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Kingdoms or Dynasties? Arabs, History, and Identity before Islam¹

This study examines the evidence for three small but prominent groups of Arabs in the fifth and sixth centuries—the Jafnids, allied to the Roman Empire, the Naṣrids, allied to the Sasanians, and the Ḥujrids, client rulers of the kingdom of Himyar, but equally subject to pressure from the Romans and Sasanians. It explores the numerous problems that have impeded efforts to produce a balanced assessment of these peoples, including source-critical, historiographical, and ideological pressures. It also highlights the long-held attachment of each group to a “people,” the Jafnids to Ghassān, the Naṣrids to Lakhm, and the Ḥujrids to Kinda, connections that have produced a misleading impression of kingdoms or stable polities under each name. The evidence only allows us to describe family dynasties composed of small groups of individuals. Finally, highlighting the importance of the framework of imperial power in any analysis of the late antique east, it offers some thoughts on what the evidence discussed here suggests for our understanding of Arab identities before Islam.

The historical dominance of the Muslim Arabs after the mid-seventh century has, perhaps inevitably, overshadowed the history of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. For much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the role and place of the Arabs in the fifth and sixth centuries remained an overlooked topic, and only a very small number of highly-specialised works were dedicated to it.² This situation has now changed somewhat, a product of an effort

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² Theodor Nöldeke, *Die Ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafnas* (Berlin, 1887); Gustav Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Ḥira: Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (Berlin, 1899); François Nau, *Les Arabes chrétiens de Mésopotamie et de Syrie du VII^e au VIII^e siècle* (Paris, 1933); Henri Charles, *Le christianisme des Arabes nomades sur le limes et dans le désert Syro-Mésopotamien aux alentours de l’Hégire* (Paris, 1936); John Trimingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs in Pre-Islamic Times* (New York, 1979).



The Arabian peninsula, from G. Fisher, Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity (Oxford, 2011), 85, after Christian Robin, “Les Arabes de Ḥimyar, des ‘Romains’ et des Perses (III^e–VI^e siècles de l’ère chrétienne),” SEC 1 (2008), 168. Map drawn by Mat Dalton.

to introduce new perspectives to the study of the Arabs of the fifth and sixth centuries. One of the major products of this trend has been to situate the Arabs in contact with Rome and Sasanian Iran, for whom there is the most abundant evidence, within the broader schemes of the history of Late Antiquity, viewing them just as much as barbarian imperial allies as the antecedents of those who would go on to conquer the Near East after the seventh century. This advance has opened up a variety of new critical perspectives that reflect similar progress made for the study of western barbarians.³ Looking laterally

³ Drawing on e.g., Walter Pohl, ed., *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity* (Leiden, 1997); Walter Pohl, Helmut Reimitz, eds., *Strategies of Distinction:*

at the important influences of Roman and Sasanian frameworks of power has helped to remove some of the imposing sense of later Muslim Arab identity, connected to political dominance in the Near East, the Arabic language, and Islam, from the problem. It has also helped to spread the focus across the different source components now accessible and that were unavailable to earlier scholars such as Theodor Nöldeke and Gustav Rothstein.⁴ Introducing these different contexts has allowed scholars to begin a reassessment of Arab identity before Islam.⁵

Despite these advances, many questions and difficulties remain. Not least of these is the fact that writing the history of any particular group of Arabs in Late Antiquity depends on challenging and sparse source material, largely produced by external observers and dependent on the ethnographic and literary conventions of the time. There are many terminological problems: what, for example, should be understood by words such as “tribe” and “state,”⁶ or even “Arab,” a label that possessed a bewildering number of associations in

The Construction of Ethnic Communities, 300–800 (Leiden, 1998); Peter Heather, *Goths and Romans, 332–489* (Oxford, 1991); Herwig Wolfram, *Das Reich und die Germanen* (Berlin, 1990).

⁴ Detailed studies, e.g., Averil Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (London, 1996); Michael Whitby, “Greek Historical Writing after Procopius: Variety and Vitality,” in Averil Cameron, Geoffrey King, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East, 1: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, 1992), 25–80; theoretical studies: Christopher Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore, 1994); comparative studies: Philip Khoury, Joseph Kostiner, eds., *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East* (Berkeley, 1990).

⁵ See in particular Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs. From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London, 2001); Idem, “Arab Kings, Arab Tribes, Arabic Texts and the Beginnings of (Muslim) Arab Historical Memory in Late Roman Inscriptions,” in Hannah Cotton, Robert Hoyland, Jonathan Price, David Wasserstein, eds., *From Hellenism to Islam: Cultural and Linguistic Change in the Roman Near East* (Cambridge, 2009), 374–400; Idem, “Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity,” in Petra Sijpesteijn, Lennart Sundelin, Sofia Tovar, Amalia Zomeño, eds., *From Al-Andalus to Khurasan: Documents from the Medieval Islamic World* (Leiden, 2007), 219–42; Idem, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur’ān,” in Gabriel Reynolds, ed., *The Qur’ān in its Historical Context* (London, 2008), 51–70; Idem, “Late Roman Provincia Arabia, Monophysite Monks and Arab Tribes: A Problem of Centre and Periphery,” *SEC 2* (2009), 117–39. See as well Hugh Kennedy, *The Great Arab Conquests* (London, 2007); Christian Robin, “Les Arabes de Himyar, des ‘Romains’ et des Perses (III^e-VI^e siècles de l’ère chrétienne),” *SEC 1* (2008), 167–208; Idem, “Le royaume Hujride, dit ‘royaume de Kinda,’ entre Himyar et Byzance,” *CRAI* (1996), 665–714; Fergus Millar, “Rome’s Arab Allies in Late Antiquity: Conceptions and Representations from Within the Frontiers of the Empire,” in Henning Börm, J. Wiesehöfer, eds., *Commutatio et Contentio: Studies in the Late Roman, Sasanian, and Early Islamic Near East, In Memory of Zeev Rubin* (Dusseldorf, 2010), 199–226; Fergus Millar, “The Theodosian Empire (408–450) and the Arabs: Saracens or Ishmaelites?,” in Erich Gruen, ed., *Cultural Borrowings and Ethnic Appropriations in Antiquity* (Stuttgart, 2005), 297–314. Most recently, Greg Fisher, *Between Empires: Arabs, Romans, and Sasanians in Late Antiquity* (Oxford, 2011).

⁶ Discussion of complexity of definitions in, most recently, Jeffrey Szuchman, “Integrating Approaches to Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East,” in Jeffrey Szuchman, ed., *Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East: Cross Disciplinary Perspectives* (Chicago, 2008), 1–14.

antiquity.⁷ These and other difficulties mean that there remains a very real danger that any modern study seeking to understand any aspect of the Arabs before Islam will suffer from distortion, either because of problems with the source material or, indeed, as a result of modern ideological pressures.

The monumental study of Irfan Shahid, which began with *Rome and the Arabs* in 1984, is an enduring testament to these issues and has formed a nexus of sorts for ideologically-driven views of the past.⁸ For example, largely (but not exclusively) through Shahid's work, Arabic was put forward as an important component of a pre-Islamic Arab identity, without any recourse to modern studies on the links between language and identity in the ancient world, or an examination of the development of Old Arabic. Shahid's work has also helped to cement the idea of "kingdoms" of Ghassānids and Lakhmids, linked respectively to the pro-Roman Jafnid and pro-Sasanian Naṣrid family dynasties, as examples of powerful groups of Arabs before Islam, elevated from indistinct groups of people into discrete polities and separate entities within the late antique world.

These ideas have proved at times popular, credible, and highly persuasive, and the present author is not immune.⁹ They were often, but not always, drawn or distorted out of the Muslim histories of the pre-Islamic period, and sometimes influenced by more recent histories dealing with the formation of national and ethnic identities, which tried to identify easily-categorised "national" groups. They are attractive, also, because they give body to inadequate and difficult ancient source material; but they are also misleading. The reasons for their appearance in modern histories range from blithe assumption and uncritical use of sources, to, in Shahid's case, at least, attempts to create a certain representation of the past that aggrandises the Arabs before Islam as worthy Christian ancestors of the Muslims. There certainly have been serious attempts to try to explain later Arab political dominance and the important role of Arabic in creating Arab identity, by seeking out similar phenomena in the pre-Islamic period, but without any real view to whether or not they actually existed. The result has been distortive, and the importance of both has been overestimated. This does not mean that Arabic was not important for Arabs, nor does it mean that there were no politically astute or powerful Arabs, and nor does it mean that there was no Arab identity in the sixth century; but it is now clear that we

⁷ Michael Macdonald, "Arabs, Arabias, and Arabic before Late Antiquity," *Topoi*, 16/1 (2009), 277–332.

⁸ Irfan Shahid, *Rome and the Arabs. A Prolegomenon to The Study of Byzantium and the Arabs* (Washington, 1984), continued by *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Washington, 1984), *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, 1989), *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, (Washington, 1995, 2002, 2010).

⁹ Greg Fisher, "The Political Development of the Ghassan between Rome and Iran," *JLA* 1/2 (2008), 313–36, where the evidence for Ghassān was overinterpreted.

must be much more circumspect about the source material, and be more aware of the ideological influences which have affected the ways in which we perceive and discuss this extremely complex topic.

This paper will briefly survey the problems involved in writing about the Arabs before Islam, focusing on those who were a part of the Roman and Sasanian Near East. Building on ideas originally advanced by Christian Robin, it will emphasise why it is preferable to talk of elite dynasties—the so-called Jafnids, Naṣrids, and Ḥujrids—and not kingdoms, and it will provide an overview of what can be said of each group of individuals. It will become clear that any argument that seeks to discern entities such as the “Ghassānid” kingdom rests on very tenuous evidence. Finally, it will offer some thoughts on what conclusions we might draw about Arab identity in the sixth century in light of what is discussed here.

A Series of Problems

Any study of the pre-Islamic Arabs confronts a wide array of difficulties. Source material is scarce, consisting of brief mentions in Roman classicizing authors, such as Procopius or Menander, who tend to write about the Arabs only when they impinge on part of their wider political or diplomatic narrative; ecclesiastical historians, whose focus is on conversion narratives and the translation of the barbarous peoples of the desert into a Christian, civilized empire; and others, such as chroniclers and those, like Photius, excerpting older works. Most difficult to assess is arguably the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus, a personal, polemical work which features the Arab allies of the Roman Empire refracted through the lens of John’s passionate opposition to the Chalcedonians, and which exaggerates the anti-Chalcedonian position of the pro-Roman Jafnid Arabs in his narrative.¹⁰ Archaeological material is also extremely sparse, and the unstable political situation throughout much of the Middle East remains the main impediment to adequate archaeological study. For example, despite promising attempts in the 1930s, al-Ḥīrah, in Iraq, the reputed “base” of the Arabs allied with Sasanian Iran, has yet to be investigated in any detail, and the location of Jabiya, the presumed center of activity for the Roman-allied Arabs, has never been conclusively identified.¹¹ Archaeological material from the Arabian peninsula has yielded a greater share of information, particularly through the discovery and publication of

¹⁰ See Joop van Ginkel, “John of Ephesus: A Monophysite Historian in Sixth-Century Byzantium” (D.Litt. thesis, Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, 1995).

¹¹ David Talbot Rice, “Hira,” *JRCAS* 19 (1932), 254–68; Idem, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira,” *AI* 1/1 (1934), 51–73; Idem, “The Oxford Excavations at Hira, 1931,” *Antiquity* 6 (1932), 276–91. Jabiya: Maurice Sartre, *Trois études sur l’Arabie romaine et byzantine* (Brussels, 1982), 120–99.

inscriptions concerned with the activities of the kingdom of Ḥimyar. The study of these inscriptions is a highly-specialised endeavour because of the scripts and languages used.¹² Aside from the material concerning the Jafnids (on which more below), the corpus of Syro-Arabian “Safaitic” graffiti and a very small group of mostly Latin and Greek inscriptions concentrated in Syria and Jordan provide most of the information on the otherwise-unknown Arabs who occasionally came to the attention of the empire in those regions.¹³ A sole inscription from Kurdistan is, it seems, the only epigraphic evidence from the Sasanian Empire to deal with their Arab allies.¹⁴

Another category of sources, the writings of Muslim authors, offer a great deal of information on aspects of pre-Islamic history for which we have no other source. We are, for example, dependent on al-Ṭabarī’s work for some of the descriptions of al-Ḥīrah, and on Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī (d. after 349 CE/961 AH) and Yāqūt (d. 626 CE/1229 AH) for accounts of the buildings said to have been erected by Ghassān or those connected with them. These accounts are by no means to be dismissed, and they have been applied in, for example, assessments of the Meccan leather trade and the Sasanian conquest of Ḥimyar.¹⁵ They can, though, easily introduce a distorting effect because of the manner in which a variety of theological and political concerns affected the way that the events and peoples of the pre-Islamic period were perceived and explained.¹⁶ Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī’s list, for example, is distinctly embroidered, and may have more to do with a desire to elevate the Jafnids or Ghassān within a context of an imagined pre-Islamic regal past, than to provide an actual list of real buildings. The occasionally uncritical use of this list has created numerous phantom buildings connected to the Jafnids, but that are otherwise unsupported by other literary or archaeological evidence.¹⁷ The material contained in the pre-Islamic

¹² See Christian Robin, “Inventaire des documents épigraphiques provenant du royaume de Ḥimyar aux IV^e-VI^e siècles,” in Jérémie Schiettecatte, Christian Robin, eds., *L’Arabie à la veille de l’Islam: Bilan Clinique* (Paris, 2009), 165–216.

¹³ Safaitic graffiti: Michael Macdonald, “Reflections on the linguistic map of Pre-Islamic Arabia,” *AAE* 11/1 (2000), 28–79; Greek and Latin, generally: Samuel Thomas Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier* (Winona Lake, IN, 1986).

¹⁴ Helmut Humbach, Prods Skaervo, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli* (Wiesbaden, 1983).

¹⁵ Patricia Crone, “Quraysh and the Roman Army: Making Sense of the Meccan Leather Trade,” *BSOAS* 70 (2007), 63–88; Zeev Rubin, “Islamic Traditions on the Sasanian Conquest of the Himyarite Realm,” *Der Islam* 84 (2008), 185–99.

¹⁶ See R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History. A Framework for Inquiry* (London, 1991); Albrecht Noth, with Lawrence Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition. A Source-Critical Study*, Michael Bonner, tr. (Princeton, 1994); Fred Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, 1998).

¹⁷ Discussed by Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* 2/1, 306–46, and Sartre, *Trois études*, 178–88. Sober assessment: Denis Genequand “Some Thoughts on Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, Its Dam, Its Monastery and the Ghassanids,” *Levant*, 38 (2006), 63–84.

oral poetry corpus, or the sometimes invented and embellished battle stories known as the *ayyām al-‘arab*,¹⁸ also played a part in the construction of early ideas about the past. These sources must be used with great care.¹⁹ There are also difficulties for late antique Romanists seeking to work with these sources, because rarely is a Roman historian also an Arabist, and vice versa. At any rate, the issue is a significant, complex, and an occasionally divisive one, and the comments here are intended only to point to the most obvious dangers that result from an uncritical use of Muslim sources. The most sensible approach is to try to use the Muslim sources in tandem with the late antique Greco-Roman, archaeological, and epigraphic material, in an attempt to create a balanced perspective. In addition to James Howard-Johnston’s recent immense work on the varied and difficult sources for the seventh century, new works on primary source material incorporating both Greco-Roman and Muslim source traditions have appeared or are underway that should, together, help provide a fresh apparatus for understanding the critical time bridging the pre-Islamic period and the Muslim invasions.²⁰

Modern ideas about nationalism and ethnicity also present a source-related problem and have played a prominent role in creating misleading perceptions of the past. This is especially evident in the strong connection in the modern world between language and identity, a link that was by no means always as strong in the ancient world.²¹ The assumption that the two might be the same has resulted in imagined connections between language, culture, and identity being projected backwards onto concepts of the past. For example, a “ghost” community of “Safaitic” people was created in the ancient Near East, purely from the “Safaitic” graffiti from southern Syria and northern Arabia. “Thamudic,” a linguistic “pending file” for largely

¹⁸ Werner Caskel, “Aijām al-‘arab. Studien zur altarabischen Epik,” *Islamica*, 3 (1930), 1–99; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 224–27. For the poetry, see the brief discussion below.

¹⁹ E.g., as by Lawrence Conrad, “Epidemic Disease in Central Syria in the Late Sixth Century: Some New Insights From the Verse of Hassan ibn Thābit,” *BMGS* 18 (1994), 12–58.

²⁰ James Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis: Historians and Histories of the Middle East in the Seventh Century* (Oxford, 2010); Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, Christian Robin, eds., *Juifs et Chrétiennes en Arabie aux V^e et VI^e siècles : regards croisés sur les sources* (Paris, 2010); by the same team, *Himyar vaincu par Aksum: Le dossier des sources épigraphiques et narratives* (in preparation); Christian Robin, Denis Genequand, eds., *Regards croisés de l’histoire et de l’archéologie sur la dynastie Jafnide* (forthcoming); Greg Fisher, ed., *The Arabs Between Rome, Himyar, and Iran: Sources, Analysis, and Commentary* (Oxford, forthcoming).

²¹ See Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York, 2000); Patrick Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton, 2002); John Joseph, *Language and Identity: National, Ethnic, Religious* (New York, 2004); cautionary note for ancient contexts: Walter Pohl, “Telling the Difference: Signs of Ethnic Identity,” in Pohl, et al., *Strategies of Distinction*, 17–70.

unidentified texts, inspired an attempt to write the history of *le Thamoud* as a single group of people.²² Similarly, investigations into the function of Arabic in identity-formation, prior to the seventh century, have occasionally manipulated the language into a framework governed more by the strong modern link between the Arabic language and Arab identity. Attention has focused on those groups of Arabs, such as the Jafnids and Naṣrids, who possessed the means and possible motive to promote Arabic. The result has been unsubstantiated speculation that it was the Naṣrids at al-Ḥīrah who played the key role. Abbott made this identification, as did Shahid, who speculated that the deeds of the Arabs at al-Ḥīrah were recorded in Arabic because the Naṣrids “were very conscious and proud of their achievements,” making an explicit link between the choice of language and a desire to promulgate a particular identity separate from those around them.²³ The *Encyclopedia of Islam* has also suggested that the Arabic language was practised and standardised at al-Ḥīrah, an act that linked Arabic speakers together into a wider separate community, largely based on language.²⁴ Not only is there no evidence that the Naṣrids made the records described by Shahid, but this sort of deliberate choice to use language as a strategy to promote ethnic difference is very hard to prove for antiquity, and there are few convincing examples.²⁵ The repetition of this position, which cannot be substantiated, can be explained perhaps by a desire to locate a decisive attachment between Arabic and Arab identity in the pre-Islamic era. There is though no evidence at present to support a link between the development of Arabic and the activities of the Naṣrids at al-Ḥīrah.

²² Thamud: Albertus van den Branden, *Histoire de Thamoud* (Beirut, 1960). See discussion on both problems in Michael Macdonald, “Some Reflections on Epigraphy and Ethnicity in the Roman Near East,” in Graeme Clarke, ed., *Identities in the Eastern Mediterranean in Antiquity: Proceedings of a Conference Held at the Humanities Research Centre in Canberra 10–12 November 1997, Mediterranean Archaeology*, 11 (1999), 177–90.

²³ Nadia Abbott, *The Rise of the North Arabian Script and its Qur’ānic Development, With a Full Description of the Qur’ān Manuscripts in the Oriental Institute* (Chicago, 1939), 5, 8; Irfan Shahid, “The Composition of Arabic Poetry in the Fourth Century,” in Abdulgadir Adballa, Sami al-Sakkar, Richard Mortel, Abd al-Rahman al-Ansary, eds., *Studies in the History of Arabia: Proceedings of the Second International Symposium on Studies in the History of Arabia, Jumādā I, 1399 A.H./April, 1979, 2* (Riyadh, 1984), 87–93, at 90; cf. the more muted but still problematic comments by Régis Blachère, *Histoire de la littérature arabe des origines à la fin du XV^e siècle ap. J.-C.*, 2 (Paris, 1952–1964), 347, highlighting the importance of al-Ḥīrah in developing linguistically-connected concepts of Arab identity.

²⁴ *EP* s.v. “Arabiyya,” 565: “The court of Ḥīra remained a centre of bedouin poets: this helped in developing and unifying the language of poetry; its written use at al-Ḥīra also furthered its standardisation.”

²⁵ E.g., the case of the Eteokretans elaborated by Jonathan Hall, *Ethnic Identity in Greek Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1997), 178–79.

It is important to note that the comments here do not amount to a denial that those speaking the same language enjoyed a sense of commonality, a prospect that we can, without danger, reasonably assume; or, indeed, that Arabic may have helped to foster a feeling of community. It is simply that there is no conclusive evidence either for or against the idea that speaking Arabic in antiquity was a deliberate marker of cultural difference, and thus to state and readily accept that this was the case is to run the risk of ascribing modern expectations to a situation in the sixth century. What can be reliably said about the development of the Arabic script is that, in the current opinion of experts, it developed from the Nabataean Aramaic script, probably out of repeated writing on soft materials, but the actual specifics are unknown.²⁶ Any number of locations or catalysts might serve for a “definitive” phase in its development, and there is no reason to suppose either way that al-Ḥīrah should be preferred. We might equally, for example, point to Syria, where the three Arabic-script inscriptions of the sixth century have been found (see below), but this could simply stem from an accident of archaeological survival.

Finally, there are also problems of terminology, such as how to understand state, tribe, and Arab, mentioned above, and the connected question of appropriate nomenclature. The names Ghassān/Ghassānid, Lakhm/Lakhmid, and Kinda, have become closely associated with the most prominent individuals who appear in the sixth-century sources that describe the relationship between Rome, Sasanian Iran, and the kingdom of Ḥimyar. While ancient sources describe individual Arab élites, they are largely silent about the wider groups of people whom they are presumed to have led. It has now become preferable therefore to talk of Jafnids, Naṣrids, and Ḥujrids, supposed family dynasties, rather than groups of people, Ghassān, Lakhm, and Kinda, respectively, about whom we know very little, and the strength of whose links to the Jafnid or other élites is open to debate.²⁷ Such dynastic terms are not themselves without their own difficulties, because they are derived from supposed eponymous ancestors, “Jafna,” “Naṣr,” and “Ḥujr,” about whom equally little may actually be known; Ḥujr is perhaps the exception. To further complicate matters, contemporary Greco-Roman authors do not talk of “the Jafnids,” but prefer to use the names of individuals, such as al-Ḥārith (Arethas) or al-Mundhir (Alamoundaros), for reasons that are unclear, but that are con-

²⁶ See Michael Macdonald, “The Decline of the ‘Epigraphic Habit’ in Late Antique Arabia: Some Questions,” in Robin, et al., *L’Arabie à la veille de l’Islam*, 17–27, at 24.

²⁷ Shift in nomenclature initiated by Robin, “Le royaume Ḥujride.” Robin and Genequand focused on the problem further in their conference, *Regards croisés de l’histoire et de l’archéologie sur la dynastie Jafnide*, held in Paris (Nov. 2008), breaking associations between Jafnids and Ghassān originally made by Nöldeke (*Ghassānischen Fürsten*), and by Rothstein (*Die Dynastie der Lahmidien*), for the Lakhmids and Naṣrids, taking their cue from Muslim Arabic sources.

sistent with the Roman preference for personal, inter-ruler relationships with single powerful individuals, rather than those with larger, inter-state groups of people. In general, the primary sources show a frustrating lack of interest in anything beyond the most basic facts about who the Arab leaders were, and in the majority of cases they say nothing at all about the wider groups of people under their influence.

It is apparent that there are many problems, issues, and obstacles that must be cautiously navigated if we are to arrive at a balanced view of the role and place of the Arabs in the sixth century. We now can turn to the three main groups or family dynasties—the Ḥujrids, the Naṣrids, and the Jafnids—to assess what we know about their activities in the fifth and sixth centuries. While nothing can be definitive, it is hoped that this brief analysis will show how it is appropriate to discuss individual élites within the context of the fifth and sixth centuries, rather than the kingdoms, which may, or may not, have existed.

The Ḥujrids and Kinda

After the kingdom of Saba was annexed by Ḥimyar ca. 275, the Ḥimyarite kingdom became the dominant power in southern Arabia and extended its authority northwards.²⁸ By the mid-fourth century, Ḥimyarite expeditions were reaching central Arabia.²⁹ While there is no direct link between the extension of Ḥimyarite power and a deliberate policy of proxy rule, using the leaders of Kinda, a group of people who lived under Ḥimyarite control in southern Arabia, there is a correspondence between Ḥimyarite military expeditions in northern Arabia and the emergence of a Kindite family dynasty, the so-called “Ḥujrids,” in the same region.³⁰ An inscription known as Ry 509, found at Ma’sal al-Jumḥ in Najd, in central Arabia, celebrates the Ḥimyarite expedition north to the “land of Ma’add,” carried out with the assistance of forces from Kinda. The later account provided by Ibn Ḥabīb about the activities of a king of Kinda, Ḥujr b. ‘Amr, lends support to the theory that it was during the events described by Ry 509 that, with Ḥimyar’s assent, Ḥujr was either installed over, or took control of, Ma’add, a group of people or an area in northern Arabia.³¹ Ḥujr may not have been the only ally or client leader

²⁸ See now on Ḥimyar, Iwona Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar à l’époque monothéiste* (Paris, 2009); Paul Yule, *Ḥimyar. Spätantike im Jemen. Late Antique Yemen* (Aichwald, 2007). The framework for our understanding of the role played by Kinda and the Ḥujrids in Arabia has been constructed by Robin, “Royaume Ḥujride,” “Les Arabes de Ḥimyar,” and “Les rois de Kinda” (forthcoming).

²⁹ Robin, “Les rois de Kinda,” 32–33.

³⁰ The name originally given by Robin, “Royaume Ḥujride,” for an eponymous ancestor, Ḥujr.

³¹ Ry 509: Gonzague Ryckmans, “Inscriptions sud-Arabes (dixième série),” *Le Muséon* 66 (1953), 267–317, at 303–07; Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-mūḥabbar*, 368; extension of Ḥimyarite power via Ḥujr examined in detail by Iwona Gajda, “Ḥuḡr b. ‘Amr roi de Kinda et l’établissement de la

under Ḥimyar's direction; Ry 510 (521 CE) describes a certain Nu'mānān, or al-Nu'mān, at the head of a group of people called Muḍar, paying allegiance to the Ḥimyarites at Ma'sal al-Jumḥ, possibly reflecting the existence of a second dynastic lineage under the influence of the Ḥimyarites.³²

What was the relationship between Ḥujr, Ḥimyar, and Kinda, and what was the nature of Ḥujr's position? Ḥujr is described as "Ḥujr, son of 'Amr, king (*malik*) of Kinda," in a graffito, found to the northeast of Najrān, and datable probably to the fifth century.³³ Kinda appears again in Ry 510 taking part, with others, in an offensive against the pro-Sasanian Naṣrid leader al-Mundhir in Mesopotamia.³⁴ Yet while Ḥujr may have been drawn from Kinda, and even claimed kingship over it, he and his descendants appear to have been used not to rule Kinda exclusively, but instead, to act as Ḥimyarite allies or deputies for the territory of Ma'add, some distance away in northern Arabia. Any understanding of Ḥujr as a king of a defined territorial area or kingdom is thus potentially misleading, because it is not clear exactly what relationship he maintained with Kinda, whose territory lay far to the south.³⁵ It also seems clear that Ḥimyar considered individuals such as Ḥujr or Nu'mānān/al-Nu'mān to be under their control. In Ry 509, for example, at approximately the same time as Ḥujr claimed kingship over Kinda—a group clearly expected to render military service to Ḥimyar when required—Ḥimyarite kings refer to their royal power over "the Arabs of the highlands and the littoral." Ḥimyarite power, not Ḥujrid, was the dominant factor. Indeed, the graffito claiming Ḥujr's rule over Kinda is just that, and there is a clear correspondence with a sixth-century Arabic graffito at Jebel Seis in Syria, which records the Jafnid leader al-Ḥārith as *malik*, "king," but in a similarly low-profile fashion and within the geographical and temporal context of the Jafnids' subordination to the Roman Empire. The "royalty" of both Ḥujr and al-Ḥārith was probably of the sort denoting elite status for local consumption, tolerated by their imperial patrons, and not a reference to serious territorial claims.³⁶

domination Ḥimyarite en Arabie central," *PSAS* 26 (1996), 65–73. See as well Robin, "Royaume Hujride," 692; idem, "Les rois de Kinda," 40–41; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 53–57; Ma'add: Michael Zwettler, "Ma'add in Late-ancient Arabian epigraphy and other pre-Islamic sources," *WZKM* 90 (2000), 223–309.

³² Ry 510: Ryckmans, "Inscriptions sud-Arabes (dixième série)," 307–310; Robin, "Les Arabes de Ḥimyar," 174.

³³ "King of Kinda": Gonzague Ryckmans, "Graffites Sabéens relevés en Arabie Sa'udite," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 32 (1957), 557–563, at 561–562; Gajda, "Ḥuḡr b. 'Amr roi de Kinda," 67. Date: Robin, "Les rois de Kinda," 43.

³⁴ Ryckmans, "Inscriptions sud-Arabes (dixième série)," 307–310; Robin, "Les Arabes de Ḥimyar," 173; idem, "Les rois de Kinda," 37–38.

³⁵ Cf. Robin, "Les rois de Kinda," 13.

³⁶ Robin, "Les Arabes de Ḥimyar," 171–73; Idem, "Les rois de Kinda," 43. Jebel Seis (528/9 CE): most recently: Michael Macdonald, "A Note on New Readings in Line 1 of the Old Arabic Graffito

In addition to being clients or allies of the Ḥimyarite kingdom, Ḥujr and his descendants also found themselves embroiled in Roman attempts to extend their political influence into northern Arabia. The Romans were historically interested in this region, as the second-century Ruwwāfa inscriptions, and the recent inscription discovered at Ḥegrā (Madā'in Šāliḥ), both from the time of Marcus Aurelius, emphasize.³⁷ Roman policy apparently sought to create a series of buffers along the west side of the Arabian peninsula, posing an attractive counterpoint to possible Sasanian attempts to do the same further east, and controlling trade interests in the area.³⁸ The sources—Procopius, Malalas, the accounts of Roman diplomats preserved by Photius, and the later writer Theophanes Confessor—suggest that the Ḥujrids became the objects of Roman diplomatic policy not long after Ḥujr became leader over Ma'add. Initially, a man called al-Ḥārith, a grandson of Ḥujr, and not to be confused with al-Ḥārith the Jafnid, apparently concluded an agreement with Anastasius in 502/3 after a period of unrest in northern Arabia.³⁹ It might be presumed that the alliance was of at least some value to the Romans, because al-Ḥārith fought the pro-Sasanian Naṣrids, whose raids would later prompt the decisive actions of Justinian with regard to the Jafnid Arabs in Syria and Arabia. Al-Ḥārith, grandson of Ḥujr, was killed in 527 fighting the dangerous Naṣrid leader, al-Mundhir.⁴⁰ Subsequently, in 530/1, a certain Kaisos, the “leader of Kinda and Ma'add” and descendant of al-Ḥārith, received a Roman embassy,

at Jabal Says,” *SEC 2* (2009), 223–25; see too Christian Robin, Maria Gorea, “Un réexamen de l'inscription arabe préislamique du Gabal Usays (528–529 É. Chr.),” *Arabica* 49 (2002), 503–10.

³⁷ Ruwwāfa: Józef Milik, “Inscriptions grecques et nabatéennes de Rawwafah,” *University of London: Bulletin of the Institute of Archaeology*, 10 (1971), 54–58; Michael Macdonald, “Quelques réflexions sur les Saracènes, l'inscription de Rawwāfa et l'armée romaine,” in Héléne Lozachmeur, ed., *Présence arabe dans le Croissant Fertile avant l'Hégire: actes de la table ronde internationale organisée par l'unité de recherche associée 1062 du CNRS, Études sémitiques, au Collège de France, le 13 novembre 1993* (Paris, 1995), 93–201. Ḥegrā: Dhaifallah al-Talhi, Mohammad al-Daire, “Roman Presence in the Desert: A New Inscription from Hegra,” *Chiron*, 35 (2005), 205–17.

³⁸ Zeev Rubin, “Byzantium and Southern Arabia—The Policy of Anastasius,” in David French, Chris Lightfoot, eds., *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire: Proceedings of a Colloquium held at Ankara in September 1988*, 2 (Oxford, 1989) 383–420; on trade, specifically: Dario Nappo, “Roman Policy in the Red Sea Between Anastasius and Justinian,” in Lucy Blue, John Cooper, Ross Thomas, Julian Whiteright, eds., *Connected Hinterlands: Proceedings of Red Sea Project IV: Held at the University of Southampton, September 2008* (Oxford, 2009), 71–77; M.D. Bukharin, “Towards the Earliest History of Kinda,” *AAE* 20 (2009), 64–80; Sidney Smith, “Events in Arabia in the 6th century A.D.,” *BSOAS*, 16/3 (1954), 425–68, at 442. Sasanian efforts to use the Naṣrids to extend their influence in eastern Arabia are inferred by Clifford Bosworth, “Iran and the Arabs Before Islam,” in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran 3/1: The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), 593–612, at 602.

³⁹ Theoph. *Chron.* 144.

⁴⁰ Malalas, *Chron.* 434–5; Theoph. *Chron.* 179.

and later enjoyed a visit to Constantinople.⁴¹ Subsequently, the diplomat Nonnosus also visited Kaisos, and, simultaneously, another ambassador, Julianus, embarked on a mission to exert pressure on Axum and Ḥimyar to join with Rome against the Sasanians. Here, Procopius portrays Kaisos as the Roman favourite in the region.⁴²

Both the Roman Empire and the Ḥimyarite kingdom seem to have attempted to influence events in northern and central Arabia through the Ḥujrids, and it is possible that the Romans also had contact with Muḍar as part of this process. Ry 510 notes the involvement of a (?)group of people, “Tha‘labat,” alongside Kinda and Muḍar.⁴³ Elsewhere, Joshua the Stylite had already recorded the appearance of “Tha‘labite Arabs,” fighting for the Romans.⁴⁴ The link between Muḍar and Tha‘labat seems to suggest the likelihood of friendly contact between Rome and Muḍar, especially if, as Robin has argued, the territory of Muḍar was generally consistent with that of northern Arabia, and was close to or even overlapped with the southern frontiers of the Roman Empire.⁴⁵

The fate of the Ḥujrids is vague. That they were continued objects of Roman policy is underlined by the report preserved by Photius that Kaisos was granted the office of phylarch in Palestine, a position that bound him into the Roman frontier “system.” Kaisos later divided his position between two brothers.⁴⁶ After this point, the disappearance of the descendents of Ḥujr from the literary sources, accompanied by the rise of the Jafnids as Roman allies in Syria in 527/8, raises the possibility that Ma‘add had fallen under Roman control via the Jafnids. However, evidence suggests that it was the Naṣrids, not the Jafnids, who took over as powerbrokers in the region, at a time when the Ḥimyarite kingdom was experiencing difficulties controlling its clients.

According to the famous inscription at Marib (548 CE), Abraha of Ḥimyar received embassies from Axum, the Romans, the Sasanians, al-Mundhir the Naṣrid, and two Jafnids, al-Ḥārith, elevated by Justinian in 527/8, and Abu-Kārib, perhaps the brother of al-Ḥārith.⁴⁷ The presumed grandeur of this occasion belies the various problems plaguing Ḥimyarite dominance in Arabia, including the need to deal with a revolt by Yazīd ibn Kabsha, the man

⁴¹ Phot. *Bib.* 3.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 3; Proc. *Bell.Pers.*1.20.9–10.

⁴³ Ry 510: Ryckmans, “Inscriptions,” 307–10; Robin, “Royaume Hujride,” 692; *Idem*, “Les Arabes de Ḥimyar,” 177.

⁴⁴ Josh. Styl. *Chron.* 57; Gunnar Olinder, *The Kings of Kinda of the Family of Akil al-Murār* (Leipzig, 1927), 52; Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 91.

⁴⁵ Robin, “Les Arabes de Ḥimyar,” 177–78, 189.

⁴⁶ Phot. *Bib.* 3.

⁴⁷ The relationship is suggested by Maurice Sartre, “Deux phylarques arabes dans l’Arabie byzantine,” *Muséon*, 106 (1993), 145–54, at 151.

whom Abraha had posted to control Kinda.⁴⁸ Only four years later, Abraha campaigned successfully against Ma'add, indicating that there were contests against Ḥimyarite power in the north as well as the south. The details for the expedition against Ma'add come from an inscription known as Ry 506 (552 CE) and the same inscription also suggests that 'Amr, son of the Naṣrid al-Mundhir, had rather ambitiously installed himself as leader of Ma'add, taking advantage of the temporary opportunity the revolt offered. In the end, Abraha enjoyed some success in his endeavours, and the Naṣrids surrendered hostages following their defeat.⁴⁹ However, Ḥimyar's power was waning. The productive diplomatic contacts between the Ḥujrids and the Romans, and the forays into Ma'add by the Naṣrids, were a symptom of this decline.

What of Kinda? Although Ḥujr may have styled himself "king of Kinda," it does not necessarily follow, given their apparent position in northern Arabia, that he or his descendants were "kings" of the territory usually ascribed to Kinda, in the southwestern part of the peninsula. Based on the evidence from Saudi excavations at Qaryat al-Fāw, 700km southwest of Riyadh, and identified by inscriptions as the "capital" of Kinda, the group minted its own coins, produced frescoes and statues, and imported fine goods, doing so as a client "state" within the territory of, and under the control of, the kingdom of Ḥimyar.⁵⁰

The Naṣrids and al-Ḥīrah

The term "Naṣrid" refers to a putative and eponymous ancestor. It has now replaced "Lakhmid" as the preferred term to describe the leaders of the family understood to have held power over the course of several centuries at al-Ḥīrah, in Iraq. The Naṣrids became allied to the Sasanians from at least the end of the third century, as the Paikuli inscription from Kurdistan indicates, referring to an individual named 'Amr of Lakhm in a list of Sasanian vassals.⁵¹ This early connection between the individuals and Lakhm led to the conventional application of the label "Lakhmid" to include anyone under the Naṣrid control, but we have very little information about who made up the people who lived in or around al-Ḥīrah, and there is no reason to suppose that any connection between Naṣrid leaders and Lakhm that may have existed in the third century was still present in the sixth, or that the Naṣrids ruled over a homogeneous Lakhmid kingdom. As mentioned above, the city

⁴⁸ CIS 4.541; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 55; Smith, "Events in Arabia," 440.

⁴⁹ Ry 506: Ryckmans, "Inscriptions sud-Arabes (dixième série)," 275–84, discussed in Zwettler, "Ma'add," 246–57; Gajda, *Le royaume de Ḥimyar*, 138–41; Robin, "Les Arabes de Ḥimyar," 173.

⁵⁰ Abd al-Rahman al-Ansary, *Qaryat al-Faw: A Portrait of Pre-Islamic Civilisation in Sa'udi Arabia* (Riyadh, 1982).

⁵¹ Humbach, et al., *Sassanian Inscription*, 3, 71, paragraph 91.

of al-Ḥīrah has only received the most limited attention from archaeologists, notably Talbot Rice in 1931–1933, but the results that he published mostly identified material from the seventh century and later. Most recently, Japanese archaeologists have worked near al-Ḥīrah, but have unfortunately not been able to do any major work at al-Ḥīrah itself.⁵²

In common with the Jafnids, it is only in the late fifth and early sixth centuries that the Naṣrids appear in a significant way in contemporary literary sources, primarily in negative contexts: the problems which a certain al-Nu‘mān caused to the Romans; the attacks of the most prolific Naṣrid leader, al-Mundhir; the role of his descendant, ‘Amr, in negotiations with the Roman Emperor Justin II; and, finally, the apparent Christianisation and death of another al-Nu‘mān, the final Naṣrid leader.⁵³ The attention paid to the Naṣrids and particularly al-Mundhir in Roman sources focuses on their military activities, and their difficult relationship with the Christian religion. Al-Mundhir gained notoriety amongst Roman authors for his sacrifices to the goddess al-‘Uzzā, with his victims purportedly including 400 nuns.⁵⁴ Yet beyond the promising rhetoric of these stories, al-Mundhir, a man of some political acumen, exploited Christians and their religion when it suited him. He was, for example, reported to be open to the idea of becoming Christian, although the details are very obscure.⁵⁵ In 530, he used a deacon named Sergius to treat, successfully, with the Romans on his behalf.⁵⁶ The Naṣrid leaders did also not stop anti-Chalcedonian missionaries from working in the environs of al-Ḥīrah, and Simeon of Bēth Arshām was active in promoting miaphysite Christianity in opposition to the local Nestorians.⁵⁷ This was presumably designed to appeal to the Christian minority in Sasanian Iran, some of whom may have made up the population of al-Ḥīrah.

Throughout the sixth century the Naṣrids continued to resist “conversion,” but, equally, they avoided being drawn into episodes of persecution. In 523, Justin I sent the diplomat Abraham, the father of Nonnosus, to al-Ḥīrah to arrange for the release of two Roman generals captured in battle.⁵⁸ Abraham

⁵² See Yasuyoshi Okada, “Early Christian Architecture in the Iraqi South-western Desert,” *Al-Rāfiḍān* 12 (1991), 71–83. Note that the article by Erica Hunter, “Syriac Inscriptions from al-Hira,” *OC* 80 (1996), 66–81 is not actually about al-Ḥīrah.

⁵³ Al-Nu‘mān: Theoph. *Chron.* 141; al-Mundhir: Malalas, *Chron.* 434–35, Proc. *Bell.Pers.* 2.16.17, 19.34, and 28.12–14; ‘Amr: Menander, frg. 6.1; on the “last” al-Nu‘mān, *Chron. Seert* (PO 13, 468–69); Evag. *HE* 6.22.

⁵⁴ Zach.Rhet. *HE* 8.5; Proc. *Bell.Pers.* 2.28.13.

⁵⁵ Theod. Lect. *Epit.* 513; cf. Theoph. *Chron.* 158–59. Discussed in Theresia Hainthaler, *Christliche Araber vor dem Islam: Verbreitung und konfessionelle Zugehörigkeit* (Leuven, 2007), 88–89.

⁵⁶ Malalas, *Chron.* 466.

⁵⁷ Joh. Eph. *Vitae* (PO 17, 140, 145–46).

⁵⁸ Zach.Rhet. *HE* 8.3.

and his entourage missed al-Mundhir at al-Ḥīrah but found him in the desert at Ramleh, where al-Mundhir had also received ambassadors from the anti-Christian king of Ḥimyar, Dhū Nuwās, who apparently informed al-Mundhir of the massacre at Najrān in north Arabia.⁵⁹ While Dhū Nuwās was perhaps looking for support from the Naṣrids, they did not respond favourably.⁶⁰ Aside from the problems which help for Dhū Nuwās may have caused in the Naṣrid militia, some of whom, according to the narrative of Zacharias, professed the Christian faith, and reacted nervously to news about events at Najrān, an inscription reported by Yāqūt shows that Hind, wife of al-Mundhir, and daughter of al-Ḥārith, grandson of Ḥujr of Kinda, dedicated a monastery at al-Ḥīrah. Al-Mundhir thus had his wife's Christian faith, and that of her supporters, to consider as he made his decision. Hind's son, 'Amr (ca.554–70), the same individual who appears engaged in diplomatic contacts with the Romans, appears on the same inscription.⁶¹ Following the short reign of 'Amr's son, another al-Mundhir (ca. 580–582/3), a number of sources report that his successor al-Nu'mān (583–ca. 602) adopted Christianity—the first and last Naṣrid leader recorded to openly do so. According to Evagrius' excited report, al-Nu'mān melted down a golden Aphrodite, and requested baptism.⁶² In any case, al-Nu'mān was short-lived, and was imprisoned and executed in 601/2.⁶³

In common with the Ḥujrids, the Naṣrids were a multi-generational dynasty, at least partially dependent on state patronage for their position and for sanction of their activities, and so it is likely that they, like the Ḥujrids, would not have had access to sources of revenue as well as political and military opportunities without some form of state support. If anything, imperial support was even more vital for the Naṣrids, because al-Ḥīrah lay in close proximity to the Sasanian capital at Ctesiphon. Any interference by the Naṣrids in Ma'add was probably encouraged by Ctesiphon, and Arabs under Naṣrid control were themselves usually supervised, on campaign, by Sasanian forces. Yet in these instances, the Naṣrid leaders also tried to influence the Sasanian King himself, even if under the pretense of a common set of goals, and, as argued elsewhere, the Naṣrids grew beyond their roles as imperial clients as a result of the wealth and political backing they received from their Sasanian sponsor.⁶⁴

⁵⁹ For Najrān see now Beaucamp, et al., eds., *Juifs et Chrétiennes en Arabie*.

⁶⁰ Trimmingham, *Christianity Among the Arabs*, 169.

⁶¹ Zach. *Rhet. HE* 8.3; Yāqūt, *Mu'jam*, 2.542.

⁶² Evag. *HE* 6.22; the story also appears in *Chron. Seert* (PO 13, 468–69).

⁶³ Al-Ṭabarī, 1.1018–28; *Chron. Jacob of Edessa*, 20; Rothstein, *Dynastie*, 115–17; Howard-Johnston, *Witnesses to a World Crisis*, 438.

⁶⁴ Josh.Styl. *Chron.* 58, on Naṣrid attempts to “persuade” the Sasanian king; Fisher, “The Political Development of the Ghassān,” 313–36.

Robin has convincingly argued that the Naṣrids were the most state-like group out of the Naṣrids, Jafnids, and Ḥujrids. Unlike the Jafnids and Ḥujrids, they developed some sort of stable and apparently urban center, and their relationship with their patrons lasted considerably longer than either of their competitors'.⁶⁵ In the end, however, their effective encapsulation by the Sasanian Empire and the resulting vulnerability to the state was as much felt by the last Naṣrid leader, al-Nu'mān, as by his Jafnid counterpart, al-Mundhir.

The Jafnids and Ghassān

The term "Jafnid" refers to a small number of individuals who were allies of the Roman Empire between approximately 500 and 585. Far more is known about them than either the Naṣrids or the Ḥujrids, due to a small corpus of inscriptions and a relatively large number of references to their activities in sixth-century Roman sources. Even so, it is not clear how they initially came into contact with the Roman Empire. Muslim Arab sources suggest that Ghassān, a tribal group usually associated with the Jafnids, moved into the frontier regions of Syria and displaced those who were already there. The Jafnid leaders emerged from these encounters with the strength and acumen to negotiate with the Romans for an alliance.⁶⁶ The exact nature of the links between Ghassān and the Jafnids is obscure, but a recently-suggested analogy offers a possible solution. Hoyland relates that in the seventeenth century, the chief of the Shammar group led Shammar out of Najd, and his descendants could be found two centuries later ruling a confederation of Shammar and other allied tribes in Mesopotamia. While this had occurred, some from Shammar had stayed in Najd, and, over time, the members of Shammar in Mesopotamia in fact constituted a minority.⁶⁷ This is not dissimilar to the situation described above for the Ḥujrids and Kinda, and we might imagine a situation where the Jafnids left the territory of Ghassān without all of Ghassān accompanying them. This hypothesis finds parallels in the debates on barbarian migrations in late antique western Europe, particularly in the possibility of a "chain migration," where some elements move, leaving others behind, or even an "elite transfer," where the top stratum of one group takes over another, larger group, where it remains a powerful minority. Both

⁶⁵ Robin, "Les Arabes de Ḥimyar," 187, 193.

⁶⁶ Ibn Ḥabīb, *Kitāb al-mūḥabbar*, 370–71; Ya'qubi, *Ta'rikh*, 233–35, translated by Hoyland, *Arabia*, 239–40; Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Ta'rikh*, 98–99, discussed by Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 285. Theoph. *Chron.* 141 records a disturbance in northern Arabia during the same period, reflecting a possible corroboration, on which see Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 120–33.

⁶⁷ Hoyland, "Late Roman Provincia Arabia," 118.

are plausible correspondences.⁶⁸ Certainly one theme that has emerged in the rebalancing of ideas about western European barbarian migration is that such movements of people were likely far smaller than previously thought, and indeed possibly far smaller than some ancient sources would like us to think.⁶⁹ A wholesale migration of Ghassān, for which there is no clear evidence, is not necessary to explain Jafnid leadership in the sixth century. We should thus exercise caution in attaching the names of the Jafnids and Naṣrids to entire groups of people such as Ghassān or Lakhm, especially because it is clear that power rested with the individual leaders, not groups of people.

The Jafnids would eventually become the principal Arab allies of the Roman Empire in the sixth century. Al-Ḥārith was the first to receive a significant level of imperial recognition in 527/8, although his father, Jabala, may have initiated contact with the Romans at the beginning of the sixth century. This is by no means clear, however, and an individual named Thaʿlaba, a possible father of Jabala, may be preferred instead as the individual who brought the Jafnids to the attention of the empire.⁷⁰ After these early contacts, the critical boost for the development of Jafnid power was the elevation of al-Ḥārith a generation later to a position of direct imperial patronage under Justinian, a situation that recalls Ḥimyarite support for Ḥujr and Sasanian support for the Naṣrids. According to Procopius, Justinian saw an opportunity to use al-Ḥārith to tackle the problems caused by the troublesome raids of the Naṣrid leader al-Mundhir.⁷¹ Al-Ḥārith was already a phylarch, and Justinian now gave him what Procopius refers to as the “dignity of king,” probably an honorific and some funding to support his position.⁷²

Why else did Justinian pursue this policy? Beyond the risk presented by al-Mundhir, Justinian probably also saw a useful opportunity, alongside his initiatives with Axum, Ḥimyar and the Ḥujrids, to frustrate Sasanian ambitions through a calculated interference in Naṣrid activities on the fringes of Roman territory. In this respect, the Jafnids presented an opportunity to turn Arab allies against Sasanian interests in a different, eastward sphere, in conjunction with efforts towards the south, which were exploited using the Ḥujrids or perhaps the leaders of Muḍar.⁷³ Whatever the precise motivation, the rec-

⁶⁸ Guy Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568* (Cambridge, 2007), 417–54; Peter Heather, *Empires and Barbarians: Migration, Development, and the Birth of Europe* (Oxford, 2010), esp. ch. 6, on Franks and Saxons and the “elite transfer” model.

⁶⁹ Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*; Edward James, *Europe’s Barbarians, AD 200–600* (Harlow, 2009), 174–92, 255–57.

⁷⁰ Theoph. *Chron.* 141 (Jabala); Shahid, *Sixth Century*, 2/2, 10–11 (Thaʿlaba).

⁷¹ Proc. *Bell.Pers.* 1.17.46.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 1.17.47.

⁷³ Robin, “Les Arabes de Ḥimyar,” 181.

ognition accorded to the Jafnids by Constantinople provided them with a consistent degree of extremely influential political backing. Between 527 and 582, the Jafnids concentrated an impressive amount of political power in their family, primarily through their involvement in the religious life, politics, and military activities of the Roman Empire. As supporters of the anti-Chalcedonian miaphysites, they helped to obtain the ordination of Jacob Baradaeus from the empress Theodora, and they were invited to mediate in disputes both within the miaphysite camp and at court.⁷⁴ They benefited from invitations to the capital city of the empire.⁷⁵ They also received honorary titles, such as *patrikios*, and al-Ḥārith is venerated in the Arabic graffito from Jebel Seis, a location within reach of Roman power, as *malik*.⁷⁶ The Jafnids were commemorated in a number of Greek inscriptions, including at the monastery at Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī,⁷⁷ at a large house at al-Ḥayyat in the Ḥaurān,⁷⁸ and, most famously, in a small building at the site of Reṣāfa in northern Syria, which was probably a commission of the Jafnid al-Mundhir.⁷⁹ They accompanied Roman forces on campaign, and fought with them in a number of important engagements, notably at Callinicum in 531.⁸⁰ Despite this, no Jafnid, to our knowledge, ever held a significant military command or prominent civilian post, a fact which stands in stark contrast to the penetration of the Roman hierarchy by those of barbarian origin elsewhere in the empire.⁸¹ Part of this seems to be due to aspiration—the Jafnids were, it seems, content with the status quo, and were satisfied to work within the constraints of the position of phylarch, a leadership role that largely governed their relationship with the empire.⁸² But it also seems to be that their status as encapsulated allies also placed them “in between”—dependent on the political support offered by the

⁷⁴ Jacob: Joh.Eph. *Vitae* (PO 19, 153–154), and see Volker Menze, *Justinian and the Making of the Syrian Orthodox Church* (Oxford, 2008), 222–23. Mediation in disputes: Joh.Eph. *HE* 3.4.38–41, and see Pauline Allen, “The Definition and Enforcement of Orthodoxy,” in Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, Michael Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History, 14: Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600* (Cambridge, 2000), 811–34.

⁷⁵ Theoph. *Chron.* 240 (al-Ḥārith, in 563); Joh.Eph. *HE* 3.4.39–42 (al-Mundhir, in 580).

⁷⁶ Al-Ḥārith as *patrikios*: IGLS 2553b, d, Theoph. *Chron.* 240. Al-Mundhir as *patrikios*: *Wadd.* 2562c, from al-Burj, near Damascus; also Joh.Eph. *HE* 3.4.39–42. Jebel Seis: n.36, above.

⁷⁷ IGLS 2553b, d.

⁷⁸ *Wadd.* 2110.

⁷⁹ *SEG* 7.188; Genequand, “Some thoughts,” 78; Elizabeth Key-Fowden, “An Arab Building at al-Rusāfa-Sergiopolis,” *DaM* 12 (2000), 303–27.

⁸⁰ *Proc. Bell.Pers.* 1.1.26.

⁸¹ E.g., Stilicho; Mallobaudes, king of the Franks and *comes domesticorum*, *Amm.* 31.10.6; Gildo, initially *comes Africae* and later *magister utriusque militiae per Africam*, *CTh* 9.7.9 (30 December 393).

⁸² A.G. Grouchevov, “Trois ‘niveaux’ de phylarques: Étude terminologique sur les relations de Rome et de Byzance avec les Arabes avant l’Islam,” *Syria* 72 (1995), 105–31.

empire; reliant on the backing of the people in Syria, where they were most active, and whom they backed through their work for the miaphysite leadership; and, most of all, perhaps, dependent on their “own people” for their position. The vulnerability that this position entailed shielded them from any direct absorption into the Roman Empire, but it was also put into stark relief when, on two occasions, the Roman emperor decided to move against the Jafnids; on the second attempt, Maurice, in 582, was successful. After a brief period of resistance from al-Nu‘mān, a son of al-Mundhir, whose actions are notable for being one of the very few occasions where any evidence is found for the activities of Jafnid supporters,⁸³ the Jafnids disappear entirely from Roman histories of the period and, with one contested exception, the archaeological record.⁸⁴

Arab Identities

The Roman Empire, Sasanian Iran, and the kingdom of Ḥimyar played a key role in supporting individual Arab leaders. They did not support wider groups of people per se, and they only supported the leaders for as long as it suited them to do so. Imperial alliance offered a significant range of opportunities, and these are best exemplified by the Jafnids, who became involved in imperial religious politics, took Roman titles, visited Constantinople, and participated in military campaigns. The Jafnids were dependent on their imperial sponsors for a significant part of their power, and when this support was withdrawn they swiftly found themselves unable to hold their position. This same was true for the Naṣrids, who were easily eliminated by the Sasanian monarchy when they became surplus to requirements. All three Arab family groups broadly fit the paradigm of frontier allies, as elaborated in studies of the Roman west and anthropological studies of the Near East.⁸⁵ Like the Goths, Franks, and other western barbarians, they were able to profit from their situation on the periphery to build up political power and support in

⁸³ Joh.Eph. *HE* 3.3.41–2.

⁸⁴ A seal with the name “Jabala,” the name of al-Ḥārith’s father, suggesting a Jafnid connection. See Irfan Shahid, “Sigillography in the Service of History: New Light,” in Claudia Sode, Sarolta Takács, eds., *Novum Millennium: Studies on Byzantine History and Culture: Dedicated to Paul Speck, 19 December, 1999* (Aldershot, 2001), 369–78.

⁸⁵ Roman west: examples in n.3, n.68, n.69; Near Eastern studies emphasising the effects of states on political development of frontier allies: Norman Lewis, “The Syrian Steppe During the Last Century of Ottoman Rule: Hauran and the Palmyrena,” in Martha Mundy, Basim Musallam, eds., *The Transformation of Nomadic Society in the Arab East* (Cambridge, 2000), 33–43; Lois Beck, “Tribes and the State in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-century Iran,” in Houry, et al., *Tribes and State Formation*, 185–225; Madawi al-Rasheed, “The Process of Chieftdom-formation as a Function of Nomadic/Sedentary Interaction: The Case of the Shammar Nomads of North Arabia,” *Cambridge Anthropology* 12/3 (1987), 32–40.

ways that might not otherwise have been possible; this is particularly true of the Jafnids and the Naṣrids.⁸⁶

Noticeably absent from this picture is this wider group of people. Clearly, they existed; after the arrest and exile of the Jafnid al-Mundhir, his supporters created problems from the Romans at Bostra, and throughout their tenure as allies the Jafnids had fought with their own forces alongside those of the Romans.⁸⁷ Yet beyond such sparse mentions, there is little we can find out about the identity, culture, politics, or religion of those who supported the Jafnids, any more than we can similarly know a great deal about many of the barbarian groups who appeared along the Roman frontiers at various stages in antiquity. This does not mean that Ghassān were not present in northern Arabia or Syria, but even if we could say for certain that Ghassān did exist in Syria, there would be little more that could be said about them. It is certainly clear that there is not really any justification for seeing a “Ghassānid” kingdom any more than “Lakhmid” one. If we must find a label more satisfying than “dynasty” or “group,” Robin’s term, *principauté*, which refers primarily to the type of individual power exercised by the Jafnids, is surely more appropriate.⁸⁸

Finally, one might return briefly to the question of language. This is a topic dealt with at length elsewhere in relation to the Jafnids and Naṣrids, and the critical foundation for which a debt is owed to the work of Michael Macdonald, Christian Robin, and others.⁸⁹ Work has focused around a number of problems, such as identifying the catalyst for the development of the Arabic script. Hoyland, Robin, and Shahid have examined the possibility that it might be linked to the Jafnids or to the activities of Christians in Syria.⁹⁰ The idea has also been proposed that court traditions, emulating those of Rome or

⁸⁶ Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 618, disarmingly describing this process as “Newton’s Third Law of Empires.” It is explored in detail for the Arabs in Fisher, *Between Empires*, 72–127, 194–212, building on Mark Whittow, “Rome and the Jafnids: Writing the History of a 6th-c. Tribal Dynasty,” in John Humphrey, ed., *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research*, 2 (Portsmouth, RI, 1995–2002), 207–24.

⁸⁷ Joh.Eph. HE 3.3.41–2.

⁸⁸ Robin, “Les Arabes de Ḥimyar,” 193.

⁸⁹ Fisher, *Between Empires*, 128–72; Michael Macdonald, “Old Arabic (Epigraphic),” in Kees Versteegh, Mushira Eid, eds., *Encyclopedia of Arabic Language and Linguistics*, 3 (Leiden, 2006–2008), 464–77; Idem, “Reflections on the Linguistic Map of Pre-Islamic Arabia”; Christian Robin, ed., *L’Arabie antique de Karib’îl à Mahomet: nouvelles données sur l’histoire des Arabes grâce aux inscriptions* (Aix-en-Provence, 1991); Idem, “Les inscriptions de l’Arabie antique et les études arabes,” *Arabica* 48 (2001), 509–77; concise overview provided by Hoyland, *Arabia*, ch. 8, esp. 198–204.

⁹⁰ Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur’ān,” 59; Robin, “La réforme de l’écriture arabe à l’époque du califat médienois,” *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 56 (2006), 319–64, at 329; categorically: Shahid, *Sixth Century*, 2/1, 403 n.3: “there is no doubt . . . that Christianity played a major role in the final stages of the development of the Arabic script in pre-Islamic times.”

Sasanian Iran, may also have played a part. As yet, no satisfactory solution has emerged.⁹¹ Questions have arisen as well about the “ethnic value” of Arabic on the three Arabic script inscriptions of the sixth century, one, the graffito from Jebel Seis described earlier, the other two, martyria inscriptions from Zebed and Ḥarrān in Syria, where the Arabic text appears with other languages and scripts.⁹² Did the deliberate choice of Arabic reflect a desire to express a particular identity? The same controversial question has been asked about the remarkable Arabic-language inscription from Nemāra in Syria, dated to 328, and which celebrates the career of a certain potentate, Imru’ l-Qays.⁹³ One answer to this problem is to point to the remarkable fact that those who used Arabic were now, initially in the fourth century, but more prominently in the sixth, of sufficient status to create inscriptions in Arabic where the usual prestige language was Greek or, occasionally, Nabataean Aramaic. At the same time, it is equally remarkable that the corpus of oral poetry and the collection of the *ayyām* al-‘arab stories, both written down much later, were apparently being created.⁹⁴ Quite what underpinned these extraordinary developments is unknown, but we perhaps should see the simultaneous phenomena of the use of Arabic on inscriptions, the production of the oral poetry corpus, and the growth of Arab elites such as the Jafnids, as significant in and of itself. This is a conclusion which does not try to answer the somewhat unanswerable question of whether or not Arabic was being used to broadcast a different sense of identity, but instead ties the sudden relative prominence of cultural phenomena such as the Arabic language and Arabic poetry not to imagined or unknowable processes, but to the visible and measurable political development of Arab elites in contact with the empires of the Near East.

What then can be said about Arab identity in the pre-Islamic period, if we are to set aside, for now, at least, the idea that there were necessarily kingdoms, where Arabic was necessarily used as a means to create an Arab

⁹¹ Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Linguistic Background to the Qur’ān,” 57–58.

⁹² Jebel Seis: n.36, above; Zebed (512 CE): most recently, Hoyland, “Epigraphy and the Emergence of Arab Identity,” 232; Macdonald, “Old Arabic,” 470; Robin, “La réforme de l’écriture arabe,” 336–338. Ḥarrān (568/9 CE): Macdonald, “Old Arabic,” 470; Robin, “La réforme de l’écriture arabe,” 332–36.

⁹³ Concise discussion of the inscription and its interpretation: Maconald, “Old Arabic,” 469; most recent detailed interpretation and facsimile: Pierre Bordreuil, Alain Desreumaux, Christian Robin, Javier Teixidor, “205. Linteau inscrit: AO 4083,” in Christian Robin, Yves Calvet, eds., *Arabie heureuse, Arabie déserte: Les antiquités arabiques du Musée du Louvre* (Paris, 1997), 265–69.

⁹⁴ See the useful discussion in Albert Arazi, Salmān Maslha, eds., *Six Early Arab Poets: New Edition and Concordance: Based on W. Ahlwardt’s The Divans of the Six Ancient Arabic Poets* (Jerusalem, 1999); Alan Jones, *Early Arabic Poetry* (Reading, 1992–1996); Abdulla el Tayib, “Pre-Islamic Poetry,” in Alfred Beeston, Thomas Johnstone, Robert Serjeant, Gerald Smith, eds., *Arabic Literature to the End of the Umayyad Period* (Cambridge, 1983), 27–114.

identity, an attractive proposition which would fulfill some modern expectations of how a people should be defined? It is worth stressing the important context of a Near East dominated by Rome and Sasanian Iran, seeing the Arabs as imperial clients and subject to similar pressures and possibilities as those experienced by their Germanic counterparts in the west. Imperial power and support certainly had critical consequences for the Jafnids, Naṣrids, and Ḥujrids. All owed a large portion of their own political strength to their interface with Rome, Sasanian Iran, and Ḥimyar. Even before the sixth century, the power of Rome and Iran was relevant enough to warrant recognition in the boasts attached to Imru' l-Qays on the Nemāra inscription, where it was claimed that he had acted as a deputy for both empires. But while we look sideways to the world in which these Arab leaders found themselves, and from which they seized their opportunities, we must also keep one eye on the future; for the presence of the Jafnids in Syria as leading Arab potentates offers a vital strand of continuity between the sixth, seventh, and eighth centuries, where what was one of the most important parts of the Roman Empire had, in the end, long experience of Arab leadership in political, religious, and military arenas.⁹⁵ The presence of the Naṣrids, so close to the future 'Abbasid capital at Baghdad, is perhaps of similar import. Places associated with the Jafnids, such as Reṣāfa, would go on to be important for the Umayyads as places of religious power and as locations which facilitated contact with the varied elements which constituted Umayyad political support.⁹⁶

There was a long history of interaction between Arabs and the Roman and Sasanian empires, framed by imperial competition for frontier allies and by the activities of the kingdom of Ḥimyar. In the sixth century, before the emergence of Islam, some aspects of Arab identity which would become important for the creation of later, Muslim Arab identity, such as political leadership, the Arabic language, familiarity with and adherence by some to a religion of the Book, were developing, and what is of stunning significance for our understanding of Arab identity before Islam is that they were doing so within the framework created by Roman, Sasanian, and Ḥimyarite power. The sixth century, surely, is of great significance for our understanding of Arab identity.

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⁹⁵ See comments by Clive Foss, "Syria in Transition, A.D. 550–750: An Archaeological Approach," *DOP* 51 (1997), 189–269, at 258–63.

⁹⁶ Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain. St. Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, 1999), 175–78; Thilo Ulbert, "Ein umayyadischer Pavillon in Resafa-Ruṣāfat Hiṣām," *DaM* 7 (1993), 213–31. See also Geoffrey King, "Settlement Patterns in Islamic Jordan: The Umayyads and Their Use of the Land," in Adnan Hadidi, ed., *Studies in the History and Archaeology of Jordan*, iv (Amman, 1992), 369–75.