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Abstract

This paper analyzes the lifestyle of Bedouin tribes in Arabia prior to the rise of Islam. It looks closely at how Bedouin tribes were able to coexist alongside pre-Islamic settlements and secure a dominant position in Arabia. Specifically, this paper covers the Bedouin's practice of pastoralism, tribalism, and militarism, and explains how Bedouin tribes were able to secure and maintain a dominant position in Arabia despite the pressure of neighboring settlements.

Keywords

Bedouin, Arabia, Nomads, Tribal, Late Antiquity

Disciplines

Arabic Studies | Islamic World and Near East History | Near Eastern Languages and Societies

Comments

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The Bedouin in Arabia: A Nomadic Success

Cole Quinn

Professor Samji

I. Introduction

The deserts of Arabia have been home to nomadic people long before recorded history. First written accounts of Arabian nomads appear in Assyrian and Israelite texts circa 900 B.C.E., well before the rise of the first Islamic state.¹ Until the mid-7th century C.E. and the rise of Islam, nomadic tribes of Bedouins controlled the Arabian Peninsula. Settled people lived in the fertile southern and eastern regions and at oases scattered throughout the northern and central regions, but were often at the mercy of Bedouin tribes.² This paper explores the sociocultural factors responsible for the prolonged success the Bedouin people enjoyed in pre-Islamic Arabia.

For one, the Bedouin practiced pastoralism. This meant he travelled with his animals in search of new grazing and could cultivate most of what he needed from them. He was an avid hunter and forager. He followed his grazing animals from pasture to pasture in nomadic fashion, atop either camel or horse. He had unmatched knowledge of the Arabian landscape, and a mentality which likened living under authority to servitude.³ Second, he lived in a tribal society. His leader was not a king whose power was strong enough to fear corruption, nor whose absence was significant enough to fear chaos, but a chief whose foremost job was to lead by example.⁴ He belonged to a tribe of extended kin, travelled with a clan of closer kin, and slept in a tent with his next of kin.⁵ Him and his clan produced similar goods to other clans in his tribe, and there was little need for intra-tribal trade, except in crisis. He nor his tribesmen specialized in crafts like smithing, weaving, baking, tanning, or banking, but all were formidable warriors of equal rank. Most importantly, his tribe was bound by blood. His fellow tribesmen were obligated to

¹ Robert Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 11.

² Hoyland, *Arabia*, 64-83.

³ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 89-96.

⁴ Philip Hitti, *History of the Arabs* (New York: St. Martin's, 1956), 28; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 117

⁵ Hitti, *History*, 26.

help, protect, and avenge him whenever necessary.⁶ Third, his tribe had distinct military advantage over settlements of the period, specifically oases settlements in north and central Arabia. On a traditional battlefield, the Bedouin was not so threatening. He lacked quality iron weapons, armor, and elite close-combat skills, and any conflict which stayed too close for too long probably did not end well for him.⁷ Where the Bedouin suffered in strength and defense, he made up for in mobility and stealth. Raiding was his game. A Bedouin raiding party could converge onto a settlement, load up their camels and horses with goods, and disappear into the desert without commotion.⁸ The continual success of Bedouin raids and the continual failure of settlements trying to defend against them must have coerced many settlements to open negotiations. These were often annual or more frequent payments to local tribes or trading agreements in exchange for a halt to raiding, protection from other raiding tribes, or caravan escorts.⁹

For these three reasons, pre-Islamic settlements would never be successful in overtaking the Bedouins. Instead, sedentary people and Bedouin tribes would live in co-dependence, with Bedouins receiving the better end of military conflicts and trade negotiations. It would take the spread of Islam to bring settled life to total prominence in Arabia, but for the pre-Islamic period, settled life would remain in check and the Bedouin's practice of pastoralism, tribalism, and militarism would bring him prolonged success.

⁶ Hitti, *History*, 26-9; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 113-21.

⁷ Richard Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1975), 94-6.

⁸ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 100-1.

⁹ Louise Sweet, "Camel Raiding of North Arabian Bedouin," *American Anthropologist* 67, no. 5 (1965): 1140.

II. Pastoralism

The Bedouin practice of pastoralism granted him two qualities essential to his freedom: resourcefulness and nomadism. His resourcefulness in regard to his animals was unmatched in pre-Islamic Arabia. Compared to settled people, whose main mechanism of survival was agriculture, the Bedouin cultivated most of what he needed from his herds. The Bedouin day-to-day life revolved around livestock breeding. A tribe could keep some combination of sheep, goats, horses, and camels, with the more powerful tribes having less sheep and goats and more horses and camels.¹⁰ Camels were the basis of sustenance for the Bedouin. He was far more adept than his settled contemporaries in the cultivation of animals, but his cultivation of the camel was particularly impressive. He drank its milk daily, used its wool for clothing, its skin for containers, its dung for fuel, its urine for washing and hair tonic, its bones for tent-pegs, and the ticks on its skin for food for his falcons. He only ate its meat on special occasions, or when the animal was injured or near death.¹¹

What little the Bedouin could not cultivate from his herds he supplemented with hunting and foraging. Sedentary people also hunted and foraged to supplement what their crops could not, but the Bedouin was more adept at both. Hunting was more than a means for food—it was recreation, practice in riding and archery, and a source of pride. Plus, his hunting personnel were better. The Bedouin hunted alongside dog, falcon, lynx, and cheetah, and rode atop horses or specially bred racing camels.¹² In foraging, the Bedouin had a wider range than settled people. He was better travelled, more knowledgeable, and more motivated by seasonal scarcity because

¹⁰ Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1134.

¹¹ Ilse Köhler-Rollefson, "Camels and Camel Pastoralism in Arabia," *Biblical Archaeologist* 56, no. 4 (1993): 185-6.

¹² Bulliet, *Camel*, 87-91.

he rarely grew crops.¹³ His stockpiles were less than those of settled people, but his resourcefulness, hunting, and foraging skills were far better.

The Bedouin's pastoralism naturally made him a nomad. He travelled vast distances in search of new pastures, making wide sweeping motions across Arabia and collecting knowledge of every hill and valley. His vast knowledge of the landscape, combined with his excellent riding ability, made him nearly impossible to pursue. A clan caught in the open by a more powerful force could mobilize swiftly. The sick and old could be thrown atop camels and transported, and men could mount their racing camels if the terrain was desert, or horses if otherwise, and harass the larger force with arrows. Retreat in these cases was often successful because of the Bedouin's better knowledge of the landscape and the fact his entire clan could be mounted.¹⁴ His nomadism also brought with it a fierce philosophy of freedom—a philosophy which had no equivalent in pre-Islamic Arabia. The worst evil that could befall a Bedouin was to have his neck bent.¹⁵ This love of freedom and disdain for authority was expressed often in Bedouin poetry, and the Bedouin mentality, combined with his resourcefulness, elite hunting and foraging, and vast knowledge of the land, helped to make him and his people unconquerable for all of the pre-Islamic period.

¹³ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 89-96.

¹⁴ Jan Retsö, *Arabs in Antiquity* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 582-3; Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1136-7.

¹⁵ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 96.

III. Tribalism

Bedouin tribal society provided two more tools which aided his defense against subjugation: equality and independence. Both were found in his society at every layer, from tribe to tribesman. Some men within his tribe could be better decorated and respected, or some clans within his tribe could be more populated and powerful, but no tribesman or clan could have direct command over another.¹⁶ Even the chief did not have direct command over his tribesmen—his responsibilities were twofold: to set example for the men and youth of his tribe and to negotiate with other tribes and settlements on fair terms of trade, payment, and war.¹⁷ On paper, the chief was on top of the tribal hierarchy, though his sole tribal functions were as role model and spokesperson.¹⁸ His passing, in battle or by other cause, did not create a power vacuum like the loss of a traditional ruler in a hierarchical society, nor did his absence create a scramble for power and bring chaos to his tribe. This equality between chief and tribesman granted the Bedouin more resilience than his settled contemporary, especially compared to those settlements who were organized in more distinct hierarchies.

In addition to the balanced relationship between Bedouin chief and tribesman, there was also a functional balance between clans of the same tribe. Given that all clans engaged in similar economic activities and exported similar products, no two clans of the same tribe relied on each other for trade. This benefit of Bedouin tribal structure made him more resilient to destruction. It meant each clan could function perfectly well without oversight from its tribe.¹⁹ For example, if a single clan was wiped out, other clans within the tribe did not suffer beyond the loss of

¹⁶ Hitti, *History*, 23-4; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 113-7; Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1135-6.

¹⁷ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 117; Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1135.

¹⁸ Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1135.

¹⁹ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 117-21.

potential manpower. The clans of a Bedouin tribe were not organized in a web, which suffers as a whole when one node is destroyed, but clans were simply related to one another. The destruction of one clan did not cripple the whole tribe. Compare to the destruction of a settlement: not only was the settlement itself crippled, but its trade relations were crippled as well. The functional balance of clans in Bedouin society avoided this pitfall.

The individual Bedouin also shared a functional balance with his fellow tribesmen. He was no blacksmith, banker, or baker—he was a hunter, forager, pastoralist, and soldier. All of his tribesmen were like him. Much like clans in a given tribe raised the same animals and exported the same products, men in a given clan engaged in similar activities. Each hunted for food and sport, foraged what he could, cared for his livestock, rode his horses and camels, practiced archery, wrote poetry, and raided rival tribes and settlements. There was no specialization of labor in Bedouin society.²⁰ A tribesman's responsibilities were the same as his kin.

This homogeneity made the Bedouin tribe resilient to loss. The loss of a tribesman in Bedouin society was less crippling than the loss of a blacksmith in sedentary society because the Bedouin tribesman was a generalist.²¹ His loss always dealt a consistent blow. The consequences of loss in settled society, however, had a larger variance. For example, the loss of a soldier in a settled society was more crippling than the loss of a beggar—such variance was the cost a settlement paid for specialization. While a settlement could be rocked by sudden loss, the Bedouin tribe was better prepared to fill the gap and take on any responsibilities left behind by a fallen tribesman. The Bedouin's generalist nature provided another explicit advantage compared to his settled contemporary: him and his tribesmen were fierce warriors. There were no pacifists

²⁰ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 118.

²¹ Hitti, *History*, 23-4.

or liabilities in his tribe, and the Bedouin could be sure his tribesmen charged beside him during raid or conflict.

All men in his tribe were battle-ready on their own, but what made the Bedouin fierce beyond his solo ability was his undying dedication to his tribesmen. Blood ties were the adhesive force in Bedouin society and were strongest in smaller tribal units.²² His tribe, for example, were related to him by extended blood line. His clan were all considered part of the same blood line—no different from his immediate family. He relied on his blood relatives to protect his life, honor, possessions, fight alongside him, and take care of his loved ones if he passed.²³ The blood pact of his society was the strongest bond between any people in pre-Islamic Arabia. The bond was reserved for actual blood-related kin but, if not blood-related, could be officialized by ceremony. Two men could cut their hands and shake, drink a few drops of each other's blood, or share a meal with each other and be bound by blood.²⁴ To violate the bond and its obligations was one of the worst offenses a Bedouin could commit. If a fellow tribesman is killed, he must be avenged. Blood was shed for blood.²⁵

This sacred Bedouin bond was stronger than any unifying force which existed in settled society at the time. Settled people were bound by mutual survival, community, and profit, but Bedouin blood ties were stronger. Bedouin blood ties would remain the strongest bond in Arabia until the rise of Islam. It would take the common faith of Islam to unite settled society to consolidate enough money, build enough infrastructure, and raise a powerful enough military to move the nomadic Bedouin out of prominence in Arabia.

²² Hitti, *History*, 26.

²³ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 113.

²⁴ Hitti, *History*, 27.

²⁵ Hitti, *History*, 26; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 113-4; Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1135-6.

IV. Militarism

The consequence of a blood-tied society is every man must be able to protect his own blood and spill the blood of others, and so it is no surprise the Bedouin was a skilled warrior. He enjoyed unimpeded success against pre-Islamic settled states, who during this time lacked the cohesion to raise professional armies. The Bedouins were a superior military force, but not because of their quality iron weapons, excellent field tactics, or overwhelming numbers—they had none of that. A Bedouin army could not reliably win a traditional, open-field battle because the men were not traditional fighters. Instead, the Bedouin found repeated success in his raiding tactics.²⁶ Two qualities aided the Bedouin in his raiding: mobility and stealth. When it came to mobility, no group in pre-Islamic Arabia could hope to match the Bedouin. He practiced riding from childhood on both horse and camel and attended his first raid at age 12.²⁷ Him and his tribe rides racing camels specially-bred to move swiftly through the desert. He rides camels to the site of the battle and in retreat, but during the raid itself he often chooses his horse.²⁸ Bedouin riders were essentially lightweight shock cavalry who specialized in raiding.

Settled societies stood no chance of pursuing a Bedouin raid party into the desert. Pursuit was near impossible, but often not even considered because the ideal raid ran undetected. A raiding party could ride into a settlement, steal what they can, and disperse into the desert before any alarm is sound. If his party was caught, their second line of defense was strategic retreat, riding away into the desert with mounted arrow fire to cover his escape. The camel and horse

²⁶ Hitti, *History*, 25; Hoyland, *Arabia*, 99-102; Retsö, *Antiquity*, 583; Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1139-46.

²⁷ Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1136.

²⁸ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 191.

provided him an elevated shooting position, and camels were able to hold two riders—most often one to steer and one to fire arrows.²⁹

The goal of the Bedouin raid was not to kill, but to plunder. His main concern was to steal wealth, where his raids sought to steal gold, weapons, food, livestock, and riding animals. Horses were considered the most impressive bounty a raid could capture.³⁰ The constant success of Bedouin raiding allowed him to impose his will over settled societies, and this extended into favorable trade relations. Those settlements whose economies suffered from constant raiding had two choices: either defend against the raids or negotiate with the Bedouins. The cost of defense was more costly for settlements because of its likely failure, constant reconstruction of the defense, hostile relations with clans of the same tribe, and loss of any pre-existing trade relationship. Therefore, settlements were compelled into choosing the latter option, and the military superiority of the Bedouin granted him favorable agreements with many settled societies.³¹ These agreements could take the form of simple paid tributes, payments in exchange for protection against other raiding tribes, paid caravan protection, or favorable trading terms.³² These paid contracts sustained the Bedouin foothold in pre-Islamic Arabia. Since tribal stockpiles were usually sparse, Bedouin military advantage provided an opportunity to reap the rewards of raiding without expending resources to do so.³³ He could enjoy the spoils of his raids through professional agreements with settled states and could still keep his skills sharp by raiding other Bedouin tribes or settlements who never bothered to open negotiations.

²⁹ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 100; Retsö, *Antiquity*, 582-3.

³⁰ Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1141.

³¹ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 96-102.

³² Sweet, "Camel Raiding," 1140.

³³ Hoyland, *Arabia*, 100.

The protection of the caravan trade was a key bargaining chip in negotiations because most trade in Arabia flowed overland. A caravan without external protection from Byzantine or Sassanid troops was an easy target, and not every caravan traveling through Arabia could enjoy the privilege of imperial protection. Without help from the surrounding empires, it was a logistical nightmare for settlements to defend a caravan from a Bedouin raid.³⁴ For one, the Bedouin knew the land better—he was a nomad, after all. His raiding party could set for ambush along a caravan path and intercept it without issue. From there, his marksmanship and mobility would take care of the rest. The only way for a settlement to protect its trade was to pay for tribal protection, and many did. Such agreements were crucial to sustaining Bedouin prominence because the income would help fill the productive gaps one would expect a nomadic-pastoralist economy to suffer. It was not until the rise of Islam that settled people were able to consolidate enough money, build enough infrastructure, and raise a formidable enough army to opt out of these agreements and successfully displace Bedouin prominence in Arabia.

V. Conclusion

The significance of the Bedouin in pre-Islamic Arabia is underexplored. Not often is a region dominated by a nomadic-pastoralist society for such an extended period, and the Bedouin's success in Arabia is made more impressive by its displacement by one of humanity's great religions. The historical and cultural significance of the Bedouin is overshadowed by the Islamic states which came after, but the unique qualities of Bedouin society render it a

³⁴ Bulliet, *Camel*, 99.

fascinating case study for nomadism versus settlement, pastoralism versus agriculture, and self-sufficiency versus co-dependence.

The Bedouin was a formidable force. His mastery over animals, foraging and hunting, and local geography made him resourceful. His adherence to a tribal structure grounded in the principles of equality, independence, and blood ties made him resilient. And his raiding tactics, supplemented by his stellar mobility, stealth, and marksmanship, made him dangerous. Pre-Islamic states would have little success in subjugating the Bedouins, and, even with powerful empires looming to his East and West, the Bedouin preserved his traditional way of living for the duration of the pre-Islamic period because his practice of pastoralism, tribalism, and militarism proved too solid a foundation for any society to challenge.

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