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# Rosetta

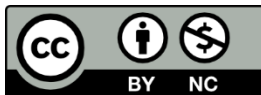
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**Valentina A. Grasso. 2023. *Pre-Islamic Arabia. Societies, politics, cults and identities during Late Antiquity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; 9781009252966 hardback**

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While the Arabian peninsula is famous as the birthplace of Mohammad and Islam, it was a place of vital importance and great kingdoms long before Islam was born. Unfortunately, most of what is known about this geographic area and general academic focus is concentrated on the Islamic period, so attempts to delve deeper into the pre-Islamic period are welcome, such as this current book. The book attempts to map and analyse the religious changes and geopolitical tides that swept through Arabia in the fourth to the middle of the seventh century CE, and exploring when the Arab nation was born.

The book is an adaption of the author's PhD dissertation and parts of it have been published as articles. The first chapter "An Introduction to the Study of Pre-Islamic Arabia," sets the premise of the study, and establishes the definitions and terminology used as well as the geographical borders which include large parts of Syria, Iraq and the entirety of modern-day Jordan, alongside the entire Arabian peninsula. This large geographical scope is problematic as during the period explored in the book, this territory was very diverse, with numerous kingdoms, religions and geopolitical changes, thus hampering the level of detail the author has reached. Although Grasso is right in pointing out the problems with the terminology, she completely falls into it with unclear and inconsistent terminological choices. She states that the term Rome should be used instead of Byzantine as this is how they defined themselves (p. 5) yet does not follow the same logic for other nations, empires and kingdoms. For instance, the Kingdom of Aksum is usually referred to as Aksum in the book, yet on a few occasions the term Ethiopians is used. Similarly, she uses the term Iran, which is not an ideal way to refer to both the Parthian and Sassanian empires.

The second part of the chapter focuses on the history of the term Arab. She correctly states that Shahid was wrong to use the term Arabs as an *ethnicon*, and that there is a lack of clarity regarding this term and how it was used (pp. 13-14). Moreover, Grasso

affirms that the term was not originally used for self-definition and self-identification and was more a geographical term rather than ethnical, and so was applied to a range of different nations and kingdoms (p. 33). Grasso also clearly states that they largely did not have a common language, and “the term ‘Muslim’ soon became an *ethnicon* used as a term of self-identification, while ‘Arab’ was rarely self-applied and emerged only after the military success of the ‘Muslims’” (p. 36).

The other chapters are split geographically between what Grasso defined as North Arabia, i.e. modern-day Jordan and parts of modern-day Iraq and Syria, and South Arabia, meaning much of the Arabian Peninsula. The chapters are also split according to two time periods, the 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> centuries and the 6<sup>th</sup> century CE. Accordingly, the second chapter deals with North Arabia in the late 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Although the chapter is good, it suffers from the same terminological problems mentioned above. This is especially clear when she translates ancient texts. For example, on page 49, when she translates “Iranians” while the Safaitic inscription says *mdh(y)*. Moreover, her analysis of Palmyrene history is also less than ideal, yet sometimes it is not solely the author’s fault, rather who is being cited. The best example is the following: “Palmyra’s decline coincided with the instability caused by the Arsacid invasion of Dura-Europos and Hatra in 239-240 CE, from which the city never recovered” (p. 43). This sentence is puzzling as there was no Arsacid Parthian Empire and Palmyra was not in decline at the time. Merely three decades later, the Palmyrenes conquered most of the Eastern Mediterranean basin in an attempt to create a Palmyrene Empire. However, these mistakes originate from Rubina Raja’s article referenced by Grasso.<sup>1</sup> While Raja corrected the mistake regarding the invasion of 239-240 being Sassanian and not Parthian in a following publication,<sup>2</sup> the flawed logic that more investment in the military can be considered as a metric for decline continues to be used in her later publications. Moreover, Grasso is antiquated in her analysis of Judaism, especially with regards to Palmyra. Whilst this is more problematic in the following chapter, I must

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<sup>1</sup> Rubina Raja et al., "Three hundred years of Palmyrene history. Unlocking archaeological data for studying past societal transformations," *PloS one* 16, no. November (2021): 24, <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0256081>.

<sup>2</sup> Rubina Raja, *Pearl of the Desert: A History of Palmyra* (Oxford University Press, 20 Jan 2022, 2022), 105. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190852221.001.0001>.

mention that I do not agree with Grasso's analysis of Zenobia's connection to Judaism where Grasso dismisses(s) possible religious preference towards it.<sup>3</sup>

The third chapter, most of it previously published, is a bit problematic. Here, the author focuses on the Himyarite kingdom and its conversion to Judaism during the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, and its zenith in the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE up to its fall in the early 6<sup>th</sup> century. Her main thesis is that the leaders made "clever use of politically motivated conversions to cautious monotheisms to gain the approval of pagan subjects and the superpowers of Late Antiquity: Rome and Iran" (pp.73-74). While this line of thinking is partially right regarding several entities, including Himyar, it misses vital nuances. Firstly, choosing Judaism could never have helped improve relationships with the Christian Roman Empire. Secondly, the Persians did not necessarily have any preference when dealing with Monotheistic rulers over pagan ones. Moreover, the book completely disregards the religious favour and appeal that Judaism still possessed during this period. Finally, the religion many of the royals and aristocracy adopted was Judaism and not ambiguous monotheism, although there were other members of the aristocracy who could be defined as ambiguously monotheistic.

In addition, the analyses of the sources are problematic, for example: "However, the process of complete conversion was relatively uncommon; only seven Roman laws enacted between the fourth and sixth centuries restricted conversions to Judaism." (p. 86). This is a problematic statement, as seven laws is a tremendous number of enacted laws, further stressing the appeal of Judaism. Moreover, many laws forbade Jews from circumcising their slaves and forcing them to convert, highlighting the prevalence and endorsement of Jewish conversion and proselytization in some Jewish circles.

Furthermore, Grasso's view is very Rabbinic-centric, even though it is well established that they were a minority,<sup>4</sup> and Hellenistic Judaism, more suitably defined as Conventional Judaism, was the norm. This can be seen in the following example: "Furthermore, the converts probably were considered somehow inferior to the full-

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<sup>3</sup> I am trying to show a cohesive and extended analysis of the topic in: Haggai Olshanetsky, "Zenobia, the Great Jewish Queen? Re-analysing Zenobia's Attitude to Monotheism, Judaism and its Reasonings," *Klio: Beiträge zur Alten Geschichte* 107, 1 (2025): 215-267. <https://doi.org/10.1515/klio-2024-0027>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

blooded Jews, or this, at any rate, is what the Jewish sources suggest.” (p. 86-87). Rabbinic Judaism was against conversion while many other Jewish groups and communities were in favour. The Jews of Grasso’s Arabia, including the communities of Palmyra and Himyar, were especially accepting of converts and conversion, and there is no indication that converts were regarded as second-class Jews in these regions.

Another example is: “Roman imperial authorities had an influential hand in defining Jewish identity by taking steps to delineate Jews as a discrete group, as testified by the tax reform (*fiscus Iudaicus*) introduced after the destruction of the Temple in 70 CE. However, during Late Antiquity, the number of Jewish sympathizers rose.” (p. 87). This is incorrect as Jewish sympathizers were common throughout the Roman period, with a possible peak in the first century CE. Moreover, the tax mentioned was a punishment for the First Jewish revolt, yet there is no trace of it being enforced after the end of the Second Revolt of 131-136 CE, emphasising that the Romans never wished to set the Jews apart.

The following chapters are significantly better, with the fourth and fifth chapters dealing with Arabia in the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Similarly, the sixth chapter accurately discusses the rise of Islam, thereby showing that when Grasso deals with later material, especially non-Jewish, she is more exact. However, another issue needs to be mentioned. The author refers to some of her works which although she cites as forthcoming, seem to refer to works she plans to write in the future, and have not been accepted for publication, as no intended publication venue is mentioned.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, only one of the three may have been published since , and under a different name.<sup>6</sup> Another example is an article of other researchers that was cited as forthcoming without mentioning the platform of publication, which is most probably an article published under a different title,<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> For example: Grasso, V. A. ‘On the Jafnid al-Ḥārith, from the Jafnid al-Ḥārith: A Translation and Commentary of Syriac Miaphysite Letters from the Sixth Century’ (forthcoming); Grasso, V. A. ‘Christology on the Red Sea: God and His Son in Late Antique Arabia and Ethiopia’ (Spring 2023, forthcoming); Grasso, V. A. ‘Slavery in pre-Islamic Arabia as Reconstructed from the Epigraphic Corpora’ (forthcoming, presented in 2022 at the QaSLA Project Conference – Epigraphy, the Qur’ān, and the Religious Landscape of Arabia).

<sup>6</sup> Valentina A. Grasso, "Slavery in First Millennium Arabia: Epigraphy and the Qur’ān," *Millennium (Berlin, Germany)* 20, no. 1 (2023), <https://doi.org/10.1515/mill-2023-0005>.

<sup>7</sup> The article was written in the bibliography as: “Haldon, J. and Fleitmann, D. ‘Drought and the End of Himyar? Complexity, Determinism and the Limits of Explanation’ (forthcoming).” yet was possibly published in 2024 as: John Haldon and Dominik Fleitmann, "A Sixth-Century CE

although, an older article from 2022 by the same authors alongside other colleagues could have been cited instead of the forthcoming one.<sup>8</sup>

To summarise, this book is a welcome addition to the research area, with several useful sections, but there is room for improvement. The last three chapters highlight its potential, especially if the author were to include different perspectives on Judaism, rather than a monolithic one, alongside a further and better examination of certain issues, such as Palmyra's economy and power. Furthermore, the inclusion of a clear, understandable definition of what Arabia and the Arabs are, as well as unified and consistent terminology, is missing and essential. The first half offers interesting ideas and suggestions, which may interest academic professionals who are familiar with the period and are able to distinguish its better parts. The second half of the book is a good introductory publication to sixth and early seventh century Arabia and the rise of Islam. This section, unlike the first half of the book, is good enough to be used as introductory reading for students and will be suitable reading for anyone taking interest in the area and the period.

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Drought in Arabia New Palaeoclimate Data and Some Historical Implications," *Journal of Late Antique, Islamic and Byzantine Studies* 3, no. 1-2 (2024), <https://doi.org/10.3366/jlaibs.2023.0024>.

<sup>8</sup> Dominik Fleitmann et al., "Droughts and societal change; the environmental context for the emergence of Islam in late antique Arabia," *Science (American Association for the Advancement of Science)* 376, no. 6599 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.abg4044>.