
Arabia before Muḥammād

*Historical notes by
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The purpose of these notes is to help you get a better understanding of the nature of Arabian society at the time of the life of the Prophet Muḥammād. He was born in or around the year 570 CE – in other words, in the closing years of the sixth century.

Arabia – *Jazīrat al-‘Arab*, ‘the Island of the Arabs’ – is a vast peninsula, and most of it is desert. There is evidence that more rain used to fall here, supporting vegetation and herds of animals. A change in the global climate about seven thousand years ago led to the desertification of almost the whole of Arabia, making much of it uninhabitable. (The Sahara dried up at the same time.)

When you think of Arabia, doubtless you think of the Bedouin Arab and his camel. But four or five thousand years ago, camels had not yet been domesticated, nor had the Semitic ancestors of the Arabs migrated south into Arabia. Without camels, people could not cross the deserts or live in them. It was all one big no-go area.

The one significant exception was the south coast bordering the Indian Ocean, especially the south-west corner occupied today by the state of Yemen. This mountainous region is within the monsoon zone, and it receives enough rain to support a profitable agriculture. From ancient times it was the home to advanced civilizations which managed their water resources with dams and irrigation systems. These people kept goats, sheep, and even cattle, which are thought to have been introduced from Persia. Furthermore, the peoples of the southern coast had ancient traditions of sailing and fishing, hunting sea mammals (especially the dugong or ‘sea cow’) and trading with Africa, Persia and India.

The origins of these coastal peoples is obscure. In the Yemen there is evidence of a long history of population movements between there and the Horn of Africa; in the south-east (modern Oman) there have been similar exchanges with Persia. The predominant ethnic type today, which we think of as Arab, is the result of migrations of Semitic peoples from the north. The first such Semitic migration arrived before 1500 BCE and the second about 1200 BCE. The newcomers soon outnumbered and absorbed the peoples who had lived there before.

Several states existed in this south-west corner of Arabia, the best known and longest lasting being Saba’. The Sabeen kingdom is referred to in some sources as ‘Sheba’, and both Jewish and Muslim tradition tell of the story of the visit made to King Solomon of Israel (who ruled about 955–935 BCE) by Bilqis, Queen of Sheba. The dynasty of Ethiopian emperors which came to an end in the 20th century with the death of Haile Selasse claimed descent from Menelik, said to have been the son of Solomon and Bilqis.

Dates are given in the format
‘CE’ for *Common Era* and
‘BCE’ for *Before Common Era*.

These are equivalent to Christian
dates ‘AD’ and ‘BC’.

Whatever the truth of these legends, the ancient Sabean state was certainly impressive. It had its capital at Ma'rib near modern Ṣan'ā; nearby they built the great Ma'rib Dam which stored and controlled the water of the Wadi Dhana and supported agriculture. Archaeological remains from this civilization include palaces and temples, altars, religious figurines of ibexes and the heads of bulls. There are also many written inscriptions, mostly carved into rock in the Sabean script. (A modern script that is based on this old alphabet is Ge'ez, used in Ethiopia and Eritrea.)

Arabia BCE and the incense trade

The Greek writer Eratosthenes, writing in the third century BCE, describes South Arabia as being organised at the time into four states. The Sabaeans dominated the region, but there were also the Qatabānians to the west, the Ḥaḍramites even further west, and the Minaeans to the north.

The Ḥaḍramites occupied the region known as the Ḥaḍramaut. This is one of the few places in the world where the *Boswellia* trees grow,¹ from which is collected the aromatic gum-like resin known as frankincense. In the religions of the ancient world, especially in Egypt and Mesopotamia, incense was greatly valued as an offering to be burned for the gods; it was also used in medicine. The collected gum was gathered (and taxed) at the Ḥaḍramite capital of Shabwah, and then made its way either via sea transport or overland through Saba' and the Hejaz, a route that ran north parallel to the Red Sea. In addition the Ḥaḍramites traded with India through their main port of Kane.

The Mineans had their capital at Qarnaw (now Ma'in), just north of Saba', but they also had trading outposts further north in the Hejaz, notably at Dedān, the site of which is about a hundred miles north of al-Madīnah. The Mineans were great traders: their inscriptions have been found in the Greek island of Delos and in Egypt.

Meanwhile in the north of Arabia another Arab trading state came into being in the second century BCE: that of the Nabataeans. These were an Aramaic-speaking trading people, who had migrated from the North Hejaz to the area around south Jordan and the Negev. They made Petra in Jordan their capital city and it became rich on the overland caravan trade in spices and incense. Petra's greatest ascendancy was during the life of Christ. However, Rome subjugated the Nabataeans and incorporated their state into *Provincia Arabia* in 106 CE.

It should be noted that in this time the south-to-north incense trade was in decline. As the ancient pagan religions were abandoned, the demand for incense fell off; and though incense was later used in Christian churches, at this time the Church leaders disapproved of it. This also undermined the profitability of the camel caravan trade through Petra. But the neighbouring trading city of Palmyra on the edge of the Syrian desert maintained its importance for much longer, due to its additional role in the east-west trade routes between Europe and Asia.

1. Other sources can be found in Oman, the island of Socotra, and Somalia.

The remarkable Queen Zenobia of Palmyra (Zinwbiya bat Zabbai) shook off Roman control and conquered a significant part of Asia Minor. She ruled this wealthy Arab mini-empire until the Romans defeated her in 272 CE, and she was paraded by the Emperor Aurelian through the streets of Rome in golden chains with two of her sons. (She later married a Roman senator from Tivoli.)

The march of the camel

The rise of the Arabs to power owes much to the domestication of the camel, and its growing role in transport and warfare.

Five thousand years ago there were two kinds of camels: a woolly two-humped version (the Bactrian camel) adapted to life in cold deserts, in the area of Iran and Central Asia, and a heat-adapted single-humped version (the Arabian camel or dromedary) living wild in the Arabian desert. By its adaptation to desert climate, the Arabian version lived near no predators that could threaten its existence, and had become a rather bold animal – which probably made it easier to tame.

The scholar Richard Bulliet suggests that it was the Ḥaḍramaut region of South Arabia where humans first domesticated the camel, about four or five thousand years ago. The initial purpose of domestication seems to have been to supplement their diet with camel milk, rather than to ride them or get them to carry loads.

Much later, the camel's potential as a beast of burden was appreciated, and from perhaps 3,000 years ago camels started to be used on the overland trade route² that ran west from the sources of incense in the Ḥaḍramaut to Saba', and from there north parallel to the Red Sea to Gaza and Syria. Certainly from around this time domesticated camels used for transport begin to be mentioned in Assyrian and Hebrew chronicles, and to be illustrated in art.

Domestication of the camel – and the gradual development of better ways of loading and riding them – progressively changed the nature of Arabian society. Some nomadic tribes began to specialise in camel-breeding and the transportation business. The dry desert interior of Arabia began to be 'inhabitable' – by those who had the camels and the know-how.

The camel is an awkward animal to ride and to load because of its fatty hump. Efficient use of a camel depended on the invention of a suitable saddle. The most primitive saddles were nothing more than a collection of mats tied to the back of the hump. The South Arabian camel-drivers invented a saddle placed behind the hump, braced against the front of the animal's hump, which transferred the weight to the beast's 'hips' and rear legs. It allowed quite large loads to be carried, but a rider placed so far back from the camel's head had difficulty controlling it – and it was impossible to fight effectively from that position.



The South Arabian camel saddle is a secure way to hang loads off the beast, but the rider is a long way behind the camel's head and has to use a guide stick to help direct it.



The North Arabian camel saddle is a frame placed around the hump, from which loads can be hung on each side. Alternatively a rider can sit close enough to control the head of the camel with reins, and can wield a long lance from this elevated platform.

Some time around or after 500 BCE, in the north of Arabia, a new kind of camel saddle was developed which not only increased the load-bearing capacity of a camel by distributing the load equally before and behind the hump, but also furnished a high stable platform from which a man could wield a spear. Whereas the wobbly hump of a camel on the battlefield had been something of a joke – at best, it had been a good way to leave the scene quickly – long-range desert warfare now became a practical reality, and the power of the camel-riding Bedouin tribes in the interior of Arabia began to rise.

Arabia just before the birth of Muḥammad

We will now fast-forward to the fourth and fifth centuries CE, to build a picture of how Arabia was organised immediately before the birth of Muḥammad. The region as a whole was dominated by two great powers. The Roman empire in the West was in the process of collapsing under the impact of Germanic and Slavic tribes, but the eastern Empire held firm with its capital at Constantinople, also known as Byzantium (modern Istanbul). Its great rival in the region was the Sāsānid empire in Persia, centred on the capital at Ctesiphon.

The Persians and the Byzantines each sponsored a border state of Arabs in north Arabia, in the hope that this strategy would secure their respective southern borders against marauding Arab raiders and defend against the rival empire too. One effect of this was that Arab armies gained formal military experience, and learned the effectiveness of fighting on horseback.

In the north east of Arabia from the third to the sixth century CE, the Persians supported the Bedouin state of al-Hirah under the Lakhmid kings, whose capital was near modern Kufah. Al-Hirah became in the sixth century a notable centre of Nestorian Christianity. However, the power of al-Hirah was cut short in 602 CE when the Sāsānian king Khosraw II (Parvīz), to cut short its independence, invaded and destroyed it, and killed the last Lakhmid king, Nu'mān ibn al-Mundhir.

The Byzantine client Arab state in the region was that of the Ghassanids, with their capital at Jābiyah in the Golan area east of the Sea of Galilee. This state controlled a large section of north-west Arabia right down to Yathrib (later called al-Madīnah). This large Arab state was also largely Christian – but of the Monophysite branch of Christianity similar to the Coptic and Ethiopian churches, a fact that progressively undermined its connections with Orthodox Byzantine Christianity. Isolated, the Ghassanid state fell prey to Sāsānid Persia, and was destroyed by the Persians in 614 CE.

And what of the situation in the South of Arabia? In the third century CE, the Sabaeans had fallen under the control of a new power which had arisen in the extreme south west of the peninsula, that of the Himyarites with their capital at Zafār. Their ruler Shammar Yuhar'ish conquered all his neighbours and unified the Yemen, founding the Tubba' dynasty of kings.

This strong development in Himyar began to unravel under the rule of king Yuṣuf As'ar Yath'ar, who is also known in Muslim literature by his nickname 'Dhū Nuwās'. King Yuṣuf converted to Judaism, and seems to have harboured an extreme hatred of Christians. Around 520 CE he massacred all the (Christian) Ethiopian inhabitants of the capital Zafār and the main Red Sea port of Mocha, and later he dealt similarly with the Christians of Najrān. Enraged, the Christian empire of Aksum (modern Eritrea) crossed the Red Sea and struck back: they smashed the Himyarite state and put their own puppet ruler on the throne.

But by 540 CE, the Himyarite king Abraha had regained some measure of independence from Aksum. He partially rebuilt the state and repaired the Great Ma'rib Dam. But he also over-reached himself in trying to subjugate the city of Mecca, which was beginning itself to act in a more confident and independent fashion. His expedition against Mecca in the year 570 CE, supported amazingly enough with elephants, failed; and shortly thereafter the Himyarite kingdom fell under occupation by Sāsānian Persian forces. The kingdom was also badly hit in 590 by the final failure and collapse of the Mār'ib Dam.

So in the closing years of the sixth century, just as Muḥammad was born, the empires of Byzantium and Sāsānid Persia had fought each other to a standstill; the Himyarites' power had collapsed; and the Ghassanid and Lakhmid kingdoms would soon be laid low. There was a power vacuum, and Mecca and the tribe of Quraysh were stepping into it.

The Quraysh ascendancy

The tribe of Quraysh took control at Mecca around 500 CE, under their leader Quṣayy ibn Kilāb, also known as *al-Mujammī'* ('the Unifier'). Mecca was a small town on the traditional west-coast incense trade route, and without trade it simply could not have survived: almost all the means of subsistence had to be imported from some distance away. However, it did house an important religious shrine, the Ka'bah, which according to legend had been constructed by Abraham himself. Quṣayy managed to arrange that he and his descendents, the house of 'Abd Manāf, would become the protectors of the Ka'bah.

Quṣayy also managed to seize control of the north–south trade route passing through Mecca. At this stage in history, this was not difficult to achieve. The Yemenite regions where incense and spices were produced were unable to reach out and dominate Mecca (and the Himyarite King Abraha's failure in 570 had proved this); nor were the northern powers such as Byzantium any more able to interfere at such a distance.

Though the Qurayshis' friendships with the camel-herding tribes, they had desert allies who were able to offer armed protection to caravans willing to pay (or alternatively, to loot caravans who declined protection). This may sound like the Mafia's 'offer you can't refuse' – which is probably what it felt like to the traders who had to submit to these arrangements. Mecca

became rapidly rich as a result of its domination over trade and the annual pilgrimages to worship at the Ka'bah.

It is without doubt that the negotiating instincts of the Qurayshis brought more peace to the region. Their negotiations north and south opened up the land-based trade route, and they also patched up the old quarrel with Aksum so that Red Sea trade also became more secure.

There is of course controversy about a decline of traditional Arab ethics under the rush for wealth at Mecca under Qurayshi leadership, and the way the rites at the Ka'bah developed under their control. The Qurayshis themselves seem to have been monotheists, but perhaps in an attempt to please their local allies – the nomadic tribespeople – they allowed the Ka'bah to become a polytheistic shrine, with idols to many local tribal gods represented there as well.

The political organisation of Mecca under the house of 'Abd Manāf is also interesting and original. They did not do the obvious thing and set up a kingdom, a dynasty. The ruling family seems to have operated with its allies more as a kind of mercantile ruling clique, rather like the Venetian Republic in the 14th century.

Pre-Islamic religions in Arabia

Because of Islam's vehement opposition to polytheism (the worship of many gods), readers may not sufficiently appreciate that there had long been an increasing tendency towards monotheistic religion anyway within the Middle East.

The first avowedly monotheistic faith in the region was promoted by Zarathrustra in ancient Persia, and known as 'Zoroastrianism'. In his writings, *Avesta*, Zarathrustra encouraged the worship of the Wise Lord, *Ahura Mazda*. He taught that the world was the arena for the struggle between good and evil, and that at the end of the world there would be a judgement of all souls, with everlasting life in resurrected bodies for all the good who had ever lived. For a long while Zoroastrianism was the official religion of the Persian state, and seems to have had a large influence on the development of Jewish religion, especially during the time when the tribes of Israel had been carried off to exile in Mesopotamia.

In the developed civilizations of South Arabia, there seems to have been a widespread worship of a supreme Semitic deity, known as *El* or *Il*. This deity was later superseded by *Athtar*, a male god of agricultural fertility occupying the same role as the goddess Ishtar played in Mesopotamian religion. *Athtar* was also thought of as god of thunderstorms and rain – in the rainfall-dependent agricultural societies of South Arabia, you can see how this would have made sense to people of the time.

However, at the same time, people often additionally worshipped local gods or goddesses.

In some of these South Arabian societies there was a moon god (e.g. in Ḥaḍramaut, the moon god *Ḥawl*), while in Himyar the national deity was a sun goddess, *Shams*. (In Semitic languages, *moon* is male and *sun* is female.) In northern Arabia, closer to the ancient religious centres of Mesopotamia, people worshipped a variety of pantheons (collections of gods and goddesses).

One quite common pattern in old Arabia was worship of a dominant male deity (in later times often identified with *al-Lāh*, *Allāh*, the Lord of the Ka'bah at Mecca), together with subsidiary female deities, such as *Al-Ilāt* or *Allāt* – ‘The Goddess’ – who is sometimes identified as the wife of Allāh, sometimes as his daughter. In several places there was a worship of three ‘daughters of Allāh’ – *al-‘Uzza* (‘Powerful’), *Manāt* (‘Destiny’) as well as *al-Ilāt*. This is similar to an idea in some old Hebrew religious writing, in which God (*Yahweh*) is married to the fertility goddess *Ashtaroth* (Ishtar).

Religious practice in Arabia generally involved gathering in a *haram* or sanctuary, often in a high place, accessible only to worshippers who were ritually clean and came unarmed. Sacrifices of food or drink would be made, and incense burned. On one occasion at Himyar, the Sun Goddess *Shams* was worshipped by the ritual slaughter of captured enemies, to thank her for victory in battle.

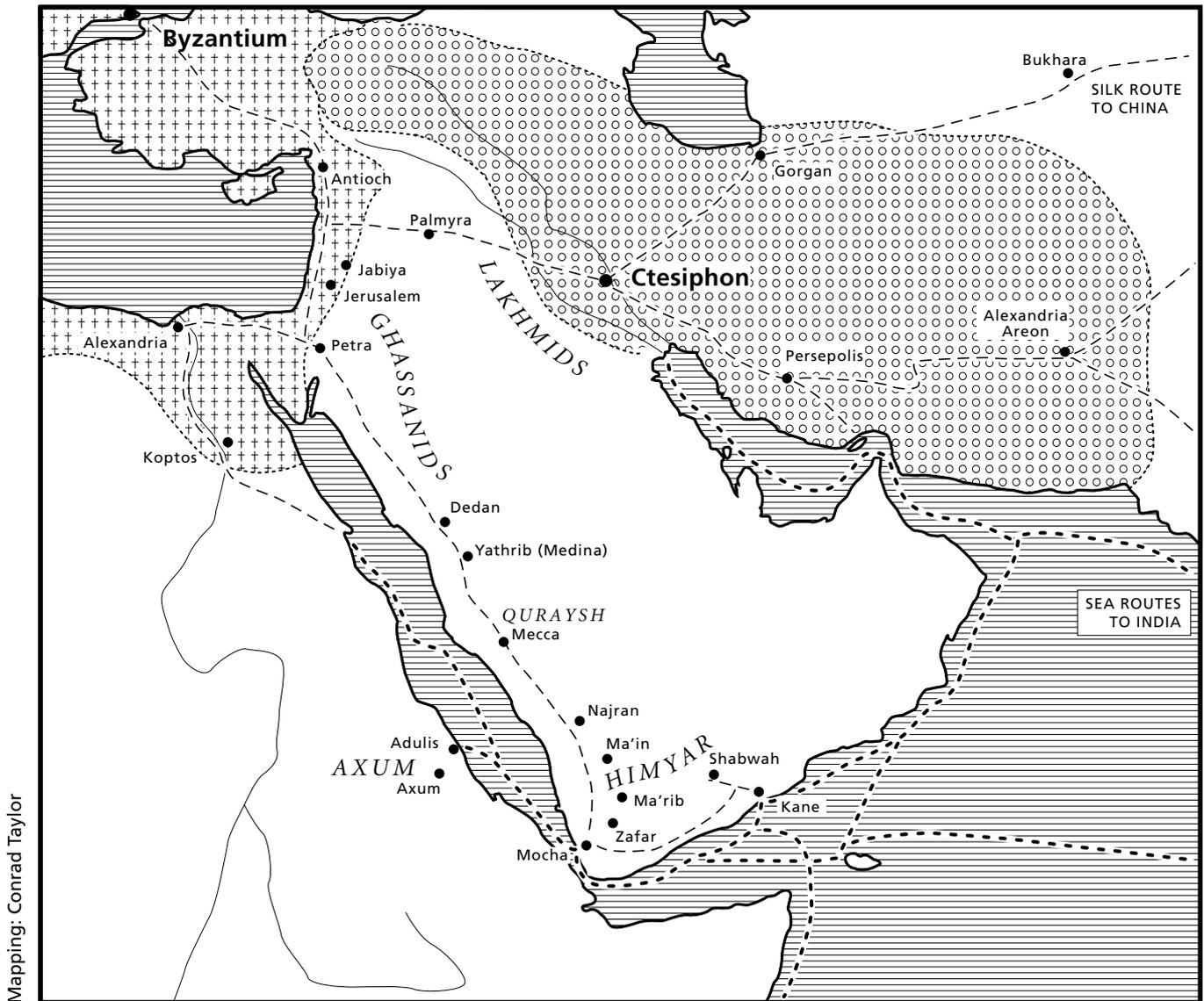
As mentioned above, in the Middle East there had been a long trend over a period of two or three thousand years in favour of monotheistic religion, or at least one in which one deity was paramount. At the time of the birth of Muḥammād there were several North Arabian societies where Christianity had become established; Warāqah, the cousin of Muḥammād’s first wife Khadijah, was a practicing Christian, for example. Large Jewish refugee communities were also widespread in the Arabian peninsula.³ In the late Sāsānid (Persian) Empire, Zoroastrianism had been reinstated as the state religion, and had some influence in the part of Arabia facing the Persian Gulf. And in around 350 CE, Himyarite society in the Yemen, which had been polytheistic until then, developed a religion that invoked one God only, *Raḥmān* – ‘The Merciful’ – an Aramaic term used by both Christians and Jews to refer to the deity. So there was plenty of precedent in the region for the claim ‘There is no God but God.’

Monotheistic religion in old Arabia may have been primarily a phenomenon of the urban, settled populations. On the other hand, tribal peoples such as the Arabian nomads carried on a worship of their own tribal gods. Many tribes carried idols with them, to worship wherever they were.

One interpretation of the large collection of deities that were worshipped at the Ka'bah – something Muḥammad greatly objected to – is that this was the result of some kind of practical accommodation between the Qurayshi authorities at Mecca and the primitive religious traditions of the tribal Arabs who were their strategic allies.

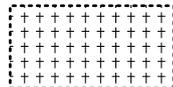
3. The Jewish people were widely dispersed throughout the Middle East and elsewhere as the result of the Romans’ systematic destruction of Judaea in 66–70 CE – and especially after the crushing of the final revolt led by Bar Kokhba in 132–135 CE. Jews were forbidden to enter Jerusalem on pain of death, and were forced out of what became called *Syria Palestina*.

Arabia and its neighbours around the year 570 CE

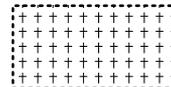


Mapping: Conrad Taylor

Byzantine Empire:



Sāsānid Empire:



This map shows the approximate political situation in the year that the Prophet Muḥammād was born. The Ghassanids were an Arab kingdom dependent on the Byzantines, and the Lakhmids had a similar relationship with the Persian Sāsānid empire. Himyar, which had absorbed the other Yemenite states, had recently lost a war with Axum, and in 570 failed to dominate Mecca – which was now under the control of the Quraishis and their allies.

The main land and sea trade routes are also shown. Remember that as times changed, some routes became more important and some less so. Borders are also approximate, and in any case were very fluid.