Was there a “civilization” among inhabitants of pre-Islamic Arabia?

• The Question of the Sources
• Example of Islamic Sources: Ibn al-Kalbi’s Book of Idols

Ibn al-Kalbi (737-819/821)

• Full Name: Hishām b. Muḥammad b. al-Sā`ib al-Kalbī, Abu al-Mundhir
• Birth: Kūfa around 120/737
• Death: Kūfa in 204/819 or 206/821 in the Abbasid caliphate of al-Ma’mūn (r. 813-833 AD)
• Specialization: wrote more than 150 book (according to the Fihrist). He is an authority on Arab genealogy and pre-Islamic religious practices
• Surviving Books: Djamharat al-Nasab, al-Aṣnām, Ansāb al-Khayl
• Disciples: al-Tabarī (Historian of Qur’an), Abu ’l-Faradž al-İsfahânsî (Historian of Music)

What is Civilization?
Tribes of Arabia

Urban Centers (Hadar vs Badiya)

- Mecca
- Yathrib (Medina)
- Hadhramaut in Yemen
- The Fertile Crescent

Islam mostly followed older patterns. Many scholars would argue that Islam was a byproduct of “Axial Age” (8th-3rd century B.C.), the millennium or so before the rise of Islam in the seventh century C.E.
Axial Age (8th-3rd century BC)

Axial Age

The Axial Age is a term coined by German Philosophers like Karl Jaspers. It marks the emergence, roughly at the same time around most of the inhabited world, the great intellectual, philosophical, and religious systems that came to shape subsequent human society and culture. It produced leading religious figures foundational religious texts(e.g. Lao-Tzu, Buddha, the Greek philosophers, the Hebrew prophets, and the compilation of the Upanishads in India).

• The Arabian Peninsula was not an isolated place during Axial Age.

• Greek Connection to Arabia via the Fertile Crescent culture owed a considerable debt to the peoples of the east Mediterranean seaside - for example, to the Phoenicians(today’s Lebanon) for their alphabet

• Greek Connection to Arabia through Alexander the Great, and the subsequent penetration of Hellenism into Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia, and even lands further to the east,

• The Hellenistic period covers the period of ancient Greek (Hellenic) history and Mediterranean history between the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC and the emergence of the Roman Empire as signified by the Battle of Actium in 31 BC and the subsequent conquest of Ptolemaic Egypt the following year.
• Arabia during the seventh century A.D. was controlled by two rival empires:

  • The Byzantine Empire: Constantinople or what is left of the old Roman Empire
  • The Sasanian Empire: a dynasty which had come to power in the third century A.D.
  • Sasanians borrowed from Byzantine culture (e.g. bath-houses, systems of taxation, and the shah Khusrav I Anushirvan (r. 531-579) welcomed the “pagan” Greek philosophers whom the Roman emperor Justinian had expelled from their Academy in Athens.

The Conflict between the Byzantine and Sasanian empires influenced pre-Islamic Arabia

• The Fertile Crescent functioned as a crossroad
• A mercantile community flourished and dominated urban centers
• The Romans employed some Arab tribes as “federates” and allies of the imperial army. This increased the level of cultural exchange and contributed to the spread of Christianity among the Arabs. Chief among them was the tribe of Ghassan, who in the sixth century ruled a buffer kingdom between Byzantine Syria, on the one hand, and on the other, both tribal Arabia and a similar Arab kingdom (the Lakhmids) allied with Iran.
• Religion was shaped by that function and vulnerability
Jews
Zoroastrians
Christians
Hunafa' (linked in a general way with the figure of Abraham.)
Polytheism

Major characteristics of religions in the seventh century

- Arising against the background ground of injustice and inequality
- The "confessional" character
- Association with empires
  - (e.g. Christianity's identification with the Roman Empire began under the emperor Constantine (274-337 AD) and was complete before the reign of his sixth-century successor Justinian)
  - (e.g. Zoroastrianism identification with Sasanian Empire developed at an uneven pace, but by the sixth and seventh centuries was substantially complete)
- With the exception of Judaism religion had a "universalist" character
  - NOTE: one of the features of Christianity which appealed to Constantine and his successors was its universalism.

Spread of Christianity and abolishing Ancient Egyptian religion

At the time of the conversion of Constantine, perhaps half the inhabitants of Egypt professed Christianity. WHY?

Spread of Christianity: The Case of Egypt

Doctrinal parallels shared with Egyptians, Greeks and Romans resident in the country:

- Redemption
- Sacramental mysteries
- Immortality
- Egyptian succeeded to adapt Christianity to their cult.
Serapeuni or the Temple of Serapis in Alexandria #1

Apis or Hapis is a sacred bull worshipped in the Memphis region. Identified as the son of Hathor, a primary deity in the pantheon of Ancient Egypt.

Serapeuni or the Temple of Serapis in Alexandria #2

Hathor
Deity of the sky, dance, love, beauty, joy, motherhood, foreign lands, mining, music and fertility.
(Deity of creation/the first being to emerge from the darkness and endless watery abyss that existed before creation.)

(Deity of craftsmen and architects)

(Deity of the afterlife, death, life, and resurrection)

Questions to think about

- Who controlled Arabia in (571 C.E. birth of the Prophet d. 632)?
- What kind of religious pluralism (if any) existed in Arabia?
- What attributes of civilization existed in Arabia before the arrival of Islam?