CHAPTER I

An Introduction to the Study of Pre-Islamic Arabia

1.1 Premise

Pre-Islamic Arabia is a rarely explored subject. Yet first-millennium Arabia is a particularly fertile ground for a historical enquiry into ethnicity, human conflict and the transition from polytheism to monotheism. This book, based on my dissertation submitted for the degree of doctor of philosophy at the University of Cambridge in early April 2021,[1] is the first extended study by a single author on the late antique history of the Arabian Peninsula and its northern extension (the Syrian Desert). A particular focus is on religious attitudes, with a view to shedding light on cultural developments and events between the end of the third and the beginning of the seventh centuries. This was a period of significant change culminating in the rise of Islam. Accordingly, the temporal boundaries of this enquiry are roughly delineated by the epitaph of Imru' al-Qays, one of the earliest and most famous kings 'of the Arabs', dated to 328, and by the death of Muḥammad, prophet of the new Muslim community (*Ummah*), in 632.[2] However, establishing the geographical limits of a region that was never unified by a single political entity is a complex task. Arabia was either fragmented as it is today or incorporated into a broader entity as in Muslim times. The absence of a unified political structure in this region allows for writing the 'history of Arabia' without falling into the anachronistic fallacy of referring to a modern concept such as the 'nation'.[3]

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[2] This book is titled 'Pre-Islamic Arabia' but could have also been titled 'Late Antique Arabia'. I chose the first option and inserted a clarifying 'Late Antiquity' only in the subtitle, as I do not expect all my readers to be familiar with the debated boundaries of Late Antiquity. 'Ancient Arabia' would have sounded too vague, while 'Arabia (300–700 CE)' or 'Arabia (328–632)' would have been too rigid. As this book aims to write the history of the Arabian Peninsula before the rise of Islam, I concluded that a pragmatic and widely accessible title and subtitle would have been the present ones.

[3] Discursive constructions such as the 'history of Italy' to refer to the period before the establishment of the modern Italian state in 1861 are indeed problematic.

On the other hand, it becomes necessary to clarify where exactly the Arabian Peninsula 'ends'. Moreover, if Arabia is understood as the 'land of the Arabs', it is also imperative to clearly define this group.

Recent enquiries into the history of pre-Islamic Arabia have adopted the 200 mm/year isohyet (rainfall line) as the northernmost border of the Arabian Peninsula,[4] corresponding to the 'absolute limit of rain-fed agriculture'.[5] Yet this approach is problematic because it does not consider social mobility and dynamic cultural interactions between nomads (dependent on cities for bare subsistence and utensils) and sedentary groups (who relied on nomads for tasks ranging from simple warfare to the escorting of trading goods). Sedentary Arabians supported themselves through agriculture and pastoralism. Yet they were also active traders, as testified by a wide array of inscriptions pointing to a symbiosis between settled populations and nomads in the Ḥawrān in the first four centuries of the first millennium.[6] Michael Macdonald, one of the foremost scholars to adopt the 200 mm/year isohyet as a border,[7] has recently pointed out that 'the traditional antithesis of the "Desert and the Sown" hinders, rather than helps, our understanding'.[8]
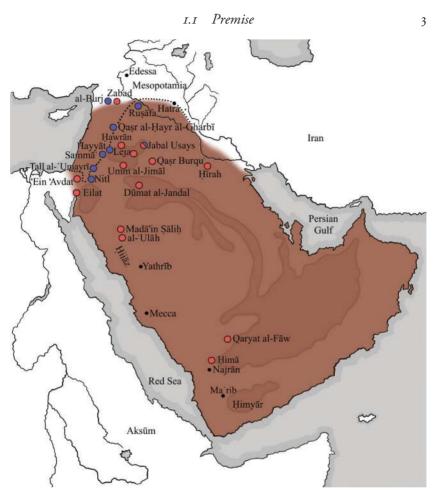
Moreover, while it is common to delineate geographical boundaries on the basis of scripts and/or languages, the use of *one language* to define *one space* is also inherently problematic for pre-Islamic Arabia. Scholars have claimed that language provided both a sense of cultural cohesion for Arabs and, at the same time, a feeling of distinction from non-Arabs,[9] and that the pre-Islamic *'rb* were 'people of Arabic language'.[10] There is, however, much uncertainty regarding the extent to which language was a bonding force for the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula before the appearance of the Qur'ān, the first Arabic document on parchment. While fewer than twenty inscriptions are universally accepted to be in 'Old Arabic', several

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[4] R. G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs from the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam* (London: Routledge, 2001), 3.

[5] D. J. Murphy, *People, Plants and Genes: The Story of Crops and Humanity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 27.

[6] M. C. A. Macdonald, 'Romans Go Home? Rome and Other "Outsiders" as Viewed from the Syro-Arabian Desert', in *Inside and Out: Interactions between Rome and the Peoples on the Arabian and Egyptian Frontiers in Late Antiquity*, ed. J. H. F. Dijkstra and G. Fisher (Leuven: Peeters, 2014), 145–64.

[7] G. Fisher (ed.), *Arabs and Empires before Islam* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

[8] M. C. A. Macdonald, 'Graffiti and Complexity: Ways-of-Life and Languages in the Hellenistic and Roman Harrah', in *Landscapes of Survival: The Archaeology and Epigraphy of Jordan's North-Eastern Desert and Beyond*, ed. P. M. M. G. Akkermans (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 343–54.

[9] Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*, 230.

[10] C. J. Robin, 'La pénétration des Arabes nomades au Yémen', *Revue du monde musulman et de la méditerranée* 61 (1991), 71–88, at p. 71.

1.1   Map of the Arabian Peninsula.
Grasso and D'Amico (2021). The map was adapted from Hoyland (2001), p. 4
(who adapted his map from Macdonald (2000), p. 39). The dotted line corresponds
to the 200 mm (8 inches) of rainfall per year (Hoyland and Macdonald). The red dots
mark where Nabateo-Arabic, and Old Arabic inscriptions have been found (Grasso).
In contrast, the blue dots correspond to the sites where Jafnid inscriptions have been
discovered (Grasso). Several new inscriptions were discovered in the summer of 2021
by the Ṭā'if-Mecca Epigraphic Survey Project, funded by the King Faisal Center for
Research and Islamic Studies. The inscriptions are not featured in this map as they are
unpublished at the time of writing this book.

languages and scripts were recorded in the peninsula during pre-Islamic
times. Alongside the Ancient North and South Arabian corpora, the
'Nabateo-Arabic' (or 'Transitional') and 'Old Arabic' inscriptions constitute

a valuable tool to uncover the history of pre-Islamic Arabia (see Figure 1.1).[11] Although the Nabatean Kingdom, established between Negev and Ḥijāz (the geographical location of modern-day Medina and Mecca), was incorporated into Rome's Arabian Province by Trajan in 106,[12] the evolving Nabatean script continued the Nabateans' legacy, as it spread throughout Arabia and eventually replaced the Ancient North Arabian script.[13]

Whereas recreating the history of the Arabs before the formation of an Arab consciousness and an Arabian unified collectivity has generated anachronistic approaches in the past, the spread throughout the peninsula of Old Arabic lends weight to the notion of the existence of a certain degree of cultural uniformity in the region. The epigraphic fusion of southern and northern Arabian local features (e.g., theonyms) further supports a global vision of pre-Islamic Arabia. The geographical boundaries of this book are thus defined as being both linguistic and political. While we can consider the most southern 'border' to be the Arabian Sea, we can define the northern border as being a linguistic barrier, passing through Zabad (Syria), where the northernmost Old Arabic inscription was found. This area includes the Syrian Desert, as most of the graffiti in Ancient North Arabian was found there. Finally, the western and eastern boundaries correspond to the Arabian borders of the Roman and Sasanian empires and, more precisely, to the *limites* of their Arabian allies' federations, that is, the Tanūkh, Salīḥids and Jafnids for the Roman Empire, and the Naṣrids for the Sasanian Empire.[14] Thus, the western limit of this enquiry is a line stretching from ʿAqaba to Zabad (roughly corresponding to the 200 mm/year isohyet), where all the inscriptions of the Jafnids, the main sixth-century Arabian partners of Rome, were discovered. Likewise, the eastern boundary corresponds to the borders of the Arabian Naṣrids.

At the dawn of Islam, the Arabian Peninsula was fringed with great empires (Iran, Rome and Aksūm) and was at the centre of a lucrative network of trade routes. Therefore, this book aims to pull together all the strands of the composite cultural and political milieu of the region, placing its history in the context of the broader environment of Late Antiquity. Although the

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[11] L. Nehmé, 'Aramaic or Arabic? The Nabataeo-Arabic Script and the Language of the Inscriptions Written in This Script', in *Arabic in Context*, ed. A. al-Jallad (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 75–98; L. Nehmé, 'A Glimpse of the Development of the Nabatean Script into Arabic Based on Old and New Epigraphic Material', in *The Development of Arabic as a Written Language*, ed. M. C. A. Macdonald (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 47–88.

[12] G. W. Bowersock, 'A Report on Arabia Provincia', *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971), 219–42.

[13] For an introduction to Nabatean, see G. Garbini, *Introduzione all'epigrafia* semitica (Brescia: Paideia, 2006), 209.

[14] Jafnids and Naṣrids are also respectively known as the tribe of Ghassān/Ghassanids and tribe of Lakhm/Lakhmids. The use of Jafnids and Naṣrids indicates no single tribal units but federations. This use is preferable as it defines the leaders of these groups and not the group itself, which is rarely mentioned in the sources.

kingdoms of South Arabia and Aksūm were transterritorial and multiethnic (or at least composed of one ethnic group dominating over people perceived as 'other'), I use the word 'kingdom' to define these polities as they were made up of several territories and peoples only for a short period during Late Antiquity (i.e., Aksūm's invasion of South Arabia and the following establishment of a satellite polity ca. 530–5, and South Arabia's conquests in Central Arabia ca. 535–65). The use of the word 'empire' requires that 'different peoples within the polity will be governed differently',[15] but we have minimal information to assess how South Arabia and Aksūm dealt with the people they conquered. Moreover, I use the word 'Iran' or 'Sasanian' to refer to the empire of the Sasanians (224–651) and the term 'Rome' to refer to the Roman Empire (both Western and Eastern). The rationale behind this motivation is simple. The lexeme *ērān* is attested as a political entity on the first Sasanian ruler Ardashīr I's investiture relief at Naqsh-e Rostam in Fārs and on his coins.[16] Ardashīr's 'idea of *Ērānšahr*, 'the kingdom of Iran', persisted through time by Shāpūr I (who expanded the rulers' title to 'King of Kings of Iran and Non-Iran'), Narseh and Shāpūr III, who adopted the lexeme.[17] The use of this endonym is preferable to the name of the south-western province of 'Persia' or to the exonym 'Persian', used by Greek historians from the fifth century BCE, while the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BCE) referred to itself as 'The Empire' (*Khshassa*).[18] The same considerations apply to the use of the word 'Rome'. Anthony Kaldellis has recently demonstrated that the so-called 'Byzantines' considered themselves Roman and called their polity *Romanía*.[19] Scholars have condemned Kaldellis' label of this entity as a 'nation state' instead of an empire, but it remains undeniable that the 'Byzantines' of Late Antiquity defined themselves as Romans.[20] To avoid

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[15] J. Burbank and F. Cooper, *Empires in World History: Power and the Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010), 8.

[16] The term is also attested in the Avesta but not as a political concept. For the first attestation on Ardashīr's relief see G. Herrmann (ed.), *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-i Rustam* (Berlin: Reimer, 1989).

[17] M. P. Canepa, 'Iran under the Parthian and Sasanian Dynasties', in *The Oxford World History of Empire*, Vol. 2, *The History of Empires*, ed. C. A. Bayly, P. Bang and W. Scheidel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 290–324, at p. 296.

[18] A. S. Shahbazi, 'The Achamenid Persian Empire (550–330 BCE)', in *The Oxford Handbook of Iranian History*, ed. T. Daryaee (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 120–41, at p. 131.

[19] A. Kaldellis, *Romanland: Ethnicity and Empire in Byzantium* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2019).

[20] According to Kaldellis, 'Byzantium sometimes veered close to being a homogeneous national state, with a vast majority of Romans and small ethnic minorities in the provinces (e.g., in 930 ad), whereas at other times, after a phase of conquests, it veered nearer to being a true empire, the hegemony of Romans over many non-Romans (e.g., by 1050)'. See Kaldellis, *Romanland*, xiv. For an opposing view see A. Cameron, 'Bitter Furies of Complexity', *Times Literary Supplement* (20 September 2019), 28–9.

privileging an (often 'external') perspective over another, I use endonyms to refer to the political entities mentioned in this work. The use of 'Aksūm/Aksūmite Empire' is preferred to 'Ethiopia/Ethiopian Empire', as a large portion of ancient Aksūm included Eritrean territories.

   As recently highlighted, 'it is an incontestable fact that the suffocating majority of attention falls on the same small part of the world'.[21] The study of geographical areas such as Arabia is still vastly underrepresented in any academic debate concerning medieval history. Any such debate has often become synonymous with the sole study of western Europe. It is imperative to widen the geographic focus of contemporary enquiries in Late Antiquity to understand this period better, counterbalancing the Eurocentric views of the past that have long dominated and shaped our comprehension of the broader medieval world. Such a shift in direction and focus may well be considered challenging and slightly intimidating because of historical reasons and the need for knowledge of somewhat 'obscure' languages from the regions which are the focus of this neglected (geographical) area of study. However, the few steps taken so far in this direction to expand the academic 'common' geographical area of enquiry have dramatically contributed to our understanding of this world. Reflecting on the past of regions that have been pushed into the historical shadows and the interactions of these regions with what was the *oikumene* of past Western scholarship (notoriously centred around Rome) will deepen our understanding of the fluid relations of past and contemporary societies. As stated by Robert Hoyland in his discussion of early Islam, the problem 'is not so much lack of the right materials, but of the right perspective'.[22] By exploiting an eclectic array of archaeological sources and literary accounts, primarily composed in Greek, Syriac and Arabic, I hope to offer an original perspective on the cultural milieu of late antique Arabia. The structure of contemporary universities usually compels scholars to look at these disciplines in a compartmentalized way. This approach has led Semitic philologists to work on Qur'ānic lexicon and rhetoric, while classicists focus on the Jafnids and archaeologists study the testimonies of South Arabia. Interactions between these disciplines are sporadic and often superficial. My attempt is to pull the interactions of cultures in pre-Islamic Arabia together, investigating the cultural milieu where the inhabitants of the peninsula lived and connecting the neglected

[21] P. Frankopan, 'Why We Need to Think about the Global Middle Ages', *Journal of Medieval Worlds* 1 (2019), 5–10.
[22] R. G. Hoyland, *The Late Antique World of Early Islam: Muslims among Christians and Jews in the East Mediterranean* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 559.

sociopolitical, religious and economic history of Arabia with its surroundings to construct a coherent historical narrative out of our fragmentary sources and fill a gap in the studies of Late Antiquity.

This first chapter is divided into three sections. First, I present a brief survey of previous scholarship concerning the history of late antique Arabia, the genesis of the Qurʾān and early Islam. I then discuss the sources available for historical research into pre-Islamic Arabia and explore the meaning of the lexemes 'Arabia' and 'Arabians/Arabs' from Antiquity to the rise of Islam, examining what these terms meant in various periods. In Chapter 2, I move on to an analysis of the political context of North Arabia (from the Syrian Desert to the Najd) between the third and the fifth centuries and the religious attitudes of the inhabitants of this region after Constantine's conversion to Christianity. The Arabians allied with Iran will receive less space than their Roman counterparts for two reasons. First, there are fewer Iranian sources than Roman sources, so any description of these groups remains highly speculative. Second, Iran had no claims of cultural monopoly. Zoroastrians did not proselytize as much as Christians, and they were not crucial actors in an inquiry into the history of pre-Islamic Arabia. Moreover, while 'Christian culture' was largely heterogenous, I am going to use 'Christianity' over 'Christianities' for the sake of clarity. Chapter 3 focuses on the rise of Judaism in the South Arabian kingdom of Ḥimyar during the same period, offering an interpretative late antique framework for the monotheism of fourth- and fifth-century Ḥimyar and contextualizing the choice made by South Arabian elites to become Jewish sympathizers. Chapter 4 is a chronological continuation of Chapter 3, shifting in focus to the arrival of Christianity in the region and positing economic factors as the leading cause for the massacre of Najrān and the shaping of sixth-century South Arabia while comparing this region with Aksūm. Chapter 5 mirrors Chapter 4, shedding light on the two federations of North Arabia – the kingdoms of Jafnids and Naṣrids – focusing on the impact of Christianity and providing a sociopolitical framework for the relationship between these kingdoms and Rome and Iran through a comparison with the Germans and the Türks.

The history of pre-Islamic Arabia needs to be analysed by taking into account the entire Arabian Peninsula, not only parts of it. Similarly, Islam cannot be understood in isolation from the political and cultural milieux of the surrounding regions. At the same time, this book aims to write the history of pre-Islamic Arabia rather than the origins of Islam. Therefore, only Chapter 6 addresses the Ḥijāz directly, looking at the religious communities in the region at the time of Muḥammad. After evaluating the decline of polytheism in pre-Islamic Arabia and making a case for the existence

of henotheistic beliefs, I compare and contrast Muḥammad's prophetic career with that of the other Arabian prophets, offering some reflections on the Qur'ān itself. My analysis focuses on the sociopolitical exploitation of cults as a mechanism for establishing identities from the end of the third to the beginning of the seventh century. This is not to say that every conversion and religious attitude were subordinated to economic interests and political power in the period, but rather that elites' conversion and their religious rhetorics had a profound impact on the shaping of the world of Late Antiquity and that the rhetoric of faith became a valuable weapon to be used in economic warfare in the period. Chapter 7 concludes by pulling these various strands together and answers one final question: what made the Arabian milieu capable of producing Scripture of such universal appeal as the Qur'ān? As highlighted by Michael Schmauder in an analysis of the interactions between Rome and the steppe empires in south-eastern Europe, 'the model of marginal cultures striving for integration into the cultural and political structure of the dominant civilisation' needs to be revised.[23]

In summary, this book delves into the political and cultural developments of pre-Islamic late antique Arabia. It offers an interpretative framework that contextualizes the choice of Arabian elites to become Jewish sympathizers and/or convert to Christianity and Islam by pursuing a line of enquiry probing a sociopolitical exploitation of cults in the shaping of Arabian identities. I argue that the Arabian rulers' cautious conversion follows a broad late antique trend which aimed to ease the transition for their subjects and/or to assume a neutral position towards the developments of the surrounding empires. While adopting and internalizing the culture of their powerful trading partners, the Arabians retained a degree of cultural autonomy as testified by the widespread adoption of Judaism, Miaphysitism,[24] East Syrian Christianity[25] and local henotheistic cults. Late antique political entities operating in Arabia exploited these systems of belief as the *casus belli* of expeditions pursuing trade monopolies. The

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[23] M. Schmauder, 'Huns, Avars, Hungarians: Reflections on the Interaction between Steppe Empires in Southeast Europe and the Late Roman to Early Byzantine Empires', in *Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. J. Bemmann and M. Schmauder (Bonn: Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhems Universität, 2015), 671–92, at p. 682.

[24] The Miaphysites believe that Christ has a single nature (*mia-physis*) in which humanity and divinity are united. They are often referred to as 'non-Chalcedonian', as they did not accept the Chalcedonian definition which maintained the 'two natures' (*dyo-physis*) of Christ.

[25] The Iranian bishops referred to the Christian Church of Iran as 'that of the East' in the documents of their first council (410). They accepted the belief in the dual nature Christology proposed by the Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius (d. 451), whose Christology was rejected in 431 at the First Council of Ephesus.

conjunction of faith and commerce (exemplified by the emergence of 'pilgrimage nodes') shaped Arabia's urban landscape and paved the way for the rise of Islam.

Throughout the first millennium, rulers' importation of foreign 'religions' was often aimed at overcoming internal divisions in a wide array of places such as Rome, South Arabia and Central Asia. Nonetheless, the systems of belief that local Arabian dynasties sponsored by exhibiting monumental inscriptions and funding the construction of religious buildings probably failed to take hold among the lower classes and the more geographically isolated peoples of the region. The political fragmentation of Arabia was further exacerbated by the Christological controversies seeping through Arabia's social strata due to the preaching of exiled monks. It was only after the fall of local political entities such as that of Ḥimyar and the kingdoms of North Arabia that the conditions for the political and religious unification of Arabia materialized, and a prophet from inner Arabia succeeded in vanquishing factional segregation and converging political, economic and religious interests and attitudes (e.g., scriptural with pagan and henotheist) through the founding of an autochthonous and universalistic (and thus easily exportable in sharp contrast to Zoroastrianism) belief system articulated in the newly formed local *lingua franca* and script. Islam leveraged the dissatisfaction with current political rule and emerged in its Arabian milieu to gain economic advantages, eliminate Iran's hegemony over the region and settle tribal divisions. At the same time, it provided a faith-based process for establishing identities and overcoming competing tendencies characteristic of the broader late antique world. In the second half of the seventh century, the adoption of kingly conduct by the Umayyad caliphs, more akin to that of Roman and Iranian rulers and of the Arabian Ḥimyarites and Jafnids than that of Muḥammad, signalled the completion of a process based on the belief in an extramundane dimension.[26]

Muslim accounts emphasize the barbarism of Romans and pre-Islamic Arabians in similar terms. However, while Islam inherited the ideological portrayal of pre-Islamic Arabians as barbarians and in antithesis to *'ilm* ('knowledge'), the 'rupture' between 'pre-Islamic' and 'Islamic' ought to be reconceptualized as a process of transformation. No historical framing of the emergence of Islam can be traced without pre-Islamic Arabia. Hence, by focusing on the different degrees of participation and mediation as well

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[26] A. Marsham, *Rituals of Islamic Monarchy: Accession and Succession in the First Muslim Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009).

as on buffer zone policies, this book aims to be the first extended study on this subject which positions the Arabians and the 'peripheries' of the late antique empires at the centre. My goal is to liberate and grant autonomy to the Arabians from marginalizing (mostly Western-produced) narratives framing the Arabians as 'barbarians' inhabiting the fringes of Rome and Iran and/or deterministic analyses in which they are similarly depicted retrospectively as exemplified by the Muslims' definition of the period as *Jāhilīyah*, 'ignorance'.[27] The recent exhibition *Roads of Arabia*, organized by the Saudi Commission for Tourism and Antiquities, showcased artefacts dated from the early lower Palaeolithic to the Ottoman period. The exhibition aimed to tell the story of the region's development over millennia but failed to cover the centuries before the emergence of Islam, partly corresponding to the period of Late Antiquity (just a few steps divided a series of frescoes datable to the first centuries CE from the first Islamic inscriptions, but these steps are supposed to cover half a millennium).[28]

While the Sasanians were Rome's greatest enemy in this period, the negative counterparts of the Romans in the literary sources were the 'barbarians'. This Roman label produces a misleading sense of a collective entity conceding with 'an inferior state of human evolution'.[29] Although the Romans perceived a binary division between their 'human and civilized category' and the 'barbarians', the relationship between these two categories was dynamic, and it was possible to cross boundaries by process of 'acculturation'. Unlike other empires' 'labels of otherness', shared blood was not a funding criterion to determine foreign peoples in late antique Rome. In China, for example, unfamiliar people were addressed by using ethnonyms that had no relation to cultural behaviour, as exemplified by Ban Gu's (d. 92) description of the Xiongnu.[30] In both regions of Eurasia, the rise of Buddhism and Christianity slowly caused the disintegration of the 'barbarians' collective identity', as people inhabiting the borders of the Roman and Chinese *oecumene* embraced monotheism. In the second half of the first millennium, the rise of the third 'universal' monotheistic

27 For an example of a Eurocentric use of the word in modern scholarship, see N. Lenski's introduction to the monumental *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Constantine* at p. 2: 'His deployment of barbarian military officers and auxiliary troops enabled the ongoing vitality of the late Roman army.'
28 For this exhibition, see A. I. Al-Ghabban et al. (eds), *Roads of Arabia* (Paris: Musée du Louvre, 2010).
29 Y. Dauge, *Le Barbare: Recherches sur la conception romaine de la barbarie et de la civilization* (Bruxelles: Latomus, 1981), 19–20.
30 Ban Gu, *Han shu*, 94.b; Randolph B. Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians: Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empires* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), esp. 96–129.