

JÉRÉMIE SCHIETTECATTE (ed.) with CHRISTIAN JULIEN ROBIN. *L'Arabie à la veille de l'Islam: bilan clinique* (Table ronde tenue au Collège de France les 28 et 29 août 2006 dans le cadre du projet de l'Agence nationale de la recherche "De l'Antiquité tardive à l'Islam"; Orient & Méditerranée 3). 316 pages, 93 illustrations. 2008. Paris: De Boccard; 978-2-7018-0256-5 paperback.

The symposium *L'Arabie à la veille de l'Islam* was born, Christian Robin's introduction informs us, from the



desire to resolve the differences of opinions between the specialists of early Islam and those concerned with Arabia in antiquity. The former maintain that before Islam the Arabian peninsula was in the grip of poverty, anarchy and ignorance (the period known as *Jāhiliyyah*), while the latter consider – on the basis of epigraphic studies and archaeological discoveries – that prosperous civilisations and exceptionally developed kingdoms flourished there for at least 1500 years. As in any clash, the champions of each cause have tended to take their historical vision to extremes, the first moved by an impulse to exalt Islam, the second from an epistemological standpoint which puts Arabian studies on par with other disciplines concerned with the ancient Near East. The Paris round table aimed therefore to close the gap between these diverse historical perspectives, trying to re-place the scientific data at the centre of the discussion.

Arab scholars, recognising the relevance of the ancient civilisations of Arabia, have recently confined the period of the *Jāhiliyyah* to the two centuries preceding the advent of Islam (fifth and sixth centuries AD), and this represent a step towards resolving the conflict. The Paris meeting responded by asking some illustrious specialists to re-consider, in a way structured in time and space, the archaeological and epigraphic testimonies available; their contributions reveal an image of pre-Islamic Arabia which is less monolithic and all-embracing.

The contributions to the volume are grouped by geographical areas (northern and central, eastern, and southern Arabia respectively) and concentrate on the documentation concerning the centuries preceding the advent of Islam, i.e. the fourth to sixth centuries AD. For northern and central Arabia, archaeology

has revealed little up to now. Indeed neither the excavations of Hijra/Madā'in Sālih (Laila Nehmé) nor of Thaymā/Taymā' (Ricardo Eichmann) have reached levels of this period. The territory of Yathrib/Madīna (Michael Lecker) is similarly untested as it has not yet been excavated, but various ancient Arabic sources refer to a flourishing market at Yathrib and to goldsmiths' workshops at Zuhra. More revealing is Michael Macdonald's contribution on pre-Islamic epigraphy, which identifies a marked decline in the 'epigraphic habit' in north-western Arabia from the late fourth century AD onwards.

In eastern Arabia archaeological data are scarce too. Indeed late pre-Islamic levels are missing both in the Samad culture of central Oman (Paul Yule) and on the sites of Mlayha and Ad-Dūr in the northern Oman peninsula (Julien Cuny and Michel Mouton); there the stratigraphic sequence ends with the rise of Sasanian power in the third century AD. However, an important and careful excavation at the site of Kush in the United Arab Emirates (Derek Kennet) has, for the first time in eastern Arabia, brought to light a sequence of deposits dating from the fifth to the thirteenth centuries AD, including the two centuries preceding Islam, a time when the Arabian coast was under Sasanian influence.

Of particular interest are the four final papers on southern Arabia. Christian Robin contributes a complete inventory of all Himyarite inscriptions of the period between the advent of monotheism at the end of the fourth and the sixth century AD when southern Arabian writing definitively disappears. It is evident here too that epigraphic documents become rarer and finally disappear. The epigraphic evidence is supported by the archaeological data presented (by Jérémie Schiettecatte) in a series of distribution maps of settlements dated to the third-sixth centuries AD, showing impressively and graphically the gradual, but irreversible, demise of settlements during these three centuries. According to Schiettecatte such a decline in population was caused by profound political, economic and religious upheavals which affected society in southern Arabia from the fourth century AD onwards. This was determined on the one hand by an increase in the centralising power of the state of Himyar and on the other hand by a progressive obscuring of the traditional identifiers of tribal populations. Thus there appears to have been a split between centre and periphery which will inexorably lead to the system's collapse.

The concept of a crisis internal to the system

is expanded in Schiettecatte's second paper, which examines the fate of three of the greatest cities in southern Arabia: Shabwa, Ma'rib and San'a. The analysis of their political, economic, religious and military functions documents their structural development and reveals that, while Shabwa and Ma'rib were in decline by the time of the advent of Islam, San'a, founded in the first century AD, was to grow through time, emerging intact at the beginning of the Islamic era. This example serves to demonstrate how artificial the 'watershed' that traditionally divides the pre-Islamic from the Islamic can be. The final paper concerns art history in southern Arabia, with Sabina Antonini de Maigret presenting architectural sculpture which from the third century AD was the only category of monuments to survive up to the seventh century AD. The shapes and decoration of column bases, pilasters and capitals show a level of accomplishment which evolves until the advent of Islam, a testimony to the strength of the local style

notwithstanding the adoption of first Hellenistic, and later Byzantine and Persian elements.

There is no conclusion to close the volume. Thus the question of the *Jâhiliyyah* remains open, though the various contributions speak for themselves. The epigraphic and archaeological documents, above all from southern and western Arabia, reflect a great state civilisation whose long and splendid course fades at the eve of Islam. Here is not the place to discuss the reasons for this decline but to acknowledge it. Islam found itself growing from the remains of a society that was neither ignorant nor primitive; on the contrary it encountered the last rays of a brilliant civilisation which provided the substrate for Islam's own roots.

ALESSANDRO DE MAIGRET

Università degli studi di Napoli l'Orientale,  
Napoli, Italy (Email: ademaigret@unior.it)

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