



**ARAB RULERS AND VASSALS OF ROMAN
EMPIRE: THE ROMAN-ARAB RELATIONS FROM
THE INVASION OF SYRIA (64 BCE) TO THE
COUNCIL OF NICAIA
(325 CE)**

BY

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Human
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**Kulliyyah of Islamic Revealed Knowledge and Human
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Alif Lām Mīm. The Roman Empire has been defeated. In land close by; but they (even) after (this) defeat of theirs, will soon be victorious-Within a few years. With God is the Decision, in the Past and in the Future: on that day shall the Believers rejoice-With the help of God. He helps whom He will, and he is Exalted in Might,

Most Merciful

(Qur'ān, al-Rūm: 1-6)

ABSTRACT

This study on Roman-Arab relation embraces its political, cultural, military and religious relation from the first to the 4th century CE, and extends to the 7th century CE to include Byzantium-Arabia political and military encounters. The discussion takes into consideration the opinions and reports of prominent classical historians, especially Cassius Dio and Herodian as well as other published archeological research. Archeological reports are also gathered from most secondary sources. In dissecting and analyzing Roman history in the East, the use of sources that are considered primarily Islamic that are the Qurān and Hadīth- strays from traditional classical historiography, however it is still relevant. In the Holy Scripture of Islam, evidence has been found against the theories of Edward Gibbon and this provides a platform for evaluating Roman history in an alternative light. The research concludes that Arabia was an agent of a ‘cultural revolution’ in the late Roman Empire, especially in military organization and urbanization. The researcher also discovers that in the last years before the Western Roman Empire succumbed to barbarian invasion and handed the baton to Constantinople as her successor in the east, Arabia was the advocate of Roman culture. What has diminished or almost annihilated in the West was continued by the Romanized people of Arabia and its representing institutions. This study has emphasized the importance of pre-Islamic tribalism, religion and society of Arabia through vassals and allies to Rome, and has possibly become the epilogue for Europe’s enduring fascination of the East.

ملخص البحث

هذه دراسة حول العلاقات السياسية، والثقافية، والعسكرية والدينية بين الرومان والعرب من القرن الأول وحتى الرابع الميلادي، فيما ستمتد الفترة في بعض الأجزاء حتى القرن السابع الميلادي. وذلك للتعرف بالمعالم العسكرية والسياسية البيزنطية والعربية المتعلقة بهذا البحث. هذا النقاش سوف يأخذ بعين الاعتبار آراء و تقارير أبرز المؤرخين التقليديين، خصوصا كاسيوس ديو وهيروديان. وسيعتبر علم الآثار أحد أهم المصادر لهذه الدراسة. وقد تم جمع تقارير الآثار من مصادر ثانوية. الصور الممثلة تحت عنوان "شكل" هي عناصر ضرورية من أجل التأكد أن القارئ قد حصل على الفهم والتصوير، وليس من أجل ذكر الأدوات التي استخدمها الباحث. غير أن تمحيص التاريخ الروماني في الشرق وتحليله، قد يكون غير مألوف من حيث استخدام المصادر الأساسية الإسلامية كالقران والحديث. وفي القران جاءت الأدلة ضد نظريات أدوارد جيبون وهذا يوفر مصدراً من أجل تقويم التاريخ الروماني على الوجه الصحيح. وقد خلص البحث إلى أن العرب قد كانوا وكلاء لثورة ثقافية في أواخر الإمبراطورية الرومانية، وخصوصا في مجالي التنظيم العسكري والمدني. وقد بررت الباحثة ذلك في السنوات الأخيرة قبل خضوع الإمبراطورية الرومانية الغربية للغزو البربري، وتسليم الراية للقسطنطينية باعتبارها خليفة في الشرق، وكان العرب مؤيدين للثقافة الرومانية. وكان التناقض محققا باستمرار مؤيدي الرومانية ومؤسساتها من العرب. وهذه الدراسة أكدت على أهمية القبلية قبل الإسلام، والدين والمجتمع العربي، من خلال التبعية و الموالاتة للرومان، وهذا يمكن يعدّ بداية افتتان أوروبا للشرق.

APPROVAL PAGE

I certify and I have supervised and read this study and that in my opinion, it conforms to acceptable standards of scholarly presentation and is fully adequate, in scope and quality, as a dissertation for the degree of Master of Human Sciences (History and Civilization).

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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation is the result of my own investigations, except where otherwise stated. I also declare that it has not been previously or concurrently submitted as a whole for any degrees in IIUM or other institutions.

Nur Dayana bt Mohamed Ariffin

Signature.....

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To my late grandparents- Sani, Aisha, Noor and Aida

My sisters- Jane Aliah, Affy, Hebe and Percy

My brothers

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract.....	ii
Abstract in Arabic.....	iii
Approval Page.....	iv
Declaration.....	v
Copyright Page.....	vi
Dedication.....	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
List of Maps.....	xii
List of Figures.....	xiii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Statement of the Problem.....	1
1.2. Background and History	2
1.3. Literature Review	8
1.4. Justification of Research	12
1.5. Methods and Sources	15
CHAPTER TWO: THE EARLIEST CONTACTS BETWEEN ROMAN AND ARABS	17
2.1. Greater Syria-Mesopotamia and the “Three Arabias”.....	17
2.1.1. Geographical Background of Greater Syria.....	17
2.1.2. Geography of the “Three Arabias”.....	18
2.1.3. Arabia <i>Patraea</i>	18
2.1.4. Kingdoms of Arabia <i>Felix</i> (Yemen)	23
2.1.5. Arabia <i>Deserta</i>	24
2.2. Roman annexations of Seleucid Empire and Armenia	25
2.2.1. Introduction	25
2.2.2. Seleucid Empire.....	26
2.2.3. Conquest of Armenia.....	28
2.3. Nabataea and Vassal kings, Arethas (I,II,III, IV).....	32
2.3.1. Introduction.....	32
2.3.2. Arethas I.....	34
2.3.3. Arethas II	34
2.3.4. Arethas III <i>Philhellenos</i>	35
2.3.5. Arethas IV.....	36
2.3.6. Nabataea under the Supremacy of the Roman Empire.....	37
2.4. “Pure Arabs”: Qahtan and Arabized Arabs.....	40
2.5. Yemen: Himyarites.....	45
CHAPTER THREE: DAWN OF THE ROMAN AGE: ARAB AND AS- SHAM.....	49
3.1. Introduction.....	52

3.2. Pompey's Military Support against the Hasmonean Tyranny.....	52
3.3. Arabs during the Great War (66-70 CE).....	55
3.4. Arab Allies of the Roman and Persian Wars.....	62
3.5. Roman Expeditions to Arabia <i>Deserta</i> and Arabia <i>Felix</i>	67
3.6. <i>Limes Arabicus</i>	69
CHAPTER FOUR: SEVERAN EMPERORS AND THEIR ARAB	74
FAMILIES.....	74
4.1. Introduction.....	76
4.2. Septimius Severus and the Syrian Princesses.....	78
4.2.1. Septimius Severus.....	84
4.2.2. The Emperors Geta and Caracalla.....	88
4.2.3. Emperor Macrinus.....	89
4.2.4. The Syrian Princesses.....	90
4.3. Elagabalus.....	97
4.4. Alexander Severus.....	101
4.5. Romanized Arab aristocracy.....	105
4.6. Philip <i>Arabicus</i> and his son, Philip II.....	
	110
	110
CHAPTER FIVE: THE REVOLT OF ZENOBIA IN PALMYRA.....	112
5.1. Introduction.....	117
5.2. Septimius Odenathus.....	121
5.3. Zenobia and her Son, Vaballathus.....	
5.4. Aurelian's War on Palmyrene Kingdom.....	
	126
	126
CHAPTER SIX: ARABS OF THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE (3RD -	127
7TH CENTURY CE)	127
6.1. Introduction.....	128
6.2.1. Hatra.....	130
6.2.2. Geographical and Cultural Background.....	130
6.2.3. History.....	131
6.3. Ghassanids.....	134
6.3.1. Introduction.....	137
6.3.2. Alliance with Rome.....	
6.4. Lakhmids: Sassanid Proxy Wars.....	
6.5. Christian Sects and Political Allegiances.....	
CHAPTER SEVEN: RELIGIONS AND CULTS OF THE EASTERN	
PROVINCES BEFORE THE ADVENT OF ISLAM.....	140
7.1. Introduction.....	140
7.2. Desert <i>Shirks</i> of Arabia.....	143
7.3. Zoroastrianism and Mithraism.....	147
7.3.1. Zoroastrianism.....	147
7.4. Mithraism.....	152
7.5. Hellenistic polytheism.....	156

7.6. Judeo-Christianism: Orientalism and Occidentalism of Christian.....	165
7.6.1. Judaism under Roman Patronage.....	165
7.6.2. Christianity.....	170
CHAPTER EIGHT: CONCLUSION: THE ANCIENT ROMANS IN THE	187
HOLY QUR'AN AND HADITH.....	196
8.1 Gibbon's Theory on the Decline of Western Roman Empire.....	
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	203
GLOSSARY.....	209

LIST OF MAPS

<u>Map No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
2.1	The Armenian Empire	31
2.2	Arab tribes	41
3.1	The Decapolis	51
3.2	Palestine in 1 st century CE	62
3.3	<i>Limes</i> around the Empire	70
3.4	<i>Limes Arabicus</i>	73
6.1	Beni Ghassan and Beni Lakhm	139

LIST OF FIGURES

<u>Figure No.</u>		<u>Page No.</u>
2.1	Arab man from Petra	48
4.1	Lineage of the Severan dynasty	77
4.2	Bust of Septimius Severus	78
4.3	Pescennius Niger	80
4.4	The Severan family	84
4.5	Bust of Elagabalus	97
5.1	Ruins of Palmyra	112
5.2	Zenobia	125
6.1	Hatra	128
7.1	Mithraeum	156
7.2	Parthenon frieze: Poseidon, Apollo and Artemis	160

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study focuses on the relationship between Romans and Arabs from Pompeius Magnus' conquest of the Eastern Mediterranean kingdoms circa 64 BCE to the Council of Nicaea, led by the Roman Emperor Constantine I in year 325 CE. The significance of selecting these dates is that it represents a timeline in classical history by which Rome and Arabia had a formal and direct contact, making it part of Rome's political treasure in the east. This thus initiated the need for Arab vassalage in Roman political map. Throughout its history, Rome went through phases after phases of political, social and religious evolution, and one agent of change was the eastern province, and it is the interest of this research to present the role of Arabia and Arabs in making evolution in Roman institutions and people possible. The discussion ends with the Council of Nicaea in 325 CE for the reason that since Christianity is a major consequence of Rome's contact with the east, it is impossible to neglect conclusion achieved in the council which affected Christianity. It was also from this council certain clarifications were made on Christian practices that finally ended some pagan rituals and habits while incorporating others. It is a historical survey of the pivotal components of the late ancient Hellenistic civilization of the increasingly multi-cultural Roman Empire in context of emergence of the Arab-origin elite of power during the ruinous Roman-Parthian Wars.

This study investigates the religious, cultural and economic results of this relationship, its impact on the Latinized *Oriens* and the lifestyle of Arab population, Arab-origin emperors, dwellers of desert cities and oases of Nabatean *Arabia Deserta*, *Arabia Petra* and Syria.

1.2 BACKGROUND AND HISTORY

Roman rule in the Mediterranean was consolidated by their victory over the Macedonians in the 2nd Punic War (218-201 BCE), when Rome crushed the forces of Carthaginian ally, Philip V. Macedonia was the stronghold of the Aegean states like Corinth, Athens and Sparta. At that time, Egypt was ruled by the Ptolemies and the Seleucid kings had most of Anatolia and Central Asia. Egypt would fall on her knees and accept Roman rule at the time of conflict between Octavian and Marcus Antonius (more popularly known as Mark Anthony) with his Egyptian ally and Queen of the Ptolemy Egypt, Cleopatra the VII (both whom committed suicide after the Battle of Actium, 31 BCE). Earlier consideration should be given to the legendary defeat of Carthage (modern day Tunisia) in the First Punic War, whereby Roman naval forces took Sardinia and Sicily, thus establishing a firm control of Mediterranean. They call it *Mare Nostrum* “Our Sea”. Carthage was an important port and many cities and kingdoms around the African coasts of Mediterranean were dependent on it. After it was captured by Romans it may not maintain the exact role it had played for centuries, but nevertheless, part of the Mediterranean was already in Rome’s possession.

The Eastern Mediterranean realm controlled by increasingly decadent Greco-Syrian despots, kings and local usurpers was swiftly conquered by the Roman legions led by ambitious Roman consuls and dictators in the Age of Julius Gaius Caesar. In the last century of *Republica Romana* (Roman Republic), endless civil wars and social

instability plagued the *Roma Vetis* (a reference to ‘Old Rome’, that is Rome before the dissolution of the Republic) and several power-hungry patricians emerged as the initiators of conquests of the Hellenized East; among them Lucius Cornelius Sulla *Felix*, Lepidus, Marcus Licinius Crassus, Publius Licinius Crassus, Julius Gaius Caesar, Pompeius Gbaeus Magnus, Cato, Octavian (later emperor Augustus) and their militant successors. But it was the consul Pompey (Gneius Pompeius Magnus, 106-48 BCE) who was the first Roman vanquisher of fragmented empire of Greco-Syrians who annexed its Mediterranean lands into the rapidly growing Roman dominions. He annexed Syria and made it one of the richest provinces of the Roman Empire. In result of his military intervention in Palestine, the civil war between local warlords was ended with *pax romana* (Roman Peace). He defeated the Armenian king Tigranes. Pompey’s triumphs initiated the Roman drive towards the Deep East and the Nabatean (Arab) South. The native rulers and tribal aristocrats were appointed as the Rome’s client kings, whom the Roman governors allowed to maintain their pseudo-sovereignty and land as long as they protect the desert frontiers of *Imperium Romanum* (Roman Empire).

Arabia was a melting pot of Hellenized Seleucid kingdoms, nomadic clans, Jewish monarchs and powerful southern Arabian dynasties. Romans divide Arabia into *Arabia Patraea* (The Fertile Crescent of Syria and Jordan), *Arabia Deserta* (Hejaz, central Arabia) and *Arabia Felix* (Yemen). In the untamed deserts were the nomadic tribes which were a troublesome factor in Roman administration of Arabia since they were not very cooperative. In the north, Arabs were considered by historians to be ‘*Arabicized*’, that is they were actually a mixture of local Arab tribes, Persians and Greeks who adopted the general idea of what is an Arab culture. This section of the region comprises of the most Hellenized of Arabs. That is inevitable,

considering their contact with Greece began in 334 BCE after the Battle of Grannicus and Alexander's army marched eastward to Persia¹.

Arabs are classified into a proto-ethnic category known popularly as 'Semites', but more accurately they known as *Arab-al-Jazeera*. They were the descendants of Shem or sons of Shem, one of the sons of the Prophet Nuh according to the Hebrew Scripture. Assyrians, Babylonia, Aramaeans, Phoenicians and Abyssinians were all considered to be Arabs. These peoples were related by culture, geography, or location of civilization, and language. Some historians believe that the Babylonians and Akkadians were the earliest. The Arabs were further divided into their northern and southern *qabail*. This division is a consequence of the vast desert of *Rub el-Khali* (Empty Quarters) which separates the Arabs in such a way that their language and civilization developed distinctive aboriginal forms.

The southern Arabs, namely the Sabaeans, Hadramautis and Himyarites² were more sophisticated, and had more trading and diplomatic relations with neighboring countries as opposed to the northern nomads (Bedouins). They traded intensively with the Arabic North, and frankincense of *Arabia Felix* was one of the most desired goods in the Roman and Parthian Empires. In the southern Arabia (Yemen: *Arabia Felix*), the Himyarites were the most powerful Arab dynasty. The earliest mention of 'Himyar' was to be found in a Hadramatic inscription from beginning of the first century CE. The inscription informs on the building of a wall at Qalat for the Hadramautis who were in danger and needed to defend itself from the Himyarites. Pliny the Elder wrote in his *Natural History* of the Himyarite capital city Zafar as *Sapphar*. Before the Himyars, Yemen was ruled by Queen of Sheba, or better known

¹ Though Persia underwent many dynastic transformation, e.g: Aechemenid, Parthian, Sassanid, some reference made to Persia is generic- in this case it is the land known as Persia or associated with Persian empires throughout its existence in any named dynaties.

² Ibid, xvii

as Queen of Saba'. She was acknowledged as a great queen in the following verse of al-*Quran*:

But the Hoopoe tarried not far: he came up and said:
"I have compassed territory which thou have not compassed,
and I have come to thee from Saba' with tiding true.
"I found there a woman ruling over them and provided with every
requisite; And she has a magnificent throne..."³

The northern Arab oases-states were recognized or destroyed by Romans, Parthians and Sassanians. They were the urbanized Nabateans, *Sarakenoi* ("Saracens"), Hatrans and Palmyrenes. These northern Arabs have the closest and direct contacts with Rome and Parthians and Sassanids. The earliest among of these recorded desert entities and cities was the Nabatean kingdom (circa 169 BCE). Arethas (*Haritha*) III was the Nabatean king who became an Arab client king during Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus' intervention in Judea and Syria (*Arabia Petraea*, "Rocky Arabia"). He was defeated by General Marcus Aemilius Scaurus who also subdued the Judean ethnarchs(client-king) Hyrcanus II and Aristobulos II. Arethas IV (9BC-40 CE) was known as *Philopatris* (Friend of the People).

The client kingdoms of Emesa, Armenia, Palmyra/Tadmor and the Nabatea in the Desert Arabia became the "Desert Shields" of Rome against the powerful Partho-Persians. Pompey forced these oriental despots to pay the annual tribute of 200-340 million sesterces to the Roman Treasury. Pompey the Great started his military campaigns in the East with war against the king Mithridates of Pontus. Mithridates tried unsuccessfully to defend the Oriental Hellenistic kingdoms against the new western empire. The Asia Minor, Mesopotamia and the Greater Syria⁴ had been

³ Al-*Quran*, Surah al-Naml, verse 22,23.

⁴ Region of north Syria-Mesopotamia region, from the border of Anatolia to the western bank of Euphrates river. See chapter 2.

strategic commercial areas, and their busiest trade routes connected India, China via South and North Arabia with the western Roman-Keltic “Europe”.

The research include the life and scandals of the young Syrian-origin Roman emperor Elagabalus (218-222 CE), and the influences of the Syrian princesses, Julia Avita Mamaea, Empress Julia Domna, Julia Soaemia and Julia Maesa (his aunts, mother and grandmother respectively). Unlike Macrinus and Philip, he was a patrician. Coming from Syrian nobility, he gained the support of the legion and raised a mutiny against Macrinus, who was finally executed in favor of Elagabalus. The new emperor was inaugurated at the age of fourteen. After he was killed by his own troops, along with his mother, his cousin Alexander Severus (222-235 CE) occupied the imperial throne, also under the influence of his mother. Alexander’s death ended the era of Arab-origin emperors.

The revolt and short-lived independent desert kingdom led by the Arab queen Al Zabba’ (“one with beautiful long hair”) bint ‘Amr ibn Tharab ibn Hasan ibn Adhina ibn al-Samida, known in the Latin historiography as Zenobia of Palmyra and in the Greek annals as Augusta Septimia Xenobia, is one of the focal points of this study.

After the death of her husband, the vassal-king Lucius Septimus Odenathus (*Othayna*), Zenobia raised an army led by able general Zabdes which seized shortly the Roman territories in Syria, Asia Minor and Egypt from Prefect Tenagio Probus. But she was captured by the Emperor Aurelian in year 272 CE, whose shock desert legions ended this brief but bold attempt to challenge Roman supremacy in the ancient “Near East”. Her son Lucius Iulius Aurelius Septimus Vahballathus Athenodorus (*Wahballat: “Gift of the Goddess-Athena”*, 266-273 CE) became also a hostage of the Romans. Preceding Zenobia, there were other Arab warlords who took

the purple mantle and make themselves emperors: *Philipus Arabicus*, or Philip the Arab, and Macrinus. These two emperors were labeled usurpers by the Roman historians who emphasized their humble background. They were both slain. Their reigns will be examined in this study.

This study emphasize on the assimilation of the Middle Eastern religious cults in Rome. Elagabalus brought with him the ancient Arab pagan deity, constructed a temple for this *shirks* and in his four years tenure as emperor, he totally marginalized the cult of Jupiter, one of the prominent deities of the Old Rome. Since the earliest Roman campaigns in Egypt and Syria, the Romans and Arabs had interwoven their cultures into new intricate civilization “melting pot” which became a blueprint for distinctively Romanized Arabs and Arabized Romans.

The religion of Arabia before the Last Prophet was heterogeneous with the presence of various deities. Some of these deities were brought to Roman attention and it was normal in a multiracial mercenary troop to induce the worship of their pagan deities. This ‘garrison cults’ was popular as far as the Rome’s western frontier in Britannia, where Celtic gods were worshipped by Roman soldiers simultaneously with the Arabian deities intertwined with the pagan religion of Rome.

Tawhid was also well established in the pre-*Quranic* Arabia. This refers to both *Hanifa*⁵ and Banu Israel monotheism as well to obscure Palestinian *Essenes*⁶ whose doctrines activated the earliest assemblies of *Nasara* as well as Hellenized Judeo-Christian cult of Paulinity (Saulism) which inaugurated the Helleno-Latin Christianity. Conversions of Himyarite kings to Judaism were recorded by Philostorgius who visited their southern Arabian kingdom. Large numbers of Jewish colonies were found all over Arabia around 1st-2nd century CE, especially after the

⁵ The teachings of prophet Ibrahim A.S

⁶ Jewish religious group which flourished in the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century CE.

Jewish Revolt of 66 CE, whereby many sought refuge down south. Theophilus the Indian encountered ‘no small number of Jews’⁷ in Himyar. Iudeans (Jews) played important role in creating a fusion between Roman and Arab cultures. King Herod (73-4 BCE) was, for example, known as a Romanized Jewish king. Judaism of this era too, was seen as being Roman in terms of doctrine and culture.

Centuries of Arab- Roman contact needed a more proper attention and organized chronology. It is important to note that Rome at its height was mortal enemy of Parthia-Persia, and Arabs (Ghassanids [Banu Ghassan, Al-Ghassaniya⁸] and Lakhmids [Banu Lakhm, Muntherids]) played their part in balancing these two superpowers, each on either side of their borders. Romans and Arabs respectively were trying to nurse their interests. Rome wanted from Arabia territorial security and trade. For this reason, alliances had to be forged. The Arabs have reciprocal reasons as well- to ensure the security of their kingdom. Religion soon became a priority in the cultural penetration. There are many dimensions by which to explore Roman-Arabia contacts. One of which is to take a thorough look into personalities which were not Roman in origin, but whose spirit and fortune gave them the opportunity to shape and change Rome from the imperial thrones, or its frontiers.

1.3 LITERATURE REVIEW

Nature of literature for this subject matter is mostly descriptive and biographical. Since this study is more on the reconstruction of historical events and deeds, it is compulsory to consult primary sources. On the lives of Caesars and military campaigns, extensive information could be found on the eyewitness accounts of Commodus Herodian (b.170?CE), a Greek historian; author of *the History of the*

⁷ Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs*. (London: Routledge, 2001) p.146

⁸ Referring to Arabs whose loyalty were towards Rome against Persia.

Roman Empire, which translation was done by Edward Echols, published in 1961 in Los Angeles by Tertullian. His work was based on personal experience, filled with anecdotes and descriptions of events that took place in the empire which was accessible to him. More importantly, his writings seem to be oriental in its understanding and perception of the empire. His eastern view is a great assistance in digging out information on Arabs and their presence in Roman politics. Josephus Flavius is another vital primary source. He was a Jew who discards his background only to be elevated as a member of the Flavian imperial court. He wrote *Jewish Wars*, and this is the closest to a reliable account of Rome's expansion to Judaea and the subsequent fate of the Jews. The particular copy I use is a translated version from Latin by G.A. Williamson, published in 2006 in London. Josephus other work, *Jewish Antiquities* is also a translation by Williamson. Both original works were published in the 1st century CE, thus Josephus was directly reporting some of the events as eyewitness or participant.

Since this work centers on historical experience of eastern and western contact during Late Antiquity, the one who works this fusion are the personalities, powerful on throne and in senate halls. Another form of primary source used to elucidate the role of peoples mentioned in this paper was the compilation of biographies of from various biographers and historians from the later Empire, as in *Lives of Later Caesars* by Anthony Birley published in London by Penguin Books in 1976, displayed an attitude of the time whereby one can see the prejudice and discomfort Romans felt about certain Arabs, especially those leading the political game. Birley's compilation is actually the English version of *Historia Augusta*, a collection of biographies of emperors. He translated it and did not do much to change the content from the actual

work. One example of such commentaries is of Julius Capitolinus, who wrote of the Emperor Macrinus, and he said in his preamble:

The lives of those *principes* (chiefs), or usurpers, or Caesars who were not emperors, for long lie hidden in obscurity, for there is[are] nothing about their private life which is worth telling.⁹

Now, this research is not about highlighting prejudices and such. It's relevant though to know perceptions such as this when all this while it's about looking at only one side of the mirror.

Historians of contemporary times too had made studies of Roman history easier to comprehend. A chronological descriptive source is the most common, but often too focused on the regional affairs that it had been difficult to deduct history of the Arabs while being in contact, or being part of, the Roman Empire. One such source would be Scullard's *From Gracchi to Nero: A history of Rome from 133 BC to AD 68*, published in London by Routledge in 1959. Yet, the relevance is on knowing the political and social development within Rome itself, and that can be relative when analyzed alongside sources that focus on Arabia.

For history of Arabia before Islam, Robert Hoyland in *Arabia and the Arabs* (Routledge, London:2001) used archeological evidences, quotes from Roman and Greek travelers, military commanders and historians like Strabo and Diodorus to find the commonalities between the two. Arabian experiences with the Romans too, were more detailed in this book. As had been said, it is important to take note from looking at an alternative dimension of things and putting it both together. Phillip Hitti *History of the Arabs*, the tenth edition published in 2002 (London: Routledge), not only provide accounts as mentioned by Ptolemy and Cassius Dio, but give its history an

⁹ Here the author highlights the image of misunderstanding a historian faces as he or she deals with illustrious yet controversial personalities, and how to scrutinize information gathered. Taken from "Opilius Macrinus" by Julius Capitolinus, taken from Anthony Birley, *Lives of the later Caesars*. (London: Penguin Books 1976), 268.