Book Review

Denis Genequand and Christian Julien Robin (eds.), *Les Jafnides: des rois arabes au service de Byzance (VI^e^ siècle de l'ère chrétienne)* (Paris: éditions De Boccard, 2015), 293 pages. ISBN: 9782701804378, Price: €49 (Paperback).

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The volume under review revisits the Ghassānids, the famous Arab dynasty allied to Byzantium that has attracted considerable scholarly attention over a good century or more. This undertaking begins with a challenge to the very name granted to the dynasty: "Ghassānid" is indeed quite a misnomer. Names ending in –ids (-idès in Greek) imply a common ancestor and so one should more accurately refer to them as Jafnids, that is the descendants of one Jafna (80 and n. 2, 193). (The same applies to the Lakhmids who are more aptly named Naṣrids after their eponym Naṣr.)

The papers collected here are the outcome of a symposium held in Paris in 2008, one in a series of conferences on pre-Islamic Arabia and pre-Islamic Arabs.[1] Interest in these topics has grown considerably over the last number of years and continues with the recent surge of publications by, *inter alia*, Greg Fisher, Peter Webb, Aziz al-Azmeh, and Isabel Toral-Niehoff.[2] But if pre-Islamic Arabia and pre-Islamic Arabs have been much neglected in modern scholarship, such has not been the case with the Jafnids, the subject of continuous modern scholarly

1. See also the proceedings of another conference that took place at the same time published by Joëlle Beaucamp, Françoise Briquel-Chatonnet, and Christian Julien Robin (eds.), *Juifs et Chrétiens en Arabie aux V^e^ et VI^e^ siècles: regards croisés sur les sources* (Paris: Association des amis du centre d'histoire et civilisation de Byzance, 2010).

2. Greg Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empire Before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015); Peter Webb, *Imagining the Arabs: Arab Identity and the Rise of Islam* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016); Aziz al-Azmeh, *The Emergence of Islam in Late Antiquity: Allāh and his People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), on which, see Webb's review in *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā* 23 (2015), 149-53; Isabel Toral-Niehoff, *Al-Ḥīra. Eine arabische Kulturmetropole im spätantiken Kontext* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), and reviewed by Michael Bonner in this issue of *Al-ʿUṣūr al-Wusṭā*, 181-186.

attention from the nineteenth century to the present.

In the opening contribution to the volume ("Rethinking the Jafnids: New approaches to Rome's Arab allies," 11-36), Mark Whittow justifies this sustained interest in noting that "they were a non-Roman dynasty on the boundaries of the empire about whom there is an unusually large body of evidence, much of it relatively contemporary" (11). As Arabs, the Jafnids have also been seen as forerunners to the world conquerors about to emerge from the Arabian Peninsula, and as a significant source of evidence on the immediate pre-Islamic period. The Jafnids are also situated at the nexus of the Roman/Persian conflict, while "Jafnid history can be read as a prolegomenon to the epoch-defining fall of the Roman empire in the Levant" (12). This last point is reinforced by their adoption of Monophysitism, which "has often been seen as the very fault line that divided the sixth-century empire" (12). It is, therefore, not surprising that Armand-Pierre Caussin de Perceval and Theodor Nöldeke could be regarded as founding fathers of what might rightly be called the field of "Jafnid studies" already in the nineteenth century.[3] The field, as it were, generated a sustained body of scholarship arguably best exemplified by the extensive work of Irfan Shahîd.[4] The latter's arguments, in fact, are discussed throughout this volume. Several of the contributors to the present book see Shahîd's work as inextricably linked to Arab nationalism (5) and, thus, revisit his conclusions on the Jafnids and what they can tell us of Arab practices of power on the eve of Islam.

Such has been the effort to reconstruct Jafnid history that Whittow even suggests that the field may have become overworked (12ff.). He wonders, in other words, if new discoveries and interpretations have in fact dramatically changed our understanding of Jafnid history. After a thorough review of the source material, Whittow explores theoretical and comparative approaches most likely to shed new light. In particular, he underscores the importance of studies on "borderlands" and "middle ground," following the pioneering work of Herbert Eugene Bolton, which could lead to a more nuanced analysis of cooperation along the frontier zone.[5] Whittow also advocates for a more global approach to Roman frontiers, urging scholars to take into account more closely what he terms "African approaches" (27-29), especially in light of the field-changing contribution on

3. Armand-Pierre Caussin de Perceval, *Essai sur l'histoire des Arabes avant l'islamisme, pendant l'époque de Mahomet, et jusqu'à la réduction de toutes les tribus sous la loi musulmane.* 3 vols. (Paris: Librairie Firmin Didot frères, 1847-8) and Theodor Nöldeke, *Die ghassânischen Fürsten aus deam Hause Gafna's* (Berlin: Verlag der Königlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1887).

4. See most recently his *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Sixth Century.* Vol. 2, part 2 (Washington DC: Dumbarton Oaks, 2010).

5. Bolton's work has generated its own industry but see the classic discussion of David J. Weber, "Turner, the Boltonians, and the Borderlands," *American Historical Review* 91 (1986): 66-81. Weber's article should now be complemented by the recent contributions of Albert L. Hurtado, *Herbert Eugene Bolton: Historian of the American Borderlands* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2012) and "Bolton and Turner: The Borderlands and American Exceptionalism," *Western Historical Quarterly* 44 (2013): 5-20. I am indebted to my colleague Chantel Rodriguez for these references.

the Moors of the late Yves Modéran.[6]

The parallel with North Africa suggested by Whittow is supported by Maurice Sartre's article ("Rome et les Arabes nomades: le dossier épigraphique de *Eeitha*," 37-51), which offers a fresh appraisal of the epigraphic corpus of Hīt (ancient Eeitha). Hīt's inscriptions indeed suggest that the Romans had developed a specific strategy to interact with nomads in the *ḥarra* (basalt desert), even though these policies are not as well documented as they are for North Africa (48). Epigraphy also helps Sartre identify family strategies: a remarkable family of Roman agents seems to have cultivated names evoking the memory of the age of Herod the Great to assert its cultural and social capital (42). Moreover, the village of Hīt/Eeitha produced a sizeable number of officials and agents that served in the Roman administration. This might be explained by the fact that the villagers had erected a temple dedicated to the imperial cult (43), and thus were rewarded for their support for the regime.

William and Fidelity Lancaster offer an anthropological approach to tribes in line with their previous work on the Ruwala bedouins from Jordan ("Concepts of tribe, tribal confederation and tribal leadership," 53-77). They settle on the following definition: "Tribe is a set of ideas about how people think about themselves as a series of social, economic and political groupings that provide livelihood and profits, and the development and defence of these, predicated on certain moral premises or givens, and which take account of geographical facts and historical events" (53). This may be a useful chapter to discuss the concept of tribe, but its relevance and applicability to a sixth century context remains unclear (as duly acknowledged by the authors themselves and by the editors in the general introduction to the volume, 6-7). Only the last sentence of the chapter suggests a potential parallel with the Jafnids, with regard to the effort by tribal leaders "to negotiate with central authorities for opportunities for tribespeople in service provision or for trade" (73). The combination of history and anthropology has proved remarkably fruitful and transformative over the past few decades,[7] but has not yet reached its full potential in the fields of Late Antiquity and early Islam, despite some important (and controversial) contributions.[8]

Christian Julien Robin, in his chapter, takes up literary and epigraphic evidence on Ghassān in Arabia ("Ghassān en Arabie," 79-120). Robin shows that the epigraphic evidence contradicts Werner Caskel's idea that Ghassān was not a real tribe but rather a "fictive community" (German: "fiktive

6. Yves Modéran, *Les Maures et l'Afrique romaine (IVe-VIIe siècle)* (Rome: École française de Rome, 2003).

7. This is perhaps best exemplified by the evolution of the journal *Annales: Histoire, Sciences Sociales*, which is not to say that the relationship between history and anthropology has not generated its share of debates. See for a recent discussion Elisa Brilli, Pierre-Olivier Dittmar and Blaise Dufal (eds.), *Faire l'anthropologie historique du Moyen Âge*, *Atelier du Centre de Recherches Historiques* 6 (2010) (available online: https://acrh.revues.org/1911, consulted on October 12, 2016).

8. See in particular Christian Décobert, *Le mendiant et le combattant: l'institution de l'islam* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1991); Jacqueline Chabbi, *Le seigneur des tribus: l'islam de Mahomet* (Paris: Noésis, 1997) and, most recently, *Les trois piliers de l'islam: lecture anthropologique du Coran* (Paris: Seuil, 2016).

Gemeinschaft") (95). Robin explores the origins of the Jafnids and the singularity of the Ghassān tribe in the Islamic tradition. Indeed, Ghassān is not integrated into the sprawling genealogical tree of Arab tribes, a specificity only shared by the Tanūkh (83). This is usually explained by the fact that Ghassān is not a man's name, but a place (a water hole located in Yemen) (83-84). But, since Ghassān is elsewhere attested as a personal name, Robin suggests that there might have been a deliberate strategy to classify them apart from traditional tribal groups (84). Ghassān is otherwise depicted in Muslim literary sources (especially in the works of Ibn al-Kalbī and Ibn Ḥazm) as a confederacy (*jimāʿ*) claiming Māzin b. al-Azd as a common ancestor, and subdivided in various branches among his descendants (83-92).

Interestingly, the apparent exceptionalism made by Muslim sources is contradicted by epigraphic sources prior to the fourth century. These sources depict Ghassān as an unremarkable sedentary (sabian: *sʾʿb*) Arabian tribe (95). Epigraphy shows that a territorial principality named Ghassān existed in Western Arabia, likely in the Ḥijāz, in the third and fourth centuries (101), probably centered around Yathrīb (97). This leads Robin to observe that Islamic historiography has preserved reliable material about the few decades prior to the rise of Islam, but that the deeper Arabian past is irremediably lost (79). Robin also debunks the classic parallel between the trajectories of Naṣrid and Jafnid history. The former lasted over 300 years and constituted a true political entity with a capital and an army, while the latter vanished after about 50 years and lacked such attributes (80). It is impossible to do justice to such a rich contribution in a brief review, but Robin also provides useful appendices, including a list of all dated references to Ghassān and of the relevant epigraphic texts (110-114).

Geoffrey Greatrex ("Les Jafnides et la défense de l'Empire au VI^e^ siècle," 121-54) suggests that the Jafnids concluded an agreement with the Roman Empire in the early sixth century, likely under Anastasius. This would explain their anti-Chalcedonian stance (123). Greatrex contends, *pace* Shahîd, that the Jafnids were allies (*symmachoi*) rather than *foederati* (126), and that al-Hārith was elevated to the status of *archiphylarchos* in 529 (123), in response to the growing threat posed by Naṣrid raids in Syria (129). This policy has to be understood in the broader framework of the reorganization of the Eastern frontier by Justinian in the context of war against Persia (131). The restructuring of the *limes* prompted economic and agricultural development and generated increasing rivalries among local power brokers and élites (135-7). The result was that the Jafnids eventually acquired, from the Roman perspective, too much authority over the course of the sixth century. This situation prompted the Romans, following a well-established practice, to topple them, and al-Mundhir was exiled to Sicily (123-4). It was normal practice for the Romans to remove allies' chiefs when they were not loyal enough or when they aspired to too great a degree of autonomy. The decision to exile al-Mundhir and his son, al-Nuʿmān, was therefore, relative to execution, not unduly harsh (139).

In his chapter on the likelihood of a Roman military strategy in the Levant ("Did the Roman Empire have a military strategy and were the Jafnids part

of it?", 155-92), Ariel Lewin challenges Edward Luttwak's famous theory. The latter posited a grand Roman military strategy for the defense of the frontiers (156-8). Lewin insists on the rise of Arab tribes in Late Antiquity that required new approaches and policies: Sasanians and Romans tended to rely on the tribes "to damage the interests of their rival". At the same time, "the Arab tribes exploited the warfare between the two empires for their own advantage" (159). Lewin concludes that Diocletian "conceived a large project of defensive works whose main purpose was to defend the eastern provinces from the Arab menace" (162). Yet, it is unclear whether this is precisely the system that the *Notitia Dignitatum* describes; it might in fact have emerged earlier.

Lewin then turns to the question of the role of Arab tribes in the defense of the Empire prior to Justinian (166-69) and during the initial years of his reign. This last period was marked by increasingly complex relationships with Arab tribes whose chiefs were gradually promoted to the phylarchate. This situation prompted the creation of a brand new position when al-Hārith was assigned authority over a large sector of the Near East, a form, one might say, of "superphylarchate" (169-74). At the same time, his brother, Abū Karib, was also a phylarch with enhanced authority. As many scholars have rightly pointed out, the two brothers exercised power over two different sections of the Near Eastern frontier: al-Ḥārith was given authority over *Phoenice* and *Arabia*, and probably *Syria* and *Euphratensis*, while Abū Karib controlled *Palestina* and the Hedjaz" (174). Despite the richness of the material examined here, one would have expected a more analytical discussion of the implications of these reforms.

Pierre-Louis Gatier looks at a small corpus of ten Greek inscriptions that mention Jafnid princes ("Les Jafnides dans l'épigraphie grecque au VI^e^ siècle," 193-222). This limited body of evidence provides important information but also underlines the need to resist the tendency to identify all or most extant sites with the Jafnids. Following Denis Genequand,[9] Gatier rejects the notion of a Jafnid architectural landscape as has been articulated by Shahîd and others. Gatier, in particular, seconds Genequand's argument that Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī was not a "Ghassānid construction," but, more likely, a Roman postal site prior to the construction of the monastery. The Greek inscription bears witness to the acclamation of Arethas/al-Ḥārith by the monastery authorities upon his arrival (198).

Gatier also challenges Robert Hoyland's interpretation that the dating under al-Ḥārith's phylarchate testifies to Jafnid control over the countryside (199). Gatier contends, instead, that the mention of the phylarch is not a sign of his independence but rather of his integration into the administrative and military imperial system (201). Al-Ḥārith's involvement in the construction of the monastery can be better understood in light of the "military importance" of the region and the need to control roads and itineraries (200-201). The other inscriptions discussed by Gatier point to Jafnid patronage and the evolving titles of Jafnid princes prior to and during their phylarchate. Their title

9. Denis Genequand, "Some Thoughts on Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbi, its Dam, its Monastery and the Ghassanids," *Levant* 36 (2006): 63-84.

as king is, however, not reflected in Greek inscriptions (217).

Greg Fisher's chapter revisits the eclipse of the Jafnids ("Emperors, politics, and the plague: Rome and the Jafnids, 570-585," 223-37). He suggests that their inability to "operate effectively in the top echelon of Roman politics, as well as their participation in the unstable ecclesiastical disputes of the sixth century" (223), were the main factors behind their demise. More specifically, al-Nuʿmān's revolt precipitated the exile of his father, al-Mundhir. The latter was released in 602, after which father and son seem to have vanished from the scene (225).

The Jafnids never managed to gain influence at the highest levels of imperial administration. "This left them critically exposed when events turned against them – al-Mundhir could not, when it counted, compete with the imperial networks of favour and patronage in the capital" (227). The degradation of Chalcedonian and Miaphysite relations also negatively affected the family, which proved unable to adjust to the "rapidly evolving political realities of the late sixth century" (228). Fisher also briefly considers the possible economic impact of the plague on the standing of the Jafnids (229). He then turns to comparative approaches, briefly considering examples such as the Naṣrids, the Ruwala bedouins in Ottoman-era Jordan, or the Sardar in modern Iran (231-33). These last two points offer useful elements of discussion but prove largely inconclusive. They simply suggest "that the experience of the Jafnids was by no means unique" (233).

Michaela Konrad offers an archaeological re-evaluation of the most famous Jafnid monument, the so-called *Praetorium* of Rūṣafa ("La frontière romaine au VI^e^ siècle et le bâtiment dit "*Praetorium* d'al-Mundhir" à Ruṣāfa – Sergiopolis," 239-57). The building has generated famously competing interpretations: Jean Sauvaget construed it as a *praetorium* and audience hall where the Jafnids interacted with local tribes, a view rejected by Gunnar Brands, who understood it to be a church. Elizabeth Key Fowden later sought to reconcile the two theories.

In her new assessment of the edifice, Konrad sees no obvious link between the building and the adjoining cemetery, thus undermining Brands' conclusions (243). Konrad instead understands the site as having had military and political strategic significance. Ruṣāfa was arguably the seat of Jafnid power for the northern Syrian *limes* (244), and the building bears witness to an "architectural language" that became common among the Arabs in the sixth century. It is likely that al-Mundhir used it to affirm his status vis-à-vis Byzantium (248). Konrad argues that the iconography inside the building was not necessarily that of a Christian church (250-1). She concludes that the evidence contradicts Brands' interpretation – that the structure was a church – and thus holds to Sauvaget's interpretation (251). Her main argument is that the edifice is remarkably consistent with other *principia* (251): it requires to be set firmly in a broader Late Antique context.

Hani Hayajneh and Mohammad I. Ababneh offer a brief discussion of a Ṣafaitic inscription found in 1999 at the Syrian-Jordanian border ("The 'God of the *Ġs*^{1}*n*' in an ancient North Arabian inscription from the Ḥarra region – northeastern Jordan," 259-76). The

inscription is remarkable because it lists a "unique and extraordinary collection of divine names" (270), and specifically mentions *Ġs¹n*. The identification of *Ġs¹n* with Ghassān remains conjectural but is regarded as the most likely option (267, 269).

The final paper is by Michael Lecker ("Were the Ghassānids and the Byzantines behind Muḥammad's *hijra*?", 277-93). It explores an intriguing hypothesis that links Heraclius' campaign (April 622), the ʿAqaba meeting between Muḥammad and the Anṣār (composed of Khazraj and Aws, June 622), and the subsequent *hijra* (September 622) (277). To demonstrate these connections, Lecker considers the long-term interest of the Khazraj in the "water resources of the Jews in Upper Medina," which they attempted but failed to capture around 617 at the battle of Buʿāth (278). Lecker assumes that the Khazraj had a "dominant role" in the ʿAqaba meeting (279) precisely because they were seeking support for the effort to seize those same lands. Lecker then turns to the links between the Khazraj and Ghassānids; he concludes that "the communication channels between the Khazraj and Ghassān were open, and hence the assumption that the latter played a role in the ʿAqaba meeting is not far-fetched" (287).

The Ghassān are also attested in the *umma* agreement (i.e., the so-called Constitution of Medina, ca. 623 CE): after listing Khazraj (§28-32) and Aws (§33), the list continues with the Banū Thaʿlaba (§ 34), the Jafna (§ 35), and the Banū al-Shuṭayba (§ 36). The three last groups were Ghassānids (or their clients). Lecker thus concludes that "the participation of three Ghassānid groups in the *umma* agreement suggests that, shortly after his arrival at Medina, Muḥammad was backed by the Ghassānids alongside their Byzantine overlords" (289). The argument, however fascinating, largely ignores the demise of the Ghassānids several decades earlier. It also undermines Jafnid agency at a time when their loyalty to Byzantium was far from obvious.

Lecker situates his hypothesis in a broader context, namely the Byzantine effort to replace the Jews of Medina, "longtime allies of the Sassanians, with a political entity friendly to Byzantium" (289). And thus the long-term goal of the Khazraj to seize Yathrīb/Medina was achieved by Muḥammad (290). Lecker is perfectly right to note "that Heraclius' fortune in his war against the Sasanians since 622 coincided with those of Muḥammad in his takeover of Medina and large parts of Arabia" (p. 290, n. 66). Again, the hypothesis is compelling. It will need much more research, however, to be fully convincing.

Edited volumes are inevitably uneven. Despite the insistence on the fact that "Jafnid" should be preferred to "Ghassānid," the usage proves quite inconsistent throughout the volume. The internal structure of the book itself would have been arguably clearer if the contributions had been arranged by their respective source material (e.g., epigraphy, literary sources, etc.). Some repetitions between various chapters could have been avoided with more internal references. In addition, contradictory arguments contained in several of the papers might have been at least partly resolved by greater engagement between the contributors. The occasional typographical error appears (see especially some of the

block quotes in Robin's article where spaces between words are almost nonexistent, e.g. p. 97). And the absence of an index is unfortunate, given the rich content of the volume, the epigraphic material in particular. These few caveats should not obscure the fact that this book will mark an important milestone in the study of the Jafnid dynasty and the pre-Islamic Arabs more broadly.