ARAB HISTORY
— Progress and Current Trends —

This article is divided into three parts. As the emergence of Islam was no doubt the first and most important turning point in Arab history, we divide it, in keeping with the Islamic historiographic tradition, into two main periods: one pre-Islamic and the other Islamic. The latter is further divided into two periods in the following parts.

Part I: Pre-Islamic Period

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Muslims, as well as scholars who study Arab history, have traditionally called the pre-Islamic period of Arabia "Jahiliya," a term introduced by the Koran. This term especially applies to the period of Arab history which immediately preceded Islam. Two prominent scholars, Shinji Maejima, in his general history of the Islamic world (Maejima 1968), and Johei Shimada, in his monograph on the early Islamic dynasties (Shimada 1977), both devoted their first chapter to this period. They opened a new era of Islamic and Middle Eastern studies in Japan after World War II.

Up to recently, there had been few monographic works on pre-Islamic Arab history. Suffice it to mention two articles (Ikeda 1977; Ogasawara 1976) in passing. Since the latter half of 1990’s, however, two young specialists in early Islamic history, Hideyuki Io and Taisuke Kono, have begun to publish academic papers (Io 1996, 1998, 2000; Kono 1998, 2001). The former, who in his first article studied idol worship and pilgrimage in the Arabian Peninsula before Islam, has been interested in the annual cycle of pilgrimage as well as various festivals and markets which were held on that occasion. He successively

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published two articles on the calendar system which regulated the periodicity of annual affairs in the Jāhiliya period. As for Kono, he examined the ways how each tribe divided from the main tree in their genealogies and found, among the northern Arabs, a “step structure,” under which the tribes did not all split off from the main trees at the same time, as is found among the southern Arabs, but each split off step by step at different generations. He suggested in conclusion that this structure probably was formed by integrating the genealogies of the originally independent tribes into the same trees. Having developed this subject, he has just submitted a thesis for a doctorate (Kono 2002).

While the above-mentioned scholars are all Arabists, there are two specialists in Old South Arabic epigraphy: Yuzo Shitomi and his pupil, Risa Tokunaga. Shitomi studied this discipline under Jacques Ryckmans at the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium and at present teaches at the University of Tokyo. He has long wrestled with the chronology of the ancient South Arabian kingdoms, above all with the Himyaritic Era (Shitomi 1976, 1988a), and published several papers on the date of the Christian martyrdom at Nağrān to fix the beginning of this era (Shitomi 1987, 1988b, 1990b, 1991). His conclusion, November 523 for the date of martyrdom and 110 B.C. for the beginning of the Himyaritic Era, is at present generally accepted. Historical study of Arab Bedouins in the ancient South Arabian kingdoms is another of his long-term interests (Shitomi 1979, 1998). Probably, however, his study of the historical relations between Aksum, an ancient Ethiopian kingdom, and Himyar, a South Arabian one, will doubtless become his lifework. Articles already published on this subject are: Shitomi 1989, 1990a and 1997.

Finally Tokunaga, having finished her study under Shitomi and published her first article (Tokunaga 1999), is participating in the survey by the Middle Eastern Culture Center in Japan in the Eastern Desert of Egypt and the Southwestern Region of Saudi Arabia. She has collected South Arabic and Thamudic graffiti and begun to publish her study on them (Tokunaga 2002a, 2002b).

Although there are not many scholars in this field, we can thus place our hope on a new generation.

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