INTRODUCTION TO THE GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE MIDDLE EAST

THE MIDDLE EAST:

Geographic and cultural region located in southwestern Asia and northeastern Africa. The geopolitical term "Middle East" was first coined in 1902 by a United States naval officer Alfred Thayer Mahan. (Originally referred to the Asian region south of the Black Sea between the Mediterranean Sea to the west and India to the east). The older term for this area was the "Near East": loaded term. "Near" to the British colonialist rulers. In modern scholarship, and for the purposes of this class, the term "Middle East" refers collectively to the Asian countries of Bahrain, Cyprus, Iran, Iraq, Israel/Palestine, Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Syria, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Yemen, and the African country of Egypt. The Middle East and North Africa brings in the Muslim countries of Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, Libya, and the Sudan. An even more broad definition of the term would include Afghanistan and Pakistan since they are adjacent areas, are predominantly Muslim and share many cultural and historical similarities with the rest of the Middle East. Arabs in fact make up the overwhelming majority of the people of the Middle East but we also have non-Arab Iranians, Turks, the Hebraic people or Jews, now associated primarily with Israel, although you continue to have Jewish communities the rest of the Middle East, the Berbers of North Africa, and the Kurds in Iraq and Turkey, for example. This is a political map of the region:

Map credit: University of Notre Dame OCW.

The Middle East is described as the cradle of civilization. Why is this? By 300 BC, as your book (Bates and Rassam) points out [p. 20 ff], 1) we see the division of society into a number of social classes; 2) the development of large, densely populated urban centers, or the rise of cities; 3) and the emergence of centralized political
institutions, leading to the formation of the state. We also have evidence of the rise of different kinds of occupations other than the primarily agricultural one, as artisans, merchants, priests, soldiers, and kings. Long-distance trade becomes important.

WRITING:

Phoenicians: a nation of seafarers and traders: developed a phonetic alphabet; previously hieroglyphics (Egypt) and cuneiform (Akkadians and Sumerians)

Writing made possible: keeping of written records, the spread of information and therefore education, and progressively led to a more sophisticated civilization.

THE AREA WE ARE PRIMARILY CONCERNED WITH:

Today the part of the world that first witnessed the rise of Islam is the area known as Saudi Arabia, containing two of Islam’s holiest sites, Mecca and Medina. In earlier periods, known simply as ARABIA or the Arabian peninsula. We do not know that much about life in the Arabian peninsula before the seventh century when Islam arose there. Much of the literature during this period was oral; there was much poetry and exquisite poetry at that. What we know about the culture and mores of Arabian society from this period is largely gleaned from this oral literature which was written down during the Islamic period. From the viewpoint of Islamic history, we have two very distinct periods: the pre-Islamic and the Islamic periods. In Islamic chronology, there are two main historical periods, the "Jahiliyya" era and the Islamic era. (Please see the meaning of Jahiliyya in the Bates/Rassam glossary.)

This map shows the tribal landscape of the Jahili world in the century before the Prophet Muhammad.
The great divide is 622 of the common era which is year 1 of the Islamic era. We’ll explain the significance of this date later. From the existing literature of the pre-Islamic period, we are able to reconstruct important pieces of information regarding the construction of Jahili Arab society. The basic unit of pre-Islamic Arab society was the tribe. Membership and affiliation with one’s natal TRIBE was crucial for individual identity and standing in society. One basically did not exist - as a person or individual - and did not have any social power without reference to one’s tribe. Personal names to this day can reflect a person’s genealogical descent (nasab). Descent is always patrilineal, that is traced through the father and his male ancestors. The name of a tribe is usually prefaced by the word Banu, meaning sons.

The importance of kinship and tribal affiliation was something the Arabs shared with other Semitic peoples: Thinking of how the Gospel of Matthew begins with the extended GENEALOGY OF JESUS: it refers to Jesus Christ as the son of David the son of Abraham and then through Abraham reaches down to Joseph and to Mary, his wife. THIS REFLECTS A COMMON SEMITIC PREOCCUPATION WITH ONE'S LINES OF KINSHIP; IT IS BOTH A SOURCE OF IDENTITY AND LEGITIMATION OF AUTHORITY AND POWER.

WHO ARE THE ARABS, ETHNICALLY AND HISTORICALLY?

Popularly, Arabs, like other ancient Middle Eastern peoples, are considered to be the descendants of Shem, son of Noah, and therefore considered to be Semites. Like ancient Babylonians, Phoenicians, Assyrians, the Hebrews, and the Aramaeans. Another son of Noah, called Ham, gives his name to a closely related group called the
Hamites, among whom are the Ethiopians (called Abyssinians in ancient times), the ancient Egyptians, and the Sabians and Himyarites, in southern Arabia. These terminologies were made popular by European scholars based especially on chapter ten in Genesis from the Old Testament. Where the original home of the Semites was remains a point of debate and discussion for scholars today; some say they come from some part of Asia, i.e. originally from the Arabian Peninsula or from Mesopotamia, some say they crossed into Asia originally from Africa. But in any case, based on linguistic evidence, we know that these various peoples of the Middle East must have originally come from one stock and then settled in various parts of what we call the Middle East, including North Africa, to become distinctive ethnic groups.

THE ARABIAN PENINSULA is divided into North and South; divided by a desolate, desert area called Rub` al-khali (the Empty Quarter). This is not only a physical division: the peoples of the North and the South are in fact two peoples with differing languages and characteristics. The people of the North considered themselves to be the descendants of a legendary figure known as Adnan, who in turn was believed to be the descendant of Isma`il, the biblical Ishmael, the son of Abraham. A prominent tribe from among the North Arabs is the Banu Quraysh, the most famous member of which is Muhammad b. 'Abd Allah, the prophet of Islam. The people of the South considered themselves to be the descendants of a man called Yaqtan, who has been popularly identified with Joktan mentioned in the Bible (as the son of Eber) in Genesis.

Until about 600 A.D. (of the common era), it was the southern Arabs who were culturally and materially more advanced than the northern Arabs. Yemen was actually referred to in ancient times as Arabia Felix (happy or prosperous Arabia), the site of an ancient civilization and of fabulous wealth, spices, gold, and precious stones. It is believed that the legendary gold mines of Solomon were located in southern Arabia. However, by the sixth century, the south Arabian kingdom called the Himyarite was overthrown by the Abyssinians (Ethiopians) and by 600 A.D., south Arabic was basically a dead language. The Arabic language of northern Arabia now gained prominence and this is the language we now refer to when we speak of the Arabic language.

POLITICAL ORGANIZATION AND WORLDVIEW:

As far as the INDIVIDUAL was concerned, one knew where one belonged; he or she had the right to a place in the tribe; as long as one did not commit a crime or violate its mores or rules and thus become an outlaw, one could count on its help and support.

Based on this strong identification with their individual tribe and the larger clan of which the individual tribe was a member, the Arabs evolved an intricate system of kinship and genealogical relationship. On the positive side, this system helped them distinguish between personalities and defined their relationship to one another, to remember historical events and keep track of participants in them; in short it was their way of recording history.

ON THE NEGATIVE SIDE, this intense loyalty to one’s tribe and the sense of partisanship that it created often led to tribal feuds. Blood revenge was one frequent reason for outbreaks of hostilities. For every blood-guilt, whatever the motive for its being committed, imposed upon any member of the tribe the duty of avenging it; he was, in turn, the object of an avenger. Thus, wars between whole tribes or individual members were constant, and only willingness to offer and accept a ransom instead of paying with blood prevented them from continuing indefinitely. These wars are the subject of those literary narratives I mentioned before, the Ayyam al-`Arab.

Among the Arabs we find those who lived in settled communities in urban areas as well as the "Bedouins," the nomads who lived in the desert and who travelled throughout it for their livelihood.

The settlements developed from the presence of water in an oasis or grew up around a sanctuary which in turn often owed its existence to the presence of a well, as was the case in Mecca, the most renowned of all. The famous sanctuary in Mecca is the Ka'ba which as Arab and Islamic tradition maintains was built by Abraham and which then consequently became a shrine to the pagan gods of the Meccans. Another important place associated with the environs of Mecca was a market-place called Ukaz. This was an important center for the cultural and literary activities of the peninsular Arabs of this time. Every year a fair would be held here at which the most renowned poets would gather to compete with one another in the composition of poetry, some of which have come down to us. Other important settled centers were Ta'if, Yathrib which later was renamed Medina, and Khaybar, an
important oasis town. The importance of these settlements lay in their role as places for rest and replenishment of food and water for the caravans that passed through them on their way from South Arabia to Egypt and the Fertile Crescent and beyond. North and Central Arabia contributed by way of merchandise to this trade in dates from the oases, riding and pack camels which the Bedouins bred and their wool and skins. Caravans from Yemen and Hadramawt and from faraway India brought back incense or sandalwood and spices.

The Ka'ba during the Hajj
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RELIGIOUS ATTITUDES AND IDEAS PREVAILING IN PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA:

Our sources do not give us copious evidence of the religious practices and emotions of the Jahili Arabs. We know they worshipped a multiplicity of gods much like the ancient Greeks and Romans or other ancient Near Eastern peoples. These deities were housed in the Ka'ba to which they performed pilgrimage. The Ka'ba is the cube-shaped temple in the city of Mecca which tradition affirms was originally built by Abraham and his son, Ishmael, and dedicated to the one God. Under the pre-Islamic Arabs, the Ka'ba was given over to the worship of idols. The pre-Islamic Arabs also subscribed to an animistic or pantheistic religion; that is they regarded the natural phenomena as manifestations of the divine. In the harsh environment of the desert, exposed to hardships of climate and geography, constantly endangered by the hostility of man and nature, the Bedouin must often have felt small and in need of divine assistance. There is evidence from the Quran and other sources which indicate that some of the pre-Islamic Arabs like the Sabeans subscribed to an astral belief; i.e. they worshipped celestial bodies like the sun, the moon, and the stars. The pagan Arabs probably had little or no concept of the after-life or of personal accountability for their deeds; no explicit expression of this belief can be found in our texts.

But this did not mean that the pre-Islamic Arab did not aspire to spiritual and moral ideals. The very important notion of muruwwa may be seen to be akin to the Latin notion of virtus, from which we get the English word virtue. Muruwwa is comprised of honor (sharaf), hospitality (karam), loyalty (wafa), help for (najda) the weak, particularly widows or women in general, and orphan children. Blood-feuds (thar) were conducted in order to avenge loss of either personal or tribal honor. Ideas of chivalrous behavior were part of the inter-tribal moral code. To the domain of chivalry belonged ideas of gallantry to women, holding to pledges, avoidance of treachery in combat and refraining from fighting an unarmed opponent. We find all or some of these themes reflected in the pre-Islamic literature and in the Ayyam al-'Arab, the battle-days of Arabs.

We also find glimpses in this literature into the political organization of the tribe. The tribal group of the Bedouin was a closely knit one. Only as a member of the tribe could the Bedouin Arab be assured of protection and help in his feuds and raids for the sake of revenge or booty. Political organization tended to be loose and very flexible, for
lack of a better word, the internal organization of the tribe has been described as a democratic one. Leadership rested in the most admired and honored, and often the strongest member of the tribe, the man who could guide because of superior wisdom and insight. At the same time he dispensed advice and charity, speaking with authority for the tribal community. A leader in particular had to have muruwwa. This leader, known as the sayyid (chieftain, ruler) or shaykh, was a primus inter pares, first among equals, and not a despotic tyrant. He was primarily a consultant, a chief advisor. This has important implications for the Islamic period as well, for in many ways, the caliph, the successor to the Prophet Muhammad, who was the leader of the entire Muslim community, was conceived along the lines of a tribal sayyid. We will discuss this further when we talk about the period of the rightly-guided caliphs.


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