. Described as the ruler of a prosperous kingdom, she is supposed to have traveled to meet King Solomon (970-931 B.C.E.), asking him questions about his religion and bringing as gifts spices, precious stones, and 120 talents of gold (II Chronicles 9:1-9 and I Kings 10:1-10).

The Himyarites, Judaism, and Christianity. In the fourth century C.E. the Himyarites were able to gain control of all of Yemen and the Hadramawt and to extend their influence into surrounding regions. The Kindah tribe of central Arabia became their vassals and, assuming the title of King of the Arabs, controlled central and northern Arabia. It is not entirely clear from the available sources, but the Himyarites adhered to a monotheistic faith and termed their god al-Rahman "the Beneficent One"; this may mean that they had adopted Judaism. It is clear that the last Himyarite ruler Yusuf Dhu Nuwas (517-25 C.E.) had adopted Judaism, and persecuted Christians in his realm in retaliation, he reports, for mistreatment of the Jews by Christian powers. He is responsible for the 523 C.E. massacre of Christians in the town of Najran, north of Yemen, perhaps the event connected with "the People of the Ditch" referred to in the Qur'an (Q 85). In reaction to Dhu Nuwas' actions, the negus Kaleb of the Aksumite Kingdom of Ethiopia (ca. 100-940 C.E.) sent forces to invade and conquer Yemen, building a Cathedral in Sanaa. After an attempted Yemeni rebellion, a second Ethiopian commander, Abraha, was sent to subjugate the Yemenis, and he may have led the expedition against Mecca described in *Surat al-Fil* (The Elephant, Q 105). The warrior Sayf ibn Dhi Yazan from southern Yemen rebelled against the Ethiopians and ousted their forces ca. 570 C.E., exploits that became the material for a popular epic tale in later centuries. Interestingly, the earliest extant biography of the Prophet, the *Sirah* of Ibn Hisham, connects the rise of the Prophet Muhammad with the ousting of the Ethiopians from Yemen.

North and Central Arabia. This region also witnessed the rise of a number of important ancient states, and sources record their presence from early in the first millennium. The region they inhabited had much scarcer water and limited access to ports for trade with outside regions. They were more nomadic and often dismissed by outsiders as mere raiders. Nevertheless, they established significant towns and cities and gained wealth from the trade in South Arabian aromatics. The Midianites of the Bible, among whom Moses took refuge when he fled from Egypt, were in the northwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula. The Bible mentions King Solomon's receipt of tribute from "all the Arab kings" (ca. 970-931). In an 853 B.C.E. inscription, the Assyrian ruler Shalmaneser III refers to Gindibu, a king of the Arab lands. Tiglath-Pileser III (744-727) boasts of defeating Shamsi, queen of the Arabs and Zabibe, another queen of the Arabs ca. 738 B.C.E. Sargon II (721-705 B.C.E.) appointed a certain Idibi'ilu the Arab as guard of the border regions. The Babylonian ruler Nabonidus famously fled Babylonia and lived in exile ca. 552-543 B.C.E. in North Arabian towns, though it is not known why he did this. The Nabataean state, with its impressive capital at Petra in Jordan, flourished from the fourth century B.C.E. until it was annexed by Rome in 106 C.E. Palmyra (Tadmur) in eastern Syria was annexed by Rome in 20 C.E.; they became Roman vassals who fended off the Romans' mortal enemies, the Parthians,

with great success. Their queen Zenobia (267-272 C.E.) gained fame for leading a short-lived revolt against the Romans. There were other significant states besides these, such as Thamud and the Lihyanites in northwestern Arabia. In the centuries before the rise of Islam, the two superpowers, the Byzantines and the Sassanians (c. 240-652), had adopted the old strategy of using one Arab tribe to defend the border regions from attack and to control the more nomadic tribes who lived further into the desert. The Byzantines' vassals were the Ghassanids or Jafnids, who had their capital at Busra, south of Damascus, and the Sassanians' vassals were the Lakhmids or Nasrids, who had their capital at al-Hirah in southern Iraq. The members of both tribes had adopted Christianity.

Arab Tribes. The Arabs were traditionally organized into tribes, and this presumably goes back to remote antiquity and survives to this day in many parts of the Arab world. Many tribes took an animal as their totem or emblem and became known as the Banu Asad (Sons of Lion or the Lion Tribe), the Banu Kalb (Sons of Dog or the Dog Tribe), Quraysh (Little Shark), and so on, while others took the given name of an ancestor who supposedly originated the tribe. Tribal organization is more flexible than many realize: new members can be adopted by the tribe or become attached to it as clients. Genealogies may be altered or created, and ancestors invented in order to serve contemporary political interests such as cementing an alliance. Before the advent of Islam, the Arab tribes were divided into two great federations that claimed descent from two ancient brothers, `Adnan and Qahtan: the Northern Arabs claimed descent from `Adnan, and the Southern Arabs claimed descent from Qahtan. Because of many migrations, the northern and southern designations no longer corresponded to the geographical location of the two groups. The *Sirah* (Life) of the Prophet Muhammad presents his genealogy in such a way as to combine descent from `Adnan (since Quraysh, the Prophet's tribe, belonged to the Northern Arabs) with descent from Ishmael, thus connecting him both with the Arabs' primordial ancestors and with the prophetic line of Abraham.

Questions

When and why do Arabs first appear in historical documents?

What are the main pre-Islamic Arab dynasties? How do we know about them? What do we know about their religion?

How and why were Arabs central to global politics and trade?

Describe the religious situation in pre-Islamic Yemen.

What was Petra?

What kinds of Arab Christianity existed in the Near East prior to the rise of Islam?

What role did the Arab Christians play vis-à-vis the Sassanian and Byzantine rivalry? Who were the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids?

Further Reading

Brown, Peter. *The World of Late Antiquity, AD 150-750*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1989.

Bulliet, Richard W. *The Camel and the Wheel*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1990.