

## **The Serpent and the Camel: A Late Antique Arab version of the Creation Myth reinterpreted**

Among the Late Antique milieus whose religious and cultural patterns took an essential influence on the emergent Islam is the Arab principality of the Lakhmids at al-Ḥīra (ca. 300 until 602 CE). Situated at the West bank of the Middle Euphrates, at the fringes of the desert, this Arab city was located not only on the Roman-Sasanian frontier, but also in close proximity to the „pagan“ Arab tribes of the peninsula. Here, all the elements that define Islam’s Late Antique heritage were to be found, namely, Christian-Aramaic, Arabic-Bedouin, Jewish, and Persian influences. Especially the Christians of al-Ḥīra, who, according to all the sources known to us made up a significant portion of its total population, functioned as cultural and religious mediators. Being Arabs and adherents of Syriac Christianity at the same time, they maintained close contacts to their neighboring coreligionists and functioned as a cultural transmission belt between Persia, Byzantine Syria, and the Arab Peninsula.

To highlight the importance of these Arab Christians within the web of emerging monotheistic communities of the region, I will present one of the few original texts we preserve: a poem composed by an Arab Christian nobleman from al-Ḥīra, who was in service of the Sasanian kings. The subject of the poem is a fundamental biblical myth: it is paraphrase of the Fall of Man as it is told in the Genesis. As we will see, the poem is to be interpreted not only as a remarkable reflect of the Christological debates of the period, but also as an argument against challenging Gnostic and Manichean ideas, in an effort to delimitate and stabilize East Syriac (“Nestorian”) positions.