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Iram

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advocated its exportation to the Middle East. Critique of this approach was also widespread, especially amongst Muslims who felt that localised Islam was a deviation from Islamic orthodoxy originating in the Arabian Peninsula.

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CHIARA FORMICHI

Iram

Iram is an ancient Arabian name most commonly associated in modern writing with a lost city in southeastern Arabia, the capital of the pre-Islamic people of

‘Ād, whom God destroyed for their disbelief (Cobb, 2:559; Clapp). The meaning of “Iram” has, however, undergone a complex evolution of varied and debated interpretations in both Muslim and European narratives.

Pre-Islamic Nabatean epigraphy uses *ʾrm* as a toponym in northwestern Arabia (Savignac, 591; Macdonald, 3:76, n. 171; Hoyland, 39–40), near the modern border between Jordan and Saudi Arabia. The inscriptions support Sprenger (144), who postulated that Iram was in the Ḥismā region, based on its identification as an Arabised form of the “Aramaya” listed in Ptolemy’s geography (vi, 7, 27). The historian-geographer al-Hamdānī (d. c.333/945) notes a well, Bīr Iram, in the Ḥismā (*Sifat*, 243), also suggestive that Iram was a pre-Islamic northern Arabian locale.

1. IRAM IN THE QUR’ĀN

The name “Iram” also appears in Q 89:6–8, where it is mentioned with a pre-Islamic people, the ‘Ād, as an example of God’s power to smite tyrants. Whether the Qur’ānic “Iram” was intended to refer to the pre-Islamic northern Arabian toponym is unclear: the precise meaning of the verses hinges on deciphering their ambiguous vocabulary and case vocalisations, and early Muslim Qur’ān readers adopted several possibilities (al-Khaṭīb, 10:418–20, has a list of attested vocalisations). One tradition reads the phrase in verses 89:6–7 as ‘Ādⁱⁿ Iram^a, implying that the Iram were a people related to the ‘Ād. An alternative reading has the verses ‘Ādⁱ Iram^a, a possessive construction that could make “Iram” the name of the ‘Ād’s city. The description in Q 89:7 of Iram as *dhāt al-ʾimād* also gave rise to disagreement. Some exegetes interpreted it as meaning

that the Iram were giants, whereas others interpreted the words to mean either “of columns” (suggesting that Iram was a substantial city) or “of tent poles” (suggesting that the Iram were a nomadic people). Each interpretation is grammatically permissible, and most pre-modern exegetes remained undecided as to whether Iram denoted a city or a tribe (Muqātil, 5:687–8; al-Akhfash, 2:578; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ*, 30:218–20; al-Qurṭubī, 20:30–2).

The context of the verses in Q 89 supports an interpretation of Iram as a location inhabited by the ʿĀd, and al-Biqāʿī (d. 885/1480), one of the few pre-modern exegetes to adopt an expressly narrative (not syntactic) interpretation of the Qurʾān, asserts that Iram was the ʿĀd’s city, not a tribe (8:416). Conversely, “Iram” appears frequently in pre-Islamic poetry as a reference to a bygone people and never as a reference to a city. Pre-Islamic poets cite Iram, often with ʿĀd and occasionally with names of other ancient peoples, to express the idea that all things, even powerful peoples, inevitably pass away (Imruʾ al-Qays, 208; ʿAmr b. Qamīʿa, in al-Buḥturī, *al-Ḥamāsa*, 1:327; Jandal b. Ashmaṭ al-ʿAnazī, in Abū Tammām, 162; Labīd, 34, 108, 209, 378). The Iram also feature metaphorically in violent threats, in which a poet boasts he will dispatch his enemies to perdition, whence they will join the dead Iram (Rashīd b. Rumayḍ al-ʿAnazī, in al-Baṣrī 1:320; see also the early Muslim-era ʿAmr b. Maʿdī Karib, 184). Al-Ḥārith b. Ḥilizza (fl. 550–60 C.E.) uses the adjective *iramī* to connote age, physical strength, or noble equanimity (Ibn al-Anbārī, 492; al-Ṭabrizī, 472). Al-Aghlab al-ʿIjlī (d. c.20/641), a pre-Islamic poet whose long career extended into the early Islamic era, compares a leader to the Iram, also possibly as a metaphor of

nobility (Ibn al-Anbārī, 493). The coupling of Iram with ʿĀd in Q 89:6–7 may thus be drawing from the familiar poetic lexicon for bygone peoples, converting names synonymous in poetry with ancient might into warnings of God’s power to annihilate unbelievers.

Umayyad and early ʿAbbāsīd-era poets also cite Iram as a bygone people, with the same formulae as pre-Islamic poets and with additional allusions to the Qurʾān (al-Qaṭāmī, 100, 103; al-Ḥuṭayʿa, 262; al-Aḥwaṣ al-Anṣārī, in al-Buḥturī *al-Ḥamāsa*, 1:298). Likewise, early genealogists (Ibn Qutayba, 28; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:204, 207, 216) and lexicographers (al-Khalīl, 8:296; Ibn Durayd, 2:1068) endorsed the definition of the Iram as a people related to the ʿĀd. Al-Khalīl’s (d. 175/791) *al-ʿAyn* additionally defines *iram* as a way-marker and/or grave cairn of the ʿĀd, but these definitions are not cited in glosses on Q 89:6–8, and extant texts suggest that most early Muslims probably interpreted the Qurʾān’s “Iram” as a powerful nomadic tribe from the ancient Arabian past.

2. IRAM BECOMES A CITY

The process by which writers reinterpreted Qurʾānic “Iram” as a city had a complex evolution. The toponymic association may have originated to justify the alternative vocalisation, ʿĀdī Iram^a, of Q 89:6–7. Al-Azharī’s (d. 370/980) *Tahdhīb al-lughā*, the first dictionary to state that “Iram” might refer to the city of the ʿĀd (11:254), cites the Qurʾān scholar al-Farrāʾ (d. 207/822–3) as the source of this interpretation. Al-Farrāʾ’s *Maʿānī al-Qurʾān* does argue for the possibility of interpreting “Iram” as a city to explain why Qurʾān readers vocalised Q 89:6–7 as a possessive (3:268), but neither al-Farrāʾ nor al-Azharī

is dogmatic, and they accept that “Iram” could also mean a nomadic people related to the ‘Ād.

The impetus for an exclusive interpretation of Iram as a substantial city perhaps derives from factional competition in early Islam. During the Umayyad and early ‘Abbāsid caliphates, an elite faction identified as the Yamāniyya (Southerner Arabs) articulated a boastful communal history in which they portrayed their pre-Islamic forebears as proto-Muslim urban empire-builders, in contrast to their rivals, the Northerner Arabs (known as Ma‘add, Nizār, or, later ‘Adnān), whose ancestors they denigrated as primitive nomads (Webb). The Yamāniyya counted the ‘Ād amongst their ancestors, and they interpreted the Qur’ānic Iram as a splendid, many-columned imperial city constructed by the ancient ‘Ād’s putative king Shaddād b. ‘Ād, where he lived for the latter part of what was reckoned a reign of five hundred years (Wahb b. Munabbih, 74; Ibn Sharya, 338; al-Hamdānī, *Iklīl*, 8:183; al-Mas‘ūdī, §827). The location of this Iram was variable: because the Yamāniyya accorded Shaddād a world empire, some placed Iram in Yemen (near Abyan, outside of Aden, or in the Ḥaḍramawt, near modern Oman), while others identified it as the original settlement of Alexandria or Damascus, interpreting those cities’ ruined Hellenistic pillars as the remains of Shaddād’s “Iram” (al-Mas‘ūdī, §926, §1143; al-Bakrī, 1:140; al-Andalusī, 1:45–6, 104). Such narratives are ascribed to the first/seventh-century Yamānī scholars Wahb b. Munabbih and ‘Ubayd b. Sharya, but the texts probably coalesced in the early third/ninth century, and it was in that century that “Iram” appears in Arabic poetry as a city rather than a tribe (al-Buḥturī, *Dīwān*, 817; al-Hamdānī,

Iklīl, 8:38; al-Buḥturī elsewhere, *Dīwān*, 1759, follows the older tradition of citing Iram as a tribe).

3. IRAM IN SOUTH ARABIA

Whilst third-fourth/ninth-tenth century Iraqi writers remained tentative in identifying Iram variously as a tribe (al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, 1:204, 207; al-Jawharī, 2:1068) or with Damascus, Alexandria, or Yemen (Ibn Khurdādhbih, 76; al-Mas‘ūdī, §1414; al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi‘*, 30:222–3 prefers Yemen), Yemeni writers promoted the interpretation of Iram as a fabulous South Arabian city. The lexicographer Nashwān al-Ḥimyarī (d. 573/1178) rejected the Damascus/Alexandria options in favour of either Aden or Ḥaḍramawt (1:230). The historian-geographer al-Hamdānī (d. c.333/945) was expressly critical of Iraqi historical narratives and placed Iram near Aden (*al-Iklīl*, 8:33, 183). Al-Hamdānī’s text is also the earliest extant attestation of wondrous associations with Iram. He noted that storytellers in Ṣan‘ā’ told of Iram’s treasures and added a tale that Iram disappeared into the sands, reappearing only once, with its bejewelled splendour intact, to a Bedouin during Mu‘āwiya’s caliphate (41–60/661–80) (al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl*, 8:33, 119, 183; al-Mas‘ūdī, §1414).

The mystique of Iram as a specifically South Arabian “lost city” gained increasing currency after the story’s fourth/tenth-century emergence and appeared in elaborate forms in Iraqi, Syrian, and Egyptian writing (al-Zamakhsharī, 4:735–6; Yāqūt, 1:155–7; al-Ibshīhī, 2:232–3). And the story changed: the initial Yamānī boast of Shaddād as a proto-Muslim subsided, and he was recharacterised into a tyrant who ordered Iram’s construction to rival Paradise, only to be smote by God on the eve of the city’s completion. The

tale borrows motifs from the *Thousand and one nights*, and scholars were roundly critical of its embellishment, rejecting its historicity (al-Mas'ūdī, §§1415–6; Yāqūt 1:157; Ibn Khaldūn 1:20–2; Ibn Ḥajar 11:82). Most exegetes contemporary with the growth of Iram's legend in the mediaeval period also criticised the tales and maintained equivocal interpretations of Iram as either a city or a nomadic people (al-Qurṭubī, 20:30–1; Ibn Kathīr, 4:478; al-Bayḍāwī, 2:594).

4. IRAM IN THE WESTERN IMAGINATION

The latest chapter of Iram's memorialisation, which decidedly promoted the impression of Iram as a lost South Arabian city, occurred in modern Western literature. Whilst Sprenger echoed the mediaeval Muslim scholarly circumspection when he chided the legendary Yemeni Iram narratives as “nonsense” (199), Washington Irving embraced the marvellous facets of the Arabic tales, and included “Irem” as a fabulous story in his 1832 *The Alhambra* (115–6). The British explorer Charles Doughty travelled through Ḥismā in 1876 and noted Sprenger's placement of Iram in that region, but Doughty added some of Irving's mythopoeic flair, coining a new interpretation of Iram as “the city of columns, the terrestrial paradise” (1:93–4). Doughty influenced twentieth-century British travellers to Arabia, and the orientalist mystique he invoked of romantic adventure about a lost city in inhospitable sands inspired exploration. The efforts of Philby and Thomas to locate the site added a novel conflation of Iram with a second lost-city tradition, that of Ubār/Wabār (Philby 575–6; Thomas 260–5). Mediaeval Arabic literature narrated wondrous tales about Wabār in Arabia's Empty Quarter but did not equate it with

the name in Q 89:6–8 (Ibn Qutayba, 27–8; al-Ṭabarī, *Ta'rikh*, 1:203–4; Yāqūt, 5:356–9). The stories' similar themes, however, merged in English writings, which located Iram-Ubār (“Atlantis of the Sands”) in southeastern Arabia. Expeditions uncovered the ruins of a late-mediaeval trading centre in southern Oman, which, despite its late date, became associated in the popular imagination with the pre-Islamic “Qur'ānic Iram” (Fiennes; Clapp). Twentieth-century Muslim Qur'ānic exegesis eschewed such romance: Sayyid Quṭb (d. 1966), like earlier exegetes, interprets Iram as an ancient nomadic people (8:156), but Arabic literary figures embrace the wondrous, invoking Iram in mystical narratives as an enigmatic lost city (Jubrān; Ṣaḥrāwī). Archaeologists have sought to reinterpret Q 89:6–8 via excavations in Jordan and have proposed that the Qur'ān's *Iram dhāt al-ʿimād* means a temple of “Iram on a high mount,” which they place at a site in the Wādī Rum (Wādī Iram) (Zayadine and Farès-Drappeau, 256), adducing yet another possible interpretation of the Iram puzzle.

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