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Early Muslims, Pre-Islamic Arabia, and "Pagans"

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Introduction and the issue of sources

Writing about the history or religious map of Arabia in the centuries preceding the birth of Islam is not a simple task. This is especially true for the Ḥijāz, the region in western Arabian Peninsula which the career of the Prophet Muḥammad (ca. 570–632 CE) is connected with. The reason for this is the paucity of evidence and the fact that, in many cases, the sources are much later than the events they depict. However, scholarly studies of recent years have furthered the field very much and the benefit of a holistic approach, which takes into account all source types, has been understood. We are starting to get a picture of Arabia that is full of life, phenomena, religious ideas, and historical events and that is not isolated from the world of late antiquity but is, instead, an intrinsic part of it (Robinson 2010: 7–11). The main powers in and around Arabia were the Byzantine Empire, Sasanian Persia, the kingdom of Axum in Ethiopia, and the kingdom of Ḥimyar in Yemen, all of which wielded influence at times on different parts of Arabia. The main religious currents in Arabia were forms of Christianity (Triningham 1979; Shahîd 1989: 148–229), Judaism (Newby 1988), polytheism (Fahd 1968; Peters 1999) and, to a much lesser degree, Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism). This chapter deals with Arabia of the fourth–sixth centuries especially (for the earlier history of Arabia and Arabians, see, e.g., Bulliet 1975, Bowersock 1983, Eph'al 1984, Shahîd 1984b, Ball 2000, Hoyland 2001, Young 2001, Retsö 2003).

The Arab identity forms a vexing issue that scholars continue to argue about; no consensus has emerged as of yet. In the primary sources, there are only very few instances of someone claiming to be an Arab in the pre-Islamic era: rather, it is a term utilized from the outside. After the Roman conquest of the Province of Arabia in 106 CE, it seems that the appellation "Arabs" was used for all inhabitants of the Province regardless of their ethnic identity, which further muddies the waters (Hoyland 2009: 392–393). As argued by Peter Webb in another chapter of this book,[2] the real ethnogenesis of the Arabs should probably be placed in the Islamic period (cf. Hoyland 2001: 229–247; Hoyland 2007; Macdonald 2009a and 2009b). Averil Cameron (2012: 179) notes: "The difficulty remains of matching modern notions of 'Arab', 'Syrian', 'Semitic' and other such terms, which are still entangled in a mesh of confusion and even prejudice, with the actual situation in our period." Because of this, this chapter refers to the inhabitants of Arabia as

[1] I have greatly benefitted from discussions with Nathaniel Miller about pre-Islamic Arabia. I am grateful to him as well as to Prof. Jaakko Hämeen-Anttila who read and commented on an earlier draft of this chapter.

[2] To the editor: Peter is writing a chapter in this book, correct? - IL

"Arabians," sometimes with the qualifying attributes "North" or "South." The word "Arab(s)" is only used when it appears in the sources.

Before proceeding any further, we have to discuss the issue of sources. The sources for pre-Islamic Arabia fall into three categories:

1) Archaeological remains: Excavations in Arabia have not been as numerous as one would hope but important archaeological work and field surveys have been carried out around the Peninsula and their results published (see, e.g., Potts 1990–1991; Hoyland 2001: 167–197; Finster 2009; Genequand 2015). However, there have been no archaeological excavations in or in the immediate vicinity of Mecca and Medina.

2) Documentary sources, in particular epigraphy: There are tens of thousands published inscriptions written in Ancient North Arabian (ANA) and Ancient South Arabian (ASA) scripts and languages (Macdonald 2000). Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions are also very significant, especially the ones that are written in the late (transitional) variety of the script that was still used in the fifth century CE and from which the Arabic script is derived (Nehmé 2010). Old Arabic inscriptions, on the other hand, are fewer in number (Macdonald 2008; Al-Jallad 2014). ANA and ASA inscriptions are very interesting because of their references to pre-Islamic deities but the dating of the ANA inscriptions in particular is problematic. The received opinion is that the writing of ANA inscriptions die out by the fourth century CE, but there is no definitive evidence to that effect (on the question of dating, see Al-Jallad, forthcoming).[3] In any case, almost all of the ANA inscriptions are undated by their writers and there are currently no tools for the researcher to endeavor to put forth dates. Thus the usability of this corpus for understanding the nascent Islam is diminished until further proof of their dating emerges. The ASA inscriptions are often dated or datable and continued to be written at least until the sixth century CE (Nebes & Stein 2008: 145), but they hail from Yemen, which is culturally different from the northern parts of Arabia where Islam began (Robin 2001). ASA survives not only as rock inscriptions but also on wooden sticks written in a minuscule script (Ryckmans & Müller & Abdallah 1994). Many more, perhaps tens of thousands, Arabian inscriptions still remain undiscovered and unpublished.

3) Literary sources: The Arabic and non-Arabic (especially Greek and Syriac) literary corpus is one that is most often used by historians to trace the events and religious phenomena of pre-Islamic Arabia. Islamicists have in the past relied almost solely on the Islamic-era Arabic literary evidence when they explore the pre-Islamic background of the Ḥijāz and the Prophet Muḥammad (e.g., Lecker 2005). It is, however, often tendentious and centuries later than the events: the first specimens of Arabic

[3] There are a couple of indications that some ANA inscriptions could be contemporaneous with Islam. See, e.g., the Safaitic inscription CIS 4448 in Al-Jallad 2015: 242, which is dated according to s[1]nt *ḥ*rb h-m*ḏ*y *ʾ*l rm b- b*ṣ*r[y], "the year the Persians waged war against the people of Rome at Bostra." The inscription could refer to the Sasanian-Byzantine wars of the early seventh century CE.

historiographical and other literary texts hail from around the year 800 CE (on the development of Arabic historiography, see Donner 1998). Material remains show that many pieces of information contained in Arabic literary evidence are inaccurate; on the other hand, they ascertain other details. Arabic texts such as Ibn al-Kalbī's Kit*ā*b al-A*ṣ*n*ā*m clearly have some authentic material about the religious beliefs of pre-Islamic Arabia but separating the wheat from the chaff is difficult. To quote Robert Hoyland (2009: 389): "[It] must be borne in mind that the Arabic reports are not plain historical narratives, but rather of an epic and legendary nature, full of seductions, ambushes, eloquent speeches and heroic battles."

Nevertheless, the Islamic-era Arabic texts can be studied from another point of view: namely, the narrative and Weltanschauung that they offer in which the pre-Islamic j*ā*hiliyya, "Age of Ignorance," is seen as a complete opposite to the time of Islam (Drory 1996; Rippin 2012: 7–17). When studying "how it really was," we must, however, give precedence to the material remains where they exist, and use literary sources with a critical eye. More research is needed on the question of transmission of pre-Islamic information to the later Arabic literary sources (for some notes, see Hoyland 2009: 390–391). Muslim authors who write on pre-Islamic Arabia sometimes refer to written sources that they had at their disposal. For example, al-Hamdānī (Iklīl: I, 118–119, 131), an expert on South Arabian matters, refers to zab*ū*rs and sijills, some kind of written books and records that he used, but the existence or character of these is unclear. Furthermore, the Middle Persian Khwad*ā*y-n*ā*mag, "Book of Kings" literature, different specimens of which were translated into Arabic (Hämeen-Anttila 2013), might have included some information on North and South Arabia. However, it might be the case that the reports on Arabia were added during the translation process and thus postdate Islam.

In connection with the Arabic sources one must also mention the originally oral Arabic poetry that is attributed to the pre-Islamic era even if it was collected in the first centuries of Islam. Some earlier scholars (Margoliouth 1925; Ḥusayn 1926) dismissed the whole of this corpus of poetry as a forgery but a case can be made that the formal features of these poems (meter, rhyme) guaranteed that they were transmitted in a way that was more or less faithful to their original form(s) (see also Zwettler 1978). Most modern scholars are of the opinion that, if genuine, the pre-Islamic poetry stems from the fifth–sixth century CE, at the earliest. Study that compares this corpus to the epigraphic record, for example, is still in its infancy.

Languages of pre-Islamic Arabia

To show how at loss the Islamic-era Arabic literary evidence can sometimes be, one needs only to consider the linguistic situation of pre-Islamic Arabia (on which see Macdonald 2000 and Al-Jallad 2015: 1–25). The Muslim authors did not have an understanding of the variety of languages in the pre-Islamic era, claiming that most of the inhabitants of Arabia were Arabic-speaking (Rabin 1951), whereas in historical reality Arabia was home to speakers and writers of forms of North Arabian (including but not restricted to Arabic), South Arabian, Aramaic (Nabataean, Syriac) and, to lesser extent, Hebrew, Ge'ez, Persian, Greek, and Latin.

In the Islamic tradition, not only Arabians but also major characters of the monotheist tradition such as Ismail speak Arabic (al-Masʿūdī, Murūj: II, 162). Furthermore, later Arabic writers had little grasp that the South Arabians did not see themselves as and could not be called Arabs in the pre-Islamic era. The Muslim authors see Yemen as the original home of the Arabs and Arabic language – an idea of which we do not have much evidence and that is most likely incorrect.

To this is connected another myth, namely that the Arab tribes are divided to two section: al-ʿarab al-ʿāriba, "True Arabic-speaking Arabs," and al-ʿarab al-mustaʿriba, "Arabized Arabs." The ʿarab al-ʿāriba are deemed to be the Southern tribes and the ʿarab al-mustaʿriba Northern. But this is incorrect insofar that the Arabic language actually spread from the north to the south in the course of late antiquity, and not the other way around. The Islamic tradition pushes the importance of Yemen even further, for example claiming that the eponym of the Greeks, Yūnān, came from Yemen (al-Masʿūdī, Murūj: II, 5–6). All of this probably reflects Islamic-era, post-conquest tendency of Yemenite Muslims to emphasize their significance but this needs further research (for some notes see Bashear 1989).

In the Muslim sources, the development and rise of the Arabic script is said to have happened in the Ḥijāz, al-Anbār, or al-Ḥīra (e.g., al-Hamdānī, Iklīl: I, 77–79). The suggestion of al-Ḥīra is interesting, since it was the capital of the Lakhmids (see below) and, indeed, the first text that is written completely in Arabic is the Namara inscription dated to 328 CE; it is a funerary text for Mar' al-Qays ibn ʿAmr, who is usually identified with a Lakhmid king of that name (Bellamy 1985). The script is a late variant of Nabataean, of which the Arabic script developed during the following centuries (Gruendler 1993). However, the Namara inscription is the only testimony for the Lakhmids' ostensible written use of Arabic.

As for the Ḥijāz, there is actually more evidence that the Arabic script evolved there. Based on epigraphy, the rise of the Arabic script seems to be more directly related with the longevity of Nabataean Aramaic that was, according to new finds (Nehmé 2010), used in the western parts of the peninsula until the fifth century. The script of these inscriptions is Nabataean and the language is often a mixture of Aramaic and Arabic. In 2014, Frédéric Imbert and a French-Saudi team found a new Nabataean Aramaic–Arabic inscription dated 469–470 CE as south as Najrān, which sparked scholarly and media interest.[4] The Old Arabic inscriptions of the sixth century (Zebed, Jabal Usays, Harran; see Macdonald 2008) seem to be continuation of this epigraphic habit of late Nabataean inscriptions, even if they have been found to the north of the Ḥijāz, in Syria. Writing on perishable material, if it existed, has not been preserved.

[4] See http://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/fr/dossiers-pays/arabie-saoudite/la-france-et-l-arabie-saoudite/evenements-4400/article/actualite-du-reseau-culturel-114654 ; the inscription has not been published.

Tribal groups

There is a rather widespread misconception among the general audience that all or most of the inhabitants of Arabia, and especially the Ḥijāz, were nomadic (often called, anachronistically, Bedouin) around the lifetime of the Prophet Muḥammad, that is, the sixth and seventh centuries CE (on nomadism in Arabia, see, e.g., Bulliet 1980; Donner 1981: 16–20; Hoyland 2001: 89–102; W. Lancaster & F. Lancaster 2004). But this is incorrect. As Fred Donner (1981: 11) reminds us about the inhabitants of Arabia: "it is unlikely that nomadic peoples have ever formed more than a small fraction of its population… Most Arabians, then, are, and have been, settled people." It has to be remembered that according to the traditional narrative, Muḥammad himself was a town-dweller, not a nomad of the desert.

Inhabitants of Arabia were divided along tribal lines that could be, if need be, flexible and negotiable. There is sizeable secondary literature on pre-Islamic Arabian tribal groups (e.g., Kister 1965 on Tamīm; Donner 1980 on Bakr ibn Wāʾil; Shahîd 1984a: 366–483 on Tanūkh; Landau-Tasseron 1985 on Asad; Lecker 1989 on Sulaym; Lecker 1994 on Kinda; Rihan 2014 on ʿĀmila). It can be assumed that the Arabic literary evidence did transmit some historically valid knowledge of the tribes on the eve of Islam. In another section below, the Banū Ghassān, Ṣāliḥ, and Lakhm will be discussed; of these, the Arabic literature has valuable material. But when it comes to earlier times, it probably does not have much authentic information, expect perhaps genealogies, which have proven to be very accurate.

The following two are extreme examples of the unreliability of Arabic literature: the extinct tribes, Thamūd and ʿĀd. They are treated here to remind the students of pre-Islamic Arabia that especially the sacred history is often of doubtful reliability. A critical examination of the Islamic sources (the Qurʾān and the later tradition) shows that Muslims did not have any information about the historical Thamūd (on which see Macdonald 1995). The Thamūd narrative in the Islamic source is, quite simply, a myth (Stetkevych 1996). It tells the story of the Thamūd that live in al-Ḥijr (ancient Egra/Ḥgrʾ, modern Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ), a city carved out of rock (Q. 11:61–68; 15:80–84; 41:13–17; al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh: I, 244–252). A prophet, called simply Ṣāliḥ, "Pious," emerges from among them, but the Thamūd disbelieve and God's punishment wipes them all out. But in historical reality, al-Ḥijr was a Nabataean city (see e.g. Nehmé 2005). Writing of Nabataean Aramaic in al-Ḥijr survived the fall of the Nabataean state in 106 well into the fourth century CE. There is no evidence whatsoever that Thamūd lived there before or after the Nabataeans. It should be reminded, at this junction, that the varieties of Ancient North Arabian inscriptions called "Thamudic" do not have anything at all to do with the tribe Thamūd; "Thamudic" is merely a modern and unfortunate misnomer. The Islamic sources are correct, though, in that the Thamūd seems to have been an extinct tribe before Islam. The last mention of them is in the fifth-century CE Byzantine military document Notitia Dignitatum (Shahîd 2000: 436a). Al-Ḥijr, a city that was probably more or less abandoned by the lifetime of

Muḥammad, became connected in the minds of the people with a lost tribe, the Thamūd. But for the study of the historical Thamūd, the Islamic sources are of little or no value.

Another extinct tribe, ʿĀd, is mentioned in connection with the Thamūd in the Qurʾān (e.g, 7:73–4). In one passage (89:6–7), the Qurʾān states: "Have you not seen how your Lord dealt with the ʿĀd of Iram of pillars?" (iram dh*ā*t al-ʿim*ā*d). The Arabic exegetical tradition speculates extensively what this "Iram of pillars" might have been. Usually it is stated that it was either a city, identified with Damascus, the ancient Aram, or a (non-attested) place of that name in Yemen, or a tribe somehow related with the ʿĀd. But a case can be made that the Qurʾānic Iram is nothing else but the ancient Nabataean town of Iram, nowadays known as Wādī Ram, in Jordan (Healey 2001: 56). Iram (ʾrm) as a toponym is securely attested in the inscriptions from the area (Savignac 1933). For example, one Bar ʿAliyyū, writing on Jabal Ram, says that he wrote the inscription with his own hand in ʾrm (Hoyland 2010a: 39). Indeed, Jabal Ram is still called Iram in the Islamic times (Yāqūt, Muʿjam: I, 154–155). But the epigraphic evidence can be pushed even further, since a Hismaic inscription found on a stone from the temple of Lāt in Iram/Wādī Ram is written "by Ġṯ son of ʾSlh son of Ṯkm – and he built the temple of Lāt (w-bny bt lt) – of the tribe ʿd" (Farès-Drappeau 1996: 276–277).[5] The Hismaic ʿd can be interpreted as the Arabic ʿĀd (Hismaic does not write vowels, even long ones), which would then place the ʿĀd in the ancient Iram. The pillars (al-ʿim*ā*d) mentioned in the Qurʾān could then be understood as the buildings or, perhaps more plausibly, as the rock formations of Iram.



Fig. 1: A rock formation from W*ā*dī Ram named, in modern times, as the Seven Pillars of Wisdom. Photograph by "Tomobe03," https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Seven_Pillars_2008_e5.jpg#/media/File:Seven_Pillars_2008_e5.jpg

[5] I thank Yusuf Gürsey for this reference.

The Ḥijāz and polytheism

In the Islamic-era Arabic narratives, the pre-Islamic history of Mecca is linked with the sacred history and, sometimes, the history of Persian Empire. For example Sāsān, the eponym of the Sasanids, is depicted as going to Kaʿba for a pilgrimage (al-Masʿūdī, Murūj: I, 283). The building of Kaʿba is credited to Abraham, as is well known. But this is of course nothing but pious fiction. This section discusses political events and religious beliefs in the Ḥijāz before Muḥammad based on documentary evidence. Epigraphy receives much space here, because many of the inscriptions are rather new finds and somewhat unknown to students of pre- and early Islamic history.

Mecca, the town were Muḥammad is said to have been born, was not suited for agriculture (Donner 1981: 15): it seems to have been an insignificant town in pre-Islamic times and it is not referred to by any source before the coming of Islam (identifying Ptolemy's Macoraba with Mecca is not credible). The first source to mention it is the Qurʾān (48:84; furthermore, in 3:96 a place called Bakka, often identified with Mecca, appears). It needs to be stressed that the trans-Arabian trade routes did not pass through it (Crone 1987; cf. Bukharin 2009). Mecca seems to have been a minor town with a temple, the Kaʿba, where some Arabians made the pilgrimage to. Even though we do not have pre-Islamic references to Mecca or Kaʿba, we do have ample evidence of sacred enclaves (in Arabic, *ḥ*aram, ma*ḥ*ram, or *ḥ*im*ā*), where violence was prohibited, in the Peninsula. These are attested in ASA and Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions as well as literary evidence (Nehmé 1998; Hoyland 2001: 157–162). The sanctuary usually employed a priest of some kind and pilgrimage to the site could be done. From Yemen, we have epigraphic record that describes annual pilgrimages to different sanctuaries; during the pilgrimage and festival time, shedding blood and sexual relations were often forbidden (Hoyland 2001: 161). In the Arabic literature, we also have references to other kaʿbas (cubic religious buildings) of the Peninsula (Finster 2009: 75–76, 85–86).

More significant than Mecca in antiquity was the other town which Muḥammad's life is linked with, Medina, known before Islam as Yathrib. Yathrib is widely attested in both pre-Islamic epigraphy and literature and was a stop along the trade route. Whereas Mecca seems to have been polytheist in the main, monotheism (particularly Judaism) was rather strongly represented in Yathrib (Lecker 1995). Jews are attested in epigraphy also elsewhere in the Ḥijāz and Northern Arabia (Hoyland 2011). However, we currently have very little tangible evidence for Christians in or around Mecca and Medina (Munt 2015: 252).

The religious environment of the Ḥijāz around the time of Muḥammad seems to be one where older polytheism was mixed with newer strands of monotheism (Christianity and Judaism): "The Qurʾān crystallized in an environment of monotheistic debate, not in a pagan environment" (Donner 2011: 29). In fact, some scholars (Hawting 1999, Crone 2010), have gone as far as to claim that the Qurʾānic mushrik*ū*n, usually translated as "polytheists," were actually some sort of monotheists (or quasi-monotheists). This is analogous to what the late antique scholars of the Greco-Roman world have noticed, namely, that there

was a general tendency toward "pagan monotheism" (Athanassiadi & Frede 1999). The Qurʾān (29:65), for example, says that "When they go on board a ship, they call on God (all*ā*h), in sincere devotion to Him alone, but once He has delivered them safely back to land, they ascribe partners." This could indicate that even the polytheists viewed Allāh as some sort of High God (Watt 1971). But there is no evidence outside the Qurʾān for this (Bowersock 2013: 120–133). It must be noted that the Qurʾān ascribes often in a polemic vein opinions and beliefs to the enemies of the Believers that they probably did not manifest. Discussing the characterization of Christianity in the Qurʾān, Sidney Griffith (2011: 311) remarks: "the Qurʾān does not simply report or repeat what Christians say; it reproves what they say, corrects it, or caricatures it." This serves as "a polemically inspired caricature, the purpose of which is to highlight in Islamic terms the absurdity, and therefore the wrongness, of the Christian belief" (idem.). In attributing the mushrik*ū*n some monotheist tendencies, the Qurʾān is probably doing the same: it claims that even the polytheists acknowledge that Allāh is the only and real God when their lives are in peril but when the danger is over they resort to their false gods again. In fact, it is rather widely attested that polytheism was still practiced in parts of Arabia, and we do not seem to have any reason to doubt that the Kaʿba of Mecca was a place where a pagan god, perhaps Hubal and possibly represented by the black stone, was worshipped (e.g., al-Azraqī, Akhb*ā*r: 31; the deity hblw is attested in a Nabataean inscription from Madāʾin Ṣāliḥ, Healey 1993: 154).

The effect of the Mazdaean (Zoroastrian) religion on the region before and during the life of Muḥammad was less significant than that of Christianity and Judaism, but scholars have suggested some influences. However, it is hard to say whether these influences are real or imagined: the evidence is slight. The Sasanian ruler Kavād I, who reigned in the late fifth and early sixth centuries, is said to have imposed Mazdaism upon the Arabians in Najd and the Ḥijāz (al-Masʿūdī, Mur*ū*j: I, 75; Daryaee 2009: 27) but whether this is a reliable report is hard to judge. In the Qurʾān (2:102), angels called Hārūt and Mārūt appear; the names seem to be influenced by the Mazdaean divine concepts Haurvatat (Middle Persian hordad, lit. "perfection") and Ameretat (Middle Persian amurdad, lit. "immortality") that were among the Amesha Spenta (Rose 2011: 171).

We have ample epigraphic evidence of Arabian polytheistic beliefs and rites in the ANA (especially Safaitic), ASA and Nabataean inscriptions. The problem is that these are (often centuries) earlier than Muḥammad and the Qurʾān, making it unclear whether this corpus is always to useful study the context of early Islam. What is more, the epigraphic evidence stems mostly from the south and north of the Ḥijāz. However, it can be argued that the epigraphic record is nonetheless more valuable than the Islamic-era Arabic literary evidence, which is centuries later than Muḥammad and composed after what was seen as a profound change in the world order: the coming of new religion, Islam, and the conquest of almost all of the known world by its adherents.

The Safaitic inscriptions are especially interesting because they are voluminous (over 30.000 are known so far), rather well-understood, and paint a vibrant picture of the religious beliefs of their writers, the inhabitants of the Syro-Jordanian *ḥ*arra, the basalt stone desert. The inscriptions attest religious rituals, such as sacrificing animals (*ḏ*bḥ)[6] or dedicating (qṣy) an animal in a rock drawing to a deity; the writers also mention going on a pilgrimage (*ḥ*g) (Al-Jallad 2015: 217). Quite a few deities feature, many of which are identifiable with the ones mentioned in the Qurʾān or later Arabic literature as being among the deities that the polytheists worshipped: for example, ʾlh, ʾlt, *ḏ*s²r(y)/ds²r(y), and rḍw/rḍy (Al-Jallad 2015: 210), corresponding to Allāh, Allāt, Dhū al-Sharā, and Ruḍā in Arabic. The inscriptions reveal that the writers sought refuge in the deities when the times were tough:

> By S¹ʿd son of S¹wʾt son of Lmʾ and may Rḍw help him through divine favor, as there is danger here, and may he bless him (AWS 218 in Al-Jallad 2015: 226).[7]

> By {ʾnʿm} and O {Gdʿw*ḏ*}, O Merciful One (h r*ḥ*m) and O One who causes death (h ymyt), and O Rḍw, may the people be established [in this place] (C 4351 in Al-Jallad 2015: 241).

The deities (or attributes) r*ḥ*m and ymyt mentioned in C 4351 are especially interesting and should be compared with the divine attributes mentioned in the Qurʾān.

> By Mlk son of ʾḥwḍ of the lineage of ʿmn and he halted on account of a monitor lizard the year Mk announced (declared war?) for Rome; and he mourned for S¹yd, who was murdered, so, O Lt, may there be vengeance against his murderer; and he mourned for his paternal uncle's captured son, whom Ṭayyiʾ have captured (CSNS 1004 in Al-Jallad 2015: 245).

> By Nẓr son of Ḥfẓ son of S¹wd and, O King of the sky (h mlk h-s¹my), let there be water (KRS 1944 in Al-Jallad 2015: 262).

[6] Animal sacrifices are attested in j*ā*hiliyya poetry and archaeological record, as well. One of the forms of animal sacrifice was that a camel was killed on the death of its owner (Stetkevych 1993: 40; Hoyland 2001: 163–166, 175).
[7] The readings of the Safaitic inscriptions are from Al-Jallad 2015. The translations have been modified if deemed necessary.



Fig. 2: Safaitic inscriptions, among them KRS 1944 (left), quoted above. In the middle of the inscription, there seems to be a drawing of the sun disc which is very fitting since the invocation is addressed to "King of the sky."

Other Safaitic inscriptions speak of more worldly matters, such as:

> By Bṯ and he copulated with Grmh, as he had celebrated the sending of the bride and had been pleased (C 285 in Al-Jallad 2015: 229).

> By Whblh son of ʾḥrb son of Ykn of the lineage of Kkb and he rejoiced at Brkt because there was fresh herbage, and returned from a place of water the year the lineage of ʿwḏ pastured the livestock of the lineage of ʿbd; and he served with his father in a cavalry unit (C 320 in Al-Jallad 2015: 229).

The inscriptions show that the inhabitants of the *ḥ*arra were of habit of naming years according to significant events, especially wars. This is analogous to what we read in Arabic sources, where years such as "the year of the elephant" (*ʿā*m al-fīl) appear. To give a couple of examples from the Safaitic corpus:

> By ʾnʿm son of Qḥs[2] and he raided in the year of the war of Nabataea (C 3690 in Al-Jallad 2015: 240).

> By Kḥs[1]mn son of Gnʾl son of S[2]ʿr son of Gnʾl of the lineage of Kn and adversity was widespread in the year of Caesar and the Persians so, O Lt and Gdḏf, may he be secure; and may he who would efface this writing go blind (HAUI 72 in Al-Jallad 2015: 248).

By Ẓʿn son of Grmʾl son of Ẓʿn son of Bnt son of Ẓʿn son of Ḫ śṯt of the lineage of Kn and he found the writing of Grmʾl, for those who remain despair; and he feared the Romans in the year of the Jews so, O Lt, … protection against misfortune (HAUI 125 in Al-Jallad 2015: 249).

As is already clear from the above examples, the writers of the Safaitic inscriptions often mention the powers in the region: Nabataeans, Romans, and Persians. One could adduce two more inscriptions to this effect, in the latter of which erecting (nṣb) a sacred stone for a deity is mentioned. Sacred stones, representing deities, are widely attested in archaeological, epigraphic and literary evidence (Hoyland 2001: 183–187).

By Tmʾl son of Qṭʿn son of Nʿmn son of Ms¹kʾl son of Bs²mt son of Ṯwr son of Ṭylt son of Rʿd son of Ḫbn son of Qnʾl the Ḥwl-ite and he fled from Rome/Romans (LP 87 in Al-Jallad 2015: 265).

By Nʿmn son of Ḫbyṯ son of Nṣr son of Nʿmn son of Nṣr son of {Grmʾl} son of Kn son of Nʿmn son of Wʿl son of Rbn son of S²ʿr son of Kn son of Ṭḥrt son of Hys¹r son of Bʾs² son of Ḍf and he erected (nṣb) [a sacred stone of] ʾṯʿ the year Caesar sent reinforcements to the province and restored order to the province and the lineage of ʾs¹hm was defeated, for the lineage of Mlk and ʿm the ʿbs²ite and ʾs¹ of the lineage of Frṯ and he/those of the lineage of Yẓr had [all] made war upon them (MISSD 1 in Al-Jallad 2015: 273).



Fig. 3: An unusually long Safaitic inscription MISSD 1, photograph courtesy of Michael Macdonald.

Polytheism features also in the late Nabataean Aramaic inscriptions, meaning Aramaic inscriptions written in transitional Nabataean script and often with heavy influences of Arabic (what follows is based on

Nehmé 2013: 69–73). While we can often only guess the dates of the Safaitic corpus, these inscriptions are rather securely dated to the first–fifth centuries CE on the basis of explicitly mentioned dates and paleography. What is more, the late Nabataean inscriptions all derive from the Ḥijāz and not outside of it. Four deities, all recognizable from the Qurʾān and the later Arabic tradition, occur in them: the Nabataean main god dwšrʾ (Arabic Dhū al-Sharā), ʾlʿzʾ (al-ʿUzzā), ʾlt (Allāt) and mntw/mnwt/mnwtw (Manāt). In addition to these, two inscribers ask to be remembered "in front of all the gods" (mn qdm ʾlhyʾ klhm). Highly interesting is the sole inscriptions that mentions Allāt, since it states dʾ ʾlt dy bnh ʿnmw, "this is [a stone representing] Allāt that ʿNmw built" (on Allāt, see Krone 1992). The inscribers mentioning the different deities ask to be remembered in front of one (dkyr PN mn qdm DN) or that the deity listens to or hears (the prayer of) PN (šmʿt DN l- PN).

Polytheistic rites among North Arabians are also recounted in the pre-Islamic literary evidence, such as the Latin Itinerarium written by the anonymous "Piacenza Pilgrim" probably in the 550s. The author mentions a sacred stone on Mount Sinai:

> And on this mountain, on a part of the mountain, the Saracens have set up their own idol, made of marble white as snow. Here also their priest resides, dressed in a dalmatic and a linen cloak. When the time of their festival arrives with the new moon, before the moon has risen on the day of their feast, the marble begins to change colour; as soon as the moon appears, when they begin to worship, the marble turns black as pitch. When the time of the festival is over, it returns to its original colour. We were totally amazed by this (Piacenza Pilgrim, Travelogue: 38, transl. in Caner 2010: 258).

The point of this section was to show that polytheism of pre-Islamic North Arabia is widely attested in epigraphic record and literature and there does not seem to by much reason to suggest, as Patricia Crone (2010, 2012) has done, that the mushrik*ū*n mentioned in the Qurʾān were monotheist or believers in the same god, Allāh, as the Prophet, even though in some instances the Qurʾān uses the word for people who were not deemed monotheist enough, such as Christians or Jews (e.g., Q. 9:30–31). What is, in contrast, true is that according to the pre-Islamic documentary record Allāh is very rarely attested, which casts in doubt the "High God" theory (at least in so far it was Allāh). Polytheist pantheon and rites in South Arabia differed from those of North Arabia and will be discussed in the next section.

Yemen

Yemen is the only part of the Arabia Peninsula able to sustain dry-farming (Donner 1981: 11–12). Yemen was, before Islam, culturally very different from the more northern parts of the peninsula: the Yemenites spoke and wrote forms of South Arabian whereas the inhabitants of the north spoke forms of North Arabian. The two language bundles are part of the Semitic family, but they are not so closely related:

alongside the Ethiopian languages South Arabian forms the South Semitic subdivision, while Ancient North Arabian and Old Arabic are part of Central Semitic (Macdonald 2000). The Yemenites did not view themselves as Arabs before the coming of Islam and neither should the modern scholarship call them that. (To be sure, it was suggested in the introduction to this chapter that the term "Arab" could also be inapplicable to North Arabians in pre-Islamic times.) What is more, the Yemenites formed political units and states much earlier than they appear in the North. Their income was secured because Yemen produced frankincense and myrrh, valuable products in antiquity that were transported to, for instance, Rome (for the spice and incense trade in and from Arabia, see, e.g., Hourani 1979: 3–50; Crone 1987; Young 2001). The trans-Arabian trade is ultimately tied to the domestication and exploitation of the camel as a pack animal (Bulliet 1975).

The Yemenite kingdom of Ḥimyar is characterized by its close, and sometimes hostile, relationship with the kingdom of Axum (Ethiopia) that had converted to Christianity by the 340s (Bowersock 2013: 67). Christianity had also spread to some parts of Yemen, especially Najrān, but, interestingly and because of reasons that we do not have clear grasp of, towards the end of the fourth century, Yemen, or at least its ruling class, adopted Judaism with some peculiar characteristics (Robin 2003; Gajda 2010). Before this, the Yemenites were mainly polytheist, worshipping, among others, ʿAthtar, the sun goddess Shams and the moon god Almaqah (Jamme 1947; Hoyland 2001: 140–141). (The importance of astral deities in North Arabia is a debated question, see Macdonald 2012; interestingly, however, Q. 53:49 calls God "the Lord of Sirius".) The South Arabian deity Wadd is mentioned in the Qurʾān (71:23) along with other, unidentifiable deities, so it seems reasonable to suppose that traditional South Arabian polytheism was practiced until the life of Muḥammad, even though it vanishes completely from the South Arabian inscriptions that are dated between 380 and 560. The new monotheist God is called r*ḥ*mnn in Ancient South Arabian and often described as "Lord of Heaven and Earth" (Nebes 2009). The Qurʾānic name al-Raḥmān is probably related to that. One interesting inscription ends, after mentioning r*ḥ*mnn, with the phrase rb hd b-m*ḥ*md, which is translated as "by the Lord of the Jews, by the Highly Praised" (Ja 1028 in CSAI), even if the similarity to the Prophet Muḥammad's name is probably purely coincidental.

In 518 or thereabouts, the Ethiopian Negus (king) raided Yemen which led to a short Christian occupation (Bowersock 2013: 87–93). But the staunchly Jewish Ḥimyarite king Yūsuf, known in Arabic tradition as Dhū Nuwās, fought against the Christianizing trend and, in 523, went so far as to massacre Christians in Najrān and other places (see, e.g., al-Masʿūdī, Mur*ū*j: I, 74–75; Brock & Harvey 1987: 100–121; Beaucamp & Briquel-Chatonnet & Robin 1999–2000 and 2010). This led to a new Ethiopian attack to Yemen, possibly at the instigation of the Byzantines, in 525 (Bowersock 2013: 96–97). The Ethiopian and Christian presence in Yemen was strengthened and the Ḥimyarite dynasty was supplanted. This led to a situation were also other foreign powers tried to yield influence in Southern Arabia. During Khosrow I (r.

531–579), Sasanian Persia was able to conquer areas in Eastern Arabia, reaching regions in Yemen too (Daryaee 2009: 31).

In the 540s–550s, Yemen was ruled by a king of Ethiopian origins called Abraha. He launched many campaigns to parts of Arabia, celebrating his deeds in inscriptions (Bowersock 2013: 111–118). One expedition, probably the one dated 552, was remembered later in Islamic tradition as "the year of the elephant" (*ʿām al-fīl*), even if there is no evidence that Abraha raided Mecca, as the Arabic literature recounts. The Islamic tradition claims that Muḥammad was born in that year but this does not seem to be anything else than a confluence of two events that were later deemed highly significant (Conrad 1987). Ethiopians were not there to stay, however. By 575, the Persians had conquered the whole of Yemen and expelled the Ethiopian troops.

Ghassānids and Lakhmids

Two North Arabian tribes, the Banū Ghassān and Banū Lakhm rise to important positions as allies and sort of buffer states of the Byzantine Empire and the Sasanian Empire toward the end of the third century CE (Shahîd 2002; Toral-Niehoff 2014; Genequand & Robin 2015). In the scholarly literature, they are sometimes called Jafnids and Naṣrids, respectively, according to their ruling houses. The reason of them being employed in as vassals of the two great empires is given by Hoyland (2009: 380) as follows: "Rome's struggle with a re-energised Iranian Empire led by the Sasanian dynasty (inaugurated in 224 CE) meant that it had an increased need for military manpower and allies. Peripheral people were thus incorporated in the Empire in larger numbers, and consequently they could negotiate with Rome on better terms."

The Ghassānids first appear in two Ancient South Arabian inscriptions dated to ca. 260 and 360 CE (Robin 2015: 111–113). To these can be added a late Nabataean Aramaic inscription found in al-Qaṭīʿa in the Ḥijāz that Robin (2015: 114; his reading and translation require modification as given here)[8] dates to the third–fourth centuries on the basis of paleography. It reads: bl dkyr nšyb *ḥ*rtt br zydmnwtw mlk ʿšn, "Indeed be remembered the relative-in-law of Ḥārithat son of Zydmnwtw, King of Ghassān."

Thereafter, the Ghassānids appear in the epigraphic record and literary evidence. The Jabal Usays inscription, dated 528–9, is written by a person that the Ghassānid king had sent for some sort of military activity: "I am Ruqaym son of Muʿarrif al-Awsī; the king al-Ḥārith [ibn Jabala] sent me to Usays as a guard [? msl*ḥ*h/mtsl*ḥ*h, the interpretation is uncertain] in the year 4x100+20+3 [of the Province = 528–9 CE]" (Larcher 2010, Macdonald 2010). Al-Ḥārith's son al-Mundhir (phylarch of Byzantium 570–581) is remembered in an inscription from Resafa, reading, in Greek, "the fortune of al-Mundhir is victorious" (Cameron 2012: 174). It is important to note that while both the Ghassānids and Lakhmids were Arabic-speaking, they usually resorted to Greek or Syriac in writing.

[8] I thank Nathaniel Miller for this reference.

By the fourth century, Christianity had spread to the Northern parts of Arabia (al-Masʿūdī, Murūj: I, 76, 81; Hoyland 2001: 147–150) as well as some places in the South, such as Najrān. The spread of Christianity can be documented not only from the literary evidence but also from the emergence of crosses in rock graffiti, for example in Kilwa in the north-western Peninsula (Finster 2009: 72). The Ghassānids had also converted and were staunch supporters of Christianity. For instance, the Ghassānid king al-Nuʿmān ibn al-Mundhir (phylarch of the Byzantine Empire 581–602, not to be confused with the Lakhmid king of the same name who ruled around the same time) is characterized in the Greek and Syriac sources "a zealous Christian man" (Hoyland 2010b: 48).

At times, the Byzantines employed other tribes than Ghassānids as their allies and clients. One must mention especially the Ṣāliḥids in this connection (Shahîd 1989: 233–324). One of their kings seem to be attested in a late Nabataean inscription found recently from the Ḥijāz that reads: "Indeed be remembered Pahmū son of ʿUbaydū for good and may he remain safe and sound; in the year 2x100+100+20+20+10 [of the Province = 455 CE] when they introduced ʿAmrū as king" (Nehmé 2009: 49–52). This is an important and rare document that appears to refer to the Ṣāliḥid king ʿAmr ibn Ḍujʿum/Zokomos that reigned in the fifth century and that is mentioned by Greek and Arabic authors (Shahîd 1989: 252–255).

The bilingual (Parthian–Middle Persian) Paikuli inscription dated 293 CE is the first record of the Lakhmids (Toral-Niehoff 2014: 30). There, the Lakhmid king ʿAmr (r. ca. 270–300) is mentioned among the vassals of the Sasanians. For the son of ʿAmr we also have epigraphic evidence: in the Namara funerary inscription of 328 CE, the Lakhmid king Mar' al-Qays ibn ʿAmr is claimed to have been the "King of all Arabs" and that he subdued different Arabian tribes, raiding as far south as Najrān. However, the inscription does not mention the Persians at all; instead it is said that they (the nobles of the subdued tribes?) became phylarchs for the Romans (Bellamy 1985). Hence, it cannot be assumed that the Lakhmids were the submissive clients of the Persians for three centuries but maintained some independence. It is possible that already Mar' al-Qays ibn ʿAmr had converted to Christianity, but be that as it may, it is strongly suggested in Arabic as well as some non-Arabic sources that the Lakhmids and the inhabitants of the area they ruled were Christian at least some time later (Toral-Niehoff 2009).

The Sasanians found a reliable ally in the Lakhmids, who built their capital in al-Ḥīra, near Ctesiphon (on al-Ḥīra, see most recently Toral-Niehoff 2014). According to the Arabic sources, the relationship between the Sasanian ruling family and the Lakhmids was close and often amiable. It is, for instance, said that the Sasanian king Bahrām V Gūr (r. 420–438) was brought up in the Lakhmid court of al-Ḥīra (al-Masʿūdī, Murūj: I, 303; Daryaee 2009: 22–23), but this might be an unreliable report. According to Isabel Toral-Niehoff (2013: 123), "such legendary material should be read as symbolic cultural legends that personalize the Iranian-Arab cultural contact." In the early sixth century, the Lakhmids played an important role in Persian military operations; this is attested also in the non-Arabic literature and is thus more strongly grounded on history (Hoyland 2007: 228–229).

According to the Arabic sources, the strong interaction of North Arabians with the Sasanian Persia goes back to the early years of Shāpūr II's reign (309–379 CE), when North Arabians raided some provinces of the empire. Later, the king avenged and the Arabian tribes of Taghlib, 'Abd al-Qays, Tamīm, Bakr ibn Wā'il and Ḥanāẓila are said to have been forcibly removed and resettled inside the Sasanian Persia (al-Mas'ūdī, Murūj: I, 295; Daryaee 2009: 16–17). The presence of North Arabians in Mesopotamia had of course a long history (Eph'al 1984) but their number probably increased during the Sasanian period.

The last Lakhmid king al-Nu'mān III ibn al-Mundhir was killed by the Sasanians in 602 CE (Hoyland 2001: 30; Dayraee 2009: 33). The Lakhmids were replaced by another Arabian tribe, Ṭayyi', which ruled in al-Ḥīra for nine years. After this, al-Ḥīra was directly ruled by the Persians.

The decades before the Islamic conquests were characterized by the renewal of hostilities between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires in different clashes and wars, the last war occurring in the years 603–630 (on these wars, see Howard-Johnston 1995; Greatrex & Lieu 2002: 182–228; Dignas & Winter 2007; Hoyland 2010b: 45–85; Fisher 2011; Sarris 2011; Cameron 2012: 191–198; Millar 2013). The inaptly named "Endless Peace" treaty of 561 between the empires came to an end when the Byzantine emperor Justin II opened hostilities in the year 572. He also planned a failed attempt at the life of the Ghassānid king al-Mundhir, which led to severing the ties between the Ghassānids and Byzantines. However, al-Mundhir was soon once again on the Byzantine side, fighting with the general Maurice against the Persians. The fighting between the Byzantine and Sasanian sides was indecisive, however, with truces being called and then broken. The Arabian clients of Persians and Byzantines also conducted proxy war against each other (on the importance of the Arabian allies, see Hoyland 2010b: 47–48; Cameron 2012: 193).

However, in the 610s things started to change. During the reign of Khosrow II (590–628), the Persian armies advanced westward, conquering Syria, Egypt, and many cities of Asia Minor. Jerusalem was reduced in 614 and the True Cross taken, alongside the patriarch, to Ctesiphon, the Persian capital. The loss of land, goods, and prestige was a serious blow to the Byzantine Empire.

The Byzantine Empire started to recover and launch counterattacks in the 620s, during the reign of Heraclius (r. 610–641). This did not stop the Persians from threatening Constantinople, the Byzantine capital, in 626. But soon their fortunes turned. Forming an alliance with the Turks, Heraclius attacked Persian lands decisively, which made the Persian king sue for peace in 629. The True Cross was recovered and taken back to Jerusalem in the year 630. The Sasanian Empire fell into disarray, with different factions fighting each other and kings coming to throne just to be unseated by the next (see al-Ṭabarī, Taʾrīkh: I, 1061–1067 for a possible list of kings). No wonder, then, that when the early Muslims started to raid the Near East in the 630s, the resistance from the Byzantines and Persians was not strong enough to stop them.

Conclusions

Today, we understand the religious phenomena of Arabia much better than before. Especially epigraphy has taken great strides, and we are not anymore so dependent on the tendentious Arabic literary sources of the Islamic era. Arabia in general and the Ḥijāz in particular are regions where both polytheistic and monotheistic beliefs and practices are attested on the eve of Islam. Neither polytheism nor monotheism should be downplayed or disregarded even if it must be conceded that we do not as of yet fully understand the interaction or the power relations of the two and of nascent Islam.

Monotheism was quickly advancing in the region but traditional polytheism, with all its variety, still had its supporters. But not for long. An Arabian Prophet called Muḥammad, "Highly Praised," was about to start receiving a new revelation that continued the monotheistic tradition. Islam should be seen being part of the tendency towards monotheism in late antiquity. After a long history of millennia, polytheism in the Near East came to its end with the career of the Arabian Prophet who himself had grown up as a "pagan" worshipping the local gods (Kister 1970) but who proved in the end to be their staunchest opponent.

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