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**Brian Ulrich**, *Arabs in the Early Islamic Empire: Exploring al-Azd Tribal Identity*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019, viii, 259 + viii pp. incl. index and two genealogical charts, ISBN 978-1-4744-3679-3.

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In current research on the first generations of Islamic history, few groups are as elusive as the Arab-Muslim ‘people’ and their conquest-cum-migration-cum-ac-culturation during and after the early Islamic conquests. Brian ULRICH’s dissertation on the somewhat elusive ‘tribe’ of al-Azd accordingly forms a most welcome and needed case study that illustrates the advantages and drawbacks of engaging with the pervasive social structure of the ‘tribal’ affiliation of individuals as presented in early and classical Arabic-Islamic historiography from the point of view of a stable tribal identity. Building on his framing of al-Azd identity as persisting from pre-Islamic into ‘Abbāsīd times with shifting meanings (2), ULRICH

proceeds by analyzing five geographically and historically delimited case studies from pre-Islamic to early 'Abbāsid times, in which individuals and collective bodies affiliated to al-Azd figure prominently, in chronological order. Within his case studies, his methodology is not strictly prosopographical, but rather focused on the intersection between the genealogically underpinned foundation of claims to status and affiliation voiced by Azdis in his case studies with social history.

Rather than follow the book chapter by chapter, the present review will focus on a discussion of ULRICH's theoretical assumptions to illustrate the challenges and advantages of his approach. The first aspect to be discussed is ULRICH's understanding of 'tribality' within the early Arab-Islamic commonwealth. Although he does not discuss this systematically, ULRICH's monograph demonstrates the stability of tribal affiliation as reflected in the 'tribal' *nisbas* that form part of the 'full' name of individuals in the historiographical corpus of early and classical Arabic-Islamic historiography. Notwithstanding the inclusion of individuals and collective bodies affiliated to al-Azd from a variety of social and occupational backgrounds in his case studies, however, ULRICH repeatedly echoes somewhat questionable notions of Arab 'tribal' identities as being substantialized in a propensity towards 'Bedouin,' 'rural,' or 'unruly' ways of life, which are not critically evaluated for their relevance in the context under discussion. Some examples of this tendency include the discussion of 'tribes and states as overlapping forms of social relations' on p. 2, where Bedouin are singled out as representative of a 'tribal' view without mentioning the continued relevance of tribal affiliation in settled and urban contexts until the present day, the assumption of a 'Bedouin past' of al-Azd on p. 56 without reference to the likely non-Bedouin life of large parts of the pre-Islamic al-Azd in Southern Arabia, or ULRICH's statement on p. 104 that 'The Arab tribes formed a [socially defined] periphery' within the early Islamic empire, which – while certainly interesting in the context of the comparative study of empires – neglects the fact that virtually every Arab and Muslim individual mentioned in the sources during the timeframe of his study is affiliated to some sort of tribal entity in one way or another.

This tendency of equating affiliation to the Arab 'tribe' of al-Azd to some sort of 'Bedouin-ness' is particularly unfortunate as ULRICH's presentation of al-Farazdaq's lampooning of al-Azd (76–77) would have constituted an ideal starting point to investigate the deployment and contestation of alternative 'Arab' collective heritages beyond the narrow 'Bedouin' paradigm. The representation of al-Azd as particularly prone to seafaring and coastal life could, in this context, have been used to connect contexts treated separately by ULRICH, such as al-Farazdaq's mockery reflecting the polemical milieu of the early Arab-Islamic garrison towns and the – supposedly shameful – crucifixion of Azdis alongside a fish attested both for the (Azdi) Muhallabid Yazīd b. al-Muhallab and during the

internal strife between different Arab collective bodies before and during the ‘Abbāsīd revolution in Khurāsān. Such a comparative transregional and diachronical discussion of polemics directed at collective bodies and individuals affiliated to al-Azd would have underpinned his central argument about the persistence of al-Azd identity. Such an overarching evaluation of representations and polemics engaging with the ways of life of al-Azd and their ancestors could then have been complemented by a systematic and comparative study of early Islamic mobilization along networks formulated in a terminology of ‘tribal’ affiliation versus alternative networks and social ties. ULRICH’s omission to discuss the overarching *longue durée* underlying the depiction of al-Azd within Arabic-Islamic historiographical traditions is to some part connected to his detailed analysis of the Azdī involvement in the socio-economic contexts of his case studies, which focuses on the particular functionalizations and deployments of al-Azd ‘tribal identity’ in the context under discussion.

A second assumption of ULRICH that is not systematically discussed concerns the relevance of the tribal affiliation of early and classical Arabic-Islamic traditionaries, a number of whom were in fact affiliated to al-Azd, for their depiction of al-Azd. This is particularly felt in ULRICH’s ‘author’-centered discussion of different reports describing one particular event to reconstruct and analyze the highly complex strife within and outside al-Azd during and after the second Islamic civil war (87–100). The first methodological question that ULRICH does not discuss concerns the limits of the influence of individual scholars (and their tribal affiliation) on the corpus of ‘historical’ reports constituting the highly contested collective and cultural memory of Muslim communities. Possible checks to the freedom of partisan and tendential presentation exercised by individual traditionaries that should have been discussed in this context are for instance the social embeddedness of these reports in contested debates conducted within Muslim communities and the readiness with which reports transcended tribal boundaries, as reflected in the predominantly trans-tribal *isnāds* or *chains of authorization* given in the extant collections.

The second unaddressed problem posed during ULRICH’s ‘author’-centered discussion of the depiction of the Muhallabids in particular (116–156) lies in the fact that different traditionaries affiliated to al-Azd arrive at differing evaluations in their judgment of the Muhallabids and other Azdīs. The prominence of traditionaries affiliated to al-Azd, such as Abū Mihknaf, Ibn A‘tham al-Kūfī, Wahb b. Jarīr, and others, within the corpus of early and classical Arabic-Islamic historiography in fact makes al-Azd an ideal case study for a critical evaluation of the influence of the tribal affiliation of traditionaries on the depiction of ‘their’ tribe in the material they transmitted during various ‘layers’ of the (communal) transmission of historical memories. Notwithstanding ULRICH’s acknowledgement of

LINDSTEDT's identification of Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī with an individual affiliated to al-Azd (124), however, ULRICH explicitly contrasts Ibn A'tham al-Kūfī with 'al-Azd traditionists' in his concluding evaluation of the tendencies and partisanship reflected in different accounts describing the Muhallabids (156). In this context as elsewhere, a systematic evaluation of the relevance of affiliation to al-Azd or other 'tribal' networks for the depiction of Azdis by different traditionaries would have been helpful.

In the view of the present reviewer, the methodological problems reflected both in ULRICH's substantialization of 'tribal' Azdī identity as somehow 'Bedouin' and in his assumption rather than discussion of the relevance of an Azdī affiliation of particular transmitters for the depiction of individuals and collective bodies affiliated to al-Azd are both connected to the framing of his inquiry. Notwithstanding his erudition and diligence in engaging with a wide and disparate variety of sources and studies pertaining to some of the most complex episodes and questions of the first two centuries of Islamic history, which are well-reflected in his monograph, ULRICH's argumentative framing of affiliation to al-Azd as a persistent 'identity' interprets affiliation to al-Azd in terms of 'being' and thereby prevents a more nuanced evaluation of its various functionalizations.<sup>1</sup> Instead of arguing for a 'persistence of tribal identity' reflected in the narratives of traditionaries affiliated to al-Azd, such as Abū Mikhnaf (155), a less substantializing framing along the lines of – for instance – 'tribal affiliation' as a social resource that continued to be available for multiple and contested deployments alongside other forms of social capital could open the way for a more nuanced interpretation of its significance and meaning in a particular context. Such a relational framing of tribal affiliation to one entity such as al-Azd would also allow inquiry into the functionalization of other tribal affiliations super- and subordinated to the 'tribal' level of al-Azd.

Stylistically, ULRICH's presentation is somewhat stretched between extensive, possibly sometimes a bit too dense and fine-grained retellings of a particular episode following the accounts of various historiographers one by one and succinct and highly perspicacious comments and conclusions by ULRICH himself that risk slipping by in the mass of detail reproduced in his presentation of the course of events. Unfortunately, the transliteration is marred by a number of mistakes and inconsistencies both in the rendering of Arabic terms and in the bibliographical information provided. In light of the prominence of Azdis among

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<sup>1</sup> On a more theoretical level, this critique of 'identity' as a frame of inquiry has been voiced most influentially by Roger BRUBAKER and Frederick COOPER, "Beyond 'Identity,'" in: *Theory and Society* 29,1 (2000): 1–47.

the most influential traditionaries in early and classical Arabic-Islamic historiography, the present reviewer would have been particularly interested in a comparison of ULRICH's findings concerning Azdis in Iraq with PIOTROVSKIJ's discussion of the Yamaniyya and Yamanis in Umayyad Syria,<sup>2</sup> which similarly combines an interest in historical memory as embedded in social history and the historiographical tendencies of the material transmitted in a particular genealogical milieu. It is to be hoped that ULRICH's detailed case studies on the social history of Azdis during the first two centuries of Islamic history will encourage further study along these lines.

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<sup>2</sup> Mihail Borisovič PIOTROVSKIJ, *Predanie o himiâritskom care As'ade al-Kamile*, Moskva: Izd. Nauka, 1977.