

A HISTORY OF MEDIEVAL ISLAM

by
J.J.Saunders



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Contents

PREFACE	<i>page</i> vii
GLOSSARY	ix
DATES	xiii
I ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS	1
II THE PROPHET	18
III THE FIRST CONQUESTS	39
IV THE CIVIL WARS	59
V THE ARAB EMPIRE	77
VI THE ABBASID REVOLUTION	95
VII THE BREAKUP OF THE CALIPHATE	106
VIII THE ISMA'ILIAN SCHISM	125
IX THE TURKISH IRRUPTION	141
X THE CHRISTIAN COUNTER-ATTACK	154
XI THE MONGOL DISASTER	170
XII THE CIVILIZATION OF MEDIEVAL ISLAM	187
INDEX	205

Arabia and Her Neighbours

THE peninsula of Arabia may be described as a vast rectangle of more than a million square miles in extent, placed between Africa and the main land-mass of Asia. The Red Sea, which forms its western boundary, is part of the great rift valley which continues northwards through the Gulf of Akaba, the Dead Sea, and the River Jordan; the huge convulsions which produced it have piled up mountain ridges which rise steeply along the coast from the Hijaz to the Yemen, and the land thus slopes down from west to east towards the gentle declivity of the Persian Gulf. On three sides Arabia faces the sea; her only land frontier is the Syrian Desert, and as the crossing of these sandy wastes was at least as difficult as landing on her almost harbourless coasts, she long remained an isolated and inaccessible country, whose inhabitants aptly styled her *Jazirat al-Arab*, the *island* of the Arabs.

The climate of Arabia is distinguished chiefly by high temperatures and the absence of moisture. The autumn monsoon deposits heavy showers on the coastline of Oman and the Yemen, but the steep hills force the rain-laden clouds to ascend rapidly and discharge their contents before they have passed over the inland slopes; the winter and spring rains of the Mediterranean region are scattered sparsely over the northern deserts, the *Nufud*, where the wilderness blossoms like a rose for a short season, but the southern interior is beyond their range, and is in consequence a dreadful, waterless waste, the *Rub al-Khali*, the Empty Quarter, which until recent times has rarely been crossed by European travellers. Arabia

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

is destitute of lakes, forests and prairies; scarcely a perennial stream is found in the land; the *wadis* or rivers, which become raging torrents in the short wet period, are for most of the year dry and empty, and a man might cross their beds without being aware of their existence. Except in the high country, the heat of the summer is intense, yet the climate is not on the whole injurious to human health. The dryness of the atmosphere mitigates the strength of the sun's rays; the nights are cool; in winter snow often lies in the highest valleys of the Jabal Shammar, a chain of hills immediately south of the Nufud, and frost is not unknown in the highlands of the Yemen.

Western Arabia, the mountainous region fronting the Red Sea, consists of three clearly defined areas: a hot, narrow coastal plain, known as the *Tihama*, or lowland; hills, with peaks rising to several thousand feet, which bear the name of *Hijaz*, or barrier, and beyond these, a great plateau which dips eastwards to the central deserts. In the north, the land of Midian, the mountains are wild and desolate, but in the Yemen, the Arabia Felix of the ancients, the hillsides receive a substantial rainfall, and grain crops and (since the sixteenth century) the coffee bean are grown in the fertile valleys. Here, in the extreme south-west corner of the peninsula, arose the earliest civilisations of old Arabia, those of the Minaeans and Sabaeans. Southern Arabia presents an inhospitable front to the Indian Ocean; its long coastline has few natural harbours, and its inhabited valleys lie inland and free from prying strangers. Its principal division, the Hadramawt, was famous in remote antiquity as the land of incense; the gum from the incense-trees was a prized article of commerce, and vast quantities of it were bought and burnt on the altars of Egyptian and Babylonian temples. Eastern Arabia is a land of contrasts. The shores of the Persian Gulf are flat, barren and humid, the natives deriving a scanty living from fishing and pearl-diving, but the province of Oman is filled with well-watered vales which run back to the foothills of the Jabal Akhdar, or Green Mountains, and whose palm-groves and fruit-orchards support a substantial population. The interior of Arabia is by no means all desert: many oases provide food and water for considerable settlements; springs and wells afford refreshment to the traveller, and some large fertile depressions, such as the Wadi Hadramawt in the south and the Wadi Sirhan in the north-west, have served for ages as channels of commerce.

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

The name 'Arab,' which may possibly be connected with the Hebrew root, *abhar*, to move or pass, has been often restricted to the desert-dwellers, the *Badw* or Bedouins, and repudiated by the townsmen and peasants, a practice which reminds us that the majority of the inhabitants of the peninsula have since historic times been pastoral nomads. The pattern of their life has remained unchanged through the centuries since the days of Abraham. Prisoners of the seasonal cycle, they spend the four summer months from June to September around the wells of their tribal territory, patiently enduring heat, thirst and choking sand-storms; in October, when the first rains fall, they strike their camps and depart for their grazing-grounds, which in a few weeks are covered with plants and coarse grasses. After seven or eight months of wandering over and consuming these pastures, they converge in May on their wells, to await with the stoic fatalism of their race the approach of another summer. Their hunger is barely appeased by a single daily meal of rice, dates and camel's milk; their clothing, consisting of a long shirt, a flowing upper garment and a headdress held in position by a cord, is worn till it rots, and their habitation is a tent of coarse cloth made of goat's hair or sheep's wool, sparsely furnished with mattresses, cooking-pots and water-skins. Every Bedouin tent shelters a single family; several families constitute a *kawm* or clan, and clans linked by blood relationship make up a *kabilah* or tribe, to whose particular name is commonly prefixed the word *Banu*, sons of. To no authority outside his tribe does the Bedouin acknowledge any allegiance; his *shaikh* or chief is merely a first among equals, chosen by the elders from the adult males of the ruling house, whose business is to govern his people according to ancient custom and to defend them against their enemies. For inter-tribal war is endemic in such a society: the fierce competition for the possession of wells, sheep, camels and pastures, the only wealth of a nomad people, constantly incites one tribe to launch a *ghazw* or raid on the territory of another. As no supreme public authority is recognized, a crime committed by a member of one tribe against a member of another, unless purged by a compensatory payment, may produce a vicious blood-feud that persists for years.

The manners and morals of the Bedouins reflect the conditions and needs of desert life. Hospitality is perhaps the chief virtue of the nomad: in a land where man is engaged in a perpetual struggle

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

against nature, food and shelter are never withheld from the traveller, and even a fugitive fleeing from the vengeance of his foes has but to touch the tent-ropes of a family to be assured of temporary sanctuary within its domain. Bedouin women enjoy more freedom than their urban sisters, and the heavy physical toil of the camp is shared by both sexes. Pride of descent is strong among the tribesmen, who carry in their heads long and complicated genealogies: to preserve the unity and purity of the family, they commonly marry first cousins. Divorce is easy: a wife is usually repudiated for childlessness. Large families are common, but dirt and ignorance account for the high infant mortality. The threat of famine always hung over Bedouin society; the nomads often refused to be burdened with extra mouths to feed, and the horrible custom of burying alive female babies was abolished only by the humane edict of the Prophet.

Whether the Bedouins were the original inhabitants of the country, whether the ancestors of the Arabs migrated from Africa or Mesopotamia, and whether the land was first peopled by Semites or non-Semites, are questions at present beyond the reach of solution. The national tradition proclaimed a duality of descent: the Arabs of the North were descended from Adnan, those of the South from Kahtan. This tradition is of great antiquity, since Kahtan is evidently the Joktan of the Old Testament, and the famous 'table of races' in the tenth chapter of Genesis, which dates from about 900 B.C., makes the South Arabians his sons. The language of the South was different from that of the North, and was written in a different alphabetic script. The northerners were mainly nomads, the southerners settled agriculturists. Whether the two groups belonged to different racial stocks, we do not know. What is fairly certain is that Arabia entered history with the domestication of the camel somewhere around 1000 B.C.

The dromedary or one-humped camel has been aptly styled 'the ship of the desert'. In pre-historic days, the only form of animal transport in Arabia was the donkey. The coming of the camel effected a social and economic revolution. It was admirably suited both for riding and as a beast of burden: its speed over long distances is three times as fast as a horse; it can go for seventeen days without water and can consume thirty gallons at a time; it can carry a weight of 450 pounds; its flesh and milk are edible; its hair

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

is used for tent-covers and its dung for fuel, and a caravan party, caught in the desert far from wells or springs, may save their lives by slaughtering a camel and drinking the water from its stomach. Once tamed, the animal increased enormously the mobility of the nomads and gave a powerful stimulus to commerce, since goods could now be carried over Arabia faster and in larger quantities than ever before. As early as 854 B.C., an Assyrian inscription records that 'Gindibu the Arab' (the first of his race to be named in history) led a troop of a thousand camels against Shalmaneser III in fighting along the border of the Syrian Desert, while the visit of the queen of Sheba (Saba, in the Yemen) to Solomon, which if historical must have occurred in the tenth century B.C., indicates that camel caravans were already travelling at that date, laden with the products of the East, between South Arabia and Palestine.

From this time onwards Arabia was drawn into the stream of international trade, and the first civilized societies appeared in the peninsula. It is possible that the disorders in Egypt, which followed the fall of the 'New Empire' in the eleventh century B.C. and led to the loss of its overseas territories, enabled the South Arabians to secure naval control of the Red Sea and establish a virtual monopoly of the incense traffic from the Hadramawt and the spice trade with India. At some time between 1000 and 500 B.C., two strong kingdoms rose to prominence in the Yemen, those of Ma'in and Saba.¹ The former sent their caravans northwards towards the Mediterranean markets; a big Minaean colony was settled at Dedan or Daydan in the Tihama, and Minaean inscriptions have been found as far afield as Memphis in Egypt and Delos in the Greek archipelago. The latter expanded westwards towards Africa; their ships controlled the Straits of Bab al-Mandab; they colonized Abyssinia (whose name is said to be derived from Habashat, an Arabic word perhaps meaning a confederacy), and for many

¹The chronology of these South Arabian kingdoms is still a matter of controversy. Mlle J. Pirenne has recently attempted (*La Grèce et Suba*, Paris, 1955) to synchronize it with that of Greece, there being some evidence that the South Arabian alphabet was derived directly from the Greek and not through the Phoenician. If her theory be correct and it seems now to be fairly generally accepted, a much lower date than the tenth century B.C. must be assigned to the emergence of Ma'in and Saba as organised States.

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

ages poured a silent stream of Arab migration into the African coastlands from Cape Guardafui to Sofala, which have retained to this day a strongly marked Semitic character. Saba ultimately absorbed Ma'in and two smaller principalities, Aswan and Kataban; her kings, known as *mukarribs*, combined the functions of prince and priest, and her wealth was largely expended in the beautifying of her capital Ma'rib, which lay at the junction of caravan routes nearly four thousand feet up in the Yemen hills. Ma'rib was celebrated not only for its temples and palaces, but above all for the dam which was built a few miles outside its walls to catch and distribute the waters of its local river, the Wadi Dhana, and so to irrigate a broad expanse of the surrounding countryside. So remarkable a feat of hydraulic engineering argues a high degree of technical skill among the Sabaeen people.

The prosperous trade of Arabia excited the cupidity of the Assyrians, who built up the first great world empire in Western Asia. The records of their kings (Shalmaneser III, Tiglath-Pileser III, Sargon II, Sennacherib, and Esarhaddon) contain frequent references to fighting in the Syrian Desert, with the object of suppressing marauding Bedouins and securing control of caravan routes, particularly the road through the Wadi Sirhan, which linked the markets of Syria with those of Mesopotamia. The overthrow of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C. brought the Chaldaeans to power in Babylon: under their rule, relations with the Arabs were more friendly, perhaps because the newcomers were themselves of Arab stock. The last Chaldaean king, Nabonidus, actually took up his residence at Tayma, an oasis and important caravan station in North Arabia, familiar from the references to it in the book of Job, and left his son Belshazzar to act as regent in Babylon. The Persians who succeeded the Chaldaeans apparently maintained this pacific policy during the two centuries of their domination (539–337 B.C.), but when their empire was destroyed by Alexander and his Greeks, the political and economic condition of the Near East underwent some significant changes.

First, the Greeks reached India itself, and Alexander's admiral Nearchus sailed down the Indus out into the Indian Ocean and up the Persian Gulf, thereby presenting a potential threat by sea to the Sabaeen monopoly of the Indian trade. Secondly, in the confusion

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

following the dissolution of the Persian realm, a North Arabian tribe, the Nabataeans, seized around 320 B.C. the rock fortress of Petra and the oases of the Wadi Sirhan, ejected the Minaean-Sabaeans from Daydan, and placed themselves athwart the principal roads running across North-West Arabia to the Mediterranean ports. For the next four centuries the Nabataeans were a power to be reckoned with in the politics of the Near East, and the wonderful ruins of Petra, the 'rose-red city half as old as Time,' have kept their memory alive to this day. Thirdly, when after Alexander's death in 323 B.C., the Ptolemies established themselves in Egypt, a vigorous attempt was made to restore Egyptian naval power in the Red Sea. The ancient canal between that sea and the Nile was reopened; Egyptian ships passed through the Straits of Bab al-Mandab and made direct contact with Indian ports, bringing back cargoes of pepper and cinnamon, and the discovery attributed to one Hippalus of the periodicity of the monsoons greatly facilitated navigation in the Indian Ocean.

These developments sapped the economic strength of Saba, provoked unrest and discontent, and led to a revolution in or about 115 B.C., when the ancient monarchy was overthrown by the Himyarites, a tribe whose original home was perhaps in the Hadramawt and who under the name 'Homerites' were familiar to the Greeks and Romans for the remainder of the classical period as the lords of Arabia Felix. The new rulers of the Yemen were soon called upon to defend their land against something more serious than mere trade competition. The shadow of Rome was falling across the Near East; after the battle of Actium (31 B.C.), Augustus landed in Egypt and turned the country into a Roman province; the Nabataean kingdom was reduced to the status of a Roman satellite, and plans were set on foot to seize the incense-lands of Arabia. In 24 B.C. Aelius Gallus, the prefect of Egypt, landed an army on the North Arabian coast and pushed down the Hijaz as far as the Wadi Najran, within a few days' march of Ma'rib. At this point something went wrong and the expedition was forced to return. Either the Romans were unable to cope with the hazards of desert warfare, or they were betrayed by Nabataean spies and agents they had brought with them. The Himyarites thus escaped subjection to Rome, but they never regained the monopoly of the Indian trade which their Sabaeans predecessors had so long enjoyed.

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

For the first two centuries of the Christian era, Western, that is to say, Roman-Egyptian, shipping plied regularly to and fro across the Indian Ocean. Details of this sea traffic have been preserved in a handbook for merchant captains compiled about A.D. 50 and known as the *Periplus of the Erythraean (Red) Sea*. Large hordes of Roman coins have been dug up in southern India, and at least one Roman trade mission reached China. The land routes across Arabia lost a good deal of their importance, and Trajan in 106 A.D. was able to annex Petra and abandon the Wadi Sirhan, which the Nabataeans had so long controlled, to Bedouin anarchy without risking economic loss. In the third century, however, the situation was transformed by the emergence of three new factors, the breakdown of the Roman peace, the rise of the powerful Sassanid kingdom in Persia, and the emergence of the kingdom of Axum in Abyssinia.

After the death of Marcus Aurelius in 180 A.D., the Roman Empire was subjected to a series of barbarian assaults which nearly brought it to ruin, and in 226 the new Sassanid dynasty came to power in Persia. Persian attacks on the Roman positions in the Near East multiplied, at a time when the emperors were struggling with foes elsewhere. Trade and commerce suffered, and almost certainly the volume of Roman shipping in Indian waters sharply declined. This circumstance revived the importance of the desert caravan roads. Petra and the Nabataeans were no more, but a new commercial centre arose at Palmyra, halfway across the Syrian Desert, a meeting-place for merchants from Damascus, Mesopotamia and Arabia. Palmyra was a very old settlement in a fertile oasis, known in Biblical days and still known to the Arabs as Tadmor, but fame and prosperity only came to it when it took over much of the trade that had once flowed through Petra. A self-governing city under the protection of Rome, its mainly Arab inhabitants used its wealth to construct a magnificent imitation of a Greco-Roman metropolis, with temples, fora, porticoes and colonnaded streets, whose vast ruins, starting up out of the desert wilderness, still amaze the traveller. For a time the Palmyrenes loyally defended Rome against Persia, but after the capture of the Emperor Valerian by the Sassanids in 260, the city, under its chief Odenathus, resolved to make a bid for the sovereignty of the East. For several years Odenathus and later his widow Zenobia ruled a kingdom which stretched over Syria, North Arabia, part of Asia Minor and even Egypt, but when the military strength of Rome was restored by

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

Aurelian, the brief glory of Palmyra was ended. In 272 Palmyra was captured by the Romans, and Zenobia was taken prisoner. The city went the way of Petra, but the example of both the Nabataeans and the Palmyrenes showed that communities of Arab stock were capable of attaining a high degree of civilization under the stimulus of contact with advanced peoples. Petra and Palmyra may be regarded as local forerunners of the mightier culture of Islam,

Far more significant for the subsequent history of Arabia was the rise of a new military State in the highlands of Abyssinia. When the Ptolemies brought Greek culture into Egypt, some knowledge of it reached the Abyssinians through the Red Sea port of Adulis, which was frequented by Egyptian shipping. A few miles inland from Adulis arose the city of Axum or Aksum, which became the capital of the kingdom of that name. Its sovereigns professed sympathy for Hellenic civilization, and their decrees were issued in both Greek and Ethiopic. Axum emerges into the full light of history after the Roman occupation of Egypt: it seems to have been accepted as an ally of Rome, and the two Powers had a common interest in repelling the incursions of the Blemmyes or Bejas, a savage tribe who roamed the regions of the middle Nile. Axum doubtless had her share of the Indian trade, and when in the third century the Roman Empire fell into anarchy and Sassanid Persia became a Great Power, she perhaps saw her interests threatened by a possible extension of Persian naval control over Arabian waters, and reacted by attempting to gain a foothold in the Yemen. Early in the fourth century, the Axumites invaded and conquered Himyar, and their kings for a time style themselves 'kings of Axum, Himyar and Hadramawt.' Some time before 378 (when the royal title changes again), a national reaction must have ejected the intruders, but the freedom of Himyar was never again secure, and from now until the rise of Islam South Arabia was a bone of contention between Axum and Persia, with Rome, or rather Byzantine Constantinople, occasionally intervening from a distance. The situation was complicated by the rapid spread of Christianity over the Near East after the conversion of Constantine, which dragged Arabia deeper than ever into the vortex of international politics.

The primitive religion of the desert was restricted to the worship of trees and streams and stones in which the deity was supposed

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

to reside. The nomad, at the mercy of a seemingly capricious and hostile Nature, was impelled to believe in personalized elemental forces, whose protection was invoked and whose anger was averted by appropriate rites and ceremonies. Yet the authority of the gods was local and limited: vast tracts of the earth were delivered over to strange, supernatural beings known as *jinn* (the 'genie' of the European translations of the *Arabian Nights*), whose activity, though sometimes beneficent, was more commonly evil and malicious. The *jinn* were conceived of as corporeal creatures who haunted thickets, graveyards and waste places, and assumed the form of snakes or wild beasts; they appeared and disappeared with mysterious suddenness, and ruthlessly inflicted death or madness on those who offended them. Nomads had naturally no temples or priesthoods; they usually carried their gods with them in a tent or tabernacle, and consulted them by casting lots with arrows, while their *kahins* or soothsayers delivered oracles in short rhymed sentences. When a nomadic tribe adopted a more sedentary manner of life, its gods were placed within a *haram*, or sacred enclosure, usually a circle of stones, and sacrifices were there offered to them: thus the Nabataeans at Petra worshipped their deity in a square block of unhewn basalt, over which the blood of offerings was poured. In short, Bedouin religion was part and parcel of ancient Semitic paganism, many traces of which are to be found in the beliefs and practices of the early Hebrews as recorded in the Old Testament

In the more advanced and civilized kingdoms of the South a higher type of religion developed. Instead of sticks and stones, the heavenly bodies were the object of a worship curiously akin to that of the Babylonians, a circumstance which has led some inquirers to seek a direct connection between the Sabaeans and ancient Sumer. Stone temples, often consisting of big sanctuaries flanked by private chapels, were erected in the principal cities, and endowed with the revenues of incense-forests and other landed estates, and a sacrificial priesthood, whose members in early days at least combined both civil and ecclesiastical functions, enjoyed great wealth and power in the State. In the South Arabian pantheon, the primacy was held by the moon-god, who was venerated under a variety of names. He was Almakah to the Sabaeans, Wadd to the Minaeans, while in the Hadramawt he was known as Sin, the same

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

name as in Babylon. Northern influence is also clearly visible in the case of Athtar, the planet Venus, whose name is obviously a variant of the Phoenician Astarte and the Babylonian Ishtar. The sun-god Shams, so prominent among the northern Semites, oddly changed his sex in Arabia, and was found under different local designations, but always in a female form. A few towns or oases, such as San'a, Najran and later Mecca, possessed temples or shrines of wide repute, which attracted pilgrimages from afar. It is doubtful if the pre-Islamic Arabs had a very clear or firm belief in a future life. It is said that a camel was often tied by its owner's grave and left to die there, so that he might ride the animal in the next world, but it is likely that an other-worldly existence was envisaged as little more than a gloomy land of shadows similar to the Sheol of the Hebrews.

An isolated people may preserve unchanged for centuries their primitive faith, but as soon as they are subjected to pressure from an external and more advanced civilization, the old pattern of life is disrupted and ancient beliefs and institutions crumble away. From the fourth century onwards, Arabian paganism was exposed to a mounting challenge from a Christianity which was now the official religion of Rome and Axum. This was not indeed the first monotheistic creed with which the Arabs were acquainted. Jewish communities had long been settled in Arabia: it is possible that the oldest of them were founded by refugees who fled from Palestine after the destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar in 586 B.C. Jews were found in the Yemen towns, in northern oases like Tayma and Khaibar, and three clans in Medina professed the Jewish religion. They rarely indulged in proselytism, kept severely to themselves, and were viewed by their Arab neighbours with some suspicion and dislike. No doubt Arabs out of curiosity strayed from time to time into synagogues, but the impact of Judaism on them was far feebler than that of Christianity.

The gospel first entered Arabia from the north, through the medium of the Nabataean kingdom, which in the apostolic age controlled Damascus, the scene of St. Paul's conversion. The beginnings of Arabian Christianity are quite obscure, though legend attributed its foundation variously to the Wise Men from the East (who were held to have come from Saba), to the apostle Bartholomew, and to the eunuch of Queen Candace mentioned in

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

Acts. Episcopal lists testify to the existence of numerous though small Christian groups in north-west Arabia from the third century, and the Romanized *shaikh*, Philip the Arab, who reigned as emperor from 244 to 249, is doubtfully claimed as a Christian convert. Constantine's acceptance of Christianity gave a powerful impetus to evangelization in lands bordering upon the Roman Empire. Axum became Christian in the reign of Ezanes (c.320–360), whose change of faith is proved by his coins and inscriptions, and a certain Theophilus 'the Indian' was sent by the Emperor Constantius to preach the gospel in Himyar and perhaps at the same time to negotiate a Roman-Arab alliance against the Persians. How successful his mission was we do not know but what is certain is that the violent controversies which rent the Church in the fifth century had repercussions all over Arabia.

Since the days of Arius and the Council of Nicaea, theologians had been trying to settle the thorny question of the precise relation of Christ to the Godhead. The Greeks tended to take the lead and to impose their own solution of these difficulties. The Councils which debated and decided these matters all met in Greek lands, but their findings were often repudiated by the non-Hellenic Christians of the East, who had created what were virtually national Churches in Egypt and Syria and were in revolt against Greek ecclesiastical domination. In 431 the Council of Ephesus condemned Nestorius for exaggerating the humanity of Christ, and in 451 the Council of Chalcedon declared heretical the belief that Christ had only one nature, his human nature being wholly absorbed in the divine. The 'one-nature' Christians ('Monophysites') had a large following among the Egyptians and Syrians; they rejected the decrees of Chalcedon, and were subjected to spasmodic bouts of persecution. Axum followed its mother-Church of Egypt in accepting the Monophysite position. The Nestorians were driven out of the Roman Empire altogether, and sought refuge in Persia, where they conducted a vigorous missionary drive all over Western Asia. It was these unorthodox forms of Christianity which now gained a lodging in Arabia, and particularly in the Yemen. Monophysite and Nestorian preachers helped to undermine Arab faith in the old gods and unwittingly contributed to the political upheavals which ruined the ancient civilization of the South, but they surprisingly failed to create a

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

Christian Arabic literature or to translate the Bible into the language of their converts, an achievement which would have given solidity and permanence to their church.

At the beginning of the sixth century, the kingdom of Himyar was far gone in decay. Already it had experienced one attack and temporary conquest by the Axumites; the foundation of Constantinople had revived Roman commerce with the East, which had fallen off badly during the troubles of the third century, and Rome's ally Axum was now trading as far afield as Ceylon. The spread of Christianity alarmed the Himyar rulers, who, ill-versed in Christian heresies, probably discerned in the missionaries the crafty agents of Roman and Axumite imperialism. Himyar's last king, Dhu-Nuwas, resolved on desperate measures. He saw that the old paganism was moribund and that his State required a new faith to strengthen its moral basis, but unwilling to adopt the religion of his powerful neighbours, he proclaimed his adhesion to Judaism, possibly at the instigation of his mother, who is said to have been a Jewish slavegirl. He then set to work to root out foreign influences from his kingdom, and a number of Roman and Axumite merchants were put to death. Ela-Asbeha, the king of Axum, resolved to punish this outrage; he landed an army on the Arabian coast, and drove Dhu-Nuwas into the hills. When the invader had re-crossed the seas, the Himyar king reconquered his realm, and wreaked a savage vengeance on the Christians of Najran, who had probably collaborated with the Axumites. Their churches were demolished, and several hundred Najranis, who refused to apostatize, were burnt alive in a trench or moat outside their principal settlement. This occurred in the year 523, and the 'martyrs of Najran' are commemorated in the liturgies of the Greek, Latin and Oriental Churches. This time the Abyssinians determined on a final reckoning, and with some naval help from the Romans, they led a veritable crusade against the persecutor. The Himyarite forces were routed; Dhu-Nuwas perished, and South Arabia was turned into a province of the Axumite monarchy. Thus ended the independence of Arabia Felix.

This was not, however, the end of the story. In circumstances which are obscure, the Axumite commander or viceroy, Abraha, seems to have mutinied against his government and to have set himself up as an independent ruler. For thirty years or more (c.535-

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

570), he was the most powerful man in Arabia. The Emperor Justinian solicited his help in the struggle against Khusrau of Persia, and he was hailed by his co-religionists everywhere as a great Christian champion. He rebuilt the ruined churches, erected a big cathedral at San'a, and in order to open up direct communication with the Mediterranean world, he invaded the Hijaz about 570 and attacked Mecca, the last independent stronghold of Arabian paganism. A hundred legends have gathered round this famous expedition, which is said to have taken place at the time of Muhammad's birth in the 'Year of the Elephant,' so-called because Abraha brought an African elephant with his army, a beast never before used in Arabian warfare. The invasion failed: probably a pestilence destroyed the bulk of the Abyssinian forces and saved the city. Abraha did not long survive this setback; the natives of the Yemen rose in revolt and sought aid from Persia. Khusrau sent a fleet and army, and in 575 the land passed under Persian control. The naval power of the Sassanids was extended to the Straits of Bab al-Mandab, with disastrous consequences to Axum, and Christian hopes of converting all Arabia were blasted. Had Abraha taken Mecca, the whole peninsula would have been thrown open to Christian and Byzantine penetration; the Cross would have been raised on the Kaaba, and Muhammad might have died a priest or monk. As it was, paganism gained a new lease of life, and Christianity was discredited by Abraha's defeat and its association with the Axumite enemy.

The confusion and disorder in the Yemen precipitated the final economic collapse of this once flourishing land, a disaster symbolized by the bursting of the dam of Ma'rib. According to an inscription of Abraha's, the dam was last repaired in 542: soon afterwards its walls must have been finally breached and the waters run to waste. The event was mournfully commemorated in Arabian song and legend. The sixth century has been called the 'Dark Age' of Arabia, because there is evidence of a general movement of population from south to north, marking not on this occasion the spread of urban, civilized life but the reversion of hitherto sedentary tribes to nomadism. Yet this same century saw the birth of Arabic literature, a momentous development apparently associated with the short-lived kingdom of Kinda, which arose in north-central Arabia about 480 and disappeared about 550. The Kinda were former vassals of Himyar from Hadramawt who built

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

up a tribal confederacy stretching from the Rub al-Khali to the fringes of the Syrian Desert. One of their kings, Imr'ul-Kais, was a poet and a patron of poets; his desert court became a literary centre, whose productions attained a wide fame and helped to fix the dialect in which they were composed as the classical tongue of Arabia, as Luther's Bible did for German. Almost every Bedouin tribe had, of course, long had its *sha'ir* or bard, who sang of his people's victories in battle, but this sudden flowering of poetic talent was as unexpected as the appearance in their day of Homer and the Chansons de Geste. These poems, the most famous of which were known as the 'seven golden odes,' give a vivid if idealized picture of desert life, and may have helped to build up something like a national sentiment among the Arabs, a sentiment deepened and intensified by Islam.

This same age is memorable in Arabian history for the bitter duel between the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids, two peoples who had settled respectively on the eastern and the western fringes of the Syrian Desert. The Lakhmids came up from the south into the lower Euphrates valley, were recognized around 300 A.D. as clients by the Persian Government, who employed them to keep the Bedouins of the interior in order, and their camp at Hira grew into a considerable town. As allies or vassals of the Persians, they took part in the incessant wars between Rome and the Sassanids by making destructive raids on Roman Syria. By 500 the imperial government at Constantinople was driven to create a rival Arab power and to entrust the Banu-Ghassan, another southern tribe who had moved northwards into the territory once occupied by the Nabataeans, with the defence of the Syrian frontier. The Ghassanids never completely shed their nomadic habits or reached the level of their Nabataean predecessors; no Petra glorified their reign, and their kings resided, not in city palaces, but in movable camps. Their greatest chief, Harith (Aretas) the lame, was a contemporary of Justinian, and for forty years (c.529-569) was a loyal ally of Rome. Arabian legend has made much of his lifelong struggle with al-Mundhir of Hira, who captured Harith's son and sacrificed him to his goddess al-Uzza and was at last killed by the bereaved father with his own hands in 554.

Yet both Rome and Persia found these Arab client-States expensive and unreliable. The Ghassanids went the way of the Nabataeans, their principality being suppressed about 584: not long after, Khusrau of Persia about 602 put an end to the Lakhmid regime and installed a

ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

Persian governor in Hira. The northern frontiers of Arabia were abandoned to Bedouin licence and anarchy, and at some time during the first decade of the seventh century, in the lifetime of Muhammad, a group of Arab tribes routed a Persian army at Dhu-Kar on the Euphrates. The affair was doubtless a mere skirmish, but was hailed as a great triumph in Arabia, and was well remembered when thirty years later, the Muslim armies marched out to do battle both with the Roman Emperor and the Sassanid Shah.

Arabia's millennium and more of recorded pre-Islamic history ended with the country still on the fringes of civilization. She was no Tibet, shut off from the rest of humanity; foreign influences—Hellenic, Persian, Christian, Jewish—had streamed in, but as yet she had been a mere passive recipient, and had given nothing to the world. Now she seemed to be sinking back into barbarism. The old civilized lands of the south were decayed, depopulated, and under alien domination; their dialects were dying out, and were being replaced by forms of Arabic spoken by the more backward peoples of the north and written in a new script possibly devised by Christian missionaries from Hira. In many regions the pastoral nomad was replacing the townsman and the peasant. What suddenly pulled the Arabs out of themselves and thrust them on the path of world empire was a combination of two factors: the appearance among them of a man of genius, the founder of a new religion, and the mutual exhaustion of their great neighbours in the north, Rome and Persia, who at the end of a war of nearly thirty years (603–629) were utterly incapable of stemming the onrush of the hordes of Islam.

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ARABIA AND HER NEIGHBOURS

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Archaeological work in Arabia is still in its infancy. For some account of what has been done in the South in recent years, see *Archaeological Discoveries in South Arabia*, published by the American Foundation for the Study of Man, Baltimore, 1958.