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Review of

F. E. Peters (ed.), *Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam*

REVIEWS

The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam, edited by F. E. Peters. Aldershot: Ashgate, Variorum, 1999. [= *The Formation of the Classical Islamic World*: Vol. 3. General Editor: Lawrence I. Conrad]. lxix 387 pp., ISBN 0 86078 702 8.

The publication under review may well become a frequently-consulted reference work for everyone interested in the origins and the rise of Islam. The book contains eighteen articles in English (published between 1954 and 1993) which deal with major aspects of the religion, culture and society of pre- and early Islamic Arabia. These articles have "served to stimulate and define the way modern scholarship has come to understand the formative period of Islamic history, for these purposes taken to mean approximately AD 600–950" (L. Conrad, p. ix). All articles represent research studies by some of the finest scholars in Middle Eastern Studies, among them Caskel, von Grunebaum, Gibb, Kister, Serjeant, and Watt. Thus, there is good reason to see this volume serving suitably as "a cogent introduction to the state of current knowledge on the topic, the issues and problems particular to it, and the range of scholarly opinion informing it" (p. ix).

For non-specialist readers, the information available in this book may, for the most part, be an exciting discovery. For specialists in the field, reading or re-reading these studies is particularly interesting, given the focused framework of the volume.

The articles were selected by Francis E. Peters. In his introduction to the volume (pp. xi-xlix), he sets the articles in relation to each other, critically discusses and extensively annotates them. Against the background of the geographical and civilizational circumstances in the ancient Near East, and with scholarly appreciation for the originality of the religion communicated by the Prophet Muḥammad, Peters sheds special light upon the ethnic, societal, economic, religious and literary situation in Arabia on the eve of Islam. This prelude is accompanied by a comprehensive research bibliography (pp. l-lxix) which lists some significant and more recent publications on major topics of the book. The bibliography is divided into sections entitled THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE (including topics such as The Arabs: A Nation of Tribes; The Nomadic Life; The Larger World; The Religion[s] of the Arabs), PRE-ISLAMIC MECCA (including: How and what do we know of Mecca before Islam?; The Organization of a Shrine-City; The Trade of Mecca), THE RELIGION[S] OF MECCA, and THE WORLD DISCOVERS MECCA: ABRAHA. Both Peters' preface and his bibliography represent genuine

and up-to-date research contributions to the study of Arabia in ancient and early Islamic times. It is worth mentioning that Peters' bibliography also includes some of the articles by Irfan Shahid (Kawar); it would have been beneficial, however, if one or more of these important studies had been included in the volume under discussion.

In the following review, only a few notions about these articles can be provided, given the wide scope of the topics dealt with in this book.

1. *The Nature of Arab Unity before Islam* by Gustav E. von Grunebaum is a classic, so to speak. It was first published in 1963, and it represents the stage of research of that time. It is well placed at the beginning of the book, since it provides a general outlook on ancient Arabia. Von Grunebaum's statement concerning the Northern Arabs, whom he defines as a *Kulturnation* (i.e. a 'nation' that is, as an entity, defined predominantly by the cultural features common to its people) rather than a *Staatsnation* (a 'nation' that is, as an entity, primarily defined by common territory and other distinct features of a 'state'), may, from today's point of view, be of interest for the understanding of terms such as 'the Arab nation,' or 'culture(s)' and 'civilization(s)'.

2. *The Role of Nomads in the Near East in Late Antiquity (400–800 C.E.)* by Fred Donner, first published in 1989, deals with an issue that has increasingly attracted the attention of scholarship in the last few years. In a concise and highly illustrative manner, this study provides insights into the complex nature of migration. This includes a theoretical discussion of major characteristics of nomadism, the interaction between nomads and sedentary people, and the impact that nomadism has had on the course of history in the Middle East. The clear approach of this article, along with a strict focus on major problems, make this study beneficial for similar research on migration in the modern Middle East.

3. *The Bedouinization of Arabia* represents a lecture given by Werner Caskel, which was first published in 1954. This paper covers, though unfortunately not always in a clear manner, a range of topics related to the history of the languages attested in ancient Arabia. For this purpose, it deals with various aspects of the historical and cultural development of the Nabataeans and Liḥyānites, the Kinda in Arabia proper, and the inhabitants of South Arabia. More specifically, it then discusses certain north-Arabian inscriptions and south-Arabian graffiti. Emphasis is placed on the impact which especially the Kinda apparently had on the formation of a "High Arabic Language" in pre-Islamic times, and thus on the development of classical Arabic. The partly controversial discussion of Caskel's paper by those attending the lecture (among them Ritter, Spuler, von Grunebaum, and Littmann) is published at the end of the article. These few pages have their own value as documents for the history of Oriental Studies. For standard information on the early development of the Arabic language, however, one may prefer today to

consult Versteegh's book *The Arabic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

4. *Trans-Arabian Routes of the Pre-Islamic Period* by Daniel T. Potts (1988) provides a historical survey of the economic situation and travel routes in the ancient Near East. The data relevant here are meticulously collected, systematically arranged and analyzed in a clear way. Most of this information is not readily accessible elsewhere.

5. *Al-Ḥīra: Some Notes on its Relations with Arabia* by M. J. Kister (1968) extracts information from various Arabic sources (Qur'ān, pre- and early Islamic poetry, the literature on the Battle Days of the ancient Arabs, etc.). By means of literary-historical analysis, this article establishes a picture of the cultural life in pre-Islamic Arabia. The focus is on the influence that the Arabian Bedouins had on the state of Ḥīra (see also Donner's article), and on the important role the Persian and Byzantine empires played in Arabia.

6. *Pre-Islamic Bedouin Religion* by Joseph Henninger (1981) is, perhaps along with Gibb's article (see no. 14.), among the most stimulating contributions included in this book. Surveying all major aspects of the religious situation in ancient Arabia, Henninger's study shows the broad spectrum of religious activities and beliefs prevalent in this region. It explains and classifies the diverse notions of religious ideas. It critically discusses also the major theories and approaches towards the religions of ancient Arabia.

The focus, however, is on the so-called Bedouin religion. Among other points, the article argues that the Arabs in pre-Islamic times already had a vague but strong belief in one supreme deity called *Allāh*, "The God." All other pre-Islamic gods, goddesses and divinities (local, tribal and inter-tribal) seem to have been considered by the Arabs not as gods in the first place, but rather as foci of intercession with God. This intercession with God was exercised through the guardians of shrines (*sādins*) who approached those super-natural spirits, and through them, the supreme God. In Bedouin religion these elements of a (non-Biblical) Arabian monotheism were combined with a) animism (belief in nature spirits; stone and tree cult), b) the belief in astral divinities (e.g., the planet Venus) and atmospheric divinities (perhaps the attributes of a creator god), and c) manism (worship of ancestors; belief in *jinn*). The article carefully notes that this religious system was far from being organized into a pantheon or hierarchical system. It seems rather to have reflected the individualism of the Bedouins and the lack of rigidity in their social system. Thus, as the article concludes, Islam and its strict monotheism neither grew out of a void, nor was it built purely on a Jewish-Christian foundation.

Henninger's general theoretical survey of the religion(s) in ancient Arabia is followed by articles that cover more specific aspects of this

topic.

7. *Idol Worship in Pre-Islamic Medina* (*Yathrib*) by Michael Lecker (1993) is predominantly based on information extracted from a Cairo manuscript of world history "*al-Khabar ʿan al-bashar*" by the Egyptian historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442), which is credited to be "his last eloquent statement on the value of history" (F. Rosenthal, *EI*² VI:193). Lecker's article convincingly attempts to clarify the identity of some of these idols (worshipped by certain tribes, clans, or families) and the practices used in worship, before the statues of these idols were destroyed at the time of Islam's arrival at Medina.

Given that in our days there is an increased interest in Islam's attitudes towards images representing the Divine (in other religions), one might draw attention to one of Lecker's findings. He writes: "Since the worship of idols was closely connected with tribal leadership, the destruction of idols (especially clan idols) defied the old leadership and undermined [the latter's] authority. In other words, in the historical context of the Prophet's struggles against many of the leaders of Medina, the destruction of idols was a political act" (p. 141). One may conclude that the destruction of these images from non-Islamic religious traditions was due to (a) the particular historical and political circumstances at the beginning of the 7th century CE, and (b) the dominance of tribal structure in society.

For the uncritical use of the term "idols" in modern scholarship, one may note that idols (Arabic: *aṣnām*) is a term used later by Muslims in an attempt to distance themselves from religious practices in pre-Islamic Arabia. Therefore, it seems to be more accurate to rather use terms such as gods, deities, or divinities. The latter are neutral terms and seem to reflect somewhat better how people in pre-Islamic times may have seen the supernatural beings they worshipped.

8. Due to its approach, the article *The Origin of the Jews of Yathrib* by Moshe Gil (1984) seems to require particularly careful reading when used for further research.

The subsequent articles establish a remarkable picture of the societal, anthropological and religious situation in ancient Arabia and, in particular, in Mecca.

9. *Ḥaram and Hawtah, the Sacred Enclave in Arabia* by R. B. Serjeant (1962) deals with the ancient concept and practices of "sacred enclaves," the latter (especially according to hagiographies) being known as founded and supervised by a member of a 'holy' family. Along with the data from classical Islamic sources (biography of the Prophet, Prophetic tradition, etc.), insights are given also into the customs at sacred enclaves as observed during the author's research in South Yemen. The article argues that the ancient Arabian "concept of a holy family seems to have survived in Islām" not only with the two *ḥarams* at Mecca and Medina,

but also "at many other times and places of the Muslim world apart" (p.182). It is suggested that the phenomenon of "sacred enclaves" can be considered as one of "the most important social circumstances into which Muḥammad was born," and as a phenomenon that is, in origin and nature, "specifically Arabian" (p. 183).

10. *Pre-Foundations of the Muslim Community in Mecca* by Fazlur Rahman (1976) critically examines the classical formulation in 'Western' studies of Islam. It discusses the latter's views that, at Mecca, the Prophet was still convinced that he was conveying *to the Arabs* the same teaching which earlier prophets had brought to their respective communities; and that, when Jews and Christians refused to accept him as a prophet, he started to link himself and his community more emphatically and directly to Abraham (cf. p. 186). Though certain historical facts which speak in favor of this view are not denied in this article, it stresses, based on Qur'ānic evidence, that the 'Islamic' image of Abraham was prevalent already when Muḥammad still was at Mecca. Based on information in "The Biography of the Prophet" by Ibn Isḥāq/Ibn Hishām, this argument is further supported by the notion that the change of the *qiblah* from Jerusalem to the Ka'bah had also already been made when Muḥammad was still at Mecca. However, the questions as to when exactly Muḥammad broke with the Jews as a religious community remains unanswered, as the article concludes. In this regard, the reader may feel tempted to consult again the classical studies by Wellhausen, Caetani and Wensinck,[1] which deal with Muḥammad at Medina. These studies note, for example, that it was a learned Jew and Rabbi who was among the first Medinans to welcome the Prophet to Medina, and who shortly after that converted to Islam. Furthermore, the Constitution of Medina[2] indicates that the Jewish tribes (before they were expelled from Medina) were for the first two years of Muḥammad's presence in Medina integral parts of that tribe-based agreement which came to be considered the constitutional 'birth certificate' of the Islamic community.

11. *Mecca before the Time of the Prophet — Attempt of an Anthropological Interpretation* by Walter Dostal (1991) provides plenty of statistical data. It discusses the legitimacy and the function of political

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[1] Cf. Wensinck, Arent J., *Mohammed en de Joden te Medina* (1908); English Tr.: *Muḥammad and the Jews of Medina; with an excursus on Muḥammad's constitution of Medina by Julius Wellhausen*; translated and edited by Wolfgang H. Behn. Freiburg im Breisgau: Klaus Schwarz Verlag, 1975 (second edition Berlin: Adiyok, 1982), p. 51, and esp. pp. 69–71.

[2] The Constitution of Medina seems have been written in the middle of the year 2 A.H. The document is quoted in M. Ibn Isḥāq [d. ca. 767 CE] / M. Ibn Hishām [d. 833 CE]: *al-Sīrah al-nabawiyah li-Ibn Hishām*, Muṣṭafā al-Saqqā, Ibrāhīm al-Abyārī, 'Abd al-Ḥafīẓ Shalabī, eds. Beirut: Dār al-Ma'rifah, 4 parts in II vols., no date, vol. I, part 2, pp. 501–504); for a literal English translation, see Wensinck, *Muḥammad and the Jews of Medina* (fn. 1), pp. 51–61.

leadership in pre-Islamic Mecca, as well as the search of the Meccans for a new "collective identity." It stresses that those ideas were backed by a postulated "ritual kinship," and that these factors altogether made it eventually possible to establish a "pre-state society" in pre-Islamic Mecca, which would "secure and strengthen the central power of the *Quraysh* by means of the ideology of a pronounced cultural tradition" (p. 228). The same topic is traced again in U. Fabietti's article from a different angle (see no. 17).

12. *The "Sacred Offices" of Mecca from Jāhiliyya to Islam* by Gerald Hawting (1990) deals with the way the sanctuary at Mecca was directed by Quṣayy b. Kilāb, an ancestor of the Prophet, who was known as the "unifier" (*mujammiʻ*) of the tribal coalition of the Quraysh and as the one who started the settlement of Mecca. More specifically, this article studies information given in Muslim sources on important offices at the sanctuary: a) the guardianship of the key to the door of the Kaʻbah (known as *ḥijābah*), b) the provision of (the Zamzam) water to the pilgrims (*siqāyah*, see also Qur'ān 9:19), as well as less known offices such as c) one responsible for providing food to the pilgrims (*rifādah*), and d) one identified with leadership in war (*qiyāsah* or *riyāsah*). The article holds the view that, by directing these offices, Quṣayy and his "priestly family" gained power not only over the sanctuary, but in effect over the city of Mecca and its inhabitants. Among other things, it makes it very clear that in pre-Islamic Mecca spiritual leadership and political power were indivisibly combined in the hands of Quṣayy and his family.

A notion of similarity and continuity is striking when looking at Muḥammad, the prophet and statesman (see also no. 17). The observation, however, that Muslim sources mention only in passing that Muḥammad descended from an established 'priestly' family such as Quṣayy's, may not really surprise, given Muḥammad's attempt to break completely with the pre-Islamic religious practices.

From different angles, the next four articles deal again with central aspects of ancient Arabian monotheism: 13. *Ḥanīfiyya and Kaʻba: an Inquiry into the Arabian Pre-Islamic Background of Dīn Ibrāhīm* by Uri Rubin (1986); 14. *Pre-Islamic Monotheism in Arabia* by Hamilton A.R. Gibb (1962); 15. *Belief in a "High God" in Pre-Islamic Mecca* by W. Montgomery Watt (1971); and 16. *The Kaʻba: Aspects of its Ritual Functions and Position in Pre-Islamic and Early Islamic Times* by Uri Rubin (1986). These articles are well known and have become standard references for the study of religion in ancient Arabia and of Islam.

17. *The Role Played by the Organization of the "Ḥums" in the Evolution of Political Ideas in Pre-Islamic Mecca* by Ugo Fabietti (1988) is based on the idea of continuity of historical processes (p. 354). This idea is applied to developments in the two historical periods commonly known as *Jāhiliyyah* and early Islam. More specifically, the article deals

with *al-ḥums*, a term that gained significance in Mecca in the years following 570 CE, and with the role the concept behind this term played in the organization of society in Mecca on the eve of Islam.

Sing. *ḥamis, aḥmas* and pl. *ḥums* are words deriving from the Arabic verb *ḥamisa*, meaning "to be/become firm, strong, strict, or rigorous." This meaning is applicable to a) matters of religion, b) courage, or c) a (secular) affair (cf. *Lisān al-ʿArab*, ed. Beirut 1992, vi, 57–58; Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* ii, 643).

In pre-Islamic times, the term *al-Ḥums* was an epithet for the Quraysh and certain tribes related to them by kinship, either living in Mecca or its surroundings. The term was used for these tribes, since they seem to have imposed upon themselves a kind of 'hardship' (*ḥums*) in matters of religion. Following the example of the Quraysh (i.e. the inhabitants and supervisors of the most important sacred district in Arabia, the *ḥaram* at Mecca around the sanctuary of the Kaʿbah), the members of these tribes were following a particularly pious life style, carefully abstaining from unlawful things and, thus, exceeding the bounds in matters of religion (Lane ii, 643), usual otherwise in ancient Arabia.

Wellhausen (1887), Caetani (1905) and other scholars have viewed the tribal association (*al-Ḥums*) formed upon the common concept (*ḥums*, i.e. hardship in matters of religion) basically in this way. Furthermore, the association based on *ḥums* has been understood by these scholars as an instrument of ritual rule of the Quraysh over the tribes who were affiliated to the Quraysh and worshipped together with them at Mecca during the pilgrimage. Along these lines, M. J. Kister (1965) highlights the term as a reference to the "religious association" between the Quraysh and its affiliates, not expressly excluding, however, other of its aspects at the social or economic levels.

By inquiring into the 'political' nature of the tribal association called *al-Ḥums*, Fabietti's article attempts to further the understanding of this important term. It plausibly elaborates the perception that the political character of this tribal association had formed the ground for "the quality steps forward that the birth of Islam represents" in terms of the political life in Arabia in the 7th century. This is a significant insight. In support of this idea, one may refer to a statement given in al-Ṭabarī's "Chronicle," which very clearly displays the crucial role that Quṣayy, due to his charisma, played as a religious *and* political leader in Arabia on the eve of Islam (al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh*, ed. M. Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo, 1967, ii, 258).

In conclusion, one may define *al-Ḥums* as involving the following dimensions: (a) an ideological level (i.e. *ḥums* representing a strict life style, especially in matters of religion; based on a concept that must have been prevalent already among the Quraysh and the tribes related to them by kinship when the name of *al-Ḥums* came to be used for

the Quraysh and their associates), and (b) the societal level (i.e. the organization of life according to this concept, eventually leading to the establishment of a tribal association by means of which the Quraysh were able to successfully implement and secure their political, economic and social interests as well as their leading political role in Arabia).

This view helps to appreciate better the societal transformation set into action by Islam. It shows also that, in pre-Islamic time already, the organizatorial settings of the association of tribes called *al-Ḥums* already indicated a preference by the Meccans for a 'community' based on standards of common religious belief and practices (including piety as one major component) *and* common politico-economic cooperation instead of kinship. In these regards, both the association of the tribes called *al-Ḥums* as well as the ancient Arabian concept on which it this association was based, provided fertile ground on which Islam would spread and develop its own concepts, including that of an Islamic community.

18. M. J. Kister's interesting article on *The Campaign of Ḥulubān: a New Light on the Expedition of Abraha* (1980) concludes this important collection of articles on Ancient Arabia and the origins of Islam. A general index (pp. 367–387) rounds off the book.

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