

**ARABIC CONFLUENCE FROM CONSTANTINE TO HERACLIUS:
The Preparation for a 7th Century Religio-Racial Explosion**

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INTRODUCTION

Among religious extremists, history undergraduates, various other sycophants, and the interested population a propagated myth or half-truth is manifest in the descriptions "Muslim explosion" and "Islamic conquest." These descriptions refer to the single-generation religio-political tsunami called Islam that rolled from its origin in the western Arabian Peninsula to the extents of Spain, North Africa, and Persia. They imply Islam as being the critical factor, diminishing the import of the Arabic people and their circumstance *vis à vis* Byzantium prior to this expansion. I would contend that Islam's importance—certainly its religious aspect—is overemphasized by these descriptions; that the explosion, such as it was, was Arabic; and that, in fact, the Arab "race" was on the verge of exploding in any event.

While we must recognize that the notion of "race" was then not yet what we accept the concept to mean, within the context of this paper the term is significant and specific. By it, particularly as the term is used to refer to the Arabic "race", we will comprehend a relatively homogenous ethnic group (again, a term and concept quite unknown in the period under discussion), particularly those peoples of Semitic origin whose "ethnicity" is that of the Arab tribes which originated in the Arabian Peninsula. Whether these peoples are citizens or federates of the Roman or Byzantine empires, are similarly associated with another great empire such as that of the Persians, or are simply independent tribes, they are associated by their common historical link to the Arabian Peninsula. As there is questionable genealogy regarding the mythological Arabic descent from Ishmael, which some historians have noted, we will consider it as unimportant to our definition of the race of Arabs except insofar as those people that shared this myth would generally be considered

to be part of our defined race of Arabs.¹ In actuality, the Arabs are likely the descendants of the same Semitic peoples that spawned the Hebrews, Assyrians, and Arameans.²

THE "ISLAMIC EXPLOSION"

This paper's argument is purposeless without the reader knowing the seventh century events of the so-called explosion of Islam, and the interpretation of which I find so contentious. Thus a brief description of the episode is necessary. In essence, Muhammad received God's revelation and created a new religion in the early seventh century that came to be called Islam (Arabic for *those who submit*; "Muslim" is Arabic for *one who submits*). How it came to be; the circumstances that permitted it; the forces that shaped it; and the way it rapidly expanded are the substance of the following discussion.

Muhammad was born in Mecca in A.D. 570 to a respectable but minor branch of the powerful Quraysh tribe known as the Hashim.³ This sedentary and urbanized tribe, some of whose members ruled Mecca at the time, were in the business of buying, selling, and transporting goods.⁴ Religiously, Muhammad was influenced by Arabic tradition as well as the religions of the God of Abraham. The overwhelming monotheism of the Koran (the holy book of Islam), its theory of revelation, and its interpretation of biblical features all suggest that Muhammad had been exposed to both Christian and Jewish influences.⁵ The theory is supported by awareness of the southern geographic extent to which Christianity was taken in the Arabian Peninsula.

Muhammad became the Prophet of Islam by receiving the revelation of Allah (God) in 610 or 611 from the angel Gabriel.⁶ It would seem that he had no intent of starting a world-changing religious movement. His more modest ambition was to bring to his people a unified Arab revelation similar to that of the Christians and Jews.⁷ At the time, the code of Arabian behaviour, *Muruwwah*, was being taught to Meccan children despite its being practically useless to sedentary merchants and not being upheld anyway. The business people of Mecca were becoming more self-centred and

¹ Some Arabs of the period, and later, consider themselves to be the descendants of Abraham's son by his Egyptian maid, Hagar: Ishmael. Thus the term "Ishmaelites" is occasionally used to describe the Arab tribes. There is insufficient and insubstantial historical proof to perpetuate the legend in this paper. It is, however, sociologically important because to some greater or lesser degree this descendency become a defining feature of the race.

² Arthur Goldschmidt Jr., A Concise History of the Middle East. (Boulder: Westview Press, 1979) p. 21.

³ Ibid., p. 27.

⁴ Ibid., pp. 25-27 passim.

⁵ John Garraty and Peter Gay, eds., Columbia History of the World. (New York: Harper & Row, 1972) p. 259.

⁶ Garraty and Gay, Columbia History. p. 259; Goldschmidt, Concise History. p. 28.

⁷ Garraty and Gay, Columbia History. p. 259.

acquisitive.⁸ By all this Muhammad was disturbed, and he spoke out about it. Naturally, attacking the status quo paganism of the powerful Quraysh leaders with new religious revelations from the God of Abraham made Muhammad anathema to Meccan society. Once his benefactors (among whom his uncle Abu-Talib was most significant) disappeared from power, and his loyal and supportive wife died (about 619), Muhammad was compelled to take his message to a more hospitable environment.⁹ Thus, in 622, he undertook his *Hijra* (migration) to Yathrib (Medina) some 250 miles northeast of Mecca, a sophisticated urban centre that originally had been settled by Jewish tribes but was subsequently populated with pagan Arabs.^{10,11}

It was in Medina that Islam began to take hold. Like the Meccans, the Medinese were not particularly religious, being generally non-participating pagans. But the Medinese saw Muhammad as a strong negotiator and conciliator who could stem the tribal antagonism raging between competing Arab tribes. They were willing to accept Islam's religious aspect only so long as through it Muhammad would provide solutions to prevailing political and economic needs.¹² Those needs included establishing economic self-sufficiency and power.¹³ Not surprisingly, as the Columbia History of the World provides, "Once in Medina, Muhammad's revelations changed in character; they became less prophetic and religious and *more regulatory and secular* [emphasis mine]. Islam, the religion and church, became a community and a state, with Muhammad as the lawgiver, the supreme judge, the commander in chief, and the ruler."¹⁴

Islam took root and Muhammad's power grew. His next objective was Mecca, and in 624, at the Battle of Badr, Muhammad's forces overwhelmed the Meccans. It was thus that Muhammad and the forces of Islam took control of the important north-south trade routes of Hijaz. In 630, Muhammad victoriously re-entered Mecca—allegedly more by negotiation than by force.¹⁵ The holy places of Mecca were in the hands of Islam; they were sanctified and purified of paganism. "Religious faith replaced old tribal blood ties [and] opposition was practically wiped out," according to the Columbia History.¹⁶

Shortly thereafter, in 632, Muhammad died. Massignon provides an ever-so-slightly excessive sense of Muhammad's impact on Arabia and on the world:

⁸ Goldschmidt, Concise History. p. 28.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Garraty and Gay, Columbia History. p. 260.

¹¹ The importance of Muhammad's *Hijra* to Medina can not be under-emphasized. So important is it to Islamic culture that the date marks the beginning of the Islamic calendar.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Goldschmidt, Concise History. p. 33.

¹⁴ Garraty and Gay, Columbia History. p. 260.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 262.

. . . car c'est bien à un homme, à Mahomet, celui qu'on appelle en arabe Mohammed, que l'on doit ce type d'hommes et ce type de culture. C'est lui qui a fait d'une poussière de tribus arabes une nation, d'un ramassis de clans en dispute, un État, d'un patois à peine écrit, une langue de civilisation mondiale. C'est à lui, à ses premières expéditions militaires, étonnants raids surprises de nuit en plein désert, sarâyâ, que remonte cette immense expansion qui a dilaté l'Islam avec la conquête arabe jusque chez les Iraniens, les Turcs, et les Balkaniques, dans l'Inde, en Chine, en Malaisie et au Soudan.¹⁷

It was the first caliphs to lead and rule the Islamic peoples, not Muhammad, who commanded the most volatile and far-reaching conquest of the Middle East since Alexander. Muhammad's caliphal successors devised a brilliant solution to the persistent disciplinary problem among the tribes. They turned the tribes' energies away from fighting each other toward the fighting of a *jihad* (holy war) against the Byzantines and Persians to expand their *ummah* (community of followers, or "nation").¹⁸ Abu-Bakr, one of Muhammad's original followers from Mecca, was the first Caliph. His role was to consolidate and create a unified force of Arabs, as when Muhammad died many of the Arab tribes broke with Islam as a way to avoid paying the *zakat*—a tribute—to Medina. Abu-Bakr forced them back into the fold militarily, then forgave them.¹⁹ Those Muslim forces had captured large tracts of Syria, Iraq, southern Persia, and the Byzantine empire before he died in 634. Abu-Bakr was followed by the caliph Omar, who reigned for ten years. During this second Caliphal reign the nature of the Muslim expansion changed permanently. What began as typical Arab raids for booty turned into campaigns of permanent conquest.²⁰

It is a fair suggestion that had the Arab tribes not come together as they had, under the yoke of the Islamic caliphs, that the so-called "Islamic explosion" may not have happened. However, before one concludes that Islamic *religion* was the active catalyst for this world-altering chain of events, Afzal Iqbal's perspective on the expansion of Islam under the Caliphs might prove insightful. He says:

[The caliphs] launched the Islamic mission in a way which was not exactly the Prophet's way, commencing rapid military conquest and rapid conversion of other nations to Islam.²¹

Under the first four Caliphs, the united Arab world began to push its borders outward aggressively. Relative to the Byzantine empire, the watershed date would be 20 August 636, the day

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Albert Hourani, *Europe and the Middle East*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) p. 20, citing L. Massignon, 'Situation de l'Islam', *Opera Minora*, vol. 1 (Beirut, 1963) p. 12.

¹⁸ Goldschmidt, *Concise History*. p. 48.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Garraty and Gay, *Columbia History*. p. 263.

²¹ Afzal Iqbal, *The Prophet's Diplomacy: The Art of Negotiation as Conceived and Developed by the Prophet of Islam*. (Cape Cod: Claude Stark & Co., 1975) p. xvii.

that the Arabian forces of Islam defeated the Byzantines (including Christian-Arab *foederati*) in the Battle of the Yarmuk. Shortly thereafter, the Arabs took more of Byzantium's territorial possessions in Syria, Mesopotamia, and Anatolia reaching as far as Constantinople itself.²² At the same time, the Arab-Islamic forces both conquered all of Sasanid Persia and took control of Egypt.

The Arabs captured territory at a furious pace. Unlike other earlier religious movements, Islam converted conquered people equally fast, eating up all other religions in its territories and digesting other "races" into its ranks. Naturally, the Islamic population base in all of the conquered territories was solidified. How and why this happened is complex, and beyond the reach of this brief explanation. Nevertheless, it can be reduced to the nature of the Islamic Arabs' philosophical approach to conquest. As Goldschmidt states, "Muslims strove to expand the territory controlled by their *ummah*, not to convert conquered Christians or Jews. Those who agreed to live at peace and pay a tribute were entitled to Islam's protection; those who resisted or rebelled against Muslim rule were crushed."²³ It was a policy decision that directed people to a particular end (acceptance of Islam) but did not force it. For the Caliphs, the built-in consolation for not converting conquered people was to increase the stores of the imperial treasury.

There can be no doubt that Islam was a cohering agent in this so-called Islamic explosion. Nor can there be doubt that religion was then, as now, an emotionally charged driving force for social activity and change. And, as noted above, Islam did swallow up other religions and races. But, the crucial issues that we must not overlook among all the other facts are that the rapid rise of Islam was (a) strictly an Arab creation, (b) strengthened by Muhammad's ever-broader, Arabically-defined political and social dicta, and (c) supported by the economic strength gained from control of the western Arabian trade routes and the capture of new territory.

It is here, in the equation of the accepted religious explosion with ethnic self-realization, where many scholars and wiser people will not tread. After all, if Islam also incorporated other peoples such as conquered Persians and Byzantines who accepted Islam, then the broad-based rapid expansion of this religious-based "nation" could hardly be reduced to a specifically ethnic base. Fortunately, I am not nearly so wise or cautious. Thus, I am prepared to show how and why the development of Islam and the subsequent rupture of the world order in the Middle East was an Arabic event. Moreover, I would suggest that the Arabic world was, and had been for some time, ready to assert itself on the world stage (such as it was then) as a primary character rather than a secondary player.

²² Constantinople was unsuccessfully sieged by the Arab forces several times, the last time for about two years (716-18).

²³ Goldschmidt, Concise History. p. 45.

THE ARABS

Let us now consider the Arab world and the Arab people as we find them in the fourth century. Let us further evaluate how the broad environment affected them through to the seventh century. While the historical material and analysis of this lengthy period is extraordinarily dense and could very easily be separated into distinct periods roughly corresponding to the actual centuries, for this paper I attempt to describe the circumstance of the Arabic people during this period in a more general manner.²⁴ My hope is to sketch this history in the sense of *la durée longue*. Thus, I offer no apology for the brevity of detail pertaining to specific historic events. The three important features that define the Arab race during these three centuries are the geographic, the social, and the religious.

Geography

The single-most important and completely unalterable condition of the Arabic people is geography. That circumstance can be summarized in a single word: desert. That is not to say that all of the Middle East is untenable. It is, after all, quite well known that Mesopotamia in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, large tracts of Syria, and the Nile valley—among other areas—are fertile. Rather, the fertile land, which led to the creation of agriculture and a sedentary populace was much more limited than the arid and barren desert. But these are areas to which the Arabs drifted. It is not, however, the geography that predominates or historically defines the people.²⁵ This is particularly true further south in the Arabian Peninsula. With the exception of the western strip of the Peninsula, bordered on the east by hills, which is known as Hijaz, the country is bone dry.²⁶

Wind patterns and geological formations (mountain/sea positions) are the geographic factors that did and still do leave this region without suitable rainfall. Soil that is too hard to hold the moisture which does occasionally come from freak storms limits the amount and type of vegetation that will grow anywhere in the region. In the Negev, Sinai, and Arabian Peninsula the desert is pervasive with the exception of the tiny fertile holes known as oases. These life-sustaining areas created by water-table variances and natural springs drew people and animals. But the oasis can not sustain everyone; and, many oases are seasonal. Thus, those who needed the water of the oasis to survive became wanderers, moving through the seas of sand from one watering hole to another. By virtue of this need to constantly move, the Arabs developed extraordinary desert navigation and survival skills.

²⁴ Irfan Shahid is the first (that I've encountered) to note the correspondence between the three centuries of the period and the development of the Arabs relative to Byzantium.

²⁵ Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century*. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984) p. 499.

The desert also defined the Arabs' transportation needs and methods. They tamed the one-hump Arabian dromedary (to the extent that a camel can be tamed) sometime around 1000 B.C. when they discovered its ability to traverse the desert with efficient use of water and a fantastic memory for oases. (They probably were also impressed with its versatility in changing easily from speedy mode of transport to satisfying mode of sustenance.) The Arabs thus became riders, which eventually extended to their use of the Arabian horse.²⁷

By obvious causal sequence, the desert created the Arab style of fighting and warfare, which was generally the mounted guerrilla-style raid. The Arab tribes, another geographically determined Arabic cultural characteristic explored further below, did not have an infantry tradition nor were they organized at all rigorously. It follows that this was a result of the desert environment in the following chain. The desert required the people to wander. To survive the long desert traverses, the people found and rode suitable animals. Their social units would fight amongst one another or raid settlers for plunder.²⁸ Raid 'n run was an Arabic tactic for three reasons. First, their mounted style was suited to a quick raid, especially against larger opposition forces. Second, their tribal unit size and nomadic tendencies inhibited the leaving behind of an occupying force. Third, the nomadic Arabs (Bedouins) were culturally not land claimants (i.e., settlers)—as if in the desert there would be much point—but sought wealth of a different sort.

Society

To this point, in examining the geography and how it defined the Arabic race, we have established that the Arabs became predominantly nomadic desert-dwellers. We noted that the desert also imposed upon them the tribal social unit, which we will explore shortly. A word of caution to the reader: as we will discover, the Arabian people were not so homogenous as to allow us to easily define them this rigidly or stereotypically. We will see that there were different types of Arabs. Specifically, not all Arabs were nomads. The people of the north, in Syria and other parts of the Byzantine empire, were significantly different in many ways from their southern, peninsular brethren.

The tribal structure of the Arabic world was a direct result of the desert. The severity of the desert impelled upon its denizens to form groups for protection and comfort. At the same time, we have previously noted, the desert's inhospidity tended to inhibit extended groupings from settling. The natural social collection was the family and extended family, which is ultimately the tribe. The

²⁶ Goldschmidt, *Concise History*. p. 23.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 21.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

tribe would move from one place to another in a unit small enough to do so effectively, but large enough to afford support and protection from the elements and other tribes.

The tribal structure of the desert-dwellers spilled over onto settled Arabs, and in both cases served to divide and separate Arab from Arab. This led to the effective "lawlessness" of the Arab peoples. That is, there could be no pan-Arabic governance or law among, but only within the tribes. What could and did develop over the centuries was a primitive "code of honor." The Arabic code of virtue, known as the *muruwah*, consists of the following traits:

. . . bravery in battle, patience in misfortune, persistence in revenge (the only possible justice where no government exists), protection of the weak, defiance toward the strong, hospitality to the visitor (even a total stranger), generosity to the poor, loyalty to the tribe, and fidelity in keeping promises.

As Goldschmidt continues, "These were the moral principles people needed to survive in the desert."²⁹

Language is another cohering force among and between people. The Arabs, separated by sand and tribalism, were further separated by the lack of a common dialect and written language. Among Arabic and peripheral desert people, languages such as Coptic (in Egypt) and Syriac (in Syria) were much further developed than "Arabic." Arabic would seem to have come along more slowly. And, without a centralized mass of people to give it strength, Arabic was for a long time a language which many of its speakers kept as a patois.

The pre-Islamic literary tradition of the Arabs was almost exclusively oral and generally a poetic tradition. Goldschmidt notes, "Pre-Islamic poetry helped to shape the Arabic language, the literature and culture of the Arabs, and hence the thoughts and behavior of Arabic-speaking people right up to the present."³⁰ In the fifth century, the tribes of Iyad, Kalb, and 'Udra were particularly connected with the rise of Arabic script and with the development of a new type of Arabic poetry, called *'Udrite* in Arabic, which, according to Shahid, "represented the confluence of the pre-Islamic chivalrous attitude with Christian ideals of chastity and continence."³¹ Notably, the Koran, which was written in Arabic, was compiled "from scraps of parchment, from thin white stones, from palm leaves, and from the breasts of men" according to an early Muslim.³²

²⁹ Ibid., p. 24.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1989) p. 538.

³² Goldschmidt, *Concise History*. p. 41.

Shahid makes a distinction among Arab groups within the context of relationship to Byzantium. Not surprisingly, his groupings correlate with proximity to Constantinople. As he describes:

The Arab beneficiaries of Byzantium are not homogenous, but fall into four distinct groups of varying degrees of receptivity to the cultural process. A recognition of their heterogeneous social structure is essential for an accurate evaluation of the success or failure of the Byzantinizing process among them. The first group are the *cives*, the *Rhomaioi*, living in the Dioceses of the Orient, to whom *civitas* was extended by the Edict of Caracalla in A.D. 212. The second group are the *foederati*, the allies settled on both sides of the *limes*. The third group are the nomads of inner Arabia. The fourth group are the city dwellers of the middle segment of the spice route in Western Arabia.³³

It bears repeating that not all Arabs were Bedouins. Throughout the Middle East, but certainly in the more fertile parts of the relevant Byzantine geographic area—say, Palestine and Syria—there were many people of Arabic racial descent who had become planted on the soil (the first of Shahid's groups). They were obviously the most Byzantinized and strongly Christian. While these geographically consolidated Arabs were legally *cives*, their position within the Empire was distinct from that of the caucasian *Rhomanaioi*.

The federated tribes, *foederati*, are of crucial import to Byzantium throughout the period. As clients and allies of the Empire, they provided both men for battle and a buffer zone between the borders of the Empire and its hostile Arabic and Persian enemies. They had been, after all, professional raiders and riders long before they settled in the Fertile Crescent.³⁴ In each of the three centuries under consideration was a tribe of Arabs, which was of primary importance to the Emperor in Constantinople. The Tanuhkids (4th century), the Selihids (5th century), and the Ghassanids (6th and early 7th centuries) were the principal *foederati* to the Empire.

The *foederati* were, arguably, the most important force in the East as the Empire's own *limitanei* were tactically and practically incapable of adequately protecting the desert *limes*.³⁵ The Arab *foederati's* knowledge and ability to properly and effectively conduct desert warfare, understanding of tribal politics in the desert, and their ferocious appetite to initiate (at the Emperor's recommendation) and conduct war with Persians and other Arabs was crucial to the Eastern front. The *foederati* could, as Shahid states, "impose the will of Rome in the desert."³⁶

The *foederati* were mercenaries. They were granted *annona* as payment for their service; and, for the most part, they received it. When they weren't paid, their loyalty diminished noticeably but

³³ BAFOC, p. 17.

³⁴ Shahid, BAFOC, p. 22.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 23.

rarely to the point of their abandoning the Empire. Money was not the only factor in the relationship. Underlying *foederati* loyalty was a stronger force: Christianity.³⁷ The federated tribes were Christian.

Shahid's third group was the *saraceni* of the Arabian Peninsula. These were the truly nomadic, maverick, and pastoral Arabs wont to raid, rampage, and plunder. Loyal to nobody but their tribes, these Arabs' numbers and reputation created the popular understanding of the ethnic group we have defined as "Arabs." By virtue of the unclear (and some might consider prejudicial) historical writing of certain Western historians, these Arabs and their name, Saracen, became the name for all Arabs.³⁸ The result is unfortunate because while the *saraceni* did shape the society of the Arabian peninsula to some extent and moreover they were eventually the shock troops of Islam, these unaligned nomadic Arabs were secondary within the Arabic social power structure of the period. Again, drawing from Shahid, "it was the sedentary [Arabic] element that shaped the history of the Peninsula and not the nomads."³⁹

The sedentary Arabs were the peoples who had settled and urbanized the oases and other strategic locations on the caravan routes through the desert, in such places as Palmyra, Petra, Medina, and Mecca. We noted one such tribe, the Quraysh of Mecca, in our earlier discussion of Muhammad. This tribe, like similar others, had settled a lucrative location and become businessmen—traders, merchants, and to some degree farmers—to the almost complete decay of their militaristic abilities. Shahid's postulation that it was the sedentary Arabs that shaped the history of the area is given specific support in this example because it was the Quraysh from whence Islam sprung. Furthermore, Palmyra, Petra, and Najran (all of which were important centres prior to the period under consideration) were trading cities of settled Arabs.⁴⁰

Religion

During this period, the Arab *cives* and the *foederati* were Christian. There is evidence that even during the reign of Constantine the Arab *foederati* were an identifiable Christian group.⁴¹ The Arabs tended to adopt Christianity faster than any others in the Orient, and possibly in the world.⁴² In

³⁷ Ibid., p. 21.

³⁸ "Perhaps the classical Roman attitude toward the Arabs was summed up best by two authors of the Byzantine period. Ammianus Marcellinus and Zosimus, who wrote ca. 500. The first almost equates the Arabs with the Scenitae/Saraceni and thus drew his well-known uncomplimentary picture of the Arabs; the second dealt mainly with the sedentary Arabs—the emperor Philip and the Palmyrenes—and drew of them a picture in dark colors, describing them as *ethnos cheiriston*." Irfan Shahid, Rome and the Arabs: Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1984) p. 157.

³⁹ Shahid, BAFOC, p. 16.

⁴⁰ Goldschmidt, Concise History, p. 23.

⁴¹ Shahid, BAFOC, p. 510.

⁴² Shahid, RAPSBA, p. 154.

fact, the Arab impact on the growth and development of Christianity in general, but certainly as the official religion of the Roman empire, is often overlooked. Shahid offers the following for consideration:

Striking is the contribution of the Arabs to the progress made by Christianity in the imperial court. It was an Arab, Abgar the Great, the ruler of Edessa, who around A.D. 200 was converted to Christianity and in so doing became the first ruler in history to adopt Christianity and make it the official religion of a Near Eastern state. And it was another Arab, Philip, who became the first Christian Roman emperor. . . . Had he ruled as long as Constantine, he . . . might have effected important changes in the course of Roman history as the half-Arab emperors of the Severan dynasty had done.⁴³

There are many possible reasons why the Arabs were quick converts, not the least of which may be (a) the comforting telos Christianity afforded its followers and (b) contact with the many Christian monks who retreated to the desert.

It is fairly well known and accepted that prior to their Christianization the Christian Arabs were predominantly pagan, although there were apparently some Jews as well.⁴⁴ The pre-Christian Arabs were religiously similar to the Arabs of the southern Peninsula who practised polytheistic animism and ancestor worship.⁴⁵ Additionally, there were and had been, as we have noted elsewhere, many other religious influences on these people ranging from Christianity to Judaism, Manichaeism, and so on.

I would contend that for many Arabs the choice of religion was largely economic. This view is supported by information drawn from before, after, and throughout the period under study. Speaking about the Arabs in the southern part of the Peninsula, Shahid notes that in the sixth century, "vast tracts [of Arabia] remained unclaimed by either [the Jewish or the Christian] faith, and *those who were converted were only slightly tintured by Christianity* [emphasis mine]."⁴⁶ The *foederati* of the fourth through sixth centuries were of the Christian faith, but were also quite unabashedly loyal to the payer of the *annona*. Later, in the seventh century, we know that the Medinese Arabs followed Muhammad only after he secured economic benefits for them. Moreover, the Arab tribes deserted Islam after Muhammad's death to avoid taxes; they returned only by force and with the promise of plunder. We would do well to consider Goldschmidt's perspective on possible underlying determinants of Arab action and religion:

Not all Arab warriors were, as popular histories suggest, fired up with Muslim zeal. A few

⁴³ Ibid., p. 155.

⁴⁴ Irfan Shahid, Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century. (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1995) p. 13.

⁴⁵ Goldschmidt, Concise History. p. 28.

⁴⁶ Shahid, BASIC. p. 994.

were, but others belonged to Christian tribes estranged from the Byzantine Empire. Some of the leading Muslim individuals and tribes may have believed in predestination and martyrdom as a quick passport to paradise. Most tribesmen believed in looting, for bad economic conditions in Arabia had brought many of them to the verge of starvation.⁴⁷

ARAB-BYZANTINE RELATIONS

We must examine a few circumstances and interactions of the Arabs with the Roman empire in the time prior to the period under consideration in order to appreciate the fullness of the Arab mindset. In fact, the friction between the Arabs and Romans (and later the Byzantines) can be dated back to Pompey's Settlement in the first century B.C., or quite justifiably even to Alexander's conquest of the area in the fourth century B.C. Pompey's settlement ensured that the disciplined warlike Romans would be successor to the Hellenistic kingdoms in the Semitic Orient rather than the undisciplined warlike Arabs, and that the Arab military and political presence in the area would have to wait for different conditions before it could be asserted.⁴⁸ Shahid provides the following:

Pompey's Settlement frustrated the unfolding of Arab history in the Fertile Crescent in the first century B.C., forcing it into . . . a new historical orbit, that of Mediterranean Rome, and delayed the Arab successful self-expression for seven centuries.⁴⁹

Queen Zenobia, of Palmyra, launched a rebellion against Rome in the third century—prior to the period being considered,. It is relevant to our examination of Roman/Byzantine relations with the Arabs, but we will not give it great pause except to note the following. First, the Palmyrene episode was the first major indication that there was disharmony with the Empire. Second, it was the first instance of Arabic unity to fight a common, non-Arab foe. Third, the Arabs failed strategically because they were (a) outclassed by Roman generalship and (b) dependent on a single city which was well within striking distance of the legions of Antioch and Emesa. Once the city fell, Zenobia's forces were lost.⁵⁰ It was an object lesson for both Arabs and Romans.

From the fall of Palmyra through to the ascendancy of the Muslim era in the seventh century, Arabic history was in eclipse. The Arabs were hemmed-in geographically by the Byzantines in the northwest, the Sasanid Persians and their Arab allies in the northeast, the Sabaeen wall in the southwest, and the desert "Empty Quarter" in the southeast. They were powerless and trapped, thereby forced into an existence of constrained military and political self-expression in which they

⁴⁷ Goldschmidt, Concise History, pp. 49-50.

⁴⁸ Shahid, RAPBA, p. 147.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 152.

were compelled to live in the shadows of their powerful political enemies for whom they worked as clients.⁵¹

The lesson of Palmyra was not lost and Rome cleverly would not again allow the Arabs to conjoin economic and military power. Thus the Arabs of this period could not mount an effective politically driven military campaign against Rome/Byzantium. While there were no significant threats to Byzantine domination of the area, over the next four centuries the Arabs did raise a number of revolts, which will explore now.

The most notable of the Arab rebellions (ca. 370–74) was undertaken by another Queen: the Tanuhkid Queen Mavia. She inherited her dominion by the untimely death of her unfortunately anonymous husband, the king. She chose not to renew the *foedus* which her husband had signed, withdrew *extra limitem* and attacked Roman provinces lying immediately outside the *limes orientalis*. Shahid points out that what was, "at issue was the consecration of an orthodox bishop acceptable to orthodox *foederati*, and not an Arian one repugnant to them."⁵² The most important feature of the revolt was its broad front (from Phoenicia to Egypt) and the pitched Arab engagement of the imperial armies.

Mavia won. The emperor Valens sued for peace and accepted the consecration of an orthodox bishop (Moses).⁵³ It is well to note that while Mavia's was a signal victory for us, it can be attributed in no small part to the Emperor's distraction by both the Persians and the Goths.⁵⁴

In 383, there was another Arab uprising, which was quickly put down by the Empire. Unlike the victory taken by Mavia, the second rebellion by *foederati* likely failed because (a) their forces were weaker due to losses sustained fighting for the Emperor in Adrianople and (b) they appear to have employed the same tactics and strategies as in 370-74, which the Romans had learned from and were prepared to counter.⁵⁵

Finally, in 498 three powerful Arab groups converged on the *limes orientalis* in what was the most serious Arab assault of the century. The first offensive came from the pro-Persian Lakhmids, likely for spoils or due to a suddenly arising anti-Christian purpose. The second offensive came from the Ghassanid *foederati*. This was in all probability another revolt caused by the emperor Anastasius's stringent economic measures (i.e., not paying the Arabs their due). The third offensive came from an unaligned tribe, Kinda, which was friendly with the Ghassanids. Their attack was quite likely the

⁵¹ Shahid, *BAFOC*, pp. 12-13.

⁵² *Ibid.*, pp. 532-33.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 533.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 213.

result of a request for help from the Ghassanids, who had been beaten back on their front by the Byzantines. While it all came to naught, it was what the Byzantines feared: cooperation among the Arabs against the Empire. Shahid sums it up thusly: "Although the Lahkmid thrust in the north cannot be related to the two other thrusts in the south, it is practically certain that Kinda and Ghassan acted in unison. *Luckily for Byzantium* [emphasis mine], they did not act simultaneously and did not synchronize their efforts."⁵⁶

We must now consider the nature of the relationship between these various Arab tribes/groupings and the Byzantine empire, generally speaking in the person of the Emperor. Even for those Arab people who were, as we have discussed, settled citizens of the Empire well within the *limes*, there were relations between the Emperor and other Caucasian parts of Byzantium and the Arabic part of it.⁵⁷ That there is even reason to examine internal relations suggests that there was a distinction and separation between the two, in this case along what amounts to ethnic lines. This is the heart of the examination that follows.

We will see that the Arabic people were in general treated contemptuously as being second class, were humiliated, etc. by the Byzantines (and the Romans before them). There was abundant cause for this racial group to become detached and decentred from the Empire to which they belonged or were allied. But, at least until the third decade of the seventh century, there was practically little that they could do about it. The simple fact is that the Arab *cives* and *foederati* did not present an adequately large or cohesive opposition to the Proto-Byzantines, who, full with the knowledge of how to deal with the Arabs that came from centuries of experience, ensured that the Arabs remained disunited.

The subject peoples in Syria and Egypt were continuously discontented. While the point at issue was Christological, the more likely reasons were economic and cultural. This discontent manifested itself in a number of ways throughout the period, not the least of which is in seventh century treachery as Goldschmidt describes:

The disgruntled Syrian and Egyptian Christians saw the Muslim Arabs as their liberators from the Byzantine yoke and often welcomed them. For example, the Christian bishops of Egypt, disloyal to Byzantium, delivered their country between 640 and 642 to an Arab force . . . numbering . . . less than a thousand. Likewise the Jews, numerous in Palestine and Syria, chose Muslim indifference over Byzantine persecution.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Shahid, BAFIC, pp. 496-97.

⁵⁷ The parallel which I simply can not resist is "relations" between Whitehall and the Irish (and the Scots for that matter), and, of course, between Ottawa and the Québécois.

⁵⁸ Goldschmidt, Concise History, p. 50.

The *foederati*, whose loyalty was paid for with *annona*, present a different but consistent circumstance. They were often treated by the Emperors with a contempt undue fellow Christians and allies. Not only were they considered to be socially and ethnically below "true" Byzantines, they were subjected to various humiliating treatments. One consistent cause of friction was the payment of the *annona* due them. Various emperors, from Julian to Theodosius the Great to Anastasius, had a habit of withholding payment. As Shahid states, "malpractice in the administration of the *annona* is indeed a recurrent theme in the annals of Arab-Byzantine relations."⁵⁹

In the case of Julian, we see an infuriating display of imperial caprice (or trenchant fiscal policy) that directly affected the federates. In general, Julian's attitude toward the Arab allies might be described as haughty, the effect of which was the undoing of the progress made by Constantine and Constantius in Byzantine-Arab relations.⁶⁰ For the most part there was little problem until near the end (of Julian). The dark side of his relations with the Arabs is portrayed in this description by Shahid: "Disagreements developed after the battle of Ctesiphon (363) during his retreat, when he denied a group of Arab *auxilia* their *munera* and *salaria* and added insult to injury with his famous reply, *imperatorum bellicosum et vigilantem ferrum habere non aurum*."⁶¹

For Theodosius, who was from the West and had negligible experience with the Arab *foederati*, the problem near the end of the fourth century appears to have been one of misunderstanding. Libanius distorted the image of the Arabs quite significantly, which only added to Theodosius's poor sense of and feeling toward the Arabs. After all, under Mavia they had rebelled against Valens; and Arabs were alleged by Libanius to have even killed an Emperor (Julian⁶²) in a treacherous attack on the field of battle. On the other hand, early in his reign Theodosius had changed aspects of the military administration and is alleged of the huckstering of military provisions by none other than Zosimus.⁶³ Again in this case, above and beyond misunderstanding we see economic matters are at the heart of the disturbed relations between the Byzantines and Arabs.

The rebellion by the Ghassanid *foederati* which Anastasius had to deal with (498) was discussed earlier. It, too, we will recall, seems to have its basis in his withholding or shortchanging the allies of the payments due to them.

As we have seen in the roots of rebellion, some of the conflict between the Arabs and Byzantines arose out of religious differences. To some extent these inter-Christian differences can

⁵⁹ Shahid, *BAFOC*, p. 536.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 529.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 530.

⁶² "According to one theory [about Julian's death], for which Libanius is mainly responsible, it was an Arab on the Roman side incited by some Christian group that killed Julian." *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 536.

and should be attributed to distance and ethnic distinction. As we know, many Arab *cives* and *foederati* were staunch Christians with strong doctrinal views. Doctrinal choice was a recurrent factor in the discord between the Arab *foederati* and the Emperor. In the fourth century, Tanuhkid orthodoxy was the predominant cause of the uprising against the heresy of Valens (Mavia's rebellion). Throughout the fifth century, Emperor and *foederati* were Christologically aligned. But in the sixth century, the Ghassanids chose the Monophysitism preferred by Anastasius. When the dynastic winds moved Constantinople back to following the Chalcedonian formula the Arabs were again out in the cold. Thus, as Shahid says, in the sixth and into the seventh centuries:

Monophysitism remained a thorn in the side of Orthodox Byzantium In spite of sincere efforts on the part of Chalcedonian emperors to effect a reconciliation and attain the ideal of *una fides*, the Monophysites remained irreconcilable till the very end. The movement had many political and military implications, and this contributed from within to increase tension and instability in the East.⁶⁴

Goldschmidt corroborates the sentiment with this perspective:

Whenever the Byzantine emperor supported the Chalcedonian formula, the Orthodox bishops would use the government to persecute Egyptians and Syrians who would not recant their Monophysite heresy. This policy effectively alienated them from Constantinople and paved the way for seventh-century Arab conquests and the subordination of Eastern Christianity to Islam.⁶⁵

The inter-relation between Arabs—inside and outside the Empire's borders—and Christianity had a subtle but profound effect on the Arab culture in several ways. Foremost, as we have noted earlier, its monotheism and its God were the foundation for Islam. Additionally, the structure of Christianity paved the way for Muhammad and the Caliphs to reach disciplined, pan-tribal harmony.

We have already noted the many clues to suggest that Muhammad himself had extensive contact with Christianity and Judaism prior to being Called. Moreover, Islam recognizes itself as the most recent and therefore the most perfect of the religions that worship the God of Abraham. We have also shown that the extent of Christianity, and Judaism, went deep into the Arabian Peninsula. So, while *post hoc ergo propter hoc* is not a valid reason to conclude that Christianity had an impact upon Islam, too many other historical traces along with those above lead us to support such a conclusion.

We have seen that the Christianization of the tribal Arabs had a positive impact on the relations between the Empire and the *cives* and *foederati*, notwithstanding their doctrinal disputes. It

⁶⁴ Shahid, *BASIC*, p. xxvi.

⁶⁵ Goldschmidt, *Concise History*, p. 19.

had an impact on the development of Islam as well in the sense that it was one of the forces, which gave, rise to the cohesion between tribes that would be necessary for Islam to succeed. Shahid notes:

The [Christian] priesthood and the episcopate subjected the Arabs to a new form of authority and discipline to which they had not been accustomed. It was a spiritual form of authority, to which even the powerful federate phylarchs and kings were subject, and it thus induced in the Christian Arabs a new sense of loyalty which was supra-tribal, related not to tribal chauvinism but to the Christian *ecclesia*.⁶⁶

It would be an unfair colouration of the quotation to suggest that all of the Christians and their newfound discipline and loyalty were swept up in Islam. But, a significant number of the *foederati*, and even the *cives*, eventually accepted Islam. Their supra-tribal loyalty to a spiritual authority would naturally have transferred to a loyalty to Islam upon their acceptance of it.⁶⁷

What of this rise of Islam and its turn against Byzantium? There is evidence, marshaled by Shahid, that would suggest the seeds for this disaster (Byzantine "disaster," that is) were sewn by the emperor Maurice. Both his brief attempt to terminate the Ghassanid *foedus*, putting a crack in the shield at his eastern border; and the Persian peace he concluded in 592, backing the wrong horse and giving the Persian shah reason and opportunity to attack later on, set up the Empire for the nightmare which Heraclius would face in the seventh century.⁶⁸

Heraclius's long Persian war, effectively culminating with victory at the battle of Nineveh (629) had three principle effects which were positive factors in the development of Islam. First, Sasanid Persia was left in an unstable state ready to implode upon itself, which it did promptly. Goldschmidt describes the result: "The sudden collapse of Sasanid Persia, after having been master of Egypt, Syria, and much of Arabia as recently as 625, created a vacuum that the Arabs were quick to fill."⁶⁹ Second, the Byzantine forces, including the Ghassanid *foederati* who had been routed in 613 by the Persians, were depleted and tired.⁷⁰ Third, Islam was allowed to grow strong as a nation without the slightest resistance from the Christian Arab tribes.⁷¹

In 634, the Arab Muslims began their thrusts against Byzantium. As Goldschmidt describes it:

[The smaller and more poorly equipped Arab forces] fought few engagements, but their victories were decisive ones that enabled them to gain vast expanses of territory. . . . Arab

⁶⁶ Shahid, *BAFIC*. p. 529.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 538.

⁶⁸ Shahid, *BASIC*. pp. 581, 608-610 passim.

⁶⁹ Goldschmidt, *Concise History*. p. 50.

⁷⁰ Shahid, *BASIC*. p. 609.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 610.

victories usually happened in the desert, or close enough so that they could get away . . .⁷²

Two years later, less than eight years after Heraclius's victory over the Persians at Nineveh, Byzantium was defeated by the Muslims at the Yarmuk. The Muslims took control of Syria, and it was the beginning of the end for Byzantine presence in the Middle East and the Ghassanid federate connection.⁷³ Goldschmidt notes that the Muslim victory, "was due to a dust storm, which Khalid knew how to turn to his advantage."⁷⁴ Moreover, unfortunately for Heraclius, he was fighting blind despite all the years Byzantium had engaged Arab *foederati*. As Shahid describes it:

. . . when, after winning the war against the Persians, he fought the Arabs, he had absolutely nothing to guide him on how to operate against the new foe. . . . The *Strategikon* was at his disposal, but it had absolutely nothing on the Arabs.⁷⁵

SYNTHESIS AND EXPOSITION

There can be little doubt that Islam was an Arabic creation nor that Islam derived its momentum from its Arab progeniteurs. To recapitulate the key traces of history and historical analysis that lead to such a conclusion, let us begin by recalling that Islam's cradle was the western Arabian Peninsula (Hijaz), most specifically Mecca and Medina. The political will for Islam to succeed came from the settled Arabs of this area. The *foederati* and *saraceni* merely provided military strength. Islam was created by the Arab prophet Muhammad whose teachings became progressively more secular and political and less religious as time passed. Moreover, the most explosive expansion of Islam was undertaken by the first four Arabic Muslim caliphs. Within a decade of the Prophet's death, Islam was a political force that swallowed and digested the majority of the geography and people below the Mediterranean from Iraq to Spain, including most of the Middle East.

Having satisfied ourselves that the Islamic explosion was an Arab event, we can move on to answer the question: Was the conquest driven by religion? I believe the answer to be, "no, at least not primarily," and would suggest that the history of insurrection and revolt which marked the relationship between the Romans (and later, the Byzantines) and the Arabs for the eight hundred years preceding the eruption of Islam is the key proof. We know that during this period the settled Arab *cives* and the *foederati* at various times attempted to exert their will upon their Roman

⁷² Goldschmidt, *Concise History*. p. 49.

⁷³ Shahid, *BASIC*. p. 646.

⁷⁴ Goldschmidt, *Concise History*. p. 49.

⁷⁵ Shahid, *BASIC*. p. 582.

governors, to greater and lesser effect. The Arabs had for all these centuries been unable to exert their own political and military will—in their "homeland", as it were—due to the presence and hegemonic power of the empires that surrounded them.

Arabs inside and outside the Byzantine *limes* were resentful and dissatisfied with the enduring, unbalanced relationship with Byzantium. Treachery by the *cives* and the various rebellions of the *foederati* go a long way to prove, that the mind, heart, and soul of the Arabic people was a fertile ground ready for a compelling pan-tribal call to arms that would let them project their will. As it turned out, Islam provided that rallying cry.

The mercenary *foederati's* tentative loyalty to the Empire was stiffened by shared Christian religious belief. When those bonds were strained, and the *annona* was not paid, the ties binding the Arabs to the Empire—and in some cases to Christianity itself—were overwhelmed by ethnic ties that would draw them to Islam. The Caliphs then gave the independent tribes and religious refugees economic incentive to convert to Islam.

Under the Caliphs many tribes of *saraceni*, *foederati*, and settled Arabs in the Arabian Peninsula came together as a cohesive political and military group under the standard of Islam. At first they accepted and joined Islam because of the economic benefits Muhammad achieved for them. Later, they came together under duress when Abu-Bakr forced them back and promised economic gains. While some Arabs were fighting a *jihad* against the infidel, many more were raiding for plunder. Economics and nascent "national" politics was at least as important as religion, and I suspect probably more important.⁷⁶

The prevailing circumstance of the area, not to mention the timing, was absolutely right for the explosion of the Arab people. Islam took hold, giving the Arabs a pan-tribal standard under which to raid just when the Byzantine and Sasanid forces' wars of the first quarter of the 7th century created a regional power vacuum. By 634, Sasanid Persia had effectively ceased to exist in the wake of its routing by the Byzantines and internecine fighting. It was no longer a relevant political power. Heraclius's empire, on the other hand, had also been ravaged by both its Gothic and Persian campaigns. We know that it had already relied to a tremendous degree on its Arab *foederati* (Ghassanids) to fight many of its 7th century battles both in the East and Northwest. Thus, we can assume that the Byzantine regular forces were depleted in strength. If there was ever a time for a vigorous military force to assert itself in the Middle East, this was it. And the Arabs took full advantage of it.

⁷⁶ We could, here, digress into an analysis and assessment of the Arabs and Islam foreshadowing the nationalism that would define politics a millennium later, but will leave that for another day.

Thus, the confluence of strong, embittered Arab tribes with an invigorating and purposeful new political religion, in a territory which was for a time in a complete power imbalance (a vacuum, in fact), against foes which were unable to mount defenses against invasions and raids, created the territory-grabbing Arabic explosion. I recognize that defining this phenomenon strictly on racial/ethnic terms as an Arab issue is limiting to a brief period following 632, after which other ethnic groups accepted Islam and began to change its purely Arabic complexion. But, to define the explosive initial conquests of the 630s in a predominantly religious cast ignores the important facts of the political prolegomena to the explosion, which have been laid out above. Perhaps it would be safest to say that Islam was initially an Arabic religio-political phenomenon that grew well beyond the Arabian geographic and ethnic limits. In doing so it changed from a movement to an empire. As Iqbal states, "The early politics of a huge empire both implemented and transformed Islam."⁷⁷

⁷⁷ Iqbal, The Prophet's Diplomacy. p. xvii.

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