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# Pre-Islamic Arabia

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## Pre-Islamic Arabia

MICHAEL LECKER

### Tribal historiography

The literary sources in Arabic dealing with pre-Islamic Arabia are copious, but rarely give direct answers to questions which are of interest to modern research. Still, the following had to be based on these sources since Arabian archaeology is only emerging; one hopes that significant Arabian pre-Islamic sites incur no damage before they are excavated.

Arabian society was tribal and included nomadic, semi-nomadic and settled populations. The settled populations had genealogies similar to those of the nomads and semi-nomads, identifying them as either 'northern' or 'southern' through the identity of their presumed eponyms. Not only did genealogy define the individual tribe, it also recorded its links with other tribes within families of tribes or tribal federations, each including several or many tribes. Muḥammad's tribe, Quraysh, for example, was part of the Kināna, and hence the other tribes of the Kināna were its closest relatives. The settled populations, which probably included more people than the nomadic and the semi-nomadic populations put together, do not receive a proportionate share in the literary sources because the limelights are typically on the nomads, more precisely on their military activities, no matter how insignificant. Tribal informants focused on the military activities since the performance of town dwellers in the realms of trade and agriculture were less spectacular, and hence less contributive to tribal solidarity.

After the Islamic conquests the tribes underwent significant changes, but they preserved their genealogy and their rich oral heritage that was inseparable from the genealogy. The amount of the materials that were transmitted and preserved was naturally affected by the size and political influence of the individual tribes. It stands to reason, however, that tribes that lived in or around the main centres of intellectual endeavour, such as Baṣra and Kūfa, stood a better chance of having their heritage recorded when oral accounts

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became written literary history. Regarding the time of Muḥammad, the coverage of individual tribes was uneven since it was also affected by their role at that time. Tribes such as Ghifār, Muzayna, Juhayna and others roaming around Mecca and Medina (pre-Islamic Yathrib)\*\* are better known to us than much stronger tribes such as Asad and Ghatafān, simply because the former played a more central role in Muḥammad's history.

The attention given in the literature to the military activities of the nomads led to an unrealistic and unbalanced perception of pre-Islamic Arabian society. While Mecca and Medina are described in much detail, many other settlements that were perhaps larger, wealthier and more populous than these two towns, such as Ḥajr (present-day Riyadh), which was the central settlement in the al-Yamāma area, are hardly taken into account in scholarly descriptions of pre-Islamic Arabia.

Much of the source material regarding Arabia goes back to tribal genealogists, each of whom specialised in a specific tribe or group of tribes. The tribal genealogists also mastered the tribal history and poetry, because they were both extensions of the genealogical information. Let us take for example the Taghlib. Al-Akhzar ibn Suḥayma was an early Taghlibī genealogist who transmitted part of the information on his tribe later incorporated in the genealogy books. Between the early genealogists and the philologists of the second/eighth century there were intermediaries who usually remained unidentified. But expertise in Taghlibī genealogy and tribal history was not an exclusive Taghlibī domain. The most famous genealogist and philologist of early Islam, Ibn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819), learned about Taghlibī matters from Abū Ra'shan Khirāsh ibn Ismā'il of the 'Ijl tribe who compiled a monograph about the tribal federation of Rabī'a that included both his own tribe, the 'Ijl and the Taghlib. Khirāsh also reported about a battle that took place in early Islam (the battle of Ṣiffīn, 37/657), which indicates that his scholarly interests covered both the pre- and early Islamic periods. Indeed, tribal genealogists, and in their wake Muslim philologists whose scope was much wider, considered the pre- and early Islamic history of the tribes as an uninterrupted whole.

The members of each tribe shared a notion of common descent from the same eponym. The eponyms in their turn were interconnected by an intricate network of family links that defined the tribal system across Arabia; tribal alliances were often concluded along genealogical lines. From time to time genealogy fluctuated according to changing military, political and ecological

\*\* Both the tribes and their territories are referred to by the Arabic term *bādiya*; one speaks of the *bādiya* of such-and-such settlement.

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circumstances. There were prestigious and famous lineages beside less prestigious ones. For example, detailed information about the Banū Zurāra, a leading family of the Tamīm, is included in a dialogue between a member of this family and an old man who lived in the south-eastern corner of Arabia who nevertheless had an impressive command of the intricacies of Tamīmī genealogy.<sup>466</sup>

By definition, tribal informants were biased and acted in an atmosphere of intertribal competition or even hostility. The formal state of truce that followed the tribes' conversion to Islam generally stopped their resort to violence. But polemics and friction, especially in the garrison cities of Iraq, were often intensified.

The bias of tribal informants must be taken into account and lead to greater prudence in using their reports. It can be demonstrated by the intertribal polemics surrounding the Arab bow of Tamīm's illustrious pre-Islamic leader Ḥājib ibn Zurāra, which holds a place of honour in Tamīm's pre-Islamic history. During a severe drought Ḥājib asked for Khusrau's permission to graze his tribe's herds on the fringes of the sown land in south-western Iraq. As a guarantee of good conduct Ḥājib pledged his bow, an unsophisticated item which nonetheless acquired great value through the eminence and authority of its owner. The Tamīm were very proud of this pledge, which showed the Sasanian emperor adopting their tribal values. Tamīm's adversaries in their turn attempted to belittle the importance of the gesture. 'Had they not been in my opinion of less value than the bow, I would not have taken it,' the emperor is made to say,<sup>467</sup> as if explaining why he did not take Tamīmī hostages instead of a worthless bow. Other anti-Tamīmī informants downgraded the authority with whom Ḥājib had negotiated. One version mentions Iyās ibn Qabiṣa al-Ṭā'ī who was 'Khosro's governor in charge of Ḥīra and the Arabs in its vicinity'; while other versions mention 'the head of the *asāwira*, or heavy cavalry, charged with guarding the border between the Arabs and the Persians'<sup>468</sup> and 'one of Khosro's *marzbāns*', or one of his (military, but also civil) governors.<sup>469</sup> Obviously, tribal polemicists were at work here, and they were anything but innocent.

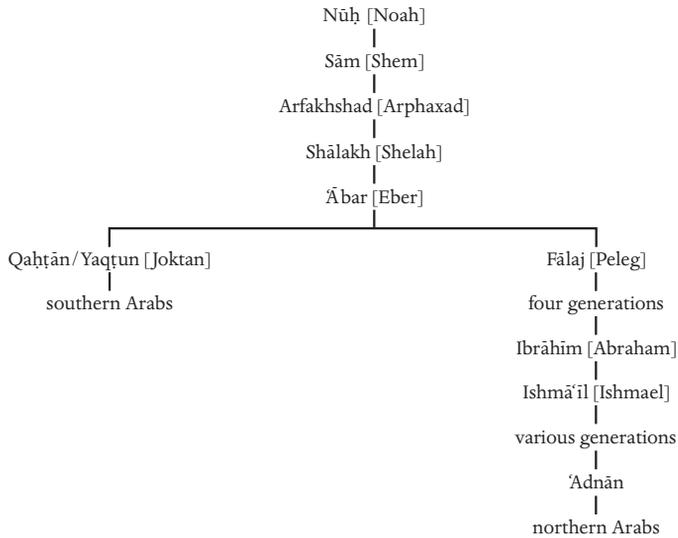
466 Abū l-Baqā' Hibat Allāh al-Ḥillī, *al-Manāqib al-mazyadiyya*, ed. Ṣāliḥ Mūsā Darādika and Muḥammad 'Abd al-Qādir Khriṣāt, 2 vols. (Amman, 1404 AH [1984]), vol. I, p. 353. The late Ḥamad al-Jāsir wrote a monograph entitled *Bāhila al-qabīla l-muftarā 'alayhā* (Riyadh, 1410 AH [1989]). Tribal genealogies remain a delicate matter in contemporary Saudi Arabia.

467 Abū Maṣṣūr al-Tha'ālibī, *Thimār al-qulūb fī l-muḍāf wa-l-mansūb*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm (Cairo, 1965), p. 626.

468 Balādhuṛī, *Ansāb al-ashrāf* (MS Süleymanie Kütüphanesi, Reisülküttap Mustafa Efendi, 597, 598), 960a.

469 Abū l-Baqā', *al-Manāqib al-mazyadiyya*, vol. I, p. 61.

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I. The 'northern' and 'southern' Arabs

Yet another example of tribal bias relates to Muḥammad's tribe, Quraysh, which was considered 'northern' from the genealogical point of view; unsurprisingly, many sources reveal a pro-Qurashī bias. Regarding the takeover of the Ka'ba in Mecca by Muḥammad's ancestor, Quṣayy, it is reported that a member of the Khuḏā'a tribe, which is usually considered a 'southern' tribe, sold the Ka'ba to Quṣayy. As usual, there are several versions regarding the mode of the takeover. However, the specific sale version that concerns us here did not come from an impartial party: it was reportedly promulgated by people fanatically hostile to the 'southern' tribes.<sup>470</sup> The Khuḏā'a did not remain indifferent to this hostile description of a crucial chapter in their tribal history: the historian al-Wāqidi (d. 207/823) concludes a variant of this version with the statement that it was denied by the elders of the Khuḏā'a.<sup>471</sup>

470 Al-Wazīr al-Maghribī, *al-Īnās fī 'ilm al-ansāb*, bound with Ibn Ḥabīb, *Mukhtalif al-qabā'il wa-mu'talifuḥā*, ed. Ḥamad al-Jāsir (Riyadh, 1980), p. 114: 'fa-yaqūlu l-muta'aṣṣibūna 'alā l-Yamaniyya inna Quṣayyan shtarā l-miftah'.

471 Taqī al-Dīn Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-fāsī, *Shifā' al-gharām bi-akhbār al-balad al-ḥarām*, ed. 'Umar 'Abd al-Salām Tadmuri, 2 vols. (Beirut, 1985), vol. II, p. 87.

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## The nomadic and settled populations

Pre-Islamic Arabia was not lawless or wild since an unwritten legal code controlled the life of its people. The law of talion and various security arrangements protected the lives of tribesmen outside their tribal territories.

The boundaries of these territories were generally acknowledged; tribesmen were supposed to know when they left the territories belonging to their tribes. But just like tribal genealogies, tribal boundaries fluctuated to reflect changing circumstances on the ground. A tribe's territory often included enclaves belonging to other tribes, which necessitated cooperation between the tribes involved; indeed, such enclaves could only survive where a clear legal code prevailed.

Although the number of literate people was limited even in the settlements, resort to written documents during the conclusion of alliances and transactions was common.<sup>472</sup> The so-called Constitution of Medina concluded by Muḥammad shortly after the *hijra* shows that complex legal documents and legal terminology in Arabic had existed in Arabia before the advent of Islam.

The genealogical variegation of the settled populations was probably greater than that of the nomads; indeed, one expects the population of a settlement to include several or many tribes. This was the case with the Christian tribal groups living in al-Ḥīra, collectively referred to as al-'Ibād, that preserved their original tribal affiliations. Pre-Islamic Medina provides further evidence of this: several towns in the Medina area were inhabited by *jummā'*, or groups from various tribes. 'The people of Zuhra' (*ahl Zuhra*) and 'the people of Zubāla', to give but two examples of such towns, were described as *jummā'*.<sup>473</sup>

The crucial relationship between the nomadic and settled populations across Arabia took many forms. Due to the size of their territory and their millstone-like roaming around their grazing grounds and water places, the Tamīm were one of the so-called 'millstones of the Arabs' (*arḥā' al-'arab*).<sup>474</sup>

472 See M. Lecker, 'A pre-Islamic endowment deed in Arabic regarding al-Waḥīda in the Ḥijāz', in M. Lecker, *People, tribes and society in Arabia around the time of Muḥammad* (Aldershot, 2005), no. IV.

473 'Alī ibn Aḥmad al-Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-wafā'*, ed. Qāsim al-Sāmarrā'ī, 5 vols. (London and Jedda, 2001), vol. I, pp. 306–8.

474 Ibn Sa'īd al-Andalusī, *Nashwat al-ṭarab bi-ta'rīkh jāhiliyyat al-'arab*, ed. Naṣrat 'Abd al-Raḥmān, 2 vols. (Amman, 1982), vol. I, p. 415.

But even the powerful Tamīmīs were vulnerable to outside pressure since they had to rely on the settlements for part of their subsistence. Their massacre in the battle of Yawm al-Mushaqqar could only take place because of their annual visit to Hajar on the coast of the Persian Gulf in order to receive their provisions.<sup>475</sup>

Sometimes the nomads roaming around a certain settlement and the people of the settlement belonged to the same tribe. The third/ninth-century geographer 'Arrām al-Sulamī's description of the stronghold of Suwāriqiyya south-east of Medina is generally true for pre-Islamic times as well. He says that Suwāriqiyya belonged to the Sulaym tribe alone and that each of the Sulamīs had a share in it. It had fields, dates and other kinds of fruit. The Sulamīs born in Suwāriqiyya lived there, while the others were *bādiya* and roamed around it, supplying food along the pilgrim roads as far as Ḍariyya seven days' journey from Suwāriqiyya.<sup>476</sup> In other words, the Sulamī farmers of Suwāriqiyya tilled the land and tended the irrigation systems, while the Sulamī nomads tended the beasts – above all the camels, which require extensive grazing grounds, and hence cannot be raised in significant numbers by farmers.

The biography of Muḥammad provides further evidence of the cooperation between the nomadic and settled populations. When the Jewish Naḍīr were expelled from Medina several years after the *hijra*, they hired hundreds of camels from a nomadic tribe roaming the vicinity of Medina; in normal circumstances these nomads would be transporting goods on behalf of the

475 Abū Ja'far Muḥammad ibn Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. M. de Goeje et al., 15 vols. in 3 series (Leiden, 1879–1901), series I, p. 985: 'This was close to the days of the *luqāt* [the picking up of dates from the stumps of the branches of palm-trees after the cutting off of the dates]. The Tamīm used to go at that time to Hajar to get provisions and collect the dates left on the trees (*li-l-mīra wa-l-luqāt*).' Hajar was the largest date-producing oasis in northern Arabia. On the connection between *al-mīra wa-l-kayl*, or provisions, and obedience, see M. J. Kister, 'al-Ḥīra: Some notes on its relations with Arabia', *Arabica*, 15 (1968), pp. 143–69, at 168. The Bedouin who came to Yamāma in the holy months (in which no warfare took place) in order to get provisions were called *al-sawāqīt*: Abū 'Ubayda Ma'mar ibn al-Muthannā, *al-Dībāj*, ed. al-Jarbū' and al-'Uthaymīn (Cairo, 1991), p. 53: 'wa-kāna l-sawāqīt min qabā'il shattā wa-summū sawāqīt li-annahum kānū ya'tūna l-Yamāma fī l-ashhuri l-ḥurum li-l-tamr wa-l-zar'. At the time of the Prophet, when a certain Tamīmī came to Hajar in the holy month of Rajab in order to get provisions for his family (*yamīru ahlahu min Hajar*, i.e. as he used to do every year), his wife escaped from him; see e.g. Majd al-Dīn Ibn al-Athīr, *Manāḥ al-ḥālīb fī sharḥ ṭiwāl al-gharā'ib*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad al-Ṭanaḥī (Mecca, 1983), pp. 495–6.

476 'Arrām al-Sulamī, *Asmā' jibāl tihāma*, in 'Abd al-Salām Hārūn (ed.), *Nawādir al-makḥṭūāt*, 2nd edn, vol. II (Cairo, 1973), pp. 431–2; Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Mu'jam al-buldān* (Beirut, 1957), s.v. al-Suwāriqiyya.

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Naḍīr. When the people of al-Khaybar cut off the fruit of their palm trees, the nomads would arrive with their camels and carry it for them to the villages, one camel load after the other (*'urwa bi-'urwa*, literally: one loop of the camel load after the other). The nomads would sell the fruit, keeping for themselves half of the return.<sup>477</sup>

In the battlefield, nomads fought against other nomads, while settled people fought against other settled people. A verse by the Prophet's Companion, the poet Ḥassān ibn Thābit (who was of the Khazraj, a 'southern' tribe) demonstrates this:

Our settled men spare us the village dwellers,  
while our bedouins spare us the bedouins of the Ma'add [i.e. the 'northern'  
tribes].<sup>478</sup>

During the *ridda* wars that followed Muḥammad's death there was a dispute within the Muslim army in al-Yamāma between the settled (*ahl al-qurā*, including the *muhājirūn* and the *anṣār*) and the nomads (*ahl al-bādiya/al-bawādī*), with each accusing the other of cowardice. The settled people claimed that they knew better how to fight against their like, while the nomads said that the settled people were not good fighters and did not know what war was.<sup>479</sup>

The military aspect was dominant in the relationship between the settled and the nomads, as shown by accounts dealing with Muḥammad and his Companions. Friendly nomads were considered Muḥammad's *bādiya*, with reference to their military role. Two tribes living near Medina once asked for Muḥammad's permission to build themselves a mosque in Medina similar to the mosques of other tribes. But he told them that his mosque was also their mosque, that they were his *bādiya* while he was their *ḥaḍīra*, or their settled counterpart (lit., 'people dwelling by waters'), and that they should provide him with succour when called upon to do so.<sup>480</sup> The *hijra* of one of the *bādiya* meant that he had to provide succour when called upon to do so (*an yujiba idhā du'īya*) and to obey orders.<sup>481</sup> A 'good' Bedouin differed from a 'bad' one in that the former provided military aid. When 'Ā'isha mentioned certain Bedouin, pejoratively calling them *a'rāb*, Muḥammad corrected her: 'They

477 Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-wafā'*, vol. II, p. 35.

478 Ḥassān ibn Thābit, *Dīwān*, ed. W. 'Arafat, 2 vols. (London, 1971), vol. I, p. 462, no. 287: 'maḥādirunā yakfūnanā sākina l-qurā [space——], wa-a'rābunā yakfūnanā man tama'dadā.'

479 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'riḫh*, series I, pp. 1946, 1947.

480 Ibn Shabba, *Ta'riḫh al-madīna al-munawwara*, ed. Fahīm Muḥammad Shaltūt, 4 vols. (n.p. [1979]; repr. Beirut, 1990), vol. I, p. 78.

481 Abū 'Ubayd al-Qāsim ibn Sallām, *Kitāb al-amwāl*, ed. Muḥammad Khalīl Harrās (Cairo, 1976), p. 280, no. 538.

are not *a'rāb* but our *bādiya*, while we are their *ḥāḍira*; when summoned, they provide us with succour.<sup>482</sup> A fuller version of this tradition makes it clear that the commitment to give succour was reciprocal.<sup>483</sup>

With regard to the relationship between the nomadic and settled populations the question of ascendancy arises. The conquest of settlements by nomads<sup>484</sup> must have been rare because the latter did not wish to become farmers. But Muḥammad's history shows that in the major military confrontations of his time the initiative was in the hands of his Qurashī enemies, and later in those of Muḥammad himself; this suggests that the ascendancy belonged to the settled people. Let us take for example the military activity of the Sulaym at that time: first they fought with Quraysh against Muḥammad, then they fought with Muḥammad against Quraysh.<sup>485</sup> In both cases the initiative was not theirs, and the same is true of the *ridḍa* wars and the conquests.

Closely linked to the question of ascendancy is that of the food allocations granted by the settled people to the nomads. At first glance they appear to indicate the ascendancy of the latter, but this was not the case. The people of Medina granted an annual share of their date produce to the strong tribal leader of the 'Āmir ibn Ṣa'ṣa'a, Abū Barā' 'Āmir ibn Mālik (nicknamed Mulā'ib al-Asinna, or 'the one playing with spears'). He received from them annually a certain amount (*kayla*) of dates in return for a guarantee of safe conduct for the Medinans travelling in Najd.<sup>486</sup> While protecting the lives and goods of these Medinans, the grant did not give the nomadic Banū 'Āmir ascendancy over the settled Medinans. This state of affairs remains unchanged when other terms are employed in similar contexts. In connection with the conquest (or rather temporary takeover) of Fadak by the nomadic Kalb around 570 CE it is reported that the Kalbī leader involved was entitled to a payment (*ja'āla*) from the people of Fadak. A *ja'āla* is a payment for services such as the return of a missing camel or a fugitive slave. The Tamīm transported Khusrau's caravan from al-Yamāma to the Yemen in return for a *ja'āla*, and the Kalb may well have earned their *ja'āla* for providing similar services. Also, the leader of the Fazāra tribe, 'Uyayna ibn Ḥiṣn, received an annual

482 Ibid., no. 539.

483 Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Maṭālib al-'āliya bi-zawā'id al-masānīd al-thamāniya*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Rahmān al-A'zamī, 4 vols. (Kuwait, 1973), vol. IV, p. 144, no. 4185.

484 See M. J. Kister, 'On the wife of the goldsmith from Fadak and her progeny', *Le Mu'oon*, 92 (1979), pp. 321–30; repr. in M. J. Kister, *Society and religion from Djāhiliyya to Islam* (Aldershot, 1990), no. 5.

485 M. Lecker, *The Banū Sulaym: A contribution to the study of early Islam* (Jerusalem, 1989), pp. 136–7.

486 Ḥassān ibn Thābit, *Dīwān*, vol. II, p. 176. The term *kayla* is derived from the root *k.y.l.*, which denotes a measure of capacity.

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grant from the date produce of Medina. The term used in his case, *itāwa*, sometimes means a tribute or tax. But here it designates an annual grant in kind to a nomadic leader, similar to those referred to by the terms *kayla* and *ja'āla*.

Medina and the other settlements could afford to grant part of their huge surplus of dates to the leaders of large nomadic tribes in order to secure their good will. The size of the grants must have varied according to the harvest and the changing political circumstances on the ground; but even where they amounted to a sizeable part of the annual produce they did not indicate nomadic ascendancy.

## Idol worship

The pre-Islamic Arabs were united by their love of poetry; many of them could probably appreciate the artistic value of the poems recited during major tribal gatherings, for example at the 'Ukāz fair, not far from Ṭā'if. In their daily life, however, they spoke a large number of dialects. Many of them acknowledged the sanctity of the Ka'ba in Mecca and made pilgrimage to it, travelling under the protection of the holy months during which all hostilities ceased. The Arab idol worshippers were polytheists, but they also believed in a High God called Allāh whose house was in the Ka'ba and who had supremacy over their tribal deities.

Despite the diversity in the forms of idol worship, on the whole it was a common characteristic of pre-Islamic Arabian society. In the centuries preceding the advent of Islam Christianity and Judaism were competing with each other for the hearts of the Yemenite polytheists. Medina had a large Jewish population, while al-Yamāma and eastern Arabia had a large Christian one. Christianity, and to a lesser extent Judaism, penetrated several nomadic tribes. The celebrated *ḥanīfs*, or ascetic seekers of true religion who abandoned idol worship, were probably few; moreover, the identification of some of them as *ḥanīfs* is questionable. Several early Tamīmī converts to Islam were former Zoroastrians. However, on the eve of Islam idol worship prevailed, with the prominent exception of the Yemen, considered by medieval Muslim historians to have been predominantly Jewish.

Idols of every shape and material were ubiquitous, and their worship showed no signs of decline. Many conversion stories regarding both former custodians of idols and ordinary worshippers specifically refer to a shift from idol worship to Islam.

The most common deity was the household idol. Several conversion accounts that prove the proliferation of household idols in Mecca are

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associated with its conquest by Muḥammad (8/630). Al-Wāqidi adduces legendary accounts about the destruction of household idols. While the accounts aim at establishing the Islamic credentials of their protagonists, the background details are credible. One account has it that after the conquest of Mecca, Muḥammad's announcer ordered the destruction of every idol found in the houses. So whenever 'Ikrima ibn Abī Jahl (who belonged to the Qurashī branch Makhzūm) heard of an idol in one of the houses of Quraysh, he went there in order to smash it; it is specifically stated in this context that every Qurashī in Mecca had an idol in his house. In al-Wāqidi's account we find that the announcer proclaimed that every idol had to be destroyed or burnt, and that it was forbidden to sell them (i.e. to sell wooden idols to be used as firewood). The informant himself saw the idols being carried around Mecca (i.e. by peddlers); the Bedouin used to buy them and take them to their tents. Every Qurashī, we are told, had an idol in his house. He stroked it whenever he entered or left the house to draw a blessing from it.

Yet another account in the same source has it that when Hind bint 'Utba (the mother of the future Umayyad caliph Mu'āwiyā) embraced Islam, she started striking an idol in her house with an adze, cutting oblong pieces from it.<sup>487</sup> She probably destroyed her wooden idol using the very tool with which it had been carved. The authors of the legendary accounts about 'Ikrima and Hind sought to emphasise the zeal of these new converts, but the background information is accurate: idols were found in all Meccan households.

In Medina, which was in many ways different from Mecca, idols were associated with various levels of the tribal organisation. A house idol made of wood was an obstacle for Abū Ṭalḥa of the Khazraj when he proposed to his future wife. She refused to marry 'one who worshipped a stone which did neither harm nor good and a piece of wood hewed for him by a carpenter'.<sup>488</sup> Several young Medinans from both of the dominant Arab tribes of Medina, the Aws and Khazraj, smashed the idols found among their fellow tribesmen. Here too household idols were the most common form of idol worship. We have some evidence about the attributes of one of the Medinan household idols. Before one of them was destroyed with an adze, it had to be brought down, which indicates that it had been placed in an elevated place such as a shelf; the same idol had a veil hung over it.

One level up from the household idols we find those belonging to noblemen. Every nobleman in Medina owned an idol that had a name of its own.

487 Muḥammad ibn 'Umar al-Wāqidi, *Kitāb al-maghāzī*, ed. Marsden Jones, 3 vols. (London, 1966), vol. II, pp. 870–1.

488 Ibn Sa'd, *al-Ṭabaqāt al-kubrā*, 8 vols. (Beirut, 1960–8), vol. VIII, pp. 425–6.

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In addition, *batns*, or small tribal groups, had idols which, similarly, had names. The *batn*'s idol was placed in a sanctuary (*bayt*) and belonged to the whole *batn* (*li-jamā'ati l-batn*). Sacrifices were offered to it. One level above the *batns* in the tribal system of Medina stood the major subdivisions of the Aws and Khazraj. Evidence has so far emerged regarding the idol of one such subdivision: the Banū al-Ḥārith ibn al-Khazraj had an idol called Huzam that was placed in their *majlis*, or place of assembly, similarly called Huzam. One assumes that sacrifices were also offered to Huzam, since sacrifices were offered to the lower-level idols of the *batns*. The idol al-Khamīs was worshipped by the Khazraj,<sup>489</sup> while al-Sa'īda, which was located on Mount Uḥud north of Medina, was worshipped, among others, by the Azd – no doubt including the Aws and Khazraj, which belonged to the Azd.<sup>490</sup> At the top of the hierarchy of the idols worshipped by the Aws and Khazraj stood Manāt. A descendant of Muḥammad's Companion Sa'd ibn 'Ubāda reports that Sa'd's grandfather annually donated ten slaughter camels to Manāt. Sa'd's father followed suit, and so did Sa'd himself before his conversion to Islam. Sa'd's son, Qays, donated the same number of camels to the Ka'ba.<sup>491</sup> The report is not concerned with idol worship as such but with generosity, prestige and tribal leadership. Sa'd's donation of sacrifice camels to Manāt before his conversion to Islam shows that its cult continued to the very advent of Islam.

Household idols were ubiquitous in Medina, as in Mecca; noblemen, *batns* and major Aws and Khazraj subdivisions had idols. The Khazraj as a whole worshipped a special idol; the Aws and Khazraj were among the worshippers of another, and they were still worshipping their main idol, Manāt, when Muḥammad appeared. All this does not indicate a decline in idol worship.

Expressing his opinion about the influence of monotheism on the Arabs before Islam, Ibn Ishāq says that 'it was merely superficial; the Arabs were illiterate and what they heard from Jews and Christians had no effect on their lives'. With regard to idol worship his statement is trustworthy.

## Foreign powers

Pre-Islamic Arabia and its tribes were not isolated from the great empires of Byzantium and Persia, with the latter probably playing a more significant

489 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, series I, p. 1085.

490 Muḥammad ibn Ḥabīb, *Kiṭāb al-muḥabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstaedter (Hyderabad, 1361 [1942]; repr. Beirut, n.d.), pp. 316–17.

491 Ibn 'Abd al-Barr, *al-Istī'āb fī ma'rīfat al-aṣḥāb*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, 4 vols. (Cairo, n.d.), vol. II, p. 595.

role. The Byzantine emperor, for example, is said to have been instrumental in the takeover of Mecca from the Khuzā'a tribe by Muḥammad's ancestor Quṣayy.<sup>492</sup>

The Byzantines and Sasanians conducted their Arabian affairs through their respective Arab buffer kingdoms, Ghassān and al-Ḥīra. The king of al-Ḥīra appointed governors to the frontiers from Iraq to Baḥrayn, each of whom ruled together with a Bedouin leader who was in fact his subordinate.<sup>493</sup>

The same pattern was found in Oman: a treaty between the Sasanians and the Julandā family concluded in the second half of the sixth century stipulated that the Sasanians were entitled to station with the 'kings' of the Azd four thousand men including *marzbāns* (military, but also civil, governors) and *asāwira* (heavy cavalry), and an *ʿāmil* or official. The Sasanians were stationed in the coastal regions, while the Azd were 'kings' in the mountains, in the deserts and in the other areas surrounding Oman.<sup>494</sup> In other words, authority was divided between the Arabs and the Sasanians along geographical lines.

In Baḥrayn there was an Arab governor, with a Sasanian superior. Al-Mundhir ibn Sāwā al-Tamīmī is said to have been the governor of Baḥrayn. But the historian al-Balādhurī (d. 279/892) draws a clear line at this point between Sasanians and Arabs: 'The land of Baḥrayn is part of the Persian kingdom and there were in it many Arabs from the tribes of 'Abd al-Qays, Bakr ibn Wā'il and Tamīm living in its *bādiya*. At the time of the Prophet, al-Mundhir ibn Sāwā was in charge of the Arabs living there on behalf of the Persians.'<sup>495</sup> At the same time Baḥrayn had a Sasanian governor who was al-Mundhir's superior, namely Sībukht, the *marzbān* of Hajar.<sup>496</sup> On the eve of Islam the Yemen was under direct Sasanian control.

Roughly until the middle of the sixth century Medina was controlled by a *marzbān* whose seat was in al-Zāra on the coast of the Persian Gulf. The Jewish tribes Naḍir and Qurayza were 'kings', and exacted tribute from the Aws and

492 Ibn Qutayba, *al-Ma'ārif*, ed. Tharwat 'Ukāsha (Cairo, 1969), pp. 640–1; quoted in M. J. Kister, 'Mecca and the tribes of Arabia', in M. Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Islamic history and civilization in honour of David Ayalon* (Jerusalem and Leiden, 1986), p. 50; repr. in Kister, *Society and religion*, no. 2. Cf. 'Uthmān ibn al-Huwayrith's attempt to gain control of Mecca on behalf of the Byzantine emperor: Kister, 'al-Ḥīra', p. 154.

493 Abū l-Baqā', *al-Manāqib al-mazydiyya*, vol. II, p. 369.

494 J. C. Wilkinson, 'Arab–Persian land relationships in late Saṣānid Oman', in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies*, 3 (1973), pp. 41, 44–7.

495 Al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ*, ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1863–6), p. 78: 'wa-kāna 'alā l-'arab biḥā min qibali l-furs'.

496 His name and title appear in connection with a letter allegedly sent by the Prophet to both al-Mundhir ibn Sāwā and Sībukht *marzbān* Hajar, calling upon them to embrace Islam or pay the poll-tax.

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Khazraj on behalf of the Sasanians. In the last quarter of the sixth century the king of al-Ḥīra, al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir, declared a member of the Khazraj, 'Amr ibn al-It̤nāba, king of Medina or of the Ḥijāz.<sup>497</sup> At that time the Jews were no longer 'kings' and tribute collectors, but tribute payers. 'Amr's appointment shows that Sasanian control in western Arabia continued in the latter half of the sixth century. Sasanian control there is also associated with al-Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir's father, al-Mundhir III (c. 504–54): the Sasanian emperor Khusrau I Anūshirwān (r. 531–79) made him king of the Arabs living between Oman, Baḥrayn and al-Yamāma to al-Ṭā'if and the rest of the Ḥijāz.<sup>498</sup>

Caravan trade was often behind the cooperation between certain nomadic tribes and the Sasanians. The Sulaym and the Hawāzin used to conclude pacts with the kings of al-Ḥīra, transport the kings' merchandise and sell it for them at the fair at 'Ukāz, among others.<sup>499</sup> With regard to the above-mentioned battle of Yawm al-Mushaqqar it is reported that Khusrau's caravan, having travelled from Ctesiphon via al-Ḥīra, was escorted by the Tamīm from al-Yamāma to the Yemen.

The evidence regarding military cooperation (or indeed any other form of cooperation) between the tribes and the courts of Ctesiphon and al-Ḥīra reveals a certain tension between the wish to praise the tribe's military exploits, even those carried out in the service of a foreign power, and the claim of independence from the same power; tribal historiography attempted to distance the tribes from the influence of the courts, while at the same time boasting of the close contacts between them.

Many Arabs probably saw the local representatives of the great power from behind bars: the kings of al-Ḥīra practised widespread incarceration as punishment and as a means of pressure. There were jails or incarceration camps at al-Qutqutāna in south-western Iraq and at al-Ḥīra itself.<sup>500</sup>

The Tamīm, the Taghlib and others took part in the institution of *ridāfa* (viceroyship) to the king of al-Ḥīra, which was essential in establishing al-Ḥīra's control over the tribes. The ceremonial and material privileges associated with it (perhaps exaggerated by the tribal informants) helped in buying

497 Kister, 'al-Ḥīra', pp. 147–9; Lecker, *People, tribes and society in Arabia*, index. It would seem that at that time Medina was no longer controlled from al-Zāra but directly from Ḥīra.

498 Al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, series I, pp. 958–9.

499 Abū l-Baqā', *al-Manāqib al-mazyadīyya*, vol. II, p. 375.

500 Abū Ḥatīm al-Sijistānī, *al-Mu'ammārūna*, bound with *Al-Waṣāyā* by the same author, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Amir (Cairo, 1961), pp. 20–2. 'Adī ibn Zayd was jailed at al-Ṣinnayn: al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, series I, p. 1023. A poet who lived in the transition period between *jāhiliyya* and Islam (*mukhaḍram*) was jailed by the Sasanians at al-Mushaqqar: Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, *al-Iṣāba fī tamyīz al-ṣaḥāba*, ed. 'Alī Muḥammad al-Bijāwī, 8 vols. (Cairo, [1970]), vol. II, p. 513.

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off potentially dangerous tribes. Through trade, military cooperation and diplomacy Arab tribal leaders and merchants became acquainted with the courts of the buffer kingdoms and the great empires.

## Mecca: trade and agriculture

Mecca and Medina, thanks to their association with the history of the Prophet Muḥammad and the rise of Islam, are better known to us than many other settlements in Arabia that may well have been larger, wealthier and more populous.

Mecca and its dominant tribe, Quraysh, reveal a high degree of internal cohesion; but Mecca's stability was in fact based on the preservation of a balance of power between two rival alliances of Quraysh rather than on any sense of tribal solidarity. As one can expect, in accounts of Mecca's pre-Islamic history – for example, concerning the establishment of its international caravan trade – the Prophet's ancestors receive more credit than is due to them. In any case, this trade was not a myth, but was Mecca's main source of revenue, regardless of the items and the income involved. In Arabian terms Mecca was a major trade centre, although it is impossible to establish whether or not it was the largest of its kind in Arabia.

Crossing evidence shows that the Prophet himself had been a merchant before receiving his first revelation. Trade partnerships were a significant aspect of the economic cooperation between Quraysh and the tribe controlling Ṭā'if, the Thaḳīf. Reportedly, the Qurashī Abū Sufyān and the Thaḳafī Ghaylān ibn Salama traded with Persia, accompanied by a group of people from both tribes.<sup>501</sup> Both were Muḥammad's contemporaries.

In addition to trade, the entrepreneurial Qurashīs invested in agriculture. Since conditions in Mecca itself were uninviting for agriculture, they looked for opportunities elsewhere. It can be argued that the Qurashī expansion in Arabia preceded the advent of Islam.

There is a legendary story about the death of Ḥarb ibn Umayya, the father of the above-mentioned Abū Sufyān and the grandfather of the caliph Mu'āwiya. He was reportedly killed by the *jinn* at al-Qurayya north-west of Mecca, since together with a local partner he disturbed the *jinn* or killed one of them by mistake. This occurred while they were clearing a thicket in order to prepare the land for cultivation. The story probably owes its preservation to

<sup>501</sup> Abū Hilāl al-ʿAskarī, *al-Awā'il*, ed. Muḥammad al-Miṣrī and Walīd Qaṣṣāb, 2 vols. (Damascus, 1975), vol. II, p. 228.

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the legendary elements; but the background details are no doubt factual.<sup>502</sup> There is rich evidence of pre-Islamic Qurashī involvement in agriculture in Ṭāʾif, the town that supplied (and still supplies) most of Mecca's demand for fruit;<sup>503</sup> hence its appellation *bustān al-ḥaram*, or the orchard of the sacred territory of Mecca.<sup>504</sup> Side by side with the locals who cultivated small tracts of land, Qurashī entrepreneurs developed large estates in the valleys of Ṭāʾif before the advent of Islam. Many Bedouin of the Qays ʿAylān and other tribes earned their living by transporting Ṭāʾifī products to Mecca. At Nakhla north-east of Mecca a caravan carrying wine, tanned skins and raisins<sup>505</sup> on its way from Ṭāʾif to Mecca was attacked shortly after the *hijra* by the Prophet's Companions.

The best known and perhaps the largest Qurashī property in the vicinity of Ṭāʾif is al-Waḥṭ, which is located in the valley of Wajj. The father of the Prophet's Companion ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ owned this estate before Islam. ʿAmr further developed it by raising the shoots of many thousands of grape-vines on pieces of wood made to support them.<sup>506</sup>

Numerous other Qurashīs owned estates near Ṭāʾif. They included, among others, Abū Sufyān, ʿUtba and Shayba sons of Rabīʿa ibn ʿAbd Shams, the Prophet's uncle al-ʿAbbās and al-Walīd ibn al-Walīd ibn al-Mughīra (the brother of the famous general Khālīd ibn al-Walīd).

The Muslim conquests in Palestine and elsewhere are unlikely to have been accompanied by large-scale devastation of agricultural land and facilities, since ʿAmr ibn al-ʿĀṣ and the other Qurashī generals had previous experience with agriculture and appreciated the economic value of cultivated land.

## Medina: a precarious balance

The cluster of towns or villages known before Islam as Yathrib was called after the town of Yathrib on its north-western side. Under Islam the cluster

502 After the *hijra* it was one of Muḥammad's companions, Ṭalḥa, who introduced the sowing of wheat in Medina, while another companion, ʿAbdallāh ibn ʿĀmir, was famous for his talent for discovering water sources.

503 Muḥammad ibn ʿAbd al-Munʿim al-Ḥimyarī, *al-Rawḍ al-miʿtār fī khabar al-aqṭār*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Beirut, 1975), p. 379a.

504 Muḥammad ibn Iṣḥāq al-fākihī, *Akhbār Makka*, ed. ʿAbd al-Malik ibn ʿAbdallāh ibn Duḥaysh, 6 vols. (Mecca, 1987), vol. III, p. 206.

505 Wāqidi, *Maghāzī*, vol. I, p. 16.

506 fākihī, *Akhbār Makka*, vol. III, p. 205 (read ʿarrasha instead of *gharasa*); Yāqūt, *Buldān*, s.v. al-Waḥṭ.

became known as al-Madīna. Major political and military upheavals preceding the *hijra* contributed to Muḥammad's success there in ways that are not yet fully clear.

Medina's large Jewish population was dispersed in both the Sāfila, or Lower Medina, in the north and the 'Āliya, or Upper Medina, in the south. The Qurayza and Naḏīr are said to have inhabited the 'Āliya, while a third large tribe, the Qaynuqā', lived in the Sāfila. But the Naḏīr probably owned estates outside the 'Āliya as well: the town of Zuhra is defined as the town of the Naḏīr (*qaryat banī l-naḏīr*); moreover, one of their notables, Ka'b ibn al-Ashraf, owned land in al-Jurf north-west of Medina, at the upper part of the 'Aqīq valley.<sup>507</sup>

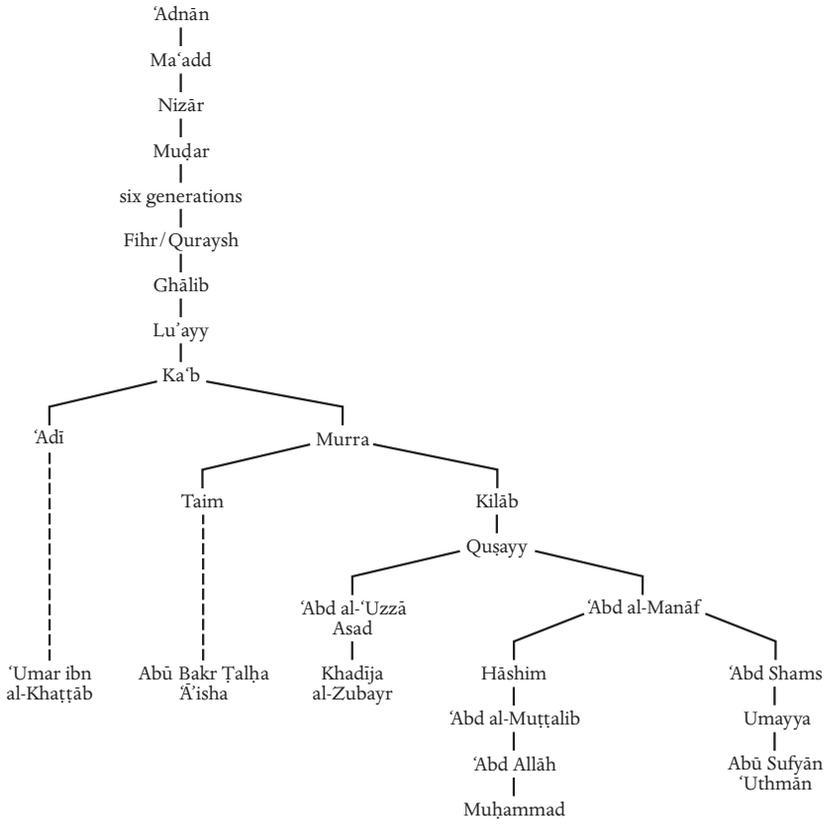
The oldest stratum in the Arab population of Medina was made up of members of the Balī and of other tribes, many of whom converted to Judaism. The Aws and Khazraj, who settled in Medina at a later stage, became known under Islam by the honorific appellation *al-anṣār* (the helpers). Unlike the earlier Arab settlers, most of the Aws and Khazraj remained idol worshippers. When they settled in Medina, their position vis-à-vis the Jewish tribes was weak. But gradually they gained strength, built fortresses and planted date orchards. The *anṣār* were ridiculed by other tribes for their initial subjection by the Jews, particularly with regard to the Arab Jewish king al-Fityawn, 'the owner of Zuhra' (*ṣāḥib Zuhra*),<sup>508</sup> who reportedly practised the *ius prima noctis* on the Arab women. No wonder that al-Fityawn figures prominently in *anṣārī* apologetic historiography. Admitting their initial weakness, they claimed that it came to an end with the killing of al-Fityawn by a member of the Khazraj; from that moment onward the Jews were at the mercy of their former clients. However, *anṣārī* historiography should be taken with a grain of salt. The Jews suffered a setback, or the Khazraji 'Amr ibn al-Iṭnāba would not have become the king of Yathrib in the last quarter of the sixth century. But by the advent of Islam the main Jewish tribes Naḏīr and Qurayza had regained their power, as is shown by their victory at the battle of Bu'āth (615 or 617), together with their Awsī allies, over the powerful Khazraj.

'Amr ibn al-Iṭnāba and al-Fityawn were not the only kings in Medina before Islam. Several generations before Islam there lived there a king called Ama ibn Ḥarām of the Khazraj subdivision called Salima whose powers included the confiscation and redistribution of agricultural land.

<sup>507</sup> In due course Muḥammad himself owned agricultural land in al-Jurf.

<sup>508</sup> Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 24 vols. (Cairo, 1927–74), vol. III, p. 40.

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2. The Quraysh

On the eve of Islam a member of the Khazraj, 'Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy, was nearly crowned. Mas'ūdī reports: 'The Khazraj were superior to the Aws shortly before the advent of Islam and intended to crown 'Abd Allāh ibn Ubayy ibn Salūl al-Khazrajī. This coincided with the arrival of the Prophet and his kingship ceased to exist.'<sup>509</sup>

Ibn Ubayy did not fight against the Jewish–Awsī coalition at Bu'āth, where his tribe, the Khazraj, was defeated. After Bu'āth he was the strongest leader among the Khazraj, and he showed great diplomatic skill in re-establishing the system of alliances that had existed before Bu'āth. In this

509 Quoted in Ibn Sa'īd, *Nashwat al-ṭarab*, vol. I, p. 190.

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system the Naḍīr were allied with the Khazraj,<sup>510</sup> while the Qurayza were allied with the Aws. At the time of the *hijra* the Naḍīr and Qurayza were the main owners of fortresses and weapons in Medina, which made them the dominant power there.

<sup>510</sup> Samhūdī, *Wafā' al-wafā'*, vol. I, pp. 387–8, provides valuable evidence on the aftermath of Bu'āth.