

Heureux qui comme Ulysses a fait un beau voyage:

**Movements of People
in Time and Space**

Nefissa Naguib & Bert de Vries (eds)
2010



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Cover: Erlend Eidsvik
Cover photo: Bert de Vries
Printer: Allkopi, Bergen, Norway

ISBN 978-82-7453-082-9

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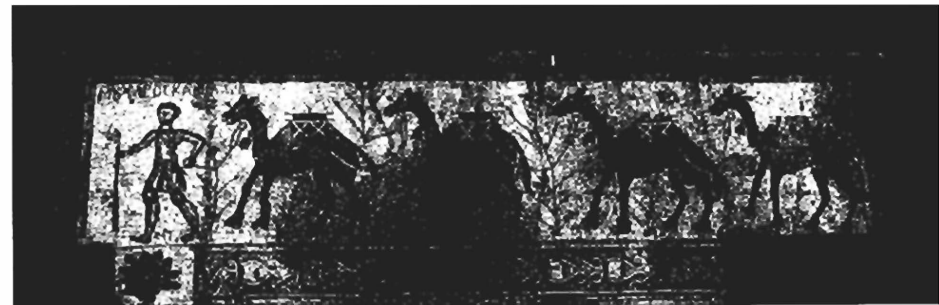
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Foreword

I present this paper in tribute to Leif Manger in celebration of his career and in appreciation of his collaborative *modus operandi* that enfolded us all. Our associations over the dozen years of the NUFU seminars at Birzeit University and the Global Moments Workshops at Bergen University have been a marvelous journey on the sea of intellectual stimulation under his captainship and in the company of the spirited and inspired crew of mates he assembled from the far corners of the globe.

Introduction: Muhammad and Bahīrā

As told in the famous annunciation legend from the 8th century A.D. (Ibn Ishāq 79-82), Muhammad first visited southern Syria as a twelve year old with the caravan of his adoptive father, Abu Talib (photograph 1). They had camped near the cell of the Christian monk Bahīrā who rushed out excitedly to offer the whole party a meal. In the course of this extraordinarily generous hospitality, Bahīrā testified that the young Muhammad was indeed the Apostle of God foretold in the books he kept in his cell. This legend has had a varied “life” as a key element in the Prophet’s early preparation. As a tradition within Islam it is an



Photograph 1. Caravan; Portion of Late Antique mosaic panel on display in the Theater at Bostra, Syria. Photograph by Bert de Vries



Photograph 2. "Basilica of Bahira," Bostra. The structure was originally a Roman building. The filling of the arch was part of its conversion to a Christian basilica, and the filling of the windows represent its further reuse likely in the Mamluk period. Association with Bahira is part of local tour guide lore, but has no basis in historical evidence. Photograph by Bert de Vries

authentication story, symbolic of universality of Muhammad's apostleship and of the intimate role of Christianity in incipient Islam. In Syrian Christianity, on the other hand, the tale was embellished to portray Bahīrā as the human originator of Muhammad's message (Griffith).

My interest, however, is in the travel aspect of this story. This particular visit to Syria, probably sometime between A.D. 580-85, was an instance in the annual routine movement of goods between Mecca and south Syria. In the story, the caravaneers are amazed at Bahīrā's generous offer. *Why are you doing this, Bahīrā, they ask.* But his insistence that he is observing the common conventions of hospitality does not convince them. *You never offered us a meal in any of the previous years we camped here, they exclaim.* Thus the story combines the routine with the unusual. Bahīrā claims to act according to mutually respected customs within the norms of a shared culture; the Meccans perceive an unusual occurrence, pointing to the distinctive role of Muhammad.

The location of Bahīrā's cell varies in different versions. In one

it is Deir Busra (Ibn Ishāq 79), today still associated with the "Basilica of Bahīrā" in the touristic lore of Bostra (photograph 2). Others give different alternatives near Bostra in the Southern Hauran: al-Kafr (Ibn Kathīr 100), 10 km to the northeast, or Deir el-Bā'iq (Yāqūt in Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs* Vol. 2:1186, n. 156), likely at Qasr el-Ba'iq 20 km to its south. And, finally, there is the village of Manfa'a (Ibn Kathīr 101), which could be a corruption of Mayfa'a, possibly Castron Mefa'a (Umm er-Rasas) to the southeast of Madaba, Jordan. Three of these are in the southern Hauran, in the vicinity of Bostra, and with no objective way of choosing the correct one, I lean towards Qasr el-Bā'iq by sentiment, for it is only 6 km from Umm el-Jimal, the locale of my archaeological research (The Umm el-Jimal Project). This puts Muhammad's caravan on the ancient *via nova traiana*, the Roman road from Damascus to Aqaba, a day's journey south of Bostra and three to five days from Damascus (photograph 3).

This Muhammad-Bahīrā *topos* will serve us to imagine not merely the caravan traffic between Mecca and Bostra/Damascus, but the movement and identity of peoples between the Arabian Peninsula and Syria, and the related settlement of some of them in towns and villages on the desert fringe, especially the Southern Hauran. As Muhammad's visit



Photograph 3. Doorway in monastic complex at Umm es-Surab, Jordan, fifteen kilometres south of Bostra, possibly on the route Abu Talib's caravan might have taken. Though the location of Bahira's cell is not known, a room such as this would fit the conditions of the monk's residence much better than the Basilica in Bostra. Photograph by Bert de Vries

is an epitome of such journey and migration, so the Southern Hauran is the epitome of a larger stage, the agricultural-pastoral fringe running on the desert side of the Fertile Crescent from Resafa in the northeast to the Negev in the southwest of Greater Syria.

The question to be treated in two articles is whether the role of Arabs in the settlement of the desert fringe of greater Syria in the centuries before Islam can be better understood. The first, presented here, will be an analysis of the interpretations of written sources. While this of necessity anticipates the results of archaeological work, the second article, to follow elsewhere, will treat the question from the point of view of the contributions that can be made by archaeological evidence and its interpretations, "Arab Settlement in the Levant before Islam: The role of archaeological evidence."

I. The issue: Recognizing Arabs in Greater Syria (the Levant, Bilād esh-Shām) in the pre-Islamic period

The simple questions we can ask are: What did Muhammad see in the Southern Hauran? Who built its towns and villages, and where did their designs and plans come from? And who *were* the people he met? Fellow Arabs, Syrians, Byzantines? Did conversation between him and Bahīrā require a translator, someone bilingually proficient in Aramaic and Arabic or Greek and Arabic? And were these people, their towns, monasteries, and farms, intimately familiar or shockingly strange? The story of Bahīrā assumes normal communication, and if al-Mas'ūdī's information that Bahīrā's real name was Jirjis (George), a man of the 'Abd al-Qays tribe (Ibn Kathīr 179), is correct, the Christian monk and the future prophet could have been speaking Arabic or closely related dialects with each other.

A. Outsiders: Arabs are from Arabia

Answers to these simple questions require entry into a complex and incomplete but growing body of evidence open to varied scholarly interpretations. Because of the prominence of the Arab-Islamic conquests in scholarly research, these inquiries have often focused on the role of Arabs in the history of population movements across Greater Syria. The classic formulation of this process sees the sudden arrival of the Arabs under the banner of Islam as the last in historical waves of Semites from "Arabia Deserta" who show up in the Fertile Crescent at given historical moments – Amorites who eclipse Sumerians in the Middle Bronze Age, Aramaeans (and Hebrews) who supplant Hittite and Egyptian hegemonies, and finally Arabs who overrun the Greco-Roman Levant. Sabatino Moscati saw these "migrations" as a series of synthetic cycles by which Semites from their Arabian-desert "homeland" merged into the civilized zone of the Fertile Crescent (9). A significant variant of this is the stereotypical conflict between "desert and sown" set up by Ibn Khaldun

to explain Berber raids on Arab Egypt, which modern historiographers read back into the Greco-Roman Near East as the ever-looming threat of Arab-nomad raiders on the Hellenized/Romanized/Christianized urban-agrarian world of the Levant. (Moscati 308-309; Dussaud; Fowden 65-67). Seen from this background, Bahīrā and Muhammad would have been strangers in geographic, cultural, and ethnic senses.

Such biases resulted in the view, both classical and modern, of the desert fringe inside the Fertile Crescent as a frontier separating sedentary populations of the Levant from the nomadic tribes of Arabia.

Roman and Byzantine authors like Strabo, Tacitus, Ammianus, and Procopius, writing from perspectives "embedded" in imperial politics, saw the Arabs as marauding nomads – "Saracens," "barbarians" – from whom Roman/Byzantine defensive strategies protected the subject populations of the eastern provinces. From their perspective, Arabs remained as mysterious and invisible as their desert was distant and impenetrable to Roman legions, like shadowy figures seen through a sand storm. Modern scholars whose historiography stresses these classical sources tend to perpetuate this divide and this invisibility. Fergus Millar, for example, while affirming the concrete reality of the Roman frontier strategy, argues that actual Arabs remain largely invisible in the available sources, mostly classical and Syriac. When used the label is vague and stereotypical – e. g. their description by Josephus as the descendants of Ishmael; moreover, "Arab" is not a term of self-identity among pre-Islamic tribal groups (Millar 511-523). In the light of their vague awareness one wonders what the Romans meant when they called their frontier province created out of the former Nabataean realm, "provincia Arabia." Were they acting on a more concrete understanding than the sources let on, equating Nabataeans and Arabs, as Josephus tended to do, or, covering up failed attempts to penetrate the desert, proclaiming hyperbolically that they had subdued all of Arabia?

Some archaeologists working on the analysis of the Roman fortifications, constructed in the fringes of the desert from the third to the sixth centuries as a defense against the marauding nomadic tribes to the south (as well as against Persia to the east), have taken these Roman stereotypes as historical facts. Tom Parker, for example, concluded his magisterial study of the Diocletianic frontier fortifications in the Kerak plateau of central Jordan during the 4th – 5th centuries, which he called the Limes *Arabicus* Project, as follows: "The only known force in the desert capable of threatening the frontier was the nomadic Arab tribes" (*Roman Frontier* 550; also see Millar 428-436). While Parker recognized critiques of his frontier thesis by colleagues (*Roman Frontier* 551-552; Isaac; Graf, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier*), he insisted that the effective securing of the frontiers from nomadic raids after the upheavals of the 3rd century brought local security, as is evident in increased settlements

behind the military zone with increased economic activity not incidentally enhanced by the supply needs of the Roman forces occupying the frontier forts (*Roman Frontier* 552-558). Because he saw this fortification system as the bastion of the defense of civilized urban-agrarian Syria against the nomad-Arab threat, he could blame the system's decline and demobilization by A. D. 530 for the enablement of the eventual Islamic conquests a century later (*Roman Frontier* 569). For a parallel analysis Partick Geary's treatment of the Graeco-Roman historians' perspectives on non-Romans as this applies to the "barbarians" on the European side of the Roman empire is very helpful (Herodotus to Ammianus, Geary 42-49).

B. Insiders: Arabs freely crossing the "frontier"

In the above framework, Muhammad and Bahīrā would have been strangers, meeting across a great divide. I'm reminded of a recent visit to a great monastery in the desert between Jerusalem and the Dead Sea. A Greek monk unlocked the door for us and, as he welcomed us in, shouted: "You can't leave your car out there unprotected. Those Arabs out there (meaning local Bedouin) are thieves! They'll break into the car and steal everything!" In contrast the story of Bahīrā suggests familiarity and sociability rather than fear and mistrust. Caravans came to Syria annually, and they knew the monk well. Whether historically true or not, the story indicates that on the eve of Islam south Syria was culturally familiar to the Arabs of Mecca (Ball 105). It took shifts in perspective and considerable new research for modern scholars to realize that.

The thesis that sedentary populations of the Levant were able to flourish under Rome-provided security has been challenged by both alternative archaeological evidence and opposing theoretical frameworks (de Vries, "Towards a History" 232-240). The Roman military occupation of the Levantine provinces from the 1st to the 4th centuries did indeed provide protection, but mainly for formally designated cities colonized by Roman citizens. Paradoxically, the rural prosperity evident in the countryside in the 5th and 6th centuries, evident especially in the desert fringe (e.g. the numerous towns and villages, like Umm el-Jimal), Negev, and the southern Hauran came at the very time that the strength of the Roman legions was waning. In fact, that rural prosperity seen in the material remains at sites in the desert fringe peaked in the 6th century, just when Justinian demobilized this frontier and relied on local agents, the Ghassānid phylarchs, for protection of his eastern flank against Persia (Johns 2-3; de Vries, "Paradox of Power" 467). One could say that the earlier period of tight military control came at the expense of local rural and nomadic populations, while the loosening of that harsh occupation benefitted local populations left to their own devices.

In debate with those who saw the desert tribes as a nomadic threat warranting the construction of a defensive frontier, others have

argued that the Roman fortifications served the purpose of internal policing (Isaac), a centuries-long foreign military occupation keeping local people subjugated. The arguments against a nomadic threat combine current anthropological theory of nomad-sedentist symbiosis with the objection that no real historical or archaeological evidence for such a threat existed. I summed up this case in an earlier publication (de Vries, "Towards a History" 236, n. 10): "Banning's (1986) argument for a symbiotic mutualism rather than hostility in sedentist-nomad relations around the fortress of el-Lejjun is applicable here. Those analyzing the classical sources which Parker cites as evidence for a nomad threat have argued that this textual data is flimsy (Graf 1989) and that it comes mostly from Roman authors guilty of negative stereo-typing (Kennedy 1992: 485). M. Macdonald's study of the nomadic evidence – "Safaitic" graffiti – reveals a situation of stable transhumance with regular seasonal movements between the basaltic Harra (Jordan's eastern desert) and the deeper desert to the south and east, not the sporadic raiding of tribes driven from Arabia by adversity (1993: 323-334)."

Evidence for such symbiotic relations is coming to light as archaeologists are expanding their field work from monumental urban centers into more "marginal" areas on the desert fringe. For example, a fascinating project targeting the very question of symbiosis between sedentists and nomads in the central Negev has revealed several stone-based nomadic encampments in the steppe lands immediately south of the more settled agricultural zone in the Byzantine and early Islamic periods (Rosen and Avni 189-199). The archaeologists conclude that these pastoral nomads would graze their flocks around their camps in winter, but move north to overgraze the harvested fields of their agricultural neighbors. This implies not only peaceful coexistence, but also symbiotic interdependence between the two sets of communities (196-197). The authors conclude that rather than a nomadic threat building up to the Islamic conquests, the picture in the Negev from the 6th to the 8th centuries, covering the Byzantine to Islamic imperial transitions, is of continuous coexistence, uninterrupted by the wars of empires (198). That is not to say that all was always as peaceful and idyllic as this archaeological evidence indicates. However, information about raids and abductions, against which local forts could defend and imperial troops could police, which is available from literary sources, is usually not reflected in archaeological evidence (Mayerson 71-75). Clearly archaeology, which gives the long-term pattern created by material evidence on the ground, serves as a corrective to the impression of constant violence and conflict given by overly dramatized stories of raiding, kidnapping, and violence that make literary sources poignant but can also make them misleading. (This example will be part of more a general treatment of archaeology in the second article in part II of "Arab

Settlement in the Levant.”)

C. A civilizing mission

Irfan Shahīd's *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century* (Vol 1/1, 1995; Vol 2/2, 2002) and Michele Piccirillo's *Arabie Chrétienne* (2002) champion the view that the densely populated landscape of towns and villages that the frontier zone had become in the 6th century represented a distinctively *Arabic* Christian culture. Shahīd stresses the emergence of a civilized Arab presence in the Levant through the succession of three tribal federations, beginning with the Tanūkhid in the 4th, continuing with the Salīhid in the 5th and climaxing in the Ghassānid phylarchy of the 6th and early 7th centuries. This Arab Christian culture is characterized by its militant Christianity and energetic sedentism, with ruling kings who rival the Roman-Byzantine emperors in their patronage of monumental architecture. Piccirillo substantiates this picture with his emphasis on churches and other Arab Christian buildings identified as “Ghassānid” by inscriptions alluding to the dynasty and the martyr-cult of St. Sergius and emphasis on the central role of the Christian bishops of Arabia. These works represent maximalist positions on the influence of Arabs in the frontier zone in the three centuries before the Islamic conquests, a zone which Shahīd treats as a virtual Arab country he titles “Ghassānland.”

I have summarized Shahīd's voluminous work elsewhere (de Vries, *Byzantium and the Arabs*), and here will limit discussion to key points. While the argument is Arabo-centric, the point of view is that of the “good empire” model described above. The high status of this Arab culture is argued by turning it into a mirror of Byzantine imperial culture. The Ghassānid phylarchs, especially Harīth, are elevated from chieftains to kings, heroic defenders of the Byzantine imperial orient, whose achievements mirror those of the emperor Justinian. Ghassānland is a bastion of Christianity, not simply of the Monophysite version, but of imperial Christianity, defended and promoted zealously in the wars against pagan Hīra. This aggressive promotion includes the patronage of massive building projects – royal residences, fortresses, churches, and monasteries – which these rulers appear to have constructed single-handedly. The Arab phylarchs are *philoktistoi*, “lovers of building,” a passion Procopius in *Buildings* attributed to his own patron, Justinian, using the same term.

Because the contemporary historian Procopius does the exact reverse, that is, portray the Ghassānid rulers negatively compared to Justinian, Shahīd has devoted much of his writing to criticizing the historian for his anti-Ghassānid, hence anti-Arab, biases. To explain the phylarchs' great building skills, Shahīd argues that they hail from the urbanized culture of south Arabia, from where they had migrated

two centuries before. To make this point he stresses repeatedly that the Ghassān tribal group was *not* nomadic, but came into the Byzantine Empire with an urban cultural tradition that qualified them as cultural equals to their new imperial hosts.

Thus we have the portrayal of a distinctly Christian Arab culture. While Shahīd has done much to shed light on the role of the enigmatic Ghassānids, he has also been much criticized for stretching the evidence and building his own earlier hypotheses into later works as facts (Whitby, 74-80; Whittow). His passionate championing, more than hard evidence, creates the impression that the Ghassānid rulers were virtual forerunners of the Crusaders, and appears to promote an ideology of militant imperial Christianity. This portrayal of the rulers as masterful generals and frenetic builders promotes a classical great-man view of history in which crediting agency to a single person overshadows the evidence available on the cultures and achievements of the 6th century societies populating “Ghassānland.”

Although the argument that the Ghassānids are familiar with urban culture from their south Arabian origins may have validity, to set this in juxtaposition with nomadic heritage presupposes a false dichotomy positing urbanism as civilized and nomadism as barbaric. This approach, possibly inherited from classical authors, is out of touch with modern anthropology and archaeology and does not follow earlier reconstructions of Ghassānid cultural economy. In contrast, Trimingham's earlier convenient summary of Ghassānid history portrays the phylarchs as preferring mobile encampments over fortified centers but “remained nomadic, moving according to season” (182).

Finally, to concentrate all cultural achievements into the personality and courts of these rulers results in a narrow definition of Ghassānid culture as that of the sites and buildings concretely identified with names of the ruling dynasty. Archaeologically it is necessary to consider the inclusion of all human features in the landscape, including the lowliest agrarian farmstead and the most modest pastoral camp sites in order to get a fair impression of the cultural landscape of the Ghassānid region of control. Only then can a fair measure of the extent of Ghassānid influence of that culture be made. Without that archaeological perspective in hand, Shahīd limits himself to the interpretation of literary sources for his reconstruction of the material culture.

The need for bringing the results of archaeological research to bear on Irfan Shahīd's analysis of the role of Arabs in “Christian Arabia” occasioned the writing of these articles. This urgency of an archaeology of the role of Arabs before Islam was reiterated by Raouf Abujaber in a paper delivered at the Eleventh Conference on the History and Archaeology of Jordan in June 2010.

II. Identifying Arabs as a distinct socio-ethnic group among the populations of the Levant

In a geographic sense, Arabs are people in or from Arabia. This geographic reference was already complex in antiquity. In one sense Arabia is the vast stretch of terrain from north Syria to Yemen inhabited by nomads. In terms of political geography, however, Arabia was the Roman province founded on the remains of the Nabataean polity in A. D. 106 (M. Sartre in Piccirillo 7). At first this covered an area roughly equivalent to modern Jordan, from Bostra in modern south Syria to Aqaba in the south, but after Diocletian the region was shrunk to its northern half, while the section south of Wadi Hasa became the separate province Palaestina Tertia.

A. Arabs and Arabia in ancient sources

1. The elusive "Arabs": Historical texts and identity

Fergus Millar asks, in dealing with the period of Roman domination, "If there were no major invasions which in any way foreshadow the Islamic conquests, was there nonetheless steady penetration of groups who should be identified as Arab into the settled zone?" (512). In his excellent discussion he makes the following points. Though scarcely used in any sources, the word Arab almost never occurs in inscriptions as a term of self-identification. People are always locally or tribally designated, as Nabataeans or Iturians (in eastern Lebanon), for example, and do not see themselves as a subset of larger groups. The notion of common genealogy was attributed to outsiders, who sometimes, like Josephus, used the term Arab for that. But when they did, their meaning is never clear – descendants of Ishmael? Nomadic raiders? (Millar 513). A second problem is that Roman imperial policy erased distinctive local identities. In the course of the replacement of buffer states (like Nabataea) with Roman provinces (like Arabia), local expressions of culture were suppressed and replaced by an increasingly uniform Greco-Roman urban culture. In the course of this both the urban architecture and identifying inscriptions became predominantly Greek and Latin by the by end of the 3rd century A.D. Strikingly, as has been pointed out by specialists, nearly all writing in native languages and scripts (Nabataean, Palmyrene, Safaitic) in monumental inscriptions and graffiti stopped (Graf, "Arabs in Syria" 521); the use of Greek and Latin prevailed.

Two conclusions can be drawn from this: First, his destruction of local cultures on the desert fringe, including that of local Arabs, must mean that the emergence of new groups like the Salīhids and Ghassānids discussed by Shahīd represents a process of arrival (migration?) from the "Arabia" into the settled zones of Syria to fill this vacuum. One significant inscriptional exception to the death of inscriptions in local languages

is the famous Namara inscription from the eastern Hauran, which identifies the Tanūkhid Imru 'l-Qais as "king of all the Arabs" (Millar 514, 521). This text is transitional, because the script straddles Nabataean and classical Arabic, and the claim of political universality for a tribal federation initiated here found its climax in the Ghassānid phylarchy of the 6th century. Secondly, the evasiveness of literary evidence points to an essential role for archaeology. As David Kennedy has pointed out, Millar's generalization about the dominant use of Greek and Latin stresses the role of the educated social stratum, but necessarily ignores the native speakers, that is, the majority of ordinary persons who carry on outside the sphere of imperial domination. To identify the cultures of those, archaeologists must increase their focus on the towns, villages, and countryside outside the more monumental centers of power (Kennedy, "Greek, Roman and Native Cultures" 102).

2. The elusive "Arabs": Geography and Prejudice

From the perspective of modern national identity we presuppose that a people are generally located in a place with defined borders in which their language is spoken. Thus, Arabs and Arabia would be coterminous in both the geographic and linguistic sense, and the phrase "Arabs live in Arabia" would be understood in those terms. Maurice Sartre makes clear that ancient geographers and historians did not approach things that way, but took their starting point from describing and discussing people concretely, with only vague reference to language and imprecise attention to location. He distinguishes three ways in which the term "Arabia" was used in ancient sources.

(1) "The geographic reality" corresponds in the main to the Arabian Peninsula, defined by the ancient authors not so much from direct acquaintance but as the impenetrable region encompassed by the Red Sea, Persian Gulf, and Indian Ocean. While they had some familiarity with the coastal areas, the interior remained largely unknown to them. Thus Ptolemy gave a detailed catalogue of peoples and towns in "Arabia Felix" which is difficult to reconstruct in geographic reality because it was a product of sporadic and less than successful military and exploratory penetrations of the peninsula, filtered through mostly off-shore impressions from Roman island positions in the Red Sea (Sartre 2-3).

(2) "The administrative reality" is geographically more precise, but ethnically vague, for it constitutes the Roman province of Arabia initially synonymous in extent with the Nabataean kingdom it replaced in A. D. 106. At its core this is the region of trans-Jordan (replicated in the modern state) with extensions south to include an ephemeral hold on ancient Meda'in Saleh in the northern Hijaz and west to include the Sinai peninsula but excluding Gaza, the former Nabataean port (Sartre 4). While the name "Arabia" reflected the presence of a population group

perceived as Arab, it should also be considered as an extension of the fringe familiarity with the “real” Arabia of the peninsula described in the previous point. And while there may have been various cultural groups perceived as Arab by the Roman occupiers, especially the Nabataeans, the region included the descendants of Greek-Macedonian colonists, local pre-Hellenistic Syro-Palestinian population groups (Aramaic speakers), and by the 6th -century Roman veterans from across the empire settled on their retirement plots and Greco-Roman clerics and monks attracted to both the biblical sacred sites and the meditative solitude of the desert.

(3) “The ethnic reality,” in which the ancient authors envisioned Arabia as the localities where Arabs lived, was far different from the geographic and administrative realities. Sartre identifies three regions described as such in the ancient sources: (a) The desert region from the Nile in the west to the Arabian peninsula in east, straddling the Red Sea; (b) the region between the Middle Euphrates in the east and Apamea in the west (i. e., the central Syrian desert); and (c) the area south east of Edessa (“le Sumatar Arabesi”), ruled from there under the Abgarid dynasty (4-5). Notice that only a portion of the first is actually in the Arabian Peninsula! Sartre’s interpretation of this apparently absurd “geography” serves as a fine warning for equating modern notions of the geography of ethnicity with ancient ones: “On peut s’étonner cet usage apparament erratique d’une terme géographique qui en vient à perdre toute continuité terrotoriale. En réalité, cela ne peut surprendre chez les auteurs anciens qui s’intérassent toujours davantage aux peuples qu’aux notions géographiques” (Sartre 5).

Who, then, are the Arabs? Sartre concludes from the above that neither geographic location nor language was the primary curiosity of ancient classical authors as they may be with us. Identification of those who in fact spoke Arabic or wrote in a certain script is possible in some instances, but overall very difficult, because the ancient authors treated language use incidentally or not at all. On the other hand, others (he gives the Ituraeans of Lebanon as example) were called Arabs even though they used a different language. Among the various population groups encompassed in the term, some are more readily identified, especially those who left their numerous graffiti and worshipped a distinct pantheon of gods. However, others were called Arabs simply because they came from the province of Arabia. (Sartre includes in this Philip the Arab, who probably descended from Roman colonists, but came from a village in the Hauran.) This, added to the lack of geographic specificity, leads Sartre (along with many others) to conclude that the term “Arab” as used by ancient classical authors refers to people with a common way of life, “le nomadisme pastorale, repute être accompagné la plupart du temps par le pratique du brigandage. Rares sont les paysans sédentaires qualifiés d’Arabes (en on connait cependant un exemple chez Diodore

Sicile” (5). Strikingly, Philip’s Arab identity causes a 4th -century source to reinvent his origin as descended from a “chef de brigands” (6).

Thus, while linguistic and geographic definitions are illusive due to lack of focus, cultural definition is focused by prejudice to form an economic stereotype – nomad tent dwellers given to plundering – born by a lack of familiarity and a history of negative experiences. It strikes me that these negative experiences are framed in a history of Roman imperial failure to defeat and conquer the peoples of Arabia; this may be psychologically similar to the French usage of the word *arabe* meaning “vagabond” in reference to its North African colonial subjects. What makes identification of Arabs who settled into the towns and villages of the Levant especially difficult is that those who did so lost the stereotype of Arab identity in most Roman sources. “An Archeology of Arab Settlement” can therefore not expect much help from classical sources, but instead is likely to be misled by them.

3. Arabs and Saracens

In the rupture caused by the Roman suppression of local identity in the 3rd century, the word Arab virtually disappeared from the sources describing this nomad threat and is replaced by other terms, most commonly “Saracens” (Retsö 505-525). Retsö took the extreme position that this meant that Arabs themselves actually disappeared from northern spheres (the Levant). This notion is in keeping with his indemonstrable thesis that Arabs over the centuries from Assyria to Islam were a camel-breeding warrior cult who disappeared from the Roman frontiers at the end of the 3rd century, an image he derived from Herodotus. (See Bowersock for a searing critique.) Others more commonly see the term “Saracen” as similar to “Arab” as a designation of nomadic raiders (Parker *Rome and the Saracens*). This identity is dangerous, because it lends itself to the Arab- as-nomad-threat stereotype (Graf, *Rome and the Arabian Frontier*), ignores the anthropology of symbiosis discussed above, and would disqualify the agrarian and urbanized populations of Yemen, Arabia, and Syria who might be considered Arabs. Irfan Shahîd used the term “Arab” in a much broader way, as in Sartre’s work (2), but made the sharp distinction between Romanized Arabs, those whose identity had merged with the other ethnic populations of the cities of Syria, and the migrant arrivals into Syria after the 3rd century, the Tanûkhid, Salîhid, and Ghassânid tribal federations (Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs* Vol. 1:1; 2:1).

Of the various frameworks for identifying cultures and roles of people from Arabia, the one least laden with modern ideology and prejudice is the symbiosis model for understanding the roles of nomads in recent anthropology. As observed in the behavior of recent, living culture groups, the coexistence of pastoral nomads and sedentists in semi-arid



Photograph 4. Much visited “Thamudic” graffiti at the “Spring of Lawrence” in Wadi Rum, Jordan, where the camels on this book’s cover took the de-Vries family in June 2008. Photograph by Bert de Vries

terrain is normal and static over the *longue durée*, and mostly impervious to the ebb and flow of urbanization and nomadization or the vagaries of spasmodic migrations caused by droughts and the like. This stasis is normal for the geographic region from Yemen in the south to Syria in the north. Jeremy Johns, for example, used knowledge of Bedouin culture of 19th-century Ottoman history to shed light on the pre-Islamic economy. As discussed above, archaeologists have demonstrated the reality of such a symbiotic economy in the central Negev.

B. Arabs as Arab speakers: Limitation of relating language and ethnicity

The “linguistic map” of pre-Islamic Arabia, produced by a leading scholar in the field, Michael Macdonald (“Reflections” 28-77; see also Hoyland 200-204), presents the plethora of the region’s languages and scripts, in which “Old Arabic,” the forerunner of classical Arabic, is but one of many. Old Arabic was part of the North Arabian group of languages which co-existed with a cluster of “Ancient North Arabian” cognate languages including those spoken in the oases and those like Safaitic, Hismaic, and Thamudic, known from graffiti in the steppe lands of Jordan and northern Arabia (photograph 4). These are distinct from south Arabian languages. Old Arabic and Ancient North Arabian are alike enough that speakers of all of these would have been able to communicate with each other (Macdonald, “Reflections” 56).

“Old Arabic seems to have remained a purely spoken language until the fifth / early sixth centuries AD, which means ... that no specific script was associated with it” (Macdonald, “Reflections” 36). The reason for this is that Old Arabic was the vernacular language of ordinary people, who normally used the prestige languages and scripts of their

region for written communication. On the rare occasions that Old Arabic was written, the writers resorted to the scripts of the prestige languages in their respective areas. This means that rarely written Old Arabic texts are scattered in documents written in the following scripts: South Arabian, Ancient North Arabian (Macdonald, “Reflections” 34, fig. 3); Nabataean and Aramaic; and one even in Greek transliteration. There are also instances in which Ancient North Arabian texts have elements of Old Arabic mixed in; Macdonald calls these Safaeo-Arabic, Nabataeo-Arabic, etc. In all, roughly two hundred such mixed texts are known (Macdonald, “Reflections” 37). Only about a dozen documents occur in “pure” Old Arabic itself (Macdonald, “Reflections” 50), though two new long ones have been found since Macdonald’s publication (Graf, “Nabataean Identity”).

Macdonald’s analysis neatly meets the objection that there is virtually no documentary evidence for the existence of Arabs in large numbers in Greater Syria during the pre-Islamic period (Millar 511-523, discussed above; Butcher 287-288), especially Retsö’s insistence that there were no Arabs in the northern region after the 3rd century because the term “Arab” was not used in sources (505-525). Old Arabic occurred in few but widely scattered texts in linguistic-cultural areas ranging from the south of the Arabian peninsula to central Syria. Using the notion that writing is the prestige prerogative of the dominant elements of these diversely located groups, Macdonald concludes that “until the period immediately before Islam, it remained a vernacular in societies which were either non-literate or which wrote in other languages” (Macdonald, “Reflections” 57). This is clear, of course, when one considers the dominant role of Aramaic and Greek in the region, but not so clear when one considers the desert graffiti of Safaitic and Thamudic nomads, which do not appear to have monumental or documentary power and prestige functions (Macdonald, “Reflections” 58). With the discovery of new, more monumental Old Arabic texts in and nearby Madeba, Jordan, David Graf has objected that texts in this language may themselves imply prestige (“Nabataean Identity”). Nevertheless, it seems certain that a rather widespread set of peoples who were speakers of Old Arabic resided in the region from the Assyrian to the Islamic periods.

Another problem is that there is no continuity between the Ancient North Arabian desert scripts and the classic Arabic script that appeared in the 6th century and continued in Islamic culture. One reason for this is that writing in the desert scripts was discontinued two centuries earlier in the Roman crushing of local identity. Macdonald’s clever reconstruction of the evolution of classical Arabic writing posits a more complicated process. He argues that when the Nabataeans emerged as a major polity in southern Jordan, they chose the then available prestige script, Aramaic, to write their language, which he sees as clearly distinct

from Old Arabic and the Ancient North Arabian languages. Then, when Arab federations led by chieftains (“King of the Tanūkh,” at Umm el-Jimal; “King of all the Arabs” at Namara) were formed from the late 3rd century on, they adopted the Nabataean-Aramaic script, which evolved into cursive Arabic by the time of Muhammad (Macdonald, “Reflections” 58-59). This evolution is traceable through several inscriptions from the late 3rd to the 6th centuries (Trimingham 226-228). The final stages of this maturing into the cursive Kufic Arabic prestige script (and language) happened at the Lakhmid court in the 6th century. Though evidence is slim, one would presume that this happened in parallel at the Ghassānid court, where the name of the greatest ruler, Harīth, harks back to the greatest Nabataean ruler, and where the famous pre-Islamic Arabic poets provided entertainment.

While this linguistic identification gives reassuring witness to the presence of speakers of Arabic, it does not do much for the assignment of Arab identity to specific groups of historically known persons. This caution extends particularly to the role of names in ancient texts, many of which are temptingly “Arabic” in form (Macdonald, “Reflections” 38, 47), so that it is tempting to over interpret names for their meaning and ethnicity (Macdonald, “Personal Names”). That is, for example, to see Arabs where there were really speakers of Safaitic. Similar Arab-sounding names occur across many of these languages, often without significant literary contexts, so that any specific name can only be classified as belonging to the group writing in that specific language. However, the fact that one Rabibil is the beneficiary of an elaborate funerary inscription, written in the Old Arabic language in Sabaeen script at Qaryat al-Faw in the 1st century B.C. (Hoyland 201, 203, pl. 33), and that another Rabibil, writing in Greek language and script, dedicated an altar at Umm el-Jimal in the 2nd - 3rd century A. D. (de Vries, “Between the Cults” 184), has some significance for seeing a common cultural basin stretching from Kinda in the south to the Hauran in the north over several centuries. However disparate Muhammad and Bahīrā’s specific ethnicity may have been, this is the common cultural basin in which they could have been able to communicate effectively without the need of an interpreter.

C. Summary: What can and cannot be known about Arabs before Islam

The numerous efforts to identify Arabs and their historic presence before Islam from documentary sources have not been successful because the sources have tended to be very unclear as to identity, geography, and agency. One could say that a history of the Arabs before Islam cannot (yet?) be written. Reasons for this are numerous. There is no agreement among ancient authors on who the Arabs are. Mostly, the term Arab is used by outsiders looking in, often by authors for whom the arid

environment of Syria-Arabia is mysterious. This is especially true of Greco-Roman authors. Some of these, earlier ones like Herodotus and Josephus, refer to these people without negative bias. However, their specific information about “Arabs” seems stereotypical and superficial. Most others, especially later authors like Ammianus and Procopius, have decidedly negative biases, and tend to see Arabs as synonymous with “barbarians” (Fowden 65-67). After the Roman suppression of distinct cultures the term “Saracens” became common as a substitute for “Arabs” and appears to carry the “nomadic raider” stereotype. These biases have tended to carry over into modern historiography and also occur among archaeologists using textual documentation to interpret their material evidence.

Debate over these biases has occurred mostly within the sphere of discussing the interpretation of these classical sources and has reflected both the ideological disagreements of modern scholars and differences between classicist and anthropologist analytical perspectives. One difficulty is that few scholars have the linguistic training to expand their treatment of sources from the Greco-Roman ones to the Near Eastern Semitic ones, which range from ancient Assyrian to more recent Syriac. Two useful works bridging this divide are the magisterial universal treatments of Arabs in all sources from the Assyrian to the pre-Islamic periods by Retsö and Hoyland. Of these, Hoyland’s is more balanced and readable; both dealt with, but neither solved the conundrum of the “elusive Arab.” The likely reason for this, as Michael Macdonald and others concluded, is that throughout their long history, Arabs remained outside the power structure, and tend to be referred to as Arabs incidentally in sources written from points of view of the centers of power in scripts and languages other than their own. Thus, no single answer to the question of Arab identity emerged, and Maurice Sartre neatly summed up the diversity in his three categories of geographic, administrative, and ethnic “realities.”

Warwick Ball sums up the ways in which the region was seen as Arab with the following list (32):

Arab-Aramaic populations as speakers of local Semitic as opposed to imperial Greek/Latin

Rome’s Arab client states: Emesa, Chalcis, Nabataea, Edessa, Palmyra (up to ca. A. D. 400)

Arab tribal confederacies: Lakhm, Tanukh, Salīh and Ghassān (after ca. A. D. 400)

References to Arabia in the Roman sources: Arabia Deserta and Felix, *provincia Arabia*)

Nomads: Arabs equals Saracens.

Ball himself does not dwell on the distinctiveness of Arabs as a sub-group, but rather stresses the distinctiveness of the conglomerate culture of Greater Syria over against that of Greco-Roman imperial culture. His thesis is that the subject populations did more to “transform” the culture of Rome than the other way around. Pre-Islamic Arabs certainly played a role in this paradoxical assertion of local cultural power of the vanquished over the conqueror (de Vries, “Paradox of Power”).

Identification of Arabs by language has proven to be complex and nearly as enigmatic as identification in historical sources. Nevertheless, the delineation of Old Arabic on the “linguistic map” creates a concrete image of the locations of Arabic speakers over time and helps explain that invisibility in historical sources did not mean absence in fact. Whether Arabs and Arab speakers were one and the same is not clear, however. In fact, the equation of linguistic and national identities as the means of determining the ethnically ‘pure’ origin of a ‘people’ was a pseudo-scientific artifice of nineteenth c. nationalist ideology (Geary 29-34). The tracing of the emergence of Arabic as a prestige language by scholars like Macdonald and Graf is in a way the documenting of the emergence of self-conscious identity and self-awareness of the historical role of those who began to call themselves Arabs. Because this was happening in the 6th century, on the eve of Islam, it could be that writing a history of Arabs before the 6th century may not be possible.

A second benefit of the linguistic approach is the realization that the conglomerate of tribes including those speaking the other Arabian languages, like the Ancient North Arabian group, could easily understand one another. Thus all are part of a larger cultural group one might call “Arabian peoples,” distinct, say, from the Aramaic cultural groups of northern Syria. In this looser sense the Arab presence in the pre-Islamic period may be understood in terms of the interplay between sedentism and nomadism in the landscape of the Levant. Although there were undoubtedly uni-directional tribal migrations like that of the Ghassānids, the cultural processes we have been describing are less determined by such travel than by the symbiotic coexistence and the sharing of a common culture with long historical roots and interesting local variants. Though the Ghassānid center of gravity was inside the desert fringe in the agricultural zone between the Golan and Damascus, they still retained their pastoral traditions for both economic and strategic reasons; after all, their military usefulness hinged on mobility in the desert (Fowden 141-149). This retention included cultural kinship and travel skills resulting from being at home in the region between the desert and the sown, a zone of familiar cultures across which one could travel freely unless artificial barriers were put up by invading exterior empires.

This zone included great cities, agricultural areas, and deserts in

which both nomads and sedentists belonged. The nomadic side has been well-discussed and increasingly understood through multi-disciplinary analysis of literary sources in the course of the debates over the role of nomads on the frontier of the Roman Empire. Until recently, the role of Arabs in the cultural and political economies of the agricultural settlements of the region has received less specific focus. However, such discussions have recently taken increasingly good advantage of archaeological field work and analysis.

Conclusion: What did Muhammad see and whom did he meet on his visits to the Hauran? Section II above led to this question: What can archaeology contribute to an understanding of Arab identity and role in the pre-Islamic Levant? Throughout this article, hints were given of the role archaeology has played and could play to further enhance our understanding and counter-balance overly enthusiastic interpretations of written documents. The question will be answered systematically in a second article, “Arab Settlement in the Levant before Islam: archaeological data and interpretations.” This conclusion will indicate briefly how the archaeological materials may or may not change or substantiate the historical information discussed above by returning to the meeting of Muhammad and Bahīrā.

When Muhammad on his caravan journeys arrived in the southern Hauran in the 580s and later, he entered a thriving landscape that no longer looked like the classical Roman imperial world of monument-filled central cities. The glorious cities of Roman construction like Philadelphia (Amman), Gerasa (Jerash), and Bostra were far less populated. The Nabataean (Arab?) city of Petra, which he passed by but likely did not see, was on the point of total abandonment, though lately the seat of a bishop. Instead, the rural semi-arid desert fringe he may have seen first in the southern Hauran (today Northern Jordan) was a thriving region of agricultural villages, constructed of sturdy, no-nonsense stone houses. Both the older cities like Bostra and Philadelphia, where pagan temples lay in ruins, and the newly thriving villages had numerous churches dispersed through their sturdy neighborhoods. Likely his uncle, Abu Talib, and later Muhammad himself still followed the *via nova traiana*, the old Roman military road from Aqaba to Bostra which had survived Justinian’s demobilization of the frontiers. Thus, a day before reaching Bostra, he could have seen Umm el-Jimal, the prosperous rural village I’ve studied, located only 6 km east of the road, which has enough *intramuros* open spaces for the safe encampment of several caravans (de Vries, “Towards a History”). Had he actually camped there, he could have looked up with awe at the great square tower on the so-called barracks, inhabited by monks, and his uncle might have commented, “These towers remind me of San’ā in Yemen” (see Arce 950-953). What he

could have seen was a blended heritage of Nabataean, Roman, north and south Arabian, and local building techniques to fit underlying societal structures he was familiar with, the Syro-Arabian culture of pre-Islamic antiquity.

We know from the epigraphic analysis described above that Muhammad could have conversed pretty freely with the people of Umm el-Jimal, who were of the same milieu as Bahīrā, especially if his cell had been at Qasr el-Bā'iq, only 6 km away. As agricultural and pastoral as this landscape was, its people were clearly Muhammad's cultural familiars, though we could not know from reading this archaeological landscape whether they were specifically Arab. Nor could we know from looking at them whether any of the fifteen churches at Umm el-Jimal were Monophysite, Orthodox, or Nestorian in theology or whether the town was Ghassānid in political orientation, for information such as ethnic identity or the local visibility of ruling authorities cannot be derived readily from material evidence, but must come from literary sources and inscriptions (like those on the half dozen "Ghassānid" buildings). In laying out the contribution archaeology can make in answering the question of the role of the Arabs before Islam, we will be served as much by observing what it cannot do as we will by learning what it can do.

As we leave Muhammad at his meal with Bahīrā, we can anticipate that archaeology per se will be much more limited in providing answers to specific historical questions, but much more useful in laying out the specifics of the cultural landscape into which the pre-Islamic Arabs fitted and in which they became more and more self-aware as Arabs in the century before Islam. Much is being accomplished in laying this cultural landscape bare, and, as colleagues like David Kennedy have urged (*Gerasa and the Decapolis* 185-197), much more field work ought to be done at the interface between village, hinterland, and desert, the sort of place where Muhammad met Bahīrā.

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