Arabia, Arabic & the Arabian Character:

An outstanding institution of pre-Islamic Arabia is the Arabic language. A unique product of ‘untorn ethnicity’, it endured - except for some terms that later became obsolete - from Biblical times till our own day. The growth and development of the Arabic language and its poetry reached its luxuriant flowering in the Jahiliya poetry of the sixth century - of which the M‘uallaqat were the creme de la crème. So, if one was to ask What did pre-Islamic Arabia have to offer? The answer would have to be “Its poetry, the cream of its language; and the preservation of those Christian heresies that were later incorporated in Islam (vide Essay Three). Pre-Islamic Arabian poetry is highly idiosyncratic; unique amongst poetries of other nations – even Arabic poetry of later Islamic ages. It was the only surviving literature from a pre-literate age. Though pre-Islamic poetry is immensely rich metrically, lexically and is informative on patterns of behavior and thought, however it does not reflect all aspects of contemporary life in pre-Islamic Arabia, of which it is our indigenous source of information on that pre-literate age. Pre-Islamic Arabia was also known historically as the land of Christian heresies, which gave rise to the saying that was widespread in the Christendom of the Near East of late Antiquity – Arabia Haeresium Ferax – Arabia fertile in heresies. Such heresies took root among the Christians of Arabia and later became part of Islamic doctrine. (Vide Essay Three).

Also idiosyncratic and highly autochthonous was the Arabian character. It was drastically shaped by the geographical and climatic factors that conditioned the environment of the Peninsula which were instrumental in forming the character of the pre-Islamic Arabian tribesman. The dominant characteristic of the desert tribesman was the ‘Abiyyah’; a pugnacious, intolerant, self-sufficient, coercive, supremacist posturing which, to Islam, was the hallmark of the Jahili era and the essence of its ignorance. Pre-Islamic ‘Abiyyah’ was the antithesis of the Islamic virtue of Hilm – magnanimous, tolerant, perceptive, tranquil wisdom. This assertive, pugnacious posturing was formed by the harsh, unpropitious, bleak environment; and its immutable, unrelenting tediousness. Such a bleak environment led to constricted perceptions; a myopic view of the world, and certain shortcomings in some of the more humane understanding of human behavior. The bare existence of desert life bred into its sons a counterbalancing, mindless arrogance and self-pride. The term “Jahili” - of the era of Ignorance - aptly describes the pre-Islamic bedouin in both his manners and his religious orientation. Exuberant pride in oneself and one’s tribe was not only a right but universally acknowledged as a social necessity, even a virtue. Although the pre-Islamic Arabian possessed many virtues which we consider laudable and worthy such as courage, patience, fortitude, hospitality, giving relief and shelter to the destitute and the oppressed, humility could not be included among them. A certain ignorance pervaded his understanding. Religiously, if he was a pagan he was, more often than not, ignorant – jahil- of any doctrine on which his paganism is or might have been based. He was in total contrast to the pagan Greeks and Romans whose religion rested on convictions strong enough that it persuaded a Christian Roman emperor, Julian, to revert to paganism - and with a vengeance. The Meccan pantheon which the pagan Arab worshipped was largely imported from Nabataea. (vide infra). He mouthed oaths and invocations to deities – including the monotheistic
God, *Allah* – but without any deep-seated, well informed religious knowledge as to who these deities really were and why they deserved to be worshipped. He had, admittedly – like human beings elsewhere - religious energy which he expended on pilgrimage to the Meccan pagan sanctuary and votive offerings to his chosen deity, but this energy lacked detailed doctrinal system. If the desert tribesman was a Christian he is often one in name only, more often professing ‘political, lip-service Christianity’ in return for his tribe’s much needed Roman/Byzantine political and financial support. Such Arabian tribal, ‘political/ mercenary’ Christians, represented mainly by northern Arabian tribes allied to Rome and Byzantium largely lacked the well-established liturgical and sacerdotal infrastructure of the well-established Christian communities elsewhere.

The environment had a formative influence on character. The basic topography and hydrology of Arabia has not changed significantly in the last two to three thousand years. This helped to give the desert tribesman his inflexible rigidity of character, and his language its vigorous durability. A systematically rigid environment most probably provided a stable incubator which nourished into steadily sustained growth the vibrant resourceful language that was to become later in the sixth and seventh centuries the *lingua franca* of the Peninsula - Arabic. Unimpeded by cataclysmic environmental change, as J. Stetkevych points out, the Arabic language in its formative - and in the literary sense - archaic stages was, with *unusual rigor*, circumscribed by geography, climate, flora, fauna and demography. Such rigorous circumscription endowed the Arabic language with unusual durability. As Jaroslav Stetkevych points out, Arabic “was not a language of a race or people who in their near past had gone through protracted periods of transcontinental migrations which would have reshaped them drastically in every aspect of their linguistic responses”. The Arabs and Semites generally, “show no evidence of a dramatically torn linguistic formative history, or even pre–history with truly major cycles of migrations. Duration itself then becomes a tightly limiting factor when it is a duration in unchanged place.”

A robust sense of durability engendered by geographical circumscription and a sound, unorn linguistic fabric, had affected the pre–Islamic Arab psyche, forming it into an idiosyncratic solipsism whose principal feature was an urge for self–expression. The earliest and most notable manifestation of this urge was the inscription of graffiti by the Safaites— a term used by western orientalists to refer to groups of multi–tribal Arab herdsmen perpetually on the move in Nabataea and the western sector of the Syrian desert in search of pasture for their flocks. Their original homeland was "Safat" a terrain of blackish volcanic rock lying south-east of Damascus which appeared in a Greek text as "Safathene" and its volcanic god as "Zeus Safathenos".

Now these Safaitic inscriptions are perhaps the earliest available indications of the primeval autochthonous Arab urge for self expression which slowly but steadily developed, in articulation, across the following centuries into what is now known as *al–arabiyah al-fusha* classical Arabic, the largely standardized language of the Arab World today. These early manifestations of the Arab urge for self-expression, Safaitic inscriptions, are found in the *harra*,

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the plains of black volcanic rock which lend themselves to engravings. The Safaites were found as far north as Palmyra and west up to Dora on the Euphrates, but they were concentrated on the eastern slopes of Jabal Hawran. They were mainly nomads but had centers of cultivation in the rich soil around extinct volcanoes. The Safaites left thousands of inscriptions written in south Arabian characters and covering a period from the first to the fourth centuries C.E. Many are personal genealogies; some merely recording the presence of a person at a location; there are invocations to deities like the Nabataean god Dushara – and to Allat which appears to be their principal deity (vide infra, Essay Two).

The Safaitic inscriptions reflect the Arabs' primeval urge for self expression; in that they exclusively express a variety of personal not public matters, although they are usually dated by reference to a war, a campaign, or the reign of a king. Safaitic epigraphy was inscribed in a script close to Thamudic or Liyhanic and from which the Arabic "Musnad" and other north Arabian scripts evolved. Apart from the intensely personal rather than the public nature of Safaitic inscriptions; a nature which could also be found in pre-Islamic qasidas of the sixth century including the M'uallaqat, these inscriptions show the impact of Arabian geography on the earliest development of Arabic as represented by Safaitic epigraphy. The impact of the silent, lifeless, infinitude of the desert aroused in man the urge to declare his 'alive-ness', so to speak, by articulating epigraphically his private innermost thoughts to the mute desert rock. Rene Dussaud suggested that the Safaitic herdsmen in their inscriptions were imitating Greek and Roman soldiers on military service in Syria who inscribed their identities and thoughts on desert rocks.

In sum, it is suggested that the contribution made by Safaitic epigraphy to the earliest, yet most lasting, development of the Arabic language lies in its being the earliest manifestation of the gnawing Arab predilection for public announcement of personal grief, sorrow, or distress. Safaitic epigraphy so far discovered is of this nature; expressive of loss of loved ones or other similar short displays of sentiments of distress. This distinctively Arab racial characteristic becomes clearer when contrasted to northern, western races’ tendency to suppress public declamations of ravaged personal feelings. The depths into which this Arab trait of public declaration of grief is ingrained is manifested in an Arabic work written in the Abbasid era almost eight centuries after Safaitic epigraphy: al-Isfahani’s ‘Adab al-Ghuraba‘, an extensive anthology of graffiti inscribed by wanderers, vagrants and homesick refugees in foreign lands on rocks, trees, walls of orchards, ruins, churches and mosques all of which are plaintive expressions of sorrow, distress and grief. Such sorrowful expressions come at the forefront of pre-Islamic poetry, especially the M'uallaqat, represented by al-atlal, the deserted campsite, the semi-mandatory theme with which most pre-Islamic odes begin.

Pre-Islamic Arabia and the Old Testament:

One significant point that is often missed is that pre-Islamic northern Arabia is either Bible land, or an extension of it outside the usual boundaries of Biblical Palestine. There is much in northern and northwestern pre-Islamic Arabia that is Old Testament land, not only in topography, fauna and history but also in the highly lauded biblical virtues of patience and fortitude represented by
Job. Pre-Islamic Arabs never tired of praising these two virtues as the epitome of manliness and strength of character; thereby raising the possibility that there could well have been an ancestral figure of antiquity who had vigorously upheld the two virtues of patience and fortitude for them to emulate.

The main link connecting pre-Islamic northern Arabia to the Old Testament and Biblical Palestine, it is suggested, is the *Book of Job* and an analysis of some depth of this work is required to elucidate pre-Islamic northern Arabia being Biblical land. This Old Testament text indicates that monotheistic Arabs lived in northern Hijaz in the latter half of the sixth century B.C.E. A. Musil gave evidence that the *Book of Job* indeed belongs to the northern Hijaz region of northern Arabia and J. Spencer Trimingham states that the story of Job, whose homeland was the upper Madyan region south-west of the Dead Sea, shows that there were Arabs, with a monotheistic outlook in northern Hijaz in the latter half of the sixth century B.C.E. One interesting paradox concerning the *Book of Job* is that its hero, Job, was not a Jew, but a Gentile and the author of the *Book* may well have been a non-Jew as well. The *Book of Job* tells the story of two Jobs, not one: To introduce the *Book* the author retells a legend that was already an ancient one many centuries before Job was born. Some scholars consider that The *Book of Job* is based on a lost original text of which the Hebrew text is a translation. This was the opinion of Abraham ibn Ezra, the renowned medieval rabbinic commentator. Textual indications point to Job being a most ancient Semitic figure. The text contains so many Arabic and Aramaic terms and forms of expression. So ancient is this story that it could be traced back to Sumerian legends dating back to several millennia B.C.E. But the biblical Job is placed anywhere between 800 and 300 B.C.E. His story - that could well have been one of edification for both pre-Islamic Arabs and later Muslims - is about a righteous man, who for no reason at all has been deprived of all rewards for his exemplary righteousness. In the midst of great suffering he remains steadfastly pious, displaying an astonishing fortitude, yet blessing, and thanking, the Lord for his suffering. His patience became proverbial, cited in “The Epistle of James” – ‘you have heard of the patience of Job.’ It was this legendary patient Job, not the desperate impatient Job of the *Book*, who ironically enough, became so well known in Western culture. It is the example of this first legendary Job whose half-forgotten archetypal example lived on in north-western pre-Islamic Arabia who - we cannot repeat often enough - hailed patience, *sabr*, and fortitude, *musabara*, as foremost among human virtues. Following closely, and strongly endorsing, these two pre-Islamic virtues first upheld by the legendary Job, Islam affirms that believers must not only accept suffering and adversity as being of God’s will, but should, also like the legendary Job, thank Him for them. Job displays a distinctively Arabian pre-Islamic trait that is also fully endorsed by Islam: That patience will be rewarded; that those who are patient will enjoy prosperity after hardship. The end of the *Book of Job* often baffles western readers. “How” they ask “can Job bear to enter a new life after all the agony he has been put through? And how can he accept new children as a replacement for his murdered sons and daughter? What a mockery!” But neither pagan Arabians nor later Islamic ones would find this a mockery at all. On the contrary, it would be a comforting, reiterated vindication of their view of life: that good times will follow bad and bad times will follow good ones; and when bad, hard times befall Man they have to be stoically endured to ease the way for the return of the good. The eighteenth century English mystic and poet William Blake saw the *Book of Job* as a ‘spiritual transformation’. It is to effect just such a spiritual transformation that pre-Islamic Arabians – and later, Islam – saw the *purpose* of Job’s – and Man’s – suffering: to metamorphose those who suffer into better, stronger, wiser beings.
That Job was not Jewish but a Gentile, and an Arabian, comes from the text itself. Internal evidence from the Book of Job shows that he came from the town of Madyan, a short distance from the eastern shores of the Gulf of Aqaba. Where he died, however, is a different matter. He is reported to have been buried much further north. In her travelogue, the European nun Egeria reports that shortly before her visit to the region (c.383 C.E) the site of Job’s tomb was discovered near the village of Shaikh Sa’ad in the Hawran, in Syria, which then could still be seen, together with that of his wife, as well as the monastery, Dayr Ayyub, dedicated to him. Tradition relates that the name of the city of Bostra is derived from that of Job’s mother. On the language side it may be inferred that the northern Hijazi Arabs of Job’s time may have spoken an early Arabic, thereby bringing back the history of the Arabic language to the sixth century B.C.

Why this extended coverage of Job in this introductory first essay?

The two virtues of patience and fortitude exemplified by Job were by no means exclusively pre-Islamic, or Islamic, but were upheld by all three monotheistic religions and other human faiths. But in pre-Islamic Arabia they have especial significance. They are a manifestation of character as it was affected, and formed by environment and climate. The desert is perhaps one of the most inhospitable of human habitats. Survival requires enormous reservoirs of stamina to be maintained by ingrained and ongoing patience and fortitude. Enduring the bleak, bare desert was further tested by a punishing and fragmented tribal culture, with its perpetual fratricidal raids and protracted wars that left untold numbers of dead. Grinding poverty among the poorer tribes meant for many that there was simply nothing to eat. In no other human society do we hear of the practice of wa’d - fathers burying their infant daughters alive either because they could not feed them or because they could not endure the shame of their being carried away as captives in tribal raids should the infant girls be allowed to live. All these punishing circumstances augmented the harsh climate and environment in rigidifying character. To ensure that character was firm and rigid enough to endure this harsh life the psychological, if not moral, supports of patience and fortitude were indispensable. The Arabian Job thus becomes a motto, an emblem, for these two virtues without which, the pre-Islamic Arabs may not have endured as they did.

It was this Jobian effect on character which probably explains the wealth of classical scholarly interest in the Arabian origins of Job. Among such scholars was the Arabist Albert Schultens in his Liber Jobi of 1737 supported later by D. S. Margoliouth and Charles James Lyall. It was Albert Schultens (1680–1750), Professor of Oriental Languages at Leyden in 1720 who was an emphatic supporter of Arabia as the background for the Book of Job, as shown in his Liber Jobi. Moreover he upheld the close relationship between Hebrew and Arabic, maintaining that the true nature of the Hebrew language and the meaning of many of its words are to be found in Arabic. Schultens made use of his profound mastery of Arabic in his exegesis of the Scriptures, especially the Book of Job and the Proverbs. Lyall, the strongest supporter of an Arabian original for the Book of Job starts his correlation between the Old Testament in David’s lamentation over Saul and his son Jonathan “I am distressed for you my brother Jonathan, greatly beloved were you to me; your love to me was wonderful, passing the love of women”. This Lyall describes as a poem strikingly resembling an Arab marthiya (Lament, dirge). He then mentions Deborah’s song of triumph which she chanted on the defeat and death of the Canaanite general Sisera.

But Lyall sees more remarkable correlations with Arabia in the Book of Job. The scene, Lyall affirms, is laid in north Arabia, and the personages are by race, Arabs. The author of
the Book of Job, says Lyall, was a Jew of the post exile period but in going to Arabia for his scene and characters he “seems to have borrowed something from the poetic art of the desert”. (18) The Arab in his odes, Lyall explains, refers to desert fauna – the mountain goat; the gazelle (doe); the oryx; the wild ass; the ostrich; the lion; the horse; and the eagle (hawk) - all of which he describes with the skill of intimate knowledge. It we turn to Job chapter 39, Lyall says, we find precisely the same animals mentioned there. For the writer of Job to have chosen for description the same types of desert fauna as the Arabia of some 800 or 900 years later leads us to conjecture that in his day, perhaps the fifth or fourth century B.C there was already some standard of poetic art in Arabia and that it dealt with the same subjects of animal life, in the same pictorial manner as the poetry of the sixth and seventh centuries A. D. (18) (my italics)

Biblical research largely corroborates Lyall. First: "There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job” (19) Genesis defines Uz as the first of the four sons of Aram. There are two conflicting traditions on the location of the land of Uz. The first places it in northern Mesopotamia or the Hawran region of Syria. The second identifies it with Edom, to the southeast of Canaan: “Rejoice and be glad, O daughter of Edom, who livest in the land of Uz” (20) Verses 15 and 17 of the first chapter of Job imply that Uz lay on the northern edge of the great Arabian desert, in the land of Edom, the Biblical Idumea, (21) a land of rough hills on the east side of Wadi Arabah, extending from the head of the Gulf of Aqaba to the foot of the Dead Sea. It contained among other cities Selah (Petra). It's old Capital was Bozrah. (22)

Now the Southern part of Edom was known as Teman. Eliphaz, Job's friend, was a Temanite, which was used as a synonym for Edom itself, although actually it was a town in southern Edom. Eusebius mentions an "east Teman", a town with a Roman garrison about fifteen miles from Petra. Johann Gottfried Westztein (1815–1905), the nineteenth century Prussian consul in Damascus places Uz and Edom in Hawran, east of the Jordan (23) From the aforementioned Biblical account it could be safely said, and in verification of Lyall's thesis, that the story of Job took place in the Roman administrative provinces of Arabia Petraeia and/or Provincia Arabia.

The Old Testament, especially in its earlier parts shows copious Arabic terms, which supports the thesis that northern and northwestern Arabia was part, and an extension to the south-east, of Biblical lands. George E. Mendenhall points out that the texts of the earliest portions of the Old Testament exhibit words that have a high percentage of cognates in Arabic, though later texts have far fewer Arabic cognates and many more cognates from Aramaic and Babylonian. The early society of ancient Israel “had quite close connections with the Arabic speaking world”. (24) This makes clear that spoken Arabic existed in early Biblical times and preceded the Arabic script by at least eight to ten centuries, and thus further substantiating the Arabian origins of the Book of Job. To conclude this account on Job we may well ask again the question posed by a scholar in the 1930’s: “Is the Book of Job a Translation of an Arabic Original?” (25).

Character & Personality in Pre–Islamic Arabia:

Personal character in pre-Islamic Arabia was governed by a vigorous autochthonous awareness, proudly self sufficient, of the separate ethnic Arab identity. This Arab self–sufficiency, as Von Grunebaum points out, is spurred by a sense of seperateness from contiguous groups; that “the racial pride of the Arab does not seem to have suffered by the realization of his political and civilizational backwardness in comparison with his Greek or Persian–speaking neighbors”. (26)
was from this ground of ethnic, racial pride that the Arabic script had evolved as a means of recording in writing the rapidly evolving Arabic language.

As will be explained in detail in “Essay Two”, Arabic epigraphy was first represented by the first century B.C.E inscription at Qaryat al–Faw; followed by the En ’Avdat inscription of First/ Second century C.E; Raqush (267 C.E); Namarah (328 C.E); Jabal Ramm, (Fourth century C.E); Sakakah (Fourth/ Fifth C.E); Umm al–Jimal (Fifth/ Sixth C.E); Zebed (512 C.E); Jabal Usays (528 C.E); Harran (568 C.E) (27). These inscriptions, plus those that are yet to be discovered, show that the Arabs were by the first century C.E developing, and by the sixth century had developed, a highly articulate language and linguistic culture that enabled them to evolve, says Von Grunebaum, into a Kulturnation in pre–Islamic times, and, after Islam they progressed into a Staatsnation. Von Grunebaum draws a clarifying analogy with Greece: Hellenic kinship and identity were based on community of blood, language and religion. A unified Staatsnation never arose in Greece, and many of its individual staatsnationen proved to be erratic and unstable. But the Hellenic Kulturnation was viable, durable and quite stable, unaffected by the instability of its individual staatsnationen (28)

The sentiment of "Arabism" was primarily and overwhelmingly located in the tribes, whose transient ephemeral alliances and their ongoing strife and skirmishes “do not seem to have curtailed this sense of identity just as perpetual warfare between Greek city–states left their Hellenic identity and culture, untouched”. (29) In pre–Islamic Arabia, continuous inter–tribal warfare not only left the tribes' Arab identity and culture untouched and intact, it, in fact, contributed to the cohesiveness of the tribal world; one that was strengthened by tribal rivalries and conflicts.”Victory and defeat, grandeur and misery had meaning only within the charmed circle of disorganized communion”. (30)

This turbulent tribal world of pre–Islamic Arabia not only facilitated the spread of the Arabic language through inter tribal communication in postwar truce negotiations. It also led to the formation of a pan–tribal code of conduct and socio–behavioral patterns to which all tribes were committed. This code was known as din al–Arab– the ways of the Arabs– which was the Sunna, or ‘the law of the land'; a universal criterion by which everyone abides. Now, pre–Islamic poetry was merely a reflection of the general tenor of Arabian life: Glory in life was to lord it over others and to have assumed an ascendancy that one can declaim, in pride, through one’s verse. And yet, it is equally glorious to resist being politically coerced by a strong leader and suffer his real– or imagined– highhanded arrogance. To assume supremacy over others, and, at the same time to resist an actual or supposed domination by an "autocratic" malik, a tribal monarch, is fully in tune with the general tenor of tribal life which is largely ‘atomistic, libertarian, devoid of larger purpose and much in need of that heightening of its petty irrelevancies by which the poets lent it dignity’. The universal code, din al–‘Arab, was another unifying factor which facilitated the spread of the Arabic language and script. This code was the medium through which declarations of compliance with what was universally accepted as ‘the law of the land’ was expressed and violations of this ‘legal code’ were publicly indicted. The pre-Islamic code of chivalry muruwwa was the major constituent of the Din, although a law of exemplary moral conduct, murrwawa had absolutely no religious character. (31)

Another factor which was instrumental in the rapid spread of Arabic was the economic one. Von Grunebaum notes that Arabia's city dwellers made possible the economic formative unity of north and central Arabia which, in turn, made possible the formation of the region's tribes into a Kulturnation. Inter–tribal markets and meeting places such as ‘Ukāz played a powerful role in the formation of that national consciousness which eventually led to the pre–
Islamic northern Arabs being a Kulturnation. Arabia, since remote prehistory was criss-crossed with hundreds of caravan routes. The merchant caravaneers carried, by the fifth century, their developing language together with their goods.

But what acted as the cultural adhesive that linguistically cemented the northern pre-Islamic tribes together and acted as the indisputable syntactical, grammatical, and morphological reference point to which all Arabs referred to as the supreme language arbiter was the incorporeal term "Arab" within the phrase "qālat al-ʻArab" – the Arabs said - as the standard norm of correct speech which every well-spoken person must comply with." ʻArab" could also denote a person whose tribe was unknown: 'rajul min 'al-ʻArab (a man of the Arabs). A vagabond would be described as S'lūk min S'aālik al-ʻArab (One of the vagabonds of the Arabs). In short the term. "The Arabs" denotes 'the public before which the individual and the tribe must make good as before a court in permanent session". "The Arabs", to pre-Islamic Arabs “existed as a regulatory, ever present public, an orientation point, stable in spite of its elusiveness, a concept not to be strictly defined, though sufficiently precise to allow the growth of a sense of national character".

Thus, pre-Islamic Arabia was a highly idiosyncratic tribal society. The absence of trans-continental migrations into the Peninsula; the rigidifying effects of a harsh, bleak climate and environment; and the absence of such external cultural influences that could have mollified such rigidities, had all contributed to the nature of the Arabian character. Moreover, the absence of the concept of ‘progress’ – in our modern sense of the word - was also a contributory factor: The pre-Islamic Arabs had a lineal view of their existence which continued, unbroken, since the Creation. They perceived themselves, their lifestyle, and their societal and moral values as an uninterrupted extension of those of Noah, Shem, Abraham, and specifically, Ishmael from whom they proudly claimed descent. They did not, or could not, perceive of ‘development’ – also in our modern sense of the word – as being an instrumental factor of change towards a ‘better’ life. This lack of a developmental mentality accentuated, and further hardened, their idiosyncratic nature. Also, their roots extending deep into the earliest of biblical times, represented by what had been shown as the Arabian origins of the Book of Job, further solidified their autochthonous nature by giving them deeper – biblical – dimensions. Thus pre-Islamic tribal Arabs, for all intents and purposes, could be described as a ‘biblical’ people, and northern Arabia as bible land (vide supra). This circumscribed, highly autochthonous pre-Islamic Arabian character is clearly shown in the only form of their culture which has been documented and had come down to us – Oral poetry – and which is discussed in copious detail in the last essay in this series.

The paganism of pre-Islamic Arabia:

Pagan Arabia aroused the interest of western scholars since the mid seventeenth century. The first to deal with this field was Edward Pococke in Specimen Historiae Arabum. The next major work was Julius Wellhausen’s Reste Arabischen Heidentums in which the author draws on Kitab al-ʻAsnam (Book of Idols) by Ibn al Kalbi, known at that time only by quotations scattered in Yaqut’s Mʻujam al-Buldan (Geographical Dictionary). Reliable studies on pagan Arabia followed the discovery of the full text of Ibn al-Kalbi’s Kitab al-ʻAsnam published in Cairo in 1913 by Ahmad Zaki Pasha and later translated into English and German. Arabian pre-Islamic paganism could be described as being both syncretic and eclectic. It drew, built upon and fused a number of religious traditions known to the Arabs. First, there was a vague form of Abrahamic monotheism, a belief in a supreme being who begat two astral daughters – Allat and
al-Uzza and a non astral daughter, Manat; and an active belief in animism; though one cannot speak of polytheism. Following are accounts on (a) Monotheism; (b) Allat, al-Uzza, and Manat; (c) Animism.

(a) The pagan Arabian belief in a Supreme Being could be described as pre-monotheistic. The Being was supreme but had, more or less, the character of primus inter pares. There were other deities, and spirits, beside the Supreme Being, who were entitled, and commanded, worshipful veneration. This was the greatest of enormities vigorously condemned by Islam as shirk (Association). It was the obsession with genealogy that entrenched belief in this Supreme Being: The pre-Islamic Arabs firmly believed in their descent from Ishmael, son of the monotheistic Abraham. Genealogical belief in descent from Ishmael would thus have augmented the pagan Arabs’ belief in that Supreme Being which Ishmael’s monotheistic father, Abraham, worshipped. Some scholars have considered the oldest form of Semitic religion to be a fairly pure monotheism. Legrange claims that “El, was the common, original and probably the only god of the Semites.” W. Schmidt endorsed and documented this view. He held that the same belief also existed among the ancient Semitic nomads in addition to the pre-Islamic Bedouin Arabs.

(b) The goddesses Allat, al-Uzza and Manat: Allat is said to have meant ‘the goddess’ as Allah is the Supreme Being, the ‘male’ god. There is a widespread belief that the three Arabian goddesses were of foreign origin. Wellhausen assumes that the pagan nomads were basically indifferent and unoriginal in matters of religion and that their gods were borrowed from more advanced civilizations, while Caskel regards influences within Arabia as being the more effective in forming Arabian belief. The author of this presentation agrees with both these views, and specifies that the Nabataeans were the ‘advanced civilization’, one within Arabia proper, from which the pagan Arabs drew most of their religious ritual and their three female deities. (vide infra). The views of the pan-Babylonian school of the early twentieth century, represented by H. Winckler, holding that the pagan nomad Arabs represent a most ancient, primitive form of Semitic religion has now been abandoned.

Henninger rejects the importance and influence of pan-Babylonian astral divinities on central and northern Arabia, though he admits they dominated the religion of south Arabia. He states that the three goddesses venerated at Mecca by Quraysh and other tribes - Allat, al-Uzza and Manat - cannot be considered as divinities of purely bedouin character and influence. Manat was a goddess of destiny without astral characteristics. Allat and al-Uzza represent the two phases of Venus, evening and morning. It is hereby argued that Allat and al-Uzza were of Nabataean origin, like other constituents of pagan Arabian religion such as the Ka'aba and circumambulation, tawaf.

(c) Animism: Pre- Islamic pagan religion tended to be freely imaginative. Trees, caves, wells, springs, stones, and boulders, were imagined to be the dwelling places of spirits. Wild animals and desolate, fearsome places in the wilderness were perceived as inhabited by djinn or demons. One field of Semitic studies holds that in the most primitive phases of the development of religion there were no gods bearing distinct personality but only spirits, djinn, taken to represent this primitive stage. Belief in djinn was attributed to the bedouins whereas settled people are credited with the creation of individual gods. Wellhausen became the champion of this theory which still has supporters today. He has rightly observed that these spirits were feared, and it was necessary to protect oneself against them, but they did not develop, or were the object, of a true cult. Henninger disagrees with the theory that the desert-djinn originated with the Bedouin and was passed by them to village and town dwellers. He says
that the Bedouin were well used to the desert and had much less to fear from djinn than town dwellers who regard the desert as an unknown, terrifying region inhabited by monsters and demons. (50) This view of the desert by townspeople already existed in the ancient Near East. (51) The word ‘djinn’ is not Arabic but Aramaic, used by Aramaic Christians to refer to pagan gods reduced to demons, and W.F. Albright concluded that the word ‘djinn’ was introduced into pagan Arabic folklore late in the pre-Islamic period. (52)

Stone-worship, litholatry, was a significant constituent of pagan Arab religious belief. Stones were not venerated as material objects in themselves but rather as a dwelling place of either a personal god or a force. Dussaud agrees with this but warns against misuse of the term ‘stone-worship,’ litholatry, which expresses a false idea and is based on a total lack of understanding of the rites. (53) The stone was either a rock outcropping or a boulder, often a black basaltic stone without representative sculptural detail. Deities were believed to have resided in these stones, hence the term ‘bet-el’ – house of god – or ‘baetyl’, used by Byzantine writers of the fifth and sixth centuries. The most famous baetyl is the Black Stone that still survives in the K’aba today. (54) The reason for venerating stones was the belief that they had fallen from the sun, moon, stars and planets and that they represent cosmic forces. So strong is this belief that it survived paganism and became part of Islamic ritual. The Black Stone (actually its color is that of burnt amber) in the K’aba today is the same one the pre-Islamic pagans venerated. So strong was this veneration that when the stone was removed and shattered in 930 by the Qarmations, an Iraqi communist/anarchist sect, the pieces were returned, sealed together in pitch, and held in place by silver wire. (55) Pagan Arabian stone worship was known throughout the world of Late Antiquity. Greek writers such as Maximus of Tyre and Clement of Alexandria considered Arabian pagan religion to be a form of fetishism; the worship of stones, and other natural objects. (56) The K’aba in Mecca, the central point of pagan worship, is considered to have been an astronomical temple, dedicated to the sun, moon, and five visible planets, making seven; the mystical number of the circumambulations, tawaf of the K’aba. That there were also some 360-odd idols around the K’aba is also of astronomical significance. (57)

In the last analysis, it is proposed that pagan pre-Islamic Arabian religion was largely autochthonous, drawing its constituents from within the northern and northwestern regions of the Peninsula; specifically from Nabataea and those of its environs which were influenced by Nabataean culture and religion. Nabataean influences on pagan Arabian religion are too numerous to be ignored. Allat, al-‘Uzza and Manat were worshipped in Petra’s temples; the aniconic shape of the K’aba reflects that of the Nabataean God Dussares; the very name K’aba derives from Chaamu Dussares’ virgin mother; and circumambulation was practiced in the temples of Petra. (58)

Notes to Essay One “The Land and the People – A Short Introduction”

2. Such a change as had, for instance, overturned the ecology and subsequently the population structures of southern Arabia through the collapse of the Ma’rib Dam.
4. Ibid.
5. JA, Vol.3 pp142-144. Jawd ‘Ali, however, does not identify the Greek texts he cites. See also G. Ryckmans Inscriptions Safaitiques (Louvain, 1951) and E. Littman Safaitic Inscriptions (Leiden, 1943; Sp. Tr. pp 91, 92.
6. The earliest Arabic inscription in Musnad script was discovered in Qaryat al-Faw, in Saudi Arabia. Vide Infra Essay Two “Nabataean Influences on northern Arabia”.
7. Dussoud is cited by Jawd ‘Ali al-Mufassal Vol.3. p. 144. The Roman soldiers were probably either building or patrolling the Strata Dioecetiana, of Dioecetian (284-305), a military road with forts and watch-towers that ran from Damascus northeast to Palmyra, and from there to the Euphrates. (BASIXC p. 211). This area is also Safaitic country where inscriptions, Roman or Safaitic, could have been left.
11. Ibid vii, viii.
12. Ibid xxvii, xxix
13. Ibid xxix
15. From William Orme’s entry on Schultens in Bibliotheca Biblica: A Select List of Books on Sacred Literature, with Notices Biographical, Critical and Bibliographical (London, 1824)
16. 2Samuel 1:26
17. Judges: 4-5.
19. Job 1.1
21. Mark 3:8
22. Isaiah 63:1 “Who is this who comes from Edom in crimsoned garments from Bozrah”; Jeremiah 48: 24n “…and Kerioth and Bozrah and all the cities of the land of Moab”; Amos 1:12 “So I will send a fire upon Timan and it shall devour the strongholds of Bozrah.”
27. Vide infra Essay Two “Nabatean Influences on Northern Arabia”
28. Von Grunebaum, op.cit p.1ff. The terms Kulturnation and Staatsnation were first used and developed by Friedrich Meinecke in his Weltburgerturn und Nationalstaat first published in 1907. The sixth edition was published in Berlin & Munich in 1922. The two terms are discussed in Meinecke Ch.1 pp.1-22
29. Von Grunebaum op.cit. p.2
30. Ibid p.8
32. Von Grunebaum p.8
33. For full details of these numerous Arabian routes see Daniel T. Potts “Trans-Arabian Routes” op.cit.

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[Some additional paragraphs or text extracted from the document are not included due to the nature of the transcription task.]
34. Von Grunebaum p.18
35. Ibid pp 18, 19.
38. Ibid. “conclusion” to Introduction.
39. See the following Essay Two “Nabataean Influences on Northern Arabia – Nabataean Genealogy”
44. See H. Winckler Arabische- Semitische- Orientalisch Mitteilungen (1901) pp. 151-373 passim.
45. Henninger op.cit p. 3ff
46. For details on the three astral goddesses see “Nabataean Religion” in Essay Two.
47. Jack Finnigan Archaeology of World Religions (1952) pp. 482-485.
50. Henninger op.cit. p.33
56. G.E. Von Grunebaum Medieval Islam (Chicago, 1953) 2nd ed. P.131 n. 89.
58. For fuller details see “Nabataean Religion” in Essay Two.