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# ***Chieftdom, Vassalage and Empire: The Political Structures of Arabia from the First CE to the Advent of Islam***<sup>1</sup>

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## **ABSTRACT**

*No political system could ever evolve in isolation from the environment in which it emerged. Similarly, no particular system can be understood as stagnant. It is actually the culmination or an improved form of a long historical growth. Keeping in view this synopsis, Islamic political institutions could be placed in the time and space in which the salient political features and social trends of the Jahiliyah Arabia and the neighboring political cultures contributed to their foundation and evolution. In addition to the compact political structures of Aksum, Rome and Persia, and then Byzantine and Sassanid on the borders, internally the pre-Islamic Arabs had a diverse mechanism for managing their affairs. The Arabian South experienced organized governance as compared to the north and central regions. This diversity can be attributed to the geo-strategic location and ecological environment of the peninsula. The fertile South was more supportive to the growth of a political mechanism than the arid, geopolitically more vulnerable north and central regions. In a nutshell, a proper study of the less discussed Jahiliyah politics could minimize assumptions about the complete lawlessness and political unawareness of the Arabs in politics and governance.*

**Keywords:** *Jahiliyah Arab, evolution, political structure, alliances.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The study of the political conditions of Arabia prior to the advent of Islam, known in Arabic sources as the *Jahiliyah* or the age of ignorance, is of great importance for a better and broader understanding of the political changes brought about by Islam throughout the peninsula and elsewhere. The pre-Islamic politics cannot be comprehended precisely without having an understanding the involvement of certain internal factors and external actors, namely the Byzantine, Persian, and Ethiopian Empires. It is pertinent to clarify the terminology and time period, used to define the era aforesaid. Arab sources refer to this period as the *Jahiliyah* period, which literally means lack of knowledge or science. However, it does not reflect the literary conditions of Arabia, as Arab poetry was at its zenith at the time. The term could be interpreted as anger, barbarism, bloodlust and selfishness among the Arabs. It was a time when the Arabs were believed to be literally devoid of most moral characteristics (Hitti 1946: 37).

The time period that denotes the pre-Islamic or *Jahiliyah* age is not agreed upon. Abd Allah Ibn Abbas determined it a period between Noah and Idris. Abū 'Uthman 'Amr ibn Baḥr al-Kinānī al-Baṣrī, commonly known as Al Jahiz, called it the time before the Prophethood of the Muhammad, while Reynold Alleyne Nicholson termed the entire time period between Adam and Muhammad (PBUH) as the period of ignorance (Shamsuddin and Ahmad 2020). Nadvi defines the *Jahiliyah* period as the pre-history age up to the fifth century AD (Nadvi N.d.: 37). There is a group of historians, who perceive the *Jahiliyah* as the period between Jesus Christ and the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the era devoid of any divine messenger. Though the *Jahiliyah* or the pre-Islamic era in terms of a specific time is not agreed upon but for a convenient discussion, the time period between Jesus Christ and the Prophetic mission of Muhammad (PBUH) will be considered in this paper (Shamsuddin and Ahmad 2020).

The pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula is an understudied area due to the scarcity of material. Both the Arabic sources and the modern scholarship dealing with the period are abundant, but they hardly provide the reader with clear answers. Most of the literary sources of the period belong to the poetic genre; they are not cited without raising questions about their level of credibility. The written prose is overshadowed by the local tradition of oral history. The second way of gaining access to the period is through archaeological excavations, which can provide insights into the history of the region. Moreover,

the Arab informants seem to have focused more on the nomadic and semi-nomadic Arabs than on the settled town dwellers. They exclusively discuss the tribal structure and the military as well as agricultural activities of the nomadic groups. This approach, on the other hand, underestimated the studies on the settled life of the Arabian Peninsula in the Late Antiquity (Lecker 2011: 153).

The Muslim sources provided a detailed account of the Late Antiquity. But most of these sources were recorded in the ninth and tenth centuries CE, which questions its credibility as a record of an accepted distant period. The interpretations based on such sources create a double difficulty for researchers. First, it is difficult to admit the credibility of these stories because most of these narratives are based on oral descriptions or poetic traditions of the locals (Webb 2020: 235–36). Secondly, Western historians at certain points object to the available narratives under the Muslim interpretation of the period as ‘*Al-Jahiliyah*’. In fact, the use of the term *Al-Jahiliyah* underestimates the social and political culture of the pre-Islam Arabs (Fisher 2015: 435–38). They assert that Muslim historians have omitted or distorted certain facts about the Late Antiquity in order to glorify the Islamic era. Late Antiquity has also been discussed by Greek and Roman authors, but these sources mainly revolve around the navigational and economic history of the period. ‘*The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*’ written between 40 and 70 CE, is one such book that sheds light on the trade relationship of Arabia with the outer world. Such sources had indeed very little to do with the social and political fabric of the Arabs (Schoff 2015).

The scarcity of credible literature on pre-Islamic Arabia and the controversy over the available sources make it difficult to conceptualize the era. However, in addition to the hope for more archaeological and epigraphic sources on the region, there are works by both Muslim and Western writers that could be helpful in making an analysis of the life on the Arab soil during the pre-Islamic period. Of the Muslim authorship Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad ibn Jaʿrī ibn Yazīd al-Tabarī's *Tārīkh al-Rusul wa al-Mulūk* (Volume II, III, IV, V), Abū Zayd ‘Abd ar-Raḥmān ibn Muḥammad ibn Khaldūn al-Ḥaḍramī's *Kitāb al-‘ibar wa-dīwān al-mubtada’ wa-al-khabar*, and Irfan Shahīd's *The Martyrs of Najran, Rome and the Arabs: A Prolegomenon to the Study of Byzantium and the Arabs, Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century, Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century, and Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, have insightful knowledge of the social, political and cultural life of the pre-Islamic Arabs.

Ibn al-Khaldun's logical explanation and Shahid's endeavor to discuss Byzantium's involvement in Arabian politics give way to an understanding of the political scenario of the region during the fourth, fifth and sixth centuries CE. Jawad Ali's *Al-Mufasssal fi-Tarikh al-Arab Qabl al-Islam*, Vol. V is of great significance in discussing pre-Islam Arabia. Among Western historians of the period, Philip K. Hitti's *History of the Arabs*, Robert G. Hoyland's *Arabia and the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, Greg Fisher's *Arabs and Empires before Islam*, McGraw Fred Donner's *The Early Islamic Conquests*, A. F. L. Beeston's *Kingship in Ancient South Arabia* and Christian Robin's 'Saba' and the Sabaeans,' in St. John Simpson (ed.), *Queen of Sheba: Treasures from Ancient Yemen* belong to the group whose opinion could be accepted in defining the Arabian life in the late antiquity. The Russian anthropologist Andrey Korotayev's research on the Sabaeans provided the foundational assessment of the political organization of South Arabia in the second and third centuries.

### **THE POLITICAL CONDITIONS OF THE PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA**

The political map of pre-Islam Arabia is somehow difficult to conceive accurately for its ever changing complex political geography. In addition to internal inter-dynastic and inter-tribal wars, the region remained one of the important wings of the contemporary powers, *i.e.*, the Byzantine and the Sassanid rivalry. Internally, it was torn apart by the instability of constant inter-tribal warfare, while externally the region was simultaneously affected by the interference of the Byzantine Empire, either through its diplomatic-ally Negus of Axum in the South (Munro-Hay 1991: 55) or through its client Arab kingdom of the Ghassanids on the north-western borders (Shahid 2002: 164–67). The Persian Empire on the other hand, influenced Arabia's life either through the Persian Gulf or through its Arab vassal kingdom of the Lakhmids on the north-eastern boarders. Both powers sought their respective economic and religious motives in the region (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 12–13).

Politically, pre-Islamic Arabia could be divided into three major power zones: the southern part, consisting of Ma'in, Saba', Hadramawt and Qataban. The central and northern part, mainly the tribal zone, consisted of nomadic and sedentary groups scattered across the Hijaz, Najd and Yamama. The third political zone was occupied by the client Arab kingdoms of the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids on its north-eastern and north-western boarders respectively. The way of life

of the Arabs in these regions was far from uniform due to the radically varied local climates, terrain and water resources. The assorted topography and ecological environment of the area contributed greatly to the evolution of a diverse political culture across the peninsula (Donner 1981: 11–12). The following pages contain a more detailed discussion on the aforementioned topic.

### **SOUTHERN ARABIA**

Of all the geographical factors, water remained the most important determinant shaping the history of the peninsula at large. In the western mountainous part of the south, some districts of Yemen, Hadramawt and ‘Asir were blessed with predictable rain (Donner 1981: 11–12), which ensured the emergence of a highly developed material culture in these regions. Moreover, the masonry excellence of the ancient inhabitants of northern Yemen developed advanced irrigation techniques (*Ibid.*: 11) and constructed dams, cisterns and channels which enabled them to utilize the rainwater for the development of their agricultural products. The famous dam of Ma’rib<sup>2</sup> was the masterpiece of their technological advancement. Economic prosperity promoted trade and industry and the emergence of towns in the southern part of the peninsula. It can be said that the south had all the essential elements required for the growth of an advanced political life in different periods of history (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 4–5).

### **POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF SOUTH ARABIA: THE SABAEANS**

The political domain of the legendary Queen Sheba or Saba (Quran 34: 15–21; Bible – Kings 10: 1–12 and Chronicles 9: 1–13)<sup>3</sup> with her capital at Ma’rib is considered to be the first ever political entity with an administrative structure in Southern Arabia. Its beginning is roughly dated back to the tenth century BC on the basis of the available archaeological inscriptions (Robin 2002: 52–53). However, leaving aside the ancient history of the region, the time scale of this paper allows grasping the middle Sabaean period, which extends from the first century BC to about 275 AD (Retso 2005: 127).

### **THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF THE SABAEANS**

It could neither be called a kingdom nor exactly a formal state, but rather a confederation of different city-states of different tribes, called *sha’bs* (Korotayev 1994). There is a difference between the *qabila* – the tribe of the northern and central regions – and the *sha’b* of southern

Arabia. The former was based on genealogical pedigree while the latter was considered from a territorial point of view. In such setting, an individual of any social class, even a serf or a tribe, could affiliate and merge with a stronger or greater *sha`b* for labor or economic purposes (Korotayev 2003: 115). Both the *sha`b* and the *qabila* are referred to in the Holy Quran, '*ja`alna: kum shu`u:b wa-qaba:'il*' (Al-Quran 49: 13). Ibn al-Khaldun used *sha`b* when talking about the southern people and termed *qabila* while refereeing to the Bedouins (Korotayev 2003: 115). Of the most ancient South Arabian kingdoms, Ma'in, Saba, Qataban and Hadramawt could be named as the most important. The most powerful of these was supposed to rule the rest, and Saba held this very privileged position for most of its history. In this way, the whole of the southern sphere was known as the Sabaeans because of its prestigious dominance (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 7).

Some scholars believe that Saba was initially a theocratic confederacy or commonwealth with a religious pantheon consisting of three astral deities, *Shams*, *Athtar* and *Ilmaqah*, the sun, the star-god and the moon respectively. *Ilmaqah* enjoyed political patronage and could be regarded as the national god of the Sabaeans. The head of the confederacy was named as the *mukarrib* or federator and his political regency was termed as '*Ilmaqah* – the name of the *mukarrib* – Saba'. A *mukarrib* may have served as a 'priest-king' (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 7–9). The other political entities were administered by *maliks*. With the gradual decline of the Sabaeans influence, the theocracy was transformed into a secular kingship, replacing the *mukarrib* with the *malik*. The monarchical kingship was hereditary, but a bit different. In the Middle Sabaeans period, the king usually ascended to the throne with the consent of the *qayls* – the tribal chiefs, the royal *sha`b* Saba and the army (Korotayev 1996: 140–149). The principle of co-regency could also be found among the Sabaeans. A son or brother could have assisted him in his royal duties. The military was under the supervision of the *malik*. However, he shared his military power with the powerful tribal chief or the *qayls* (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 7). The Royal House maintained a significant number of clients and collected rent from them to run the governance system. In the absence of a formal tax mechanism, the rent collected from clients, royal lands, booty and the original possessions of the ruling *qayls* were the sources of the Royal House. The Royal House possessed very little power to interfere in the affairs of the *sha`bs*. It could play the role of an arbitrator at large. This is also evidenced by the fact that the Sabaeans

could not show any visible resistance to the Himyarites who took over the royal authority in the late third century CE (Korotayev 1993: 55).

The *Bayts* – house or clan communities – were at the bottom of the social hierarchy and came under the control of the tribal chief or *qayl* concerned. The term *bayt* was used to refer to the community, its habitation and the irrigated land it had acquired (Beeston 1972). The *qayls* who owned their lands were empowered to organize clients, who in turn added to the agricultural strength of the tribe and, of course, the concerned *sha`b*. Moreover, the clients had to pay a personal rent to their patron (Korotayev 1996: 143–44). In addition to clients, the *qayls* used to grant some lands to their tribesmen on lease. Both of these forms were sources of income for the *qayls*. There existed a reciprocal system of help and support between the *qayl* and the tribesmen. They helped each other in times of need (*Ibid.*: 145–46). The tribesmen were also given a share of booty, although the major share was kept by the *qayls* themselves. In addition to clients, there were personal servants or assistants, called *maqtawis*, who were supposed to serve the individual, the king, or the clan (*Ibid.*: 143–144).

A Royal register, called the *watf* was kept to record various matters. A proper record of the individual or nomadic tribes affiliated to any of the *sha`b* was noted on the *watf* with the respective reasons as to why one joined the *sha`b*. Nomads usually settled in the south for grant of lands in return of their military service (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 7). The archaeological inscriptions found to date are silent about the existence of a formal state taxation mechanism among the Sabaeans. However, there is evidence for the existence of a temple tithe (Korotayev 1993: 56). The taxes deposited to the temple by the tribesmen could be reclaimed in the form of compensation in times of need. It was rather similar to modern ‘insurance’ (Korotayev 1996: 145). The absence of a regular tax system led to the assumptions that the Sabaeans at the center were rather weak during the second and third centuries CE. The *sha`bs* seemed to be stronger as individual entities (Korotayev 1993: 56). The Sabaeans had a system of coinage. The coins excavated from here bear the name of their national god, *Ilmaqah*. These coins do not bear the name of the king or his palace, but there is a Royal emblem on the coins (Huth and Alfen 2010: 358).

The tribes were required to raise militias, which could be used by the royal authority for either offensive or defensive purposes. This was the most important source of manpower and booty for the *qayls* and, of course, for the central authority. Special lands, particularly in Ma`rib, San`a`, Nashq and Nashshan were allotted to certain officials

on lease by the royal authority for the purpose of using the rent from these lands for to maintain a regular army. The army was under the direct command of the king who, despite his weak position in other matters, effectively used the army as a collective force either for purpose of defense or war against outsiders; and in a way to avoid inter-tribal warfare (Korotayev 1996: 147–150).

There are no sources to confirm any uniform law for the whole of the Sabaeen Kingdom. The king, the *qayls*, and even the communities could devise their own laws, which were only honored and applied at their respective level. However, the federal temple of *Ilmaqah* attempted to integrate the whole of the Southern region by formulating certain laws. These were the only laws that were considered valid at every level from top to bottom (Korotayev 1996: 147–150).

To sum up, the Sabaeen structure cannot be described as a well-organized political system, but it was far more a better mechanism, taking into account the transitional process of political evolution and its transformation from an early to a mature governing structure. The Sabaeen rule, after passing through various stages of foundational political formation, came to an end by the last decade of the third century CE at the hands of the Himyarites, who continued the transitional process.

### THE HIMYARITES

Before discussing the political and administrative structure of the Himyarites, it is important to know certain basic things about them. Himyar is not an official designation. It is rather the name of the community or tribe that established the kingdom of *'dhu Raydhan*, which denotes the king's palace at *'Dhofar* (Fisher 2015: 16) or Zifar as its capital. Himyar was part of the Qataban kingdom, which split from it around 110 BC. However, the exact date and the events that led to the separation remain unclear (Huth and Alfen 2010: 359–61). On the authority of the Roman historian Pliny, Kakakhel has traced the emergence of the Himyarites in 25 BC (Kakakhel 1981: 376). After their secession from Qatban, they probably formed a coalition with the Sabaeans in the first century CE. However, in the first century AD, Shammar dhu-Raydān ascended the throne as the king of Saba and *'dhu Raydhan* (Huth and Alfen 2010: 359–61). This was followed by the complete defeat of Saba and Hadramawt by 290 CE, and so it was in 300 CE that the king of Himyar, after annexing certain other city-states, proclaimed himself with the royal title of the 'King of Saba and *'Dhū Raydān* and Ḥaḍramawt and Yamanat and the Arabs of the



Highlands and Coast' (Avanzini 2009: 61). They were also often called *Tubba* as well (McAuliffe 2006: 389). The Himyarite kingdom reached its zenith in the first half of the fifth century AD under King Abu Karib As`ad (Avanzini 2009: 61), who led his armies into central Arabia and planned to conquer as far as Yathrib. It was the first of the southern kingdoms to establish in the top mountainous area and to conquer the more agriculturally rich regions at the bottom. They constructed a canal system of cisterns and dams which added to the prestige and prosperity of the empire (Power 2010: 32). The Himyarite kingdom expanded gradually, however, the abrupt change in their belief system and the rapid conversion from their pagan polytheistic religion to the monotheistic belief of Judaism and Christianity led to its disintegration and downfall (Kogan and Korotayev 2007: 168). The internal collapse was used by Byzantium for its plans to monopolise trade in the region through its Axumite ally, the kingdom of Ethiopia. Thus, by the first half of the sixth century, the Himyarite rule had perished with the crushing defeat of the Himyarite king *'dhu Nawas* in 525 CE (Johnson 2012: 279–282).<sup>4</sup>

### THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF THE HIMYARITES

As for the political status of the Himyarite kingdom, it was a much more mature and organized polity than that of the Sabeans. Theoretically, the kingdom was a monarchy. However, in practice, the monarch was not very powerful. His authority was more limited by the local feudal and land lords who ruled over their vassals and castles (Kakakhel 1981: 377). As with the Sabaeans, the military was under the command of the Himyarite king. The succession was hereditary. A king could nominate any of his relatives to the throne, a son, a brother or anyone else from the Royal House. The nominated candidate had to be approved by the nobles and then by the community through an oath of allegiance. In some of the semi-autonomous regions, such as Hadramawt, the heir had to be the eldest of the family's nobles. At later stages, during the bad days of the dynasty, the rulers became mere puppets in the hands of the powerful nobility. Some of the nobles even proclaimed independence of their local chiefdom after the death of a ruler. Such was the case when Hassan, one of the powerful rulers of the Himyar House, died. Most of his chiefs proclaimed their independence. Interestingly, none of them came from the royal lineage (Kakakhel 1981: 377–379). Besides the sedentary population, there were certain nomadic tribes, called *a`rab*, who lived on the peripheries of the kingdom. The state provided for the needs and protec-

tion of these wandering tribes. In return, they were required to serve as military men in the army. Compared to the sedentary nobility, the nomads were the inferior political groups in southern Arabia (Donner 1981: 37).

Certain archaeological inscriptions reveal that the Himyar king was advised and assisted in governmental affairs by an advisory body or council of elders or *Shura*. The wisest of the men were part of such governing bodies. They were usually taken from the royal family, respected *aqyal* – tribal chiefs/dukes or powerful *adhwas* – provincial governors (Kakakhel 1981: 377–79). In addition to being of noble birth and high social standing, members of the consultative council were essentially required to be of good moral character, to have the wisdom to resolve social and political issues with insight, and to enjoy repute in the community for their understanding of human problems. The typical method of resolving any issue was to put the matter for a general discussion before the Council, take suggestions from the members and then, after agreeing on a decision, present it to the king for his royal assent. Religious matters were handled by religious experts. Their advice carried great weight in the decision making of ecclesiastical matters. This shows the importance and respect they used to give to the prophetic knowledge and divine teachings among the Himyarites. Keeping in view the utmost significance of trade for the kingdom's prosperity, representatives of trade entities were also given a seat at the council's meetings (Guraya 1979: 327–28).

The kingdom was divided into different units. Some acted as provinces, while others such as Hadramawt acted as semi-independent political units. There were larger urban centers like Al-Muza and towns or *hagars*. The basic unit of the physical division and social stratification was the village or *bayt* (Korotayev 1996: 19–20). The Himyar kingdom also had a colony in East Africa. *The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea*, written by an anonymous author and dealing with navigation and trade activities in the ancient Red Sea, refers to the Himyarite trading settlement at Rhapta in northern Tanzania. This settlement was leased to a trading oligarchy of Muza, who collected taxes and managed the commercial activities in the town on behalf of the Himyarite king (McLaughlin 2014: 136). Moreover, the Kindite Kingdom in central Arabia served as a client state of the Himyarites. It supported the Himyarite kings in their military campaigns (Lecker 1995: 635–641).

Administratively, each political entity was headed by a strong tribal chief, a landlord or a governor of the city. He was not empowered to act independently according to his personal will; but he was

accountable to both the king and the council of the Elders for his actions. He had to supervise the political, military and economic affairs in his respective domain. He provided military battalions when requested by the king for both defense and offence. A military force of a special caste of warriors, referred to in South Arabian inscriptions as *qasd*, was placed at the king's disposal. With the help of a special official called *kabir*, the chief was bound to ensure the imposition of laws and decrees in the area under his jurisdiction. He was also responsible for making arrangements to ensure agricultural productivity in his area. Crops and taxes were collected by the tribal chief or the governor on behalf of the king. It is noteworthy that the Himyarite kings had a monopoly over the agricultural production. The peasants were obliged to sell their entire harvest to the king. These activities were closely supervised by the governor or tribal chief in his district or tribal area (Donner 1981: 37).

The Himyarite state had a well-organized bureaucratic structure. It employed a number of competent officials to manage specific department such as foreign diplomatic relations, the mint, storage depots, taxation, agriculture and the construction of dams and water canals. Scribes and personal assistants were also engaged with their respective responsibilities both at the upper and lower levels. There were spies and agents who secretly looked after the empire affairs and kept the king informed of events throughout the kingdom (Hoyland 2002: 120–121).

There is no historical evidence to date for the existence of a universal law of government among the Himyarites. The king and senior priest could issue certain decrees in times of need but there is no evidence of a formal code of law in the entity (Hoyland 2002: 122). In the commercial sphere, they inherited certain merchant laws from the Qatabanians, dealing with prices, taxation and other commercial activities in the port and in the market (Korotayev 1996: 114). In the absence of any law code, the existence of a formal judicial official or judge is out of the question. Disputes and misdemeanors were heard and decided by the king, the tribal chief or the local governor of the city. Sometimes, in wealthier polities, the king would form a judicial council (*maswad* in ancient inscriptions) comprising certain tribal groups and would issue edicts on certain conditions for the whole kingdom (Hoyland 2002: 122–24).

The Himyarite state had a proper mint department which struck silver coins. These coins bore the name of the king and his residential palace. There were also various other symbols, some of dynastic and other of religious connotations, on the coins (Huth and Alfen 2010:

358). The Himyarites used the Sabaic language with slightly foreign words, which can also be found in scripted form. This may have been under the influence of the Arabic and Ethiopian languages, as the Himyarite kingdom remained a client state of Ethiopia at one point in its history. Hebrew influence could also be seen in the Himyarite language. The epigraphic evidence, discovered in 1973, which revealed some private documents and letters, tribal and royal treaties, and some magical texts, although difficult to decipher, showed a dominant Sabaic script (Kogan and Korotayev 2007: 168). Keeping in view their literary development, it is of great importance to note that the Himyarites had an elaborate dating system. By 229 CE, their calendar was followed throughout the kingdom (Maroney 2010: 191–192).

The Himyarites had an organized army. In addition to the royal military, there were tribal militias that were called in times of need. In times of war, the army was divided into four units. The first was the royal battalion, called *Khamis*, under the command of the king or one of the generals. The second was the enlisted troops from the highland communities, the third was the cavalry and the fourth was made up of mercenaries or Bedouin allies. The army used to work in five levels. At the top was the king, followed by the generals, the tribal leader, and the leader of a particular number of soldiers, usually in even-numbered sets. The Romans were followed by the Muslims for such pattern with even numerical sets of 16, 32, and 64 and so on. They might possibly have followed the same division while advancing towards or fighting on the battlefield. At the bottom was the individual soldier (Syvanne 2015: 134). Like the Sabaeans, lands were allocated to special officials who were required to use the income from such land to maintain a well-trained and well-equipped army that could be provided when called upon by the king (Korotayev 1996: 148–149). Donkeys and camels were used to carry luggage and military equipment. In addition to the camel, the borrowing of the horse by the Arabs made warfare in the desert more sophisticated (Syvanne 2015: 134). However, the horse was a comparatively expensive animal and was kept only for special forces (Donner 1981: 29).

Plate armor, laminar armor, scaly armor and chain mail armor were used for self-protection by the soldiers. A thick turban, a kind of helmet was used for head protection. A leather shield, mentioned in Arabic poetry, was also included in a soldier's battle gear. Their weapons included daggers, spears, swords and battle axes (Hoyland 2002: 189). The Himyarites used to dig trenches in times of war. The trench of Najran, where thousands of Christians are believed to have

been burnt alive by the Himyarite Jewish king *'dhu Nawas*, is one such example in this regard (Saunders 2002: 13). In short, it could be concluded that the political structure of the Himyarites was far more advanced and organized than that of their predecessors, the Sabaeans. The Himyarites ruled the southern region and some parts of central and northern Arabia until 525 CE, and vanished through an Ethiopian attack under the command of Aryat. However, Aryat's governorship did not last long. He was betrayed and subsequently murdered by his ambitious subordinate commander Abraha. Abraha took over control of the region and added more territory to his rule. Abraha had devised certain laws; that preserved, the original Greek copy of which is preserved in Vienna. He even attacked Ka'ba (Mecca) in order to reduce the prestigious position of Mecca and to divert pilgrims and the wealth that Mecca had to the temple that he had built at San'a'. However, he failed in this attempt and lost his life. He was succeeded by his son, but the people were fed up with Ethiopian rule (Khan and Haleem N.d.: 77–80). In the last quarter of the sixth century CE, *'dhu Yaz'an*, one of the southern tribes, asked the Persians to free them from the atrocities of the Ethiopians. The Persians occupied the region in 570 or 575 CE and turned it into a Sassanid province (Shoshan 2021: 259; Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 15). They ruled over the people for about half of a century and were finally defeated by the Muslims in their third attempt against the Persians in 628 CE.

#### **THE CENTRAL AND NORTHERN ARABIA: THE HIJAZ REGION**

As previously mentioned, geography played an important role in defining pre-Islamic Arabian politics. In addition to the rain-fed areas in the south, there were arid regions in the central and northern parts of Arabia. In other words, the two extreme ecological divisions of the Arabian Peninsula produced two different political cultures (Holt, Lambton, and Lewis 2008: 4). It is noteworthy that the social setting in Arabia remained in a similar pattern everywhere. It had been unanimously tribal on the eve of Islam (Donner 1981: 20).

The challenges posed to human intellect and existence by the extreme aridity had been responded by the Bedouins with their traditional desert companion, the camel. The date-palm was the main source of the desert economy and hence their survival (Hourani 2013: 42–43). In addition to the constantly moving herders and pastoralists, there were some sedentary towns. In the outskirts of certain arid areas there were rings of oases, where a kind of a sedentary life existed (Zaidi

2002: 34). The perennial springs of the oases supported the agricultural activities of the inhabitants. Yathrib (Medina), Fadak, Tayma, al-Ta'if, Dumat al-Jandal, Khaybar, Wadi al-Qura, Najd, al-Yamama and al-Qatif were some of the extended oases (Holt, Lambton, and Lewis 2008: 4–5). There developed some busy trading out spots (Hourani 2013: 42–43) like Dadan, Palmyra and Petra within or near these towns, which served to support lives of both the Bedouins and the settled people of these towns. In addition to trading centers, the *Haram* in Mecca was regarded by both the settled and the Bedouins as the sacred enclave of the contemporary religious cult and was held in high esteem. Politically, the sedentary towns had a comparatively some sort of organized system (Holt, Lambton, and Lewis 2008: 4–5). The relationship between the Bedouins and the sedentary population was mixed. They remained friendly and at peace with their settled cousins and fellow tribesmen and even defended each other in times of external aggression. However, at times, the Bedouins raided certain settled towns and engaged in constant bloody wars over resources (Rejwan 2008: viii). The Bedouins even readily invaded the border provinces of the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. Both Empires then used to keep certain Arab tribe such as the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids on the north-western and north-eastern borders respectively as their clients to keep the Bedouins away from their borders. Both of the aforementioned Arab kingdoms served as a safe-gap or buffer zone between the Empires and the unexpected Bedouin attacks (Holt, Lambton, and Lewis 2008: 4–5).

### **THE POLITICAL STRUCTURE**

Keeping in view the foregoing discussion on the environmental and social diversity as well as the multifaceted relationship between the sedentary and Bedouin groups in pre-Islamic central and northern Arabia, the political scenario is expected to be complex. There existed a dual mechanism that determined the form of law in the region. Power was the order of the day. In general, one tribal group would dominate the others, either for its military prowess or its religious prestige. This gave rise to two forms of governance in the region, the warrior aristocracy or the nomadic sphere of power and the religious aristocracy or the sedentary township (Donner 1981: 28–29).

### **THE WARRIOR ARISTOCRACY**

The tribal confederation in the desert was headed by the warrior aristocracy. Various powerful tribes had their representatives in this aristocra-

cy. Their authority was based on two factors: firstly, they had a large number of horses, which was considered a sign of strength among the desert pastoralists. Horses were considered a luxury and a more reckless resource, allowing their master to carry out swift raids. Secondly, they had the intellect to organize a safe movement in the desert and the strength to evade any pursuit by a well-organized but weak mobile force. They had enough power to subdue the weak nomadic and semi-nomadic groups, merchants and weak peasant towns in their vicinity and to extract a tax called *khuwwa* from them. In return, they avoided raiding these tax-payers and ensured their protection against any other invading group. Furthermore, the strength of such a warrior aristocracy largely depended on the settled wing of these tribes. In fact, they were constantly striving to subjugate more town dwellers and to increase their power in the region by extracting more taxes. Both of the nomadic and sedentary wings of these tribes rescued and defended each other in times of need and an invasion by other tribal groups (Donner 1981: 29). However, the warrior aristocracy had strengthened their position from the towns occupied by their cousins through their commercial links and trade with the merchants and caravans that provided them with material resources to survive in the savage deserts (Hourani 2013: 43).

Social disparities between different desert groups were not uncommon. Some resourceful groups with ruling genealogies were considered as *sharif* or noble, while other financially weaker groups with no or a lesser aristocratic background were called *dha`if* or weak or non-noble. There were certain intermediary groups, somewhat stronger than the *dha`if* but weaker than the *sharif*. These tribal groups used to pay *khuwwa* to the *sharif* when they gathered with the aristocratic groups at the wells in the summer season, but on the other hand they collected the aforementioned tax from the *dha`if* semi-nomadic tribes and the villagers in their vicinity. These intermediary tribes used to provide protection to their respective taxpayers. However, they never claimed any aristocratic status and avoided taking the risk of coming into conflict with the noble groups. It is important to clarify that there existed a power hierarchy among the various tribal groups. The aristocracy collected taxes and the weaker tribes paid, but none of the subordinate tribes or groups was supposed to be bound by the rules and laws of the dominant group in their internal affairs. Each one of the tribes in its own sphere was independent in the management of their affairs. The relationship between the two groups, *sharif* and *dha`if*, revolved around taxes and protection (Donner 1981: 31–34). Besides

the alliance or *hulf* between the weaker and stronger Arab tribes, there existed a bond called *wala* between the Arab tribes and the non-Arab tribes called *mawali*. Similarly, the prisoners of war who could not pay their ransom were also called *mawali*. They were known in the society by the name of the tribe with which they used to live (Abu Bakar 1977: 21).

#### THE ADMINISTRATIVE MECHANISM OF THE NOMADIC TRIBES – THE WARRIOR ARISTOCRACY

Al-Maqrizi in his book *Kitab al-Niza' wa al-Takhasum fi ma bayna Bani Umayyah wa Bani Hashim*, has asserted that the pre-Islamic tribal society was structured into six levels. At the top there was the *sha'b* – confederation, followed by *qaba'il* – tribes, *ama'ir* – kin, *butun* – clans, *afkhadah* – lineage and *fasa'il* – family at the bottom (Marín-Guzmán 2004: 57–96). The tribal solidarity or *Asabiyyah* was the force that united these different classes into a group against their enemy (Ibn Khaldun 2015: 171–176), although there were certain internal rivalries among them at almost every level. Politically, this stratification was under one leader in a tribal chieftainship or *Ri'asah* or *Mash-aykhah*. It was the basis of a political structure among the nomadic tribes and could be defined as an area ruled by a chieftain or *Sheikh*. The tribe was the basis of a chieftaincy which at a higher level was part of a *sha'b* or tribal confederation. Chieftainship was organized on the basis of *Rabitat al-Damm* – blood relationship. The common genealogy bound them into a unified social and political organization (Guraya 1979: 324–25). The motherland of a tribe was the region wherein it originated, or the land that their ancestors gained through victory over another tribal group. These lands were usually places where there was enough water, greenery and pastures to feed them and their herds. Each member of the tribe considered his land as his honor and defended it at all costs against aggressors (Guraya 1979: 324–25). The chieftainship had three basic organs: (i) *Ilah* or *Aliha* – god/gods, equally respected by both the chief and the tribesmen, (ii) *Hakim* – chief or leader, known by different titles in different tribes such as *Sayyid*, *Kahin*, *Malik* or *Ameer*. Obedience to a chief's authority was mandatory over all in times of peace and war. (iii) The people – tribesmen, whose duty was to submit their will to the god and their chief (Guraya 1979: 336).

The tribe was usually headed by a senior member with an age-long experience in war and peace affairs, financially stable and possessing organizational intellect (Shamsuddin and Ahmad 2020: 280).



He was called as *Sheikh*, *Sayyid*, *Ameer*, *Ra'is*, *Ba'l*, *Rabb* or sometimes *Malik*. For instance, Hisham bin al-Mughirah was known as *Rabb Quraysh*, similarly, Amr bin Ja'eed was called as *Sayyid Rabi'ah* and Hudhayfah bin Badr was known as *Sayyid Ghatfan* as well as called *Rabb Ma'add*. Since the office of *Sheikh* was a persona-based designation, one could hold it as long as he possessed the qualities mentioned above. Moreover, the death of a *sheikh* sometimes led to the annulment of the alliances and agreements that he had made with other tribes. The allied tribes refused to honor their allegiance to the succeeding *Sheikh*. In this context, some of the tribes abandoned Islam as their religion after the demise of the Prophet Muhammad. They argued that the departure of the Prophet had dissolved their oath of allegiance, and so they refused to pay *sadaqah* and *zakat* to Abu Bakr (Guraya 1979: 324). The responsibilities of a chief included the protection of his people. He had to take care of his tribe, make policies to improve their livestock and their ability to wage war. He shared the spoils of war and made peace alliances with other tribes. He held hospitality to the guests and received delegations from other tribes. However, his sovereignty was symbolic. His authority in making decisions was controlled by the council of elders. The graceful thing about a chief's position was his respect, which he enjoyed to an extreme degree (Shamsuddin and Ahmad 2020: 280).

In some cases, the office of the *sheikh* was hereditary. Usually the eldest son succeeded his father, but occasionally an appointment was made. For instance, Hisham bin Hudhayfah appointed his son Uyaynah and instructed him: '*You are my successor and chief of your people after me.*' Then he turned to the people and said, '*My banner and my rule are for Uyaynah.*' This proclamation was wholeheartedly accepted by the tribesmen. On certain other occasions, however, there are instances of selection of a chief from the tribesmen. This happened when either the eldest son of the chief did not possess the necessary skills or there was a lack of consensus on succession amongst the sons of a chief, who were born to different wives of the *sheikh*. The council of elders and nobles of the tribes would then select the most suitable of them (Guraya 1979: 325). There are also certain instances where a chief was chosen from outside the tribe when the council could not decide on the choice of the chief. The council then applied to the king of the nearest kingdom, who made the appointment, which had to be accepted by all (Ali 1970: 349–350). The appointment of the chief of the Kindah tribe by the king of Yemen was an example of such succession. Some such appointments were also made in some parts of Najd and Yamamah (Guraya 1979: 325).

Every tribe had a council of elders. It was called the *majlis al-shuyukh or nadi al-qawm*, which in modern terms could be translated as the tribal council or parliament. Usually the most experienced, wisest and oldest men were members of the tribal council. The meetings of the council were chaired by the respective tribal chief. All important matters were discussed at the meetings. Each member had an equal right to speak and make suggestions. There was no special date or particular time for council meetings. Whenever something bad happened in or against the tribe, the chief would call a meeting to find a solution to the problem. Recommendations and decisions made by the mutual consensus of the council members were followed by all tribesmen without any objection (Shamsuddin and Ahmad 2020: 280).

There was no formal constitution or code of law among the nomads (Nicholson 1966: 89). They had their aged-old tribal traditions to be followed as laws. The cases were usually heard and decided by the chief of the tribe. However, cases of a more complicated nature, such as inter-tribal social and political differences, wars with other tribes or certain cases of a complex nature were brought before the council of elders. They would thoroughly discuss every possible detail of the case. After hearing both parties, the chief of the tribes, acting as chief justice, would announce a joint decision. The decision had to be accepted by all without any objection or right of appeal. Furthermore, the council functioned as a precedent setting body. In social cases of a broader level, the council would take a decision and set a *sunnah* – a precedent for the whole tribe. There was a tradition of *khali* – outlaw – among the nomads. If member of the tribe denounced the council's decision, or if a person's criminal activities tainted his family's reputation, the tradition of *khali* was then imposed on such persons. It was on the occasion of the Hajj or Ukaz festival, the tribal chief or the father of the offender would declare him a *khali* in front of the people. It was the worst calamity for a person who lost his tribal affiliation. He could never regain his former respect from anyone after such a declaration (Ali 1970: 234).

### **THE RELIGIOUS ARISTOCRACY**

Generally, the sedentary tribes were vulnerable to aggression by the migratory warrior tribes, but the existence of a cultic center or shrine within such towns provided a compact security against their raids (Donner 1981: 36). Certain towns like Ta'if (temple of Al-Lat) and Mecca (Haram) were examples of such places. These harams were dominated by a local religious family, descendants of a holy man who had founded

the cultic center. The holy family claimed to be the servants and defenders of the god or goddess who resided in such temples. The sanctity of these towns was wholeheartedly revered by everyone in the desert. The frequent arrival of pilgrims to the shrines and the safe environment gave merchants the confidence to do their business in such towns. As a result, economic activities added to the importance of these towns in addition to their holiness. Within such environment, these holy towns served as sedentary political entities and the respective custodian family enjoyed great political power and prestige (Donner 1981: 34–36). The religious aristocracy was stronger than the warrior aristocracy.

#### **POLITICAL STRUCTURE OF THE CITY STATE OF MECCA: A RELIGIOUS ARISTOCRACY**

Kulayb bin Rabbiah is said to have laid the foundations of a short-lived independent rule in certain parts of northern and central Arabia; and the confederated tribes scattered after his death. It was in the fifth century CE that the Quraysh leader Qusayy bin Kilab, through his great organizational skills, established the city-state of Mecca. He devised certain rules and departments to run the administration of the city-state and to facilitate the pilgrims in their worship practices (Kakakhel 1981: 382).

Qusayy bin Kilab, with the mutual cooperation of other tribes, formed the association of the *Hums* – defined differently by different authors. The present study prefers Kister's assertion, which suggests an 'association composed of those tribal groups (both nomadic and sedentary) who recognized the sanctity of the haram, totally complied with the regulation governing periods of truce, and professed the same faith. In fact, they are defined as devout people, devoted to their *din*' (Fabiatti 1988: 25–33). Qusayy bin Kilab was the leader of Mecca and all important offices, that is religious, military, social and commercial affairs, were decided under his direction. He was the *de facto* ruler and his words were obeyed as law by the Meccans (Guraya 1979: 331). After his death, however, the head of the city-state of Mecca was chosen by mutual consultation at *Dar ad-Nadwa* or the Council of Elders (Kakakhel 1981: 383–86).

The Meccan's administration consisted of a ten-member council. The main departments were *nadwa* – presidency/*shura*; *liwa* – military command; *rifadah* – provision of food and shelter for pilgrims; *hijaba* – control of the keys of Ka'bah; *siqaya* – control of the water supply for pilgrims (Haque 1996: 10–11); *Diyat* – civil and criminal administration; *Sifarah* – legation; *Khaimmah* – custody of the cham-

ber council; *Khazinah* – public finance and *Azlam* – protection of the sacred arrows by which the judgment of the gods was obtained (Kakkhel 1981: 383). Ibn-i-Kalbi gave details of the main tribes responsible for various administrative departments in the Meccan Township. They were Banu Hashim, Banu Umayya, Banu Abd ad-Dar, Banu Asad, Banu Tamim, Banu Makhzum, Banu ‘Adi, Banu Naufal, Banu Jumah and Banu Sahn. There were also co-opted members who looked after the needs of pilgrims in Arafat and Muzdalifa during the hajj season. A client family of Mecca had assigned a hereditary duty to carry out repair work on the building of the Ka’ba. They were called as *jadir* or engineer/architect. The administrative departments and duties were hereditary, but the mode of selection/nomination/election of the member of a family to head the department is obscure (Hamidullah 1973: 15–16).

*Dar al-Nadwa* was a semi-open rectangular hall, decorated with various statues and it was built near the Ka’ba. All important social, religious, commercial and political decisions were taken here. A man of forty or more could be a member of the Council. However, exceptions were made for some members for their wit and organizational skills. Amr ibn Hisham, commonly known as Abu Jahl in Muslim tradition, was admitted to membership at the age of twenty for his intelligence and cleverness (Sahin 2015: 4). There was no specific date or time schedule for convening a meeting. Any emergency or important matter would lead to the members being called together to discuss and resolve the issue. However, it was important to submit the agenda to the head of the Council so that he could arrange the meeting (Hamidullah 1973: 16).

There were two types of foreign alliances or *hifl* that the Meccans signed with the outer tribes. The first was called as *Al-Ilaf*, which was a commercial truce and was made with the tribes living on the winter and summer trade routes to Yemen and Syria respectively. This truce provided safe passage for their caravans from the communities that used to live along the route. The second agreement was called the *Sifara*. The Meccans used to send their legates to other tribes and to the kingdoms of Yemen, the Lakhmids and the Ghassanids, to secure their commercial and political interests. Men of intellect were chosen to perform this task. Umar ibn Al-Khattab from Banu Adiy, Syhayl Ibn Amr from Banu Luay, and Amr Ibn al-‘As from Banu Sahn represented Quraysh in different places on different occasions (Sahin 2015: 7).

Mecca had no formal army as it was not an empire or a state. However, there was a tradition of defending the honor of Mecca at all

costs, which led to the formation of certain groups of fighters who were responsible for leading the rest in any emergency. In addition to moral support, women provided financial and medical aid in such situations. Movable war booty was granted to the person who got it, while immovable property such as land was distributed among the warriors. Abu Sufyan, Amr ibn Hisham and Utba ibn Rabia were famous Quraysh commanders (Sahin 2015: 8–9).

Qusayy bin Kilab divided Mecca into several small districts, each headed by a different tribe. Each of the districts had a district council or *Dar al-Ushrah* along the lines of *Dar al-Nadwa*. This council played a similar role to that of *Dar al-Nadwa*. It decided civil and criminal cases. It was also called *Majlis al-Shuyukh* or *Nadi al-Qawm*. All district-level cases were decided in these councils, while if a case could not be resolved at a lower level or belonged to the whole community; it was referred to the Supreme Council or *Dar al-Nadwa*. These councils were responsible for maintaining peace in their localities. However, after the death of Qusayy bin Kilab, the peace and order situation became gradually deteriorated. The situation led the elders of the town to sign a truce, the *Hilf al-Fudhul*, aimed at restoring law and order in Mecca. Overall, there was no specific department to deal with judicial matters, but the existence of these councils at the upper and lower levels was a good gesture in this regard (Guraya 1979: 333–338).

#### **THE SITUATION IN YATHRIB (MADINA)**

Yathrib, or later on called Madina, was another important town in the Hijaz region of the pre-Islamic Arabia, inhabited by Arab tribes and Jewish merchants. Yathrib was in fact the largest part (*qarya*) of the cluster of towns located between the edges of Qanat and Al-Jurf from east to west and between the orchard of Al-Barni and Zubala from north to south respectively. Ibn-i-Zabala in his *Akhbar Madinah* referred to the region as *umm qurā l-Madīna* or the mother of the towns of Medina (Chushti 2008: 494). The earliest history of the town is obscure (Dumper and Stanley 2007: 237). There is no clear answer to the question of Yathrib's first inhabitants in either Muslim or in Western historiography. Some Muslim scholars consider the Amalekites as the earliest town settlers, invaded by the Bani Isra'il, who expelled them out and occupied the region. However, the argument is rejected by Western scholars who say it is a mythical story. Moreover, the time of the Jews arrival is still an open question. Some trace them back to the time of Noah, while others to the time of Moses's expeditions against the Amalekites. A group of historians traced their arrival to the period of Da-

vid and Solomon. There are certain traditions about the origin of the Jews in Yathrib which trace it to the destruction of the Temple by Nebuchadnezzar (Gil 2017: 145–148), while a group of historians believe that the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans was the time of their migration to Hijaz (*Ibid.*: 149). The Roman emperor Hadrian expelled them from Palestine in 135 CE (Dumper and Stanley 2007: 237). Leaving aside the question of the first inhabitants of Yathrib and the surrounding rich agricultural belt, as well as the exact time period of the Jews' arrival in the region, it cannot be denied that the Jews were the wealthiest class in Yathrib at the dawn of Islam.

Yathrib at the time of the Prophet Muhammad could be loosely divided into two geographical sections. The upper part in the south was called *Aliya*, while the lower part in the north was termed as *Safila*. *Aliya* on its eastern side was inhabited by the two larger Jewish tribes of Banu Nadir (in the town of Zuhra) and Banu Qurayza. The Amr ibn Awf branch of Aws lived in the town of Quba, located on the western side of Madina *Aliya*, whereas the three branches of the Arab tribal group Aws, collectively known as Aws Allah, spread between the upper and lower Madina. The Arab tribe of Khazraj, the Jewish tribe of Banu Qaynuqa (in the town of al-Quff) and the Nabit branch of the Aws inhabited Madina *Safila*. Banu Nadir and other tribes, both the Jews and the wealthy Arabs, also owned fields, orchards and fortresses in other parts of Madina. The Qaynuqa were among the oldest settlers of the town, while Qurayza and Nadir were the strongest Jewish tribes (Lecker 2009: 64–70). In addition to the aforementioned groups, the Bali tribal group, the oldest branch of the Arab tribal confederation of Quda'a, lived there. Their migration to Yathrib was reported prior to the arrival of the two Yamini brother tribes of Aws and Khazraj (al-Undlasi 1948: 331),<sup>5</sup> who came to Yathrib after the destruction of the Ma'rib dam in 300 CE. Many of the Bali tribes converted to Judaism during their long stay with the Jews (Lecker 2009: 63). According to Samhudi, the Bali were one of the strongest groups in Yathrib, owning thirteen tower houses against fifty nine owned by the Jews, before falling under the clientage of the Aws and Khazraj (Lecker 2009 32).

The city was rich in palm trees, orchards and water reservoirs, which enhanced its importance both economically and politically. The town of Yathrib also served as a commercial center for the trade caravans that passed through it between southern Arabia and the commercial city of al-Sham in the north, one of the Byzantine economic hubs. However, the internal political turmoil of Yathrib ad-

versely affected the business life of the tribal groups living there. A constant power struggle between the Aws and the Khazraj tribes converted the region into a center of strife. The Jewish tribes were affiliated with one of the two tribes and supported their respective side in the battles. Similarly, the nomadic wings of the warring sedentary tribes accelerated the war sentiments on both sides (Kennedy 1986: 32–33). Of their bloody quarrels, the last known battle was the battle of Bu'ath, fought in 617 CE. Moreover, there was no established form of administrative mechanism in the town, not even existed a tribal senate, as there was in Mecca. There was no police or military authority to maintain law and order in the town (James 1955: 50).

In order to know which group or groups, enjoyed political hegemony in the region in the centuries before Islam, it is necessary to trace the situation back in time to the possible extent. The Jews could be considered as the first group in Yathrib to enjoy an authoritative position in the town. The Banu Nadir and the Banu Qurayza were the local masters of the township of Yathrib under Sassanid suzerainty until about the middle of the sixth CE. It was at a later stage, precisely, by the last quarter of the sixth century CE that the Jewish power was taken over by the Khazraj tribe when al-Numan bin al-Mundhir, the king of the Sassanid Arab vassal kingdom of al-Hira, appointed Amr bin al-Itnaba<sup>6</sup> as the king of Madina (Yathrib) (Lecker 2002: 109–113).

The fall of Jewish power in Yathrib was all of a sudden. There are tales about a quasi-legendary Jewish king, Al-Fityawn, who is said to have deflowered every new bride in the town before she was delivered to her lawful husband. It is asserted that Al-Fityawn was killed by an Arab Malik bin al-Ajlan of the Khazraj tribe. The murder of the king was followed by a massacre of the Jews. This incident weakened the power of the Jews and reduced them to the status of clients of the Aws and the Khazraj. The Fityawn affair received some recognition from Muslim historiographers and narrators. However, Western historiographers, and especially Jewish historiographers, seem to deny the story (Lecker 2005: 50–55). Leaving aside the controversial Al-Fityawn affair, a comment by the renowned historian, Patricia Crone is of enormous value regarding the fall of the Jews and the rise of the Aws and Khazraj to the authoritative position in the last quarter of the sixth century AD. Crone asserts, '*Reputedly lords and masters of both Yathrib and its Arab immigrants at first, they (the Jews) were defeated by the Arab tribes some time before the rise of Islam and reduced to client status*' (Crone 2002: 56). Previously, the taxes were collected from Aws and Khazraj by Banu Nadir and Banu Qurayza on behalf of

the Sassanid ruler, whereas the fall of the Jews turned them into tax payers to the Khazrajite Chief of Yathrib (Lecker 2002: 123). Moreover, the decline of the Jews in Yathrib affected the conditions of the Jewish population of Fadak and Wadi l-Qura, where the former paid protection money called *Ja'ala* to the Banu Kalb and the *Tu'ma* by the Jews of Wadi l Qura to the Arab Quda'a tribal federation (Crone 2002: 56).

Al-Fityawn was neither the first nor the only king to rule Yathrib. This agriculturally rich oasis had also seen some powerful kings such as Amr ibn al Itnaba and the great Ama Ibn Haram from the Salima subdivision of the Khazraj. Ibn Haram even enjoyed enormous power to confiscate and redistribute the land in Yathrib. When the Prophet Muhammad migrated from Mecca, one resourceful person, Abd Allah Ibn Ubayy Ibn Salul al-Khazraji, was the strongest candidate to be crowned as the king of Yathrib. This man had great diplomatic skills in making tribal alliances. At the time, he was trying to win the favor of certain resident tribes by restoring the alliances between Khazraj and Banu Nadir that had been broken by the battle of Bu'ath (Lecker 2008: 167–170). However, the arrival of the Prophet Muhammad upset the situation for Abd Allah Ibn Ubayy (Arafath N. d.: 8–9). Mas'udi reported the occasion as, *'The Khazraj were superior to the Aws just before the advent of Islam and intended to crown Abd Allah ibn Ubayy ibn Salul al Khazraji. This coincided with the arrival of the Prophet and his kingship ceased to exist'* (Lecker 2011: 169).

Pre Islamic Arabian politics, both inter-tribal and intra-tribal, could not be isolated from the political sphere of their Persian and Byzantine neighbors. Both superpowers had a keen interest in their underdeveloped, poor tribal neighborhood. The land of Arabia was important both for their respective political strategies in the region and for weakening their rivals' economic position by extending their commercial zone of influence between the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean, the ancient trade route connecting East and West. Michael Lecker argues that the Byzantine emperor was instrumental in Qusayy bin Kilab's taking custody of Mecca from Banu Khuza'a. It was a similar story in other Arab regions. Each of the major empires supported rival Arab tribes not only to extend their spheres of influence against each other, but to keep their empires safe from nomadic invaders on their borders (Lecker2011: 163–164). Various internal and border areas had remained a bone of contention between Byzantium and the Persian empires throughout history. Yathrib remained under the control of the Persian king for a long time. The locals had to pay taxes to the



Persian *marzuban*, who sat in al-Hira, through a local Jew and later a Khazraji representative or the local chief of Yathrib. In addition to the taxes collected for the Persian Shah by the Arab representative or *amil* in the town, there were certain other taxes which were paid by the settled tribes to the nomads, either at of harvest time, or for providing military services to Yathrib in time of need, or for the safe passage of their trade caravans through the respective nomadic areas. The Aws and Khazraj had close ties (alliances) with the powerful tribes of Amr bin Sa'sa'a, Banu Ghatafan and Banu Tamim in eastern Arabia. In addition, the smaller tribes of Juhayna, Ghifar, Aslam, Khuza'a and Ashja provided military services to the Yathribites in times of need. In return for their services, the town dwellers paid them certain taxes. For instance, *Kayla* (annual share of dates) for military services as well as for a safe passage in the Najd region was paid by the town dwellers to the nomadic tribes. Similarly, *Ufa* was granted a share of barley by the Iran settlement living in the region, from Banu I Sharid of the Sulaym. Yathrib and the surrounding fertile lands had a surplus amount of various agricultural products each year, and so they used them to buy various kinds of services from the nomadic tribes living around them. However, it should be noted that the payment of these various kinds of taxes to the nomads did not make any of the sedentary groups subordinated to the nomads. It was a give-and-take mechanism between the sedentary and the nomadic tribes (Lecker 2005: 59–65).

As far as the political significance of Yathrib for the contemporary superpowers, the Sassanid and Byzantine empires, is concerned, Michael Lecker's hypothesis of Byzantium's involvement behind the invitation of some of the Arab Yathribite leaders to the Prophet Muhammad and the resulting migration is of value. Lecker argues that the Byzantine emperor Heraclius and his Ghassanid *Phylarch* (the Arab border king or representative) were very interested in Yathrib as a lost Byzantine colony. In April 622 CE, about six months before the Prophet's migration, Heraclius set out to regain his lost territories in the region in order to strengthen his forces against the Sassanid occupations in Arabia. The political instability in Yathrib appealed to him, so Heraclius urged the Khazraj to strengthen their power against the Aws and the Jews by inviting the Prophet Muhammad to Yathrib to lead the Khazraj group. The Khazraj had a keen interest in gaining the Jews' orchards, sweet water springs and fortresses in the upper region of Yathrib, as well as gaining the upper hand over their rival Aws in the town. In support of this hypothesis, Lecker links the dates of Hera-

clius's advance towards the Arab borders, which took place in April 622 AD, followed by Khazraj's invitation in June 622 AD and the resultant migration of the Prophet Muhammad in September of the same year (Lecker 2005: 277–290).

Lecker's hypothesis needs to be re-examined. The importance of Yathrib, both from economic and political points of views, is undeniable for the then superpowers. On the other hand, the political developments in Yathrib since the Battle of Bu'ath in 617 AD are of great importance in this regard. The uneasy relationship between the Aws and the Khazraj houses and the agricultural rich soul of upper Yathrib favors Lecker's argument to some extent. However, the presence of eleven to twelve members of the Aws against seventy Khazraj in the Aqba meeting with the Prophet raises certain questions that need to be considered (Lecker 2005: 279).

### **POLITICAL SITUATION IN OTHER REGIONS**

In addition to Mecca and Yathrib, both of the emperors operated their spheres of influence in Arabia through their respective vassal kingdoms, the Ghassanids in the west between Arabia and Byzantium, and the Lakhmids at al-Hira in the east between Arab tribes and the Persian Empire. The Persian king controlled the border regions from Iraq to Bahrain through the king of al-Hira, who appointed Arab governors to collect taxes and protect Persian interests in the subordinate territories. In a similar way, Oman was controlled through an agreement with the local Julanda family. The Arab tribes received trade benefits from the Persian *marzuban* in return for their services. The nomadic Banu Sulaym and Banu Hawazan used to sell out Persian mercantile goods at the fair of *Ukaz* for the Persian Shah, with their due share of the business. Banu Tamim escorted Persian trade caravans between Ctesiphon and Yemin. However, the internal affairs of the tribes were expected to be independent of the Persian or al-Hira courts. The spirit of independence occupies a valuable place in pre-Islamic tribal historiography. Leaders of the Banu Tamim and Banu Taghlab held rights of *ridafa* or viceroyalty under the Lakhmid king. In addition to commercial cooperation, these leaders and their tribes served the military interests of al-Hira (the Persian emperor) when required (Lecker 2011: 163–166).

### **KINGDOMS OF NORTH AND CENTRAL ARABIA**

Apart from the great kingdoms of Saba and Himyar in the south, there was a number of smaller kingdoms in the north and central region of

Arabia during the pre-Islamic period. These were the Nabataean Kingdom, the Palmyrene Kingdom, the Ghassanid Kingdom, the Lakhmid Kingdom and the Kingdom of Kindah. In addition to extreme aridity, the tribes, chiefdoms and kingdoms of northern and central Arabia were often prey to the capricious political entanglement of the contemporary great powers in the region. These polities had to serve either Roman or Persian political interests rather than their own, which never allowed these peoples to grow like the southern Sabaeans or the Himyarites (Hoyland 2002: 58–59).

### THE NABATAEAN KINGDOM

The Nabataeans were Arab nomads who, after wandering the Arab deserts for years, reached the Transjordan region and got settled in Edom. Their power gradually grew until they wrested Petra from the Edomites and later extended their borders into neighboring regions. Their borders stretched from Tihama in the Hijaz region in the south to Damascus in the north. During the period of their glory, they reached as far south as Hegra and Duma (the Islamic Dumat al-Jandal) in Arabia. The Nabataeans are known in history since the fourth century BC, according to Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian of the first century BC. They may have been present in the region much earlier, but their exact arrival is unclear. Among their well-known kings, known in Roman sources as Malik or *Malchus*, are the names of Harithath or Aretas III, Obaydah or Obodus II, and the great Harithath or Aretas IV, under whom the Nabataean Kingdom reached its zenith of glory. The Arabic egalitarian spirit was evident in the way they were governed. Petra, with its goddess Al-lat, remained their religious center. The spice trade was their economic strength. Moreover, the metropolis of Petra also played an important role in providing shade and water for the trade caravans between the Mediterranean regions and the rich south Arabian kingdoms. The prosperity of trade in south was largely dependent on Petra. The Nabataeans remained completely independent until the beginning of the second century AD, when their charm faded and Petra finally came under the Roman flag by Emperor Trajan in 106 AD. Trajan transformed Arabia Petraea or Petra into *Provincia Arabia* (Hitti 1946: 67–74). Under Rome, Petra was reorganized as a military establishment against its long-standing enemy, the Parthians, and later remained in the same position between the Byzantine and Sassanid empires. Petra lost its commercial importance during the first two centuries AD, when the trade route was diverted to Palmyra (Holt, Lambton and Lewis 2008: 20).

### THE PALMYRENE EMPIRE

Palmyra, the Semitic Tadmur, was an ancient trading city in the Syrian Desert between Parthia and Rome. Its peace, prosperity and security largely depended on its neutral position between the two Empires. The city had plenty of fresh water reservoirs which made it an ideal location to serve as a center for trade caravans between East and West, as well as a commercial link between south and north. Palmyra's trade with China enhanced its importance among other northern cities. The story of the first Arab migration to the city is unconfirmed, and even the first settlement of any human race that ever lived there is silent. However, the frequent use of Arabic words and names in the Aramaic inscriptions and the reference to the existence of the Arab god Shamash (Sun) in the city support the Palmyrene lineage to the Arab stock. The earliest local inscriptions date back to the ninth century BCE, the time when Palmyra existed as a developed commercial city between Parthia and Rome. It was in 130 CE that the city was conquered by the Roman Emperor Hadrian, who named it *Hadriana Palmyra*. The city became one of the provincial cities under the Roman Emperor by the last decade of the second century CE. Palmyra became a Roman colony during the third century CE. However, the Palmyrenes enjoyed maximum independence under the Roman suzerainty. It was administered along the lines of the Greek city-state module (Hitti 1946: 74–78).

The most significant period in Palmyra's history came when the Palmyrene chief Odhaynath sided with the Roman army against the Sassanids and drove them out of Syria by defeating the Sassanid emperor Shapur I in 265 CE. Odhaynath was rewarded with the title of Imperator by the Roman emperor Gallienus, who made him master of the eastern Roman legions. However, Odhaynath and his eldest son were murdered soon, accused of conspiracy against the Roman Emperor. Odhaynath was succeeded by his minor son Wahb Allahth with his widowed queen Zenobia (Zaynab in Arabic) as her son's vicegerent. Queen Zenobia decided to take revenge of her husband and son on the suspect, the Roman Emperor. Zenobia was the bravest lady ruler Arabia had ever seen. She organized her husband's army, occupied Egypt and pushed the Roman garrison to the borders of Ankara. The Queen fought bravely against the Romans, but in 272 CE, she was defeated by Emperor Aurelian's army, whose military might and huge battalions were no match for her, and she was captured in golden chains. Aurelian also attacked Palmyra and destroyed it. The beautiful city was reduced to ruins. Palmyra experienced the greatest glory,

prosperity and fame ever achieved by the inhabitants of the Arabian Desert (Hoyland 2002: 75–76).

### THE GHASSANID KINGDOM

Some of the Arab tribes played a formidable role in the great political game between the Sassanid and Byzantine empires. Of these, the Ghassanids and the Lakhmids, who established their kingdoms on the north-western and north-eastern borders of the peninsula, were of great value. Both served as client states of the Byzantine and Persian empires, protecting their masters from Arab nomadic invaders and promoting their trade with the Saracens.

The Ghassanid lineage could be traced back to Amr Muzayqiya of the Azd tribal confederation. The Azd migrated from Yamin after the breach of the Ma'rib dam in the third century (Ulrich 2008: 313). One of Amr's children, Jafna, settled in Syria around 490 CE as a client king of Byzantium. Politically they merged with the Byzantine identity, but the Ghassanids kept their tribal life style alive to a greater extent. Tim Mackentosh Smith rightly asserts that the Ghassanids had one foot in the tent and the other in the courtroom. They lived a semi-mobile life. Their king resided in a tent palace near al-Jabiyah in the Golan hills. They played the role of the defenders of Byzantium's borders, keeping their land as a buffer zone against Arab nomads. In return, their services were rewarded with handsome financial and political incentives. The Ghassanid kings were given the title of *Phylarch*, a rank second only to the Byzantine emperor. Al-Harith II Ibn Jabalah was the famous *Phylarch* of the House of Ghassan during the sixth century of the Christian era. The Ghassanids guarded Byzantine trade in the peninsula and served the emperor in times of war. They were constantly engaged in wars with their neighboring Arab vassal kingdom, the Lakhmids, who patrolled the north-eastern Arab border under the patronage of the Persian king. The Ghassanid dynasty remained under Byzantine patronage until 636 CE, when its last ruler, Jabalah Ibn al-Ayham, was defeated by the Muslim army during the Caliphate of Umar I (Smith 2019: 77–79).

### THE LAKHMID KINGDOM

The Tanukh, commonly known as the Lakhmids, called themselves the southern Yaminite Arabs. Their migration northwards took place during the beginning of the third century CE. They settled in the fertile Tigro-Euphrates valley. Initially, they adopted a camp-based life style, but gradually they established a permanent settlement in the al-Hira

region of northern Arabia. Malik Ibn al-Fahm al-Azdi was known as the first Lakhmid chieftain in Iraq, whose son Jadhimah al-Abrash was regarded as a vessel of Ardashir. However, another Lakhmid chief Amr Ibn Adi Ibn Nasr Ibn Rabiya Ibn Lakham, was regarded as the founding father of the House of Lakham (Hitti 1946: 81–84). It was Amr who established his tribal kingdom with al-Hira as its permanent capital in the later part of the third century CE (Hoyland 2002: 78–82). The Lakhmid, as a vassal of the Persian court, proved a front-line enemy of the Byzantine-backed Ghassanids. Both Arab vassalages remained at rival terms throughout their history, protecting and supporting interests of their respective royal masters. In addition, the Lakhmids served the Persian interests in the major Arab lands in much the same way as their counterparts, the Ghassanids, did for Byzantium. They protected the Persian borders from the Arab nomads and developed their commercial links with the southern Arabian businessmen. They sold Persian goods at traditional Arab fairs, such as *Ukaz*, through their Arab representatives in the region. Al-Hira played an important role in tax collection from the conquered Arab settlements on behalf of the Persian king. The dynasty came to an end under al-Nu'man III Abu Qabus when the Persian king expelled him from al-Hira on false charges. After al-Nu'man, al-Hira was no longer a Persian vassal. The Persian king reorganized his rule in Arabia by appointing Persian governors who controlled Saracen affairs directly through the local tribal chiefs. This mechanism remained intact until the Muslim occupation of al-Hira in 633 CE under Khalid bin Walid (Hitti 1946: 81–84).

The Lakhmids under Persian patronage achieved a prestigious place among the Arab tribes, but not as high as attained by the Arab civilizations of Petra, Palmyra and the Ghassanids did under Syro-Byzantine influence. On the other hand, the role of the Christian religious class living in the lower lands of the Euphrates played an important role in bringing Christianity to Najran. It is important to note it down that all the kings of al-Hira were pagans, with the exception of its last ruler, al-Nu'man, who embraced Christianity. Moreover, al-Hira influenced the life of Mecca by introducing the system of writing and false beliefs into the *Haram* town (Hitti 1946: 84). Al-Hira also served as a hostage residence for the recalcitrant Arab chiefs, who usually refused to pay taxes or were involved in any kind of anti-king activities. By the sixth century CE, the capital had served as a forcible training ground for more than 500 sons of Arab chiefs. They were kept in a six-month confinement that changed lawbreakers for the rest

of their lives. If this did not work, the fugitive tribes were attacked and forced to surrender (Smith 2019: 80).

### THE CENTRAL ARABIAN KINGDOM OF KINDAH

The kingdom of Kindah, located in the Najd region of central Arabia, had its roots in ancient history. Sabaeen sources trace it back to the second century BCE, when it served as an Arab tribal confederation led by chiefs of the Kinadh branch of the southern Banu Qahtan tribe. It remained a client state of the Saba and Himyar for a long time. Its exact history can be found in the inscriptions of its political masters, the Sabaeans, dating back to the fourth century CE. Kindah's ancestral roots have been attributed to Thor bin Afeer bin Uday bin Al Harith bin Marra (Ali 2021: 3–5). The well-established king of the Kindite house was Hujr, surnamed Akil al-Murar, a stepbrother of the Himyarite Hassan Ibn Tubba, who was appointed as king of the Kindah in 480 CE after Tubba's conquest of the central Arabian tribes (Hitti 1946: 85). Many of the central and some northern Arabian tribes came under the banner of the Kindite confederation, either by occupation or alliance (Banu Bakr and Banu Taghalab). The tribes living in Bahrain and Najd were also polarized by the Kindite kings (Ali 2021: 5–6). Hujr was succeeded by his son Amr, who was the father of al-Harith, the most valiant of the Kindite kings. Al-Harith was an ambitious man. He wanted to occupy Iraq. He soon made an attempt to occupy the Lakhmid capital of al-Hira, taking advantage of the chaotic situation in the region following the death of the Persian Shah Qubadh. He conquered al-Hira in 529 CE. But his victory was short-lived. He lost al-Hira and his life to al-Mundhir III in the same year. Al-Harith's death proved to be the death blow for the Kindite power, as none of his sons proved worthy enough in any part of their father's kingdom to justify their position as king. They could not keep the various tribes of the confederation intact for long and rapidly lost their lands (Hitti 1946: 85). The kingdom of Kindah, which had been called the kingdom of *Kindahwas* (the Kindah of Kings) because perhaps the king himself used to reside in Wadi al-Rama, a place near Mecca in al-Hijaz, and placed various tribes under his sons as heads, eventually dispersed into a number of emirates. The last living emirate of the Kindite confederation at the dawn of Islam was at Dumat al-Jandal under Akidar bin Abd al-Malilk (Ali 2021: 5–6). Akidar or Ukaydir, who was a Christian by faith, converted to Islam in 630 CE in the wake of an Islamic expedition to Dumat al-Jandal under Khalid bin Walid, but there are traditions about Ukaydir's fate. Some say that he

later renounced Islam and fled to al-Hirah. But there is nothing to confirm the end of this last Kindite King (Charloux and Loreto 2014: 33).

With the dissolution of the Kindites, there was no way back to their former glory. One of the Kindite chiefs, Imrul Qais, the famous *Jahiliyah* poet and the composer of one of the Golden Odes, al-Mu'allaqat, tried to revive the glorious past of his Kindite ancestors. He even approached the Byzantine Emperor Justinian to seek his help against their common rival, the Lakhmids, but he failed in his attempt and lost his life on return from Byzantium in 540 CE (Hitti 1946: 84–85).

The role of Kindah in the development of Arab civilization in the Arabian Peninsula during ancient and late antiquity period is of great significance. Situated on the main trade route between Yemen and the northern commercial markets of Persia and Byzantium, Kindah served as a resting place for caravans travelling along this route. It also protected the trade caravans from attacks by Bedouin Arab tribes by escorting them with men of swords. The Kindite city of al-Faw enjoyed a unique position as a transit route for caravans and a highly favorable spot for the trade in frankincense, myrrh, tender trees and jewelry. In addition, the art of making statues and idols of a refined level was the specialty of the Kindite sculptors. They were also great architects. The archaeological ruins of water wells, buildings, shops and houses testify to the level of civilization achieved by these people. Kindah linked merchants and businessmen from Africa, India, Persia and the Mediterranean regions to the west. The importance of Kindah as a colony or vassalage under Saba and later on Himyar cannot be denied as far as the commercial prosperity of these Empires is concerned (Ali 2021: 8–11).

#### **POLITICAL SITUATION IN THE NORTH-EASTERN REGION**

Northeastern Arabia at the advent of Islam is a less discussed region in Muslim chronicles and historiography than the Hijaz region, the mainland where Islam was revealed (Abu Ezza 1979: 53). The available history of the area during the *Jahiliyah* is the result of the scraps of information gathered from Islamic and Persian sources, in addition to the more recent calculations provided by the archaeological surveys conducted in the region during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries of the modern era (Mouton 2009: 185–207). Late antique northeastern Arabia consisted of three sub-regions of Oman, Bahrain and Kazima (modern Kuwait) from south to north on the eastern side of the peninsula. These areas were under the control of the Sassanid al-Hira during their glorious days. The tribes of Abd al-Qays, Bakr bin Wa'il and



Tamim along with some other minor tribes dominated the region during the late antiquity. These tribes could be traced back to Tihama in western Arabia and Ma'rib in southern Arabia. However, Arab genealogists do not provide any exact date or event for the migration of the first three tribes to the eastern part. For the Azd, the Ma'rib event in the second century CE had been widely cited. Of the three, Abd al-Qays were the first to arrive, driving the Iyad clans from their homes in Bahrain. Bakr bin Wa'il were the second who came to the area after a fratricidal strife with their sister tribe, the Banu Taghalab bin Wa'il in Tihama. Bakr bin Wa'il defeated the Taghalab and moved towards Bahrain in the east, where they were not welcomed by Abd al-Qays. Bakr bin Wa'il tried to drive the Abd al-Qays out of the region which led to a long struggle between the two powerful tribal groups. However none of them managed to drive the other out of the region, and they eventually managed to live together in Bahrain. The third wave consisted of the Tamimites who, after a struggle against the other Mudarites, migrated eastwards and joined the two aforementioned tribes in the Bahrayn. Some of the Banu Tamim went to Yabrin and some had got settled in Oman with the Yaminite Azd. Another assumption traces the existence of the three tribes (Abd al-Qays, Bakr bin Wa'il and Tamim) in Persia between 330 BCE and 370 CE. It is reported that Shapur II (309–370 CE) of Persia expelled them from his lands which led to their migration to Bahrayn and other areas. In order to protect his empire from the Arab invaders, Shapur II tried to suppress the Arabs to the maximum. However, tribal resistance forced him to make alliances with them and he used the Arabs to secure his trade in the peninsula. As a result, some of the clans of Abd al-Qays, Bakr bin Wa'il and Banu Taghalab were allowed to settle down in Persia at Kirman and Ahwaz. Groups of the Taghalab went to Bahrayn, Darin or the ancient Samahij and al-Khatt, while some of the Abd al-Qays settled at Hajar in Bahrayn (Abu Ezza 1979: 53–54). The third north-eastern region of Arabia was Kazimah, reportedly inhabited by clans of Banu Taghalab, Banu Tamim and the Shayban clan of Bakr bin Wa'il. A constant conflict between the Tamimites and the al-Bakri clans is worth mentioning, up to the late antiquity in regional history (Ulrich 2012: 405).

It is important to note the involvement of north-eastern Arabia in international politics in the centuries before Islam. *Jahiliyah* Arabia had witnessed a long Persian presence in Oman, Bahrayn and Kazima, first through the Sassanid Lakhmid vassalage and later through the direct Persian governors, *marzabia* or *Marzuban*, after the fall of al-

Hira. The Lakhmid king used to administer Persian authority in the area under his control through the system of *ridafah*, where tribal chiefs acted as tribal representatives or viceroys in his Court. They were granted with money and lands. In return, these chiefs protected Persian interests in Arabia (Ulrich 2011: 380–383). They escorted Persian trade caravans through their territories to protect them from nomadic raids. They also sold Persian trade goods at Arab fairs. These tribes also served as a defense line at the Persian borders against nomadic invaders. However, these tribes were free to manage their internal affairs according to their tribal traditions (Lecker 2011: 163–166).

## CONCLUSION

The political structure of the Arabian Peninsula in late antiquity or the pre-Islamic period is a less explored and discussed area of research. This is due to the paucity of material on this period. Most of the local sources in Arabic were written in the ninth and tenth centuries CE, which tells us less about the period. However, the recent archaeological excavations have greatly aided researchers working on the history of the region, so there is hope for more information on the period in the future.

The pre-Islamic Arabian Peninsula had been remained an important trade route between India, Europe and Africa. The neighboring powers, including the Byzantine, Persian, and Ethiopian empires, had for the most part been engaged in expanding their spheres of influence in the region using diplomacy and weapons to undermine each other. They played a crucial role in turning pre-Islamic Arabia into a political entity. The region itself remained weak due to disunity and structural diversity. The Arabs were basically a tribal people and preferred to follow their tribal structure independently rather than to gather under a common ruler and devise a uniform law for the entire peninsula. This was the technical weakness that never allowed the Arabs to establish themselves as a powerful entity in the regional politics of the time.

In addition to the physical lifestyle of the peninsula, the region is unfortunately blessed with an arid, unfriendly ecological system. The topography allowed for the emergence of two distinct life styles in the region. The southern part or Yemen, which had a fertile soil and a rich agricultural environment, gave birth to a state mechanism, while the central and northern regions had a nomadic and slightly sedentary life ran under a purely tribal structure in an extremely harsh climate. Southern Arabia, with its rich economy, had a political and administra-

tive structure and an institutional life. Central and Northern Arabia, on the other hand, was a disunited and economically less developed area that rarely unify into an effective political zone. Prolonged inter-tribal warfare and adverse atmospheric conditions rarely allowed the region to develop a state structure and formal administrative mechanism.

Some of the Arab tribes in the central and northern regions had tried to establish themselves on a possible political level. They occupied lands, gathered some of the tribes under their banner, but the geographical location in which they attempted to establish some sort of political identity hardly favored them. The communities of Mecca, Yathrib and Duma, for instance, developed some sort of political structures. But these city-states or chiefdoms could not achieve independent status and economic prosperity. For the most part, they acted either as tax-payers or as servants, serving the interests of their masters. There were also a few small Arab kingdoms in the northern and central parts of Arabia. The Nabataea, the Palmyrene, the Ghassanid, the Lakhmid at al-Hira in the north and the kingdom of Kindah became politically significant in late antiquity. However, none of these polities, whether tribal chiefdoms or kingdoms, could ever compete with the well-developed Arab Empires of Saba and Himyar in the south. The bad fate of the northern and central polities, apart from the arid and unfriendly climate in which they were destined to be born, was largely determined by the international political scenario. Both types of political entities in northern and central Arabia remained either as vassalage or as tax-paying townships to support the political and economic life of the major political players of late antiquity, that is the Byzantine, the Sassanid, the Saba and the Himyar Empires.

However, keeping in view the geographical disparities and the natural transitional mechanism of the evolution of political entities from a crude singular form (tribe) to an early (chiefdom) and finally to an organized and complex political system (empire), the well-established dynasties in the south and the less organized political entities in central and northern Arabia should be accredited as a prelude to the political structure refined by Islam. In one way or another, they provided the foundations for the Muslim polity, which was built on the basic bricks of the political structure of late antiquity.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for their valuable feedback and insightful comments, which contributed greatly to the improvement of this article. Their expertise and suggestions were instrumental

in refining the content and improving the overall quality of this work. We are also thankful to Prof. Andrey Korotayev, one of the editors of the *Social Evolution and History* for sharing his valuable feedback and some very essential sources for the improvement of this paper.

<sup>2</sup> The Ma'rib dam was Saba's greatest architectural and engineering achievement. It was constructed around the eighth century BC in the ancient city and the Sabaean capital of Ma'rib, across the Dhana Valley from the northernmost to the southernmost Balaq. It was made of stone and earth. The walls of the dam were fifty feet high and about 197 feet wide. Its length was about 2,362 feet. The dam was used to store the monsoon rainwater, which in turn was used to enrich the fertility of the irrigated land. It was a major source of prosperity for the Sabaean Empire. However, it collapsed due to heavy rains and flooding. There are several legends about the destruction of the dam. Some say that it broke because of an earthquake, while others claim that the breach was caused by huge rats scratching at it with their nails and gnawing at it with their teeth (Al-Emadi, N.d.: 86–89). The dam was repaired several times. It broke in 450 CE and 543 CE, and in the second half of the sixth century CE the dam broke for the last time. Its remains can be found in Yemen today (Donner 1981: 3).

<sup>3</sup> The Holy Quran refers to the glory and prosperity of the Sabaeans, as well as their disobedience and the subsequent divine punishment of floods and draughts (Al-Quran 34:15-21). The story of the Queen Saba or Sheba is mentioned twice in the Bible (Kings 10:1-12 and Chronicles 9:1-13).

<sup>4</sup> Dhu Nawas was the last of the Himyar kings and ruled from 515 to 525 CE. He expanded the empire far and wide. He was a Christian but converted to Judaism. Not only that, he also forced his subjects to change their religion. This act of Dhu Nawas was highly criticized and led to the killing of hundreds of Christians in Najran. According to some legends, he dug a pit and burnt many Christians alive in the fire. It is believed, that this tragedy is referred to as 'Ashabal-Ukhlood' in 'Surat Burooj' of the Holy Quran (Al-Quran 85). The tragedy led Justin I of the Byzantine Empire to ask his Christian ally Negas Ella Asbeha of the Axum kingdom in Ethiopia to take revenge for his co-religionists killed in Najran. Negas sent his army and defeated Dhu Nawas. It is said that 'Dhu Nawas committed suicide in the Red Sea' (Johnson 2012: 279–282).

<sup>5</sup> The genealogical line of both of the tribes could be traced back to the Azd tribe of Yemen. Their great-grandfather Amr bin Amir migrated to Madinah around 300 CE and settled here. Aws and Khazraj were the two sons of Haritha bin Tha'laba bin Amr bin Amir.

<sup>6</sup> Amr bin al-It'naba, a member of the Harith bin al-Khazraj (more precisely, a sub-group of the Harith called Malik al-Agharr), was the grandfather of one of the Prophet's Companions, Qaraza bin Ka'b bin Amr. Another Companion, the poet Abdallah bin Rawaha, was the great-grandson of Amr. Abu Darda, the Qazi of Damascus during Uthman (RA), was also a great-grandson of Amr.

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Hisham%20(a.k.a.%20Abu%20Jahl)%20was,twenties%20because%20of%20his%20cleverness.&text=ceremonies%20like%20clothing%20the%20girls,were%20made%20in%20this%20building.

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