

**EXPANSION OF THE ARABS:
ITS RELATION TO CLIMATIC CHANGES
AND OTHER FACTORS**

by
S. HUZAYYIN

Introductory:

The expansion of the Arabs which started from Arabia in the 7th century A.D. represents one of the major phenomena in human history. It carried Arab culture and Islam far wide to the west and the east both by land and by sea. This great movement, however, did not represent an isolated phenomenon. It came as a link in a chain of movements of expansion from the Semitic steppe-lands of the Near East. The history of those earlier Semitic movements of expansion is a complicated one; and it is not proposed to deal with them here in any detail. Suffice it to say that views have widely differed upon the original cause of those early expansions and migrations from the desert and the steppe. Some authors would attribute them to what was coined by E. Huntington as the pulse of climate — namely fluctuations and oscillations in the amount of precipitation over the great Asiatic belt of steppe-lands and its borders. Others would simply attribute these migrations to purely political reasons — namely the decline in the power of empires adjoining the steppe-lands and the consequent inducement to the hordes of nomads to migrate to the settled plains. Rare among researchers are those who tried the possible combination of the two sets of factors. It is our intention in this short paper to survey the possibilities of those natural and human factors which may have directly or indirectly affected the expansion of the Arabs from their peninsula.

Archaeological Evidences of Climatic Changes:

The school of changeability of climate in south west Asia in historical times was first championed by E. Huntington. His early researches pertained to Palestine in Biblical and earlier times, and he came to the conclusion that the Palestine of those days was favoured with better rainfall and vegetation than in

later times. Its past climate was marked with fluctuations which forced the bedouins to migrate and seek shelter and abode in the near-by plains of Egypt or in the settled oases of Syria as well as in the borders of Iraq.

The gist of the views of E. Huntington, C.E.P. Brooks and others is that a so-called period of classical rainfall existed and extended (with oscillation) roughly from 1800 B.C. to A.D. 500, though it was best represented from 1200 B.C. to A.D. 200. Other historians such as Caetani have tried to apply similar views to Arabia of early Islamic days, though in their enthusiasm they put forward evidences which were not always convincing. Caetani, for example, thinks that the fact that parts of Arabia were in former times more forested than at present, and that several of its wild beasts have now become extinct may be taken as an indication of increasing dryness of climate. In a country like Arabia, however, where woodlands are naturally restricted and where people depend on wood for fuel and other purposes, deforestation is better regarded as the result of the action of man. The extinction of wild animals in such a desert country may be explained on the ground that those animals are easily trapped at the watering-places, where they are obliged to call. This is perhaps the reason why it is that, on the steppe and semi-desert, the domestication of tamable animals and the extinction of comparatively more fierce ones is achieved at an earlier date than in more prosperous lands.

But the problem of changeability of climate and the onset of dryness which led to outbursts of tribes from semi-desert and desert areas should be approached from a different angle. Evidences of former changes and onset of desiccation should be looked for in more than one field. Archaeology is perhaps one of the main sources for reliable evidence, at least of the change which took place since Roman and early Christian times. The coast of Mariut district to the west of the Nile delta is covered with a series of large cisterns which belong to the Graeco-Roman phase. These cisterns are now dry, and most of them filled with sand. But even if they were cleaned up, it is estimated, with good reason, that they would never all get filled up with the winter rain which now falls in the district. The large temples whose remains are still standing are a clear indication that Mariut was a district rich in cultivation and vineyards. At present the great efforts to revive the area are much hampered by both the insufficiency and uncertainty of water-supply. If

we pass on to North Arabia we find similar archaeological evidence. The deserts of Transjordan and Syria have a multitude of Roman cisterns whose abundance and large capacity may be taken as a sign of greater precipitation of rainfall. It is true that these cisterns must have been built at different times when the older ones got filled with debris and sand; and that consequently their evidence as indicating desiccation in later times may not be conclusive; but they should not be taken alone into consideration. The large camps of Roman garrisons, the theatres and huge buildings attached to them, as well as the roads which covered the face of what is now desert must be taken as an indication of better climate than at present prevails. In addition to this must be added the existence of remains of large cities, with their temples and palaces, such as the famous Petra and other centres further north (Bostra, Palmyra, etc.) where the supply of local rainfall and underground water is at present utterly insufficient for their maintenance. In fact the study of the locations of these ancient cities and the trade routes serving them supports the evidence of desiccation and gives further indication that the onset of dryness was gradual and took place during the first few centuries of the Christian era. The crossing of the Syrian desert between the eastern and the western horns of the Fertile Crescent was gradually shifted from south to north. The head of the trade routes on the western side (dominated by the Romans and Byzantines) was first at Petra (capital of the Nabataeans north of Aqaba), and then shifted northwards to Bostra, Damascus and Palmyra in north Syria. This northward shift may have been partly due to the development of the ports of the coast of Phoenicia instead of Gaza in relation to the gradual rise of the Byzantine Empire and the advancement of north Syria and Mesopotamia as centres for religious and mercantile enterprise. But it is equally possible that a gradual onset of desiccation may have made the maintenance of the southerly routes and crossings impossible. We shall come back to this point when we discuss the rôle of the trade activity in its relation to Arab expansion.

Another interesting piece of evidence comes from the study of underground water-level in the Transjordan desert. There are clear indications from the Azraq depression that the underground water-level which supplies the springs has fallen by some 6 feet since Roman times. This could not be attributed to any increase in the digging of wells in that depression, as in fact it was more

populous in Roman times than at present. But perhaps the most important area from which we can draw archaeological evidence of dryness of climate is the south-west plateau of Yemen and Hadramaut. There, especially in Yemen, the climate was always and is still more humid than in any part of Arabia. The rainfall being more abundant, its oscillations were always more appreciable in amount, and thus more easily discerned. The plateau of Yemen with its extension towards Hadramaut, was the site of a series of ancient civilizations. This plateau may be roughly divided into three levels. (1) The so-called Minnaean Jauf (= interior) which lies in the north-east, in the rain-shadow of the higher toplands of Sanaa, at a level of less than 1200 metres (above sea-level) in general. This is now within the semi-desert zone. (2) The southern Jauf or the Maarib level which extends to the borders of Hadramaut at an altitude of 1200 to 1700 metres. It receives a slightly higher amount of rainfall, being somewhat higher and more situated to the south. (3) The toplands of Sanaa and the rest of the high mountains above 1700 metres (Sanaa itself at about 2300 m.). These toplands rejoice in both temperate conditions and heavier rainfall, reaching 50 cms. or even more. Archaeological evidence from south-west Arabia, mainly inscriptions, bring out three distinct and successive phases of civilization, each of which may be associated with one of the above-mentioned levels of altitude. These are the so-called Minnaean, Sabaeo-Himyarite and Ethiopian. It is difficult to give any definite dates for each of these phases, and particularly the first two which overlap. But on the whole, the earliest Minnaean inscriptions may be dated at about 800 B.C., if not a little earlier. The chief centre of power at that time was at Qarnawah in the northern Jauf. As from 550 B.C., however, the centre of power in Yemen became shifted upwards to the middle level round the city of Maarib the capital of the Sabaeans. Later on, about the year 115 B.C. another power appeared in South Arabia. These were the so-called Himyarites whose accession to the power in place of the Sabaeans was probably due to sheer political disturbances among the tribes. Maarib the higher capital continued to act as the chief city of the Himyarites whose culture and power extended eastwards in the direction of the valley of Hadramaut. Many cities rose up at that time, but it is interesting to note that they were all in the interior of South-West Arabia, and lay still in the rain-shadow area of the high plateau of Sanaa. Those cities re-

presented oases which exploited the water of the streams descending from the high plateau, as well as the stretches of steppe-lands which were still rich with vegetation. Maarib itself had a famous dam, and its gardens were well described in the Koran. At present not even the restoration of the ancient dams would suffice to revive life in that remote interior of South-West Arabia. The southern Jauf acted as the seat of power for both Sabaeans and Himyarites because it must have received more rainfall and more run-off and drainage than it does at present. A change, however, in the seat of capital came with the arrival of the Ethiopians in Yemen about A.D. 525. The invaders must have found the Jauf of Yemen too dry to act as the seat of their capital; and the chief city of Yemen was built up at Sanaa on the higher level. It is interesting to note that this removal of the seat of power in Yemen coincided with the suggested date of final desiccation in northern Arabia — namely the end of the so-called period of classical rain-fall. It is also interesting to note that the toplands of Yemen above 2000 metres which were singularly poor in remains of cities or inscriptions from the Sabaeo-Himyarite periods, became the seat of political power in the Yemen since the days when Sanaa was established. The power of Islamic Yemen was always established on those higher top-lands, or on the western and south-western sides of the plateau, which received higher rainfall, because they faced the winds which brought rain. Cities like Sanaa, Taiz, Ib, Manakha etc. all lay either in the top-land area or on the windward side of the Yemen Plateau. Zabeed (another Islamic centre but on a much lower altitude) lay on the westward edge of the plateau, with more abundant run off brought down by torrents.

It is feasible, therefore, to conclude that from the study of the location of the main centres of power and cities on the Yemen Plateau, there must have occurred a gradual onset of dry condition, which led to the gradual climbing of the plateau into the direction of better-watered areas and levels. This conclusion is also supported by another piece of archaeological evidence which may be drawn from the study of the location of ancient cisterns as may be compared with modern ones. In areas where Sabaeo-Himyaritic influences extended, large cisterns were built up usually on the surface of elevated spots. The cisterns were exceptionally large, but they must have been filled with water in those days. At present the rainfall is enough only to supply these cisterns with limited amounts of water, filling only their

bottom parts. The present population in such areas have been obliged to dig their cisterns and waterpools at a lower level, usually in the centre of a natural collecting basin. A striking example of this shift of the place of a cistern can be seen at the town of Nait in north east Yemen, which was a prosperous city with temples and high cisterns in Sabaeen and Himyarite times, but has now become a decadent village with a low-lying and unhealthy water-pool at the apex of a collecting basin.

Historical Documents Indicating Changes of Climate:

But apart from such archaeological evidences which strongly point out to the change of climate towards aridity in both northern and southern Arabia, other evidences pointing into the same direction, may be drawn from sources of historical documents or legends. These documents may be drawn from both Graeco-Roman and Arab sources. In fact we do possess some literary evidences which are mainly derived from descriptions of various parts of Arabia, especially the south-west, by Greek writers, who have either visited or heard about the country in their times. Most of these descriptions relate to what is now Hadramaut. To these writers, this was the country of spices and incenses par-excellence. Strabo (A.D. 20) speaking of its people says (Strabo 16,4,19), "Amongst them myrrh, frankincense and cinnamon are produced, and on the sea-coast also balsam and other fragrant plants, though their perfume soon passes away." It is possible that some of these products may have been originally imported from Sokotra or Ethiopia, or even from India; but at any rate the country does not at present produce any of these plants. Moreover the valley of Hadramaut is described by Greek writers as being very unhealthy. The picture they drew of it approaches in a way what we see in semi-jungle valleys. This gave rise to an ancient legend, reflected in the name of the country itself which means death is present. In other words Hadramaut was considered in a way as the valley of death, while at present it is a healthy land. According to an early traveller's tale, appearing in Herodotus and other writers, the air of Hadramaut was very much scented with the overpowering fragrance of incense which spread death. Diodorus Siculus (2, 48-9) related that even the earth exuded a sweet fragrance when it was dug. Another picture is given by the author of the *Periplus of the Erythraean Sea* (A.D. 80): "The incense is collected by the king's slaves, or by malefactors con-

demned to this service as punishment. The country is unhealthy in the extreme, pestilential even to those who sail along the coast, and mortal to the wretched sufferers employed in collecting the frankincense who perish likewise as often by want and neglect as by the pernicious influence of the climate. The country inland is mountainous and difficult in access; the air is foggy, loaded with vapours caused by the noxious exhalations from the trees that bear the incense." We may well deduce from these descriptions, however legendary in nature some of them may be, that the bottom of the valley of Hadramaut and the coastal plains were by no means inviting for settlement, probably by reason of malaria and other diseases caused by stagnant waters. This is supported by the fact that the most important of the archaeological remains of the country come from the western and upper stretches of the valley. In this district lies the ancient capital of Shabwah, in the arid plateau area between Yemen and Hadramaut, unlike the modern towns of Shibam, Saioun and Tareem which lie in the middle and lower parts of the valley where subterranean waters still make garden irrigation possible. It may be safe to deduce that the dryness of climate which took place sometime during post Graeco-Roman times led to an amelioration in the hygienic conditions, especially in the middle and lower parts of the valley of Hadramaut. At the same time, however, the desiccation of climate gradually had a disastrous effect upon the incense production of the country. This happened at a time when demand for this commodity in the Roman world was steadily increasing, owing to the spread of Christianity and particularly after its recognition, in the fourth century A.D., as the official religion of the empire. The need for more incense was also felt in the Syrian and Nestorian churches, which were associated with monastic activity on the edge of the drying deserts of northern Arabia. The failure of the produce of Hadramaut and the southern coasts of Arabia, as well as Sokotra and Somaliland, to satisfy the growing needs of the north, seems to have induced the Arabs to expand by sea and look for supplementary amounts of incense and spices produced in other countries round the Arabian sea.

But Graeco-Roman sources are not alone in indicating possibilities of climatic changes. Arab sources, though written at a much later date, contain references to early and pre-Islamic conditions of better rainfall in some parts of Arabia. Legends about famous poets and knights speak of the facility with which

they could roam about Arabian deserts. Umru'ul-Qays, the legendary hero and poet of pre-Islamic times started most probably in the Ahqaf region north-west of Hadramaut and was able to reach the confines of Anatolia. The so-called Period of Ignorance in Arabia was also marked with wide tribal movements and migrations, which may safely be taken as an indication of unsettled climatic conditions. It is interesting to note that it has become proverbial amongst the Arabs that Yemen was the cradle-land of the Arabian tribes, and that Iraq with its well-irrigated plains became their graveyard. We know that the tribes of Azd, Qudaah and others had migrated from eastern Yemen across southern Najd to the Hasa area on the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, where they settled for a while before moving on to the borders of Iraq and Syria.

It is of course quite likely that the break of the famous dam of Maarib some time between 440 and 450 A.D. led to large-scale migrations from the vicinity of that ancient town; but it is very likely that the migrations started at least a century or two earlier owing to the gradual onset of drier conditions. Such aridity would affect not only the area irrigated by the dam, but the whole of the interior of Yemen with its floral wealth. But even after the tribes which moved from south Arabia had settled on both sides of the fertile crescent bordering the Syrian desert, conditions seem to have continued to become increasingly drier than before. This was reflected in the intensification of warlike habits and hostilities among the tribes of Arabia for the commanding of pastures and watering places. Also among the customs which the Arabs of the Period of Ignorance (before the appearance of Islam) developed and which Islam prohibited, was the killing of girl-descendants. We understand from the Koran that this was not just done "for fear of shame," but rather for "fear of dearth." Conditions in pre-Islamic Arabia seem to have been gradually approaching a climatic crisis which took place early in the 6th century A.D. This is referred to in the legendary accounts preserved in the writings of some Arab historians of later times, such as Masudi (vol. I) of the 10th century A.D. Amongst these is the story of a "very old man" from Hirah (near the modern Karbalaa) who gives the following narrative in the year A.D. 632: "During the early day of my life, any woman from among the people of Hira could traverse the country to Syria on her own... She passes by a string of settlements and a succession of streams and fruit-bearing trees,

until she arrives at her destination quite safe. Look! how everything has changed! and how desert prevails everywhere!"

Other Environmental Factors Affecting the Expansion of Arabs.

From the above survey we may well see that the expansion of the Arabs both by land and by sea was affected by a climatic change which led to gradual aridity during the few centuries preceding the appearance of Islam; the crisis reaching its climax some time about 500 A.D. The evidence, archaeological and otherwise, for the onset of this aridity is too strong to be overlooked. It would be misleading, however, to think that desiccation was the only factor affecting the movement of spread from Arabia, or that it was even the only natural factor which affected this movement. The geographical situation of the Arabian peninsula was in itself a particularly important factor. Arabia differed from a peninsula like that of India in the fact that it was a land of passage and not a terminal peninsula of Asia. Space-relationships between Arabia and both Africa on the one hand, and the rest of the Asiatic continent on the other, greatly facilitated the outward movement of the Arabs. The picture which is usually drawn of the Arab movement of expansion is that the bedouins of Arabia preferred to spread by land. A deeper insight into the history of Arab expansion, however, brings forward the important fact that the Arabs had spread by sea as much as they did by land. The Arabian elements of the Arabian (Persian) Gulf were in fact the ancestors of the Phoenicians — for it has now become evident that these latter may have risen on the shores of that gulf. The mariners of the southern coasts of Arabia and Hadramaut were well acquainted with navigation in the Arabian Sea and Indian Ocean at a particularly early date. It is rather interesting that mariners from the coasts of Oman spread mostly towards the Zandj (negro) coasts of Africa, while the people of Hadramaut (Phoenicians of the southern seas) spread eastwards as far as the south-east corner of Asia. In this way the people and cultures of the eastern and southern coasts of Arabia became deeply connected with maritime activity in the Indian Ocean. Thus we may well see that while the space-relationships of northern Arabia encouraged the spread by land, maritime conditions in the east and south encouraged expansion by sea. This was perhaps why Islam as a new religion had the opportunity of spreading into the three directions of east, west and south. The existence of the mountain chains of Anatolia in the north,

and the fact that they extended from east to west, represented a barrier which prevented the Arabs from freely expanding in a northerly direction. It is interesting to note that Armenia which lay to the extreme north of the chains maintained its Christian character to the present day. It is also significant to note that Islam was carried into the heart of Anatolia and beyond towards the Balkans not by the Arabs but by the Osmanli Turks who were converted to Islam and carried it during their spread westwards along the main line of the chains.

The geographical situation of Arabia also was an important natural factor which helped the movement of spread. It is interesting that Arabia was not an island surrounded or even a peninsula entirely skirted on one side by the waters of the sea. If the Mediterranean were linked either to the Red Sea or to the Arabian (Persian) Gulf, it would have been possible for the people of the west to join hands with those of the south and south east without passing over a land-bridge in Arabia. The existence of this land-bridge meant that no connection or intercourse between east and west could be established without the Arabs and their land taking part in it. It fell to the people of Arabia to play the part of intermediaries since times immemorial. This made them acquainted with their neighbours both in adjacent areas and in territories far away by land or by sea. When the time came for the Arabs to spread from their peninsula and take the new religion with them, their task was greatly facilitated by the existence of a long tradition of early contacts.

Another factor pertaining to the environment of Arabia and also affecting the movement of outburst and expansion is perhaps the appearance of the breed of the Arab horse. So far as is known there is no definite information as to the exact date of the introduction of this new and vigorous ally of the tribesman into the heart of Arabia. But it is almost certain that such an introduction could not have taken place at the same time as the animal was brought to the fertile plains of the Crescent and Egypt (where it came as an ally of the Hyksos about 1700 B.C.). The horse is essentially an animal of the rich pasture lands; and it must have taken a comparatively long time to breed the new "Arab" type, which could stand more severe conditions of draught. But in any case, it is almost certain that by the early centuries of the Christian era, the Arab breed had fully evolved. The fact that the famous civil war of "Dahis" and "Ghabraa" between two of the most powerful tribes of pre-Islamic Arabia,

and which is said to have lasted for 40 years, was called after the names of a horse and a mare, is no weak evidence that the horse must have played an important part in the disturbances of the "Period of Ignorance". It is true that the horse remained always as a luxury animal within Arabia, and that it never superseded the camel; but its existence provided the bedouin with a strong ally in his struggle to dominate the settled plains.

Non-Environmental Factors Affecting the Expansion of the Arabs:

We should not, however, limit our analysis of the factors affecting the expansion of the Arabs to the natural and environmental sphere. There can be no doubt that this great movement was also influenced by other factors which did not belong to their changing environment. These factors had a special effect upon the movement of outburst, though they did not always work in one or the same direction. Amongst these factors special emphasis must be laid upon the appearance of Islam. It is particularly significant that the outburst from Arabia, which followed upon the appearance of Islam differed drastically in its effects upon neighbouring civilizations from the earlier outbursts of the Semitic elements from Arabia, or still more from the devastating outbursts which took place at various times from the steppe-land of Inner Asia, since the days of the Huns down to those of the Tartars and Monguls. We know from history that whatever may have been the reasons for the outward movement which took place from the steppe into the sown (whether they were climatic pulsations or not), the result was nearly always the devastation of settled life on the conquered plains. The movement of the Arabs in early Islamic times had totally different results. It must be recognised that the new religion gave the bedouins a new message and a spiritual outlook which subdued their temptations and ferocity. They had something to offer to the lands and peoples around them. At the same time the conflict which they had to face during the initial stages of their expansion in the Near East was not a particularly severe one. We must remember that the appearance of Christianity, the religion based upon love, had prepared the ground for the acceptance of the new creed of Islam, based upon brotherhood. Actually the Christian elements in northern Arabia and in Egypt, for example, did not find it difficult to shift over from Christianity to Islam, which after all, had many things in common. At the same time the liberal attitude of Islam which preached

equality between "Arab" and "non-Arab" had the double effect of subduing and taming the tribesmen, and of inducing the non-Arab to join into the common life of Islam. We are therefore led to the conclusion that although environmental factors, such as the changing climate or the appearance of the Arab breed of the horse, might have led to a ferocious outburst from Arabia, the situation was entirely changed by the appearance of Islam. This new creed which gave the Arabs further enthusiasm and impulse to carry the message into the outer world, was at the same time a most helpful factor which tamed the conquerors and saved the heart of the ancient world from the usual effects of an uncontrolled turmoil.

But there was another human and historical factor which affected the movement of the Arabs. We must remember that the Arabs were preceded in the Near East by two other peoples who dominated the heart of the ancient world — namely the Romans (and Byzantines) and the Persians. The former had a great empire in the west, which endeavoured to establish strong and fruitful commercial relations with the Central East including India and innermost Asia. Greek and other mariners joined hands with Arab traders and mariners to carry on a vast and prosperous trade between the Roman empire and India. This trade had to pass through Arabia where caravans became busy carrying goods from coast to coast. Also Arab mariners from the eastern and southern coasts took an increasingly active part in the maritime trade. Another route of trade was the famous silk-route which went by land from the coasts of the Mediterranean through northern Arabia to the north of Ancient Persia, and yonder to Turkistan and the borders of China. A number of caravan routes crossed Arabia in different directions in order to serve the maritime routes as well as the silk-route. It is perhaps interesting to mention the famous route of Hidjaz which provided livelihood as well as great riches to the tribe of Qureish which commanded Mekka. Another route came from Qateef on the coasts of the Arabian (Persian) Gulf and crossed Nejd and the Nefud desert to Taimaa where it joined the route of Hidjaz. Later on this latter route was superseded by one which started from Charax Spasinu at the head of the Gulf and skirted the Nefud desert to Petra and the Gaza coast. Some time about the 3rd century A.D. the routes of Qateef and Charax were abandoned in favour of a newer and more northerly ones which started from Hira to Bostra, Damascus and Palmyra crossing the middle

and northern parts of the Syrian desert. We have already mentioned at an earlier stage that this northerly shift of the routes may have been at least partly due to gradual desiccation in the southern parts of the Syrian desert. But in spite of the shifts in the routes, there can be no doubt that the land trade which crossed Arabia represented a substantially important source of livelihood for the Arabs. When Rome fell in the 5th century A.D., it was superseded in the field of trade by Byzantium. The Arabs continued to draw great benefits as intermediaries between the two enemies — the Byzantine Romans and the Persians. They also continued to work as mariners and caravan leaders for the rich trade of India. We may well imagine that whatever may have been the consequences of the desiccation, which started in a serious way about the 3rd century A.D. and perhaps reached its present day intensity about the early sixth century A.D., the effect of this desiccation became more or less nullified by the temporary prosperity drawn from trade and transport. Instead of depending entirely upon grazing and little cultivation around wells, a large section of the bedouin population of Arabia was engaged in the activity of transport and trade between east and west. In fact, trade seems to have more than compensated for the impoverishment of the environment. The result was that the outburst from the desert was delayed as long as the income from trade and transportation was maintained.

The trade of the Romans and Byzantines, however, was destined to decline. The great wars between the Byzantines and the Persians weakened both sides and led to a decrease in their purchasing power. At the same time the latter part of the 6th century A.D. seems to have witnessed new changes in the trade policy of the Byzantines. The emperor Justinian (A.D. 527-565) is known to have made a special effort to develop the sea-route of the Red Sea through Ethiopia, in order to establish contacts with the Indian Ocean without passing through Arabia, where trade might be controlled by the Persians. He made a similar effort in order to develop a route from the Black Sea, north of the Caspian, into Central Asia and on to the borders of China. Such changes in the trade policy of the Byzantines must have affected the vital source of the tradesmen of Arabia. The delaying effect which trade and transportation had upon the necessary and pre-ordained outburst from the desert was thus nearing its end.

Finally we must not forget the purely political issue and the consequent military factor. The existence of the two great

powers of the Byzantines and the Persians flanking Arabia on both sides, represented a decisive factor of containment for the Arabs, who had no military strength that could equal either side. The Arabs could not possibly expand outwards as long as the two empires were strong enough to contain them into their desert homeland. The two great powers, however, went on with their suicidal struggle which continued during several centuries. The final result of such a struggle was doomed to lead to the weakening of both giants. The Arabs of those times were the only people who could have benefited from the fatal struggle of the two traditional enemies; gradually the two empires became too weak to go any further with the fight or even to defend their own frontiers. The new faith gave the Arabs the freshness and strength of spiritual impulse, and they were soon to realise that they were the natural trustees of power in the Near East. When the time came, they overran the Persian empire and became masters of the best parts of the empire of the Byzantines.

Summary and Conclusions:

From this broad survey of the movement of the expansion of the Arabs which took place in the early Islamic phase, we may well see that this important historical phenomenon was not by any means a simple one. Rather was it a complex feature which could only be properly explained if we take into consideration a number of natural and human factors. The weight of evidence seems to point to the conclusion that a climatic change led to the onset of gradual aridity as from the 3rd century A.D., until the crisis reached its climax some three centuries later. Evidences for this aridity may be drawn from archaeological, as well as historical data. The change could not have been quantitatively significant, as Arabia was already in an arid and semi-arid region. Indeed the quantitative change in rainfall could best be traced in south-west Arabia which was always a more rainy plateau. The desiccation which took place had its natural effects upon the life of the bedouins of Arabia. Civil wars between the tribes in this "Period of Ignorance" (before Islam) represented the natural outcome of increasing aridity. Also migrations took place from one part of Arabia to another; but the main movement of outburst was delayed until the seventh century A.D. Delaying action was due chiefly to human factors. For some time the two empires of the Persians and Byzantines were too strong to allow the bedouins to encroach deep into

the settled lands. For political and military reasons the Arabs were contained into their deserts. Perhaps the sea outlet was the only gateway left free. At the same time the prosperity of trade through Arabia compensated for the dryness of climate. Indeed this represented a period of prosperity for at least some sections of the bedouin community of Arabia. Those who engaged themselves in trade and transportation drew great benefits from this crucial rôle. But prosperity of trade was naturally linked to the prosperity of the consumers especially in the markets of the Mediterranean world. When wars between the Byzantines and the Persians led to decrease in the amount of trade and deviation from the routes of Arabia, the delaying action of the trade upon the outburst from Arabia was nearing its end. At the same time political weakness of the two adjoining empires came soon after the appearance of the new creed. The stage was ready for the people of Arabia to take over the leadership of the heart of the ancient world. Islam came as a subduing and civilizing element, which rendered the movement of expansion both constructive and humane. In this respect both Christians and Muslims in the Arab East seem to have joined hands. There was little conflict between the two religions which were based upon love and fraternity. Even during later phases Islam which benefited partly by political conquests of the Arabs, was never permanently linked in its spread to the military strength of the Arabs. From the southern and eastern shores of Arabia the new creed spread far and wide through simple and peaceful methods of proselytism by mariners and traders. Even in central and eastern Asia, Islam spread chiefly during the Mongul phase which coincided with military weakness of the Arabs. In fact the new creed, once it reached beyond the borders of Arabia, became a world religion which spread under varying circumstances by land and by sea. The expansion of the Arabs gave birth to a movement which led ultimately to the world community of Islam. Thus the expansion of the Arabs represented a phenomenon which had its roots long before the advent of Islam, but did not bear its full fruits until long after the appearance of the new creed.

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