



A Roman legionary subdues a barbarian in a panel from the Arch of Constantine in Rome. Although the image itself is of Trajanic origin, enduring tenets of Roman imperial ethnology and ideology made this image as ideally suited to adorn the monument of a fourth-century emperor as it had been to illustrate the virtues of his second-century predecessor. The stubborn resistance of Roman imperial ethnology to change would eventually emerge as an important *topos* within early Islamic historiography.

"Do Prophets Come with a Sword?" Conquest, Empire, and Historical Narrative in the Early Islamic World

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IN THE NINTH CENTURY OF THE COMMON ERA, a Christian apologist living and writing under Muslim rule in Iraq repeated a very old critique of Islam. 'Ammār al-Baṣrī wrote that Islam, like the religion of the *Banū Isrā'īl* (roughly "the Sons of Israel"), had been spread by the sword, whereas Christianity forbade the use of the sword as a means of promulgating the faith.¹ However much we may doubt the assertion that late ancient and early medieval Christians scrupulously abstained from the use of the sword in spreading their religion, the Christian apologist clearly meant to suggest that Islam's history of faith-driven conquest had made moot any claims that Muslims may have advanced concerning the status of their religion as the one true religion of God upon the Earth.²

In tandem with its theological implications, this Christian author's critique of Islam's use of the sword also seems to have taken aim at the early Muslim community or *umma*'s organizing historical narratives about the origins of the Islamic community itself. For Muslims of the era, the events of the conquest period were recalled as a series of monumental episodes that located contemporary Islam and its adherents within an overarching narrative of prophecy, revelation, and salvation.³ Although 'Ammār al-Baṣrī was a Christian intellectual, he was intimately acquainted

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¹ 'Ammār al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-burhān*, in Michel Hayek, ed., *'Ammār al-Baṣrī: Apologie et controverses* (Beirut, 1977), 32–33. This critique appears, for example, in the seventh-century *Doctrina Jacobi Nuper Baptizati*, 5.16.11, ed. and French trans. Vincent Déroche, *Travaux et Mémoires* 11 (1991): 209, where a former Jew recalls that when he asked an elderly and learned Jew about the prophet who had appeared among the Saracens, the old man replied, "He is a false [prophet]. For do prophets come with a sword and a war chariot?"

² See Sidney Griffith, "'Ammār al-Baṣrī's *Kitāb al-Burhān*: Christian *Kalām* in the First Abbasid Century," *Le Muséon* 96 (1983): 145–181, esp. 164–165.

³ For the *futūḥ* in early Islamic thought, see Fred M. Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins: The Beginnings of Islamic Historical Writing* (Princeton, N.J., 1998), 174–182; Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests* (Princeton, N.J., 1981); Thomas Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community in Islamic Late Antiquity," *Past & Present* 185 (2004): 9–42; Lawrence I. Conrad, "The Conquest of Arwad: A Source Critical Study in the Historiography of the Early Medieval Near East," in Averil Cameron and Lawrence I. Conrad, eds., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East: Problems in the Literary Source Material* (Princeton, N.J., 1992), 317–401; Chase F. Robinson, *Empire and Elites after the Muslim Conquest: The Transformation of Northern Mesopotamia* (Cambridge, 2000).

with the holy texts of the Muslims—he was one of a group of Christian scholars who are believed to have often met and studied with local Muslim religious scholars—and he clearly understood the place of the conquests in Muslim sacred history.⁴ Indeed, the Iraqi Christian author seems to have alluded directly to this early Muslim interpretation of the conquests when, using the Arabic term favored in Muslim histories, he wrote that Muslims of his age boasted about the gains made by their community “with the sword” during the *futūḥ* (literally “openings” or “conquests”) of the lands taken by early Muslim armies.⁵

For the apologist’s Muslim contemporaries, however, to focus on the sword as the primary symbol of the conquests of the lands of the Eastern Roman and Sāsānid Persian empires was in many ways to miss the true significance of those conquests. The significance of the *futūḥ* as depicted in the texts of most of our early Muslim sources was the profound reordering of the present world that they brought about. This global reordering was in turn occasioned by the changes effected in the hearts and minds of Muḥammad’s followers and companions by the Prophet’s message and mission.⁶

For these Muslims, the great imperial powers of late antiquity represented crucial landmarks within the cultural, political, and religious environment that was realigned and remade by Muḥammad’s revelation.⁷ Perhaps paradoxically, however, the grand-scale changes wrought through conquest were but traces left upon the landscape of the present world by the far more profound transformation that had taken place in the hearts of those who had embraced Muḥammad’s message and mission. This

⁴ See Griffith, “‘Ammār al-Baṣrī’s *Kitāb al-Burhān*,” 146.

⁵ ‘Ammār al-Baṣrī, *Kitāb al-burhān*, ed. Hayek, 32–34. ‘Ammār uses the verb *fataḥa*, which is derived from the same root (*fā’-tā’-ḥā’*) from which the term *futūḥ* is derived. ‘Ammār seems to have been the kind of Christian religious scholar (*mutakallim*) to whom al-Jāḥiẓ (d. 255/868–869) referred in his tract *Al-Radd ‘alā al-Naṣārī* (Against the Christians) (in al-Jāḥiẓ, *Rasā’il al-Jāḥiẓ*, ed. Muḥammad Bāsil ‘Uyūn al-Saud, 4 vols. [Beirut, 2000], 3:243). Al-Jāḥiẓ says that the Christian *mutakallimūn* have favorite Qur’anic verses (e.g., Qur’ān 5, *Sūrat al-mā’ida*:82) that they memorize and deploy in argumentation; *ibid.*, 3:235. For the familiarity of Christian authors with Muslim historical narratives and the distinctive *topoi* of these narratives, see Robert Hoyland, “Arabic, Syriac and Greek Historiography in the First Abbasid Century: An Inquiry into Inter-Cultural Traffic,” *ARAM Periodical* 3 (1991): 211–233, esp. 223–233; Lawrence I. Conrad, “Theophanes and the Arabic Tradition: Some Indications of Intercultural Transmission,” *Byzantinische Forschungen* 15 (1988): 1–44.

⁶ See, for example, Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh al-rasul wa-’l-mulūk*, ed. M. J. de Goeje et al., 15 vols. (Leiden, 1887–1901), 1:2098; trans. Khalid Yahya Blankinship, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 11: *The Challenge to the Empires* (Albany, 1993), 96–97. For *futūḥ* as a theme, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 174–182; Albrecht Noth and Lawrence I. Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), 31–33, 109–171; Chase F. Robinson, “The Study of Islamic Historiography: A Progress Report,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, Series 3, 7, no. 2 (1997): 199–227, esp. 214–217.

⁷ One rich pool of sources of information concerning the role of the great empires of late antiquity in the imaginary of early Muslims is the corpus of very early exegetical texts. See Nadia Maria El Cheikh, “Sūrat al-Rūm: A Study of Exegetical Literature,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 118 (1998): 356–364; El Cheikh, “Muḥammad and Heraclius: A Study in Legitimacy,” *Studia Islamica* 89 (1999): 5–21. See also, for example, al-Ṭabarī’s explication of the term *al-nās* as it appears in *Sūrat al-anfāl*. Abū Ja’far Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 30 vols. (Cairo, 1954), 9:220. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2294–2295; trans. Yohanan Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 12: *The Battle of al-Qādisiyyah and the Conquest of Syria and Palestine, A.D. 635–637/A.H. 14–15* (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 89–90. See especially Friedmann’s note at 89 n. 305. Cf. Hūd b. Muḥakkam al-Hawwārī, *Tafsīr kitāb Allāh al-‘azīz*, ed. Bālḥāj b. Sa’id Sharīfī, 4 vols. (Beirut, 1990), 2:83; ‘Abd al-Razzāq b. Hammām al-Ṣan’ānī (al-Ḥimyarī), *Tafsīr al-Qur’ān*, ed. Muṣṭafā Muslim Muḥammad, 4 vols. (Riyad, 1989), 2b:257; Muqātil b. Sulaymān, *Tafsīr Muqātil b. Sulaymān*, ed. Aḥmad Farīd, 3 vols. (Beirut, 2003), 3:5–6; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi’ al-bayān ‘an ta’wīl al-Qur’ān*, 21:18–19.

otherwise invisible revolution of the spirit was, according to the contemporary Muslim narratives of Islam's birth and early growth, manifested in the character and behaviors of the men who carried Islam into the territories of the Romans and Persians.

By the time 'Ammār al-Baṣrī produced his *Kitāb al-burhān* (The Book of Proof), the text in which he claimed that true religion forbids that the sword be taken up in its service, Muslim authors had for a century and more crafted histories of the conquest period in which the purified souls of Muslim Arab *mujāhidūn* (practitioners of *jihād*) were manifested in their interactions with Roman and Persian imperial agents. In these texts, poor and pious Muslim warriors confronted and bested the armies of the great powers of late antiquity. Intriguingly, however, the meaning that these battles carried within the larger narrative of the conquest period (and so within the evolving metanarrative of Islam's formative past) was signaled in small, quiet meetings between Muslim and Roman warriors just before their respective armies clashed on the field. In a *topos* common to most early Muslim accounts of the conquests, Muslim authors framed the landmark battles of the period by setting poor and pious Muslim Arab warriors in dialogue with agents of Roman and Persian imperial power. The point of these meetings was always to allow the Muslim heroes to hear and reject offers of imperial beneficence, gifts, and friendship from the Romans and Persians they met.⁸

In so refusing, these early Muslim heroes were understood by later Muslims to have subverted, disrupted, and reinvented the place of the Arabs within the late ancient political world, and to have done so by means of a revolution fought and won in the hearts of Muḥammad's followers long before they appeared, swords in hand, on the horizon of Syria or Mesopotamia. Moreover, the narratives in which these claims were advanced seem to have taken the form that they did in part as a result of the centuries-long relationships between Rome and her Arab clients, allies, and enemies. This becomes apparent, however, only when we read later Roman and early Muslim sources *in tandem*, a strategy that has not yet gained wide currency among scholars of late antiquity and early Islam.⁹

Proceeding in this way, it becomes clear that many accounts preserved in later Roman histories concerning imperial relations with nomadic tribesmen in general and the Arabs in particular specify a fixed array of diplomatic tactics and strategies to be used in dealing with fractious frontier warriors. When we in turn survey the extant early Islamic Arabic accounts of relations between Arab tribesmen and Roman imperial officials during the first days of the conquests, these specific tactics and strategies emerge as crucial elements within the dominant early Muslim narrative of

⁸ See Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community," 29–38. See as an example the long series of such scenes collected in al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2268–2285; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:63–81. See also Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. 'Umar b. Gharāma al-'Amrawī and 'Alī Shīrī, 80 vols. (Beirut, 1995–2001), 2:81–82. On Ibn 'Asākir as a source for early Islamic history, see James E. Lindsey, ed., *Ibn 'Asākir and Early Islamic History* (Princeton, N.J., 2001). On the use of *topoi* in early Islamic historiography, see Noth and Conrad, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*; Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 266–271.

⁹ See Walter E. Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests* (Cambridge, 1992); Robinson, *Empire and Elites*; Chase F. Robinson, "The Conquest of Khūzistān: A Historiographical Reassessment," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 67 (2004): 14–39; Conrad, "Theophanes and the Arabic Tradition"; Hoyland, "Arabic, Syriac and Greek Historiography"; Robert Hoyland, "Writing the Biography of the Prophet Muhammad: Problems and Solutions," *History Compass* 5 (2007): 581–602; Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community."

the conquests, the advent of Islam as a community of God, and the establishment of an Islamic empire.

This approach to the early Islamic past represents a departure from a long-established scholarly tradition whose adherents have frequently found themselves frustrated in their aims. Formerly, the primary goal of most researchers was to determine how closely individual manifestations of early Islamic memory coincided with demonstrable historical fact. In so doing, these historians took it as their primary task to determine the value of various literary texts as documentary sources for the formulation of a narrative of early Islamic history "as it really was." Worthy though this pursuit may have been, it most often proved to be a project of diminishing returns for historians; the greater the scrutiny to which early Muslim texts were subjected, the less dependably "factual" information they tended to yield. By the 1970s and 1980s, some researchers had begun to despair of ever developing a satisfying portrait of the first centuries after the *hijra* (the seventh and eighth centuries C.E.), while others, although rather more optimistic, had nevertheless to admit that the challenges they faced in producing empiricist recollections of early Islamic history were indeed grave, if not absolutely intractable.¹⁰

A change is under way, however. Increasing awareness among Islamic specialists of the work of theorists in other fields has begun to profitably shift the focus of much research on early Islam. One particularly fertile strain of this research suggests that appreciating the development and character of the early Islamic *umma*'s origin narratives is crucial not only for understanding the imaginative bases for early Muslim identities, but also for tracing with greater nuance certain key political and cultural developments within the medieval Muslim community. The foundational work of Fred Donner on the formation of early Islamic communal narratives, for example, explores the evolution of these narratives from scattered oral histories and tribal battle accounts into highly elaborated written histories, and argues that it was in articulating these histories that the monotheistic Arab "community of believers" collected around Muḥammad's personality and prophecy defined itself as the "Muslim *umma*" known to history.¹¹

While Donner's work has proved invaluable for foregrounding the importance of narrative as a component of early Islamic history, beyond the field of Islamic history such scholars as Margaret Somers, Jerome Bruner, Francesca Polleta, Paul Ricoeur, and Hayden White have articulated a highly stimulating set of theoretical positions regarding the role of narrative in the hermeneutic processes whereby human subjects negotiate such problems as individual and communal identity, political

¹⁰ See, as examples, Patricia Crone and Michael Cook, *Hagarism: The Making of the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 1977); Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1980); G. R. Hawting, *The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam: From Polemic to History* (Cambridge, 1999); Andrew Rippin, "Literary Analysis of Qur'ān, Tafsīr and Sīra: The Methodologies of John Wansbrough," in Richard C. Martin, ed., *Approaches to Islam in Religious Studies* (Oxford, 2001), 151–163; Judith Koren and Yehuda D. Nevo, "Methodological Approaches to Islamic Studies," *Der Islam* 68 (1991): 87–107. For concise overviews, see Donner's "Introduction" to his *Narratives of Islamic Origins*; R. Stephen Humphreys, *Islamic History: A Framework for Inquiry* (Princeton, N.J., 1991), chap. 3; Robinson, "The Study of Islamic Historiography."

¹¹ Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*. See also Fred M. Donner, "From Believers to Muslims: Confessional Self-Identity in the Early Islamic Community," *al-Abhath* 50–51 (2002–2003): 9–53. I am indebted to Professor Donner for providing me with a copy of this article.

decision-making, and cultural patterning.¹² In turn, this body of research often coincides very usefully with current examinations of the roles of remembrance, memory production, and commemoration in the articulation of communal identities, whether these are national, ethnic, political, confessional, or some combination thereof.¹³ Although they differ in their objects of study, methodologies, and conclusions, most examples of this literature necessarily attend to the problem of narrative and narration.¹⁴ For many narratologists, this connection between memory and narrative can be explained by one simple but compelling argument: these scholars contend that the capacity of any human subject to imagine any past (or present or future) depends upon the arrangement of that past into either discrete but comprehensible episodes or a theme-driven story arranged into a plot, which in turn lends cohesive meaning to the characters and events from which that story is constructed.¹⁵

Many of these studies suggest that it is through memory—conceived of as an ever-evolving and socially constructed constellation of recollected episodes, characters, themes, truth claims, and plots, all inflected with meaning via the hermeneutic power of narrative—that individuals tend to locate themselves within specific social, political, and cultural matrices.¹⁶ That is, it is by understanding one's community and

¹² See Margaret R. Somers, "The Narrative Constitution of Identity: A Relationship and Network Approach," *Theory and Society* 23, no. 5 (1994): 605–660; Jerome Bruner, "The Narrative Construction of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1991): 1–21; Francesca Polleta, "Contending Stories: Narrative in Social Movements," *Qualitative Sociology* 21 (1998): 419–446; Polleta, "It Was Like a Fever . . .": Narrative and Identity in Social Protest," *Social Problems* 45 (1998): 137–159; Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer, 3 vols. (Chicago, 1984); Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," in W. J. Thomas Mitchell, ed., *On Narrative* (Chicago, 1981), 1–23. For the intersection of narrative and memory among the communities of late antiquity, see Thomas Sizgorich, "'Not Easily Were Stones Joined by the Strongest Bonds Pulled Asunder': Religious Violence and Imperial Order in the Later Roman World," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17 (2007): 75–101, esp. 76–79, 97–101.

¹³ The literature on the role of memory in the humanities and social sciences is vast and growing prodigiously. See, as concise overviews of the growth of the field, Natalie Zemon Davis and Randolph Stern, "Introduction," *Representations* 26 (1989): 1–6; Susan A. Crane, "Writing the Individual Back into Collective Memory," *American Historical Review* 102, no. 5 (December 1997): 1372–1385; Kerwin Lee Klein, "On the Emergence of Memory in Historical Discourse," *Representations* 69 (2000): 127–150; Hue-Tam Ho Tai, "Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory," *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 906–922; David Berliner, "The Abuses of Memory: Reflections on the Memory Boom in Anthropology," *Anthropological Quarterly* 78 (2005): 197–211. See also Daniel J. Sherman, *The Construction of Memory in Interwar France* (Chicago, 1999); Katherine Hodgkin and Susannah Radstone, eds., *Contested Pasts: The Politics of Memory* (London, 2003); Edward Said, "Invention, Memory and Place," *Critical Inquiry* 26 (2000): 175–192.

¹⁴ See, for example, John Seed, "History and Narrative Identity: Religious Dissent and the Politics of Memory in Eighteenth-Century England," *Journal of British Studies* 44 (2005): 46–63; Thomas A. Abercrombie, *Pathways of Memory and Power: Ethnography and History among the Andean People* (Madison, Wis., 1998), 12–15.

¹⁵ For the "narrative vs. episode debate," see Paul John Eakin, "What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?" *Narrative* 12 (2004): 121–132; George Butte, "I Know That I Know That I Know: Reflections on Paul John Eakin's 'What Are We Reading When We Read Autobiography?'" *Narrative* 13 (2005): 299–306; James Phelan, "Who's Here? Thoughts on Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism," *Narrative* 13 (2005): 205–210; Paul John Eakin, "Selfhood, Autobiography, and Interdisciplinary Inquiry: A Reply to George Butte," *Narrative* 13 (2005): 307–311; Galen Strawson, "Against Narrativity," *Ratio* 17 (2004): 428–452; Paul John Eakin, "Narrative Identity and Narrative Imperialism: A Response to Galen Strawson and James Phelan," *Narrative* 14 (2006): 180–187.

¹⁶ See Seed, "History and Narrative Identity," 46–47, 61–63. See also Ronald Grigor Suny, "Constructing Primordialism: Old Histories for New Nations," *The Journal of Modern History* 71 (2001): 862–896; Suny, "Provisional Stabilities: The Politics of Identities in Post-Soviet Eurasia," *International Security* 24, no. 3 (2000): 139–178.

communal self as actors in a procession of past episodes—all of them impregnated with specific and often even metaphysical meaning, and all of them culminating in the contemporary social and political order—that one can come to understand as innate not only the legal, social, and political boundaries that give shape to the known world, but also the normative relations between individuals and communities mandated by those boundaries.¹⁷

For historians of early Islam, the application of these insights can bring new life and new possibilities to very old and much-worried problems. In particular, attention to the question of early Islamic communal memory, specifically the forms that it took and the resources with which it was articulated, has the potential to dramatically elucidate the cultural, political, and social circumstances in which early Muslims thought and wrote. In better understanding these circumstances, it may then be possible to better understand how and why the early Muslim community came to define itself in the ways that it did, and why its members fashioned themselves and their empire as they did. Once we can more readily comprehend these matters, it becomes possible to more effectively address many of the underlying questions that have so motivated empirically minded Islam scholars over the past centuries. In a move that would likely have surprised those scholars, however, we will begin by asking what certain pre-Islamic Roman sources can tell us about the ways in which the early Muslim community recalled its past.

OUR ROMAN SOURCES FOR THE EVENTS OF THE CONQUESTS frequently leave much to be desired.¹⁸ In composite, they often allow us to say with surety only that one day soon after the final Roman defeat of the Persian Sāsānid shah, Roman imperial officials looked out across the great expanses of the Syrian steppe and watched the approach of mounted Arab warriors. From Roman texts of a slightly earlier era, we know that they and generations of their predecessors on Rome's eastern frontiers had seen this many times before. For the Roman soldiers and administrators re-

¹⁷ See, for example, Sherman, *The Construction of Memory*; Sizgorich, "Not Easily Were Stones Joined," 95–101; Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Mémoire*," *Representations* 26 (1989): 7–24; Pierre Nora and Lawrence D. Krizman, eds., *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past*, trans. Arthur Goldhammer, 3 vols. (New York, 1996–1998); Hue-Tam, "Remembered Realms"; Michael Feige, "Introduction: Rethinking Israeli Memory and Identity," *Israeli Studies* 7 (2002): v–xiv; John R. Gold and Margaret M. Gold, "The Graves of the Gallant Highlanders': Memory, Interpretation and Narratives of Culloden," *History & Memory* 19 (2007): 5–38. Following Maurice Halbwachs's work on "collective memory," most treatments of the question of memory now underscore the ways in which the cultural and political circumstances in which human subjects imagine the past tend to determine the ways in which particular pasts are envisioned by both individuals and communities. Accordingly, as a process of alternately recalling and forgetting, the social production of memory can be understood as a process by which possible iterations of the past are assembled not only to reflect the concerns of the contemporary social, cultural, and political order, but with semiotic figures selected from a much larger universe of possible signs and symbols. See Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, ed. and trans. Lewis A. Coser (Chicago, 1992). See also Jan Assmann and John Czaplicka, "Collective Memory and Cultural Identity," *New German Critique* 65 (1995): 125–133. On the "rediscovery" of Halbwachs's work, see F. R. Ankersmit, *Historical Representation* (Stanford, Calif., 2001), 155–160; Michael Rothberg, "Between Auschwitz and Algeria: Multidirectional Memory and the Counterpublic Witness," *Critical Inquiry* 33 (2006): 158–184.

¹⁸ For an admirable analytical survey of non-Muslim sources for the conquest period, see Robert Hoyland, *Seeing Islam As Others Saw It: A Survey and Evaluation of Christian, Jewish and Zoroastrian Writings on Early Islam* (Princeton, N.J., 1997).

sponsible for the maintenance of order on the eastern deserts, bands of nomadic warriors had come to represent both a persistent dilemma and a vital resource.¹⁹ For centuries, the Arab clients of the two empires had served as dreaded light infantry, whose raids across those empires' frontiers represented a crucial component of each army's tactical array. Through the fifth and sixth centuries, powerful Arab tribal confederations had become each empire's first line of defense against nomadic raids and large-scale invasions.²⁰

As they watched the Arab bands ride toward them, these Roman soldiers and officials would have had at their disposal an old and well-tested diplomatic strategy for handling troublesome Arab tribesmen. Whether they faced small but threatening bands of Arab raiders or found themselves in need of the support of large tribal confederations, the Romans' diplomatic strategies with regard to the Arabs were regularly predicated upon strategic exchanges of capital in the forms of gifts, honors, and titles.²¹ It was through such exchanges that they built ties of obligation with their

¹⁹ Irfan Shahid has insisted upon the sedentary nature of the Ghassānid allies of Rome, and I have no desire to take issue with him on this point. In what follows, however, I will refer to the Arabs as they appear in our sources—that is, as they are described by such Roman authors as Procopius, Menander Protector, and Theophylact Simocatta. These authors interpret the Arabs they describe through the prism of Roman ethnographic traditions concerning nomads in general and Arab nomads in particular. It is also clear, as I will suggest below, that the diplomatic strategies described by these sources were imagined on the model of those that were deployed with regard to other "nomadic" peoples, such as the Huns. See the comments of Elizabeth Key Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain: Saint Sergius between Rome and Iran* (Berkeley, Calif., 1999), 141–144; and Shahid's review of *The Barbarian Plain* in the *Catholic Historical Review* 86 (2000): 650–652, esp. 651. For the pastoralist in the Roman ethnographic imaginary, see Brent D. Shaw, "Eaters of Flesh, Drinkers of Milk: The Ancient Mediterranean Ideology of the Pastoral Nomad," *Ancient Society* 13/14 (1982): 5–31. For the Arabs, see Elizabeth M. Jeffreys, "The Image of the Arabs in Byzantine Literature," in *The 17th International Byzantine Congress: Major Papers, Dumbarton Oaks/Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., August 3–8, 1986* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1986), 305–323; J. B. Segal, "Arabs in Syriac Literature before the Rise of Islam," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 4 (1984): 89–123. For the Ghassānids, see Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century*, vol. 1, pt. 1: *Political and Military History* (Washington, D.C., 1995); Mark Whittow, "Rome and the Jafnids: Writing the History of a 6th-C. Tribal Dynasty," in John H. Humphrey, ed., *The Roman and Byzantine Near East: Some Recent Archaeological Research, Volume 2* (Portsmouth, R.I., 1999), 207–224; Theodor Nöldeke, *Die Ghassānischen Fürsten aus dem Hause Gafna's* (Berlin, 1887). For the Lakhmids, see Gustav Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lahmiden in al-Hira: Ein Versuch zur arabisch-persischen Geschichte zur Zeit der Sasaniden* (1899; repr., Hildesheim, 1968).

²⁰ See, for example, Procopius's comments concerning Persia's Lakhmid allies; *History of the Wars, Books I and II* [hereafter *Wars*], ed. and trans. H. B. Dewing (1914; Cambridge, Mass., 1961), 1.17.40–48. All references are to this edition and translation. See also Lawrence I. Conrad, "The Arabs," in Averil Cameron, Bryan Ward-Perkins, and Michael Whitby, eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, vol. 14: *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, A.D. 425–600* (Cambridge, 2000), 678–700, esp. 689–695; C. E. Bosworth, "Iran and the Arabs before Islam," in Ehsan Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3(1): *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (Cambridge, 1983), 593–612; David F. Graf, "The Saracens and the Defense of the Arabian Frontier," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 229 (1978): 1–26, esp. 16–17; Kaegi, *Byzantium and the Early Islamic Conquests*, 52–65; Philip Mayerson, "The Saracens and the Limes," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 262 (1986): 35–47, esp. 43–47; Mayerson, "The First Muslim Attacks on Southern Palestine (A.D. 633–634)," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 95 (1964): 155–199. For an overview of Roman-Sasanian relations, see James Howard-Johnston, "The Two Great Powers in Late Antiquity: A Comparison," in Averil Cameron, ed., *The Byzantine and Early Islamic Near East*, vol. 3: *States, Resources and Armies* (Princeton, N.J., 1995), 157–226.

²¹ See, for example, Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.47. For the enticements with which the Romans seem to have incited Arab cooperation, see Irfan Shahid, "Philological Observations on the Namāra Inscription," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 24 (1979): 429–436. A. F. L. Beeston, "Nemara and Faw," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 42 (1979): 1–6; G. W. Bowersock, *Roman Arabia* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), chap. 10; James A. Bellamy, "A New Reading for the Nemarah Inscription," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 105 (1985): 31–51; Evangelos K. Chrysos, "The Title Basileus in Early Byzantine

nomadic allies, or bought off troublesome war bands intent on raiding Roman settlements or caravan routes. Wars with nomads were profitless and exceedingly difficult, and nomads, as every Roman knew, were unsuited for inclusion in the ordering bounds of Roman *imperium*.²² Accordingly, the strategies with which the Romans handled Arab tribesmen reflected quite closely the policies with which they dealt with other nomadic peoples, most notably the Huns.²³

Indeed, it was because nomadic Arabs were, in Roman eyes, roving, rootless barbarians who could not be civilized, and whose desert domains were inhospitable to *romanitas* (roughly "Roman-ness") and the imperial Roman "civilized ideal" of *humanitas*, that strategies of gift exchange were ideally suited to the pursuance of Rome's imperial agenda on the eastern frontier.²⁴ Through exchanges of gifts, Arab tribesmen could be bound to the Roman (or Persian) Empire in a way that could not be achieved via Rome's other, preferred methods of inciting consensus and compliance. The Arabs of the desert seemed to have no need of access to Roman law, for example; nor would those Arabs who dwelled in the border spaces between empires have had much occasion to interact with the Roman state on the basis of a shared culture, encounters with officialdom, or public performances of *romanitas* of the sort that linked settled and urbanized Roman provincials to the centralized government.²⁵ Meanwhile, direct coercion of the Arabs who resided in the borderlands that stretched between the two empires was particularly tricky for the Romans, because if pressured, the Arabs could ally with their Persian enemies, turn their fighting prowess back on their former masters, or simply fade away into the desert, where the settled peoples dared not follow.²⁶ Despite these difficulties, however, throughout the fifth and sixth centuries, the Arabs were increasingly crucial to the defense of the Romans' eastern domains.²⁷

Relations," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 32 (1978): 50–51; C. D. Gordon, "Subsidies in Roman Imperial Defense," *Phoenix* 3 (1949): 60–69.

²² See Clifford Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty in the Roman Empire* (Berkeley, Calif., 2000), 325–326. See also Procopius, *Wars*, 2.10.23–24. For nomads motivated by the poverty of native lands, see Strabo, *Geographica*, 17.3.15, in *The Geography of Strabo*, ed. and trans. Horace Leonard Jones, 8 vols. (London, 1917–1933). All references are to this edition and translation. For nomads as weak, poor fighters, see *ibid.*, 16.4.23, 17.1.3.

²³ See, for example, Procopius, *Wars*, 2.1.12–15 and 2.3.47. See also *ibid.*, 2.10.20–24.

²⁴ For *humanitas* in Roman imperial and ethnographic thought, see Greg Woolf, *Becoming Roman: The Origins of Provincial Civilization in Gaul* (Cambridge, 1998), 16, 54–76.

²⁵ Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty*, esp. 41–42, 73–80, 101–108, 131–138, 206–215; Woolf, *Becoming Roman*, chap. 3. For some strategies undertaken by Justinian as means for inciting compliance among local populations during his sixth-century reconquest of formerly "Roman" territories in Italy and North Africa, see Charles Pazdernik, "Procopius and Thucydides on the Labors of War: Belisarius and Brasidas in the Field," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 130 (2000): 149–187. The strategies examined by Pazdernik, which involved stressing a common "Roman" past shared by the occupants of those lands and the invading army, and declaring that the invasion represented a restoration of "freedom" to Romans "enslaved" by Gothic and Vandal barbarians, would also have found little to recommend them in relations with nomadic or settled Arabs.

²⁶ See Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 44.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 43–49. In the late sixth century, changes in Roman policy toward the Arabs under the emperor Maurice seriously diminished the power of Ghassān, Rome's long-time ally, and created an array of smaller tribal groups with which the Romans could negotiate. See F. E. Peters, "Introduction," in Peters, ed., *The Arabs and Arabia on the Eve of Islam* (Aldershot, 1999), esp. xxii–xxiii. In the early seventh century, we are told, Heraclius suspended payments to some Arab tribesmen in service of the empire. See Theophanes Confessor, *Chronographia*, AM 6123 (631–632 C.E.), ed. C. de Boor, 2 vols. (1883; repr., Hildesheim, 1963), 1:335–336; Nikephoros, *Breviarium*, 20.11–21, in Cyril Mango, ed. and

The strategies favored by the Romans in their dealings with the Arab tribes emerge from our sources in scattered anecdotes. In the Roman author Procopius's sixth-century history of the emperor Justinian's wars, for example, we read of an exchange of gifts that took place between Justinian (ca. 482–565) and a band of Syrian nomads. The exchange began when a particularly formidable group of nomads gave the emperor a grove of palm trees, to which the emperor responded with a gift of his own. As Procopius points out, however, the palm grove given to Justinian was the "mere form of a gift": it was inaccessible to anyone but the nomads themselves because of its desert location. What Justinian had really received, Procopius says, was the allegiance of the nomads against the enemies of the empire.²⁸

Elsewhere we learn that Justinian made a practice of bestowing gifts even upon the Arab allies of Persia during a period of peace between the two empires. He did so, we are told, because he felt sorry for the "leaderless" desert nomads, and so entered into an exchange of gifts with them. When his nephew and successor Justin II (d. 578) ended the practice, however, the Arabs protested that from their point of view, Justinian's gifts had been a sort of payoff to buy their forbearance from the raiding of Roman lands. The Romans took strenuous objection to this, insisting that the relationship had been an exchange between the emperor and the Arabs based on altruistic benevolence on Justinian's part.²⁹ In any case, the Romans and Persians tended to agree that one could not expect much from nomads in the way of loyalty.³⁰ Nevertheless, Justinian and his predecessors seem to have given frequently and liberally in their exchanges with nomads, particularly Arabs.³¹

In addition to material items, the Romans and the Persians bestowed honors upon their Arab allies, and these seem to have become an important aspect of the prestige economy of pre-Islamic Arabs. Titles including "King of the Arabs" and such honors as the chance to take one's place among the great men of the Romans were bits of capital distributed to the Arab allies of both empires, and competition for them could be deadly. Moreover, the capital accrued from relations with the imperial powers was used by powerful tribal entities including the Ghassānids and Lakhmids as a means of consolidating and widening their influence within Arab tribal politics.³²

trans., *Nikephoros, Patriarch of Constantinople: Short History* (Washington, D.C., 1990), 68 (Greek), 69 (English). See also n. 40 below.

²⁸ Procopius, *Wars*, 1.19.8–16.

²⁹ See Menander Protector, *History*, Fragment 9.1.29–95, in R. C. Blockley, ed. and trans., *The History of Menander the Guardsman* (Liverpool, 1985), 98, 100, 102 (Greek), 99, 101, 103 (English).

³⁰ The late-sixth-/early-seventh-century Roman historian Theophylact Simocatta wrote that the "Saracen tribe is known to be most unreliable and fickle, their mind is not steadfast and their judgment is not firmly grounded in prudence"; *History*, 3.17.7, trans. Michael Whitby and Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta* (Oxford, 1986), 99–100. Elsewhere, the sixth-century Roman historian Menander Protector reports that one Roman envoy to the Persian court urged his listeners, "When I say 'Saracens,' think, Medes, upon the uncouthness and unreliability of that people," as he discussed a dispute involving the Arab tribes allied with the Persians; *History*, Fragment 9.1.67–69, in Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, 100 (Greek), 101 (English). See also Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.47–48, where Procopius expresses doubt about the loyalty of the Roman Ghassānid ally Hārith, and wonders whether his lack of success in the field after becoming a Roman ally resulted from his "having turned traitor as quickly as possible."

³¹ For the early origins of such arrangements, see Strabo, *Geographica*, 16.1.28; Procopius, *Wars*, 1.19.32–35.

³² See Donner, *Early Islamic Conquests*, 43–49. For the use of titles such as "King of the Arabs," see

Negotiations for such tokens of imperially granted capital could begin with attacks by the Arabs against the territories or interests of their imperial neighbors. In the fifth century, for example, an Arab warrior once allied with the Persians attacked some Roman territories, routed the Romans' Arab allies, kicked out the Roman tax collectors, and began collecting taxes himself. Then he sent the bishop of his tribe to negotiate with the Romans. In the end, the Arab chieftain went to the imperial capital, exchanged gifts with the emperor, and was allowed to sit among the great men of the Romans. It was this last honor that our Roman source for this incident, Malchus of Philadelphia, found most disturbing; that so great an honor should be paid to a barbarian was unheard of, he said, and was simply too much for the Roman people to bear.³³ This may have been a bitter concession in the estimation of the elites of the Eastern Roman capital of Constantinople, but on the frontiers of the empire that it was the emperor's duty to defend, such exchanges of prized capital with formidable Arab chieftains were the one semi-dependable means of ensuring the compliance of restive and potentially dangerous Arab tribesmen.

And so as our seventh-century Roman imperial officials watched the approach of those Arab raiders, they likely had in mind a plan for dealing with them, one crafted in accordance with a centuries-old mode of diplomatic comportment with regard to nomadic Arabs. If necessary, they would pay the Arabs off, and if possible, they would bind them to the service of the Roman imperial state through gifts of treasure and honor. Then, presumably, with the barbarians pacified and co-opted, the world would go on as it had for the better part of a millennium.

OUR MUSLIM SOURCES FOR THE CONQUEST PERIOD are both more plentiful and in some ways more problematic than our Roman sources. Transmitted orally for unknown and invisible periods of years, and set down in writing more than a century after the events they describe, they speak to us through the use of persistent *topoi* and abstracted, stylized narratives.³⁴ Those narratives tell us repeatedly that one day soon after the death of the Prophet, a band of Arab *mujāhidūn*, practitioners of *jihād* "on the path of God," approached the Roman army in Syria. These warriors were mounted on horses and camels and dressed for riding. Some of them, we are told, wore their hair plaited "like the horns of a goat." Many of them were all but naked; some of them carried only rudimentary weapons and wore no armor, while others bristled with weapons and sported coats of chain mail. They were members of a community that had cohered around the revelation of a Meccan merchant, that had endured persecution, and that had, in time, won control of Arabia. Now they had

Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.47. See also Shahid, "Philological Observations on the Namāra Inscription"; Beeston, "Nemara and Faw"; Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, 138–147; Bellamy, "A New Reading for the Nemarah Inscription"; Chrysos, "The Title Basileus in Early Byzantine Relations." For the potentially lethal competition over these titles, see Abū l-Faraj 'Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Isfahānī, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 20 vols. (1868; repr., Beirut, 1970), 2:104–107, and below.

³³ Malchus, Fragment 1, in R. C. Blockley, ed. and trans., *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire* (Liverpool, 1983), 404, 406 (Greek), 405, 407 (English). For this incident, see Irfan Shahid, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century* (Washington, D.C., 1989), 59–113.

³⁴ See Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*; Humphreys, *Islamic History*, chap. 3; Robinson, "The Study of Islamic Historiography."

come to call the peoples of the areas outside of Arabia to embrace the revelation of their prophet.³⁵

As recalled by their descendants more than a century later, these men were defined by their intransigence, their ascetic virtue, and their piety. They were taken as models for the fashioning of specifically Muslim selves by those descendants, and as the agents of God in the "opening" of the lands of Syria, Mesopotamia, and Egypt to the Arab Muslim *umma*, the one true community of God upon the Earth.³⁶ The lands they would conquer would become the imperial patrimony of those descendants, and the stories told about them would become the basis for a specifically Islamic imperial narrative, the story of the founding of God's final empire. It was the function of those stories to explain how the creation of that empire had been a manifestation of God's will and proof of the truth of Muḥammad's revelation.³⁷ Over the space of centuries, the descendants of the ragged and ultimately victorious Muslim army that rode onto the field opposite the mighty Roman army would draw upon two modes of remembrance as they narrated the story of the conquests.

On the one hand, the Muslim authors of the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries often drew upon a lexicon of signs and symbols common to many late antique communities in order to craft portraits of their imagined forebears and their deeds.³⁸ The figure of the Christian monk, for example, recurs frequently in very early Muslim texts as a model upon which the image of conquest-era *mujāhidūn* is fashioned, just as the institution of Christian monasticism was evoked as one means of communicating the essential character of *jihād*.³⁹

In concert with this "late antique" semiotic system, however, the narrative of

³⁵ For the appearance and character of early *mujāhidūn*, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2271, 2274–2275, 2351; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:66–67, 70–71, 130–131. See Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1.197, for the array of weapons that Muḥira b. Shu'ba al-Thaqafī carried with him to meet the Persian shah. See also Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Azdī al-Baṣrī, *Tārīkh futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Abd al-Mun'im 'Abd Allāh 'Āmir (Cairo, 1970), 201, for the appearance of Khālīd b. al-Walīd, and *ibid.*, 28, where Heraclius describes the Muslims as "barefoot, naked and hungry." Cf. the following Christian Syrian sources for the meager appearance of the Muslim soldiers: *The Chronicle of AD 1234*, cxii, ed. and Latin trans. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Anonymi Auctoris Chronicon ad annum Christi 1234 pertinens*, 3 vols. (CSCO 81–82, 109, 354) (Paris, 1916, 1920, 1937, and Louvain, 1974), CSCO 81:246–247 (Syriac), CSCO 109:192–193 (Latin); English trans. in Andrew Palmer, Sebastian Brock, and Robert Hoyland, *The Seventh Century in West Syrian Chronicles* (Liverpool, 1993), 151–153; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.6, ed. and trans. Jean-Baptiste Chabot, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien patriarche jacobite d'Antioche (1166–1199)*, 4 vols. (Paris, 1899–1910), 2:422 (French), 4:417 (Syriac); English trans. in Palmer, Brock, and Hoyland, *The Seventh Century in West Syrian Chronicles*, 152 n. 363.

³⁶ Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community," 29–42.

³⁷ See Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 177–182.

³⁸ Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community." The Islamic era is dated from 622 C.E., the year in which Muḥammad and his embattled community made a migration, or *hijra*, from Mecca to the city of Yathrib (later "Medina"). It is reckoned using lunar years. Here and elsewhere I have referred to the dates in question with the formula Hijri (Muslim) date/Common Era date. For the role of the *hijra* in Islamic chronology and narrative, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 230–239.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 29–38. For conquest-era *mujāhidūn* compared to monks, see as examples al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Āmir, 211; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2125–2126; trans. Blankinship, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 11:126–127; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2395; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:181–182; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. al-'Amrawī and Shīrī, 2:95–96. For *jihād* as "the monasticism of the Muslims" in prophetic *aḥādīth*, see 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-jihād*, ed. Nazih Hammād (Beirut, 1978), no. 15–17; 'Abd Allāh b. al-Mubārak, *Kitāb al-zuhd wa-'l-raqā'iq*, ed. Ḥabīb al-Rahmān al-'Azamī (Beirut, 1970), no. 840, 845. See also Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, ed. Aḥmad Zakī 'Adawī, 4 vols. (1925; repr., Cairo, 1973), 2:297, cited by and trans. Suleiman A. Mourad, "Christian Monks in Islamic Literature: A Preliminary Report on Some Arabic *Apophthegmata Patrum*," *Bulletin of the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies* 6 (2004): 90.

Islam's advent and victory in the lands of Syria, Egypt, and Mesopotamia also drew upon the "memory" of relations between pre-Islamic Arabs and the great imperial powers of the late ancient world. In the early Muslim imaginary, relations with the Romans and Persians underscored the wretchedness of life in the pre-Islamic *jāhiliyya* or "time of ignorance."⁴⁰ The evolving metanarrative of the advent and triumph of a distinctively Arab Islam in the second/eighth and third/ninth centuries cast the dire conditions of life in Arabia during the *jāhiliyya* in stark contrast to the enlightened and civilized condition of life within the Islamic empire. Implicit in this contrast were the effects of Muḥammad's revelation; the word of God had brought unity, piety, and order to the Arab communities of Arabia even before the conquests of the lands of Syria, Egypt, and Mesopotamia.⁴¹

In another sense, however, the empire built by those conquests was in many ways the geographical home of the post-*jāhiliyya* Islamic world. Arabia remained a powerful imaginative space in the lives of early Muslims, but the vast new Arab-ruled domain in the lands outside Arabia was the true fruit of Muḥammad's revelation and mission; it was here that the consequences of his revelation were manifested in the formation of new, specifically Muslim communities, and in Muslim control of ancient cities and populations that long bore the splendid markings of their former imperial masters.⁴² The figures of the great imperial powers of late antiquity would be crucial resources as Muslim authors sought to trace the trajectory of these changes.

IT SEEMS CLEAR FROM WHAT NON-MUSLIM SOURCES WE POSSESS for the seventh-century conquests that at first the Romans had little idea what to make of the Muslims. For example, the *Doctrina Jacobi*, an anti-Jewish seventh-century text, draws upon the borrowed gaze of "the Jews," long believed to possess arcane, numinous knowledge, to interpret the new prophet who had appeared among the Arabs in accordance with certain Christian apocalyptic expectations concerning the Jews.⁴³ Indeed, as Robert Hoyland has suggested, "the Jews" provided seventh-century Christian communities with a familiar paradigm of alterity as they attempted to make sense of the Muslims.⁴⁴ Eventually, Muslim, Syrian, Armenian, and Greek authors would all come to dif-

⁴⁰ See, for example, al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. ʿĀmir, 204–205. See also Ibn Aʿtham, *Futūḥ*, 1:199, for one Muslim warrior's explication before the Persian shah of exactly how bad things were in Arabia before the appearance of Muḥammad as a prophet. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2283–2284, 2352–2353; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:78–79, 137–138.

⁴¹ See, for example, al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan tāwīl al-Qurʾān*, 9:220.

⁴² For the role of *futūḥ* narratives in negotiating the problem of Muslim rulership over subject populations, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 180–181. For the self-conscious presence of Islam in ancient metropolises such as Jerusalem, see Oleg Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art* (New Haven, Conn., 1973). For the formation of specifically Muslim cities, see Hichem Djait, *Al-Kūfa: Naissance de la ville islamique* (Paris, 1986).

⁴³ *Doctrina Jacobi Nuper Baptizati*, 16.14–16, 17.21–22, ed. and French trans. Déroche, 209, 211, 213. For Christian beliefs about Jews as possessors of secret or arcane knowledge, see, for example, Han J. W. Drijvers and Jan Willem Drijvers, *The Finding of the True Cross: The Judas Kyriakos Legend in Syriac* (Louvain, 1997). See also Andrew S. Jacobs, *Remains of the Jews: The Holy Land and Christian Empire in Late Antiquity* (Stanford, Calif., 2004). For the dangerous attraction of "Jewish" knowledge for late antique Christians, see John Chrysostom, *Adversus Judaeos orationes*, I–VIII, in J. Minge, ed., *Patrologia Cursus Completus: Series Graeca*, 161 vols. (Paris, 1857–1866), 48:843–942.

⁴⁴ Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 78–87.

fering versions of the same explanation for the advent of the Muslims; they were an army of God sent to punish the proud and arrogant imperial powers of the age.⁴⁵

At the time of the conquests themselves, however, the Romans would have had no reason to understand the Muslim bands they encountered as anything other than yet more Arab raiders, or at best a new Arab tribal confederation to be co-opted into imperial service. Indeed, even the Byzantine historian Nikephoros, writing almost two centuries after the events he describes, still referred to the Muslim leader 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ as a "phylarch," the title traditionally applied to tribal leaders taken into Roman service, as he described attempts to co-opt 'Amr with gifts and bribes.⁴⁶ It would seem that for the Romans of the seventh, eighth, and early ninth centuries, the weight of long centuries of diplomatic and ethnographic tradition regarding Arab tribesmen produced a kind of hermeneutic inertia that carried through the beginnings of the conquest period.⁴⁷

The earliest Muslim accounts we possess of the conquest period also seem to suggest that as Roman imperial agents encountered the first Muslim expeditions, they interpreted the encounters through the prism of imperial memory. In time-tested fashion, the Roman officials pictured in these accounts consistently attempted to initiate gift exchanges with the Arabs as a means of winning their compliance with the Roman imperial order. Such scenes as we find them in the works of second/eighth- and third/ninth-century Muslim authors are not examples of "factual" reportage in any strict sense, however; instead they are occurrences of a common *topos* employed to frame subsequent scenes of military gallantry.

The great historian of Muslim historiography Albrecht Noth identified such scenes as a rather insignificant component of what he termed the "Summons to Islam" or "*da'wa*" *topos*, in which Muslims summon non-Muslims to Islam as a prelude

⁴⁵ Ibid., 524–531. See S. P. Brock, "North Mesopotamia in the Seventh Century: Book XV of John Bar Penkāyē's *Riṣ Mellē*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 9 (1987): 51–75, esp. 57–61; *The Chronicle of AD 1234*, xciv, ed. and Latin trans. Chabot, CSCO 81:228 (Syriac), CSCO 109:178–179 (Latin). See also ibid., cii, CSCO 81:237 (Syriac), CSCO 109:185 (Latin), and ibid., cviii, CSCO 81:242–244 (Syriac), CSCO 109:190–191 (Latin). English trans. Palmer, in Palmer, Brock, and Hoyland, *The Seventh Century in West Syrian Chronicles*, 130–131, 148–149; Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle*, 11.6, ed. and French trans. Chabot, 2:422 (French), 4:417 (Syriac) = English trans. Palmer, in Palmer, Brock, and Hoyland, *The Seventh Century in West Syrian Chronicles*, 152 n. 363. Agapios (Maḥbūb) of Manbij, *Kitāb al-ʿUnwān*, 2.211, 213–214, ed. and French trans. Alexandre Vasiliev, *Patrologia Orientalis* 5, no. 4 (1947), 7, no. 4 (1948), 8, no. 3 (1971), 11, no. 1 (1974) [PO 8.3:471, 473–474], where the emperor Heraclius orders the Roman forces and citizens of the eastern provinces to stop fighting the Arabs, because to do so is to resist the will of God. In his *Annales*, ed. L. Cheikho (CSCO 50, 51) (Beirut, 1906), CSCO 51:9–11, the Melkite Christian author Eutychios provides a remarkably flattering portrait of the first Muslim caliph, Abū Bakr, and such conquest-era Muslim heroes as 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ, incorporating a version of the Roman official-*mujāhid* meeting-offer-rejection trope we encounter so often in Muslim *fuṭūḥ* texts. This is unsurprising given Eutychios's reliance on Muslim historical traditions. What is intriguing, however, is that Eutychios's irenic rendering of the *fuṭūḥ* comes immediately after his rendering of Heraclius's war with the Persians, in which the Roman emperor is depicted as killing every Persian man, woman, and child he encounters, and ripping open the bellies of pregnant Persian women and smashing their fetuses on rocks, claiming to perform the words of the prophet David in Psalms.

⁴⁶ Nikephoros, *Breviarium*, 26.18–19, ed. and trans. Mango, 74 (Greek), 75 (English). For the sixth-century use of the term "phylarch," see, for example, Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.48. See also n. 21 above.

⁴⁷ See Jonathan P. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800* (Cambridge, 2003), 73–74. For the archaizing tendency in Roman ethnographic thought, see Ando, *Imperial Ideology and Provincial Loyalty*, 329.

to battle.⁴⁸ Noth further argued that the summons of enemies to Islam before engaging them in battle was likely of little importance by the time of the Muslim campaigns outside Arabia; accordingly, scenes featuring this *topos* are likely fictional.⁴⁹ For our purposes, however, the operative question is not whether such scenes are empirically "factual," but rather why Muslim scholars so consistently included them in their renditions of the *futūḥ*. A subsidiary question is why these scholars chose to craft iterations of this *topos* in the specific way they did—that is, why do the scenes structured around this *topos* look as they do and not some other way?

The recurrence of such *topoi* is significant because it was through the use of these hermeneutic guideposts that the conquest period became comprehensible not simply as a time of military conquest, but more importantly as a period during which the changes wrought in the souls of Muḥammad's followers brought about a momentous transformation of the present world.⁵⁰ Moreover, the specific forms that this *topos* took in the texts of early Muslim authors seem to reflect not arbitrary editorial or authorial decisions made by those writers, but rather the lingering impression left by certain late Roman diplomatic strategies upon the imaginations of those who contributed the raw material from which early Muslim origin narratives were constituted.⁵¹

Typical of this *topos* are two passages from Muḥammad b. 'Abd Allāh al-Azdī al-Baṣrī's second/eighth-century *Tārīkh futūḥ al-Shām* (History of the Conquest of Syria).⁵² In these passages, the conquest-era heroes Khālīd b. al-Walīd and Mu'ādh b. Jabal meet with Roman imperial officials on the eve of two battles during the conquest of Syria. Although the details of these scenes differ intriguingly, they share a common theme. In both cases, the Roman imperial officials attempt to seduce their Muslim counterparts into cooperation with the Roman imperial state by extending offers of gifts and honors. In his meeting with Khālīd, for example, the Roman general "Bāhān" professes great admiration for a red tanned-leather tent purchased by Khālīd before their meeting, and offers to trade anything that Khālīd might desire for it. Rather than accept anything in return for the tent, however, Khālīd simply gives it to Bāhān, explaining that he wants nothing from the Romans.⁵³

In the story of Mu'ādh's meeting with the Romans, Mu'ādh, too, rejects an offer of material gifts in return for his cooperation, but not before he similarly turns down what is presented in the text as a profoundly attractive offer on the part of the Ro-

⁴⁸ Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 146–167, esp. 147. Cf. Robinson, "The Study of Islamic Historiography," 217–218.

⁴⁹ Noth, *The Early Arabic Historical Tradition*, 160–167.

⁵⁰ See Sizgorich, "Narrative and Community," 29–38.

⁵¹ For one important theory concerning the ways in which very old material found its way into early Islamic texts, see Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 203–212.

⁵² Al-Azdī's *Futūḥ al-Shām* is believed to be one of the oldest Muslim historical sources we have for the conquest period. On this text, see Sulayman Mourad, "On Early Islamic Historiography: Abu Ismā'īl al-Azdī and his *Futūḥ al-Shām*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 120 (2000): 577–593; Lawrence I. Conrad, "Al-Azdī's History of the Arab Conquests in Bilād al-Shām: Some Historiographical Observations," in Muḥammad Adnan Bakhit, ed., *Proceedings of the Second Symposium on the History of Bilād al-Shām during the Early Islamic Period up to 40 AH/640 AD*, 3 vols. (Amman, 1987), 1:28–62; Hoyland, "Arabic, Syriac and Greek Historiography," esp. 223–233; Nadia Maria El Cheikh, *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), 37–38, 120–121.

⁵³ Al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Āmir, 201. Cf. Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:241. For *qubba* as a grand red leather tent set up for important men, see R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1927), 2:297, *sub* "qabba."

mans. Upon arriving in the Roman camp, Mu'adh is informed that he has been accorded a great honor—he is to be allowed to attend a gathering of prominent Romans. This, he is assured, will be ennobling for him. There is a catch, however. The Romans explain that the Arab may not sit with his interlocutors; he must stand in the presence of the great men of the Romans. Predictably, Mu'adh refuses to do so, explaining that the prophet of his community has forbidden his followers to stand in honor of any creature. Accordingly, he sits in the presence of the Romans. Notably, Mu'adh also refuses to have anything to do with the effete finery of the Roman nobles, their carpets and cushions, and so he takes his seat on the ground ("God's carpet," as he calls it), holding the reins of his horse.⁵⁴

Repetitions of these *topoi*, situated in tales of various conquest-era battles against both the Romans and the Persians, are to be found in many early Muslim accounts of the *futūḥ*, including those of Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam (d. 871), Ibn A'tham (d. 926), and al-Ṭabarī (d. 923). In Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's history of the Muslim conquest of Egypt, for example, 'Amr b. al-ʿĀṣ, whom we encountered above described by the Roman historian Nikephoros as an Arab "phylarch," also refuses Roman overtures toward a negotiated, exchange-based settlement, and does so very much in the style of al-Azdī's Khālīd b. Walīd and Mu'adh b. Jabal. One remarkable feature of Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam's iteration of this *topos* follows 'Amr's initial refusal, however, and seems to underscore its significance. After turning down an offer of negotiated settlement from the Alexandrian bishop Muqawqis, who is acting as the representative of Roman power on the scene, 'Amr sends one of his men, the black-skinned 'Ubāda b. al-Ṣāmit, to speak with Muqawqis once more. When 'Ubāda appears before him, however, Muqawqis screeches, "Save me from this black! Send someone other than him to negotiate with me!" 'Ubāda's companions promptly explain to the official that 'Ubāda is the most accomplished Muslim among them, and is accordingly the most fitting representative of their community.⁵⁵ The central point of the conquest narratives we have encountered thus far seems dramatically underscored here: the consequences of Muḥammad's revelation have upended the arrangements of power taken for granted by Roman imperial officials, whether these manifested themselves in economies of power and wealth or in hierarchies of human taxonomy or physiognomy.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. ʿĀmir, 115–117. Cf. Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:184. See also al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2103; trans. Blankinship, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 11:103–104, where Muslim visitors to a Roman camp during the conquest of Syria refuse to enter the Romans' silken tents; and *ibid.*, 1:2271, where a Muslim visitor to a Persian camp slashes pillows and destroys the carpets of his hosts; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:66–67.

⁵⁵ See Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Kitāb futūḥ Miṣr wa-akhbārḥā*, ed. Charles Torrey (1922; repr., Piscataway, N.J., 2002), 65–66. Cf. al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2288; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:84. For race as a signifier in early Muslim discussions about ranking in Islamic society on the basis of personal, Islamic merit alone, see Patricia Crone, "'Even an Ethiopian Slave': The Transformation of a Sunni Tradition," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 57 (1994): 59–67.

⁵⁶ It is difficult to discern whether Muqawqis's reaction to 'Ubāda's black skin reflects some early Muslim knowledge about late Roman and/or Christian attitudes to skin color, or whether it simply reflects certain attitudes toward black-skinned persons common among Abbasid-era Arabs. Either could well serve as the basis of the remarks attributed to Muqawqis. See David Brakke, "Ethiopian Demons: Male Sexuality, the Black-Skinned Other, and the Monastic Self," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 10 (2001): 501–535; Vincent L. Wimbush, "Ascetic Behavior and Color-ful Language: Stories about Ethiopian Moses," *Semeia* 58 (1992): 81–92, esp. 89. See also Philip Mayerson, "Anti-Black Sentiment in the *Vitae Patrum*," *Harvard Theological Review* 71 (1978): 304–311. For popular Arab views of black-

There were other ways of making much the same point. In Ibn A'tham's epic compilation of early Muslim conquest accounts, a Muslim warrior named al-Mughīra b. Shu'ba punctuates his refusal to accept gifts and friendship from the Persian shah Yazdgird III by dropping heavily into the King of Kings' throne. "[Al-Mughīra] was a huge man and he tipped the throne until Yazdgird was about to tumble from his throne," Ibn A'tham wrote. "Al-Mughīra ended up on the center of the throne and Yazdgird landed on the left side of it. And Yazdgird was displeased by this." However slapstick the tone of this episode, its point is a familiar one: Muḥammad's revelation has overturned the old economy of imperial power, and even at the court of the Persian shah, the terrors and enticements of that economy no longer touch the hearts of Muḥammad's followers.⁵⁷

Other early Muslim texts repeat a number of stories that are best understood as variants of those we have examined above. As they appear in the texts of early Muslim authors, these stories vary in their cast; Khālīd turns up frequently in them, as do Abū 'Ubayda and other prominent conquest-era Muslims. The Roman Bāhān is a frequently recurring character as well, but the imperial official in question can also be an anonymous Roman soldier or diplomat, the Persian general Rustam, or, as we have seen, even the last Sāsānid shah, Yazdgird III.⁵⁸ What is constant, however, and what serves as the defining act of such episodes, is the refusal of the Muslim *mujāhid* in question to enter into any kind of agreement with the imperial officials, and in particular his refusal to accept their gifts, whether these are offered in material form or as bits of the kind of social and political capital that Mu'adh b. Jabal turned down when he declined the "honor" of joining the council of the Romans.

The texts in which Mu'adh, al-Mughīra, and their fellow *mujāhidūn* refuse such honors invariably go on to describe monumental conquest-era battles such as those that took place at al-Yarmūk and al-Qādisiyya. The descriptions of these battles as they appear in early Muslim *futūḥ* accounts are showcases for martial heroics of the sort we often find celebrated in pre-Islamic *ayyām al-'Arab* or "battle days" poetry.⁵⁹ As Lawrence Conrad has illustrated in the case of al-Azdī, moreover, such accounts could also contain elements gleaned from jealously cultivated tribal histories.⁶⁰ However, these episodes of Bedouin gallantry become comprehensible as episodes within

skinned persons, see, for example, the disparagements against which al-Jāhīz defends blacks in his *Kitāb fakh al-sūdān 'alā al-bīdān*, ed. 'Abd al-Salām Muḥammad Hārūn, in *Rasā'il al-Jāhīz*, 4 vols. (Cairo, 1965), 1:173–226, esp. 196, 211–212. See also Bernard Lewis, *Race and Slavery in the Middle East: An Historical Enquiry* (Oxford, 1990), esp. 92–98.

⁵⁷ Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:196–198.

⁵⁸ For Bāhān, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2081–2082, 2084, 2088–2089, 2091, 2146; trans. Blankinship, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 11:76–78, 80–81, 85–88, 160–161; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2349; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:135; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, 2:104. At *ibid.*, 2:72, as at Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:239–271, and Eutychios, *Annales*, ed. Cheikh, CSCO 51:14, this figure appears as "Māhān." Bāhān is described as a Persian who converted to Christianity and took up with the Romans in Khalīfa b. Khayyāt, *Tārīkh*, ed. Akram Diyā' al-'Umarī (Beirut, 1977), 130. For Yazdgird III, see Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:195–203. For Rustam, see al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2271–2287; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:66–83. For Abū 'Ubayda, see Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:184–189.

⁵⁹ See Tarif Khalidī, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge, 1994), 63–67. See also Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 180, 203–208.

⁶⁰ See Lawrence I. Conrad, "Heraclius in Early Islamic Kerygma," in Gerrit J. Reinink and Bernard H. Stolte, eds., *The Reign of Heraclius (610–641): Crisis and Confrontation* (Leuven, 2002), 113–156. See also Donner, *Narratives of Islamic Origins*, 104–107, 165–166, 178–180.

a specifically Muslim narrative of the *futūḥ* era only when they are read in tandem with scenes like those sampled above, in which poor and pious Muslim warriors, men such as Mu'adh and Khālid, stand intransigently before representatives of the late ancient imperial powers and refuse to accept the enticements of this world held out to them by Roman and Persian imperial agents. These are not simply refusals of the gifts and honors offered by the Roman and Persian imperial officials; rather, they should be understood as repudiations of the system through which the empires of late antiquity had long bound Arab tribesmen to themselves and to their imperial agendas. This rejection was in turn to be understood as the result of such men's submission to Islam and the disdain for the present world that this submission inspired.⁶¹

In composing such histories, early Muslim authors consistently allude to a common pool of knowledge concerning the diplomatic tactics of late ancient imperial officials, tactics that did their work at the level of the imperial subjects' desires, ambitions, and fears. The precise provenance of this knowledge is difficult to know; as with most questions about the "memories" of the pre-Islamic world one encounters in early Muslim texts, there is no way of tracing satisfactorily the origins of this body of knowledge.⁶² Nevertheless, it corresponds remarkably well with what one reads in Roman texts produced over the space of centuries describing relations between the empire and its Arab clients.

Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the sense that later Roman imperial officials would have readily recognized their own diplomatic tactics in the portraits that our Muslim authors crafted of them. Think, for example, of the second/eighth-century Muslim author al-Azdī's story of the Roman general Bāhān's professed desire for Khālid b. al-Walīd's leather tent, and his offer to trade anything the Arab might want for it, and then of the Roman author Procopius's story of the inaccessible palm grove accepted by Justinian from the Arabs of Syria. The palm grove was presumably as valueless to Justinian as the tent would have been to Bāhān, except that both items would have initiated a process of gift exchange through which frontier Arabs would have been bound to a Roman imperial patron. Al-Azdī, like Procopius, seems to have understood very well the point of such exchanges, and to have taken this tenet of Roman imperial practice in service of his own narrative.

Consider also the story cited above of the Arab chieftain who was called to Constantinople and allowed to sit among the great men of the Romans as one means of seducing him into the service of the empire. As we have noted, the Roman author of this text seems to offer testimony to the significance of the capital that such meetings represented through the vehemence with which he condemns the emperor's decision to allow a barbarian such an honor. When we read this text in tandem with al-Azdī's story of Mu'adh b. Jabal's meeting with the council of Roman nobles and what that meeting was assumed to represent to such a man as Mu'adh, it would seem

⁶¹ See, for example, al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Āmir, 116, where Mu'adh b. Jabal explains explicitly that God, through Muḥammad, induced a loathing of the present world and forbidden covetousness of those things that are in it. See also Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Kitāb futūḥ Miṣr*, ed. Torrey, 65, where Roman envoys report back to the bishop of Alexandria and acting governor of Egypt that the Muslim invaders they have visited desire death more than life, humility more than prominence, and care nothing for the present world or what is in it.

⁶² See Humphreys, *Islamic History*, chap. 3.

that al-Azdī, writing in the eighth century but presumably working with much older sources, understood quite well the role that such meetings played in Roman diplomatic practice with troublesome Arabs.⁶³

Nor does it seem a mere coincidence that in the context of Muslim accounts of meetings between Roman and Persian officials and Muslim warriors, the imperial officials are often made to refer in concise and rather accurate ways to the history of relations between the Romans and the Arab peoples.⁶⁴ In the Roman general Bāhān's conference with Khālīd b. al-Walīd as it appears in al-Azdī's history, for example, Bāhān makes reference to the long history of what he styles as traditional Roman generosity to the Arabs. He recalls, for example, that the Romans long had Arab "neighbors" whom they allowed to settle in Roman territory and with whom they scrupulously maintained their treaty obligations and kept faith in all things. He then expresses dismay that any Arab would attack the Roman Empire—he would have thought, he explains, that the empire's kindness to its Arab neighbors would incite the admiration and loyalty even of "those Arabs who are not our neighbors."⁶⁵

The Romans did indeed enjoy long and valuable relations with Arab tribes and tribal confederations. In the version of Bāhān and Khālīd's dialogue that he includes in his own history of the conquests, for example, Ibn A'tham identifies the Arabs to whom Bāhān refers here as the tribal confederation of Ghassān, which was to become the Roman Empire's counter to the Persian Arab ally the Lakhmid confederation.⁶⁶ To understand the true significance of Bāhān's reference to these relationships, however, it is necessary to understand that reference within the context of Bāhān's meeting with Khālīd, and within the history of Rome's relationship with the Arabs as it was recalled within the evolving Islamic metanarrative in accordance with which al-Azdī shaped his history. In al-Azdī's text, Bāhān's narrative of the history of Roman-Arab relations is situated within a larger and multifaceted campaign undertaken by Bāhān to draw Khālīd into cooperation with the Romans, and at each turn this campaign hinges upon offers of gifts and friendship. Khālīd is not fooled, however, and while acknowledging the past benefactions of the Romans with regard to their Arab neighbors, he observes that this was all done to benefit the Roman Empire and to further its worldly aims. "For," he asks, "did you not think a third of them or half of [the Arabs] would take up with you in your religion and they would fight with you?"⁶⁷

⁶³ It would seem that personal meetings with highly placed imperial officials were understood by Roman writers as a source of valued capital for nomad allies other than the Arabs as well. See, for example, Zachariah, *Chronicle*, 7.3, in E.W. Brooks, ed., *Historia Ecclesiastica Zachariae Rhetori vulgo adscripta* (Paris, 1919–1924); trans. F. J. Hamilton and E. W. Brooks, *The Syriac Chronicle* (London, 1899), 151–152.

⁶⁴ See, for example, al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Āmir, 202–205; Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:195–199, 242–243; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh madīnat Dimashq*, ed. al-'Amrawī and Shīrī, 2:81–82; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:2275–2277, 2280–2285, 2352–2353; trans. Friedmann, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 12:71–73, 76–81, 137–138; Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, *Kitāb futūḥ Miṣr*, ed. Torrey, 66.

⁶⁵ Al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Āmir, 202.

⁶⁶ Ibn A'tham, *Futūḥ*, 1:244.

⁶⁷ Al-Azdī, *Futūḥ al-Shām*, ed. 'Āmir, 204.

FROM THE THIRD/NINTH-CENTURY MUSLIM AUTHOR Ibn Hishām's collection of pre-Islamic Arabian tribal lore, we get a vivid illustration of the way in which early Muslims would likely have understood the sort of imperial clientage to which Khālīd is invited in al-Azdī's text. According to Ibn Hishām (d. 834), whose work depended upon much earlier sources, the relationship between the mighty Arab tribal group called Ghassān and Rome began with Ghassān's desire to escape hard living and conflict, and to live in peace and quiet in the lands of Caesar. To this end, they convinced the Roman client tribe of Salīḥ to vouch for them with the emperor. They were accepted, and took up residence in Syria as "neighbors with Salīḥ in a most beautiful area."⁶⁸

Soon, however, Ghassān learned that residence in Roman lands meant paying Roman taxes. This revelation came during the visit of an imperial tax collector to their new home area. He is recalled as a man who was "hard on [Ghassān] and hard to bear," a strutting and abrasive man whose manner was peremptory and whose methods were crude.⁶⁹ He is described as making his way among the proud Ghassānid warriors, demanding one *dīnār* from each of them. Finally he came to one elderly man who explained that he did not have the required tax, but offered his sword as a hostage until he could come up with the money. The tax collector responded to this offer by suggesting that the old man perform with his sword what would have been an uncomfortable and unhygienic act. When the man's fellow tribesmen explained to him what the Roman had said, the old warrior struck the Roman official on the head with this sword, drawing blood.⁷⁰

War with the Romans ensued. The central tragedy of this conflict, as it is described in Ibn Hishām's text, was that it pitted two kindred Arab peoples against one another. Ordered into the field against Ghassān by their Roman imperial masters, the people of Salīḥ lamented, "We are betraying our brothers and they have sought asylum with us, and we see only good in them." A comment attributed to one of the men of Salīḥ captures the dilemma that he and his tribesmen faced. "You are between two paths," he said. "On the one hand is Caesar, and on the other is Ghassān. So let your bodies be with Caesar, but let your hearts be with Ghassān." Accordingly, Arab unwillingly fought Arab on Rome's behalf. In the ensuing battle, the skulls of those slain by Ghassān were said to litter the ground like so many ostrich eggs.⁷¹

This, in the opinion of our early Muslim sources, was one cost of accepting Roman beneficence. But there were also other, more profound prices to be paid for the

⁶⁸ 'Abd al-Malik b. Hishām, *Kitāb al-ījān fī mulūk Ḥimyār*, ed. F. Krenkow (1928; repr., Sa'nā', 1979), 294. For Salīḥ, see, with due caution, Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 220, 242–244, 282–288, 301–306, 507–509.

⁶⁹ Irfan Shahīd, following Ibn Ḥabībī (d. 245/860), identifies the tax collector as a man of Salīḥ who was empowered by the Romans to perform this duty. See Muḥammad b. Ḥabībī, *Kitāb al-muḥabbar*, ed. Ilse Lichtenstadter (Hyderabad, 1942), 370–371. Shahīd also suggests that the third/ninth-century Arab author al-Ya'qūbī supports the notion that this man was a Salīḥid tax collector authorized by the Romans; *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 285 n. 264. In my reading, however, al-Ya'qūbī refers to the man whom the old Ghassānid struck as "a man from the companions of the king of the Romans [*raḥul min aṣḥāb malik al-Rūm*]" rather than specifically identifying him as a man of Salīḥ. See al-Ya'qūbī, *al-Ta'rikh*, in M. Th. Houtsma, ed., *Ibn-Wādhīh qūi Dicitur al-Ja'qūbī, Historiae*, 2 vols. (1883; repr., Leiden, 1969), 1:235. For Shahīd's interpretation of the falling-out between Salīḥ and Ghassān, see his *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fifth Century*, 282–289.

⁷⁰ Ibn Hishām, *al-Tījān fī mulūk Ḥimyār*, ed. Krenkow, 294–295.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 297–300.

acceptance of Roman and Persian imperial largess. To accept the gifts of the Romans or Persians had been to submit to the terrestrial order for which those two empires were universally legible emblems. This, at least, was the contention set forth in the texts of many early Muslim authors, and it was hardly a suggestion with which the Romans would have disagreed. Indeed, the diplomatic strategies deployed by the Roman Empire with regard to the nomadic peoples on its frontiers, and particularly the Arabs, had, by the seventh century, long depended upon rituals of gift exchange as a means of domesticating threatening nomadic groups and binding them to the imperial agenda of the Roman state. The Roman relationship with Ghassān, for example, was recalled by the Romans to have been cemented by means of the bestowal of the title "King of the Arabs" by Justinian upon one Ḥārith, a Ghassānid chieftain.⁷² From the point of view of early Muslim authors, however, Arabs who entered into such exchanges made themselves subject to the will of the great imperial powers of late antiquity, often to their great peril.

An incident described in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī's third/ninth-century *Kitāb al-aghānī* (Book of Songs) provides an intriguing illustration. Among the figures we know to have been involved in pre-Islamic political relations between the Arabs and the imperial powers of late antiquity is 'Adī b. Zayd, a Christian poet and ambassador native to the Arab cultural center of al-Ḥīra. Abū l-Faraj's *Kitāb al-aghānī* contains an account of the effort of the Persian shah Kistrā (presumably Hormizd IV, son of Khusraw I, who ruled from 579 to 590) to find a new "King of the Arabs," a project in which he enlisted the aid of 'Adī b. Zayd.⁷³

When the head of the Lakhmid tribal confederation, al-Mundhir IV, died around 580, he left behind a number of sons, all of whom seem to have been contenders for rulership among the Arabs of Kistrā's realm. When the King of Kings' initial efforts to find a suitable successor to al-Mundhir failed, the shah turned to 'Adī b. Zayd and asked him, "Who remains of the family of al-Mundhir? And is there any one of them with any good in him?" 'Adī replied that there were several sons of al-Mundhir left, and that there was good in all of them. 'Adī then summoned the sons of al-Mundhir to meet with the shah, so that he might choose a new ruler of the Arabs in his domain.⁷⁴

'Adī now acted as a broker of both political power and cultural taste. He met with the candidates for power one by one, and instructed them in the proper mode of comportment for their meeting with the shah. He advised them to wear their most splendid garments when they met with the king, and to eat modestly in his presence. When asked if they could control the Arabs on the king's behalf, they should say yes, all except their own brothers.⁷⁵

⁷² Procopius, *Wars*, 1.17.47–48. This was done, Procopius says, to no immediate effect, as a means of countering the strength and successes of al-Mundhir, a Lakhmid ally of the Persians.

⁷³ Abū l-Faraj, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 2:104–107. A version of this story that lacks the element of 'Adī's advice to the competing candidates on their self-presentation with regard to their dress and table manners is included in al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:1016–1019; trans. C. E. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, vol. 5: *The Sāsānids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and the Yemen* (Albany, N.Y., 1999), 338–345. See particularly Bosworth's copious and very helpful notes. On Abū l-Faraj and his work, see Hilary Kilpatrick, *Making the Great Book of Songs: Compilation and the Author's Craft in Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣbahānī's Kitāb al-aghānī* (London, 2003).

⁷⁴ Abū l-Faraj, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 2:105; al-Ya'qūbī, *al-Tārīkh*, ed. Houtsma, 1:241–242.

⁷⁵ Abū l-Faraj, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 2:105.

Finally, however, 'Adī met with a man named al-Nu'mān and told him confidentially that he would support no other than him for sovereignty over the Arabs. Then 'Adī gave al-Nu'mān very different advice from that which he had given al-Nu'mān's kinsmen about their meeting with Kisrā:

Wear riding clothes, and gird yourself with your sword. When you sit down to eat, make your mouthfuls large, and chew and swallow rapidly, and then take more food and act hungry after that. For copious eating as a special quality of the Arabs pleases Kisrā, and he believes that there is no good in an Arab who does not eat ravenously . . . And when he asks you, "Can you protect me from the Arabs?" say, "Yes." And when he says to you, "And [what about] your brothers?" say, "If I am weak with them, then surely I will be weak with other than them."⁷⁶

Al-Nu'mān followed 'Adī's advice, and Kisrā made him king, giving him a crown of gold bedecked with pearls. Later, however, 'Adī was imprisoned and killed when the patron of one of those whom he had deceived with his advice arranged a falling-out between the poet and the new king. The patron did so, significantly, by initiating a gift exchange with the king by which he eventually gained ascendance among the nobles of the realm. Finally, the vengeful patron incited the new king, al-Nu'mān—who owed his position to 'Adī b. Zayd's loyalty and support—to put his benefactor to death.⁷⁷

To be sure, interventions in imperial politics were always potentially perilous for the Arabs, and often involved great sacrifice. Think, for example, of the sadness with which the dilemma of Salīḥ was recalled when its members were forced to fight against their Ghassānid brothers on Rome's behalf, and in the end to leave the skulls of many of their sons strewn gleaming and vulnerable in the dirt. Indeed, those Arabs who accepted the gifts and friendship of the Romans or the Persians would very likely find themselves, like Ghassān and Salīḥ, set Arab against Arab in service of one or the other of the late ancient empires. Similarly, those whose souls coveted the power and prestige that the Romans or Persians held forth as enticements would find themselves pitted brother against brother like the sons of al-Mundhir, or crushed in the machinery of imperial politics like 'Adī b. Zayd, whose erstwhile client al-Nu'mān would also eventually fall victim to Arab-on-Arab rivalry and imperial caprice.⁷⁸

Nor should we forget that in order to gain ascendancy over his brothers, al-Nu'mān had been required to demean himself by playing the barbarous Arab before the Persian king, performing for Kisrā in accordance with the shah's ethnographic expectations concerning "the Arab." Nor again did this sort of humiliation end with al-Nu'mān's ascendancy. Even after he became king, we are told that al-Nu'mān was obliged to listen as Kisrā described the Arabs as filthy, despicable, and barbarous.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Ibid. Cf. Procopius, *Wars*, 1.19.8–16, where Procopius describes another sixth-century series of gift exchanges between the emperor Justinian and a group of frontier Arabs that resulted in an alliance between Rome and a band of Bedouin warriors. The Arab was appealing to Justinian, Procopius says, because "to the barbarians he ruled and to the enemy [he] seemed a man to be feared."

⁷⁷ Abū l-Faraj, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 2:118–121; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:1012–1024; trans. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 5:333–352. See Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lahmidenin in al-Ḥīra*, 109–114.

⁷⁸ See Abū l-Faraj, *Kitāb al-aghānī*, 2:119–125; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:1024–1029; trans. Bosworth, *The History of al-Ṭabarī*, 5:351–359. See also Rothstein, *Die Dynastie der Lahmidenin in al-Ḥīra*, 114–119, especially Rothstein's bleak conclusion regarding the downfall of al-Nu'mān for the fortunes of the Lakhmids: "Der Sturz Nu'man's bedeute den Sturz der Dynastie."

⁷⁹ Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Rabbih, *Kitāb al-īqd al-farīd*, ed. Aḥmad Amin, Aḥmad al-Zayn,

Kisrā made this pronouncement before a gathering of Indian and Roman ambassadors; after praising the qualities of the nations of the other dignitaries, the King of Kings told his visitors, "I see nothing good among the Arabs in matters of religion or the present world." The Arabs, he continued, were weak, shiftless, animal-like, insignificant, incapable of hospitality, eaters of camel meat—which even beasts of prey found loathsome—and given to killing their own children out of poverty.⁸⁰

ALL OF THIS ALLOWS US A DETAILED SENSE OF WHAT, for early Muslim authors, the rejection of Roman offers of friendship or Persian attempts at gift-giving betokened in the texts of al-Azdī, al-Ṭabarī, Ibn Aʿtham, and others. Such refusals subverted the humiliation, dependency, and weakness that the pre-Islamic Arabs endured before the power of the Roman and Persian empires. Acts such as gift-giving and exchanges of capital with imperial agents were, from the point of view of such authors, practices that supported the late antique structures of power that had so long subjugated and abased the Arabs. It was these structures, moreover, that Islam had come to overturn. Not only had Muḥammad's revelation undone the power elite in Arabia, it had also undone the imperial arrangements that gave contour to the operations of Roman and Persian power from one horizon to the other. Culturally and politically, the empires had exuded a deadly gravitational pull upon the lives and imaginations of those who resided on their peripheries. This dynamic functioned through the medium of gift exchange. From the point of view of early Muslim and late Roman authors, it was gift exchange that drew the Arabs into the embrace (and so the control) of the imperial powers.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has suggested that such exchanges are of particular utility when they are undertaken by individuals or institutions that have an agenda but lack the means to force the acceptance of that agenda from those whose cooperation it requires.⁸¹ In such cases, the exchange of gifts builds ties of obligation between giver and acceptor, setting in place what Bourdieu calls a "gentle violence" through which actors with no means of physical coercion can induce cooperation with their agenda.⁸² In the case of the pre-Islamic Arabs, gifts bestowed by the imperial powers of late antiquity, whether in the form of material goods or the prestige associated with honors derived from imperial ceremonies or titles, became a highly valued form of capital among the Arabs themselves, and seem to have played an important role in Arab social and political hierarchies.

and Ibrahīm al-Abyārī, 7 vols. (1940; repr., Cairo, 1968), 2:4–5. El Cheikh notes that this text must be understood as a product of the *Shuʿūbiyya* controversies of the second/eighth and third/tenth centuries; *Byzantium Viewed by the Arabs*, 111.

⁸⁰ Ibn ʿAbd al-Rabbih, *Kitāb al-ʿiqd al-farīd*, ed. Amin et al., 2:4–5. On the issue of the repulsiveness of camel meat to "civilized" peoples, see Michael the Syrian, *Chronicle* 9.29, ed. and trans. Chabot, 2:246–248 (French), 4:311–312 (Syriac), where the non-Chalcedonian (Monophysite) Ghassānid chief-tain al-Ḥārith has camel meat set before Ephrem, the Chalcedonian bishop of Antioch (whom Michael calls "the Jew"), as a means of making the bishop understand why al-Ḥārith will not take communion with the Chalcedonian "heretics." Cited by Fowden, *The Barbarian Plain*, 142–143.

⁸¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (1977; repr., Cambridge, 1999), 191–197. On the function of gift exchanges in a slightly later era, see Anthony Cutler, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 247–278.

⁸² Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 192–193.

The effect of this exchange, however, was that those who accepted these gifts and those who gave them were bound through ties of obligation; the imperial powers took on a crucial role in Arab economies of prestige and power, and the Arabs themselves were accordingly bound to the imperial agendas of those entities through the double imperative of personal ambition and patron-client obligations. This did not always work to the advantage of the imperial powers; think, for example, of the Arab tribesmen who looked upon the gifts they took from the emperor Justinian as payoffs, while the Romans insisted that they had been part of an exchange between the emperor and the "leaderless" nomads of the desert. Despite this, however, it is clear from our Roman and Arab sources that these gift exchanges were the foundational element for Roman-Arab relations over the space of centuries, and that the point of these relations was that the Arabs should serve the agenda of their imperial masters.

In this sense, the hold the imperial entities enjoyed over their Arab clients was one that resided finally in the hearts of those Arab tribesmen; it did its work in the double register of worldly ambition and dependent clientage. It was through the bonds represented and preserved by the process of gift exchange that pre-Islamic Arabs had been bound to the history of the late ancient world. With the advent of Islam, however, the role of the Arabs in this world changed profoundly. Now, although they were still taken for Bedouin raiders by the agents of the imperial powers, the Arab Muslims in many ways mimicked and then supplanted the monotheistic Romans as the one community of God upon the Earth. The imperial arrogance that blinded the Romans to the true character of the Muslim Arabs became the shroud in which the old order was wrapped and then buried.

The token of this change in early Muslim narratives of the *futūḥ* was the refusal of Arab warriors to extend their hands and accept from the Romans or the Persians the hollow honors and lying trinkets upon which the old economy of power had depended. Khālīd could now give away his tent to the Roman general Bāhān, but would take nothing in return; Mu'ādh no longer saw anything to be desired from an audience with the great men of the Romans. In text after text, early Muslim authors narrated such refusals, always framing battlefield victories with such performed signals of the changes wrought by Muḥammad and his revelation in the invisible terrain of his followers' hearts. So narrated, it was the poor and pious Muslim warrior's refusal, and not his sword, that signaled for early Muslim authors and readers the significance and implications of Islam's emergence.

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