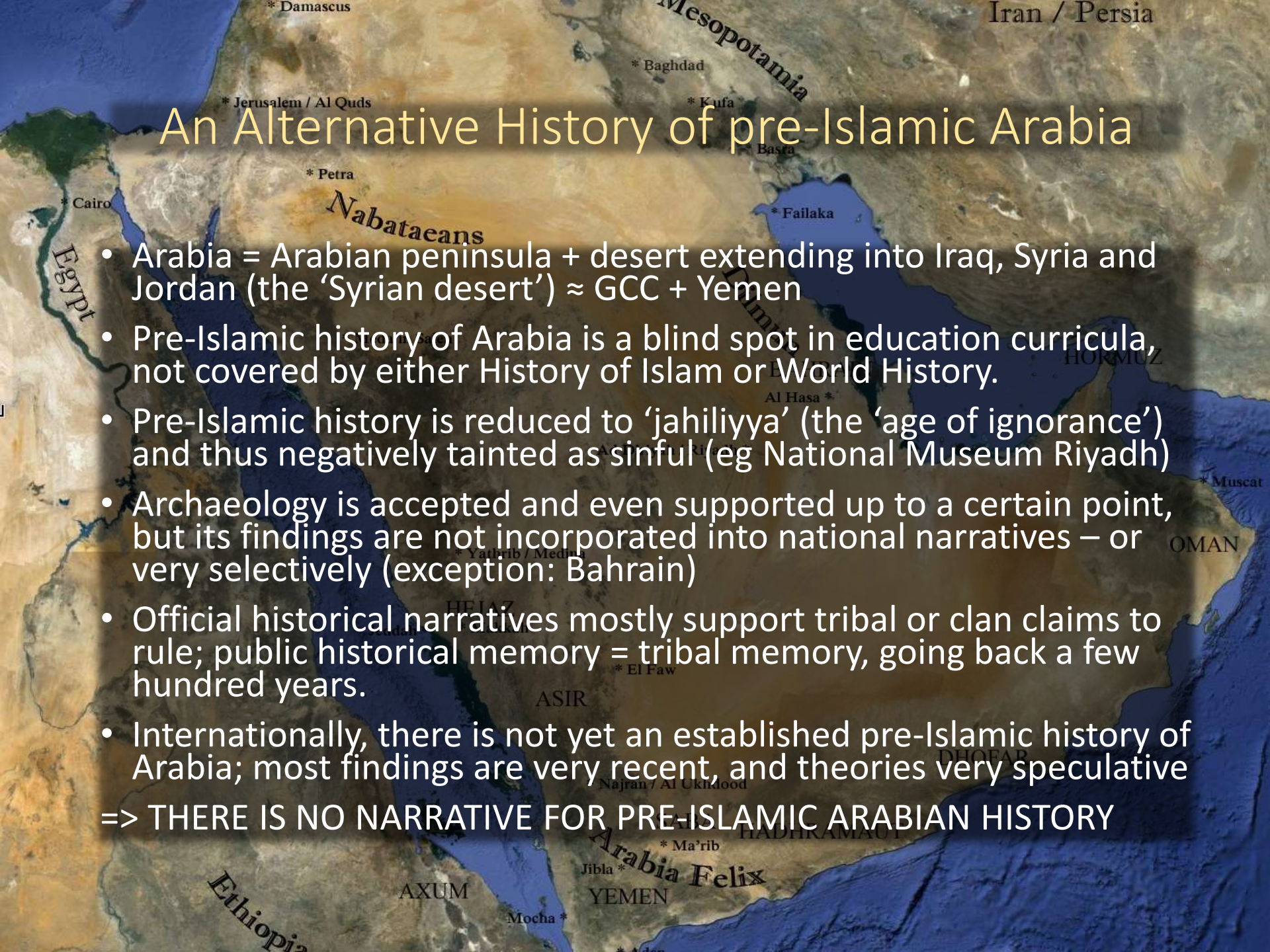


The Subversive Potential of Cultural Heritage

1. An alternative history of pre-Islamic Arabia
 - The case of Bahrain
2. Saudi Arabia, Daesh, and Islamic culture
3. Ocalan's Stone Age and contemporary Rojava

An Alternative History of pre-Islamic Arabia

- Arabia = Arabian peninsula + desert extending into Iraq, Syria and Jordan (the 'Syrian desert') ≈ GCC + Yemen
 - Pre-Islamic history of Arabia is a blind spot in education curricula, not covered by either History of Islam or World History.
 - Pre-Islamic history is reduced to 'jahiliyya' (the 'age of ignorance') and thus negatively tainted as sinful (eg National Museum Riyadh)
 - Archaeology is accepted and even supported up to a certain point, but its findings are not incorporated into national narratives – or very selectively (exception: Bahrain)
 - Official historical narratives mostly support tribal or clan claims to rule; public historical memory = tribal memory, going back a few hundred years.
 - Internationally, there is not yet an established pre-Islamic history of Arabia; most findings are very recent, and theories very speculative
- => THERE IS NO NARRATIVE FOR PRE-ISLAMIC ARABIAN HISTORY**



*There is ample evidence that, until shortly before the advent of Islam, Arabia was ruled by **matriarchs** – both the tribes and the settled areas*



Purportedly, the first mention of the 'Arabs' was made in Assyrian texts of the 9th century BC. King Tiglath-Pileser conducted a campaign against the "Shamsi, Queen of the Arabs" capturing "1000 of her people, 30.000 camels, 20.000 cattle, 5000 bags of all kinds of spices (...) and she, to the desert, like a wild she-ass made off".



2000 BC (left) and 500 BC (above): women, including attributes of power, are represented much more often than men in South Arabian art

There is no indication of inequality between men and women in pre-Islamic Arabia



Some statues of women with attributes of power from the early centuries AD – in Bahrain National Museum



High levels of
artistic
sophistication,
including
synthesis,
abstraction
and aesthetics

*Grave markers, Tayma,
Northern Saudi Arabian
Desert, 4000 to 3000 BC*





But also
astonishingly
realistic art

*Votive statuettes,
Yemen, 1st millennium
BC*



Some really cool art
was made in ancient
Arabia...

*Nabataean God Stone,
Petra, approx. 1st C AD*

... as well as some amazing architecture



Ruins of the Palace of Saba, Ma'rib, Yemen, 8th – 2nd C BC



Monumental Rock Architecture from the Nabataean era, Meda'in Saleh, Saudi Arabia

Ancient Arabians had fun – drinking, sex, partying...



Seals, Bahrain, Dilmun period (3rd – 2nd millennium BC). Not on display in the Bahrain National Museum were purportedly lurid seals



Important agricultural and urban development techniques were pioneered in Ancient Arabia



Above: 'madbasa' (Qalat Bahrain, 2000 BC)
Left: Irrigation channels, Al Thuqeibah, Sharjah (UAE) 1st millenium BC



Town of Saar, Bahrain, 2300-1900 BC



Ancient Arabia was fully integrated into the classic Mediterranean world (Greeks, Romans etc.) and played an important part in its development

Funerary Stele for Ghalilat, Yemen, 7th C BC



Lihyanite statues, 7th - 4th c BC

Hellenic art found on the island of Failaka, Kuwait



Portrait of a nobleman, Qaryat El Faw, Kindah Kingdom, ca 3rd-4th C. AD



Before the advent of Islam there were Jewish and Christian communities whose history marked subsequent developments, and who left their own heritage



Ruins of Sir Bani
Yas monastery,
UAE, 7th C. AD

*Ruins of Najran, Saudi Arabia
(until 500 AD)*





**Ancient dam
at Khaybar
(a Jewish
oasis 150 km
North of
Medina)
destroyed ca
7th-8th C AD**

This alternative historical narrative of Arabia is based on archaeological findings and creative interpretation:

Arabia used to be a rich, peaceful and mostly settled society ruled by women. Relations between women and men were uncomplicated and joyful. Different cultures coexisted peacefully and some of them knew high levels of artistry and religious sophistication.

There was intensive trade and cultural exchange with countries far away. There were several boom periods fueled by natural resources and trade, with long bust periods in between.

5000-4000 BC: Stone Age boom

2300-1800 BC: Bronze Age boom

800 BC – 300 AD: Iron Age boom

1900 AD - ?: Oil Age boom

The narrative of Arabia's Islamic period is also very selective, repressing many historical facts – especially 'heretic' movements.

The self-image of tribal origin = that of the As-Salaf As-Salih: pure, innocent, manly joy of free raiding tribes on horseback.



This self-image is based on oral history and religious traditions, not on material remains.

The case of Bahrain

- Bahrain commemorates its pre-Islamic history at the expense of its early Islamic age
- Bahrain/Al Hasa were home to some of Islam's most heretic movements, such as the Qarmatians.
- When the Al Khalifa Sunni tribe related to Kuwaiti and Saudi current ruling families took over the island, in the late 18th century, they imposed their rule on an unwilling Shia population
- The population of Al Hasa and Bahrain was Shia well before the Iranians (not imported from Iran)
- Thus cultural heritage policies again reflect current political issues
- Interestingly, Bahrain is still known as 'the island of pleasure', as in antiquity, because of its relatively lax morals



The Saudi government has consciously erased most of its cultural heritage, especially in Mecca: the birthplace and grave of the prophet, the mosques built by the prophet's companions, the Ottoman fort overlooking the great mosque etc. In their place have come monuments to Saudi Arabia's current oil wealth



Ahmed Mater, from the *Desert of Pharan* series

Saudi Arabia's development has generally had no regard for culture...



... or the environment

Ahmed Mater: *Empty Land* (2011)



Local cultures in Saudi Arabia, for example in the Asir, have rapidly been erased by the state's Wahhabism



Ibrahim Abumsmar: painting of his parents



There is a growing passive resistance against Wahhabism in many Saudi cultural circles.

For example: Hejazis (from the area around Mecca, Medina and Jeddah) oppose their tolerant, cosmopolitan views on Islam with the stricter Nejdi (Riyadh and central provinces) points of view.

Ibrahim Abumsmar: *the New Religion*, 2014

While the Saudi state is erasing all forms of culture and replacing it with supposedly culture-less Wahhabism, the country's opening to the internet and satellite TV in the late 1990s has completely revolutionized popular culture.



Manal Al Dowayan: Satellite Hallucinations, 2008

Similar approach to culture

by the Wahhabi clergy and the Islamic State



Culture is seen as an accretion, over the ages, of layers of filth over the true message of Islam – not any specific culture, but culture **generally** – also Islamic

Evolution of propaganda styles and messages of Islamic extremists, from early Salafists to Daesh



Jordanian pilot confronted with the result of his aerial bombardment – [ISIS propaganda video](#), 22'34", 2014-15



Unlike the early Taliban, and in a much more pronounced way than Al Qaeda, the Islamic State, due to its emphasis on self-representation (propaganda), definitely has a **cultural aspect**.

The culture of the Islamic State seems more rooted in **global pop culture** than in Islamic theology.

IS does not seek a sustainable system, but is eager to bring about an apocalypse; one could call it a **CULTURE OF DEATH**



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The PYD which governs the Kurdish Syrian enclave of Rojava takes the protection of cultural heritage very seriously (site of Urkesh, Hakaseh Province)

Ocalan's theories of Kurdish cultural origins

- Kurds are one of the oldest indigenous populations of the Middle East; they have lived in what is now Kurdistan for at least 4000 to 5000 years.
- Civilization in the Neolithic period (20,000 to 5000 BC) was characterized by equality between men and women, lack of private property (primitive socialism) and high levels of cultural achievement as well as the establishment of settlements, the beginning of agriculture and first inventions – many of which were made by women.
- Trouble began with the establishment of patriarchic states based on religion and institutionalization of power, for ex. territorial control (ancient Assyria). Men came to control the surplus and use it for their own power-related purposes. Monotheism made matters worse.
- Kurdish communities escaped both forms of control, up to a degree, until modern times thanks to their isolation. Their salvation lies in returning to a stateless democratic society with complete gender equality.

What we are led to believe

- Material view of history: agriculture led to surplus, which led to urbanization and the gradual development of superstructures – and civilization
- Primitive man (the cave-man) was brutish, stupid and wholly uncivilized.
- Societies which did not master agriculture and thus urbanization – tribal societies – remained generally uncivilized/backward and are doomed to disappear.
- Some counter-narratives developed, among anthropologists for example, about the importance of spirituality and relative sophistication of some tribal or primitive societies.
- Although contemporary education, museum displays etc. have taken note of these counter-narratives, the main narrative they relay remains clearly materialistic.

The recent discovery of the 12000 year old city Gobekli Tepe in southern Turkey fits within Ocalan's theory better than within mainstream historical narratives.



Conclusion

- History is a narrative, connecting dots. These dots are historical facts as related in chronicles or shown by archaeological excavations. Although their existence is certain, they can be interpreted differently.
- The dots can be connected in different narratives.
- Historical narratives serve political purposes, usually a hegemonic discourse
- New interpretations of cultural heritage, and new ways of constructing historic narratives, thus can be powerful political tools
- Would the alternative history of pre-Islamic history outlined above help bring about a renaissance in the world of Islam, in the same manner that a new reading of classical history brought about the Renaissance in Europe?