

Reading One

The history of Arab (1)

The Semites

The Arabs belong to¹ the great family of nations which on account of their supposed descent from Shem, the son of Noah, are commonly² known as the 'Semites.' This term includes³ the Babylonians and Assyrians, The Hebrews, the Phoenicians, the Aramaeans, the Abyssinians, the Sabaeans, and the Arabs, and although based on a classification that is not ethnologically precise⁴-the Phoenicians and Sabaeans, for example, being reckoned⁵ in Genesis, chapter x, among the descendants of Ham.

The Arabs as representatives of the semetic race

Notwithstanding⁶ the fact that Arabic is thus, in a sense, the youngest of the Semitic languages, it is generally allowed to be nearer akin than any of them to the original archetype, the Ursemitisch; from which they all are derived⁷ ^A, just as the Arabs, by reason of their geographical situation and the monotonous uniformity of desert life, have in some respects preserved the Semitic character more purely and exhibited it more distinctly⁸ than any people of the same family. From the period of the great Moslem conquests (700 A.D.) to the present day they have extended⁹ their language, religion, and culture over an enormous¹⁰ expanse of territory, far surpassing¹¹ that of all the ancient Semitic empires added together. It is true that the Arabs are no longer what they were in the Middle Ages, the ruling nation of the world, but loss of temporal power has only strengthened their spiritual dominion.

Islam still reigns supreme¹² in Western Asia; In Africa it has steadily advanced^A; even on European soil it has found in Turkey compensation for its banishment from Spain and Sicily.

Arabs of the north and south

From time immemorial, Arabia was divided¹³ ^A into North and South, not only by the trackless desert (al-Rub' al-Khali, the Solitary Quarter') which stretches across the

¹ be a member of; be related to; be connected with

² usually; widely; generally

³ contains

⁴ exact; correct

⁵ estimated; considered

⁶ although; whereas; despite

⁷ taken

⁸ more clearly

⁹ developed; enlarged; improved; advanced; promoted

¹⁰ Very large

¹¹ extend; go beyond; exceed

¹² having highest power and influence

¹³ separated; split

peninsula and form a natural barrier to intercourse, but also by the opposition¹⁴ of two kindred races widely differing in their character and way of life.

Whilst the inhabitants of the northern province (the Hijaz and the great central highland of Najd) were rude nomads sheltering¹⁵ in 'houses of hair' and ever shifting¹⁶ to and fro in search of food for their camels, the people of Yemen or Arabia Felix are first mentioned in history as the inheritors¹⁷ of an ancient civilisation and as the owners of fabulous¹⁸ wealth-spices, gold and precious stones¹⁹-which ministered to the luxury of king Solomon.

Ishmaelites and youqtanieds

It was, no doubt, the consciousness²⁰ of this racial distinction²¹ that caused the view to prevail among Moslem genealogists that the Arabs followed two separate lines of descent from their common ancestor, Sam b. Nuh (Shem, the son of Noah). As regards those of the North, their derivation from 'Adnan, a descendant of Isma'il (Ishmael) was universally recognized; those of the South were traced back to Qahtan.

Character of Muslem's genealogy

It is undeniable that these lineages are to some extent fictitious. There was no Pre-islamic science of genealogy, so that the first Muslem investigators had only confused and scanty²² traditions to work on.

They were biased, moreover, by political, religious, and other considerations. Thus, their study of the Koran and of biblical history led to the introduction of the patriarchs who stand at the head of their lists. may hold good if we restrict the term 'Yemenite' (Southern) to the civilised Sabaeans, Himyarites,&c., who dwelt²³ in Yemen. and spoke their own dialect, but can hardly apply to the Arabic-speaking 'Yemenite' Bedouins scattered all over the peninsula.

'Arabic in its widest signification has two principal dialects:

1. South Arabic, spoken in Yemen and including Sabaean, Himyarite, Minaean, with the kindred dialects of Mahra and Shihr.
2. Arabic proper, spoken in Arabia generally, exclusive of Yemen.

The Himyarite Empire was overthrown²⁴ by the Abyssinians in the sixth century after Christ, and by 600 A.D., South Arabic had become a dead language. From this time

¹⁴ *disagreement; quarell*

¹⁵ *taking refuge*

¹⁶ *moving from one place to another*

¹⁷ *owners; receivers*

¹⁸ *great; marvelouse*

¹⁹ *التوابل و الذهب و الأحجار الكريمة*

²⁰ *awareness; knowing*

²¹ *difference*

²² *little; not as much as is needed*

²³ *lived; settled*

²⁴ *defeated; collapsed*

forward the dialect of the North established²⁵ an almost universal supremacy and won for itself the title of 'Arabic' par excellence

²⁵ *gained; attained; obtained; got*

Reading Two

The history of Arabs (2)

The Oldest specimen of Arabic writing

The most ancient examples of Arabic writing which have hitherto²⁶ been discovered appear in the trilingual (Syriac, Greek, and Arabic) inscription of Zabad, south-east of Aleppo, dated 512 or 513 A.D., and the bilingual (Greek and Arabic) of Harran, dated 568 A.D. With these documents we need not concern ourselves further, especially²⁷ as their interpretation presents great difficulties. Very few among the Pre-islamic Arabs were able to read or write. Those who could generally owed their skill to Jewish and Christian teachers, or to the influence of foreign culture radiating from Hira and Ghassan. But although the Koran, which was first collected soon after the battle of Yamama (633 A.D.), is the oldest Arabic book, the beginnings of literary composition in the Arabic language can be traced back to an earlier period.

The pre-islamic poems

They were preserved²⁸ during hundreds of years by oral tradition, as we shall explain elsewhere, and were committed to writing, for the most part, by the Moslem scholars of the early 'Abbasid age, *i.e.*, between 750 and 900 A.D.

It is a noteworthy fact that the language of these poems, the authors of which represent many different tribes and districts of the peninsula, is one and the same. The dialectical variations²⁹ are too trivial to be taken into account.

When we find, however, that the language in question is employed not only by the wandering troubadours, who were often men of some culture, and the Christian Arabs of Hira on the Euphrates, but also by goat-herds, brigands, and illiterate Bedouins of every description, there is no doubt that in the poetry of the sixth century we hear the Arabic language as it was then spoken throughout the length and breadth of Arabia.

The Koran

The success of Muhammad and the conquests made by Islam under the Orthodox Caliphs gave an entirely new importance to this classical idiom. Arabic became the sacred language of the whole Moslem world. This was certainly due to the Koran. Moslems, who realized that the Koran was the Word of God and inimitable in point of style, naturally exalted³⁰ the dialect of the Prophet's tribe above all others. It was a commonly held belief that the speakers of other tribes spoke less purely in proportion to its distance from Mecca. The Koran, however, exercised a unique influence on the history of the Arabic language and literature.

²⁶ *so far, up to now, up to the present time*

²⁷ *particularly*

²⁸ *protected; saved; kept*

²⁹ *differences; changes*

³⁰ *praised; admired; honored; respected*

The unique character of the text of the Koran as well as the complexity and delicacy of the Arabic language caused the Moslems to invent a science of grammar and lexicography, and to collect the old Pre-Islamic poetry and traditions which must otherwise have perished³¹.

Arabic in the Islamic Empire

The purity of the classical language could no longer be maintained. While in Arabia itself, especially among the nomads of the desert, little difference was felt, in the provincial garrison towns and great centres of industry like Basra and Ku'fa, the door stood open for all sorts of depravation to creep in. Against this vulgar Arabic,³² the philologists waged unrelenting war, and it was mainly through their exertions that the classical idiom triumphed over the dangers to which it was exposed.

During the early middle Ages, it was spoken and written by all cultivated Moslems, of whatever nationality they might be, from the Indus to the Atlantic.

When the Mongol invasion³³ in the thirteenth century swept away³⁴ the Abbasid Caliphate, and hence the last vestige of political unity in Islam, classical Arabic ceased to be the common dialect of the Moslem world, and was supplanted in Arabia, Syria, Egypt, and other Arabic-speaking countries by a vulgar colloquial idiom. In these countries, however, it is still the language of business, literature, and education.

The Nabataeans

The Nabataeans (*Nabat*, pl. *Anbat*) settled in towns drove a flourishing trade long before the birth of Christ.

These Nabataeans were Arabs and spoke Arabic, although in default of a script of their own they used Aramaic for writing. Muslim authors identify them with the Aramaeans, but careful study of their inscriptions has shown that this view, which was accepted by Quatremere, is erroneous.

³¹ *destroyed*

³² اللغة العربية العامية

³³ *attack*

³⁴ *overpowered*

Reading Three

The history of Arabs (3)

Three periods of Arabian history

From what has been said the reader will perceive³⁵ that the history of the Arabs, so far as our knowledge of it is derived from Arabic sources, may be divided into the following periods:

1. The Sabaean and Himyarite period, from 800 B.C. the date of the oldest south Arabic inscriptions, to 500 A.D.
2. The Pre-islamic period (500-622 A.D.).
3. The Islamic period, beginning with the Migration (Hijra, or Hegira, as the word is generally written) of the Prophet from Mecca to Medina in 622 A.D. and extending to the present day.

The sabaean and Himyarites

For the first period, which is confined³⁶ to the history of Yemen or South Arabia, we have no contemporary Arabic sources except the inscriptions.

The pagan Arabs

The second period is called by Muslem writers the jahiliyya, i.e., the Age of Ignorance or Barbarism. Its characteristics are faithfully and vividly reflected in the songs and odes of the heathen poets which have come down to us. There was no prose literature at that time.

it was the poet's privilege³⁷ to sing the history of his own people, to record their genealogies, to celebrate their feats of arms, and to extol their virtues. Although an immense quantity of Pre-islamic verse has been lost for ever, we still possess a considerable remnant, which, together with the prose narratives compiled³⁸ by Moslem philologists and antiquaries, enables³⁹ us to picture the life of those wild days, in its larger aspects, accurately enough.

The Moslem Arabs

The last and by far the most important of the three periods comprises⁴⁰ the history of the Arabs under Islam.

³⁵ *understand; find out*

³⁶ *limited; restricted*

³⁷ *Preference; special right*

³⁸ *collected*

³⁹ *make possible for us to*

⁴⁰ *includes; contains*

The Life of Muhammad

About the beginning of the seventh century of the Christian era a man named Muhammad, son of Abdullah, of the tribe Quraysh, appeared in Mecca with a Divine revelation (Koran). He called on his fellow townsmen to renounce idolatry and worship the one God. In spite of ridicule and persecution, he continued for several years to preach the religion of Islam in Mecca, but, making little progress there, he migrated in 622 A.D. to the neighbouring city of Medina. From this date his cause prospered exceedingly⁴¹. During the next decade, the whole of Arabia submitted to his rule and did lip-service at least to the new faith.

The Orthodox Caliphate (632-661 A.D.).

On the death of the Prophet the Moslems were governed in turn by four of the most eminent among his Companions, Abu Bakr, `Umar, 'Uthman and 'Ali –who bore the title of *Khalifa* (Caliph), *i.e.*, Vicegerent, and are commonly described as the Orthodox Caliphs (*al-Khulafa al-Rashidun*).

The Umayyad Dynasty (661-750 A.D.)

On the killing of Ali, Mu'awiya succeeded to the Caliphate which remained in his family for ninety years.

The Abbasid Dynasty (750-1258 A.D.)

Hitherto the Arabs had played a dominant role in the Moslem community, and had treated the non-Arab Moslems with exasperating contempt. Now the tables were turned. We pass from the period of Arabian nationalism to one of Persian ascendancy and cosmopolitan culture. The flowers of the Abbasid troops were Persians from Khurasan. Baghdad, the wonderful Abbasid capital, was built on Persian soil; and Persian nobles filled the highest offices of state at the Abbasid court. The new dynasty, if not religious, was at least favourable to religion, and took care to live in the odour of sanctity. For a time, Arabs and Persians forgot their differences and worked together as good Moslems ought. Piety was no longer its own reward. Learning enjoyed munificent patronage. This was the Golden Age of Islam, which culminated⁴² in the glorious⁴³ reign of H`arun al-Rashid (786-809 A.D.). On his death, peace was broken once more, and the mighty empire began slowly to collapse. As Province after province cut itself loose from the Caliphate, while the Caliphs became helpless puppets in the hands of Turkish mercenaries. Their authority⁴⁴ was still formally recognized in most Islamic countries, but since the middle of the ninth century they had little or no real power.

⁴¹extremely

⁴²reach the highest point of development; climax

⁴³splendid; magnificent; brilliant

⁴⁴power

Reading Four

The history of Arabs (4)

From the Mongol invasion to the present day (1258A.D.)

The Mongol hordes under Hulagu captured Baghdad⁴⁵ in 1258 A.D. and made an end of the Caliphate. *Sweeping onward, they were checked⁴⁶ by the Egyptian Mamelukes and retired into Persia, where, some fifty years afterwards, they embraced Islam. The successors of Hulagu, the Il-khans, reigned in Persia until a second wave of barbarians under Timur spread devastation and anarchy through Western Asia (1380-1405 A.D.). The unity of Islam, in a political sense, was now destroyed. Out of the chaos three Islamic empires gradually took shape. In 1358 the Ottoman Turks crossed the Hellespont, in 1453 they entered Constantinople, and in 1517 Syria, Egypt, and Arabia were added to their dominions.

SABA AND HiMYAR

With the Sabaeans Arabian history, in the proper sense, may be said to begin. Among these are the peoples of `Ad and Thamud, which are constantly⁴⁷ held up in the Koran as terrible examples of the pride that goeth before destruction⁴⁸. The home of the `Adites was in Hadramawt, the province adjoining Yemen, on the borders of the desert named ahqafu `l-raml.

It is doubtful⁴⁹ whether they were Semits. They were a people of gigantic strength and stature, worshipping idols and committing all manner of wrong. Then a fearful drought fell upon the land of 'Ad. Then God drove the cloud until it stood over the land of 'Ad, and there issued from it a roaring wind that consumed the whole people except a few who had taken the prophet's warning to heart and had renounced idolatry.

The legend of 'Ad and 'Thamud

In North Arabia, between the Hijaz and Syria, dwelt the kindred race of T'hamud, described in the Koran (vii, 72) as inhabiting⁵⁰ houses which they cut for themselves in the rocks. Thamud sinned in the same way as 'Ad, and suffered a like fate. They refused to believe in the prophet Salih unless he should work a miracle. Salih then caused a she-camel big with young to come forth from a rock, and bade them do her no hurt, but one of the miscreants, Qudar the Red (al-Ahmar), hamstrung and killed her. "Whereupon⁵¹ a great earthquake overtook them with a noise of thunder, and in the morning they lay dead in their houses⁵²."

⁴⁵ got control of Baghdad by fighting

⁴⁶ stopped; prevented

⁴⁷ always; very often

⁴⁸ من الأمثال السائرة في الإنجليزية "Arrogance goeth before destruction" هذه العبارة التكثر مقدمة الهلاك

⁴⁹ uncertain; dubious

⁵⁰ living; dwelling

⁵¹ as a result of; in consequence of

⁵² فَأَخَذْتُهُمُ الرِّجْفَةَ فَأَصْبَحُوا فِي دَارِهِمْ جَائِعِينَ (37:29)

History of the Yoqtanids

The Pre-islamic history of the Yoqtanids, or Southern Arabs, on which we now enter, is virtually⁵³ the history of two peoples, the Sabaeans and the Himyarites, who formed the successive heads of a South Arabian empire extending from the Red Sea to the Persian Gulf. Saba (Sheba of the Old Testament) is often incorrectly used to denote the whole of Arabia Felix, whereas it was only one, though doubtless the first in power and importance, of several kingdoms, the names and capitals of which are set down in the works of Greek and Roman geographers. However exaggerated may be the glowing accounts that we find there of Sabaean wealth and magnificence, it is certain that Saba was a flourishing commercial state many centuries before the birth of Christ.

The prosperity of the Sabaeans lasted⁵⁴ until the Indian trade, instead of going overland, began to go by sea along the coast of Hadramawt and through the straits of Bab al-Mandab. In consequence of this change, which seems to have taken place⁵⁵ in the first century A.D., their power gradually declined, a great part of the population was forced to seek new homes in the north, their cities became desolate, and their massive aqueducts crumbled to pieces. The disappearance of the Sabaeans left the way open for a younger branch of the same stock, namely, the Himyarites or, as they are called by classical authors, Homeritae. The Himyarites never flourished like the Sabaeans.

The Himyarites

Their maritime situation exposed them more to attack, while the depopulation of the country had seriously weakened their military strength. Ultimately⁵⁶ the Himyarite Empire was reduced to a Persian dependency.

It had ceased to exist as a political power about a hundred years before the rise of Islam.

Note:

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⁵³practically; almost

⁵⁴continued; remained

⁵⁵happened; occurred

⁵⁶finally; at last; in the end; eventually

