
Arabia Before Islam

South Arabia, the *Arabia felix* of antiquity, had been famed for its wealth, but when Muhammad was born (570) its most glorious times were over. Ancient polytheism had been largely replaced by Jewish and Christian influences. In Central Arabia, a rather "primitive" religion was still maintained, and the country boasted numerous tribal sanctuaries. Caves and (as is common among the Semites) stones were regarded as sacred and filled with blessing power, *baraka*. A center of the stone cult was Mecca: there, the black stone in the southeastern corner of the Ka'ba was the goal of annual pilgrimages. Such pilgrimages, performed at specific times, brought the wealthy trade center economic advantages. Trade fairs and markets were held during the four sacred months, during which fighting and killing were prohibited, and members of all Arabic clans and tribes would travel to the sacred places. The life of the Arabs during that period, which the Muslims call *jāhiliyya*, "time of ignorance," showed but little trace of deep religious feeling, as far as one can judge from inscriptions and

literature. Arabic literature (primarily poetry) from the late sixth century A.D. sings mainly of the virtues of the Bedouins: that is, bravery, boundless hospitality, revenge, faith in an immutable fate, but does not display much religious consciousness. Compared with the themes of heroic life, the purely erotic moment remains in the background. The women of the tribe used to compose threnodies for those slain in war; the priests at the sanctuaries performed soothsaying in high-sounding rhyming prose.

It is astounding to see how highly developed the Arabic language already was at this early time. In its poetical idiom, which was common to all tribes, it unfolded to perfection the finest tendencies inherent in all Semitic languages, superseding the dialectical variants of everyday speech. An almost inexhaustible wealth of words is combined with an extreme syntactic brevity, and even at that early time the use of several distinct meters in poetry can be seen. In fact, the perfection of pre-Islamic Arabic poetry has rarely been reached by writers at any later point in history, and the language, with its apparently boundless possibilities, was perhaps the most important and precious heritage which Islam received from its native Arabic soil.

Now and then in ancient Arabic poetry, Christian motifs appear: wandering monks, or the light that shines forth from a hermit's cell. The country was situated in the sphere of influence of Byzanz and Persia, both trade partners of the Meccans, and this facilitated contacts with Jacobite, Melkite, and Nestorian Christians; but entire Christian colonies would probably not have been found in the heart of Arabia. However, there were Jewish settlements not far from Medina; furthermore, the kings of Sheba had converted to Judaism around the year 500. One hears also of seekers, unsatisfied with the dominant religion of the Arabs, who were in quest of a higher faith. These men were called *ḥanīf*, and it seems that the belief in a high God, *Allāh* (a term that incidentally appears elsewhere among the Arabs) formed the center of their religious attitude. It may well be that their religious interest had been intensified

by contacts with Christians or Jews. One can speculate that Arabia possibly would have become a Christian country during the late sixth to early seventh century, had Muhammad not appeared on the scene.