

Day 2 Salle Demargne — Special Session – Late Antique Arabia : A changing landscape

The Ḥigāzī Paleo-Arabic Inscriptions and the Context of the Quran

Al-Jallad, Ahmad

Abstract: The past several years have witnessed a dramatic increase in the number of documented Paleo-Arabic inscriptions from the Ḥigāz, ranging from the region of Tabūk to Ṭā'if. Many of these text contain substantial content that shed light on the religious background of their authors. The aim of this talk is to bring this material in conversation with the Quran and early literary sources to bring us towards a reconstruction of the religious landscape of the Ḥigāz on the eve of Islam.

Northwest Arabia during Late Antiquity: crisis or transformation? A reassessment of the archaeological evidence (4th–8th century AD)

Chung To, Guillaume ; Guillaume Charloux ; Jérôme Rohmer

Abstract: In the oases of northwest Arabia, Late Antiquity is usually considered as a period of decline between two settlement peaks – the Nabataean/Roman period and the Early Islamic 'revival'. Until recently, the 5th and 6th centuries indeed appeared as a gap in the archaeological record (e.g. at al-Bad', Madā'in Šāliḥ, Qurayya, 'Aynūna, and to a lesser extent Taymā') and inscriptions are scarce, suggesting a massive decrease of sedentary settlement in the region, an abandonment of oasis agro-systems and the presence of mobile populations. However, this picture does not sit well with Islamic sources, which mention several active settlements in the region at the time of the Prophet – especially Khaybar and Taymā'. In view of these contradictory clues, the recent identification of Late Antique settlements in the oases of Dādān (al-'Ulā), Dūmat al-Jandal and Khaybar provides critical new evidence that lead to adumbrate a more nuanced picture of human occupation in Late Antique northwest Arabia. Based on most recent discoveries and on a reassessment of the available archaeological evidence, the present lecture aims to better characterize the changes in the settlement patterns of Late Antique northwest Arabia, to shed new light on the transition toward the Early Islamic settlement boom, and to question the causes for major socio-political changes during this major transitional period.

Hydroclimate during the emergence of Islam in late Antique Arabia

Fleitmann Dominik & alii [John Haldon, Raymond S. Bradley, Stephen J. Burns, Hai Cheng, R. Lawrence Edwards, Christoph C. Raible, Matthew Jacobson, Albert Matter]

Abstract: In Arabia the 6th and 7th centuries C.E. are marked by profound societal changes which promoted the disintegration of the major Arabian polities. Yemen has a long and diverse agricultural tradition that developed over several millennia to cope with the harsh and marginal environmental conditions. Present-day rainfall ranges from 150 to 450 mm yr⁻¹

in most parts of Yemen but can reach up to $\sim 1000 \text{ mm yr}^{-1}$ in the highlands. Rainfall typically lasts from January to May (termed *seif*) and July to September (termed *kharif*), where the summer rainfall period is more intense. Himyar utilized ingenious water management strategies to maximize agricultural yields despite low mean annual rainfall. In the highlands, large-scale terraced fields, dams and soil retention walls prevailed, whereas spate irrigation was used along the Ramlat as-Sab'atayn desert margin. Overall, Himyar's agriculture was primarily rainfed, the use of wells and cisterns was only marginal and mainly for household consumption. Since agriculture was a primary aspect of the local and regional economies, low agricultural yields during dry years would have affected the stability of these economies and undermined the political influence of Himyar's rulers. The amount of labor is one key factor in agricultural productivity, in particular the maintenance of hydraulic infrastructures, in both the highlands and desert margins, required substantial resources and planning which only a well-organized and stable society could provide. The structural integrity of terraced fields depends on the maintenance of the whole system of hillside terraces. Furthermore, the intensive terrace and irrigation systems of Himyar were clearly a source of great pride for the inhabitants and political leaders as evidenced by abundant inscriptions. Our climate reconstructions reveal a simultaneous significant reduction in spring and summer rainfall at the beginning of the sixth century C.E. This change would have had a profound impact on socio-economic conditions and all aspects of economic life in Himyar. The combination of drought, neglect of irrigation systems and terraced fields can thereby exacerbate socio-economic problems. Thus, severe droughts contributed to the demise of Himyar, the dominant power in Arabia until 525 C.E., led to general socio-economic and political decline, strengthened tribal communities across Arabia and raised the influence of pilgrimage centers such as Mecca.

Religions of Ancient South Arabia from polytheism to monotheism (4th - 6th century CE)

Gajda, Iwona

Abstract: Religions of Ancient South Arabia from polytheism to monotheism (4th - 6th century CE)

The religions of southern Arabia underwent major changes between the 4th and early 7th centuries CE. At the beginning of the 4th century CE, all the territories of ancient South Arabia were unified: the Himyarite kings succeeded in unifying three ancient kingdoms, Himyar, Saba and Hadramawt. A common language and a common era were adopted. As far as religion was concerned, the situation was more complicated. The kingdom of Saba had an ancient religious tradition, with its own pantheon and main god, Almaqah. The Hadramite kingdom also had a traditional religion, with the main god, Siyān. The Himyarite kingdom, however, did not have a strong centralised cult, the main gods of the Himyarites were only rarely mentioned and their various tribes, who had previously belonged to other kingdoms, worshipped a variety of gods. This is probably why the Himyarites did not try to impose their own religion on the annexed territories. Rather, they preferred to preserve the worship of the main Sabaeen god, Almaqah, in Marib. Later, as religious developments progressed in South Arabia, Jewish and Christian communities settled there and some inhabitants converted to Judaism. In the second half of the fourth century CE, the Himyarite kings converted to Judaism. The majority of the population followed. The ancestral polytheistic cults were abandoned.

Christianity and the expansion of East Syrian monasticism in East Arabia (6-8th cc. CE)

Hoyland, Robert

Abstract: This paper will examine the historical context for the expansion of East Syrian ('Nestorian') Christianity and monasticism in late antique East Arabia. Four monasteries have now been excavated in this region and a number of other Christian buildings and artefacts have been uncovered. In particular, excavation has now begun at the site of Darin on Tarut Island, which would appear to have served as the most important episcopal seat along this coast. In the light of this new evidence, it is worth returning to the question of what drove this expansion and in what way it is connected with the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in Iran in the 3rd century CE. We will also pay some attention to the status of East Syrian Christianity in East Arabia during what has recently been called Islamic Late Antiquity, namely the formative period of the Islamic Empire (*ca* 630-750).

Legitimacy and authority in late pre-Islamic and early Islamic South Arabia: the case of the Yu'firids and the Manāḥids

Koutchoukali, Imar

Abstract: The period between 500 and 850 CE saw unprecedented social and political change in South Arabia. In the second half of the 6th century AD, the Sabaeen political tradition that had existed for over a millennium disappeared, seemingly overnight. Over the next two centuries, South Arabia came to be integrated into the Islamic polity, being ruled by the Umayyads and the Abbasids until the latter's disintegration during the second half of the ninth century.

With the collapse of central political authority, rule over southwest Arabia was divided between several semi-independent dynasties. Of these, the Yu'firid and Manāḥid dynasties asserted their rule by claiming descent from the Himyarite kings who had ruled the region centuries earlier. At the same time, they had come to operate within new political framework of Islam, which had its own impact on how these dynasties sought to legitimize their way

The ascent of the Yu'firids and Manāḥids co-occurs with the appearance of a renewed scholarly interest in South Arabia's pre-Islamic history. Scholars like Webb ((Webb 2016, 2021) have discussed the role of Yemen in debates in Abbasid Iraq, but comparatively less attention has been paid to how early Islamic Yemenis saw their own history, particularly in a political context (Robin and Schiettecatte 2013). During this period, a distinct exegetical tradition arose that came to see pre-Islamic South Arabia as a center of pre-Islamic monotheist piety, further solidifying the notion of Yemeni exceptionalism (Koutchoukali 2023).

This paper will investigate how the political traditions of pre-Islamic South Arabia interacted with early Islamic attitudes to legitimacy and authority. It does so by studying the early Islamic material, such as genealogies, *qubūriyyāt*-literature and messianic prophetic traditions.

Pre-Islamic Arabic Christian poets and the religious landscape of Western Arabia

Lindstedt, Ilkka

Abstract: Louis Cheikho (1859–1927) famously labelled many pre-Islamic Arabic poets “Christian.” This rather sweeping categorization has come under quite a bit of criticism, most recently by Nora Schmid and Peter Webb. In my talk, I will discuss the thorny question of the identification of parts of Arabic poetical corpus as Christian, as well as the authenticity of the poetry ascribed to figures such as ‘Adī ibn Zayd, commonly known as Christian. I will analyze the contents of some (possibly) Christian poets and their import for reconstructing the religious landscape of Western Arabia. In light of recent epigraphic finds of sixth-century CE Arabic inscriptions, all of which are monotheist and some clearly Christian, it makes sense that there were also Arabic-speaking Christian poets.

Finally, I will present the interesting case of Abū Qays Ṣirma ibn abī Anas, a not very well known Christian poet from Medina and contemporary to the Prophet Muhammad. Though Ṣirma’s poetry only survives as quotations in later Arabic narrative sources, I argue that it cannot be merely discarded, and certain features in his verses bolster their authenticity.

Religious continuity and variability in Northwest Arabia, 200–600 CE

Nehmé, Laila

Abstract: The demise of the Nabataean Kingdom in 106 CE was followed, in Northwest Arabia, by a Roman religious imprint which was neither significant nor long-lasting for the Roman military presence in Hegra ended at the end of the third century CE. Following this Roman parenthesis, the religious landscape of the region started to diversify, with the appearance of deities, epithets and formulas not attested before in the epigraphic landscape. The divine names were mentioned either *per se* or were used as the divine element in theophoric names. This presentation will try to present the broad lines of the changes which occurred during the period under consideration, using mainly but not only the Nabataean Aramaic and Developing Arabic epigraphic material.

The “Entry” of Iyād into Tanūkh. Invasion, Migration, and Integration in Late Antique North-Eastern Arabia

Pierre, Simon

Abstract: In his genealogical work, Ibn al-Kalbī notes various sub-groups of the Nizārī atypical tribe of Iyād as having “entered into (*dakhala fī*)” the Yamanī conglomerate of Tanūkh. This fusion process, thus opposed to the classical fission model of the *nasab*, is not confined to these groups, but they are its most prominently represented in Medieval sources. Iyād and Tanūkh would have migrated together from the same Arabian region and maintained a close though distinct presence in Iraq and then Northern Mesopotamia and Syria during early Islam, both associated with Arab Christianity.

By prioritizing dated testimonies, particularly epigraphy, over Abbasid textual reconstructions, an alternative scenario emerges. Initially, “Tanūkh” represented the northernmost trans-Arabian kingdom from the 3rd-5th centuries, somehow synonymous

with “Iraq”. Simultaneously, “Iyādh” was a *‘ashīra* within the central Ma‘add territory. Similar to Germanic groups of the same period, they began attacking and migrating into sedentary territories. After many convolutions only discernible from traces of lost imperial reports, they became the predominant “Ma‘addī” population over “Tanūkh,” whose original significance vanished. Finally, during the 6th-7th centuries, new introgressive groups began to exert influence in the “camp (*Hīra*)” of the region of ‘Aqūlā (Kūfa), diminishing the importance of “Iyād” as an elite designation.

The phylarchs and the sponsorship of the church

Wood, Philip

Abstract: The phylarchs and the sponsorship of the church. Both the Jafnid and Nasrid phylarchs ruled over Christian populations. But secondary literature, following propagandistic primary sources, has tended to play up the Jafnids’ commitment and underplay that of the Nasrids. This paper offers a re-reading of the hagiographic sources relating to Jacob Baradeus and to the conversion of Nu‘man III to understand them in their immediate settings and recognise later pressures to re-write these narratives in response to changing events.

Focus session - Zaydi governance in Yemen between legal theory and political practice

Legitimizing the rule: The examination of an imam

Johann Heiss

Abstract: The establishment of a form of centralized rule even of only of local significance necessitates many legitimacy procedures. In the case of the biographies of the Zaydi imams, their legitimations are carefully described and usually exhaustively presented. Practically every author of an imams biography dwells on miracles (*āyāt*, *karāmāt*, *mu'jizāt*) showing that the imam is worthy (*muḥaqqiq*) of his position, and on dreams (*al-manāmāt al-ṣādiqa*) pointing out the imam and predicting his imamate.

This paper will focus on one of the legitimating procedures, the examination of the imam (*imtihān*, *iḥtibār*), is where the imam is asked numerous questions intended to show his excellent education, good memory, and sound mind. Some of the scholars who have formulated questions may later become important officials and politicians at the imam's court. The examination of the imam thus has a double function: on the one side it is one of the legitimating tools for the imam's position, on the other side it serves as an opportunity for the imam to select officials serving in his government. The text serving mainly as a source for the lecture is 'Alī b. Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī's sīra of imām al-Manṣūr 'Abdallāh b. Ḥamza (d. 617/1217).

Shifts in the Zaydi theory of appointing the imam (ca. 1400-1500 CE)

Eirik Hovden

Abstract: The Zaydi theory of the imamate states that the method (*tarīq*) is *da'wa*, that is, the qualified man should claim the imamate. This shifts the focus from those selecting and appointing, to the person making the claim. If he is qualified according to the criteria, and if he is the best candidate, his imamate becomes binding on all Muslims. But who should evaluate his claim and validate it? This point is less clear, perhaps because Zaydi imams for a long time operated with a small number of followers already backing the imam before the *da'wa*, making alliances with local tribes, and in any case operating as a minority, albeit with its own realm, the *hijra*.

This paper focuses not on classical imamate theory as formulated in *uṣūl* and *'aqīda* chapters, but rather on how the theory is presented in *fiqh* texts at a time when Zaydis had much practical experience with the imamate, ca 1400-1500 CE. I draw the attention to a possible sunnization of the appointment theory itself. The location in the *Kitāb al-siyar* places these debates with other relevant topics such as the permissibility to have several parallel imamates and making peace treaties with other neighboring polities, if opportune. The main sources are the *Kitāb al-azhār* and *al-Bahr al-Zakḥkhār* of Ibn al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/1436) as well as the *Wābil* by al-Miqrā'ī (d. 990/1582).

Dhimma Governance and the Zaydi Madhhab Spectrum: The forced conversion of Jewish orphans, its Islamic-legal background, and political relevance for Qāsimī and Mutawakkilī Yemen

Kerstin Hünefeld

Abstract: Twentieth century Jewish-Yemeni sources refer to the practice of forced conversion of Jewish minor orphans to Islam and their removal (*naz'*) from their remaining family environment. Though the practice is reported to have taken place within the realm of Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn (r. 1904-1948), however, the latter is not mentioned as a driving force, but seems to rather have been challenged by it by not clearly identified actors from within the Zaydi spectrum.

This talk seeks to identify the Zaydī subgroup supporting this practice and its political positioning within the Qāsimī and Mutawakkilī political context. The major work of Zaydī jurisprudence, the *Sharḥ al-Azhār* that – including all text layers – developed from 15th to mid 18th century, does not include a clear ruling regarding that practice. Zaydi Islamic-legal sources (fatwas) from 17th/18th century Yemen, however, point to the practice of Imam Sharaf al-Din Yaḥyā (d. 965/1558) as precedent. Following the question of what it means, in political terms, to revive a practice attributed to Imam Sharaf al-Din within the imamate of Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn, this talk aims to give insights into and provoke further discussion on the formation of a Qāsimī “middle course” and those forces excluded from it.

Restricting Judicial Discretion in Medieval Zaydism (1348-1558)

Ebrahim Mohammed Abdulwahid Mansoor

Abstract: Among the literature produced in the Zaydi territory between 1348-1558 CE was a set of *fiqh* texts that worked to some extent as the law of the community. Some of these texts were written by Zaydi imams and belonged to different genres of legal writing. An example is the texts of the imams: Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza (d. 749/1348), Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā al-Murtaḍā (d. 840/14367) and 'Izz al-Dīn b. al-Ḥasan (d. 900/1494). In most cases, the imams point out legal disagreements in their texts, identifying the opinion that is described as (*al-mukhtār/alaqwā/al-aṣaḥḥ* etc.), i.e., the correct opinion from their point of view. One feature of the correct opinions chosen by the imams is that they do not restrict the judge's discretion, meaning that a judge may or may not use them as a basis for his judgments. In other cases, however, the imam indicates certain areas of disagreement where judges are obliged to follow his opinion.

This paper presents the *fiqh* texts attributed to the imams who governed/or sought to govern the Zaydi territory between 1348-1558 CE, focusing on areas of obligation and how they worked as an instrument to consolidate the Zaydi power.

Transfer of power in the Sharaf al-Dīn imamate (912-980/1506-1573): theory and practice

Ekaterina Pukhovaia

Abstract: The tension between the meritocratic principle underlying Zaydi political theory that prevented the formation of dynasties and the practical need to stabilize the transfer of

power between rulers was constant throughout the pre-modern history of the Zaydi imamate. The demand for a stabilized transfer of power became particularly strong when the imamate expanded its territory and developed a broader support base. This article provides a functional analysis of the development of dynasticism as a practice in Zaydi Yemen by focusing on a unique document from the period of rule of imam al-Mutawakkil Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn (d. 965/1557), the first Zaydi imam to rule over both Upper and Lower Yemen. The document, a will (*waṣīya*), composed during the plague of 933/1527, demonstrates how the Zaydi political elite developed a new language to ensure hereditary transfer of power. The paper contextualizes this unique document preserved in a single manuscript of a biography (*sīra*) of imam Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn in the broader context of sixteenth-century political transformation in Yemen and places it within a *longue durée* history of Zaydi political thought and practice.