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Andrey Korotayev, Vladimir Klimenko, and
Dmitry Proussakov
(Moscow)
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view the origins of Islam against the background of the 6th century
AD Arabian socio-ecological crisis whose model is specified in the paper
through the study of climatological, seismological, volcanological and
epidemiological history of the period. Most socio-political systems of the
Arabs reacted to the socio-ecological crisis by getting rid of the rigid
supra-tribal political structures (kingdoms and chiefdoms) which started posing
a real threat to their very survival. The decades of fighting which led to the
destruction of the most of the Arabian kingdoms and chiefdoms (reflected in Ayyam al-`Arab tradition) led to the
elaboration of some definite "anti-royal" freedom-loving tribal
ethos. At the beginning of the 7th century a tribe which would
recognize themselves as subjects of some terrestrial super-tribal political authority,
a "king", risked to lose its honour. However, this seems not to be
applicable to the authority of another type, the "celestial" one. At
the meantime the early 7th century evidences the merging of the
Arabian tradition of prophecy and the Arabian Monotheist "Rahmanist"
tradition which produced "the Arabian prophetic movement". The Monotheist
"Rahmanist" prophets appear to have represented a supratribal
authority just of the type many Arab tribes were looking for at this very time,
which seems to explain to a certain extent those prophets' political success
(including the extreme political success of Muhammad).Â

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Key-words: Islam, Arabia, ecology, political anthropology, history,
climate, evolution
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South Arabian puzzle
For many years we were a bit
puzzled by a strangely quick collapse of the South Arabian Empire of the
"Kings of Saba and dhu-Raydan and Hadramawt and Yamanat and Their Arabs in
the Highland and the Coastal Plain" (mlk
S1Bâ€™ w-d-RYDn w-HDRMWT w-YMNT w-â€™`rb-hmw TWDm
w-THMT) in the second half of the 6th century AD.

Of
course, at the beginning of this century South Arabia experienced a series of
rather turbulent events: dhu-Nuwas' coup, violent persecutions of the Christians,
Ethiopian invasions and conquest, rebellion (successful) of the Ethiopian
soldiers deployed in Yemen, their leader (Abraha) getting the royal power
etc.Â â€“Â see Sabaic inscriptions CÂ 621; RyÂ 507; 508; 510;
JaÂ 1028; as well as: Pirenne and Tesfaye (1982); Carpenter (1869); MÃ¸berg
(1924); Berzina and Kubbel' (1990:203â€“249); Shahid (1971); Lundin (1961);
Kobishchanov (1980:10â€“88); PioÂ-trovÂ-skijÂ (1985:17â€“23); Smith (1954); Robin
et al. (1996) etc. Then, however,
under Abraha's rule the EmÂ-pire seems to have stabilized and achieved
reasonable florescence by the end of the 540s: Abraha managed to organize the
successful repairs of the famous Marib Dam (`RMn [C 541]), campaigns to Central and Northern Arabia
etc. (Ry 506; VaÂ-sil'evÂ 1907; KobishchanovÂ 1980:64â€“89; Piotrovskij 1985:23â€“24
etc.).

And then in the second half of the century the Empire (together with the
1500-year-old South Arabian civilization) simply collapses without any apparÂ-ent
serious reason. The study of this collapse is further complicated by the fact
that the catastrophe appears to have been so profound that the written texts
seem to have stopped to be produced in South ArabiaÂ â€“Â since the 7th
decade of the 6th century (this decade including) we have no
authentic dated South AraÂ-bian texts up to the Islamic AgeÂ â€“Â which
stands in a sharp contrast with the comparatively well documented first 5
decades of the Century.[1]

The collapse seems to have been so profound that when in AD 570 (Shahid
1995:365) Khusraw [I] Parwez reluctantly sent (as a sort of punishment) a few
hundred convicted criminals to put Yemen into the Persian sphere of influence
(considering this such an adventure that it would be wiser not to risk with the
proper troops), they (the convicted criminals) did manage to overthrow the dyÂ-nasty
of Abraha, though, of course, not without the help of the Yemenites opposed to
the dynastyÂ â€“Â see e.g.
al-Tabari (1964:950â€“956).

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North Arabian puzzle
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Of
course, it is evident that what happened in the 6th century Yemen
was not an isolated event. Already if we look at Arabia
as a whole, we shall get a bit different perspective.
To begin with, in the Soviet Islamology up to
the 1980s the dominant theory of the origins of Islam connected it with the
crisis and degeneration of the clan-tribal system in the 6thÂ â€“Â early
7th century Arabia, the process of the state and class forÂ-mation
(TolstovÂ 1932; SmirnovÂ 1954:180f.; BeljaevÂ 1965; PetrushevskijÂ 1966:5â€“11;
MavljutovÂ 1974; ZhukovÂ 1974:29; Fil'shtinskijÂ 1977:22,107;
Negrja 1981 etc.; a preliminary critique of this point see e.g. Bol'shakovÂ 1989:40). A somewhat strange theory, we must
say, as the very well-known facts show quite clearly that the actual processes
were simply contrary to the ones described above. The clan-tribal systems in
pre-Islamic Arabia were strengthening and
consolidating, whereÂ-as these were precisely the state structures which
degenerated and disintegrated in the first century before al-Hijrah. Indeed at the beginning of the 6th century we
see a few kingdoms controlling most of the Arabian territory: the already
mentioned huge Kingdom of the tababiah
in Yemen (dominant not only over the whole AraÂ-bian South but also considerable
parts of Central Arabia), the second Kindite Kingdom (the vassal of the first
one) in Central Arabia, the Lakhmid Kingdom (dependent on the Sassanid Empire)
in the Arabian North-East (controlling also considerable parts of Northern and
Central Arabia), and the Ghassanid Kingdom (dependent on the Byzantine Empire)
in the North-WestÂ â€“Â see e.g.
NÃ¶ldekeÂ (1879;
1888); RothÂ-stein (1899); Olinder (1927); Pigulevskaja (1964) etc.

What is more, even in the territories outside the direct control of the
above-mentioned kingdoms we normally find what should be more correctly deÂ-scribed
as chiefdoms rather than true tribes. Their heads often explicitly call
themselves amlak (sg. malik) "kings"Â â€“Â see
e.g. Negrja (1981:103â€“104).

The situation at the beginning of the next century (say, at the time of
the beginning of Muhammad's Prophecy) differs dramatically. All the above-mentioned great Arabian kingdoms
had disappeared together with most smaller ones. There were almost no
"kings" left in Arabia; and where
there were chiefdoms a century before, now we see true free tribes.[2]

Some neglected causes of
the crisis
It appears that the 6th century AD evidenced
a simultaneous global climate deterioÂ-ration and the peak of the tectonic and
volcanic activity in the whole world (inÂ-cluding the Mediterranean region [see Appendix C for detail]). Of course, on
the face of it, it is not quite self-evident what this has to do with the 6th
century AD Arabian crisis. Naturally, the earthquakes affected in some way the
evolution of the 6thÂ â€“Â early 7th cent. AD
Arabian societies, leaving even some trace in al-QuranÂ â€“Â cf. e.g.
the beginning of the famous Earthquake surah
([XCIX:] {1.} idha zulzilati 'l-ardu
zilzala-ha {2.} wa-akhrajati 'l-ardu athqala-ha {3.} wa-qala 'l-insanu ma la-ha "When the earth is shaken with an
earthquake, and the earth lifts its loads, and the man asks: `What has happened
to it?`" etc.). StooÂ-key (1978:22) and Grjaznevich (1994:34) have already
proposed to connect the fiÂ-nal decline of the pre-Islamic South Arabian
civilization with the seismic activityÂ â€“ indeed it may well have produced
the final deadly blow to the most ancient civiÂ-lization centers of the edges of
the internal Yemeni desert, which were already on the brink of final collapse
by the 6th century AD and which depended heavily on relatively
large-scale irrigation structures that could be significantly affected by the
earthquakes. But this does not seem to be the case with the kingdoms and chiefdoms
of the Arabian North which could not be apparently affected by the earthquakes
to a critiÂ-cal extent. Thus, the most significant outcome of the seismic activity
seems to be volcano eruptions rather than earthquakes. Again, it is not
self-evident how, say, the volcano eruptions on the New
Britain Island near New Guinea
could affect the evolution of the Arabian communities. Again, what is significant
here is not the diÂ-rect effect though some of the South Arabian sites were destroyed
just in this way (though not necessarily in the 6th centuryÂ â€“Â see
e.g. MÃ¼ller and
Wissmann [1976]). What is really important are volcanic gases and tephra which
are thrown to the atmosphere in great quantities during such eruptions. And
this could affect signifiÂ-cantly really huge areas. E.g. sulphuric aerosols would halt partially solar radiation,
causing the cooling of the Earth surface and, hence, droughts, or otherwise
floods, and various disbalances in the ecological systems, which could result
in the outÂ-bursts of the numbers of the epidemic disease bearing animals,
plague fleas etc., and the causal link between the tectonic and volcanic activity
and the epidemics was noticed long ago.

However, the most significant factor seems to be the
droughtsÂ â€“Â and there are documented cases when, say, changing solar
activity or massive volcano eruption, resulting in a global climatic shift,
caused severe droughts in various parts of the world (naturally, North Arabia
could have been affected in such cases too [see Appendix C for detail]).

Hence, global climate
deterioration and the peak of the tectonic activity produced such an array of
primary, secondary, and tertiary factors (earthquakes and volcano eruptions
themselves, epidemics, droughts, barbarian invasions caused by the
socio-ecological crises on the barbarian peripheries) which could pose a deadly
threat for the survival of most of affected civilizations of the time. We
ourselves came to terms with the sudden death of the 1500-year-old pre-Islamic
South Arabian civilization when we realized that this happened simultaneously
with the severe crisis in the Byzantine Empire which put it on the brink of an
almost complete collapse (the early 7th to early 6th
century comparison would produce for Byzantine results rather similar to the
ones obÂ-tained above for the Arabian North and South in any case). And what was
an almost deadly blow for strong Byzantine appeared to have been just a deadly
blow for the weaker South Arabian civilization as well as for most Arabian
kingdoms.

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[1] The
last dated Sabaic text (C 325Â â€“Â see MÃ¼ller 1991) is (see
line 5) of year 669 of the "Himyarite" Era ~ AD 554/555, or much more
likely AD 559/560, depending on the solution of the problem of the beginning of
this eraÂ â€“Â for the current state of this question see de Blois
(1990); Shahid (1994); Kitchen (1994:1â€“9); and especially Robin et al. (1996).

[2] Even for the 6th century Mecca there seem to be some grounds to
suspect the transformation of a quasi-chiefdom polity into a tribal confederaÂ-tion
(e.g. Dostal 1991:193â€“199; al-Tabari
1964:1083â€“1100). At the age of Muhammad local kings are still attested in
al-Yamamah (see e.g. ibn Hischam
1858â€“1860:II:971), but even there at this age we seem to observe a clear trend
towards the replacement of the "royal" authority with a political
authority of quite a different type (see below in the section on "Origins
of Islam: socio-political context").

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