



# 'ARAB I. ARABS AND IRAN IN THE PRE-ISLAMIC PERIOD

---

## 'ARAB

### i. Arabs and Iran in the Pre-Islamic Period

As two of the most prominent ethnic elements in the Middle East, Arabs and Iranians have been in contact with each other, and at times have had their fortunes intertwined, for some three millennia. Herodotus (3.5) relates how in the 6th century B.C. the Achaemenid Cambyses marched against Egypt through northern Arabia after making a transit agreement with the local Arab ruler, probably one of the kings of Leḥiān in the northern Ḥeǰāz and how in the following century Xerxes employed camel-mounted Arab archers in his forces. The honored position of Arabs as “allies” of the Persian empire is also indicated in Achaemenid sculptured reliefs at Persepolis (E. F. Schmidt, *Persepolis III*, Chicago, 1969, pp. 112f.). On the northern fringes of Arabia at least, and in the Syrian Desert region, the world empires contending for mastery in western Asia—the Greeks, Romans, and then Byzantines on one side and the Achaemenids, Parthians, and Sasanians on the other—traditionally sought the alliance of local Arab chiefs and enrolled their tribesmen as frontier auxiliaries (the Greek *symmachoi* and Roman *limitanei*).

In the period after Alexander the Great, the policy of his Seleucid successors aimed at extending their authority over Mesopotamia and the Persian Gulf in



order to control the sea routes and to benefit from the commerce of the Gulf ports and South Asia: several centuries earlier, Darius (522-486 B.C.) had sent the Greek navigator Scylax of Caryanda on an exploratory voyage round the coasts of the Arabian peninsula. In 205-04 B.C. the Seleucid Antiochus III the Great sailed from his base at Seleucia on the Tigris along the southern shores of the Gulf as far as Chattene and the port of Gerrha. Gerrha, probably situated in what was later Qaṭīf opposite Bahrain island, was an entrepot for exotic imports from India and the aromatics of South Arabia, the *Arabia Odorifera* of the ancients. Aramaic and Greek inscriptions of this period from the Qaṭīf coastlands and from the island of Failaka off modern Kuwait testify to this Seleucid interest in the Gulf and its commercial potential.

After 129 B.C., with the decay of the Seleucid empire, a predominantly ethnically Arab principality arose in Lower Iraq, based on a settlement on the lower Tigris banks named Charax of Hyspaosines. While the founder, Hyspaosines, bore a purely Iranian name, he is described as king of the Arabs in that region, and he ruled over what must have been a predominantly Arab population in the district of Characene or Mesene (later Arabic, Maysān), even though the cultural language there, as in all Mesopotamia, was doubtless Aramaic. In central Iraq, the Parthian capital of Ctesiphon became a center for the spread of Iranian influence over the whole region.

In northern Iraq, another Arab principality was established by the middle of the 1st century B.C. at Hatra (Ar. al-Ḥaẓr), one of a crescent of Arab kingdoms situated along the northern fringe of the Syrian Desert as far west as Palmyra and Emesa. The more westerly kingdoms, eventually went down before the advancing Romans; those in the east came under considerable Parthian political and cultural influence, so that even certain of the early rulers of Edessa bore Iranian names. Hatra remained the firm ally of the Parthians in their epic struggle with Rome; among its rulers were three with the typically Arsacid name of Sanatrūk, while the “king of the Arabs” (Aramaic, *malkā dī ‘Arab*) in the 1st century A.D. had the Parthian name of Vologases. Much more than a caravan city, Hatra had an important shrine for sun worship that attracted rich votive offerings. Hatra’s fortunes declined with those of its Arsacid patrons, and it was occupied and plundered by the Sasanian Šāpūr I (A.D. 241-72, the Sābūr-al-ḵonūd of later Arabic historians). In later Islamic lore Hatra became an example of the fleetingness of human achievement and earthly prosperity, but its memory lived on, and the pre-Islamic poet al-A‘šā began a famous *qaṣīda* with praise of the former al-Ḥaẓr.



The Sasanians, once they had become masters of Ctesiphon, continued the ancient Seleucid policy of involvement in the Gulf region to which was added, in the 6th century, intervention in South Arabia as well (see below). The founder of the Sasanian dynasty, Ardašīr I (d. A.D. 240), secured the head of the Gulf and the districts of Ahvāz and Maysān, with new settlements established at Sūq al-Ahvāz and Karḵ Maysān, and then, according to Ṭabarī (I, p. 820), drove southward into Bahrain. It is possible that Gerrha was sacked, for Ardašīr seems to have built a new settlement called (?) Firūz Ardašīr, on the site of earlier Chatta.

Not surprisingly, these imperialist designs provoked an Arab reaction. During the early years of the reign of Šāpūr II (A.D. 309 or 310-79), Arabs crossed the Gulf from Bahrain to the Ardašīr-ḳorra littoral of Fārs and raided the interior. In retaliation, Šāpūr led an expedition through Bahrain, defeated the combined forces of the Arab tribes of Tamīm, Bakr b. Wā'el, and 'Abd-al-Qays, and advanced temporarily into Yamāma in Central Naǧd. Frontier defenses were set up in Lower Iraq against the Bedouins, including a trench and rampart (the *ḳandaq Sābūr* of the Arabic historians); wells were blocked up, and Arab captives were harshly treated (whence Šāpūr's name in the Arabic sources, Sābūr Du'l-aktāf "he who pierces or dislocates shoulders"). Following the ancient Persian practice of mass population resettlement, the Sasanians carried off tribesmen of Taǧleb, Bakr b. Wā'el, and Ḥanẓala and implanted them in Kermān and Ahvāz.

It is possible that a recently discovered settlement on an island off the northern tip of the Musandam peninsula in northern 'Omān, a site commanding the sea route through the narrow Straits of Hormoz, may date from this time. Certainly, 'Omān was regarded as a key region for the Persian policy of hegemony throughout the Gulf. Geographically separate from the plains of eastern Arabia and geologically more akin to the Zagros mountain region of southern Persia, 'Omān has often been linked culturally and even politically with Persia. Already, Šāpūr I—on the evidence of the Naqš-e Rostam inscription—claimed 'Omān (Pers. Mazūn) as part of his empire. In later times, some degree of control was certainly established. Persian officials and garrison troops settled in the coastal plain and also on the cultivable slopes of the Jabal Aḳẓar; their administrative center of Rostāq permanently implanted a Persian name in 'Omān. Relations between these Persian colonists and the indigenous Azd Arabs of the interior were normalized during Ḳosrow Anōšīravān's reign (A.D. 531-79) by a treaty that gave the Āl Jolandā



paramountcy, as tributaries and auxiliaries of Persia, over the Arabs of 'Omān. It is possible, though not proven, that the Persians developed agriculture extensively there and introduced the system of *qanāts* to convey water for irrigation from the mountain slopes.

Persian control over central and northern Mesopotamia was exercised through the Arab dynasty of the Lakhmids, who had their court and their capital at al-Ḥīra (Aramaic *Ḥērtā* “fortified encampment”) near the later Muslim garrison of Kūfa. Ḥīra was a creation of the Tanūḵ Arabs; the antiquarian Ebn al-Kalbī (d. 204/819 or 206/821) situates its founding in the reign of Ardašīr I after the Sasanians had taken over Iraq from the Parthians, but it is equally probable that its growth was a slower, more gradual process. At all events, Ḥīra became essentially an Arab town, strategically situated as the starting point for caravan traffic westward across the Syrian Desert. Although Syriac was the learned and hieratic language for its population, a large proportion of whom were Nestorian Christians, famed for their literacy (the so-called 'Ebād “devotees” of Arabic sources), ethnically they must have been Arab. The Lakhmid rulers themselves, the Manāḍera or Na'āmena of Arabic sources, remained pagan and strongly attached to the culture and traditions of the Arabian Desert; only at the very end of the dynasty did al-No'mān III (ca. A.D. 580-602) become Christian. The great Bedouin poets of the Jāheliya frequently sought the patronage of the Lakhmid kings (see [Lakhmids](#)).

In general, the Lakhmids remained faithful Sasanian vassals, holding the northwestern fringes of the desert against pressure from the Byzantines and their Arab Ghassanid allies and against incursions from the Bedouins of Najd. The Sasanian prince Bahrām V, known as Bahrām Gōr (r. A.D. 421-39), grew up at the court of Ḥīra under the tutelage of al-Monḍer I al-No'mān I al-A'war, and eventually gained the throne in Ctesiphon with Lakhmid help against the Persian nobles who had killed his brother Šāpūr. Other regroupings and alliances took place outside the usual pattern. Thus the evidence of the famous proto-Arabic al-Namāra inscription from southern Syria commemorating the death in 328 of the “king of all the Arabs” Emro 'l-Qays al-Bad' b. 'Amr b. 'Adī shows that this potentate, who governed the North Arab tribes as far as the Ḥejāz, on behalf of the Sasanians, had at the end of his life transferred his allegiance to the Byzantines. Yet on the whole, the Lakhmid kings of the 5th and 6th centuries bore a substantial share of the fighting against the Byzantines over control of the Syrian Desert fringes. Thus, al-No'mān II was heavily involved in the Byzantino-Sasanian warfare and scored a victory



against the East Romans at Ḥarrān in 502.

The 6th century is the best-documented period of Lakhmid history. Al-Monḍer II (A.D. 503-54) was delegated by the Sasanian emperors—shortly after 531, according to Ṭabarī—to rule over much of northern and eastern Arabia, including Bahrain, ‘Omān, Yamāma, Najd, and the Ḥeǰāz as far west as Ṭā’ef. Some degree of Persian influence appears to have been exercised as far northwest as Yaṭreb (Islamic Medina) through the agency first of the local Jewish tribes of al-Nazīr and Qorayḏa and then, in the second half of the 6th century, by a Lakhmid tax collector. Al-Monḍer III managed to survive the powerful bid for control over northeastern Arabia made early in his reign by the rival chief of Kenda, al-Ḥāreṭ b. ‘Amr, who for three years (525-28) actually occupied Ḥīra itself; in revenge, al-Monḍer largely extirpated the ruling house of Kenda. In 531 he played a leading role in the Persian campaign that culminated in the victory over Byzantium at Callinicum on the Euphrates; he was eventually killed in a battle with the Ghassanids near Qennasrīn, probably the Yawm-al-ḥīār of the Arabic sources.

The extent of Persian political influence over the Lakhmid royal family can be seen in the name of one ruler, Qābūs b. al-Monḍer III (A.D. 569-73), arabized from Kāvūs, a typically Iranian epic name. Among the Lakhmids’ troops are mentioned the *wazā’e’*, described as Persian cavalymen sent to Ḥīra by the emperor for a year’s tour of duty. The Arabic poets who thronged the Lakhmid court at Ḥīra and who also visited Ctesiphon had at least some exposure to Persian culture and its technical vocabulary; the 9th-century critic Ebn Qotayba says of the great Jāhelī poet Maymūn b. Qays al-Aššā’s fondness for using Persian words, “al-Aššā used to visit the court of the kings of Persia, and because of that, Persian court words abound in his poetry” (*Ketāb al-Še’r wa’l-šo’arā’*, ed. M. J. de Goeje, Leiden, 1900, pp. 136-37).

The end of the Lakhmids’ independence seems to be connected with their attempts to through off a Persian tutelage that had become irksome. Al-No‘mān III b. al-Monḍer IV (A.D. 580-602), the first Christian Lakhmid king, eventually quarreled with Ḳosrow II Aparvēz, who deposed and killed him. This weakening of the Lakhmid bulwark against nomadic pressure from the interior of Najd may well have contributed to the Arab Muslim breakthrough into Iraq and Bahrain some thirty years later, just as the victory of Bedouins of Bakr b. Wā’el and Šaybān over the Persians and their allies at Dū Qār near Kūfa sometime between 604 and 613 demonstrated to the Arabs the deterioration of Persian defenses in that quarter.



Finally, the 6th century witnessed strenuous attempts to extend Persian power into South Arabia as well as into the north and east of the peninsula. Long before this, there had been diplomatic contacts; a Sabaean inscription from Ma'rib mentions an embassy from the Himyarite king Šammar Yoḥar'eš of Yemen and Hadramaut (later 3rd century A.D.) to the Persian twin capitals of Ctesiphon and Seleucia. In the 6th century, the Sasanians were able to take advantage of the decline of Himyarite central power and political fragmentation in Yemen, together with the confessional discords exacerbated by Ethiopian attempts to support the indigenous South Arabian Christian community. The Yemenite ruler Ǧū Nowās, a convert to Judaism, seems to have been encouraged in his persecution of the Christians of Naǧrān (the latter traditionally and, it now seems, correctly identified with the Koranic (*Aṣḥāb al-oḳdūd* "Companions of the trench") by the anti-Christian and pro-Persian Lakhmid al-Monḍer III, even though the latter could supply no material help for that distant corner of Arabia. The opportunity for direct Persian intervention in South Arabia did not come until about 570, when the rule of the Ethiopian-backed governor in Yemen, Masrūq b. Abraha, provoked a Yemeni uprising under Sayf b. Ǧī Yazan, who appealed first to the Lakhmids, and then directly to Ǧosrow Anōšīravān. Although South Arabia was remote from Persia itself, Anōšīravān was tempted by the prospect of extending Persian influence along the southern coast of Arabia and controlling the Gulf of Aden, thereby blocking Byzantine trade up the Red Sea. An expeditionary force under the Persian general Vahrēz fought its way to the Yemeni capital, Ṣaṇ'ā, expelled the Ethiopians, and eventually installed Sayf b. Ǧī Yazan's son Ma'dīkareb as a Persian vassal ruler. A colony of Persian officials and soldiers settled in Yemen, and their Muslim descendants formed the group of the *Abnā'* in early Islamic times.

It is improbable that centuries of contacts between the Arabs and Persians, above all in eastern Arabia, should not have left behind some legacy in the fields of thought and culture, but such a legacy is not easy to quantify or to evaluate. In centers like Ctesiphon the Arabs acquired some familiarity with the externals of Persian life—the impressive buildings, the court ceremonial, the military institutions like the mailed, heavily armed cavalymen, the ceremonies and practices of Zoroastrianism,—yet these had no penetrating effect on society within the Arabian peninsula. The Lakhmid kings, with their circles of Bedouin poets and their alliances with the tribesmen of the interior seem to have been quintessentially Arab rulers rather than largely Persianized ones. The most lasting result of Arab-Persian contacts in these centuries was



an influx of Persian words into the classical *‘arabīya*, especially those with religious and cultural references; as early as the Namāra inscription we find the Middle Persian *tāg* (crown) borrowed into Arabic; subsequent borrowings are discernible in the Jāheli poets and in the Qur’ān itself, where they were evaluated by later Muslim philologists concerned with the *mo‘arrabāt*.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*. G. Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lakhmiden in al-Ḥīra*, Berlin, 1889.

A. Siddiqi, *Studien über die persischen Fremdwörter im klassischen Arabisch*, Göttingen, 1919.

A. Jeffery, *The Foreign Vocabulary of the Qur’ān*, Baroda, 1938.

Christensen, *Iran Sass.* F. Altheim and R. Stiehl, *Die Araber in der alten Welt*, Berlin, 1964-68.

M. J. Kister, “Al-Ḥīra. Some Notes on its Relations with Arabia,” *Arabica* 15, 1968, pp. 143-69.

J. C. Wilkinson, “Arab-Persian Land Relationships in Late Sasanid Oman,” *Proc. of the Sixth Seminar for Arabian Studies*, London, 1973, p. 40-51.

I. Shahid, “Lakhmids,” *EI*<sup>2</sup>.

C. E. Bosworth, “Iran and the Arabs before Islam,” *Camb. Hist. Iran* III, 1983, pp. 593-612.