“BAREFOOT AND NAKED”: WHAT DID THE BEDOUIN OF THE ARAB CONQUESTS LOOK LIKE?

The Syriac churchman Bar Penkaye, who wrote about 690, held the Arab invaders to have been “naked men riding without armor or shield.” In the same vein Michael the Syrian (d. 1199) reports that a certain Hiran sent by the last Sasanid emperor to spy on the Arabs told his employer that the invaders were “a barefoot people, naked and weak, but very brave.” A Muslim text dating from, perhaps, the later eighth century similarly insists that the invaders were “barefoot and naked, without equipment, strength, weapons, or provisions.” In all three texts the word “naked” seems to be used in the sense of poorly equipped and lacking body armor rather than devoid of clothes, and all three depict the Arabs as poorly equipped in order to highlight the extraordinary, God-assisted nature of the Arab conquests. “I have a sharp arrowhead that penetrates iron, but it is no use against the naked,” as Rustam says in the Shāhnāma, in his premonition of the fall of the Sasanids. But precisely what did the Arab invaders wear? It would be the first question to spring to Oleg Grabar’s mind. Under normal circumstances it would be the last to spring to mine, for as Oleg is fond of telling his colleagues, historians tend to ignore the concrete physical manifestation of things; in particular, they do not think of the way things looked and so miss an important dimension of the past. I have always pleaded guilty to that charge. Having benefited from Oleg’s lively company and warm heart for over ten years, however, I shall now try to make amends, if only with a trifling offering: how should we tell a filmmaker who wanted to screen the story of the Arab conquests to depict the conquerors? More precisely, how should we tell him to depict the desert Arabs who participated in the conquests, for the bedouin will not have been dressed in the same way as the settled Arabs, and I should like to keep things simple.

Most of us would probably reply that the hypothetical filmmaker should depict the bedouin warriors as men in kaffiyehs and flowing robes, along the lines familiar from Lawrence of Arabia and countless Hollywood films; but as far as the bedouin of pre-Islamic Arabia are concerned, it would seem that we are wrong. Though “naked” may be a little hyperbolic, both literary and iconographic evidence suggests that it is not far from the truth.

To start with the literary evidence, Ammianus Marcellinus, commander of the eastern armies about 350 AD, tells us that the Arabs of the Syrian desert were “warriors of equal rank, half nude, clad in dyed cloaks as far as the loins.” The word he uses for their cloaks is sagulum, a short, military tunic, and one wonders how literally one should take him: were they wearing Roman army issue, passed down from relatives and friends who had served in the Roman army, or alternatively stolen from unlucky soldiers? (“When bedouin raiders in the desert encountered someone from the settled areas, it was their custom to accost him with the command, Ishlah yâ walad, ‘Strip, boy!’ meaning that they intended to rob him of his clothing,” as Jabbur says of the Syrian bedouin many centuries later. Ammianus does not tell us what, if anything, the warriors wore on their heads, but of another Arab, this time one in Roman service at Adrianople, he says that he was long haired and naked except for a loincloth. In the same vein Malka, a fourth-century Syrian who was captured by bedouin between Aleppo and Edessa and whose adventures were recorded by Jerome, describes how the Ishmaelites descended upon his party of about seventy travelers “with their long hair flying from under their headbands.” He did not think of them as wearing turbans or kaffiyehs, then, or as shielding their heads from the sun by any kind of head cover at all. Like Ammianus, he says that they wore cloaks over their “half-naked bodies,” but he adds that they wore broad military boots (caligae). Again one wonders if they were wearing Roman army issue. They transported Malka into the desert and set him to work as a shepherd, and there he “learned to go naked,” he says, presumably meaning that he learned
to cover himself with a mere skin; this seems to have been all that slaves wore in pre-Islamic Arabia. One would infer that he had handed over his clothes to his captors.

We now turn to the iconographic evidence, looking at it region by region.

SYRIA

To start in Syria, there is a representation of semi-naked bedouin in an ivory carving from a chair made in the first half of the sixth century in Antioch or (under Syro-Palestinian influence) Alexandria (fig. 1). It depicts Joseph’s brothers selling Joseph to two Saracens: the brothers are represented by the three figures on the left, Joseph stands in the middle, and two Saracens appear with two camels behind them to the right. The Saracens, who are armed with a bow and a spear respectively, have long, apparently plaited hair and wear nothing on their heads or their upper torsos, merely loose garments wrapped around their waists, which reach as far as their ankles but expose one of their legs as they walk. The brothers are also scantily clad, but in more military-looking outfits, and it is they rather than the Saracens who are wearing boots. The Saracens are shod in sandals. There is of course no guarantee that the carving is based on observation rather than artistic convention, but one point is clear: it was not as heavily clad figures in the style of Lawrence of Arabia that bedouin were envisaged in sixth-century Syria.

Another ivory carving on the same chair shows the Saracens selling Joseph to Potiphar (fig. 2). Here Joseph is seen twice, first on a camel (on the left) and next between Potiphar and one of the Saracens, to whom she is handing money. Potiphar is wearing classical-looking robes. The Saracens’ robes also appear more flowing than in the first panel, but here as there their lower body wraps are split in the middle, exposing their legs, and their arms are bare. In fact, their entire upper torsos could be bare, though it is hard to tell. The short tunic that Joseph is wearing clearly includes a drape over one shoulder, and the adult Saracens could have a similar item on their shoulders. Maybe the artist dressed his characters in classical clothes in order to conjure up a bygone age. In any case, he depicted the Saracens with the same long, apparently plaited hair as in the first panel, and he gave them sandals, too, but not any kind of head-gear. One would take it to have been long hair of this kind that Malka saw flowing under headbands.

Yet another sixth-century carving, also a Syrian or Syro-Egyptian work, depicts two brothers selling Joseph to a Saracen. Joseph and his brothers are wearing short tunics similar to those in which rural people are depicted on the mosaic floors of sixth-century churches in Madaba. The Saracen is wearing a mantle that leaves the left part of his chest exposed, but what he is wearing underneath...