

## Book Review

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Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥira, Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext*, *Islamic History and Civilization: Studies and Texts*, ol. 104 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), xvii + 248 pages, appendix, indices, maps. ISBN: 9789004229266, Price: \$133 (Cloth).

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When the phrase “late antiquity” appears today in scholarly publications on early Islam, it connotes a quest for continuity across time. That is, we expect that when authors use this phrase, they seek elements of continuity between the early Islamic world and the world that preceded it in the Near East. Until recently, however, and somewhat paradoxically, Arabia (geographically speaking, in the broadest sense) has often appeared outside this model. Arabia existed, of course, throughout the late antique period (however defined), but according to this view, its destiny and historical meaning were, first of all, for it to be remote from its imperial, bureaucratized, urbanized, and monotheistic neighbors; and second, for it to bring discontinuity and even rupture to Near Eastern history, precisely through the rise and spread of Islam. As a result, historians who have advocated for continuity between late antiquity and early Islam have often presented this as proceeding

more or less independently of the coming of the Arabs and Islam. According to this approach, in other words, things mostly went on as before, *despite* the arrival of a new religion, language, and political system.

The book under review here, which features late antiquity in both its title and its content, provides occasion for reflecting on these matters. Its subject matter is at once familiar and strange. It is well known that the city of al-Ḥira had an important place in the history of the Arabs before Islam, even though it was situated outside Arabia proper (at least in modern terms), not far from the Sasanian capital of Ctesiphon in Iraq. However, modern guides to al-Ḥira have not been plentiful. Beginning with Gustav Rothstein’s detailed *Die Dynastie der Lakhmiden in al-Ḥira*, now well over a century old, these have tended to focus on the Lakhmid dynasty and its role in international politics and warfare. Meanwhile, the Lakhmid court and its patronage loom large in the early history

of Arabic literature, especially poetry, but the connection between this court on the one hand, and the just-mentioned political and military role of the Lakhmids on the other hand, is historiographically tenuous. Moreover, when al-Ḥīra and its inhabitants appear in eastern Christian literature, they present an entirely different set of concerns, heroes, and villains. As Isabel Toral-Niehoff points out (p. 27), we can easily get the (erroneous) impression of dealing not with one city but several: in Arabic, a nurturing ground for poets and a stage for Arab kings; in Greek (and perhaps Persian), a source of allied troops for the imperial wars; and in Syriac and Christian Arabic, a breeding-place for bishops and saints engaged in theological controversies and in the conversion of the Arab nomads of the steppe land.

This book proposes to put these pieces together in a unified picture. This involves a focus on the city itself (or as often, “the oasis”); if the book foregrounds any particular group, this is the Christian Arab urbanites known as the *‘ibād*, rather than the Lakhmid (or Naṣrid) ruling house. The book also features late antiquity, and not as a matter of mere lip service. After all, al-Ḥīra was founded in or around the third century CE, and fell into eclipse after its conquest by the Arab Muslims in the seventh. The Christian sources relating to it are unmistakably products of late antiquity. But then, if we want to integrate the Islamic Arabic sources into this picture, we need to view them in a similar, or at least comparative light.

Isabel Toral-Niehoff has not achieved—and does not claim to have achieved—a completely unified picture of al-Ḥīra, but she has come as close to this goal as seems imaginable. Since the relevant source

material is so vast, she restricts herself to outlines of certain issues and events, while entering more fully into others. The mode of presentation is thematic, rather than sequential and chronological. This means that readers who want, say, a full, detailed account of the Lakhmid princes, will find that, while this book has much to say on the topic, they may still want to consult Rothstein and more recent contributions (cited in the book’s bibliography).

The book’s chapters indicate its main thematic divisions as follows. The first chapter, on “Historical Background,” deals with dynastic, urban, and tribal history, and with historiographical issues presented by the Muslim and Christian sources. It also considers the (unfortunately meager) archaeological and inscriptional evidence. The next chapter, on “The Natural Environment,” provides a somewhat surprising view of al-Ḥīra, set in a pleasant upland location at some remove from the Euphrates, and founded at a time when technological advances had just made settlement of this area possible. Indeed, al-Ḥīra’s climate was mild enough to permit the production of wine, provoking later disapproval among some of the area’s inhabitants in the Islamic era, and bringing delight to pleasure-seeking tourists. The city was truly “Arab” in the sense that like Yathrib/Medina, it consisted of separate settlements, partly rural in character and linked together without external fortifications.

Then comes a chapter on the community’s origins, including its relation to Palmyra and its trade, the Zenobia legend, and the possibility that al-Ḥīra may have played host to Manichaeans seeking refuge from Sasanid repression. (The author wonders if this could have

contributed to the later triumph of Christianity at al-Ḥīra, but this can only be speculation.) A treatment of “Al-Ḥīra and the Sasanians” follows, again not in chronological order, but with a focus on political and cultural relations. Then we have a discussion of “The City,” including the structure of its settlement and royal palaces. A subsequent chapter discusses “The Population,” divided ethnically among Arabs, Aramaeans, and Persians, although the latter are so rare in al-Ḥīra – apart from the ongoing presence of a unit of heavy cavalry – that we may wonder why they are included here at all. The Aramaean element is overwhelmingly Christian, rural, and of low social status. Meanwhile, the Aramaic language is entirely familiar to the Arabic-speaking urban elite (the *‘ibād*), though the written form of Aramaic most in use was Edessene, or Western Syriac. These *‘ibād* are, as already mentioned, this book’s main protagonists. They were the ones who participated fully both in Arab life and culture and in the sophisticated urban life of late antiquity, for well over two centuries.

Toral-Niehoff follows with a discussion of al-Ḥīra’s languages and the relations among them (*die sprachlichen Verhältnisse*). As just mentioned, she argues for an urban environment that in the case of the elite, is bilingual or even trilingual, as some of the *‘ibād* learned Persian during their education and travels. Their position as a “minority in the middle” enhanced their elite status, or even made it possible. The author cites Knauf’s argument that this kind of “functional multilingualism” was characteristic of the Near East in late antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The idea

deserves further consideration, as does also the question of continuity afterward under Islam.<sup>2</sup> “Subaltern” elements, meanwhile, are relegated to monolingualism: Aramaic for the rural peasantry, Arabic for the Arab “allies” (*aḥlāf*) recently arrived from the steppes.

A subsequent chapter takes up “The King and the Tribes.” Like the royal house of Kinda, the Lakhmids were a dynasty and not a tribe, and their skill at tribal politics helps to explain their remarkable longevity. The author delves into their relations with Tamīm, Taghlib b. Wā’il, and Bakr b. Wā’il. In the chapter entitled “The King and his Court,” we see the fascination that Lakhmid cultural production exerted over poets, prose writers, and audiences of the Umayyad and ‘Abbāsīd eras. Several interesting questions arise, for which full answers cannot be provided. For instance, did the corpus of pre-Islamic poetry really have its origins in the desert, where poets recited their compositions for the clan gathered around the campfire? Or should we view it, following Thomas Bauer, as a product of the “three courts” (Kinda, Ghassānids, Lakhmids, p. 86), at least as much as of the “campfire”; or similarly, following James Montgomery, as more “beduinizing” than “beduin”?<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Arabiyya: From Ancient Arabic to Early Standard Arabic, 200 CE–600 CE,” in A. Neuwirth et al., eds., *The Qur’ān in Context. Historical and Literary Investigations into the Qur’ānic Milieu* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 197–254, esp. 229–32 (on the Nabataeans) and 242–45 (the Ghassānids).

<sup>2</sup>One implication of Knauf’s work is that the diglossia (or as he thinks, triglossia) of Arabic could be an inheritance from late antiquity at least as much as from the Arabian *jāhiliyya*.

<sup>3</sup>Thomas Bauer, “Die schriftliche Sprache im Arabischen,” in *Schrift und Schriftlichkeit*, ed. H. Günther and O. Ludwig (Berlin and New York:

1. Ernst Axel Knauf, “Arabo-Aramaic and

The chapter concludes by asking whether a truly Christian Arabic poetry existed in al-Ḥīra; the answer to this question is no, not by any strict definition of the term. However, we have an exception in ‘Adī b. Zayd, maker and baptizer of kings, able administrator, virtuoso polyglot, hapless victim of intrigue, and Arabic poet. (Why we should admit ‘Adī and no one else into this category is still not entirely clear.)

The longest chapter deals with “Christianity in al-Ḥīra.” It describes the arrival of Christianity; relations and contacts with members of other faiths; the activities of ascetics and missionaries; and the life of the Ḥīran saint, John the Arab (Yoḥanan Ṭayāya). The author relates, in chronological order, the relations of al-Ḥīra’s princes with the Christians and their institutions. These relations were hardly typical of the time, since the Lakhmids remained outside the faith nearly until the end. The conversion of al-Nu‘mān III b. al-Mundhir took place (largely through the machinations of ‘Adī b. Zayd), around a decade before his dethronement and the final destruction of the Lakhmid state. Nonetheless, from the fifth century onward al-Ḥīra figured as a Christian city, adhering to the “Persian” or “Nestorian” church. At the same time, it maintained contacts with Syria/Palestine, so that its monastic architecture came to bear traces of that world, while the conversion of the nomadic Arabs of al-Ḥīra’s surrounding steppes tended toward Monophysite/Miaphysite Christianity, rather than the

Nestorianism of al-Ḥīra itself. The book concludes with a summary and conclusion.

So many themes and topics come up in this book—more than I have managed to list—that I can only comment on a few of them. The treatment of historiographical issues, though brief, holds considerable interest. One point strikes me especially, namely (p. 10) the fact that we still lack a full, systematic treatment of the Islamic Arabic sources for *pre-Islamic Arabia*, with regard to their literary forms and genres, their historicity, and the process whereby these narrative materials assumed written or literary form (*Literarizität*). I would add that Werner Caskel was probably the Arabist who went farthest in this direction during the past century. Since Caskel’s death in 1970, however, a tremendous amount of work has been done on the sources for early Islam, including Arabia, especially regarding the genres of *sīra/maghāzi* (life and campaigns of Muhammad and the earliest community) and of *akhbār* (historical narratives) on the era of the great conquests and the early Caliphate. And here, even though the contemporary profession has not arrived at consensus (and probably never will), we can still benefit from strong opposing arguments, each drawing on painstaking research. For pre-Islamic Arabia, however, we have nothing of the kind. From a literary and rhetorical point of view, should we think of *jāhiliyya* as a “primary theme” all by itself, along the lines of Albrecht Noth’s thematic triad of *rida*, *futūḥ*, and *fitna*? Or should we break these narrative materials down into genres or sub-genres such as *ayyām al-‘Arab* (“battle-days of the Arabs”); *aswāq al-‘Arab* (“markets and commerce of the Arabs”); monographic treatments of tribes (*Kitāb Tamīm*, etc.) and of royal

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De Gruyter, 1996), 1483-91; James Montgomery, “The Empty Ḥijāz,” in *Arabic Theology, Arabic Philosophy...in Celebration of Richard M. Frank*, ed. J. Montgomery (Leuven and Paris: Peeters, 2006), 37-97.

dynasties (Kinda, Lakhmids, etc.); and so on? Why did so accomplished and prolific a scholar as Ibn al-Kalbī devote himself to this material, and why do we have so much of it? Answers to this latter question are available,<sup>4</sup> but it remains a difficult area for historians.

Commerce, trade, and the economy writ large constitute another area of interest. The Arabic historical sources do not dwell on agriculture in al-Ḥīra, but then, they have little interest in peasants and agriculture overall (p. 39f.). Of course agriculture must have been important for al-Ḥīra, considering its favorable location, rich soil, relatively large population, and so on.

And what about trade? Al-Ḥīra's early history involved both commerce and rivalry with Palmyra (p. 51). Coming closer to the Islamic era, its location must have made it a (or the) primary point for communication between eastern Arabia and Sasanid Iraq. Accordingly, modern historians often refer to al-Ḥīra as one of the two most important players (together with Mecca) in sixth-century peninsular trade, as it constituted the point of departure for Sasanid commerce with Yamāma, the Ḥijāz, Yemen, and so on (p. 52). But given the lack of archaeological evidence, how do we actually know this? The literary sources relate a late sixth-century episode involving a caravan (*laṭīma*) intended for commerce in South Arabian aromatics, dispatched by the Lakhmid ruler once each year. This episode recurs constantly in modern treatments of Arabian trade, including the one under discussion here

4. As in Nina Drory, "The Abbasid Construction of the *Jāhiliyya*: Cultural Authority in the Making," *Studia Islamica* 83 (1996): 33-49.

(p. 52). But, in fact, it appears only once in the narratives transmitted by Ibn al-Kalbī, briefly describing the caravan's arrival at the annual fair of 'Ukāz.<sup>5</sup> Apart from this one episode, our sources have little to tell us about al-Ḥīra's place in sixth-century Arabian commerce as a whole.

Elsewhere, seeking to demonstrate the existence of commercial ties between Ḥīra and Yamāma, Toral-Niehoff refers to the well-attested fact that Christianity was present, or even dominant, in eastern Arabia from the fifth century onward. This point, which goes against the picture of an "idolatrous" Arabia on the eve of Islam, is worth emphasizing, but it hardly constitutes concrete proof of commercial relations between these two places (as Toral-Niehoff basically agrees, pp. 92-99). The author also includes al-Ḥīra (at p. 53) within the annual sequence of "markets of the Arabs," reported by Ibn al-Kalbī and others, which included sites throughout the entire peninsula. In fact, however, this narrative tradition does *not* include al-Ḥīra, just as it does not include several other obvious candidates including Yathrib and Mecca.<sup>6</sup> So in the end, "Ḥīran trade" remains, historiographically speaking, on thin ice. Again, there is no reason to deny al-Ḥīra a major role in sixth-century Arabian commerce. The problem is rather that "Ḥīran trade" has become subsumed

5. Abū l-Faraj, *Aghānī* (Cairo: Dār al-Kutub al-Miṣriyya, 1927-), 19:75; Ibn Ḥabīb, *Muḥabbar* (Hyderabad: Dā'irat al-Ma'ārif al-'Uthmāniyya, 1941), 195, and other sources, all referring back to the same piece of information from Ibn al-Kalbī.

6. M. Bonner, "Commerce and Migration before Islam: A Brief History of a Long Literary Tradition," in *Iranian Language and Culture*, ed. B. Aghaei and M.R. Ghanoonparvar (Malibu and Costa Mesa: Mazda, 2012), 65-89, esp. 71-75.

into “Meccan trade,” an argument which has seen little progress in the nearly thirty years since the appearance of Patricia Crone’s book bearing that same title.

The author also assigns a central role to al-Ḥīra in the development of the Arabic language and literary culture. Again, the “intermediary” position of the *ʿibād*, together with the patronage of the Lakhmid court, led to an early blossoming not only of orally-transmitted poetry, but also of written prose, perhaps even in al-Ḥīra’s chancery, and even resulting in an official court historiography by the turn of the seventh century (pp. 14, 114-18, 123, 234). This thesis rests on difficult evidence, but deserves further consideration. If all this is true, meanwhile, it would make eminent sense for Arabic writing to have been invented first in al-Ḥīra, as used to be commonly thought. Toral-Niehoff admits that the consensus of recent decades favors the Nabataeans as the originators of Arabic writing, but she rightly claims

that al-Ḥīra’s literate elite must have had a key role in the process nonetheless. It also appears now that the older view, in favor of al-Ḥīra, is gaining back some ground; certainly the evidence collected here would favor this view.

This book is written in a clear, accessible, academic German style. Readers who lack sufficient German to read it should consult an article in English by the same author, bringing together several of the book’s arguments with a focus on its protagonists, the *ʿibād*.<sup>7</sup> The article appeared in a volume featuring the work of several important German-language scholars, here presented in English. English-speakers should be grateful for this effort. At the same time, we may hope that scholarly production in the German language, with its great tradition in our fields, will continue to prosper. This book, an illuminating, indeed eye-opening contribution to our knowledge, is an excellent case in point.

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7. I. Toral-Niehoff, “The *ʿibād* in al-Ḥīra: An Arab Christian Community in Late Antique Iraq,” in *The Qurʾān in Context* (see above, n. 1), 328-56.