

*Arab kings, Arab tribes and the beginnings of Arab  
historical memory in late Roman epigraphy*

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As a historian of the late Roman/early Islamic Middle East I read enviously the publications available to historians of western Europe for the same period, such as those by Patrick Geary, Walter Pohl, Peter Heather and others, which treat so well the Roman interaction with and integration of the ‘western barbarians’.<sup>1</sup> Geary’s point regarding the Franks that ‘their very existence as well as every phase of their history makes sense only within the context of Roman presence in northern Europe, for their genesis as a people and gradual transformation into the conquerors of much of Europe were from the start part of the Roman experience’<sup>2</sup> has long struck me as pertinent to understanding the rise of the Muslim Arab Empire. Yet sadly no such studies have been composed treating the same subject in respect of the ‘eastern barbarians’, i.e. the tribes on Rome’s eastern frontier, and these tribes never get more than the briefest of mentions in survey works on the Roman/medieval Mediterranean world. Irfan Shahid has done the great service of laying the groundwork with his exhaustively documented volumes on *Byzantium and the Arabs*,<sup>3</sup> but no one has used these to produce a narrative/discursive study à la Geary or Pohl. Unable to claim to be intrinsic to the formation of Europe,<sup>4</sup> these ‘eastern barbarians’ still suffer from a lack of focused attention and from a lingering sense that their role in the history of the late Roman Empire was minimal.<sup>5</sup> Arabists are less likely to think along these lines, but they

<sup>1</sup> Geary 1988; Pohl 1997; Pohl 1998; Pohl, Wood and Reimitz 2001; Pohl and Diesenberger 2002; Heather 1994b; Heather 1999.

<sup>2</sup> Geary 1988: vii–viii.     <sup>3</sup> Shahid 1984–2002, four volumes and a prolegomenon so far.

<sup>4</sup> There is no eastern counterpart to the EU-funded *Transformation of the Roman World* (in the west) project, which sadly never thought to include even one article on the Near East in all its volumes. New synthetic works on the Mediterranean are starting to include some coverage of the early Islamic Near East, but not on the ‘Arabs’ of the late Roman Near East (this is the pattern, for example, of Wickham 2005, which is, however, to be commended for its coverage of the early Islamic Levant).

<sup>5</sup> E.g. ‘The lack of detailed information in Greek historians about Arab affairs in the sixth and seventh centuries accurately reflects their lack of importance in contemporary wars and diplomacy’, in Whitby 1992: 80; cited approvingly by Whittow 1999: 219 in a review of I. Shahid.

rarely have the depth of knowledge of the Roman Empire necessary to redress this imbalance.

In this article I would like to draw to the attention of late Romanists a number of new and striking phenomena occurring in the epigraphic record of the third/fourth-century Middle East, in the hope that they will use their greater experience to elucidate them further. First, the appearance of 'Arab'<sup>6</sup> kings of 'Arab' tribes, by which I mean that these monarchs and their tribes are known to and described as 'Arab' by Muslim historians, which suggests that we have entered the earliest period of Muslim Arab historical recollection. Second, there is the deployment of (Old) Arabic in inscriptions.<sup>7</sup> The usual practice in the Middle East for parvenu leaders was to write in the local language of prestige, at this time Greek and Aramaic, and so these texts in Arabic are of great significance, presumably reflecting a desire on the part of the commissioners to make a statement about their ethnic and/or cultural affiliation and a demonstration of their political power, though probably also related to the efflorescence of a whole range of languages and scripts across the Roman Empire at this time (Gothic, Coptic, Palestinian Aramaic, Armenian and Georgian). Third, there is the emergence of the term 'Saracen' to designate nomads and a narrowing in the application of the term 'Arab', which becomes reserved more and more for denoting residents of the province of Arabia.

#### THE TEXTS

##### *'Arab' kings and 'Arab' tribes*

###### *1. Rabi'a ibn Mu'awiya of Kinda and Qahṭān*<sup>8</sup>

Date: c. 220 CE (in the reign of the Sabaean king Sha'r Awtar).

Language: ESA (Epigraphic South Arabian, i.e. the language that is used in the inscriptions of pre-Islamic South Arabia).

<sup>6</sup> I put Arab within quotes in this article to emphasise that it is difficult to be sure whether that is how the people I am discussing habitually described themselves. Almost all our references to Arabs come from outsiders, who used the term Arab in different ways at different times. And in the fourth–sixth centuries the nomads whom modern scholars typically refer to as Arabs were no longer labelled as such by Romans and Persians, but rather as Saracens and Ṭayyāyē. However, it is such a well-established term for the tribal peoples of the Arabian Peninsula (excluding Yemen) and the Syrian Desert that I shall continue to use it here for convenience.

<sup>7</sup> For simplicity I will just use the term 'Arabic' in this article, but the reader should note that, given how few texts we have in Arabic from the pre-Islamic period, it is difficult to be sure how similar/different it was to the Arabic of the Islamic period and for this reason some scholars use the term Old Arabic to designate the pre-Islamic variety. See Müller 1982; Robin 2001: 545–56; Macdonald 2000: 48–57; Macdonald (in press).

<sup>8</sup> Plausibly this is the Rabi'a ibn Mu'awiya al-Akramūn b. al-Ḥārith al-Aṣghar b. Mu'awiya b. al-Ḥārith al-Akbar b. Mu'awiya b. Thawr b. 'Amr Muratti' b. Mu'awiya b. Kinda listed by Ibn al-Kalbī,

Provenance: Bilqis temple, Marib, in modern Yemen.

Type: Votive, thanks for success in battle.

‘the two engagements against Rabīʿa of the lineage of Thawr, king of Kinda and Qaḥṭān (*Rbʿt d-l Thwr mlk Kdt w-Qḥṭn*), and against the lords of the city of Qaryat’.<sup>9</sup>

2. *al-Ḥārith ibn Kaʿb of al-Asd*<sup>10</sup> and *Mālik ibn Baddāʾ of Kinda*<sup>11</sup>

Date: 230–55 (in the reign of the Sabaeen king Ilīsharaḥ Yaḥḍub and his brother and co-regent Yaʿzil Bayān).

Language: ESA.

Provenance: Bilqis temple, Marib.

Type: Votive, thanks for safe return and for success in battle.

‘when he had been sent (as an envoy) to the kings (*mlk*) of the north, al-Ḥārith ibn Kaʿb, king of Asd (*mlk ʿsd*), and Mālik ibn Baddāʾ, king of Kinda and Madhḥij (*mlk kdt w-mdḥj*), and various *aʿrāb*’.<sup>12</sup>

3. *Kings of Ghassān, al-Asd, Nizār and Madhḥij*

Date: c. 260 (in the reign of the Sabaeen king Ilīsharaḥ Yaḥḍub alone).

Language: ESA.

Provenance: Bilqis temple, Marib.

Type: Votive, thanks for safe return.

‘because he returned safely from Syria where his lord Ilīsharaḥ Yaḥḍub, king of Saba and Dhu Raydan, sent him (as an envoy) to the kings of the peoples (*mlk ʿshʿb*) of Ghassān, al-Asd, Nizār and Madhḥij’.<sup>13</sup>

*Jamhara*: I, tables 233–5 (note closeness to genealogy of Mālik ibn Baddāʾ in n. 11 below). Possibly the Muʿāwiya ibn Rabīʿa, king of Qaḥṭān and Madhḥij, mentioned in an inscription from Qaryat al-Faw (al-Ansary 1981: 144) is a relative of his.

<sup>9</sup> Jamme 1962: 137 (known to Sabaicists as Ja 635.26–27 = DAI-Barʿan 2000–1); see also Nebes 2004: 273–88. The city is Qaryat al-Faw, which seems to have been a base for the tribes of Kinda and Qaḥṭān and has yielded a number of Arabic inscriptions; see Robin 1991c: 113–25.

<sup>10</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī lists two al-Ḥārith ibn al-Kaʿbs of al-Asd (*Jamhara*: I, tables 203 and 210).

<sup>11</sup> A Mālik ibn Baddāʾ is listed in Ibn al-Kalbī (*Jamhara*: I, table 233) whose mother was a Yazʿanid: Mālik b. Baddā b. al-Ḥārith al-Akbar b. Muʿāwiya b. Thawr b. ʿAmr Murattī b. Muʿāwiya b. Kinda.

<sup>12</sup> Beeston 1986: 33–6 (known to Sabaicists as Ja 2110.7–10); cf. Jamme 1962: no. 67 (= Ja 576.2), regarding ‘the reparation which Mālik (ibn Baddāʾ) was required to make to Almaḡah and the kings of Saba, (namely the person of) Imruʿ al-Qays son of ʿAwf, king of Khaṣāsa’. Beeston suggests reading Asad rather than Asd (in Arabic: Azd), as the latter is usually written with the Arabic definite article *al-* (e.g. nos. 3–4 below), but since the *al-* is a foreign particle it might easily be omitted and Asad are not known from other south Arabian inscriptions.

<sup>13</sup> Bafaqih and Robin 1978: 51 (known to Sabaicists as ʿInan 75) (Robin and Gajda 1994: 113–37).

4. *Mālik ibn Ka'b of al-Asd*<sup>14</sup>

Date: 275–310 (in the reign of the Sabaeen king Shammar Yuhar'ish).

Language: ESA.

Provenance: Bilqis temple, Marib.

Type: Votive, thanks for safe return.

'when his lord Shammar Yuhar'ish sent him (as an envoy) with Mālik ibn Ka'b, king of al-Asd (*mlk l-'sd*) . . . and to Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the two royal cities of the Persians, and to the land of Tanūkh (*ard' tnh*)'.<sup>15</sup>

5. *Ġadima of Tanūkh*

Date: mid-third century (based on identification with Jadhīma al-Abrash of the Muslim sources which say that he lived on into the reign of the Persian emperor Shapur I [242–70].)<sup>16</sup>

Language: Greek and Aramaic.

Provenance: Umm al-Jimal in modern north Jordan.

Type: Epitaph for the tutor (*tropheus/rbw*) of 'Ġadima king of Tanūkh'.

*Gadimathou basileus thanouitōn / Gdmt mlk tnuh*.<sup>17</sup>

6. *'Amr king of Lakhm*<sup>18</sup>

Date: 293–302 (in reign of the Sasanian emperor Narseh).

Language: Persian and Parthian.

Provenance: Paikuli by the modern Iraq–Iran border.

Type: Monumental, commemorating events leading up to accession of Narseh plus his recognition by other rulers.

'Amr king of Lakhm' (*Amrw lhm'dyn mlk*).<sup>19</sup>

7. *Imru' al-Qays ibn 'Amr*

Date: 328 CE (dated; NB this date fits with his being the son of no. 6).

Language: Arabic (but in Nabataean Aramaic script).

<sup>14</sup> There is a Mālik ibn Ka'b of al-Asd in Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara*: I, 209, but it is impossible to say whether they are the same.

<sup>15</sup> Müller 1974: 155–65 (known to Sabaicists as Sharaf 31).

<sup>16</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara*: I, table 211; Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Tārikh* 84. In the Islamic tradition he is killed by queen Zabbā, who is assumed to be queen Zenobia of Palmyra (d. 273); see below.

<sup>17</sup> Littmann 1914–49: 4A.41; see also Sartre 1979: 253–8.

<sup>18</sup> Usually identified with 'Amr ibn 'Adī, nephew of and successor to Jadhīma al-Abrash in the Muslim Arabic sources: Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara*: I, table 246; Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Tārikh* 85 and al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh* 1.768. ('he was the first Arab king to settle in Hira and the first of the Arab kings of Iraq whom the Hirans celebrated in their writings'); al-Ṭabarī (citing Ibn al-Kalbī) goes on to emphasise that the history of this dynasty 'is known and recorded among the Hirans; it is known from their church records'.

<sup>19</sup> Humbach and Skjaervo 1983: 92.

Provenance: Nemara, a Roman outpost south-east of Damascus.

Type: Epitaph.

‘Imru’ al-Qays son of ‘Amr, king of all the Arabs/all the (province of) ‘Arab, who . . . ruled both sections of al-Asd and Nizār and their kings, and chastised Madhḥij . . . and he ruled Ma‘add’.<sup>20</sup>

*Arabic*

7. *Imru’ al-Qays ibn ‘Amr, as above.*

8. *Ka‘b son of Ḥāritha*<sup>21</sup>

Date: 267 (dated).

Language: Arabic with Aramaic elements.

Provenance: Hegra, north-west Arabia.

Type: Funerary text.

‘This is the tomb which Ka‘b son of Ḥāritha made for Raqūsh daughter of ‘Abdmanāt, his mother, who died in al-Ḥijr in the year 162 in the month of Tammuz. May the Lord of the World curse whoever violates this tomb and whoever opens it, bar his offspring, and may He curse whoever inters (a body) in it and removes (a body) from it.’<sup>22</sup>

9. *Garmalabi son of Taymalabi*

Date: Undated, difficult to fix more precisely than first–fourth centuries CE.

Language: Aramaic with two lines in Arabic.

Provenance: Oboda (‘Ayn ‘Abada/En Avdat), southern Palestine.

Type: Votive, request for protection.

Opening in Aramaic calling for the author, who is making an offering, and whoever reads it, to be remembered by Obodas the god, followed by a ritual text in Arabic: “For He (Obodat) acts (expecting) no reward nor predilection / Though death has often sought us out, He afforded it no

<sup>20</sup> This Imru’ al-Qays (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara* I, table 246) and his epitaph are very famous with a very extensive bibliography; most recently see the articles of Kropp 2006 and Zwettler 2006, which refer to much of the earlier literature. For the suggestion that *al-arab* is here a geographical rather than an ethnic entity see Zwettler 1993: 3–37; see also Retsö 2003: 447–8, who makes the point that ‘the word itself can hardly be a place-name from the beginning . . . It is easier to imagine an unchanged gentilic being used as a name for a dwelling than vice versa’ and Shahid 2000: 81–6, who adduces many strong arguments in favour of keeping the ethnic interpretation.

<sup>21</sup> There is a Ka‘b ibn Ḥāritha of Khuzā’a and one of al-Anṣār (Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara* I, tables 196, 183), both tribes active around Hegra, but it is too ordinary a name to make a positive identification.

<sup>22</sup> Healey and Rex Smith 1989: 77–84; Healey 2002: 81–90.

occasion / Though I have often encountered wounding, He has not let it be my destruction.”<sup>23</sup>

*‘Arabs’ and Saracens*

7. *Imru’ al-Qays ibn ‘Amr, as above (if the reading ‘king of all the Arabs’ is to be preferred).*

10. *Rufinus of Qanawat*

Date: Third century (based on palaeographical criteria).<sup>24</sup>

Language: Greek.

Provenance: The Aegean island of Thasos.

Type: Epitaph.

‘Rufinus, bird-augurer, Arab (*ho araps*),<sup>25</sup> of the city of Septimian Kanotha, for his son Germanus.’

11. *A pagan female phylarch of Anasartha*

Date: 319/20 CE (dated).

Language: Greek.

Provenance: Anasartha, a polis south-east of Aleppo.

Type: Epitaph.

‘phylarch of the Saracens’.<sup>26</sup>

12. *Vincentius, chief of a bodyguard*

Date: 334 CE (dated).

Language: Latin.

Provenance: c. 30 miles east of Mafraq, modern north Jordan.

Type: Building text.

‘Vincentius . . . observing that many of the outlying pickets had been ambushed and killed by Saracens while fetching water for themselves, laid out and constructed a reservoir for the water.’<sup>27</sup>

<sup>23</sup> The exact meaning of this text is unsure, but the many scholars who have studied it all agree that it is to some degree metrical (hence the rhyme in my translation); most recently see Hackl, Jenni and Schneider *Quellen*: 396–402, which lists earlier literature thereon.

<sup>24</sup> See Robert 1946: 43–50.

<sup>25</sup> It is assumed that the reason why Rufinus calls himself an Arab, though he is writing in Greek and living on a Greek island, is that he was from the province of Arabia, on the border of which lay the city of Kanotha (modern Qanawat). See discussion below.

<sup>26</sup> Found and to be published by Marc Griesheimer; for the reference and more on Anasartha see Feissel 2002: 220, n. 112 (unless there is confusion here with the fifth-century Greek inscription on a martyrium in Anasartha dedicated by one Sylvanus to his recently deceased daughter, who was the wife of a phylarch; see *IGLS* II 168–70).

<sup>27</sup> Iliffe 1942: 62–4.

## THE INTERPRETATION

It would seem, then, from the evidence of these inscriptions that a number of changes were afoot in the third–fourth centuries. Obviously, it is a cliché that the third century was a time of upheaval for the Roman Empire – ‘the crisis of the third century’ even gets its own entry in wikipedia.com – so I do not want to point out the obvious to those who are much more knowledgeable about such things than I. What I would like to consider here is those events that might elucidate, or be elucidated by, these three new phenomena in the epigraphic record that I have highlighted above (i.e. Arab kings/Arab tribes, Arabic inscriptions, the term Saracen)

*Greater involvement of ‘Arabs’ in the imperial system*<sup>28</sup>

Rome’s struggle with a re-energised Iranian Empire led by the Sasanian dynasty (inaugurated in 224 CE) meant that it had an increased need for military manpower and allies. Peripheral peoples were thus incorporated within the Empire in larger numbers, and consequently they could negotiate with Rome on better terms. There was, therefore, a difference between the various ‘barbarian chieftains and their bands’ who had participated in the Empire in earlier times in a subordinate position and the ‘new peoples’ (such as Goths, Franks, and Alamanni in the west) who feature in the third/fourth century as major players.<sup>29</sup> For the east it has been noted that there was a change from local exchanges between Roman officials and nomads in frontier areas in the first to third centuries CE to ‘the formal alliances of the late Empire with major Saracen tribal groupings’.<sup>30</sup> ‘Whereas during the first three centuries . . . they are mentioned only incidentally as exotic barbarians, from the fourth century onwards every author who discusses the eastern wars or every source of a local nature . . . refers to the Saracens as a factor of importance’.<sup>31</sup> This

<sup>28</sup> I assume this to be true for both the Roman and the Sasanian Empires, but the dearth of sources for the latter means that I will have to concentrate on the Romans.

<sup>29</sup> Wolfram 1990: 38–44. Cf. Heather and Matthews 1991: 1–2: ‘such recruitment [of Goths in the Roman army in the third century] is probably a sign that the movement of Goths and other peoples south and east from central Europe into the northern hinterland of the Roman empire was already under way by the beginning of the third century. These movements eventually precipitated conflicts not only between Goths and Romans, but also between Goths and other tribal peoples’; Lee 1993: 27: ‘These peoples were therefore gradually acquiring the characteristics of states . . . and were developing the ability to organize themselves so as to pose more serious threats to the Roman empire than had been the case prior to the third century.’

<sup>30</sup> Millar *Roman Near East*: 430.

<sup>31</sup> Isaac 1990: 235; cf. Sartre 1982b: 134: ‘Un phénomène nouveau dans notre documentation est digne d’attention. Alors que les nomades dont nous avons parlé jusqu’ici étaient plus ou moins

is documented by Grouchevoy in an exhaustive examination of the term 'phylarch', demonstrating 'the transformation of "phylarch" from a neutral word [i.e. just meaning head of a tribe or local potentate] into the title of a functionary in the ranks of the Byzantine administrative hierarchy'.<sup>32</sup> And this fits well with Heather's assertion that 'by the fourth century the essence of imperial defence... lay in managing an inner core of client kingdoms that, in practice, were integrated into a late Roman imperial system'.<sup>33</sup> He speaks of 'an inner belt of client kings', those who belonged more inside the Empire than outside it, who could be called upon to provide military and economic support, and who had become to some extent Romanised and active in the affairs of the Empire. In short, 'a whole range of political, social, cultural and economic ties worked across the fortified lines to tie barbarian client kingdoms into a Roman-dominated imperial system'.

Most work on this has been done for the western part of the Empire, but I think one could plausibly argue that there were similar developments taking place on the eastern front.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, as early as the fourth century there were 'Arab' leaders who had close dealings with the imperial powers, in particular king Imru' al-Qays (fl. 320s) and queen Mawiya (fl. 370s). The latter's tribal following are explicitly described as having treaty relations with Rome (*hypospondoi*), and though she first appears in our sources as devastating the eastern provinces over non-payment of subsidies and the appointment of a bishop, she shows herself to be at home within the Empire, renewing the Roman alliance once her requests are granted, and even giving her daughter in marriage to a *magister militum* called Victor.<sup>35</sup> Imru' al-Qays must be placed in the context of the dealings between Himyar and Iran. Shammār Yuhar'ish, who unified all south Arabia under the rule of the kingdom of Himyar, sent an envoy to the Persians (inscription no. 4 above), seeking closer ties between his realm and the Iranian Empire. The reason for this was almost certainly that he wished to counter south Arabia's arch-enemy Axum, which was backed by Rome. Imru' al-Qays boasts that he led a successful campaign against

anonymes... désormais des noms de chefs émergent.' In part this is because, having disbanded the numerous client states on their eastern borders (Nabataea, Palmyra, Commagene, etc), 'Rome became responsible for the policing and control of the steppe' and so acquired more direct knowledge of steppe peoples (Kennedy 1999: 81).

<sup>32</sup> Grouchevoy 1995: 120.      <sup>33</sup> Heather 2001: 32.

<sup>34</sup> One should also note that the South Arabian kingdom of Himyar was also struggling during the fourth century to incorporate various 'Arab' groups within its state structures, as is clear from the expansion of the royal titlature by 430 CE to include 'the Arabs of the Highlands and the Coast' ('*rb Ṭwd w-Ṭhmt*).

<sup>35</sup> Basic story given in Tringham 1979: 96–100.



Shammar in the area of Najran and, though the exact sense is unclear, he mentions allegiance to Rome.<sup>36</sup> This would seem confirmed by the location of Imru' al-Qays' inscription (no. 7 above), only seventy miles south-east of Damascus and within a short distance of the Roman military outpost of Nemara. In this case, Imru' al-Qays' campaign is likely to have been at the instigation of Rome, an attempt to reduce the influence of Shammar. Subsequently, in the 340s, king Ezana in Axum (Ethiopia) commissioned inscriptions in which he adopted elements of the titulature of the Himyarite monarchy, implying that the kings of Axum laid claim to the Himyarite throne as well. Though a detailed account of these events eludes us, it would seem certain that they form part of a struggle between Rome and Iran to gain influence in the Red Sea region and that various Arab groups were embroiled in this struggle.<sup>37</sup>

By the sixth century, with the struggle between the two great powers at its height, attempts to manipulate the 'Arabs' to imperial advantage were intensive:

At that time, when Ella Asbeha was reigning over the Ethiopians and Esimiphaeus over the Himyarites, the emperor Justinian (527–65) sent an ambassador, Julianus, demanding that both nations on account of their community of religion should make common cause with the Romans in the war against the Persians. For he purposed that the Ethiopians, by purchasing silk from India and selling it among the Romans, might themselves gain much money, while causing the Romans to profit in only one way, namely that they be no longer compelled to pay over their money to their enemy . . . As for the Himyarites, it was desired that they should *establish Qays, the fugitive, as chief over Ma'add*, and with a great army of their own people and of the Ma'add Saracens make an invasion into the land of the Persians.

Mundhir, holding the position of king, ruled alone over all the Saracens in Persia, and he was always able to make his inroad with the whole army wherever he wished in the Roman domain. Neither any commander of Roman troops, whom they call *duces*, nor any leader of the Saracens allied with the Romans, who are called *phylarchs*, was strong enough with his men to array himself against Mundhir, for the troops stationed in the different districts were not a match (individually) in battle for the enemy. For this reason *the emperor Justinian (527–65) put in command of as many clans as possible al-Hārith the son of Jabala*, who ruled over the Saracens of Arabia, and bestowed upon him the dignity of king (*basileus*), a thing which among the Romans had never been done before.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>36</sup> See the strong arguments in favour of this reading in Shahid 1984–2002: 86–91.

<sup>37</sup> For the Ezana inscription and some discussion see Retsö 2003: 472–3.

<sup>38</sup> Procopius, *History of the Wars* 1.17 (Dewing 1914) (italics mine).

As regards the expressions ‘establish as chief’ and ‘put in command of’, Justinian obviously did not have the authority to do this himself. Presumably what is meant is that he undertook such measures as announcing that he would henceforth deal with the tribes only through al-Ḥārith as well as giving him money and this title of ‘king’ so as to raise his standing among the tribes, making it easier for him to recruit among them and exercise his command.

This augmented ‘Arab’ role in imperial affairs has been portrayed by some scholars in terms of a ‘nomadic menace’ that assumed greater proportions in the third–fourth centuries.<sup>39</sup> This is, however, just the flip side to the ‘Arabs’ having a greater presence in the imperial system and greater military strength. If they felt they were being treated badly, they could, as Mawiya illustrated, translate their frustration into action, and pose a significant threat to internal security. Yet, as we can see from her reconciliation with Rome and from the many Greek inscriptions of leaders of Ghassān,<sup>40</sup> they wanted to be a part of the Roman world, to improve their lot within it, not to destroy it.

A further ramification of this debate is whether it was improvements in means of transport that furthered this enhanced role of the ‘Arabs’ in the third–fourth centuries. It was once argued that the use of a particular type of camel saddle enabled the Bedouin of this time to fight more effectively on camel back, but this was rejected when it was pointed out that this type of saddle was already known to nomads by the first century CE and that in any case Bedouin mostly used camels only to get to and from a battle, and rode on horses, or fought on foot, in the battle itself.<sup>41</sup> This argument has been revived of late with the amendment that ‘only when these nomadic herdsmen, by employing pack-camels, managed also to lead horses along on their raids did they become a serious menace to the Romans and Sasanians’, the assumption being that Bedouin only got hold of horses around the third century CE.<sup>42</sup> But this too has been shown to be false, as graffiti by nomads of the first century BCE/CE sometimes comprise hunting and raiding scenes involving horses.<sup>43</sup> In addition to this, it misses the point that the Romans were deliberately arming the

<sup>39</sup> Much has been written on this subject; see Hoyland 2001: 96–103, which gives an overview and the most relevant literature (on pp. 288–90).

<sup>40</sup> Listed and discussed in Hoyland 2007a, and in much greater detail by Shahid 1984–2002: vol. III.

<sup>41</sup> Macdonald 1991: 103; see also Zwettler 2000: 279–80.

<sup>42</sup> Kuhnen 1991: 332, who also summarises and gives references for the earlier theory of Walter Dostal about the new camel saddle. Kuhnen is supported by Zwettler 2000: 281–5.

<sup>43</sup> Macdonald 1996: esp. 73 and n. 6.

tribes, increasingly employing them as units in the imperial army and entrusting them with the management of the frontier regions, and that many of them were in varying degrees Romanised. In other words, it is no longer (if it ever was) a question of Romans on one side of a border facing 'the ever present danger of Arab penetration' from the other.<sup>44</sup>

### *Movements of tribes*

The point has been made that 'Arab tribal or collective names that were recorded in ESA [Epigraphic South Arabian] inscriptions, dating mostly from the late second to the sixth centuries CE, can be identified by and large with the names of major tribes or confederations featured in the *ayyām*-accounts [Muslim accounts of pre-Islamic 'Arab' battles] and genealogical lore of medieval Islamic scholarship... In contrast, almost none of the tribes named in the ENA [Epigraphic North Arabian] graffiti and inscriptions can be connected with certainty to a correspondingly named group in the Arab-Islamic historico-genealogical tradition.'<sup>45</sup> For example, among some 20,000 ENA graffiti of the type known as Safaitic, only two group names are easily identifiable with names of tribes cited in Muslim sources, namely Ṭayyi' and Ḥawāla.<sup>46</sup> And they are in any case

<sup>44</sup> Gichon 1986: 584–5.

<sup>45</sup> Zwettler 2000: 278; ENA graffiti refers to informal inscriptions found in their thousands on rocks of the southern Levant and north-west Arabia, written in a variant of the south Arabian script, but in one of the pre-Islamic north Arabian dialects of this region (known to modern scholars, for a variety of accidental reasons, by such names as Safaitic, Hismaic, Thamudic etc.; see Macdonald 2000 and Macdonald 2004 (who prefers the term ANA/Ancient North Arabian)). Note that Zwettler's point is true also of the Greek inscriptions of the area where ENA texts are found; see Sartre 1982a: 77–91, and MacAdam 1986: chapter 3: 'Tribal and clan names in the Greek Inscriptions from Provincia Arabia'.

<sup>46</sup> One might argue that most of the authors of the ENA texts are in their home territory, and so only give the name of the immediate clan or cousin/*ibn 'amm* section, which was unknown to Muslim genealogists. By contrast, the members of Ṭayyi' and Ḥawāla featuring in these texts are outside their home base and so the larger grouping to which they belong is stated (Macdonald 1993: 367). However, this argument is weakened by the fact that some Safaitic graffiti are found far outside their core area (e.g. in Dura Europos and Lebanon), while some group names feature frequently and in very diverse locations, so that larger groupings are likely to be included among the group names of the Safaitic texts (see Macdonald 1993: 304 on distribution of the texts; Harding 1969 for listings of the frequency and place of occurrence of group names; and Millar *Roman Near East*: 428–30 for the diverse locations of texts of the 'Ubayshat and 'Amrat groups). The situation is complicated by the fact that there seems to be only one commonly used word in ENA to designate a group (though one might denote group identity in other ways, e.g. in Safaitic by a nisba), namely *l* (cf. Arabic *āl*), which makes it impossible for us to be sure what size of group is intended. Note that Ḥawāla are subsumed under al-As/zd by Muslim genealogists (e.g. Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara*: I, table 209); they are possibly to be identified with Strabo's Chaulotaeans (from Eratosthenes) and Pliny's Avalitae, whose cities were Duma and Hegra (Macdonald 1993: 308, n. 36).

outsiders, as is obvious from the way in which they are referred to by the authors of these texts.<sup>47</sup>

One expert in Safaitic makes the same point, namely that, besides the Ṭayyi' and the Ḥawāla, 'the earliest [Muslim] Arab writers make no mention of any of the about 136 [group] names as being those of tribes in this area or, for that matter, elsewhere'.<sup>48</sup> What are we to make of this?<sup>49</sup>

<sup>47</sup> For example:

By Tm son of Ḥlš son of 'hrb son of Msk son of Z'n son of Šrb son of Ġlmt son of 'bd. And he was anxious for his companions who were raiding the people (ʾ) of Ṭayyi'. And so, o Lat and Gd-'wd, (grant) vengeance on Ṭayyi' (C2795).

By Nqm son of Rs[n] of the people (ʾ) of '[ty]. And he grieved for [Sy]d, killed by Ṭayyi'. And so, o Lat and Dushara, (grant) revenge (CSNS1011).

By Swd son of M'n, and his is the cairn, killed by Ṭayyi' wretchedly. And so, o Dushara, (grant) revenge (CSNS1046).

By Šby son of Ḥmnt son of Msk son of Z'n son of Šrb son of Ġlmt. And he camped in this place while escaping from the Romans (? *brm*) and the horsemen of Ḥwlt, and so, o Gd-whb'l, (grant) deliverance (C1713).

By Dr'l son of 'ty son of Bḥnh son of Wdm'l. And he waited for his brother whom Ḥwlt had captured, and so, o Lat, (grant) return (C2552).

By Šmt son of 'bd son of Ġt son of Šrk son of Skr. And he escaped from Ḥwlt. And so, o Lat, (grant) security to the one who lets remain this inscription but blind the one who destroys it (WH153).

By Šddt son of 'd. And he expelled Ḥwlt and restrained them and shepherded (WH1231).

By 'mr son of S'd son of Šbh son of Rdh son of Ḥzl. And he feared Ḥwlt (WH2360).

Note that there is one Safaitic text by a person of Ḥawāla who notes his tribal affiliation (*bn-ḥwly*; cf. CSNS 661: By Drb son of Qn *b-nbtj*/the Nabataean) and one Hismaic one (*d-l Ḥwlt*); see Macdonald 1993: 308 and n. 34.

<sup>48</sup> Harding 1969: 22; on pages 20–1 he lists twenty-one names (excluding Ḥawāla and Ṭayyi') out of 136 'as candidates for tribal status', but notes that not one of these can be identified for sure with tribes known to Muslim genealogists. There may be the odd exception to this, but they are so rare that they are clearly just the exception that proves the rule. One plausible exception is Alma', mentioned in a Safaitic graffito of the Jawf area of northern Arabia, which is very likely the Alma' ibn 'Amr tribe of 'Adī ibn Ḥāritha, which, significantly, were seen by Muslim genealogists to be settled in the area of the Sarat mountain range of western Arabia/Jordan before the migrations of al-As/zd; see al-Theeb 2003: no. 1, and Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamhara* 1, table 202.

<sup>49</sup> The point applies also to the ENA dialects called by modern scholars Hismaic and Thamudic, though group designations are rarer in these texts: only twenty-three are listed in King 1990: appendix 6; only eighteen listed in the indices of S. 'A. al-Theeb's books (see bibliography). None of these latter can be identified for sure with tribes recorded by Muslim genealogists, but it is tempting to relate *mzn* (three occurrences listed in King 1990: appendix 6, and one in al-Theeb 1999: index) to the Māzin ibn Kalb, said to be of Jurhum (who belonged to the 'first Arabs' – see below – and were active in the region of the Hijaz), and possibly also to the *mzn* of Dedan (Abū l-Ḥasan 1997: no. 92), but it is perhaps a step too far to link them with the *alimazeis/amazoneis/banizomeneis* of various Greek sources (Septuagint chronicler,

Was there a substantial change in population in this region? Certainly, a number of the 'Arab' groups recorded in ESA texts in southern/central Arabia appear later in north Arabia and Syria/Iraq as though they have migrated to this latter region. Thus Ghassān are in central Arabia in the period 260–360 (see no. 3 above; and already in the second century if they can be identified with the Kassanitae in Ptolemy's *Geography*), and then they defeat the Salīḥ tribe to become the chief allies of Rome in Syria by the sixth century (see below). So were these 'Arab' groups that entered into imperial service in Syro-Mesopotamia in the fourth–sixth centuries coming from southern/central Arabia, as Zwettler implies?

The answer must in some measure be yes, as is illustrated by the following example:

(The tribe of) Salīḥ would tax those of Mudar and other Arab tribes who settled in their territory on behalf of the Romans. Ghassān approached in a great multitude heading for Syria and then settled in it. Salīḥ said to them: 'If you agree to pay the tax you can stay, if not we will fight you.' Ghassān refused and so Salīḥ fought and defeated them... The chief of Ghassān at that time was Tha'laba ibn 'Amr... They (Salīḥ) continued to tax them (Ghassān) until Jidh' ibn 'Amr of Ghassān killed the tax collector of Salīḥ... Then Salīḥ called one another to arms, as did Ghassān, and they engaged at a place called Muhaffaf, and Ghassān destroyed them. The ruler of the Romans feared that they would side with Iran against him, so he sent to Tha'laba saying: 'You are a very courageous and numerous people and you have destroyed this tribe who were the most vigorous and numerous of the Arabs. I now appoint you in their place and shall write an agreement between us and you: if a raiding party of Arabs raid you I will support you with 40,000 armed Roman soldiers, and if a raiding party of Arabs raid us then you must provide 20,000 soldiers, and you must not interfere between us and the Iranians.'<sup>50</sup>

However, one would not wish to suggest a crude model of replacement of one people by another, and so it is useful to bear in mind a number of caveats. First, one should recognise, of course, that languages and scripts

Agatharchides of Cnidus, Diodorus Siculus; references in Retsö 2003: 298), although the location is right.

<sup>50</sup> Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar* 370–1; cf. Ḥamza, *Tārikh* 99, who specifies that the Byzantine ruler was Nṣṭwrs, and al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārikh* 1.233 and 235, who specifies Nusar, most likely Anastasius (491–518). Regarding the last point in this passage, compare the clause in the Byzantine–Persian peace treaty of 561 CE, which stipulated that the Saracen allies 'of the Persians should not arm themselves against the Romans nor those of the Romans against the Persians', presumably aiming to stop superpower conflicts arising from inter-Arab fighting (see Kavar 1956: 181–213). Cf. Malchus, *Byzantine History*, fr. 1 (Blockley 1983), who gives the story of a certain Amorkesus (presumably the 'Arab' name Imru' al-Qays) who leaves the service of the Persians with his 'tribe of Nomalius' and manages to become a phylarch of the Romans through the military prowess displayed by himself and his tribesmen.

can be borrowed and learnt, so there would have been no necessary and immutable link between the ENA and ESA languages and scripts and specific ethnic groups.<sup>51</sup> Second, one must bear in mind that these ENA texts are all graffiti,<sup>52</sup> which are less likely to contain statements about status and identity than texts of a more formal nature, such as the ESA texts that mention 'Arab' kings and tribes (e.g. nos. 1–4 above, and cf. nos. 5–7).<sup>53</sup> Third, the idea of large-scale migrations of peoples has fallen out of favour,<sup>54</sup> and this is a good thing inasmuch as the once widespread idea of Arabia as 'a vast human reservoir' pouring forth waves of tribal settlers into the Fertile Crescent is not a plausible or helpful one.<sup>55</sup> Rather we should perhaps think in terms of more frequent movements of smaller groups within the arid areas of the Syro-Arabian landmass for a variety of purposes, such as pasture, water, trade, booty, employment, etc.<sup>56</sup>

These caveats aside, the idea of some form of movements of certain tribal groups does seem to fit the evidence, both the epigraphic and the literary (such as the notice about Ghassān quoted above). It might also help explain the substantial increase in economic activity throughout the border regions of the Levant in the fourth–sixth centuries that all experts now agree took place: 'All evidence points to the same conclusion, that in

<sup>51</sup> One should likewise be wary of the idea, once very popular and still adduced quite often, that migrations from Arabia to the Levant and Fertile Crescent are discernible in the epigraphic record via an increase in 'Arab'/Arabic names (discussion and examples given in Macdonald 1998 and Macdonald 2003). This is usually stated with little regard for what might constitute an 'Arab'/Arabic name as opposed to a Semitic name in general, and for whether that would in any case necessarily mean that its bearer was an 'Arab' (whatever that might have signified at the time of the inscription's engraving).

<sup>52</sup> The one famous exception is the text on the temple at Rawwafa in north-west Arabia in honour of the emperors Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus (165–9 CE), which, though not an ENA text (it is a Greek/Aramaic inscription), is by a north Arabian tribe, the *ethnos/shrkt* of Thamud. Text and discussion given in Hackl, Jenni and Schneider *Quellen*: 295–300. Macdonald 1995 argues convincingly that one should understand by *ethnos/shrkt* a military unit drawn from the tribe of Thamud rather than the tribe itself, which would better account for their construction of a temple in honour, and with the support, of Roman authorities. Of course, Thamud are known to Muslim genealogists, as are 'Ad, who are also mentioned in the context of the construction of a temple in north-west Arabia (Zayadine and Farès-Drappeau 1998: 255–8), both as tribes of the 'first Arabs' (see below).

<sup>53</sup> Yet the odd south Arabian tribal leader did boast of his status in graffiti, such as 'Ḥujr son of 'Amr king of Kinda' (Gajda 1996: pl. 1).

<sup>54</sup> For an excellent discussion of its problems with regard to the Slavs see Curta 2001, which also reviews much earlier literature on this issue.

<sup>55</sup> An image conjured up by Dussaud 1955, and refuted by Macdonald 2003. However, note that migrations of some form are still generally considered to have taken place in the West at the time (and probably as a function) of the end of the Roman Empire (for a recent overview see Halsall 2006).

<sup>56</sup> And it could go in different directions; thus Kinda extended c. 450–550 into northern Arabia, but subsequently retrenched in the later sixth century in the Hadramawt in Yemen (Lecker 1994: 336).

much of the eastern empire the fifth and sixth centuries saw not only a remarkable rise in the density and geographical spread of settlement, but also a rise in prosperity and in conspicuous expenditure'.<sup>57</sup> The nature of this boom is still not fully clear, but all again concur that an increase in population surely figures, whether as a cause or an effect (i.e. newcomers attracted by the rise in prosperity) or both. For our purposes, it is important to note that tribal movements help make sense of the three new phenomena occurring in the epigraphic record of the third–fourth-century Middle East that were listed at the beginning of this article, namely:

*(a) 'Arab' kings, 'Arab' tribes and the earliest Arab historical memory*

Migrations of 'Arab' tribes from southern Arabia constitute the earliest chapter in the traditional Muslim account of the beginnings of 'Arab' history, which opens with exactly this event, a consequence of some natural disaster or internecine wars. Some tribes, say the Muslim historians, went as far as Syria and Iraq, where they ousted earlier peoples and entered into relations with the Empires of Rome and Iran, as in the text on Salīḥ and Ghassān above, and the following:

The southern tribes were compelled to leave their homes and dispersed in the land. Quḏā'a . . . were the first to settle in Syria. They allied themselves with the emperors of the Romans, who made them kings, after they had become Christians, over the Arabs who had gathered in Syria.<sup>58</sup>

A number of Arab tribes (who had left southern Arabia) gathered in Bahrain; they became allies known as Tanūkh . . . and pledged themselves to assist and support one another . . . These Arabs of Bahrain looked towards the land of Iraq; they were desirous of overpowering the non-Arabs in order to seize the area adjoining Arabia or to share it with them. Taking advantage of the discord among the [Parthian] princes, the Arab chiefs resolved to march to Iraq . . . Many of Tanūkh settled at Anbar and Hira . . . The first ruler from among them was Malik ibn Fahm . . . then his brother 'Amr ibn Fahm . . . then Jadhīma al-Abrash.<sup>59</sup>

They (the southern 'Arab' tribes) did not enter a land without robbing its people of it. Khuzā'a wrested Mecca from Jurhum; Aws and Khazraj wrested Medina from the Jews; the clan of Mundhir seized Iraq from its people; the clan of Jafna seized Syria from its people and ruled it; and the progeny of 'Imrān ibn 'Amr ibn 'Āmir [of al-As/zd] seized Oman from its people. Up till then all of these [southern tribes] had been in obedience to the kings of Himyar.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Ward-Perkins 2001: 168, citing other literature.      <sup>58</sup> Al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* 3.214–15.

<sup>59</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh* 1.746–49; cf. Ptol. *Geog.* 6.7 (ed. K.F.A. Nobbe). He speaks of *Thanuitae* in Bahrain, generally accepted to be a reference to Tanukh.

<sup>60</sup> Al-Asma'i, *Tārīkh al-'arab* 88.

This is then invariably followed by a section on the kings of the 'Arabs' in Iraq and Syria, which always includes: king Jadhīma of Tanūkh, king 'Amr ibn 'Adī of Lakhm and king Imru' al-Qays son of 'Amr ibn 'Adī.<sup>61</sup> Since the timeframe is right, it seems all but certain that these are to be identified with the men of the same names in inscriptions nos. 5–7 above. However, it must be borne in mind that the Arabic reports are not plain historical narratives, but rather of an epic and legendary nature, full of seductions, ambushes, eloquent speeches and heroic battles. For example, Jadhīma kills 'Amr son of Zārib, head of a dynasty that controlled eastern Syria and parts of Mesopotamia for the Romans, father of the beautiful, clever and courageous Zabbā who becomes queen after him and avenges his death by luring Jadhīma into her palace with promises of marriage. She is then herself killed by a Trojan horse-style ruse (men hidden in the saddlebags of camels) executed by the faithful adviser to Jadhīma, now in the employ of the latter's nephew 'Amr son of 'Adī. And on the basis of this tale modern scholars build their knowledge of Roman–'Arab' history, arguing, for instance, that 'the Tanūkh emerge as the consolidated enemies of Palmyra; and when Zenobia decided, after her husband's death,<sup>62</sup> to revolt against the Roman authorities, her action was as much an assault upon her Arab neighbours as it was a defection from the government in Italy'.<sup>63</sup>

Nevertheless, though the details may be hazy, the general fact that (Muslim) Arab historical memory begins with the movements of these tribes and the careers of these kings does seem significant. The link with Zenobia is interesting for two reasons. First, the demise of Palmyra would certainly have left a power vacuum in that region, and it is plausible that the contest between Jadhīma/'Amr ibn 'Adī and Zabbā told in the Arabic sources is a mythical portrayal of the events surrounding that demise and the struggle between groups competing to fill the vacuum. Second, Zabbā is connected in the Arabic accounts with 'the first Arabs' (*al-'arab al-'āriba [al-ūlā]*), who are distinguished from the newcomers who replaced them, the Arabised Arabs (*al-'arab al-musta'riba* or *muta'arriba*, those 'making themselves Arab' or 'seeking to be Arab'). Thus her army 'consisted of remnants of the 'Amālīq and of the first Arabs'.<sup>64</sup> Again, it is tempting to

<sup>61</sup> E.g. al-Ya'qūbī, *Tārikh* 1.234–46; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh* 1.745–771; al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj* 3.181–99.

<sup>62</sup> Thus in the Greco-Roman sources (i.e. Odenathus), as opposed to her father (i.e. 'Amr ibn Zārib) in most Arabic sources where she is portrayed as a virgin queen. For a discussion of the Arabic versions see Piotrovskij 1970: 170–84.

<sup>63</sup> Bowersock *Arabia*: 132; more recently see Sartre *Alexandre*: 984–90.

<sup>64</sup> Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārikh* 1.757. The two groups are, however, much commingled in this early period; e.g. among the migrating tribes were 'the Banū Lihyān (a people who ruled Dedan and its environs



see in this a mythical representation of the political–historical situation, though of course a simplified/schematic one: the movement of some tribal groups from southern/central Arabia into Syro-Mesopotamia and their interaction with tribal groups already there. The Muslim Arab historical memory of this period is remarkably accurate with respect to genealogy (e.g. a Tha‘laba b. Salūl chief of Iyad is mentioned in a south Arabian inscription of the mid-fourth century CE and in Muslim genealogical works),<sup>65</sup> which suggests that there is some degree of continuity between the tribal groups of the third–fourth century and their homonyms of the seventh–eighth century.

It seems reasonable to connect this latter point with the earlier one about increased ‘Arab’ involvement in the imperial system. Thus we might conclude that (Muslim) Arab historical recollection begins in the third–fourth century because it is then that the (political groups known as) tribes that joined the Muslim community were *constituted*, and this was in response to/a result of the imperial policies that increasingly impinged upon the ‘Arabs’ from that time onwards. The degree to which they were the same people as before in different political constellations or new arrivals or a mixture of both is unclear, but in any case they formed the political entities that went on to participate in the rise of Islam and the Muslim conquests. The tribes of north Arabia/Syro-Mesopotamia before that period were in different formations, reflecting a different political reality, and so the tribal map of Muhammad’s time has to be understood in terms of the interaction between Rome/Iran<sup>66</sup> and this region from the third century onwards. The increased literacy evidenced by inscriptions, and the rise in the use of Arabic in particular (e.g. nos. 7–9 above), would be part and parcel of the same development, a result of increased contact with a bureaucratic empire.<sup>67</sup> Possibly the historical memory evidenced above was facilitated by records that began at this time, whether kept by outsiders because these ‘Arab’ tribes had

c. third to first centuries BCE), who were a remnant of Jurhum (of the first Arabs), and it is even said that ‘Jadhīma al-Abrash was from among the first Arabs, of the Banū Wābar (a mythical town in southern Arabia frequented by another tribe of the first Arabs, Umaym) . . . and he raided the dwellings of Ṭasm and Jadīs (of the first Arabs) in Jaww (= Yamāma in north-east Arabia)’ (*Ta’rikh* 1.749–50; see further Retsö 2003: 34–40).

<sup>65</sup> Robin and Gajda 1994: 1, line 14; e.g. Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jambara* I, table 174; the patronymic is rare enough to make homonymy highly unlikely.

<sup>66</sup> As I said in n. 28 above, a lack of evidence makes it difficult to determine Iran’s role, but the fact that it exercised substantial influence in eastern and southern Arabia and cultivated a number of Arab client tribes means that it must also have affected the socio-political situation in Arabia.

<sup>67</sup> Nos. 7 and 9 above in particular hint at a developed literary culture behind them; see Hoyland 2007b. More generally see Heather 1994a and Lee 1993.

become important enough to have their deeds noted,<sup>68</sup> or kept by themselves because they had now acquired sufficient literacy. Plausibly the two phenomena are related, that is, clans that became powerful wanted to record/manipulate their genealogies for political ends and enshrined this in texts.<sup>69</sup>

*(b) The disappearance of ENA and the rise of Arabic*

ENA inscriptions mention Romans and Nabataeans, but never allude to any aspect of Christianity/Christians (even though they frequently call upon deities), and so it is assumed that they peter out around the third–fourth century. Interestingly, this is when Arabic texts start to appear in this area (nos. 7–8 above are located at either end of the region where most ENA texts are located, i.e. southern Syria to northern Arabia). Now, it is in south central Arabia that the very earliest (Old) Arabic texts have been discovered (c. first–second century CE), particularly around the city of Qaryat al-Faw in south central Arabia, the base of the tribes of Kinda and Qaḥṭan.<sup>70</sup> Plausibly, then, the southern/central Arabian tribes that subsequently went to the Syrian desert area made their dialect dominant in this region, by virtue of their greater success in attaining political power, and it is their dialect that went on to form the basis of classical Arabic. The Arabic texts from Qaryat al-Faw were written in south Arabian script, the script of prestige in that area, but in northern Arabia/southern Syria it was the Nabataean Aramaic script that was more prestigious, and so it was in this script that Arabic came to be written. Constant writing of Arabic in Nabataean Aramaic script led to the gradual evolution of the latter until, by the sixth century, we witness the emergence of what looks recognisably like what we call the Arabic script. The most likely reason for this ‘constant writing’ was that Arabic was used by the client tribes

<sup>68</sup> Note Ibn al-Kalbī’s claim to be using church records (see n. 18 above) and the reference of a mid-seventh-century chronicler in south-west Iran to ‘the city of Hira, which was the seat of king Mundar, surnamed the “warrior”, who was sixth in the line of the Ishmaelite kings’ (reference and discussion in Hoyland *Islam*: 188). This does not at all preclude the continuation of oral tradition alongside the written record, and indeed the colourfulness of the tales about Jadhima, Zenobia and numerous other figures of ‘Arab’ history implies an oral component in the composition/transmission of this material.

<sup>69</sup> Though it relates to southern Arabia, it is interesting to note that al-Ḥamdānī (d. 970s) used written sources in compiling reports (*akhbār*) about the men of Khawlān and Ḥimyar, which he says, came in part from a register (*siḡill*) passed down among them from the pre-Islamic period/*jāhiliyya* (*Iklīl* 1 75).

<sup>70</sup> See Robin 1991: 113–26 and 71–88 (esp. 74–7: ‘Critères pour identifier les tribus arabes’). As well as wholly Arabic texts, he discusses Arabic elements in ESA texts, such as the terms ‘*ashīra*’/tribe’, *āl* ‘clan or lineage’ and nomads/*a’rāb*, and the use of the definite article *al* in personal and tribal names (e.g. nos. 2–4 above and the Elisaroi – al-Ash’ar – of Ptolemy’s *Geography*).

of Rome, as is suggested by an inscription in Arabic language and script from Jabal Says, which records the instruction to a small guard unit to proceed there by ‘the king al-Ḥārith’, assumed to be the Ghassanid leader al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala.<sup>71</sup>

(c) *‘Arabs’ and Saracens*

Greco-Roman authors had applied the term ‘Arab’ to a host of independent peoples and principalities around the edges of the Syrian steppe and either side of the Euphrates, but as these became absorbed into the Roman Empire during the first–third centuries, the term gradually faded from their writings and came thereafter to be largely restricted to the citizens, probably now overwhelmingly Christian, of the Provincia Arabia (which explains no. 10 above), whereas nomads were now referred to by the term Saracen. Thus a funerary inscription from that province, from the city of Pella (in modern Jordan), dated 522 CE (year 584 of the era of Pompey), refers to two soldiers, both called John, as hailing ‘from the lands of the Arab nation’ (*apo khōrōn tou Arabōn ethnous*),<sup>72</sup> and the emperor Justinian, in his *Novella* 102, explicitly speaks of ‘the province of the Arabs (*Araborum provincia*)’.<sup>73</sup> And it is in this vein that we should understand comments like those of John Cassian (d. c. 435), that some monks killed in the Judean desert by Saracens were mourned ‘by the whole people of the Arabs’ (*a universa plebe Arabum*).<sup>74</sup> Although the Provincia’s borders were redrawn a number of times after its establishment, it was for long equated with the former kingdom of the Nabataeans. For example, Epiphanius of Salamis, writing in the fourth century, describes Petra as being ‘the main city of Arabia’, even though in his day it was in Palestina III Salutaris (= modern southern Palestine and Jordan). And he says of the Manichaean Scythianus that ‘he originated from the *Sarakēnia* and was raised in the borderland of Palestine, that is, in Arabia’, evidently again thinking of the old Arabia, now Palestine III.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> For some pertinent remarks see Contini 1987 [1990]: 25–77, and Hoyland 2007a and 2007b.

<sup>72</sup> Smith 1973: 1.188.

<sup>73</sup> Schoell and Krall 1954: *Novella* 102. ‘Arab’ was used in the same way in the East, as a term for inhabitants of the province of ‘Arab/Beth ‘Arabaye in northern Mesopotamia (cf. Zacharias Rhetor, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, 2.35 (ed. E. W. Brooks): the city of Dara was built ‘to guard the country of the Arabs [*‘Arabāyē*] from the marauding bands of Persians and Ṭayyāyē’). See further Shahid 1984–2002: 2.192–3, 3.56–9, and Retsö 2003: 505–25.

<sup>74</sup> ‘*Collatio sexta: De nece sanctorum*’, *Patrologia latina* 49.643–4; note the disjunction between the terms Arab and Saracen.

<sup>75</sup> References given in Retsö 2003: 510.

Epiphanius' reference to *Sarakēnia* reminds us of a change that went hand in hand with this new definition of Arabs as settled inhabitants of Arabia, namely, as mentioned above, the designation of nomads as *Sarakēnoi*/Saracens. These first appear as a tribe in north-west Arabia and Sinai in the second-century *Geography* of Ptolemy (6.7), and, presumably because they were the nomads that the Romans first had to deal with directly after disbanding the kingdom of the Nabataeans, their name came to mean nomads in general, as we see from inscriptions nos. 11–12 above and from Ammianus Marcellinus' references, apropos of the campaign of the emperor Julian in 363, to 'the tent-dwelling Arabs whom we now call Saracens' and 'the tent-dwelling Arabs whom men of later ages call Saracens'.<sup>76</sup> The same phenomenon can be observed in the Persian sphere of control, where the tribe of Ṭayyī' came to provide the generic name for nomads (in Syriac: *Ṭayyāyē*; in Greek: *Taiēnoi*; in Persian: *Tāzīgān*).<sup>77</sup>

### Conclusion

One wonders what might have been the consequences for the tribes of the Arabian Peninsula and the Syrian desert of this involvement with the imperial powers over the course of the third–sixth centuries. As noted at the beginning of this article, it is felt by many historians of the west Roman Empire that it was through engagement with Rome that peoples like the Franks and the Slavs came to be nations. For example, we can observe in western peoples a tendency to move towards more unitary leadership:

No less than seven Alamannic kings gathered their men to fight Julian at the battle of Strasbourg in 357; they were also accompanied by ten princes. The narratives of Julian's operations across the Rhine subsequently, and in the next two years, confirm both the great number of Alamannic kings and the fact that they ruled their own geographical areas more or less autonomously, at least to the extent of making their own treaties with the Roman state. This much is clear,

<sup>76</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *History*, 22.15.1, 23.6.13 (ed. and tr. J. C. Rolfe). There have been various explanations of the name Saracen, such as easterners (*sharqiyyīn*), plunderers (*sāriqīn*), inhabitants of barren lands (from the Aramaic root *srq*), confederates (from *shrkī*); but it seems simpler to assume it began as the name of a tribe, as with Ṭayyāyē and a number of examples in the west of the Roman Empire; for a resumé of these ideas and a different suggestion see Macdonald 1995: 93–101.

<sup>77</sup> An early testimony to this change in terminology is Bardaisan's *Book of the Laws of Countries*, written shortly before 240 CE, which enumerates a series of lands where there is no visible trace of the alleged influence of the constellations, among them 'the region of the Ṭayyāyē and Saracens' (p. 50). In the 290s a panegyricist lauds Diocletian's response to 'the chains of captivity of the *Saracenum*' (*Panegyrici latini* vol. 3, 11.5.4 (ed. R. A. B. Mynors)).

but some later – fifth- and sixth-century – sources refer to an overall king of the Alamanni, so that debate has centred on when and if such a figure emerged. In the pages of Ammian, however, it is very striking that the cluster of fourth-century Alamannic kings and princes already shows a tendency to throw up from among their number, one figure more powerful than the rest.<sup>78</sup>

And in the case of the Goths we can see the gradual emergence of the kingdoms of the Visigoths and Ostrogoths out of a multiplicity of smaller units.<sup>79</sup> The impetus for this probably came more from the barbarians, a result of their wish for greater bargaining power and of the competition amongst their leaders for greater prestige and status, for in general Roman emperors would not have wished to create super-kings. Such increased power and authority among barbarians would mean that they could extract greater concessions/better terms from their masters, which, if not met, could lead to more devastating raids and even more serious challenges. Justinian's move to 'put in command of as many clans as possible al-Ḥārith the son of Jabala' and 'to bestow upon him the dignity of king' was therefore probably bred of necessity, and it is significant that the emperor Maurice cancelled the arrangement and 'the kingdom of the Arabs was shared out amongst fifteen chiefs'.<sup>80</sup> But such actions may have left a more lasting legacy, and it is tempting to connect it with the emergence of ever larger groupings among the Arabs in late antiquity, culminating in the appearance of the two great factions of the Qays and the Yemen in early Islamic times, which led to a substantial merging of groups that were once very distinct.<sup>81</sup>

One also wonders how the social structure of the various Arab tribes was affected by their dealings with the Empires. Certainly, it would seem that as they became more powerful, ruling clans would rely less and less on their own tribesmen for military support and turn increasingly to outside recruits, in the process bringing together very diverse

<sup>78</sup> Heather 2001: 42; cf. Heather 1997: 74: 'It is quite clear that by the sixth century at the latest *federati* had taken on a quite different significance, designating new groups held in a more equal and favourable relationship with the Roman state.'

<sup>79</sup> Heather 1991. <sup>80</sup> Michael the Syrian, *Chronique* 2.350–51 (= Chabot 1899–1910).

<sup>81</sup> Ibn al-Kalbī, *Jamharat* I, 33–35; Crone 1994 (she labels them tribally-inspired military factions). For example, Nizār and Ma'add are evidently separate entities in the Nemara inscription (no. 7 above), but are combined in Islamic times by making Nizār the son of Ma'add (note the assertion of Zwettler 2000: 284 that 'the pre-Islamic sources . . . give no hint that before the seventh century Ma'add was thought to designate an eponymous ancestor or genealogical figure of any kind. And . . . there is no sound evidence that Ma'add has ever been used . . . to designate a "tribe" or "confederation" as such'). Zwettler 2000: 286–9 gives further examples. Note also the mid-sixth-century *bā'iyya* poem of al-Akhnas ibn Shihāb (Lyall 1918: no. 41) that lists Ghassān, Lakhm, Kalb and Bahrā' (i.e. southern Arabs according to Muslim genealogists) as members of Ma'add (i.e. northern Arabs according to Muslim genealogists).

groups. Thus we read that Mundhir ibn al-Hārith (569–81) obtained gold from the emperor Justin in order to hire mercenary troops, and also that the Lakhmid king Nu'mān (580–602) was presented with 'two bodies of troops by the Persian emperor, one called *Dawsar*, these being from Tanūkh, and the other called the radiant ones (*al-shaba*), these being Persians'.<sup>82</sup> And we hear of a king of Ghassān who 'waged war and summoned to his aid the roving bands who have no camels of their own to guard and defend'.<sup>83</sup> But for this reason, that they did not solely rely on their tribal followings in battle, these leaders and their clans were often mocked and satirised:

Ghassān is a tribe whose strength lies in other than their kin, both lightly armed men and squadrons of cavalry fight on their behalf... Iyād have moved down into lower Iraq; offering protection to them are Persian lancers seeking out those who would fight them.<sup>84</sup>

Unfortunately, we do not have much information to answer these and other questions. These Arab clients, even the mighty Lakhm, did not generally leave us any documents. The sole exception is Ghassān, from whom we do have a number of inscriptions. Here they appear as perfect Byzantine allies, writing in Greek, flaunting their imperial titles and their staunch allegiance to Christianity, though we do have a hint of another side to their identity in the aforementioned inscription from Jabal Says, south-east of Damascus, written by a soldier despatched by 'al-Hārith the king' in Arabic language and Arabic script (so, though in imperial dealings they wrote in Greek, amongst themselves they presumably used Arabic). In addition, there is the large corpus of poetry composed in honour of chiefs of Ghassān, which, if genuine, would suggest that these chiefs used their imperial subsidies to create their own courts and sponsor their own brand of poetry centred around their own heroic world of generosity and forbearance in peace and courage and fidelity in war, a veritable archive of their own glorious deeds immortalised in lofty Arabic diction.<sup>85</sup> Put together, the evidence shows that Ghassān had their own military following and were involved at a high level in the imperial

<sup>82</sup> John of Ephesus, *Ecclesiastical History* 6.3 (Mundhir) (ed. and tr. E. W. Brooks); al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1.853 (Nu'mān). This would appear to have been on top of various other military cadres, such as levies (*waḍī'a*) personal clients (*sani'a*), and hostages (*nabā'in*); see Rothstein 1899: 134–8, and Kister 1968: 165–8.

<sup>83</sup> Lyall 1918: no. 54, line 20 (Muraqqish the Elder). <sup>84</sup> Lyall 1918: no. 41 (Akhnas ibn Shihāb).

<sup>85</sup> Now well and thoroughly presented and discussed in Shahid 1984–2002: 3.2; see also Hoyland 2007a.

and church hierarchies<sup>86</sup> (in contemporary inscriptions and manuscripts their leaders are called *patrikios*, *phylarchos*, *endoxotatos*, *philochristos*, etc.) and they engaged in constructing buildings and patronising culture. Furthermore, they had their own regional powerbase, the Damascus region, where they were acknowledged as powerbrokers by the local authorities, as is evidenced by inscriptions from there dated according to their time in office,<sup>87</sup> and by a Syriac manuscript of 570 CE that bears the signatures of the priests and abbots of the 'eparchy of Arabia' and recognises the authority of the Ghassanid phylarch.<sup>88</sup> All of this is enough to suggest that we may make better progress on the question of Rome's interaction with the 'eastern barbarians' if we consider Ghassān, and other 'Arab' polities, on a par with the west Roman kingdoms/proto-states of the Goths, Franks and others rather than as just nomadic tribesmen.

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<sup>86</sup> For example, both al-Ḥārith ibn Jabala and his son Mundhir ibn Ḥārith exchanged letters and visits with church leaders, presided over councils and even went to Constantinople to debate matters of dispute between Christian groups (see Shahid 1984–2002: 3.1 for more examples and exhaustive discussion). Note also the Ghassanid phylarch Abū Kārib's involvement in the settlement of a dispute between two church deacons concerning the sale of a vineyard (Kaimio 2001: 2.719–24).

<sup>87</sup> *IGLS* 2553bd (Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, on lintel of former monastery, 870 = 569 CE) and *IGLS* 2110 (Hayyat, on a house, recording construction of a courtyard, 473 of the eparchy = 578 CE), both from the vicinity of Damascus, state that they were written 'in the time of . . . the archimandrite and of the deacon Anastasius and of the phylarchate of the most illustrious Harith' and 'in the time of Mundhir, *paneuphēmos* and *patrikios*' respectively; i.e. instead of in the time of a Roman emperor or provincial governor. Similarly, an event in John Moschus' *Pratum Spirituale* is dated to 'when Nu'mān (*Names*), the phylarch of the Saracens, was making raids' (*Patrologia Graeca* 87.3, 3024 = chapter 155 (ed. J. P. Migne) and Ms. BM Syriac 585 of the monastery of Natpha near Tadmur (Palmyra) is dated to when Abū Kārib, a Ghassanid, was king (Wright 1871: 2.468).

<sup>88</sup> From which Nöldeke 1875: 420 concludes: 'Dies lässt sich nur so erklären, dass diese mono-physische Kirchenprovinz "Arabia" so weit gerechnet wurde, wie die Macht der Ghassānischen Phylarchen ging'; that is, ecclesiastical 'Arabia' was pretty much coterminous with the Ghassanid sphere of authority. See also Shahid 1984–2002: 3.821–38.

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