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PART I

The emergence of the Muslim world

1

The Middle East in late antiquity

To understand the rise of Islam requires some familiarity with the state of the Middle East in late antiquity—roughly the period from the fourth century to the early seventh. What was it about the pre-Islamic Middle East of that time that led to the rise of Islam or, if that is too much to ask, made it possible? Here we have to distinguish three geographically very different scenes.

We will start in the Arabian interior, in the region where Islam was to be born in the early seventh century. What we see there is a stateless, tribal society, much of it nomadic. Its nature will be apparent in the style of warfare between the tribes, the character of their internal politics, and their identity, language, and culture. How did the environment in which they lived shape a lifestyle so remote from urban civilization?

We will then move north to the two empires, Byzantine and Persian, that dominated the rest of the Middle East. This was a very different world, one of teeming cities and tax-paying peasantries living in an environment that favored the formation of powerful states. However, this two-empire configuration, stable for centuries despite frequent hostilities, came under serious strain in the early seventh century thanks to a war of unprecedented duration between the two. At the same time their geopolitical rivalry was exacerbated by a religious difference: the Byzantine Empire was Christian, whereas the Persian Empire was Zoroastrian. Yet they had coexisted for centuries in the past, so why not in the future?

Farther to the north, beyond the boundaries of the Middle East, lived the nomadic peoples of the steppes. Unlike the Arab tribes, these northern nomads had a track record of threatening the empires, and we will see two steppe rulers intervening in the war between them. If any external force was to overthrow one or both of the warring empires, would it not be these steppe nomads?

The main call on our attention, however, will be relations between the empires and the Arabs. In political and military terms the empires had a number of options, of which the most significant was outsourcing the task of keeping order among the tribes

of the borderlands to a cooperative Arab chief. As we will see, by the late sixth century this practice was in abeyance—a fact of some significance for our story.

In religious terms the key change of late antiquity was the rise of monotheism in its Christian form, including a strong presence on the fringes of Arabia, which already had Jewish populations in the interior. This meant that the paganism of the Arab tribes looked increasingly out of place in the wider world. Did that matter?

All these questions focus on late antiquity, but in the last section of the chapter we will reach deeper into the past to ground our understanding of two things: how the existence of states in the Middle East related to its resources, and how old-fashioned paganism was giving way to something else.

We will end by asking what the future of the Middle East might have looked like to an early seventh-century observer who lacked what we have: the wisdom of hindsight.

The Fijār wars and the Arabian interior

Sometime in the later sixth century, the wilderness of western Arabia was the scene of four successive wars.[1] They were concentrated around Mecca, in the region of the Ḥijāz, and were known as the "Fijārs." The name suggests that there was something immoral about them (*fujūr* means depravity), and the explanation given is that they took place during a sacred month when people were not supposed to fight each other. Each of these wars is a colorful story in itself, but we will have to be content with looking closely at just one of them and making some reference to another. Here, then, is what happened in the "Third Fijār," as narrated in an Arabic book by a ninth-century author, Ibn Ḥabīb (d. 860), with occasional details drawn from other sources. Despite the passage of more than a millennium since he composed his book, most of the narrative flows easily enough in the twenty-first century. But from time to time a word of explanation is needed, and where that is so, I put it in parentheses. Also, at a couple of points we are given more names than most readers today would know what to do with; I will come back to this profusion of names a little further on.

The story of the Third Fijār

The trouble began when an Arab woman came to ʿUkāẓ, not far from Mecca, to do some shopping. (The reference to her being an Arab suggests that she belonged to a nomadic tribe rather than to the sedentary population of the oases; ʿUkāẓ was

1. E. Landau-Tasseron, "The sinful wars," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 8 (1986). For a wider survey of the pre-Islamic Arabian past see R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, London 2001, and for the whole sweep of the history of the Arabs see T. Mackintosh-Smith, *Arabs*, New Haven 2019.

the site of an annual fair at which people from different tribes would gather to buy and sell.) The woman belonged to the Banū ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa (the sons of ʿĀmir son of Ṣaʿṣaʿa), who in turn were part of a larger tribal group, the descendants of ʿIkrima ibn Khaṣafa ibn Qays. (For now the only name to remember here is Qays; we can think of Qays as her tribe, named after its common ancestor.) The woman was tall and attractive, and her presence soon drew the attention of some young men from Mecca. She was wearing a striped veil that concealed all of her face but her eyes. Cheekily, the young men suggested she remove it, but she did not oblige them. Now in those days, our narrator explains, women wore only a single garment. So when she sat down to negotiate some purchases, one of the young men came up behind her and pinned the end of her dress to her back. This young man was Abū ʾl-Ghashim ibn ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā ibn ʿĀmir ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥāritha ibn Saʿd ibn Taym ibn Murra. (There is no need to attend to any of these names at this point; what an insider learns from them is that the young man belonged to a certain Qurashī clan, Quraysh being the tribe that dominated Mecca.) This practical joke was a success: when the woman had completed her purchases and stood up, her lower body was stripped naked. This greatly amused the young men, who taunted her, "You wouldn't show us your face, and now you've shown us your buttocks!" She responded by unveiling her face (now an appeal for aid) and shouting, "Help, O Qays! Look what they've done to me!"[2] A crowd gathered, and members of her tribe rallied around her. The fellow tribesmen of the young men must have responded similarly, and there was a skirmish between the two sides. But there was no serious fighting, and the opponents soon separated. There, in this account, the war ended; but other accounts have it that the fighting, whether described as light or heavy, did lead to injuries. A prominent member of Quraysh then took it upon himself to pay the requisite blood money, thereby resolving the matter before it could lead to further trouble.

This story gives us several things to think about. Perhaps the most obvious question it invites is why, in a book devoted to the grand narrative of fourteen centuries of Muslim history, we should be bothering with an incident as trivial as this. But we had best defer that question till we have tackled some more pedestrian ones.

Should we believe the story?

The first and most pedestrian question is whether we are to believe this story. Well over two centuries intervened between the time when the incident allegedly took place in the Arabian desert and the time when Ibn Ḥabīb was composing his book in the sophisticated urban milieu of Baghdad. Two things might nevertheless be said to shore up his credibility. One is that he was an expert on the lore of

2. Ibn Ḥabīb, *Munammaq*, Hyderabad 1964, 189–90.

pre-Islamic Arabia, and indeed one of many such experts. By the ninth century this was a well-developed scholarly discipline with a significant readership among the cultural elite of the day—or perhaps we should say audience, since this was a society whose elite absorbed much of its literary heritage in oral settings. The other is that he did not compose his book out of thin air; he used earlier sources, and he tells us what—or rather who—they were. He had his account of the Third Fijār from an earlier expert in the same field who hailed from Medina in western Arabia but moved to Baghdad, where he died in 815–16. He, in turn, had the story from another resident of Medina, who died in 768–69 and incidentally belonged to the same clan of Quraysh as the youth who caused the woman such distress. He had a reputation for unreliability among experts on the transmission of traditions about the sayings and doings of the Prophet Muḥammad, but that was a different discipline from the study of pre-Islamic Arabian lore, so perhaps it did not matter. This man, in turn, had the account from a Medinese poet who died in 747–48. There the chain of transmission ends. So even if we believe in the accuracy of this chain of transmission and accept that the account as we have it today is pretty much as it left the hands—or the mouth—of the eighth-century poet, we still have a gap of more than a century between the event and the poet's lifetime. We have no idea how the information was transmitted—or alternatively invented—over that period.

Another consideration is that stories like this one are often told in variant forms. For example, one key feature of our story is unstable: depending on the account, the fighting is said to have been insignificant or severe. Obviously two such variants cannot both be right. Yet another phenomenon that could incline us to skepticism is the way elements of a story can appear in more than one narrative context. Thus we encounter the same practical joke in Yathrib or, to use its Islamic name, Medina in 624; this time the joker is a Jew, and the incident leads to the expulsion of his tribe from the oasis. Either the trick was a popular one among young men at the time, or the story has migrated within the literary tradition. A further problem could be that accounts of the past are liable to be distorted to serve the purposes of the present, but this is not apparent in the case at hand.

Very occasionally we are able to check such memories of pre-Islamic Arabia against sources external to the Arabic literary tradition. For example, the Arabic sources tell us that Muḥammad's great-grandfather Hāshim, who must have lived around the year 500, met the Byzantine emperor in Syria. We can say with assurance that this is wrong, because we know from the Byzantine sources, which are fairly extensive, that no emperor visited Syria between the fourth century and the seventh. But consider another example. The literary tradition preserves the testimony of a contemporary poet to the effect that his eastern Arabian tribe fought on the side of Abraha, a mid-sixth-century Ethiopian ruler of Yemen, in the course of a campaign in western Arabia. This sounds unlikely, but it finds startling con-

firmation in a contemporary inscription that we owe to the Ethiopian ruler. As these examples show, external checks can go either way. But in the case of the Third Fijār there are no sources external to the tradition that we could bring to bear. Are we then to say that we have no reason to believe this account? Or should we rather say that we have no reason to doubt it? The issue arises with regard to much of what the Islamic sources have to tell us about pre-Islamic Arabia, and often, as in this case, there is no clear resolution.

A possible compromise, and one we will adopt here more because it is fruitful than because it is demonstrably right, is to say that irrespective of whether the details of a narrative are true, the narrators of the early Islamic period still retained a good sense of the realities of life in pre-Islamic Arabia, despite the distance that already separated their world from the one they described. They were certainly aware of this distance. As we saw, our narrator—presumably the eighth-century poet—knows that he has to explain to his audience that in those days women wore only a single garment; in his own time they obviously wore more than one. Read in this vein, what does our story have to tell us about the character of the society in which it is set?

The marginality of states

When reading a historical source, it often pays to ask what is *not* there. One thing that is conspicuously absent from the background assumed by the story is any sign of activity on the part of a state or its agents. A ruler whose territories included ʿUkāẓ would have had reason to maintain a presence there during the fair. This concentration of commerce would have provided an opportunity for him to collect some taxes, and that, in turn, would have given him a motive for reining in any conflict likely to disrupt the buying and selling. Such an authority might, of course, have missed this particular incident, which does not seem to have been very serious; but in fact there is no trace of a ruler or his agents in any of these wars bar the fourth and last. There the ruler in question was indeed an Arab king, but he was located far away to the north in the town of Ḥīra, on the edge of Mesopotamia—the region we will know in Islamic times by its Arabic name, Iraq. This king had organized a caravan that was to bring goods to ʿUkāẓ, and to ensure its safe passage through the territories of the tribes he was looking for someone with the right local connections to guard it. Clearly he had no permanent agents in place in western Arabia. Meanwhile, rulers based beyond the frontiers of Arabia do not even appear on the horizon.

For the most part the impression we get from the accounts of the Fijārs fits well with the wider picture of the Arabian interior in this period that we gather from our sources, such as they are. We hear of occasional kings who ruled there, but they were unimpressive figures by the royal standards of the outside world—we

could call them kinglets. In general the Arabian interior was stateless. Thus in the Ḥijāz, the region of western Arabia that included Mecca and Yathrib, there was no king in sight on the eve of the rise of Islam. Neither the Ḥijāz as a whole, nor any of its oases, nor any of its nomadic populations were then ruled by kings. In Yathrib there was a tribal leader who had hopes of making himself king but did not succeed, and there were recollections of men who had ruled as kings there in bygone days. One was appointed king by his clan but was then attacked and injured by one of his subjects, a man whose inheritance he wanted to appropriate part of. Unable to get even with his assailant because members of the clan were protecting him, the king went on strike by sitting in the sun and vowing not to enter a house till the score was settled. A little girl collecting firewood happened to pass by and asked him what he was doing sitting in the sun, so he told her his hard-luck story in verse. She passed it on to his fellow clansmen, who then bound the assailant and brought him to the king, who thereupon forgave the clan. He did, in the event, get some of the inheritance, but the story is hardly redolent of the pomp and power of kingship as it was understood outside Arabia. The Ḥijāzī tribe of Sulaym, which was partly nomadic and partly settled, likewise had traditions about kings in the past. We are told of one man who was about to become king when a cousin slapped him in the face, after which he left the tribal territory in humiliation. Another was deposed when he acted contrary to the wishes of the tribesmen in some matter—when it came to the crunch he did not have enough kinsmen in the tribe to support him.

This absence of states in most of Arabia is not hard to understand, once we think away our modern assumption that outside Antarctica the world's land surface is partitioned into territories each ruled by a state. In a premodern context such as this, we can usually think of a state as an enterprise that made a living by collecting taxes from its subjects and delivering security in exchange; this security, in turn, encouraged the economic activity without which there would be nothing to tax. Such an enterprise was worth mounting only in an environment in which a decent amount of tax could be collected without too much difficulty. Egypt is a prime example of a premodern tax collector's paradise: a country in which rich agricultural land was cultivated by humble peasants and laid out along a river system that ensured easy access for the agents of the state. The Arabian interior, by contrast, was a tax collector's hell: a wilderness in which agricultural land was scarce and widely dispersed, with a population of refractory and often nomadic tribesmen. This Arabian landscape forms part of an extended band of desert that stretches to the Atlantic in the west and spills over into northwestern India in the east. So Arabian agriculture was largely confined to the oases. Rare in the Ḥijāz, they were somewhat more common in the eastern region known as Najd and culminated in Arabia's largest oasis in Baḥrayn near the coast of the Persian Gulf (here Baḥrayn refers to the mainland opposite the island we know today as

Bahrain). But most of Arabia was too poor in agricultural resources to provide adequate returns to would-be state builders, and this was particularly true of the Ḥijāz. A fifteenth-century navigator summed it up: "The Ḥijāz is barren with little food. . . . The winter rains never reach it except a little."[3] A Syrian Jew who settled in Yathrib in pre-Islamic times is described as contrasting his former abode—"a land of bread and wine" with his new one—"a land of hardship and hunger."[4] Farther south, in Mecca, we have the derisive response of some pagans who were resistant to the message brought to them by Muḥammad: "Well, Muḥammad," they are said to have mocked their prophet, "you know that no people are more short of land and water, and live a harder life than we, so ask your Lord who has sent you . . . to straighten out our country for us, and to open up in it rivers like those of Syria and Iraq." Without rivers, drought meant famine, particularly for the nomads whose animals had nothing to eat when the vegetation did not grow. Accounts of a drought that struck Medina and the region around it in 639 preserve a vignette of a nomadic group who prevailed on their reluctant chief to slaughter a sheep for them: it turned out to be nothing but skin and bones. It certainly helped that there was, as we have seen, some trade in the pre-Islamic Arabian interior. But the fair at ʿUkāẓ clearly did not offer sufficient resources for state building. One reason for this was that between the decline of the frankincense trade in late antiquity and the rise of the Yemeni coffee trade in the seventeenth century, no part of Arabia grew a cash crop valuable enough to be of serious interest to the world outside it.

The corners of the peninsula, the Yemen and Oman, were better provided with rainfall. Here let us concentrate on the Yemen, which played a more prominent role in Arabian affairs than Oman did. It was not for nothing that the ancients knew it as Arabia Felix, as opposed to Arabia Deserta. The Yemen had a long tradition of state formation associated with a culture of Ancient Near Eastern vintage, and in late antiquity, between the third and sixth centuries, the Ḥimyarites united the region for the first time and maintained a significant kingdom there. Yet even in the Yemen the supply of water was far from generous. A Roman military expedition to the Yemen led by Aelius Gallus in 25–24 BC failed to take the capital city for lack of water. Moreover, such water as the country possessed was associated with a mountainous terrain, the result of the rifting that produced the Red Sea. Mountains help bring down rainfall, but they are also one of nature's devices for making life difficult for states and their tax collectors. Thus any state in the Yemeni interior was condemned to float uneasily on a sea of recalcitrant mountain tribes.

3. Ibn Mājid in G. R. Tibbetts, *Arab navigation in the Indian Ocean before the coming of the Portuguese*, London 1971, 264.

4. For this and the next quotation see Ibn Isḥāq, *The life of Muhammad*, trans. A. Guillaume, Oxford 1955, 94, 134.

Of course commercial revenues helped, since the Yemen, like Oman, had Indian Ocean frontage. But by the time of the Fijārs the Yemeni tradition of state formation was over, as was the larger culture that went with it. Ḥimyarite rule had ended in the later 520s thanks to an Ethiopian military intervention against a background of debilitating drought. Thereafter, the Ethiopian Abraha ruled a successor state for a few decades, but after about 570 even that came to an end.

Meanwhile, the tribesmen of the Arabian interior did not just lack rulers; they showed themselves positively allergic to them. A self-respecting tribe would set a high value on being what was called *laqāḥ*, a status it could claim if and only if it had never given allegiance to a king and never paid tribute to one. Thus the story goes that a member of Quraysh sought to become king of Mecca. But one of his fellow tribesmen quickly killed the idea, declaring that "Quraysh is *laqāḥ*; it neither wields royal power nor is subject to it."[5] This defiant attitude to kings is vividly illustrated in a story about a pre-Islamic poet who killed one. The king in question—a king of Ḥīra—had attempted to trap the poet's mother into the servile act of passing a plate to his own mother. The poet's mother at once called out to her tribe for help, and the poet promptly killed the king. In a poem he boasts on behalf of his fellow tribesmen that "we rebelled against the king, and would not serve him." He asks the king why they should "be underlings to your chosen princelet" and when they were ever "your mother's domestics"; he describes how they returned from a raid "leading the kings in fetters."[6] Another story recounts that a tribe responded to the arrival of a would-be tax collector sent by the king of Ḥīra by throwing him into a well.

Unfriendly as the Arabian environment may have been for the nurturing of states, are we to say that the interior had always been as lacking in large-scale political organization as it appears to have been on the eve of the rise of Islam? This is a good question, but one that is best deferred until we have brought the two largest and most powerful states of the Middle East into the picture. Before we do that, we should pay some further attention to the society and culture of the Arab tribes.

The centrality of tribes

If this Arabian society lacked states, what did it have instead? The answer is easily detected in our story of the Third Fijār: a form of tribalism based on patrilineal descent that embraced the entire free population, nomadic and sedentary. Each of the two main actors in the story—the woman and the young man who humiliated her—is given a tribal identity expressed by the naming of a string of male

5. Muṣʿab al-Zubayrī, *Nasab Quraysh*, Cairo 1976, 210.
6. A. J. Arberry (trans.), *The seven odes*, London 1957, 204–9.

ancestors. In the case of the woman, her own name is not even mentioned; it is enough that we know that she belonged to the Banū ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa, who in turn were among the descendants of ʿIkrima ibn Khaṣafa ibn Qays (*ibn*, again, means "son of," and *banū* is its plural). The reader is expected to make this connection when she uses a set form (*yā la-Qays*) to call upon any members of Qays within hearing to come to her aid. By addressing herself to all those descended from this distant ancestor, she is casting her net very wide; a variant version has her call out *yā la-ʿĀmir*, thereby limiting her appeal to the Banū ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa. In the case of the young man, we are given a full recital of his male ancestors back to a certain Murra: Abū ʾl-Ghashim ibn ʿAbd al-ʿUzzā ibn ʿĀmir ibn al-Ḥārith ibn Ḥāritha ibn Saʿd ibn Taym ibn Murra. As already indicated, the reader is expected to know that Taym ibn Murra is the ancestor who gave his name to a well-known clan within the tribe of Quraysh. In both cases, we see that Arab genealogy is about men. Of course everyone knew perfectly well that women had a role to play in the process by which men begat men, but no need was felt to provide comparably systematic information about female lines of descent—which is not to say that they didn't matter.

But why so many ancestors? Why not simply say that the young woman belonged to Qays and the young man to Quraysh? This, indeed, is all we need to know to make sense of the story as told above. But in other contexts other ancestors could come to the fore. Thus in a variant version of the story the woman's side is identified with the tribe of Hawāzin—Hawāzin being an intermediate ancestor, a grandson of ʿIkrima and great-grandfather of Ṣaʿṣaʿa. In some other conflict the Banū ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa might find themselves pitted against another Qaysī group that did not descend from ʿĀmir. Or Qays and Quraysh, both descended from a certain Muḍar, might even find themselves on the same side against a group that did not share that ancestry. Some of these genealogical nodes are more important than others, so that in practice we can often think of the pre-Islamic Arabs as divided into a fixed set of tribes—Hawāzin, Quraysh, and so forth. But in any given situation the operative group might be larger or smaller, bringing different ancestors into play.

This salience of patrilineal genealogy does not mean that the structure of Arabian society was based *exclusively* on extended kinship. Two men could create a formal relationship whereby one became the client or ally (*ḥalīf*) of the other; the agreement would likely include the kinsmen of each party. Such supplementation of the kinship system was in fact an ancient feature of Arabian society. Herodotus, the Greek historian of the fifth century BC, has this to say:

> No nation regards the sanctity of a pledge more seriously than the Arabs. When two men wish to make a solemn compact, they get the service of a third, who stands between them and with a sharp stone cuts the palms of their hands near

> the base of the thumb; then he takes a little tuft of wool from their clothes, dips it in the blood and smears the blood on seven stones which lie between them, invoking, as he does so, the names of Dionysus and Urania; then the person who is giving the pledge commends the stranger—or fellow-citizen, as the case may be—to his friends, who in their turn consider themselves equally bound to honor it.[7]

By the time of the Fijārs this ritual had been forgotten, and instead we hear of one involving fire. But the basic social building block described by Herodotus was still in play, and we will soon see an example of it in the context of the Fourth Fijār. Like extended kinship, this institution helps a tribal society function in the absence of a state.

To an extent, then, we can see Arabian society as having tribes *instead* of states. One aspect of this can perhaps be seen in our story. In her distress, the woman calls upon the members of her tribe for help. What would a woman subjected to comparable sexual harassment do in our own society? Depending on the context, she might call upon her immediate family members, her friends, bystanders, the campus authorities, or those in charge at her workplace. In terms of kinship, the options of a woman today are much narrower than those of the woman in the story; few Americans, for example, maintain bonds of kinship with relatives more distant than their cousins. But as far as authorities independent of the kinship system are concerned, her options today are considerably wider. Moreover, if the incident were to take place at her workplace, it could end up in court; if it led to violence, the police might be involved. But Arabian society, lacking rulers, did without such authorities. In one version of the story, as we have seen, the hostilities ceased when a prominent member of Quraysh took it upon himself to pay blood money.

We can perceive more clearly how the tribal structure substituted for the state—as we would see it—if we shift our attention briefly from the Third to the Fourth Fijār, where the key event was a murder. When the king of Ḥīra was looking for someone to secure the safe passage of his caravan, there were two candidates for the job. One was a certain Barrāḍ, a drunkard and a troublemaker who had moved to Mecca after being disowned by his own tribe; there he obtained the protection of a leading member of Quraysh by becoming his client (*ḥalīf*). Because he continued to make trouble his patron soon wanted to end the relationship, but against his better judgment he was persuaded to continue it on condition that his client left Mecca. Barrāḍ then went to Ḥīra, where he offered himself to the king as an escort for the caravan, though quite unsuited for the role. Instead, the king gave the job to a rival, a certain ʿUrwa; as it happened, ʿUrwa belonged to the same tribal

7. Herodotus, *The histories*, trans. A. de Selincourt, Harmondsworth 1955, 176–77 (3.8).

group as the woman at the center of the Third Fijār, the Banū ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa. Barrāḍ then followed the caravan, killed his rival, and went off with the goods. He did at least have the grace to notify his patron and other leaders of Quraysh, who were at ʿUkāẓ at the time; they immediately left for the security of Mecca—its security arising from the fact that the town was located within a widely recognized sanctuary. Their problem was that the Banū ʿĀmir ibn Ṣaʿṣaʿa would want revenge for the murder of their fellow tribesman. Killing the murderer himself would not have satisfied them, since as an outlaw Barrāḍ could not rank as the equal of a man like ʿUrwa. Killing members of Barrāḍ's own tribe was against the rules because they had already disowned him and so bore no responsibility for anything he did. But the continuing relationship of clientage that bound him to his patron made members of Quraysh a suitable target to avenge the murder. In short, we can see revenge killing as a game with rules that took the place of our criminal justice system—or more accurately, our criminal justice system is a development that has replaced practices of revenge killing that were no doubt more or less universal in human societies prior to the emergence of states.

This is not to imply that the Arabs lacked a judicial system. They had one, and here is a rare anecdote that gives some idea how it worked:

> Muratti' . . . married a woman of Ḥaḍramawt; her father imposed on him the condition that he take no further wife in addition to her and that she give birth only in the abode of her own people. But Muratti' did not observe the condition. So they made Afʿā ibn al-Ḥuṣayn the Jurhumite their judge . . . the Arabs being in the habit of having recourse to him in their disputes. At the hearing the fact that the condition had been imposed was established, and Afʿā gave the verdict "The condition is binding." He was the first to use this maxim. So the Ḥaḍramīs took the woman and the son she had had by Muratti'.[8]

Here, then, we have a judicial system, but the judge is not appointed by a ruler who gives him the authority to try cases within a certain jurisdiction; instead, the judge is chosen by the agreement of the parties concerned, and the authority he derives from this is limited to the particular case. Thus Afʿā in the anecdote had a continuing role as a judge only in the sense that the Arabs made a practice of submitting cases to him, presumably because he had established a reputation as a fair and insightful judge. If the parties to a dispute did not agree on taking it before a judge, it was likely to be resolved, if at all, by violence.

That brings us to the character of tribal warfare. According to Ibn Ḥabīb's version—and not his alone—the fighting in the Third Fijār was limited to a brief skirmish. In fact, of the four Fijārs, the only one in which anyone was actually killed

8. Balādhurī, *Ansāb al-ashrāf*, vol. 1, ed. M. Ḥamīd Allāh, Cairo 1959, 9.

was the last. In this case the need for the tribe of the murdered man to avenge the killing led to a series of one-day battles at exact intervals of a year. To us that sounds peculiar, not to say quaint; yet such anniversary battles are a standard ingredient of accounts of pre-Islamic Arabian warfare. The fourth battle was the last, but it was followed by some further killings on both sides. In due course there were calls for a peace settlement, as without one the killings might have continued indefinitely, an unenticing prospect. It was now suggested that the party that had suffered the most killings should receive blood money to make up for the difference; we are told that the side of the murdered man had lost twenty more men than their enemies had. The first time this deal was proposed it was torpedoed by a leading figure from the town of Ṭā'if, an oasis to the east of Mecca, but the second time it held, and the war was brought to an end. Appropriately, the blood money was paid by Barrāḍ's patron—incidentally the same prominent member of Quraysh who in some versions had paid the blood money to settle the Third Fijār. All this could, of course, have been avoided had the patron had the good sense to end his relationship with his troublesome client before the damage was done. But the level of violence in the Fourth Fijār need not surprise us. This was a society in which any adult male who was sound in mind and body would bear arms and know how to use them; among adult males there was no distinction to be made between soldiers and civilians. Thus warfare was an endemic feature of Arabian society. The poem composed by the killer of the king of Ḥīra is accordingly full of bellicosity. He boasts of white banners taken into battle and brought back crimson, of youths "who deem death in battle a glory" and graybeards "long tested in warfare."[9] Such sentiments are typical of the warlike ethos of pre-Islamic Arabian poetry. "Not one chief of ours ever died a natural death, nor was any slain man of ours ever left where he lay unavenged," as another poet puts it.[10] Here, then, was a society with an abundance of military energy. But the energy was dissipated in small-scale hostilities, not channeled into total war aimed at the subjection or elimination of a rival group. Warfare had its rules and could be tied to a schedule that in today's world we might associate more readily with football than with war.

Someone who thought hard about the nature of the tribal society of the Arabs was the historian Ibn Khaldūn (d. 1406), a North African of Spanish origin who settled in Egypt. His ideas have a certain affinity to the thinking behind Second Amendment fundamentalism in the United States today. He saw two groups as polar opposites: the nomads of the deserts—above all the camel nomads—on the one hand, and the sedentary populations—above all those of the

9. Arberry, *The seven odes*, 206.
10. A. J. Arberry, *Arabic poetry*, Cambridge 1965, 30 verse 10.

cities—on the other. Sedentary people are "sunk in well-being and luxury."[11] They have "entrusted defense of their property and their lives to the governor and ruler who rules them, and to the militia that has the task of guarding them." Accordingly, they "have ceased to carry weapons" and have "become like women and children"; in another passage he compares their inability to defend themselves to that of students. Their fortitude is broken by the domination of the state, with the result that they grow up in fear and docility, losing their power of resistance as a result of "the inertness that develops in the souls of the oppressed." Camel nomads, by contrast, make do with the bare necessities of life. They are "the most savage human beings that exist," and they have the virtues that go with that condition. They do not outsource their self-defense to rulers and their armies. Instead they are self-reliant; they always carry weapons and have developed a character marked by fortitude and courage. Their way of life also means that they are held together by "group feeling" (*ʿaṣabiyya*): only "a closely knit group of common descent" can hope to defend itself successfully—though bonds of clientage and alliance can amount to the same thing. But this group feeling is in one crucial way limited in what it can achieve. These desert Arabs are rude, proud, and ambitious, each one eager to be the leader. They are reluctant to subordinate themselves to their chiefs, who have to avoid antagonizing them. That is why these Arabs could form only tribes and not states. Altogether, Ibn Khaldūn's analysis is insightful, and it does much to explain why the warlike energy of the Arab tribes was mostly expended on small-scale conflicts among themselves, between and within the tribes.

The culture of a tribal people

A key part of the culture of a people is its sense of its own identity. Did the society of the Arabian interior see itself as Arab? As we saw, ethnic identity is not a prominent theme in the Fijārs. The young woman in the Third Fijār is described as an Arab, probably reflecting a sense that the nomads of Arabia were the Arabs par excellence. Yet the word was readily used in sources of the early Islamic period to include the settled but fully tribal population of the oases, and the general absence of reference to ethnicity in our story may reflect no more than the fact that all those involved were Arabs and spoke Arabic. There is reason to think that a sense of Arab identity was old.[12] In the first half of the first millennium BC we encounter forms of the word "Arab" in texts from three different linguistic regions on the borders of Arabia: Assyria in the northeast, Israel in the northwest, and

11. For this and the quotations that follow see Ibn Khaldûn, *The Muqaddimah*, Princeton 1967, 1:252, 257, 259, 261, 263.

12. For a very different perspective on the history of Arab ethnic identity see P. Webb, *Imagining the Arabs*, Edinburgh 2016, arguing that Arab identity emerged only after the rise of Islam.

the Yemen in the south (the people of the ancient Yemen were not Arabs, and they spoke languages quite distinct from Arabic). It is in the Assyrian records that we meet the first Arab whom we know by name, a certain Gindibu, who appears in 853 BC with a thousand camel riders from Arabia fighting for a king with whom the Assyrian monarch was at war. The name Gindibu means "cricket," one of many words for animals that were used as personal names among the Arabs; it was still common as a name in the form Jundab around the time of the rise of Islam. That the ethnonym "Arab" should appear in the records of three distinct neighboring regions strongly suggests that a people identifying itself as Arab had already spread over a large part of Arabia more than a millennium before the rise of Islam. But for direct evidence of the indigenous use of the ethnonym we have to wait till around AD 200. A particularly striking instance is found in an inscription marking the grave of an Arab king who died in 328; he describes himself, with royal exaggeration, as the "king of all the Arabs" (*malik al-ʿArab kullihā*).[13] By contrast, in late antiquity outsiders on the northern frontiers of Arabia took to calling the Arabs by other names, Saracens in Greek and Ṭayyāyē in Syriac. The fact that the Arabs of Islamic times nevertheless called themselves Arabs is a clear indication of the continuous existence of this identity among the Arabs themselves. This survival need not, of course, mean that nothing about Arab identity had changed over the centuries, but it clearly had staying power. It is worth noting that, just like Greek identity before the rise of Macedonia, Arab identity did not owe its emergence and persistence prior to the rise of Islam to the homogenizing activities of a state. It must have been helped by the fact that Arabia—like Greece and unlike the Sahara—is a peninsula with the sea on three sides, and by the mobility of much of the population in the open desert environment.

An important part of the culture of the Arabs was their language. Unlike the other major languages of the Middle East today—Persian and Turkish—Arabic has a good claim to be indigenous to the region. It belongs to the Semitic language family, which is attested in Syria and Mesopotamia already in the third millennium BC (no language can be attested much earlier than that, since writing was not developed till toward 3000 BC). Semitic is the close-knit family that includes such ancient languages of the Fertile Crescent as Akkadian, Hebrew, and Aramaic, together with the languages of pre-Islamic South Arabia and their African offshoot, Ethiopic. Any reader with a knowledge of Arabic or Hebrew should have no trouble deciphering most of the following Ethiopic sequence: *aḥadu*, *kelʾētu*, *shalastu*, *arbāʿtu*; the catch is the second word, which is as if the Ethiopians said "both" in place of "two." Arabic shares with its sister Semitic languages a pattern of triconsonantal roots. Thus words from the root *k-t-b* will usually refer in one

13. A.F.L. Beeston, "Nemara and Fau," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, 42 (1979), 3, 6.

way or another to writing: *kataba* is "he wrote," *yaktubu* is "he writes," *kātib* is "someone who writes" or "a scribe," and *maktūb* is "something written." Given this information and the fact that *qatala* means "he killed," no attentive reader should have much trouble figuring out the meaning of *yaqtulu*, *qātil*, and *maqtūl*. But despite the indigenous status of Arabic, as we have seen it is not till the early first millennium BC that we begin to hear of the Arabs. And though Arabian inscriptions written in dialects related to Arabic are found in large numbers before the rise of Islam, they are usually frustratingly brief—more in the nature of graffiti than of texts. It is only in late antiquity that we have significant numbers of inscriptions that are unambiguously in Arabic and written in what we know as the Arabic script; currently more than thirty such inscriptions are known. Among the more significant is the inscription of the "king of all the Arabs" dating from 328. But the only substantial body of pre-Islamic material we possess in Arabic is the tribal poetry that was transmitted into Islamic times. Though its transmission can be problematic, there is little doubt that much of this material is authentically pre-Islamic. Nevertheless, the first book we possess in Arabic, and to the best of our knowledge the first ever to be written in the language, is the Qurʾān, the collection of Muḥammad's revelations. In that respect, at least, there is some truth in the saying attributed to Muḥammad: "We are an illiterate people; we neither write nor count."[14]

Arabic was and is the language of the Arabs. But in late antiquity the geographical distribution of the Arabs and their language was much more limited than it is today. The Arabs of that time were primarily the people of the Arabian Peninsula—bar the south—and the Syrian desert, and they had to an extent spread into Mesopotamia, Syria, and the Eastern Desert of Egypt. But the mass of the rural population in Mesopotamia and Syria still spoke dialects of Aramaic, just as the mass of the Egyptian peasantry spoke dialects of Coptic, a late form of the language of the Pharaohs. Both Coptic and Aramaic had written forms; in the case of Aramaic the most widely used was Syriac. These languages coexisted with the relevant imperial language, Persian in Mesopotamia and Greek in Syria and Egypt. We know that Greek had made very considerable inroads in Syria and Egypt, particularly in the cities, and it is likely enough that Persian had done the same in Mesopotamia. Meanwhile in the Yemen, the South Arabian linguistic heritage still prevailed. A story that amused people in the early centuries of Islam had it that an Arab came to visit the Ḥimyarite king, who greeted his visitor with the command "*Thib!*"[15]—the Ḥimyarite for "Sit down!" (from the same Semitic root as "yeshiva"). But "*Thib!*" in Arabic means "Jump!"—which the Arab did, in one version of the story tumbling over a precipice.

14. See, for example, Ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad*, ed. A. M. Shākir, Cairo 1949–, nos. 5017, 5137.
15. See, for example, Samʿānī, *Ansāb*, Hyderabad 1962–82, 4:264.

A significant aspect of the culture of any society is its religion. It does not, however, play much part in our stories of the Fijārs. In one way this is typical of the wars of the pre-Islamic Arab tribes as a whole. Whatever else they may have been about, they were not about religion, and their protagonists were not the sort of men whom we can readily imagine throwing themselves into religious warfare. There are nevertheless two religious elements in the stories. One is the idea that the Fijārs were immoral because they occurred during a sacred month, and the other is the fact that Quraysh felt safer in Mecca because it was located within a sanctuary. This is the sanctuary at the center of which lay the Kaʿba, the temple into which was built the sacred Black Stone. According to tradition, five generations before Muḥammad an enterprising Qurashī had taken over the sanctuary from another tribe and settled his fellow tribesmen there. Both the sacred months and the sanctuary are examples of Arab paganism providing amenities that made life somewhat less dangerous and more predictable for all concerned. But these elements are incidental to stories that focus on other matters.

What the Fijār narratives do not reveal to us is the abiding core of Arab paganism: idol worship. It was of hoary antiquity. We get a vivid picture of it as early as the seventh century BC, when the Assyrian ruler Esarhaddon (ruled 680–669 BC) tells us that his father Sennacherib (ruled 704–681 BC) had raided an oasis in northern Arabia and taken its idols as booty. After Esarhaddon's accession, an Arab king had come and kissed his feet, begging for the return of his idols. Esarhaddon in his mercy had the idols—there were six of them—repaired and handed over to the Arab king, after taking the opportunity to inscribe on them a message proclaiming the superior might of the Assyrian god Ashur, together with his own name. One god among the six was Ruldaiu, still remembered in early Islamic times as Ruḍā; a leading genealogist recorded sixteen men who bore the name "Slave of Ruḍā" (ʿAbd Ruḍā) before the rise of Islam. A couple of centuries after Esarhaddon, when Herodotus identified the deities the Arabs invoked in making a solemn compact as the Greek gods Dionysus and Urania, he went on to explain that the Arabs themselves called them something like Orotalt and Alilat. Orotalt would seem to be a garbled form of Ruḍā, while Alilat is readily identifiable as the goddess Allāt, who was still widely worshipped by the pagans of Arabia in Muḥammad's day. At that time we find Yathrib chockablock with idols. Some were closely connected to the tribal system; it seems that each clan had its idol, and above these clan idols an entire tribe might have one. Below them were the ones people kept in their homes. Mecca, too, had a large population of idols. One of them was the idol of the god Hubal, which had the privilege of being placed inside the Kaʿba. There were 360 more surrounding the Kaʿba, and as in Yathrib there were idols in people's homes—we are told that every Qurashī had one in his house. A Meccan several centuries before the rise of Islam is credited with bringing Hubal to Mecca:

> ʿAmr ibn Luḥayy left Mecca for Syria on business. When he got to Moab in the Balqāʾ, then inhabited by the Amalekites, . . . he saw them worshipping idols, and said to them, "What are these idols I see you worshipping?" They said, "These are idols that we worship. We ask them for rain, and they make it rain; we ask them for victory, and they give us victory." He said to them, "Do you think you could spare me one to take back to the land of the Arabs for them to worship?" So they gave him an idol called Hubal. He took it back to Mecca and set it up there, telling people to worship and venerate it.[16]

Whatever the historical value of this story, it conveys a good sense of what idols were for—and by implication what they were not for. Insofar as the pre-Islamic Arabs thought about the meaning of life, Hubal had nothing to do with it. He did not offer cosmic mystery, spiritual sustenance, or redemption from the burden of sin. Any deeper reflections the Arabs might have on the human condition came rather in the context of their heroic poetry: "The days of a man are numbered to him, and through them all / The snares of death lurk by the warrior as he travels perilous ways."[17] The poets rarely had much to say about idols.

Finally, the story of the Third Fijār, though not the Fourth, can tell us something about women in pre-Islamic Arabia. The woman in the story is veiled, which we should probably take to mean that she has class—were she a mere slave girl it would be presumptuous of her to give herself such airs. She nevertheless moves freely at the fair to do her shopping, with no sign of the presence of a kinsman to escort her and watch her back. Moreover, in another version of the story she has no inhibitions about chatting to amorous young men who manifestly find her sexually attractive. To use a term that was later to become widespread among the Muslims of India, she is not in purdah. This picture fits the fact that we find occasional references in our sources to Arab queens. Sennacherib's booty included a "queen of the Arabs," and in the fourth century the Byzantines were using troops contributed by one. On the other hand, the way in which the woman in the story is identified by a recital of her male ancestors finds a telling parallel in the case of the mother of the regicide poet. The king asks his companions why she would disdain to be of service, and they answer by pointing not to *her* character but to those of her father, uncle, husband, and son.

That leaves us with the question deferred at the start of this discussion: Why should we be bothering ourselves with an event as historically trivial as the Third Fijār? Even the Fourth Fijār hardly sounds like the stuff of world history, and the same goes for events in Arabia as far back as we can peer. But as we will see in the

16. Ibn Hishām, *al-Sīra al-nabawiyya*, Cairo 1955, 1–2:77; for the context see Ibn Isḥāq, *The life of Muhammad*, 701.

17. ʿAbīd ibn al-Abraṣ in H. Ringgren, *Studies in Arabian fatalism*, Uppsala 1955, 67.

next chapter, the story does something to frame a major explanatory problem regarding the history of state formation in Arabia. And in the meantime it helps point up the drastic contrast between the tribal society of the Arabian interior and the two empires that ruled the Middle East outside it.

The last war between the empires

A summer night in 626

For ten days in the summer of 626 the Avars laid siege to Constantinople, the capital city of the Byzantine Empire.[18] They were nomads from the steppes of Eurasia who had occupied the grasslands we know today as Hungary. The Byzantine forces defending the city included some twelve thousand cavalry, but the attackers numbered around eighty thousand. On the evening of Saturday, August 2, the Avar ruler—the Kagan, as they called him—invited the defenders to send him a delegation. When the members of this delegation arrived, they found three silk-clad Persian envoys seated comfortably in the presence of the Kagan, while they were left to stand. These envoys had been sent by the Persian general whose army was encamped on the opposite side of the Bosphorus—the narrow waterway that separates Europe from Asia. The Kagan's message to the Byzantine delegation was all too clear: with the Avars at the walls of their city and the Persians just across the water in a position to send him reinforcements, the situation of the defenders was hopeless. As he put it, unless they could turn themselves into birds or fish they had no way to escape. But he did make them an offer of sorts: if they left their city and their property behind them, each of them could take with him a cloak, a shirt, and his family. With these they could cross the Bosphorus to the Asian side, where the Kagan would generously arrange for his Persian allies not to harm them. Presumably Constantinople would then become an Avar city. But the Byzantine delegation responded in no uncertain terms that they would never relinquish it.

That night the Persian envoys attempted to cross back to the Asian side, but this time they were out of luck. The Byzantines captured them in transit. They found one of them hiding in the bottom of a skiff, killed him, and cut off his head. The other two they captured alive. They cut off the hands of one of them, hung the severed head of the first envoy around his neck, and in this state sent him back to the Kagan. The remaining envoy they threw in a skiff that they took close enough to the Asian shore for the Persians to be able to see him. There they proceeded to behead him and throw his head to the Persians, accompanied by a written message designed to make them think that the Kagan had double-crossed

18. J. Howard-Johnston, "The siege of Constantinople in 626," in his *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the end of antiquity*, Aldershot 2006, art. VII.

them. Five days later the Kagan abandoned the siege, burned the twelve massive siege towers with which he had attacked the city, and went home. The Persians likewise abandoned their positions on the Asian side of the Bosphorus. The Byzantines had survived, and they duly gave thanks to the Mother of God for protecting her city from its enemies.

It is immediately obvious from this narrative that we are in a different world from that of the tribesmen of the Arabian interior. For a start, we can pinpoint the exact date of an event—Saturday, August 2, 626—whereas all we can say of the Fijārs is that they must have taken place sometime in the later sixth century. This difference reflects the fact that the Byzantines chronicled historical events in a way that the pre-Islamic Arabs did not. Thus most of the details of the siege given above derive from a Greek chronicle written by an inhabitant of Constantinople who lived through it. This leads to another contrast. Constantinople, where the anonymous chronicler wrote, was a massively fortified city; in western Arabia Ṭā'if was unusual in being a walled town, and with the possible exception of Ṣan'ā' in the Yemeni highlands, there was nothing anywhere in the peninsula that could have been called a city. We also meet a ruler, the Avar Kagan, who was far more powerful than the king of Ḥīra. There were, of course, other major rulers with a stake in the outcome, but in this story, as it happens, we do not meet either the Byzantine emperor Heraclius (ruled 610–41) or his Persian counterpart Khusraw II (ruled 591–628). Both were otherwise engaged far to the east, in the heartlands of the Persian Empire. At the same time, we hear nothing of tribes. There were none among the Byzantines or the Persians, though they no doubt existed among the Avars. Particularly striking is the very different character of warfare as it appears in the two settings. At the siege of Constantinople we encounter armies that were far larger than any tribal forces that might gather in western Arabia, and quite different in kind. Likewise the siege equipment brought to bear by the Avars would have been unheard of among the Arabs; a sixth-century Byzantine historian describes them as adept in plundering but incapable of storming a wall.

These contrasts reflect two things: the much greater fiscal resources available to the parties involved in the siege of Constantinople, and the much higher stakes of the conflict. None of the Fijārs were about seizing territory from the enemy, let alone expelling a whole population from its abode. The high stakes in turn help explain the vein of calculated atrocity that we see in the Byzantine treatment of the Persian envoys. All in all, we have left the wilds of Arabia for the charms of civilization.

During the siege of 626, large numbers of Byzantines, Persians, and Avars were crowded together within a few square miles in and around Constantinople. But they were not usually to be found in such close proximity, and they had very different histories and destinies. We need to look separately at each of them, and at the states of which they were the core populations.

The Byzantine Empire

Byzantium was a Greek colony founded in the seventh century BC on the site of the future Constantinople, known today by its Turkish name as Istanbul. During the thousand years in which it was called Byzantium it was never an imperial capital; that dignity came to it only when the Roman emperor Constantine (ruled 306–37) refounded it as his "New Rome" in 330, following which the city soon came to be known after him as Constantinople. For the next millennium it served as a capital for emperors belonging to a succession of dynasties, though in its last two or three centuries there was not much of an empire left. Calling this empire "Byzantine" and its people "Byzantines" is a modern anachronism. At the time, its rulers and subjects identified it as the Roman Empire and themselves as Romans. Despite the fact that Rome itself usually lay beyond its borders, this usage made some sense. What we call the Byzantine Empire was what remained of the Roman Empire after its division into an eastern and a western half in 395 and the demise of the western half in 476. This territorial displacement had a significant linguistic implication: the demographic base of the empire was now a population that spoke Greek rather than Latin, the language historically associated with Rome and its imperial role. The emperor Justinian (ruled 527–65) still had his monumental codification of Roman law prepared in Latin, but increasingly the language of his "Roman" empire was to be Greek. A ninth-century pope was ill-mannered enough to tell the Byzantine emperor that it was ridiculous to call oneself emperor of the Romans without knowing the Roman language. And yet the name "Roman" stuck, and this is why even today the Turkish word "Rum" means "Greek." So to speak of the "Byzantines" and their empire, though anachronistic, avoids a certain confusion.[19]

Even if we ignore the last centuries of Byzantine history, when this state was only a shadow of its former self, the fact that an empire centered on Constantinople lasted from the fourth century to the twelfth would suggest that in choosing his new capital Constantine had done something right. And the fact that the Ottomans were able to repeat the imperial achievement from the fifteenth century to the early twentieth is strong confirmation. What, then, was so advantageous about Constantinople? In microgeographical terms, its location on a peninsula that could be defended with a massive land wall was a major strategic asset, enhanced by its possession of an adjoining harbor, the Golden Horn, that could be closed off from the sea with a chain. In macrogeographical terms the city had two things going for it. On the sea, it had easy access both to the Black Sea at the northern

19. For a survey of the history of the empire see A. A. Vasiliev, *History of the Byzantine Empire*, Madison 1958; for its history before the rise of Islam see A. Cameron, *The Mediterranean world in late antiquity*, London 1993.

end of the Bosphorus and to the Aegean, and hence the Mediterranean, through the Dardanelles at the western end of the Sea of Marmara. This latter linked it to what in this period was perhaps the most commercially active maritime scene to be found anywhere in the world, together with the agricultural wealth of Egypt. Meanwhile on land, Constantinople was close to the fertile river valleys of western Anatolia and the southeastern Balkans. ("Anatolia" is a convenient—because ethnically neutral—term for what is now the Asian part of Turkey.) This combination of advantages meant more than just rich potential for collecting taxes, crucial as that was. It also made it easy to supply the imperial capital with an abundance of grain, the commodity without which large urban populations could not be sustained. All in all, Constantinople made a fine capital for an eastern Mediterranean empire, whether in late antiquity or in Ottoman times.

But these advantages of the location of Constantinople were not the whole story. Polybius, a Greek historian of the second century BC, drew a sharp contrast between land and sea when he sized up the location of the city: "The site of Byzantium is as regards the sea more favorable to security and prosperity than that of any other city in the world known to us, but as regards the land it is most disadvantageous in both respects."[20] He saw the city's maritime advantage as its control over entry to the Black Sea: no one could sail into or out of it without the consent of the Byzantines. But the disadvantage on land was that for all its fertility the city's agricultural territory was exposed to the raids of the neighboring Thracian chieftains. Given their number the Byzantines could hope neither to subdue them nor to reach an agreement with them. Not that things were any better when the Thracian chieftains were replaced for a while by a single Celtic ruler—they then found themselves paying an onerous tribute to him. Polybius's analysis of this disadvantage related to the time before the city was the capital of an empire, but we can easily update it. To be successful, an eastern Mediterranean empire based in Constantinople had to have undisputed control of the good agricultural land of the southwestern Balkans, western Anatolia, and if possible Egypt. But Egypt was some way across the sea, Anatolia was exposed to invasion from the east, and the Balkans were open to invasion from the north. This predicament was a key part of the background to the siege of 626. The Avars had invaded the Balkans from the north and reached the walls of Constantinople, while the Persians had taken possession of Egypt and overrun Anatolia from the east. Had the city held out without being able to recover at least some of its agricultural territory, it would in effect have regressed to being the Byzantium described by Polybius.

At the same time we should add a qualification to Polybius's favorable assessment of the maritime situation of the city. His analysis rested on the assumption

20. Polybius, *The histories*, trans. W. R. Paton, Cambridge, MA 2010–12, 2:431 (4.38.1–2).

that the naval technology available to the Byzantines was as good as anyone else's. For a long time this was indeed so. The Avars ruled a large Slav population in the Balkans, and although most of them were agriculturalists, those living along the banks of the Danube were adept at navigating the river in canoes. In 626 the Kagan brought a large number of Slavs with their boats to the siege of Constantinople and used them as a navy. However, a combination of Byzantine naval resources, trickery, and bad weather sufficed to parry this threat, which explains why communications between the Avars and the Persians worked out so badly. But what if the navy of the incumbent imperial power was no longer state-of-the-art? This came to be a serious problem for the Byzantines from the eleventh century onward, just as it was to be for the Ottomans from the seventeenth century. In the period that concerns us here, however, these developments were still far in the future.

Before we leave the Byzantines we should say something about their religion. They were Christians; like the population of the Roman Empire in general, they had abandoned paganism for Christianity following the conversion of the emperor Constantine in the early fourth century. More specifically, they were Orthodox, as the term is conventionally used. This distinguished them from a number of other Christian groups that had emerged in the fourth and fifth centuries and were regarded by the Orthodox as heretical in their Christological doctrines. There were the Arians, for whom God had not always had a son; the Nestorians, for whom God did not have a mother; and the Monophysites, for whom God died on the cross. Eventually, in the Orthodox view, these heretics would be joined by the Catholics of western and central Europe over a doctrinal issue of such nuance that we can ignore it. This fissiparous tendency arose at least in part from the imposition of the abstract categories of Greek thought on a myth in Ancient Near Eastern style about a god and his son. One can get a sense of what this doctrinal hairsplitting involved from a tortured passage in the Athanasian Creed, a fourth-century document that came to form part of the traditional prayer book of the Church of England: "For the right Faith is that we believe and confess: that our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is God and Man . . . Who although he be God and Man: yet he is not two, but one Christ; One, not by conversion of the Godhead into flesh: but by taking of the Manhood into God; One altogether, not by confusion of Substance: but by unity of Person. . . . This is the Catholick Faith: which except a man believe faithfully, he cannot be saved."[21] This suggests that despite some theological trickle-down, large numbers of ordinary people must have suffered eternal damnation because of their inability to understand just what it was they were being told to believe. A prominent fourth-century churchman visiting Constantinople

21. *The book of common prayer*, London n.d., 29–30.

gave a vivid account of the resulting chaos: "If you ask about your change, the shopkeeper talks theology to you, on the Begotten and the Unbegotten; if you inquire the price of a loaf, the reply is: 'The Father is greater and the Son is inferior'; and if you say, 'Is the bath ready?' the attendant affirms that the Son is of nothing."[22] In the sixth century we hear of thousands chanting Christological slogans at the emperor Justinian; they did not have to understand the issues to know which side they were on. Such scenes help explain why the Byzantine emperors of late antiquity got so little joy out of their efforts to get everyone on the same theological page by holding large church councils to resolve contentious issues—in marked contrast to the way in which Justinian was able to codify Roman law to his own satisfaction without serious challenge from anyone. By the time of the rise of Islam a fairly clear geographical pattern had emerged: the core of the empire was Orthodox, whereas the eastern and southern fringes—Armenia, Syria, and Egypt—were Monophysite, and the Nestorians were yet farther to the east, in the Persian Empire.

In 626, however, theological nitpicking was not at the forefront. Instead, just as in the case of the Third Fijār, a woman played a key part in the story—but in a very different role. Before the siege began the patriarch Sergius, the head of the Byzantine church, placed icons of the Virgin Mary at the gates of the city to ensure that she would protect them. At one of the gates he addressed himself to the enemy who was threatening the city: "A woman, the Mother of God, will quell all your boldness and boasting with one command, for she is truly the Mother of Him who drowned Pharaoh with all his army in the Red Sea."[23] The rout of the Slavs in their canoes was likewise attributed to "the intercession of our Lady the Mother of God," and the pagan Kagan was quoted as having seen "a woman in stately dress rushing about on the wall all alone"[24]—obviously the Virgin defending her city from his infidel hordes. Such stories may not reveal much about relations between Byzantine men and women on the street—for that we might do marginally better to turn to Theodora (d. 548), the actress whom Justinian made his empress and who looks us straight in the eye, without a face veil and in mixed company, in the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna. But the role of the Virgin in 626 certainly tells us something about the development of Byzantine religion. In pagan times the patron deities of cities might well be female, as in the case of Ephesus, where the preaching of Saint Paul elicited the angry response "Great is Diana of the Ephesians!" (Acts 19:28). Thanks to the rise of the cult of the Virgin in late antiquity, the people of Constantinople had in effect found for themselves a Christian counterpart of such a pagan goddess.

22. Quoted in P. Brown, *Power and persuasion in late antiquity*, Madison 1992, 89–90.
23. Quoted in A. Cameron, "Images of authority," *Past & Present*, 84 (1979), 20–21.
24. *Chronicon Paschale*, trans. M. Whitby and M. Whitby, Liverpool 1989, 178, 180.

The Persian Empire

Whereas the rulers of the Byzantine Empire belonged to a whole series of different families, the Persian Empire from its inception in 224 to its demise in 651 was almost the exclusive possession of the Sasanian dynasty.[25] The second ruler of this dynasty was Shāhpuhr I (ruled 240–70). To burnish his image he had a long account of his glorious deeds inscribed on a rock surface near the site of Persepolis in southwestern Iran, and to get his message out he made the inscription trilingual. One text was written in his own language, Persian. Another was in Parthian, the closely related language of the Arsacids, the Parthian dynasty that had ruled Iran from the third century BC until displaced by the Sasanians in 224. The third was in Greek, a language widely known in the Middle East ever since its conquest by the Macedonian Alexander the Great (ruled 336–323 BC) had opened it up to Greek colonization. That conquest had ended the rule of the Achaemenids, the Persian dynasty that dominated the Middle East from the sixth to the fourth century BC and likewise celebrated itself in inscriptions in Persian.

As all this makes clear, Persian has had a long history, and as might be expected it has changed over the course of it. Unlike Arabic, it belongs to the Indo-European family, which in contrast to Semitic cannot have originated in the Middle East. Within this family Persian belongs to the Indo-Iranian branch, speakers of which are likely to have arrived in Iran from the steppes in the second millennium BC. The oldest Iranian text we possess is the Gāthās, composed in an archaic Iranian language quite close to the Sanskrit of the Vēdas. We first hear of the Persians in the ninth century BC, but the oldest specifically Persian texts are the Achaemenid inscriptions, composed in a form of the language known as "Old Persian." There is then a silence of several centuries until the early Sasanian inscriptions, which are in "Middle Persian," as is a body of literature preserved by Zoroastrian priests (we will come to Zoroastrianism shortly). The fact that both Persian and English (like Latin and Greek) are Indo-European languages is not, in general, of much help to English speakers, but the following words for close relatives should be fairly transparent: *pidar*, *mādar*, *birādar*. As cited here, these words are in "New Persian," a form of the language that emerged only after the rise of Islam. Persian was originally the language of the Persians in a narrow sense—that is, the people of Persis or Fārs, the region in southwestern Iran from which both the Achaemenids and the Sasanians stemmed. But as the imperial language of both these dynasties its use naturally spread well beyond its original homeland, particularly among the elite. Today it is recognized without contestation as the national language of Iran,

25. For surveys of the history of the empire see R. N. Frye, "The political history of Iran under the Sasanians," in *The Cambridge history of Iran*, Cambridge 1968–91, vol. 3; J. Wiesehöfer, "The late Sasanian Near East," in *The new Cambridge history of Islam*, Cambridge 2010, vol. 1.

but there are still dialects in the north of the country that are closer to Parthian than to Persian.

Returning to Shāhpuhr's inscription in its Middle Persian version, he introduces himself as follows: "I, the Mazdā-worshipping god Shāhpuhr, King of Kings of Ērān and Anērān, of the seed of the gods . . . am the sovereign of Ērānshahr."[26] Several things in this short passage are worth a comment.

First, the passage tells us something about Persian identity in this period. The key word is Ērān. If we go forward in time, we can see in it the name of the modern country of Iran, but in Shāhpuhr's usage it is rather the name of a people, the Iranians, who are contrasted with Anērān, the non-Iranians ("an-" is the same negative prefix as that found in Greek words such as "anarchy"). The kingdom that the Iranians possess is Ērānshahr, "the kingdom of the Iranians," and an inscription of the later third century stresses the role of the reigning monarch in keeping Ērānshahr "in peace and confident" and ensuring its well-being.[27] If instead of going forward we go back in time, we can make a further connection. The people called Ērān in the Middle Persian text are referred to as Aryān in the Parthian version and as Arians (not to be confused with the Christian heretics of the same name) in the Greek. This is a very ancient but also very familiar ethnic term. It is well attested not just in the Avesta, the body of religious texts of which the Gāthās form part, but also in the form Ārya in the oldest Sanskrit texts; from there it eventually made its way to the Nazis. In its third-century context Shāhpuhr's use of the term Ērān seems to aim at pitching a big tent—big enough to include Persians, Parthians, and no doubt other Iranian ethnic groups. Thus the rarity of references to Persians in the third-century Sasanian inscriptions could be deliberate. In this they contrast sharply with the Achaemenid inscriptions, where references to Persia and Persians abound; thus in an inscription at Persepolis, Darius I (ruled 522–486 BC) speaks proudly of "this country Persia which Ahura Mazdā bestowed upon me, good, possessed of good horses, possessed of good men,"[28] and he affirms that thanks to his god, Ahura Mazdā, and himself, it does not fear any other country. He rarely uses the word Aryan, though at one point he describes himself as "a Persian, son of a Persian, an Aryan, having Aryan lineage."[29] By the time of Shāhpuhr, Persians and Parthians had long been rubbing off on each other. The very name Shāhpuhr, "son (*puhr*) of the king (*shāh*)," is an example, since the form of the word for "son" used here is Parthian, not Persian. By Islamic times the Parthians seem to have disappeared as an ethnic group. A tenth-century Iranian

26. A. Maricq, "Res gestae divi Saporis," *Syria*, 35 (1958), 304–5.

27. H. Humbach and P. O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian inscription of Paikuli*, Wiesbaden 1978–83, part 3.1, 60–61.

28. R. G. Kent, *Old Persian*, New Haven 1953, 136a §2.

29. Kent, *Old Persian*, 138a §2.

writer still knew the Parthian form "Aryān" as the name of a people, but he equated this people with the Persians.

Second, the passage tells us something about Persian religion. As in the paganism of ancient Greece and Rome, there are many gods, and the line between gods and humans is not sharply drawn—Shāhpuhr is descended from the gods and is himself a god. He does, however, tie himself closely to the cult of one particular god, namely Mazdā. This is Ahura Mazdā, the good god of Zoroastrianism, the ancient dualistic religion of Iran that was closely tied to Iranian ethnic identity. The linkage between Ahura Mazdā and Persian kingship was an old one, already conspicuous under the Achaemenids. Darius, boasting of his deeds in a famous trilingual rock inscription of his own, gives credit to this god: "By the favor of Ahura Mazdā I am King; Ahura Mazdā bestowed the kingdom upon me."[30] But Zoroastrianism was considerably older than the Achaemenids. Indeed, its oldest text, the Gāthās, could easily date from around 1000 BC. The religion flourished until the rise of Islam, though thereafter its adherents were gradually reduced to small communities in Iran and western India. In Shāhpuhr's time Zoroastrianism was heavily backed by the state; as one Middle Persian text puts it, the helpmate of the Good Religion is kingship. Kerdīr, whom Shāhpuhr put in charge of religious affairs, celebrated himself in an inscription just like his patron. He boasted about his closeness to Shāhpuhr and his successors and described how he had ensured that the cult flourished from Mesopotamia to Peshawar, protecting it outside the empire wherever Shāhpuhr's armies burned and pillaged. He tormented heretics until he "made them better," and converted many unbelievers. Jews, Buddhists, Hindus, Nazarenes, Christians, Baptists, and Manichaeans were all of them, he proudly declared, "smitten in the empire."[31]

Third, Shāhpuhr lays claim to a characteristic Iranian royal title, "King of Kings." This title, too, was old. Darius used it in introducing himself at the beginning of his long and boastful inscription: "I am Darius the Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of countries."[32] The Arsacid rulers of the Parthian Empire frequently included the title (in Greek) on their coins. It likewise had a distinguished future: it was to be revived in Islamic times in the form Shāhanshāh and seen as a key symbol in a continuing tradition of Persian statecraft. Occasionally it was matched by the female equivalent, "Queen of Queens." A couple of the luckless rulers at the tail end of the Sasanian dynasty were women, allegedly prompting the Prophet Muḥammad to observe that "a people who appoint a woman as their ruler will not prosper."[33]

30. Kent, *Old Persian*, 119b §5.

31. D. N. Mackenzie, *Kerdir's inscription*, in *Iranische Denkmäler*, Lieferung 13, Reihe II, Berlin 1989, 58–59 §11, §16. For a different perspective see R. E. Payne, *A state of mixture*, Oakland 2015, ch. 1, "The myth of Zoroastrian intolerance."

32. Kent, *Old Persian*, 119a §1.

33. Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ*, Beirut 1987, 7–8:687 no. 1923.

After the third century the Persians seem to have lost the habit of inscribing their deeds on stone. This means that for the subsequent history of their empire we depend largely on books. But whose books? For us to possess a society's record of its own history, two conditions must be satisfied. The first is that its members should have written about it. This cannot be taken for granted; even societies that possess the skill of writing may not choose to use it to record their history. The second is that the books, or at least a few of them, should survive into our time. But unless books are preserved archaeologically—in caves, deserts, or waterlogged tombs—they will survive only if people think them worth preserving throughout the intervening generations. Here a number of interrelated historical variables come into play. One is political: other things being equal, the literary heritage of an elite culture that is disestablished by unsympathetic conquerors is in danger of disappearing. Another is religious: where religious truth is understood as a zero-sum game, the books of a sect or faith that goes extinct have little chance of survival. Yet another is institutional: a book that has found its way into something like a monastic library has a better chance of survival than does one in private circulation. In the case of Middle Persian literature, the prospects for the survival of historical works, though not hopeless, were dim. Middle Persian books reach us in their original language only if they were continuously transmitted by Zoroastrian priests, and these priests were not much interested in history. By contrast, some Muslim scholars of the early Islamic period were very interested in the history of pre-Islamic Iran, and they made use of Arabic translations of a late Sasanian chronicle known as the *Khwadāy-nāmag*, the "Book of sovereigns" (*khwadāy* is the same word as that used by Shāhpuhr when he described himself as "the sovereign of Ērānshahr"). But the accounts of Sasanian history given by these scholars are divergent enough that we have only a rather fuzzy notion of what the Sasanian chronicle originally said. We also have the works of contemporary historians writing in Syriac, Armenian, Greek, and Latin to fall back on. They can tell us a lot about the wars between the empires, but their knowledge of the internal history of the Persian Empire tends to be sketchy, particularly in the case of the Greek and Latin sources.

What, then, can we say if we turn to the sinews, as opposed to the symbols, of empire? Fortunately the broad outlines are clear enough. The foundation of imperial power was an ethnic division of labor, or more precisely a geographical one, that went back to the sixth century BC. According to Herodotus, the Persians once suggested to Cyrus (ruled 560–530 BC), the founder of the Achaemenid Empire, that they should leave their "small and barren country" and take possession of a better one. Cyrus warned them that if they did so they should expect to be ruled by others rather than be rulers themselves. "Soft countries," he told them in an anticipation of Ibn Khaldūn, "breed soft men; it is not the property of any one soil to produce fine fruits and good soldiers too." The Persians listened to the wisdom of their ruler and "chose rather to live in a rugged land and rule than to cultivate

rich plains and be slaves."[34] In other words, the military manpower that created and sustained the empire was recruited from the Persian highlands, the land Darius praised as "possessed of good horses, possessed of good men." But this did not mean that the rich plains with their fine fruits and servile cultivators were of no consequence. On the contrary, it was the lowlands of Mesopotamia, irrigated by the Tigris and the Euphrates and inhabited by Aramaic-speaking peasants, that provided the empire with its fiscal sinews—its tax power. Mesopotamia lived on borrowed rainfall brought to it by rivers rising in eastern Anatolia. As long as it lasted, this combination of highland manpower and lowland tax power provided a firm foundation for an empire based in the eastern region of the Middle East. It worked for the Achaemenids, the Arsacids, and the Sasanians. What became of it in the Islamic period, and what that meant for the geopolitics of the Middle East, we will see in a later chapter.

The Avars

North of the Byzantine and Persian Empires lay the world of the steppes, the grasslands extending across northern Eurasia from Manchuria to Hungary. This band of territory was the natural habitat of the horse, whose domestication a few thousand years earlier had made possible the spread of nomadic pastoralism throughout the region. Economically these nomads may have been more dependent on sheep than on horses, but it was their horses that made them so formidable for the civilizations to the south. In an age in which the horse was crucial to military power, the nomads of the steppes were habituated to riding from childhood. As a fifth-century European writer put it in describing the Huns, "You would think the limbs of man and beast were born together, so firmly does the rider always stick to the horse."[35] These people, he added, were not just transported on horseback; they lived there. Their mobility made them almost impossible for settled empires to conquer. As Herodotus observed of the Scythians in the region north of the Black Sea,

> Such is their manner of life that no one who invades their country can escape destruction, and if they wish to avoid engaging with an enemy, that enemy cannot by any possibility come to grips with them. A people without fortified towns, living, as the Scythians do, in wagons which they take with them wherever they go, accustomed, one and all, to fight on horseback with bows and arrows, and dependent for their food not upon agriculture but upon their cattle:

34. Herodotus, *The histories*, 599 (9.122).
35. Sidonius, *Poems* [*and*] *letters*, trans. W. B. Anderson, London 1936–65, 1:31.

(continued...)

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