
Primary Source Readings

READINGS FOR CHAPTER 1 PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIA

1. A medieval historian on nomadic and sedentary peoples

Ibn Khaldun

Ibn Khaldun (text pp. 98-99) is one of the most original thinkers in the Islamic tradition and is widely considered the father of sociology and the philosophy of history. Ibn Khaldun was born in Tunis (1332 CE) to an Arab family and died in Cairo (1406 CE). In his youth he received a thorough education in the Islamic sciences (Qur'an, *hadith*, jurisprudence and, later, theology and philosophy). For most of his life, Ibn Khaldun held various appointments in the courts of rulers in Tunis, Fez, Granada, Bougie and Cairo, and was deeply involved in the regular court intrigues. Alternating between top positions in government and spells in prison, towards the end of his life he found himself dedicating more of his time and energy to his intellectual pursuits, which often reflect the experience he had acquired in politics and the service of power. Ibn Khaldun's greatest work was "the *Muqaddima*," an introduction to a universal history. In this introduction, Ibn Khaldun introduces what he calls "a new science" which does not examine only "what happened," but explores the forces that guide human history, and especially the

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rise and decline of empires. As can be seen in the reading below, Ibn Khaldun gives great weight to geographical, social, economic and ethnic factors in what he conceives as the natural cycle of dynasties and empires. At the very heart of his thought is the relationship between nomadic and sedentary peoples. Notice the characteristics he attributes to nomadic (Bedouin) and to sedentary people. Is the interaction between sedentary and nomadic populations constructive or destructive? What is Ibn Khaldun's explanation for the success of the Arab-Islamic conquests?

Both Bedouins and sedentary people are natural groups.

It should be known that differences of condition among people are the result of the different ways in which they make their living. Social organization enables them to co-operate toward that end and to start with the simple necessities of life, before they get to conveniences and luxuries. Some people adopt agriculture, the cultivation of vegetables and grains (as their way of making a living). Others adopt animal husbandry, the use of sheep, cattle, goats, bees, and silkworms, for breeding and for their products. Those who live by agriculture or animal husbandry cannot avoid the call of the desert [Ibn Khaldun uses "desert" here to mean uncultivated land or bad lands], because it alone offers the wide fields, acres, pastures for animals, and other things that the settled areas do not offer. It is therefore necessary for them to restrict themselves to the desert. Their social organization and co-operation for the needs of life and civilization, such as food, shelter, and warmth, do not take them beyond the bare subsistence level, because of their inability (to provide) for anything beyond those (things). Subsequent improvement of their conditions and acquisition of more wealth and comfort than they need, cause

them to rest and take it easy. Then, they co-operate for things beyond the (bare) necessities. They use more food and clothes, and take pride in them. They build large houses, and lay out towns and cities for protection. This is followed by an increase in comfort and ease, which leads to formation of the most developed luxury customs. They take the greatest pride in the preparation of food and a fine cuisine, in the use of varied splendid clothes of silk and brocade and other (fine materials), in the construction of ever higher buildings and towers [...] Here, now, (we have) sedentary people. "Sedentary people" means the inhabitants of cities and countries, some of whom adopt the crafts as their way of making a living, while others adopt commerce. They earn more and live more comfortably than Bedouins, because they live on a level beyond the level of (bare) necessity, and their way of making a living corresponds to their wealth.

[...]

Bedouins are prior to sedentary people. The desert is the basis and reservoir of civilization and cities.

We have mentioned that the Bedouins restrict themselves to the (bare) necessities in their conditions (of life) and are unable to go beyond them, while sedentary people concern themselves with conveniences and luxuries in their conditions and customs. The (bare) necessities are no doubt prior to the conveniences and luxuries. (Bare) necessities, in a way, are basic, and luxuries secondary and an outgrowth (of the necessities). Bedouins, thus, are the basis of, and prior to, cities and sedentary people. Man seeks first the (bare) necessities. Only after

he has obtained the (bare) necessities, does he get to comforts and luxuries. The toughness of desert life precedes the softness of sedentary life.

[...]

Bedouins are closer to being good than sedentary people.

Sedentary people are much concerned with all kinds of pleasures. They are accustomed to luxury and success in worldly occupations and to indulgence in worldly desires. Therefore their souls are colored with all kinds of blameworthy and evil qualities. [...] Bedouins may be as concerned with worldly affairs as (sedentary people are). However, such concern would touch only the necessities of life and not luxuries or anything causing, or calling for, desires and pleasures [...] As compared with those of sedentary people, their evil ways and blameworthy qualities are much less numerous. They are closer to the first natural state and more remote from the evil habits that have been impressed upon the souls (of sedentary people) through numerous and ugly, blameworthy customs.

This is obvious. It will later on become clear that sedentary life constitutes the last stage of civilization and the point where it begins to decay. It also constitutes the last stage of evil and of remoteness from goodness.

[...]

Bedouins are more disposed to courage than sedentary people.

The reason for this is that sedentary people have become used to laziness and ease. They are sunk in well-

being and luxury. They have entrusted defense of their property and their lives to the governor and ruler who rules them, and to the militia which has the task of guarding them. They find full assurance of safety in the walls that surround them, and the fortifications that protect them. No noise disturbs them, and no hunting occupies them. They are carefree and trusting, and have ceased to carry weapons. Successive generations have grown up in this way of life. They have become like women and children, who depend upon the master of the house. Eventually, this has come to be a quality of character that replaces natural (disposition).

The Bedouins on the other hand, live separate from the community. They are alone in the country and remote from militias. They have no walls and gates. Therefore, they provide their own defense and do not entrust it to, or rely upon others for it. They always carry weapons. They watch carefully all sides of the road. They take hurried naps only when they are together in company or when they are in the saddle. They pay attention to every faint barking and noise. They go alone into the desert, guided by their fortitude, putting their trust in themselves. Fortitude has become a character quality of theirs, and courage their nature. They use it whenever they are called upon or an alarm stirs them.

The reliance of sedentary people upon laws destroys their fortitude and power of resistance.

Not everyone is master of his own affairs. Chiefs and leaders who are masters of the affairs of men are few in comparison with the rest. As a rule, man must by neces-

sity be dominated by someone else. If the domination is kind and just and the people under it are not oppressed by its laws and restrictions, they are guided by the courage or cowardice that they possess in themselves. They are satisfied with the absence of any restraining power. Self-reliance eventually becomes a quality natural to them. They would not know anything else. If, however, the domination with its laws is one of brute force and intimidation, it breaks their fortitude and deprives them of their power of resistance as a result of the inertness that develops in the souls of the oppressed [...] For this (reason), greater fortitude is found among the savage Arab Bedouins than among people who are subject to laws. Furthermore, those who rely on laws and are dominated by them from the very beginning of their education and instruction in the crafts, sciences, and religious matters, are thereby deprived of much of their own fortitude. They can scarcely defend themselves at all against hostile acts. This is the case with students, whose occupation it is to study and to learn from teachers and religious leaders, and who constantly apply themselves to instruction and education in very dignified gatherings.

[...]

The restraining influence among Bedouins tribes comes from their *shaykhs* and leaders. It results from the great respect and veneration they generally enjoy among the people. The hamlets of the Bedouins are defended against outside enemies by a tribal militia composed of noble youths of the tribe who are known for their courage. Their defense and protection are successful only if they are a closely knit group of common descent. This strengthens their stamina and makes them feared,

since everybody's affection for his family and his group is more important (than anything else). Compassion and affection for one's blood relations and relatives exist in human nature as something God put into the hearts of men. It makes for mutual support and aid, and increases the fear felt by the enemy.

[...]

Arabs can obtain royal authority only by making use of some religious coloring, such as prophecy, or sainthood, or some great religious event in general.

The reason for this is that because of their savagery, the Arabs are the least willing of nations to subordinate themselves to each other, as they are rude, proud, ambitious, and eager to be the leader. Their individual aspirations rarely coincide. But when there is religion (among them) through prophecy or sainthood, then they have some restraining influence in themselves. The qualities of haughtiness and jealousy leave them. It is, then, easy for them to subordinate themselves and to unite (as a social organization). This is achieved by the common religion they now have. It causes rudeness and pride to disappear and exercises a restraining influence on their mutual envy and jealousy. When there is a prophet or saint among them, who calls upon them to fulfill the commands of God and rids them of blameworthy qualities and causes them to adopt praiseworthy ones, and who has them concentrate all their strength in order to make the truth prevail, they become fully united (as a social organization) and obtain superiority and royal authority. Besides, no people are as quick (as the Arabs)

to accept (religious) truth and right guidance, because their natures have been preserved free from distorted habits and uncontaminated by base character qualities.

[...]

For all these (reasons), the Arabs are by nature remote from royal leadership. They attain it (only) once their nature has undergone a complete transformation under the influence of some religious coloring that wipes out all such (qualities) and causes the Arabs to have a restraining influence on themselves and to keep people apart from each other, as we have mentioned.

This is illustrated by the Arab dynasty in Islam. Religion cemented their leadership with the religious law and its ordinances, which, explicitly and implicitly, are concerned with what is good for civilization. The caliphs followed one after another. As a result, the royal authority and government of the Arabs became great and strong. When Rustum [the commander of the Persian army that fought against the Muslims during the Islamic conquests] saw the Muslims assemble for prayer, he said: "Umar eats my liver. He teaches the dogs how to behave."

Later on, the Arabs were cut off from the dynasty for generations. They neglected the religion. Thus, they forgot political leadership and returned to their desert. They were ignorant of the connection of their group feeling with the people of the ruling dynasty, because subservience and lawful (government) had (now) become strange to them. They became once again as savage as they had been before. The epithet "royal" was no longer applicable to them, except in so far as it (continued to) apply to the caliphs who were (Arabs) by race. When the caliphate disappeared and was wiped out, gov-

ernmental power passed altogether out of their hands. Non-Arabs took over the power in their stead. They remained as Bedouins in the desert, ignorant of royal authority and political leadership. [...] When the Arabs forgot the religion, they no longer had any connection with political leadership, and they returned to their desert origins. At times, they achieve superiority over weak dynasties, as is the case in the contemporary Maghrib. But their domination leads only to the ruin of the civilization they conquer, as we have stated before.

Arabia in the Hellenistic Period;

Arabia between Byzantines and Persians

2. The nomads of Arabia in Antiquity

Diodorus Siculus, al-Mas'udi

The fact that Islam arose in the towns of western Arabia can obscure another fact: that much of the peninsula was home to nomadic or transhumant herders. Great travelers and traders, the nomadic Arab peoples had frequent contacts with their neighbors to the north: Syrians, Greeks, Persians, and others. It is to such contacts that we owe the first description below, by the first-century BCE historian Diodorus Siculus. He may be using here an account composed by one of the generals of Alexander the Great. His description seems to refer to the Nabateans (text p. 9). While Arabia was not as uniformly hostile to civilization as this passage claims, the description does capture some of the perquisites of desert life. The second passage, by the tenth-century writer al-Mas'udi, represents an idealized vision of the free and noble desert nomad. Such visions of the past were useful to

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