

The Jafnids and History in East and West

INTRODUCTION

Throughout this study, I have suggested that an important aspect of the Jafnids was that they belonged to two related but conceptually separate worlds. They were Christian allies of a Christian Empire. They commemorated themselves in the style of contemporary elites, mediated in ecclesiastical disputes, and enjoyed a personal relationship with the highest levels of the imperial court. At the same time, they had apparently entered the Roman Empire partly on their own terms, and maintained, from places like Reşāfa or the southern Ḥaurān, a distinct connection to the barren world of the *jazira*, 'the island', which lay beyond the villages, cities, churches, and dry-farming regions of the Empire in the remote deserts between Syria and Iraq and south into the deserts of the Ḥijāz. In the sixth century, this remained a remote space, the literary preserve, at least, of the 'nomadic' Arabs who could still emerge to disrupt the civilised fabric of an ordered, Christian world.

THE JAFNIDS AND HISTORY IN EAST AND WEST

It is the existence of the Jafnids 'in-between' which frames a part of their significance to the broader historical processes that are a background element to this study, for in the history of the relations between states and tribes in the Near East, the experiences of the Jafnids strike a familiar note.¹ At the close of Chapter 3 I noted the

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¹ Cf. Whittow, 'Rome and the Jafnids', 222.

similarities between facets of the Rome-Jafnid and Sasanian-Naşrid relationships and those of the ways in which the twentieth-century Iranian government dealt with the tribal office of Sardar. The Sardar, whose office was not dissimilar to that of phylarch, was dependent on the government for much of his position, and was the main point of contact for Iranian officials; in turn, he exploited the opportunities available to him from state patronage, and passed the benefits on to those under his leadership.² The constant need for balance between the two worlds which the Sardar linked is echoed by the Jafnids' use of places like Reşāfa, whose location favoured contact with the more mobile members of those under their control, as well as others whom the Jafnids might hope to win over. Here they might also meet and influence pilgrims at the shrine of St Sergius; and remain in touch with the flows of information or trade that passed through this relatively remote location. The efforts of the nineteenth-century Rashidī family to remain connected to an important power base, the Shammar tribe, by camping with them for a few months every year—before returning to their base at Ḥail—offer a clear parallel.³ Sites like Reşāfa also indicate another important facet of the state-tribe relationship, which is the method by which tribal leaders drew legitimacy from their association with cultural or political symbols of state power. When al-Mundhir was deposed, he forfeited his position of *patrikios* and surrendered his right to demonstrate his tangible and powerful link to St Sergius at Reşāfa. This is another reason why the political elimination of tribal leadership had such far-reaching effects, since the removal of such symbols, or the severance of the link to state political or cultural legitimacy, had an immediate and dramatic effect on the ability of leaders like al-Mundhir to maintain their position.⁴

² Salzman, 'Tribal chiefs as middlemen', 207-9; see too Beck, 'Tribes and the state in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Iran', 215, 218.

³ Whittow, 'Rome and the Jafnids', 221; al-Rasheed, 'The process of chiefdom-formation', 33-4; cf. U. Fabietti, 'Lords of the desert, lords of the frontier: nomadic pastoralism and political centralisation in Arabia and Baluchistan', in Fabietti and Salzman (eds.), *The Anthropology of Tribal and Peasant Pastoral Societies*, 415-25, at 417, describing (in reference to situations in Arabia and Baluchistan) the tribal sheikh as 'the axis around which rotated the interests of the two [i.e. nomadic and settled] communities'.

⁴ See S. C. Caton, 'Anthropological theories of tribe and state formation in the Middle East: ideology and the semiotics of power', in Khoury and Kostiner (eds.), *Tribes and State Formation in the Middle East*, 74-108, at esp. 99-103.

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diplomatic missions to Justin II indicates a growing diplomatic role for the Naṣrid leaders, which is discussed in more detail below.⁸⁶

Despite the increasing independence of action which characterises later Naṣrid leaders, it is unlikely that the sources of revenue or the political and diplomatic opportunities taken by the Naṣrids would have been as accessible without the consistent support provided by the Sasanian leadership. Unlike the territory of Ma'add, the Naṣrid base was located in close proximity to the seat of Sasanian power, yet comparisons with the Ḥujrids are illuminating. The Naṣrids took part in the wars of the Sasanians against Rome and seem to have acted as their agents in Arabia and the Gulf. The Naṣrid leadership was also a multi-generational dynasty maintained at least in part through the tolerance of the empire which patronised it. Sasanian support was probably a key component in the longevity of the Naṣrid dynasty and the source of many of its opportunities to extend its power.

Even whilst 'part' of the Sasanian Empire, the Naṣrids fostered a noticeable political identity, and this, alongside their maintenance of their stable base at al-Ḥīrah, contrives to make the Naṣrids the most state-like group of the Naṣrids, Jafnids, and Ḥujrids. Little is known of any stable Jafnid 'base', and there are conflicting reports of where exactly any descendants of Ḥujr exercised their power.⁸⁷ Unfortunately, as well, little is known of al-Ḥīrah, other than the sparse archaeological evidence, but its celebrated place in Muslim tradition as a centre for pre-Islamic poetry,⁸⁸ and the traditional attribution of the construction of al-Khawarnak—a desert castle or retreat⁸⁹—to the Naṣrids, held in awe by Muslims at the time of the seventh-century invasions, points towards a flowering and distinctive culture inside the borders of a late antique superpower state which supported and protected its leading dynastic family.⁹⁰ Traditions concerning its army, court, and other familiar aspects of state-like entities, whilst provided by much later sources, also suggest that the Naṣrids should be placed apart from the Jafnids and the Ḥujrids. Certainly their relationship with the Sasanians was far longer-lived than that between

⁸⁶ CIS 4. 541; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 55; Smith, 'Events in Arabia', 440.

⁸⁷ Robin, 'Les Arabes de Ḥimyar', 187, 193.

⁸⁸ Poetry, language, and culture will be discussed in more detail in Ch. 4.

⁸⁹ On al-Khawarnak, see further Ch. 6.

⁹⁰ D. Talbot Rice, 'The Oxford excavations at Hira, 1931', *Antiquity*, 6 (1932), 276–91, at 277; also 'Hira', 257.

the Romans and the Jafnids or Ḥujrids,⁹¹ and it was this ongoing support which probably helped to develop the Naṣrid principality at al-Ḥīrah into a state-like entity capable of acting within a large, centralised, and well-organised empire.

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THE JAFNIDS AND GHASSĀN

For the Jafnids, we can take advantage of the greater evidence for their activities in the sixth century, such as their involvement in the economic and political life of the Empire, as well as their involvement in ecclesiastical matters, to examine the ways in which they produced an identifiable and developing political 'entity' within the Roman Empire but, at the same time, managed to remain somewhat detached from it.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the manner in which the Jafnids came into contact with the Roman Empire is not well understood. Muslim Arab sources suggest that Ghassān moved into Syria, displacing those who were already there and who already enjoyed some sort of treaty relationship with Rome.⁹² In the *Kitāb al-mūḥabbar* of Ibn Ḥabīb and the *Ta'riḫ* of Ya'qubi, for example, a power struggle between Ghassān and another tribal group, Salīḥ, following a movement of Ghassān northwards into Syria, resulted in the Romans choosing Ghassān as their preferred allies and concluding a treaty of mutual support.⁹³ Interestingly, these passages suggest that Salīḥ were in a 'management' position over a number of other Arab tribes on behalf of the Romans, including Muḍar, a duty which included the collection of taxes. There is no contemporary evidence for this, but the sense of these passages is consistent with the general picture of an increased level of contact between the Romans and the Arabs in Syria and northern Arabia and

⁹¹ Cf. Robin, 'Les Arabes de Ḥimyar', 191–3.

⁹² It is tempting to connect this disturbance in southern Syria with that reported by Theophanes for the turn of the sixth century: Theoph. *Chron.* 141; cf. Evag. *HE* 3.36; Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 120–33.

⁹³ Ibn Ḥabīb, 370–71; Ya'qubi, 233–5, translated by Hoyland, *Arabia*, 239–40. This episode also features in Ḥamza al-Iṣfahānī, *Ta'riḫ*, 98–9, discussed by Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 285. The presence of Salīḥ within or on the edges of the Roman Empire is inferred by Sartre, *Trois études*, 148, a connection also made by Shahid, *Fifth Century*, 243.

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