

Arabia before Islam

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Just as trade had been the dominant feature of Arabia in an earlier period so now religion became the leitmotif of the era under discussion. Not that trade lost its importance, but after the fall of the Roman Empire the demand for luxury goods from the east subsided. Also there was not the great quantity of gold available to pay for the imports, and India still sought gold in payment for spices. It was not until the sixth century when the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires had become stabilized that new demands for eastern luxuries became so important that trade in silk, spices and perfumes had a great influence on the politics of the time. But common people were more concerned with religion.

The written sources which have survived are almost exclusively religious, in contrast to the earlier period where secular documents are available. From the third century of our era religion usurped all other activities in the concerns of people. This is reflected not only in writings but in art and architecture and indeed in every aspect of life. The period from the fourth to the eighth century could be called the age of religions.

Another difference between the earlier and later periods of the history of Arabia is that earlier the cultural influence, as well as the migrations of tribes, went from south to north, for south Arabian civilization was more advanced than the north. But from the fourth to the eighth century of our era the reverse obtains; south Arabian tribes underwent the influence of north Arabia. All of the old south Arabian scripts vanished and the north Arabic script used by the Lakhmids, and possibly of Nabataean origin, was spread to the south. Some scholars have characterized the later period as the 'Dark Ages' of Arabia in contrast to the earlier period, although this designation may have been influenced by the common view of the contemporary history of western Europe.

The fourth century of our era saw the spread of universal religions and their forging of orthodoxies, and this development obviously had repercussions in Arabia although they occurred later. The religious consolidation paralleled the establishment of the centralized Sasanian Empire with its Zoroastrian church organization and the Byzantine empire with Christianity as the state religion.

During this period, to the rise of Islam, several kingdoms in Arabia rose, declined and fell. Some were powerful and enjoyed independence while others were vassals of one or the other great empire. A third force was Ethiopia which became a Christian state, and in alliance with Byzantium, extended its influence in south Arabia.

In the south the Himyarites not only established a new kingdom about 300 A.D. but they embarked on a policy of expansion and soon ruled all of south Arabia, while to the north they extended as far as Najran, south of Mecca. During the later fourth century and afterwards the Himyarites introduced monotheism into their religion which had been a polytheism. Mention of one god, Rahmanan 'the Merciful' was initiated by the Himyarites. At the end of the fifth century Abu Kariba, also called Ma'd Karib Ya'fur, the Himyarite king with his center in Yemen accepted Judaism as his faith. His son and successor Yusuf Dhu Nuwas began a persecution of Christians in his realm, especially against those in Najran in 518, which provoked a reaction of Najashi ruler of the Ethiopians in Axum. He sent a large army to Yemen in 517 which defeated Dhu Nuwas who fled. Almost all of south Arabia then was ruled by the Ethiopians who set up a viceroy Abraha over the land. Dhu Nuwas sought the aid of the Sasanians and an embassy was sent to al-Hira, capital of the Lakhmid vassals of the Sasanians, for help, but none came. Dhu Nuwas returned and regained power. He tried to exterminate pro-Axumite people but in 524 a tripartite military alliance of the Byzantine Empire, the Axumite Ethiopian kingdom and south Arabian Christians was formed against Dhu Nuwas. He was defeated and either killed or committed suicide, which ended the line of Himyarite kings.

Abraha now consolidated his rule and gained control of the spice trade, which was the main objective of Ethiopian interest in south Arabia. Abraha built a church in San'a, and in order to attract pilgrims to his center he sent missionaries to different regions of Arabia. At that time Mecca was a place of pagan pilgrimage and Abraha sought to divert pilgrims to San'a to his Christian shrine. It seems that pilgrims would go to a shrine, pagan or Christian, simply because it was a consecrated or holy place. When someone from the north defiled his church Abraha marched against Mecca with elephants in his army. That year was recorded as the year of the elephant, and it is mentioned in the Quran, but Abraha was unsuccessful and turned back.

South Arabia was dependant on Axum, but a vassal king was set up, and a unique dual government was instituted, with the king's administration side by side with the Ethiopian military settlements which were independent of local authorities and probably of the king himself. The first king was Sumafa Ashwa and he remained faithful to Ethiopian rule. His grandson Sayf, however, wanted to free himself from Ethiopian tutelage. At first he turned to the Byzantines for help but they declined since they were co-religionists with the Axumites. Sayf

then approached the Persians and the Sasanian king Khusro I sent some ships to aid Sayf who had fled Ethiopian rule. The Persians sent a force to Yemen under a Persian general Wahriz who succeeded in conquering south Arabia in 577 and reinstalling Sayf as king. The Ethiopians reacted by supporting a counter-king but he was deposed by the Persians in 599. Thus south Arabia became virtually a province of the Sasanian Empire, and it replaced Ethiopia as the dominant force in the south which entered the politics of the two great powers to the north.

The Christian and Jewish competition in south Arabia was now joined by a third religion, Zoroastrianism although the latter was not as missionary-oriented as the other two. Not only in south Arabia but also in the north Christianity made converts while Medina or Yathrib had a substantial Jewish population and only in Bahrain in eastern Arabia did Zoroastrianism have adherents. Even though both the Byzantines and the Sasanians sought to obtain a monopoly of trade, in western Arabia independent merchants were able to prosper in the period before the rise of Islam.

In the fifth century for the first time in recorded history we learn of an Arab kingdom in central Arabia established by the Kinda tribe. Under the reign of al-Harith b. 'Amr in the last decades of the fifth century all of the tribes in Najd, central Arabia, were united into a kingdom of Kinda. His son in 510 attacked border lands of the Byzantine Empire and the emperor Anastasius was obliged to conclude peace with the Kindites. Al-Harith also attacked the Sasanians but in 529 he was killed by the Lakhmid vassals of the Persians. After his death the kingdom was divided among his sons and was finally dissolved. We know about Kinda mainly because a later Kindite prince Imru'l-Qays was a famous pre-Islamic Arab poet some of whose verses have survived.

It should be mentioned that the most important source for information about Arabia just before Islam is pre-Islamic Arabic poetry. Much was recorded in Islamic times and from it we see the overwhelming importance of tribal society. The poetry is mainly concerned with tribal warfare, with lonely camel trips on the desert, or the longing for one's beloved. As mentioned even the settled folk in oases were divided by tribal allegiances such that this time could be called the tribal period of Arabia's history. Eastern Arabia, however, had been under strong Iranian influences from early times, but now direct rule was instituted.

Eastern Arabia, on the shores of the Persian Gulf, came under Persian rule in the time of the Sasanian ruler Shapur II (310-379) who led expeditions far into Arabia and defeated marauding tribes. After a period of independence in the sixth century the region again fell to the Sasanians who appointed a Lakhmid king as their governor. Persian garrisons and settlers were established in Bahrain, Oman and elsewhere in the east. Traces of underground irrigation

canals called qanats found in Oman were probably the result of Iranian techniques brought there by settlers from Iran. Persian culture and customs became prevalent all over eastern Arabia.

In the century before the rise of Islam the bedouin tribes became more powerful and we hear of tribal confederations such as Kinda, but none of them lasted since tribal rivalry disrupted any unity. As with other nomads, the bedouin were better warriors than the settled folk and retained a heroic prestige among the latter, even though the bedouin raided and pillaged towns and villages. They also provided guards and camels for long distance trade of merchants in towns. But we must return to religion.

Christianity especially made converts in Arabia after the Byzantine emperor Constantius II (317-361) sent the Arian (Monophysite) bishop Theophilus Indus on a two year mission to convert the kings of Axum and of the Himyarites. He was successful in Ethiopia but less so in south Arabia. Christianity was brought to the Sasanian Empire in the middle of the third century primarily by prisoners taken by Shapur I in his raids to the west and his capture of cities such as Antioch on the Orontes, and his settling of the captives in southern Iran. During the persecution of Christians in the Sasanian Empire by Shapur II, which began in 339, some Christians fled to Arabia and probably merchants seeking pearls also brought Christianity to the eastern part of the peninsula. The Christians of the Sasanian Empire for the most part became Nestorians and it was the Nestorian church in al-Hir in particular which sent missionaries to the Persian Gulf littoral in the fifth century. A Nestorian bishop of Oman is attested as early as 424, evidence of the spread of that faith in Arabia.

Trade continued to be important but the fall of the Roman Empire had diminished the demand for luxury objects from the east and Byzantium could not replace Rome as a large market for imports. Not until both the Sasanian and Byzantine Empires were well established in the sixth century did competition for luxury objects increase. The overland trade routes from China then assumed a larger role in long distance trade than the sea routes, and this was due in no small measure to the enterprising Sogdian merchants who were more willing to take risks with their camel caravans than the sea captains of Arabia with their boats.

By the sixth century, however, both the Byzantines with their Ethiopian allies, and the Sasanians were competing in the revival of all trade routes with India and the Far East. Silk, spices and perfumes were still the principal imports in the long distance trade, and control of trade routes in Arabia was the object of Byzantine-Sasanian rivalry. As previously Oman and Yemen were key areas for exercising that control, but in the northern part of the peninsula competition was also fierce. Just as nomadic chieftains were able to conquer settled regions of

south Arabia, also in the north Arab warriors had established small kingdoms already at the break up of the Seleucid state. We already have mentioned Palmyra, Hatra, and the Nabataeans, but there were others. At Emesa (Hims) in Syria an Arab dynasty was established already at the turn of the millennium and also in Edessa (al-Ruha') the Abgar family of Arab origin ruled until the beginning of the third century when the Romans abolished the dynasty. So the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires took control of the north Arabian states and established their own vassals, the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids.

The Ghassanids were by origin a south Arabian tribe which migrated to the western edge of the Syrian desert and in the fifth century they were appointed by the emperor Anastasius (491-518) defenders of the Byzantine marches against the Sasanians. They fought many times against the Sasanian Arab client state of the Lakhmids who also were of south Arabian origin. Neither of these client states, however, were heirs of the earlier Arab principalities of the caravan cities such as Palmyra and Hatra, but rather they maintained their bedouin background and customs. They were warriors rather than traders and this contributed to the belief that north Arabia during this time was in a state of nomadization and decline. After both states were absorbed by their imperial masters in the beginning of the seventh century the frontiers in effect were left unguarded. A forerunner of the Islamic conquests was a battle at Dhu Qarú in southern Iraq about 610, between Arab bedouin and a Sasanian army in which the latter were badly beaten.

By the seventh century the eastern coast of the Red Sea had become the most popular trade route from south to north. The town of Mecca flourished because it was both a center of the caravan trade and a shrine with the cult object of the black stone in the Ka'ba. The leading tribe of the city, which had become sedentary, was the Quraysh to which the prophet Muhammad belonged. In his time trade had developed more than in the previous centuries and large camel caravans plied the routes to Syria bringing local skins and leather, and from Africa ivory and gold dust, as well as slaves, and, of course, transit trade of spices and perfumes from the east. In return from Syria came cotton and linen textiles, manufactured objects such as weapons and housewares, oil for lamps. The trade was highly profitable and brought wealth to Mecca. In this milieu Muhammad was born about 571, the year of the elephant.

Blood feuds and tribal warfare held sway in Arabia and the young Muhammad, who had lost his parents at an early age, abhorred the constant fighting. When he was twenty-five a rich widow named Khadija recruited him to care for her trading business and he led a caravan to Syria. Although Khadija was fifteen years older they married and his life as a merchant was financially secure. At the age of forty, however, while praying in a cave Muhammad received a message and embarked on his role as the prophet of Allah. His first

preaching to his own tribe the Quraysh not only fell on deaf ears but as custodians of the pagan shrine they opposed him. But slowly he obtained followers and his message was spread over Arabia.

Fearing persecution at home some of his followers took refuge in Ethiopia where they were kindly received. The affinities of his message with Christian and Jewish beliefs attracted some adherents of these faiths to the prophet, but on the whole he was unsuccessful in winning many of them to his persuasion. Because of strong opposition in Mecca he was obliged to flee to Medina with his followers. This was the Hegira in 622, from which date begins the Islamic era of time reckoning. After a number of skirmishes between the forces of Mecca and Medina at last the Muslims, as the followers of the prophet were called, succeeded in capturing Mecca and Islam was launched.

It is not possible to go into the details of the spread of Islam throughout the Arabian peninsula and beyond, but many tribes accepted the new faith and some who were not Arabs, such as the descendants of the Persians who had settled in Yemen. They not only accepted Islam but helped defeat the uprising of a local prophet called al-Aswad, and thereafter they were called Abna' or 'sons', a distinct group in early Islam. Other prophets in various parts of Arabia sought followers but they fell before the message of Islam. For the first time in history the Arab tribes were united in following a new faith which gave them a common ideology and a force which changed the history of the world.

It was not only due to a common religion, but the Quran solidified for the Arabs a common language, a common culture and way of life. The inter-tribal rivalry was not ended, for it reappeared later during the Umayyad Caliphate, but Islam gave all Arabs a unity of purpose in conquests outside of the Arabian peninsula. This is a later story when the religion of the Arabs was transformed into a world religion with universal appeal. Although it took several centuries and contacts with many peoples an Islamic culture and civilization developed, which produced an Islamic art and architecture, Islamic literatures, first in Arabic and then in other languages, Islamic governments and societies. Because of the brilliance of Islamic civilization the time before Islam was called Jahiliyya 'age of ignorance', perhaps unjustly, but only because Islam so transformed the world from India and China to the Atlantic Ocean that what transpired before Islam seems completely pale in comparison. The history of Islam, however, belongs to the next period of world history.