

ARABS  
AND  
EMPIRES  
BEFORE ISLAM

*Edited by* GREG FISHER



OXFORD

*Arabs and Empires before Islam* illuminates the history of the Arabs before the emergence of Islam, collating nearly 250 translated extracts from an extensive array of ancient sources. Drawn from a broad period between the eighth century BC and the Middle Ages, the sources include texts originally written in Greek, Latin, Syriac, Persian, and Arabic, inscriptions in a variety of languages and alphabets, and discussions of archaeological sites from across the Near East. More than 20 international experts from the fields of archaeology, classics and ancient history, linguistics and philology, epigraphy, and art history provide detailed commentary and analysis on this diverse selection of material.

Richly illustrated with 16 colour plates, 15 maps, and over 70 in-text images, the volume provides a comprehensive, wide-ranging, and up-to-date examination of what ancient sources had to say about the politics, culture, and religion of the Arabs in the pre-Islamic period. It offers a full consideration of the traces which the Arabs have left in the epigraphic, literary, and archaeological records, and sheds light on their relationship with their often more powerful neighbours: the states and empires of the ancient Near East. *Arabs and Empires before Islam* gathers together a host of material never before collected into a single volume—some of which appears in English translation for the very first time—and provides a single point of reference for a vibrant and dynamic area of research.

**Jacket photograph:** Detail of tomb façade from Madā'in Šālih, ancient Hegrā, Saudi Arabia. Photograph by Greg Fisher.

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officers taxed the goods there; Gaza was incorporated into the Roman provincial system only in 4 BC, after the death of Herod.<sup>226</sup> Pliny also notes that in his time, or just before, a second harvesting of incense had been introduced, presumably to meet growing demand. The second harvest was gathered in the spring, but until the autumn unfavourable winds made maritime traffic in the Red Sea dangerous. The land route thus remained part of this vibrant commerce activity for at least all the first century AD, a date consistent with the last-known text from the Arabian Peninsula mentioning a caravan (2.25).<sup>227</sup>

Pliny, Strabo, Diodorus, and the others discussed here illustrate the different views of Arabs: romanticized nomads, tent-dwellers, traders, potential allies, and sometime enemies, spread over a vast region of the Near East. Between the fifth century BC and the early Roman imperial period, the pool of Graeco-Roman knowledge about Arabia had increased significantly through exploration and the growing dominance of Roman power. Still, though, there were many Arabias, and many populations could be called Arabs. The growth in knowledge was not always accompanied by greater precision in labelling, categorization, or understanding.

Greg Fisher and Ariel Lewin

### *The New Testament*

This multiplicity of opinions on Arabia, and Arabs, is further reflected in the New Testament:

Arabia and the Arabs in the New Testament

[1.23] Acts 2.8–11 (NIV).

Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Lybia near Cyrene; visitors from Rome (both Jews and converts to Judaism); Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues.

Here 'Arabs' are listed as one of the many peoples who received the Holy Spirit at the Pentecost in Jerusalem. The passage is more of a theological construction than a remembered historical event; its purpose is to stress the widespread participation of a diversity of populations. The list of peoples is divided into groups, with the Arabs mentioned in the same group as Judaeans, proselytes, and Cretans. A clue to the literary function of the Arabs here is suggested by the *Story of Aḥiqar*, the sayings of an Assyrian wise man from approximately five centuries before Acts. In the *Story of Aḥiqar*, the Arabs appear as the opposite of the Sidonians: Arabs designate the land-dwellers, while the

<sup>226</sup> Joseph. *BJ* 2.97; *AJ* 17.320.

<sup>227</sup> Lewin 1994: 112–13; Fiema 2003a: 38–43; Robin 2001a; see Hoyland 2001: 41.

Sidonians symbolize the maritime people. In the passage here we find a similar situation, where the Cretans take the role assumed by the Sidonians in the *Story of Ahiqar*, and so it seems that the term 'Arabs' is being used here to refer to people living around Judaea.<sup>228</sup>

[1.24] Galatians 1.15–17 (NIV)

But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus.

In this passage Paul narrates his journey to Arabia from Damascus. 'Arabia' is probably not a reference to Nabataea, as, in 2 Cor. 11.32, Paul says that his flight from Damascus was due to the animosity of a Nabataean official towards him. Instead, it has been argued that 'Arabia' should be understood in the context of Paul's adherence to the Law, which evoked the memory of Elijah.<sup>229</sup> Paul was thus perhaps travelling to the same region of the Sinai visited by Elijah, after his killing of the prophets of Baal, in order to gain an understanding of his mission.<sup>230</sup> This identification is strengthened by the prophetic lexicon detectable in Gal. 1.15, and by the fact that in Gal. 4.25, Mount Sinai is described as a mountain 'in Arabia'.<sup>231</sup> The parallel with Elijah is, however, by no means conclusive. In Acts 9.19–20, Paul informed people in Damascus about his intentions for missionary work, and so we might instead deduce that Paul travelled, probably as a missionary, to Trachonitis, a region close to Damascus, whose population is described as 'Arabs' by both Ptolemy and Strabo.

Donata Violante

### *Trajan and Septimius Severus*

Trajan (AD 98–117) expanded Rome's reach into Dacia, annexed the Nabataean kingdom as *Provincia Arabia*, and campaigned against the Parthians. Between 113 and 117 Trajan led an ambitious and successful expedition which briefly extended Roman rule to the Tigris river. In 115 Trajan attempted to reduce both Nisibis and Edessa, and found himself negotiating with Arab phylarchs—the Mannus mentioned above, as well as another, Sporaces. Both receive only a passing mention in the surviving parts of Cassius Dio's Greek eighty-book *Roman History*, and it is clear that they did not play a major role in the campaign.<sup>232</sup> In 117 Trajan attempted an assault on Ḥaṭrā; like that of

<sup>228</sup> Retsö 2003: 416–18. <sup>229</sup> See Gal. 1.13–4.

<sup>230</sup> 1 Kings 19.8. <sup>231</sup> Wright 1996.

<sup>232</sup> Cass. Dio 68.22. On Dio see Millar 1964; Andersen and Hohl 1975.