

## Between Empires

### Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity

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Greg Fisher, *Between Empires, Arabs, Romans and Sasanians in Late Antiquity*.  
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One of the main challenges to scholars is to explain the Muslims revolution, dating from the first decades of the 7th c. AD, from the Hegira in 622. This is so for several reasons, not least the fact that there is a lack of documents in Arabic script prior to that period, but also because it is apparently difficult to figure out the Arab upsurge from the relative obscurity of the previous centuries. Greg Fisher, associate professor at Carleton, Canada, has studied this intricate subject under the supervision of professor Averil Cameron, in Oxford, resulting in this volume published at Oxford University Press. From a theoretical standpoint, Fisher considers that religious, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural identities are a core research interest in studies of Late Antiquity. Then, the author stresses the importance of the study of the sources, as the Greek and Syriac ancient authors, as well as archaeological and epigraphic data form the foundation of the study. Third, and less intuitive, is an anthropological comparative approach, including colonial American history, such as borderland studies about Spanish colonizers, missionaries, Native Americans, British and French in North America. He emphasizes that the borderlands framework offers a flexible way to approach the engagement between empires, peripheries, and frontiers, encouraging us to view history of people such as the Jafnids from a macro historical perspective which is not confined to the context of the ancient world. A key concept is "in-between", for people living in the outskirts of empires.

For the late Roman world, Christian monotheism constituted and overt influence on the identity of the Empire, influencing peripheral tribes, notably Arab ones. The fifth century cold war between Rome and the Sasanians had demonstrated the role of religion in winning and controlling political affiliates. Acculturation and assimilation to Christianity were conjoined with sociocultural and political side-effects, allowing also a

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variety of deliberate or less intentional responses allowing for those Christianized to be so while maintaining links to ideas of a world beyond. Arabs were subjected to a long-term provincialisation of their territory and the deposition of their monarchies. Their incorporation into the Empire was often simply the formal expression of a pre-existing state of affairs. The Jafnids did not produce a state, yet the emergence of some state-like features is best explained by their position in-between the state, and the tribe. In 561/2 Rome and Iran signed another peace treaty, whose text is preserved in Menander. It categorizes the place of the Arab allies, suggesting that both empires recognized that changes were under way and that the actions of their allies needed to be curbed. It was within the context of the late antique Roman and Sasanian world that Arabs began to gain political power within the Fertile Crescent, and took advantage of the opportunities offered with the competition between the Romans and the Sasanians to make an impact on the settled lands of the two dominant empires in Late Antiquity.

The volume explores how the Nasrids and Jafnids became increasingly integrated into the culture, politics and religiosity of their imperial patrons. The consequences of such integration includes the political and cultural visibility of Arab elites, concluding that the interface with the Roman Empire played a key role in helping to lay the foundation for later concepts of Arab identity. The volume is thus a solid contribution not only to understanding late antiquity, but modern issues relating to Arab and Muslims spread. In methodological terms, it is also a most enticing volume, showing the importance of archaeology and social theory to understand past and present issues. It is a very useful introduction to a most relevant subject.