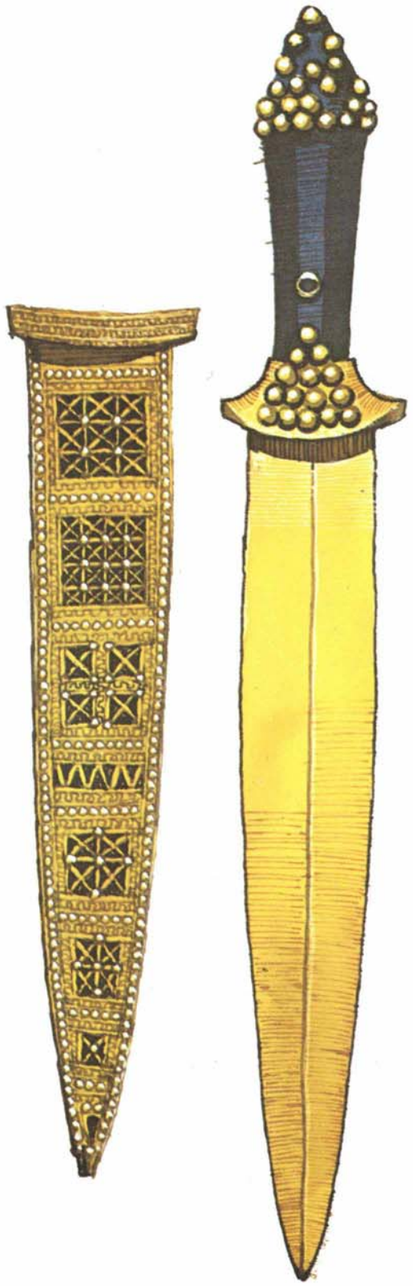

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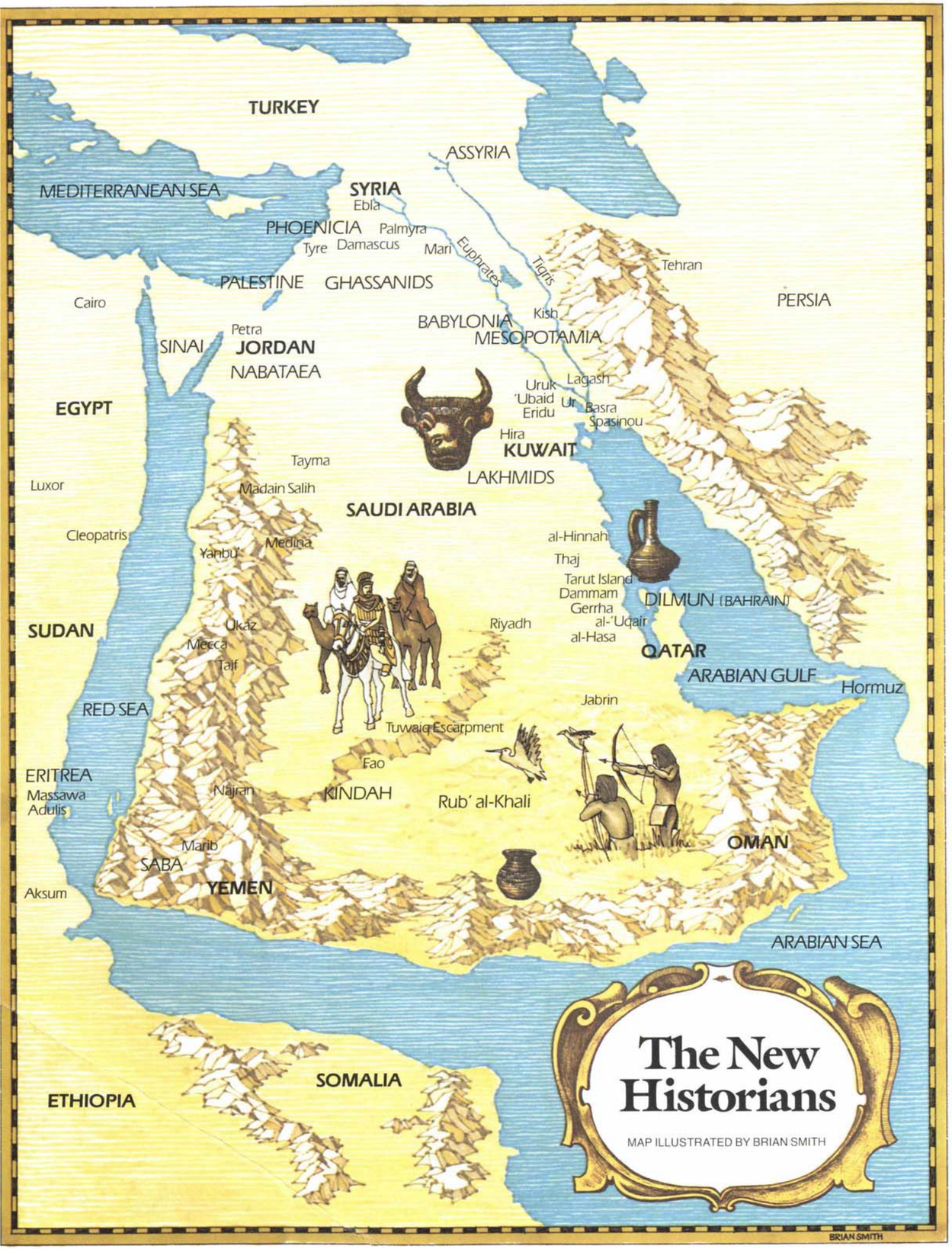
MARCH–APRIL 1980

The New Historians



ARAMCO WORLD magazine

VOL. 31 NO. 2 PUBLISHED BI-MONTHLY MARCH-APRIL 1980

Written by Jon Mandaville. Illustrated by Michael Grimsdale.

Jon Mandaville grew up in an Aramco family in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. After finishing high school in Beirut, he studied Arabic at the University of Edinburgh and under Philip Hitti at Princeton University. Now a professor of history and Middle East studies at Portland State University, he thinks of history as more than facts alone, and likes to explore the background of historical events in "live narrative." The author of seven earlier Aramco World *articles, Mandaville traveled the length and breadth of Saudi Arabia for this issue, visiting sites and museums and talking with the kingdom's "new historians." Subsequently, he moved to Yemen – subject of a future full issue of* Aramco World *– where he is presently serving as the first director of the year-old American Institute for Yemeni Studies in Sanaa.*

Illustrator Michael Grimsdale also grew up abroad: in Hong Kong, Malaya and South Africa. Son of a British army family, he was educated at Cheltenham and Sandhurst, and studied architecture and then illustration at St. Martins School of Art in London. After traveling in the U.S., Mexico and Australia, he returned to Britain to become one of the country's foremost free-lance illustrators. For this Aramco World *issue, Grimsdale haunted the British Museum, sketchbook in hand, and searched through dozens of reference volumes to find authentic details for his 30 impressionistic scenes of Arabia's pre-Islamic history. Some preconceived notions fell by the wayside in the process: "Greek helmets, at that period," he asserts, "looked very like what we always think of as Roman ones. But this is the design the Greeks wore."*

— The Editors

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Cover: In this artist's impression of an archeological dig in Saudi Arabia, an ancient sculpture again sees the light of day for the first time in centuries – perhaps millennia. Under the watchful supervision of one of the kingdom's "new historians," excavation workers gently lift the find out of an exploration trench; in the background, only suggestions remain of what may once have been the walls of a living city. Back cover: A richly filigreed knife and sheath are examples of the quality of Sumerian craftsmanship. Illustrations by Michael Grimsdale.

The New Historians

Pick a time in the past, any time. You'll find someone in the Arabian Peninsula dipping his pen by lamplight to fill a few more pages of the month's events. Ask any desert man there the history of his tribe, and he'll reel it off by rote – or if he can't, he'll drag you by the hand to an old man who can. For generation upon generation, Arabs of the Peninsula have singled themselves out to record the experiences of their people. Why? Two reasons, basically: to help their generation learn from lessons of the past, and then, to pinpoint their pride of place in time.

New Saudi Arab historians are doing the same today, and for the same age-old reasons. But the methods have changed from manuscripts and memory to computers, transits, microfilms and shovels. Writing history is nothing new to the people of Saudi Arabia. But digging history is.

In the last six years, Saudi Arabia has decided to add archeology to its collection of historical tools and the results are just beginning to show. Already, however, scholars around the world are beginning to revise their traditional histories. Who, after all, expected to find some of the earliest settlers of Sumer 400 miles south of Basra? Greek towns in al-Hasa? Cities in the sands of the Empty Quarter?

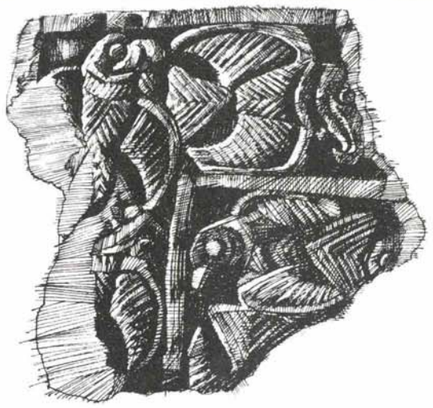
The main purpose of these articles, therefore, is to offer a glimpse of this revision, and show a little of how these new discoveries are affecting interpretations of man's earliest history in the Middle East.

A second purpose is to introduce, briefly, the key figures in this exciting exploration into man's past – the new historians. From different generations of different backgrounds and upbringings with different personalities, they share, nevertheless, certain important qualities: drive, conviction and faith.

And they need it. It takes a tough man to push through a new approach to something so fundamental to national identity as history. And it takes a *fast* man to beat the bulldozers in Saudi Arabia today. We call these men "new" because of their use of the latest technology. But beneath all this, they still are working as their fathers did on the perennial goals of history: a compendium of man's experience and – an important factor for their people – a sense of place in time. Today, in this world of overnight modernization and rapid social change, those age-old goals look more important than ever.

Who *are* the new historians of Saudi Arabia?

Of the dozen or so I talked to, three stood out clearly as the pioneers: Shaikh Hasan Al ash-Shaikh, Minister of Higher Education of Saudi Arabia, Professor 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ansary of the University of Riyadh, and Dr. Abdullah Masry, Director of the Department of Antiquities and Museums of Saudi Arabia. These men, scholars all, represent three different generations and each has his own particular style and approach and worries. But all three in their own way, through their faith in the ultimate value of the history of man, have made major contributions in bringing the modern science of history to Saudi Arabia. Saudi Arabia is their immediate beneficiary; ultimately, the whole world of historical scholarship is in their debt.



My first interview on the subject was with Shaikh Hasan Al ash-Shaikh and it very nearly didn't take place. I had come to the ministry in Riyadh with almost no forewarning and the secretary, with a glance at other gentlemen patiently waiting for appointments, could only smile dubiously. But a few minutes later he beckoned to me and I entered the office – large, respectable, lined with books but not particularly pretentious – and saw a tall man unfolding himself from behind the desk, leaning forward with an easy smile and offering his hand.

Shaikh Hasan, Minister of Education when the Department of Antiquities was founded and now Minister of Higher Education, shows the best qualities of an older generation – open, generous to visitors, easy in conversation, but firmly the leader in ministry business – and brings to his position a heritage of education. His great-great-great-great grandfather was Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab, the 18th-century founder of an Islamic reform movement. His vocation, then, is scarcely surprising. What is particularly noteworthy is his success at it, given the trials and tensions of Saudi Arabia's overnight drive for industrialization. How do you establish from scratch a national educational system which, on the one hand, will satisfy impatient younger people and meet the future demands of a modern society, yet, on the other hand, will be acceptable to a more cautious older generation? How do you make neutron activation analysis of dug-up potsherds acceptable as historical methodology to a traditional historian who relies on manuscripts?

Shaikh Hasan's answer is illuminating: "With the help and guidance of God." Which took the form, he suggests, of encouragement from his friend the late King Faisal, and solid work from a "competent, cooperative staff."

His examples of success in the kingdom's elementary and secondary schools, and now in higher education, are also telling: computer programming where pens once laboriously worked the figures, schools standing where there were none before, and a curriculum to match the challenge.

Included in the curriculum, of course, is history. But is it taught, I asked him, by the new historians? "Fundamentally," he muses, "there are no new historians. The goals of both the historians of the older generation and those of our universities today are the same: the study and understanding of man's past. But there are, certainly, new technologies and methods for discovering new sources for that study. These new approaches in themselves are truly useful for history. We are bringing them into the classroom as rapidly as we can train our faculty to use them." He shifted back in his chair. "Of course, speaking as an administrator of the educational system, they have their drawbacks." How do you mean? "Well, consider. Our historians in the past were generalists. They were more widely read in many fields of history. Many literally memorized volumes of important works; I know personally of one who did this, a scholar in Mecca.

"Now we are sending students from our colleges to Europe and America for doctoral studies in history, to learn the new techniques. They return as specialists, specialists not only in rather small periods but in one kind of source for those periods. Some have come back having spent two years writing their thesis on a few years in the life of one man.

"We can't afford that kind of specialization. It may be suitable for developed countries like America, where you can afford one hundred specialists to cover one hundred years, but not for developing countries like Saudi Arabia. Here, with our shortage of teachers, one man must be prepared and willing to cover a great deal of history; we need broadly useful teachers for our students.

"And it's not just a matter of teaching," he added. "At this stage, as we open new universities every five or so years, the new highly-educated Saudi students of history as well as of other disciplines find themselves moving to administrative posts within a few years, and must suddenly be able to handle broad policy questions."

The Minister of Higher Education has no special interest in history, although, as a graduate in Islamic law, he is well versed in the field of Islamic legal thought. What matters is that he appreciates its importance in the curricula of his colleges and universities, and in turn encourages the new Saudi historians in their classrooms and in their research.

There are two worlds of history in Saudi Arabia today. One is the world of the court chronicler compiling dynastic annals of wars and diplomacy or the traditionist painstakingly analyzing the accuracy of thousands and more traditional stories of the life of the Prophet and his companions and committing the best of them to memory. The other is the world of the modern researcher who burrows into archives, checks out a book on interlibrary loan from a library a continent away, studies the 300-year statistical trend of house rents, or – as they now do in Saudi Arabia – makes a chemical analysis of pottery from a four-millennia-old town site. This is the world of the new historians – of men like Professor 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ansary.

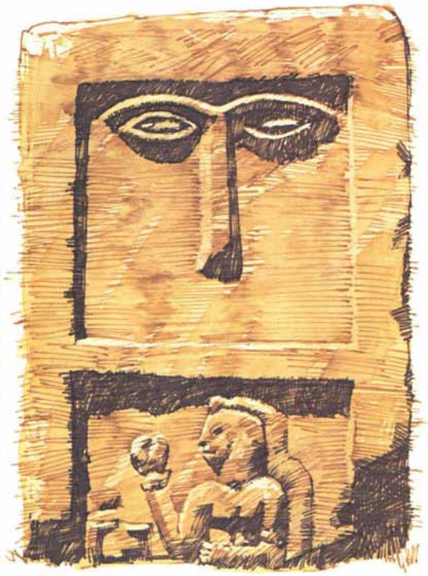
Presently chairman of the Department of History at the College of Arts of the University of Riyadh, Professor al-Ansary has been excited by ancient history and archeology since he was a boy. "I was on a high-school trip to visit Mount Uhud outside my hometown of Medina," he said. "Wandering around right up near the top I saw a piece of metal sticking out of the ground. I dug it out and found that it was a sword, a really old one, hundreds of years old. I'll never forget it."

From that point, he continued, he moved slowly, if indirectly, toward what is now a consuming interest in archeology and anthropology. In college in Cairo, he majored in Arabic literature, with emphasis on ancient Arabic poetry, and from there steadily moved into the study of ancient Arab society. While in Cairo he made trips on his own to Luxor and after a year as an instructor at the new University of Riyadh, in 1960, he finally cast his lot with the historians, beginning his doctoral program in ancient history and archeology at Leeds University in England. In the fall of 1966 he returned to the University of Riyadh as assistant professor with his doctorate in hand. He never looked back. Ahead of al-Ansary lay a whole series of "firsts" for Saudi Arabia: the founding of the Saudi Arabian Historical and Archeological Society – a wide group of Saudi historians and citizen history buffs – the establishment of the university museum in Riyadh, regular radio and television programs for Riyadh stations on archeology in the Peninsula, newspaper and magazine articles on the same subjects and an international conference in Riyadh on ancient and modern Peninsular history which brought together more than 100 famous scholars from around the world. Finally – in 1978 – he helped to establish a department of archeology and anthropology in the university.

In the beginning it wasn't easy. "When we organized the society in 1967," says al-Ansary, "people found the idea very strange. There was much criticism, some of it public."

"What was their problem?" I asked.

"Well, I could see their point," he said slowly. "People were concerned that, with all the excitement and publicity about our ancient past, the younger generation would forget the far more important fundamental values of our Islamic society." He glanced at me with a smile. "That sort of thing has happened elsewhere in the world, you know."



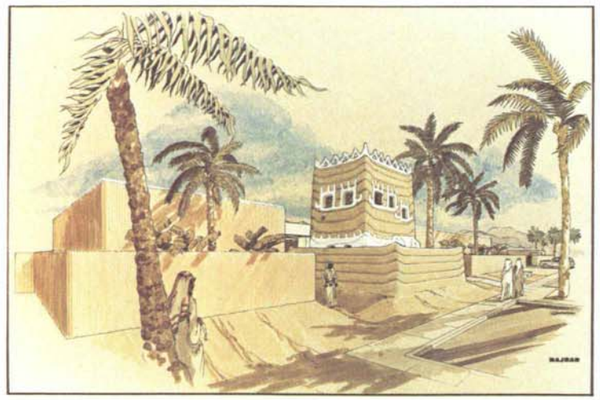
Above left: A black steatite fragment, carved with eagles, from the third millennium B.C. Found on Tarut Island. Above: Grave marker found at Taima, from about 1000 B.C.

But al-Ansary's society survived – partly because al-Ansary knew as much about classical Arabic literature as he did about digging. Most of his publications resulting from his excavations at Fao have relied on both, for example, and his writings on the Lihyanite kingdom of northwest Arabia depend heavily upon inscriptions and literary references. This double background allowed him to talk easily with traditionalists outside the university and thus smooth the way for others among the new historians. It also made him a good candidate for administrative positions within. He has chaired innumerable faculty committees, served as dean of faculty for two years, headed his own department for the past four. "I have spent more time in administration than I ever intended," he admitted ruefully, "but what can I do? No decent research and teaching will get done – neither mine nor anyone's – unless there's an administration to support them. We all have to take our turn."

With that sentiment Abdullah Masry, who epitomizes the new generation as al-Ansary represents the transitional generation, is in full agreement. The first director of the new Department of Antiquities, he is already frustrated by paperwork. But, like al-Ansary, he also knows that administration is vital if the new historians are to make the contributions he envisions. To Dr. Masry, however, the major issue is not whether to use literature or excavation to study ancient history; it is "new" versus "old" archeology – the holistic environmental approach to a site versus the analysis of only the human artifacts. He comes down heavily on the side of the "new."

Abdullah Masry was born and raised in Mecca. "My father was a grain merchant there," he says. "I went to one of the older established primary and secondary schools, Falah School, it's called; we started English in the fourth grade." In the 10th grade, he transferred to the Aziziya School where, by finishing in the top 10, he qualified for a government fellowship for university studies overseas in a subject of his own choice. He opted for archeology and headed for the United States.

In the States, he found that archeology suited him splendidly; at California he earned a B.A. degree and at the University of Chicago won his M.A. and Ph.D. During those years he worked on Indian mounds in the upper Sacramento Valley, studied the Southwest Indian collections in Flagstaff, Arizona, participated in the ongoing excavations at Lagash in Iraq with the New York University/Metropolitan Museum of Art group and worked with the Harvard Expedition on Iran's Tepe Yahya. At last, though, it was time to return and in 1973, doctorate in hand, and a reputation as one of the Oriental Institute's brightest graduate students, he came back planning to teach and do research at the University of Riyadh. Because Saudi Arabia, just at that point, needed someone to direct the program of its new Department of Antiquities and Museums, however, his career abruptly changed direction; nominated as



director, he accepted the job. Since then, he says, administration has been his primary job. Still, he teaches an occasional university course, has published both his thesis and a respectable list of scholarly articles over the past five years, and edited an illustrated survey of Peninsular archeological sites, as well as the first issue of *Atlal* (Ruins), a Peninsular archeology journal. Last, but certainly not least, he has supervised construction of Saudi Arabia's National Museum in Riyadh. (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1979)

"The museum's too small," he says, "but it's a start. We already are well underway planning a proper museum. We want an all-encompassing program and exhibits, which will cover all aspects of man's life on earth and particularly in the Peninsula. It will include ethnography as well as archeology. But for the time being the present museum will serve our purposes.

"The stage we are working on now is the establishment of a regional museum network. These regional museums aren't museums, really, as you think of them. They're still site research centers, located on or near the major sites around the country, and serve the districts in which they're located as gathering points, information points for local schools. Once we have enough trained personnel we will then establish proper provincial museums in the capitals of each province, into which the research centers will feed material and information for public interpretation and display."

"You work with the schools?" I asked.

"Good heavens, yes! That's a central theme of our program. My department lies in the Ministry of Education, after all. Museums aren't just fancy warehouses. They're learning laboratories, or should be. We work closely with school authorities all over the country, helping with school trips to historic sites and the like. These authorities and the teachers also are a great help to us, acting as liaison people in the various districts.

"The same thing applies to the general public. We're in the business of educating everyone, not just school children. And again, we get enormous amounts of help from local people of different regions; these so-called backwoods people have a much more sophisticated view of the sites in their region than we do."

"When do you think the next major discovery will be made in Saudi Arabia? Where would it be?" He fiddled with a pencil on his desk and said, slowly, "People repeatedly ask me this. Really, it's too early to say. After all, we've hardly begun. The preliminary survey of the Eastern Province is nearly done; this season we're concentrating on the Central Region. This is the area we know least about." He glanced up. "You know, one has to be careful not to get carried away in this line of work. There are great pressures generated by the treasurehunting instinct. If one gives in to that, one often does irreparable damage to the central task of archeology, uncovering the *history* of man. At the very least, one ends up offering misleading interpretations.

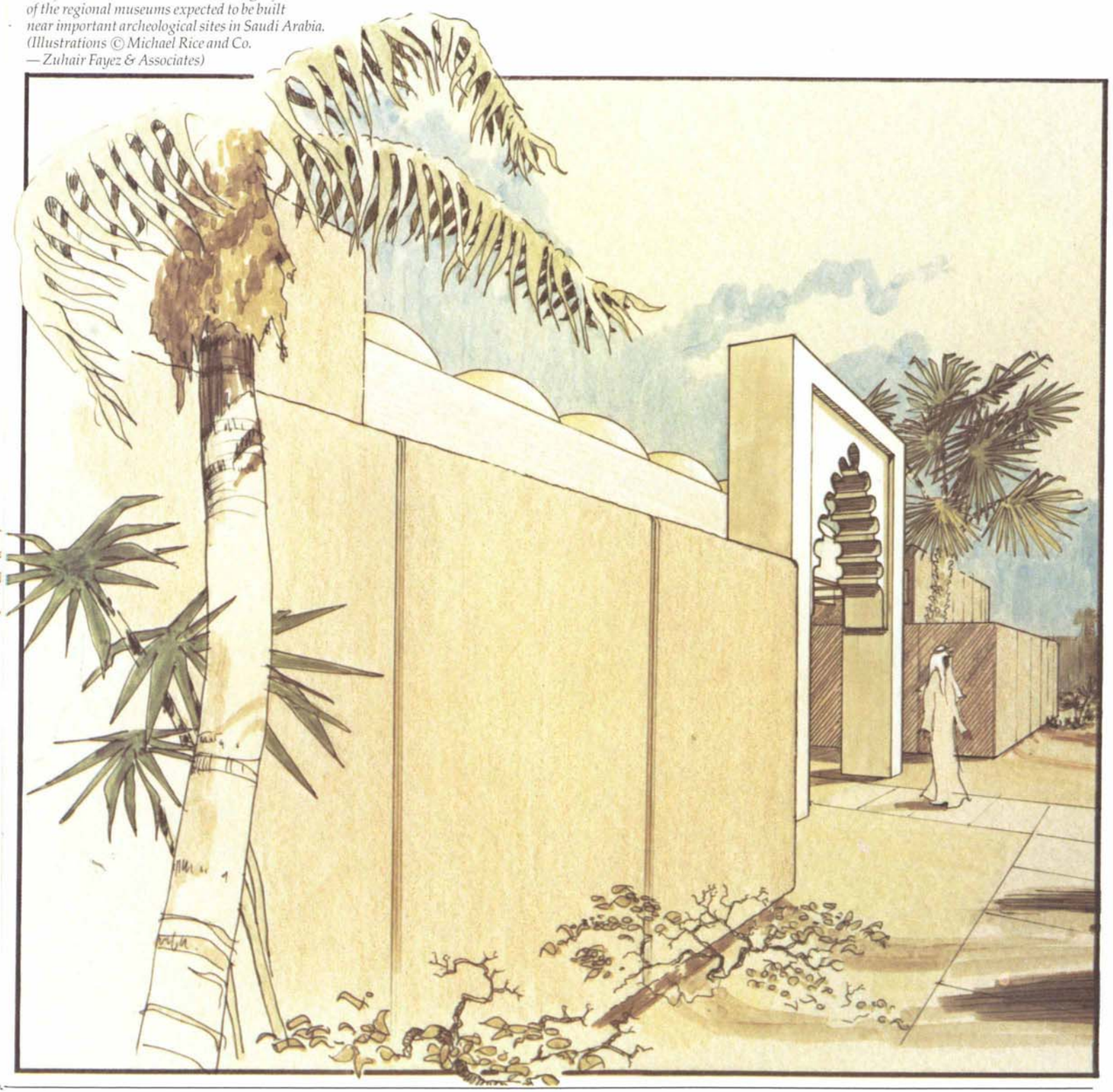
"Still," he resumed, "I think it's fair to say that the future work on Tarut Island, near Dammam in the Eastern Province, will turn out to have major bearing on our interpretation of the earliest periods of man. And of the other known sites, Tayma, up in the northwest, will probably be of tremendous interest. The site itself is enormous; I just came back last week from driving the outer walls, and they're seven kilometers [4.35 miles] round. The mounds inside the walls are classic Near Eastern tells, just like Iraq or Syria, and stand about 30 to 40 meters [100 to 130 feet] high. It's going to take a lot of seasons of excavation to grasp the history of that site. Fortunately, it's not directly in the path of a proposed freeway or development project."

I thought of the history of urban renewal projects in America and commented wryly, "You have that problem, too?"

"Have it!" He was obviously upset at the idea. "I've seen sites butchered! We have laws now which require historical research before any project is undertaken and many of the larger companies and government agencies are very good about consulting us and carrying out surveys. But the pressures for the project completion are so great we always seem to be a step too late." He smiled suddenly. "I can really get worked up over that issue." He paused, and then said, "But that's what the work of our archeologists and historians is all about, in large degree. Unless our cultural heritage is carefully preserved, 20 years from now Saudis may be walking around like zombies with only a veneer of modern life to call civilization. You asked me earlier if I didn't miss the traditional quiet of the academic life of research and teaching. Certainly I do, at times. But I can't think of anything more important for an archeologist to be working on right now than the job I have."

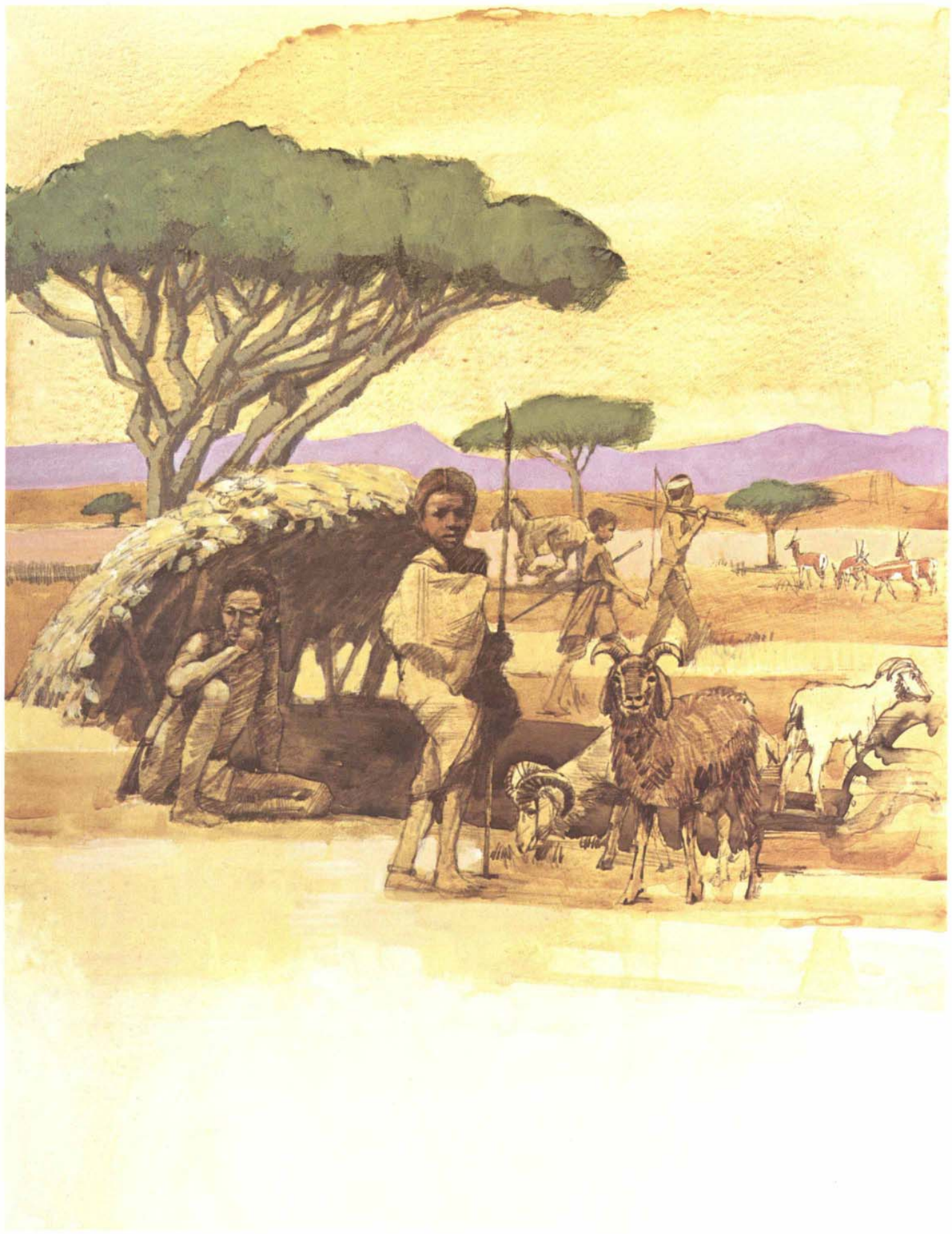
Two weeks before this conversation with Masry, I had been out in the Empty Quarter. I found a flint. I stood beneath the high dune on the marl floor of the desert fingering it absent-mindedly. Thirty feet away a rusted geological survey stake rose up out of the ancient lake bed. It was on the leading fringe of the dune; one or two hard winter winds and it would be swallowed. A flint and a stake: what a world of time between the two! But also, what a strong argument for the new historians in their search for records of man's experience. For everyone knows that there is oil beneath the surface, and that it is valuable. But there is also, the new historians believe, a record of man's experience, spanning the whole of his sojourn on earth. And who knows? Perhaps in retrospect that treasure of perspective will ultimately be the more valuable. With the new historians at work, we will at least have the opportunity to judge.

At left and below: Architect's renderings of two of the regional museums expected to be built near important archeological sites in Saudi Arabia. (Illustrations © Michael Rice and Co. — Zuhair Fayez & Associates)



From the Lakes of Arabia

GRIMSDALE



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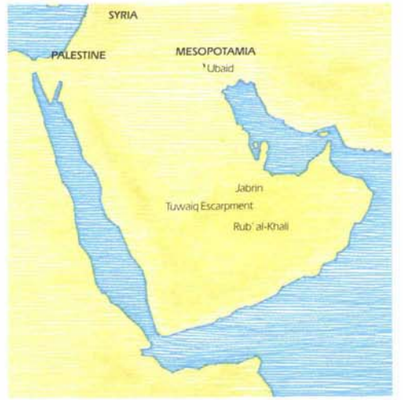


Heavy drenching rains fell for the last time late one winter some 7,000 years ago on the Arabian Plateau. Swollen rivers rushed north and east off the Tuwaiq Escarpment, widening canyons, tumbling rocks and boulders, then dropping them as the waters poured out onto the great flat savannah, pushing into the marshes and shallow lakes before them.

Out on the plain a small hunting band crouched in the high reeds along the edge of a lake, their bows notched with finely worked flint-point arrows, tense as the first great flock of migrating ducks spiraled in. Hunting would be as good this year as last, and for as long back as any could remember or storytellers recount. It had always been thus, in this hot but well-watered and grassy land; why should it change?

It had, in fact, not changed significantly for some 2,000 years before. And it would rain again the following year – but imperceptibly less. And less again the next year, and the next, and the next. Generations later, hunters would tell stories of better times in the good old days when the grass stood higher, the lakes were deeper and the game more plentiful.

The old days would not come again. Over the next 500 years the rain would all but cease. What little plant life remained would remain only because it was able to survive on the annual inch or two of water it might receive. The lakes would dry stone-hard and sand, lifted by the north winds from crumbling mountains and dry river beds great distances away, would fill and cover them. The great basin of lakes would become a wilderness of mountain dunes called the Rub' al-Khali – the Empty Quarter.

Those skilled Arabian lake country flint workers of 5000 B.C. stood at the end of an immensely long march of human cultural development through the Stone Age. Massive, crudely shaped axes and cleavers found widely on the Peninsula attest to hundreds of thousands of years of human occupation there by the roving hunter bands which made up man's earliest prehistoric cultures. As the field surveys sponsored by the Department of Antiquities report on their findings, a picture of gradually increasing sophistication of flint work is emerging, with polished knives and small tanged points to go with the introduction of the bow. Crude shelter settlements have been found in the southeast, the north, the northwest, the center of the Peninsula; many more will be found before the surveys are finished. Before the last dry age descended, the Peninsula had been a good land for the Old Stone Age people.

The final tapering off of rainfall was not the first in man's time in Arabia. The preceding half-million years and more had seen periods of very dry, hot years strung together like beads on a string with alternating eras as long of cool moist weather. Europe's glaciers waxed and waned; the climate of Arabia followed. Even after the last great ice sheet that began to form 70,000 years ago, the weather of the Middle East oscillated uneasily a few times more before reaching the tentative balance which holds today.

Man – the sophisticated Neolithic man – adapted to this final ponderous climatic swing as he had before. But this time he shifted into quite a new way of life: a life of tamed and bred sheep, goats, and cattle; of sown and harvested wheat and barley. With these radical inventions in hand, two main patterns of livelihood developed across the lands of the Middle East.

One, emerging where plentiful spring or river water – or an annual rainfall of at least eight inches – allowed, was that of the farming settlement, where people, depending on their grain field for their food, grouped their huts together for protection and support. The other was the herding group, blending the mobility of the traditional hunting life with the new availability of domesticated goats and sheep to create the wandering shepherd, the "pastoral nomad," working those lands too dry for settled farming.

The lake-shore hunters and food gatherers of Arabia adapted, too. As the rains ceased, the marshes dried and the game disappeared, these peoples edged, season by season, outward from the more desolate center toward the promising watered lands around the periphery of the Peninsula. And there they settled.

Was it here on the fringes that they learned of domesticated animals, of planting seed: here on the borders of Palestine, Syria, Mesopotamia? Or did the new ways spring up of their own accord out of sheer necessity? Abdullah Masry, Director of the Saudi Arabian Department of Antiquities, shrugs the question off impatiently.

"We are not in the business of that nationalist one-upmanship, 'we did it before you' nonsense. We're studying the history of man." No, what is important is that the times of a relatively simple single culture stretching out across the Peninsula are over. In its place by 4700 B.C., from the Indian Ocean north through eastern Arabia and Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean, are now more than half a dozen cultural styles. We know this because of another invention that comes with this Neolithic – New Stone Age – period: pottery.

Pottery, in color, shape, texture and use, is as rich and varied in man's hands as poetry. And it is as expressive, especially in the hands of the new historian-archeologists of Saudi Arabia like Abdullah Masry, who are reusing these broken bits of clay to shape the history of eastern Arabia in the Neolithic age.

It was through pottery, indeed, that one of the earliest Neolithic cultures in the Middle East – the 'Ubaid culture – was

From the Lakes of Arabia

Early and middle-period 'Ubaid pottery.

identified. 'Ubaid is not a language or a race. It is simply a peculiarly fine kind of pottery which stands as a flag of cultural identity: bowls and cups and jugs made of greenish-yellow clay with deep red-brown and black geometric designs painted on. But it has also come to include the peoples – the master potters – who developed this culture.

'Ubaid takes its name from the archeological site in southernmost Mesopotamia where it was first found early in this century. Since that first discovery, intensive digging in Iraq has shown the 'Ubaid culture to have been not only very early but also very extensive in influence, reaching far up north into the "land between the rivers" – Mesopotamia. The culture that the pottery represents became the baseline for man's earliest civilization; it was shown to be the dominant culture in southern Iraq just before that of the Sumerians, builders of man's first cities.

Then, 10 years ago, the tidy world of Mesopotamian history was shaken. Four hundred miles south of 'Ubaid on the western coastline of the Arabian Gulf, archeologists, in their ongoing quest for knowledge, found more 'Ubaid pottery.

To archeology this discovery was astonishing and at archeological conferences around the world, the corridors were filled with gossip, questions and surmises. Was it really 'Ubaid ware? And if so, what were the 'Ubaid people, precursors of Sumer, doing in the middle of the east coast of the Arabian peninsula? Who, after all, *were* the 'Ubaid peoples, and where did they come from?

Since the 'Ubaid pottery was found in Saudi Arabia Abdullah Masry was naturally interested; in fact he has concentrated his research on these questions and now, as a result, the haphazard collection of pottery on the coast of Arabia has given way to scientific excavations under his guidance; for several seasons his people have been digging into settlement sites, both on the coast and inland. More excavation remains to be done, but the results already are conclusive: this was where the migrants from the drying lakes of the Empty Quarter came in the next stage of their long march into history. Historians, as one result of this work, must now draw a new picture in which 'Ubaid cultural influence sprawls from the middle of Mesopotamia to the borders of the Empty Quarter, shading out into the deserts rather as later cultures and civilizations of the Middle East will do through economic, social, and political interrelationships with the wandering peoples of those regions.

From nearly its beginnings, 'Ubaid culture is evident in eastern Arabia; on the fringes of the desert as well as among the gardens and coves of the coast. At 'Ain Qannas, for example, a spring mound at the oasis of Jabrin, halfway to the coast from the Empty Quarter, the lowest sequence of levels show 1,000 years or more of pre-pottery flint tools, the earliest carbon-14 dating (although not of the earliest level) reading about 4935 B.C. The flints are those of the lakeshore people. Then, in the next levels, pottery appears – 'Ubaid pottery of an early style. But the flint points and blades continue *alongside* the pottery, in level after level, from early to middle 'Ubaid style.

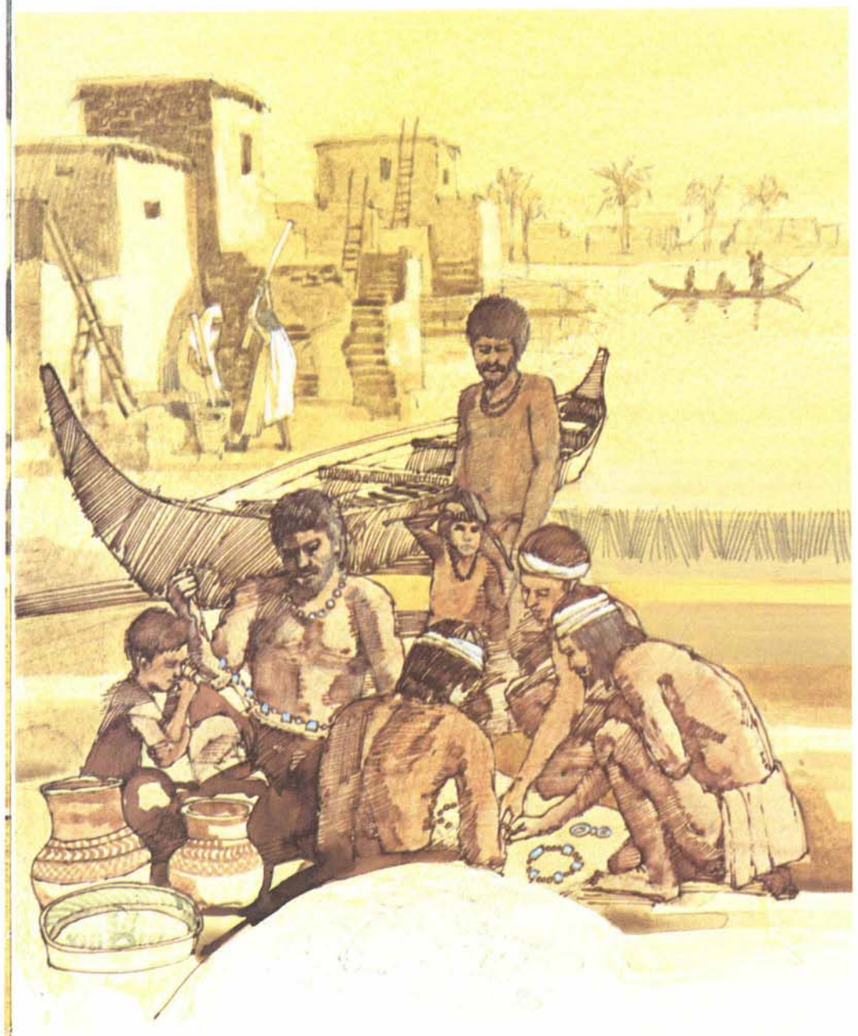
Late 'Ubaid pottery jug.

Flint, in fact, dominates the 'Ubaid horizons of this far inland site. From this fact – and from bones and other excavated material – the following story emerges.

Here at the inland sites bands of hunters and food gatherers, like those who once crouched by the lakes in the Empty Quarter, made their regular encampment around the sure waters of the springs. They probably had some domesticated cattle but they still hunted – focusing primarily on the onager, gazelle and wild goat. When they traveled they ranged widely, trading with the settlements on the coastline – perhaps for the pottery which they carried with them or left broken at their spring encampment for archeologists to find later.

Some joined the coastal settlements permanently, where they combed the sea as well as the land for a livelihood. There, in much larger settlements – call them fishing villages – they lived a settled life in plastered reed houses of the same design as those of lower Mesopotamia, with round cattle pens nearby. But in place of the cattle, onager and gazelle bones of the camps of the inland people, here enormous quantities of fish bones and clam and oyster shells are scattered in and around the coastal villages. The hunters had become fishermen.

Like other fishermen of other times and places, however, they were also traders. Chemical analysis suggests that much, if not all, of the 'Ubaid pottery (no kilns used for 'Ubaid ware have been found yet) was imported from Mesopotamia. Now, that bespeaks a very large volume of trade – and also poses a problem. What did the south offer in return for the northern pottery? It is early yet to say, but every evidence points to



luxury goods: beads of shell and semi-precious stone; powdered stone and earth for cosmetics; mother of pearl – and, yes, pearls. All of these have been found in the coastal sites, and would be lacking on the mud plains of Mesopotamia. In our terms, these would not have been earth-shaking quantities of goods – it was after all, the beginnings of man's maritime commerce – but the pattern was established; and in less than 1,000 years, it would reach out to tie India to the world of Sumer.

About 3700 B.C. the 'Ubaid settlements of eastern Arabia dwindle; some are abandoned. For the next 1,000 years the region seems to fall into the doldrums. It is as if much of the population simply moved away. The process was one of steady attrition – and apparently, cultural decentralization. The peoples of the 'Ubaid world seem to have withdrawn each to their own small region, engrossed in their own problems and troubles.

And well they might. It was a momentous 1,000 years for man, by all current archeological accounts. Writing appears for the first time. Metal – copper – is worked into tools of agriculture and war for the first time. A cataclysmic flood occurs and cities emerge after it – the first cities in man's sojourn on earth – all in the far south of Mesopotamia, the old 'Ubaid heartland.

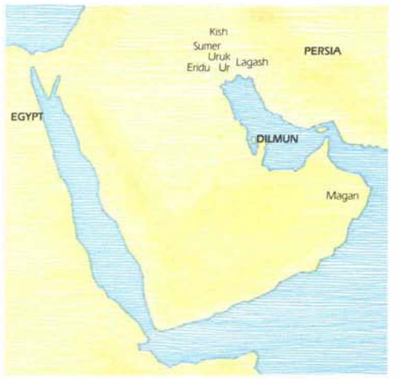
Each of these events in itself is a revolution in the history of man. And three of the four – copper, cities, and the flood – have emerged as inextricably entwined with the people and the land of eastern Arabia, the people who adapted once thousands of years earlier to the drying of the lakes and the shifting of the climate, and now would have to adapt again to fundamental changes in the organization and technology of human society.

They would adapt. And when the new elements combined to create a new experience in man's history – the civilization of the city – they would be there and prepared to play their part in it.

The Sumerian Connection

GRIMSDALE

The Sumerian Connection



For a long while scholars thought that Sumer and the emergence of man's first cities were a Mesopotamian affair. Survey and digging were limited to that region; and though there were references in the epic myths of early Sumer to places beyond Mesopotamia, one could only shrug. Possibly these were ghost-like memories of ancestors and their neighbors. But how do you prove the existence of a ghost?

Twenty-five years ago a Danish expedition under the supervision of Geoffrey Bibby set out to make one of those ghosts a little more substantial by digging on Bahrain. Extended from that island to the Saudi Arabian mainland by the Saudi Department of Antiquities, the digs gave us a very substantial ancestor indeed. It is called Dilmun.

Dilmun, to the Sumerian, was the land of immortality. Dilmun was the land of Enki, god of *abzu*, the vast spreading ocean of fresh, sweet water beneath the earth. Dilmun was the home of Utunapishtim, who alone with his family among all earthly living things survived the Flood.

Dilmun was also soapstone for figurines, alabaster for bowls, carnelian beads, cowries and pearls. Dilmun was copper and lapis lazuli. Dilmun was a trading agency in the Syrian city of Mari, another on the banks of the Indus River.

Dilmun was all of those things to Sumer; and Dilmun, it now appears, was the central east coast of Arabia and its islands. The Peninsular connection, forged by the roving hunter bands of the Old Stone Age, reinforced by trade between agricultural settlements in the neolithic, lived on more strongly than ever in Sumer.

The third millennium dawned brightly for man in southern Mesopotamia. It had been roughly 700 years since a great flood stormed down the riverine system, covering the great plain as far as the eye could see with deep sluggish mud-filled water, destroying the 'Ubaid settlements there. Seven hundred years: a period of time not very different from that between the depths of the European Dark Ages and the rise of the Renaissance. What occurred in Mesopotamia, however, was not the "rebirth" of civilization, but rather the birth itself.

The Sumerians alone could not have done it. Civilization springs from a catalysis of cultures, the interaction – not always in a friendly fashion – of peoples of different ethos. Three main actors, we can now say with certainty, played essential roles in this particular creation: the 'Ubaid peoples, representatives of the older Semitic culture; the Sumerians, newcomers to the region; and the Elamites, Aryans, the earliest sophisticated Persian culture, located in the foothills and mountains to the east of what would be Sumer.

The 'Ubaid peoples spoke a language distantly akin to modern Arabic, judging by names encountered in early Sumerian writings; they are Semites. They are at this time fishermen and farmers both; they are traders, hunters and sheep-herding bands. They represent an enormous spread of cultural experience within one language group, and it is shared; their settlements, whether south on the Peninsula coastline or north in the mid-Euphrates valley, are constantly replenished by immigrants from the desert lands to the west. Information is regularly exchanged as roving tribes move into home settlements for seasonal supplies, a pattern of short-range pastoral nomadism which still occurs today.

The Sumerians arrived late in the fourth millennium on the southernmost dry lands of the Mesopotamian plain from parts unknown, speaking a language oddly unrelated to that of any other group known – as yet – in the Middle East. Their settlement culture came to dominate the remnants of the 'Ubaid people there, disheartened and dispersed as they were by the great flood. The source of the Sumerians' strength was irrigation and the written word: irrigation to harness the rivers as they had never been before with dikes and ditches and a complex administration to maintain them, and the development of man's first writing – cuneiform – in turn to maintain that administration and the increasingly complex religious and political system of which it was a part.

These Sumerian technological innovations weren't overnight strokes of genius. Through excavations and inscriptions we can see both emerge gradually over a period of several hundred years, while local 'Ubaid peoples are assimilated in neighboring lands through war and alliance.

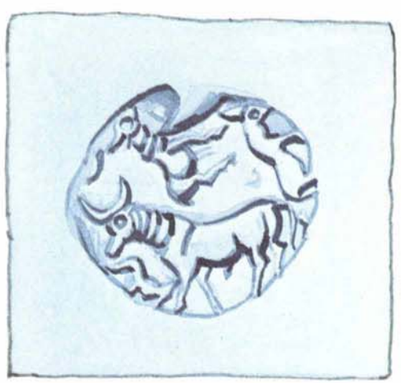
Assimilated is the word for it. From the cuneiform lists of the rulers of Sumer, we know that the earliest kings had Semitic names; later rulers, though almost certainly Semitic, also chose (or had chosen for them by their parents) Sumerian names. It's a process familiar to Americans.

It wasn't just the aristocracy who were tempted by the greater wealth of Sumerian irrigation and administrative technique. The growth of the urban centers, Ur, Eridu, Uruk, Lagash, Kish, and others, made enormous demands on manpower; man's first cities like all thereafter were powerful magnets to country folk. They came from all walks of life, from the desert settlements and wandering tribes of the west and up from the south, tempted by wealth or fleeing drought and famine. And so the two

Top left: An inlaid Sumerian cosmetics box. Above: A field of Dilmun burial mounds on Bahrain. The mound in the foreground has been cut away to show the stone grave chamber.

peoples as the centuries passed grew more thoroughly entangled by the fates of economic geography and cultural tradition. Each tested and challenged – and learned from – the other, creating out of this dialogue a civilization which rapidly filtered north and west to be adopted by Semitic peoples there as well (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1978). It is a civilization which historians, notorious sticklers for precision, now call Sumero-Semitic. Allowing for variations on its main theme (what civilization worth its salt doesn't?), it dominated the eastern Fertile Crescent for the next 2,500 years.

Is it any wonder, then, that 'Ubaid memories of the old land to the south of Dilmun would make their way into the early myths of Sumer? That the land of Enki, god of fresh waters, would be identified with the great spring pools of al-Hasa, in Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain – Bahrain, where fresh water gushes offshore from the depths of the sea? The land out of which many 'Ubaid peoples first moved, to which a straggling few perhaps returned as refugees after the floods? These are the threads from which every great national literature is woven: stories and tales of the old country.



Above: Clay seals from Failaka. The bottom left illustration shows the back of a seal, with its pierced projection. Below left: Seal image impressed in clay.

Yet for all the intermingling throughout this period, a strong theme of separate identity and cultural style persisted. Different languages kept them apart, certainly. Perhaps more fundamentally, it was a matter of pastoral as opposed to urban traditions, or of desert and sown, of farmland and city.

Take politics. There were centuries which saw 'Ubaids holding high office as Sumerians – in all ways, save some slight hint of ethnic heritage – and cooperating in the administration of the affairs of state. But there were also long centuries when political control was wrenched back and forth through warfare between the two. It was Sargon of Biblical fame - himself a second-generation immigrant from the rural districts – who in 2340 B.C. first established a Semitic dominance over the old Sumerian lands. Under him and his successors the shift in political style beneath the surface of on-going administrative bureaucracy is unmistakable.

Even more distinctively Semitic is the new, unified composition of the Sumerian Gilgamesh tales which is undertaken at this time. The unconnected episodes of quarreling gods and goddesses give way to a single vibrant theme pulling the stories together, a theme foreshadowing man's search for peace in God: the epic tale of one man's journey to understand the tragedy of death and the source of immortality.

In a few short years archeology in the Peninsula has proven the Arabian connection to Sumer and its myths. But the connection has more than myth to it, recent excavations have also shown. As the Mesopotamian cities grew rich and markets for luxuries expanded, fabled Dilmun itself revived in the form of an ordinary port town. It re-established the old trading ties by sea with the north – and for the first time reached out to India in the east to satisfy the burgeoning northern markets. Thus begins the historic "trade route to India" role cast for the Arabian Gulf.

It was a larger world in the third millennium B.C., larger for merchants and traders, with triple the markets – and triple the chances for profit. It was also a world of international politics, with states – even empires – vying for power. As it happened, regional rivalries worked for Dilmun.

Not much later than the appearance of the Sumerian urban civilization, another grew up on another river far to the southeast in India. It also had items to trade which Sumer would buy: spices and precious stones, later cotton and copper. To reach there by land, however, meant crossing through Persia.

Persia was from the beginning and almost continually thereafter hostile territory for Sumer, constantly threatening and sometimes carrying out the invasion and sacking of Mesopotamia. That left the sea routes down the Gulf to India – the route controlled by Dilmun. So Dilmun became a monopoly broker for the Indian trade.

Changing market demands also played into the Dilmun merchants' hands. In the earliest of times, we have seen, flint was the basic commodity. Later, fired and decorated pottery dominated. But now we are entering more modern times; man is learning to

Above: Copper bull's head from Sumer. Below right: A Sumerian gold cup, inlaid with lapis lazuli.

work metal for his uses, first copper, then bronze, then iron. Sumer came to need copper; but where was Sumer – a civilization of the mud plains – going to find it?

Dilmun had the answer. There were good copper deposits in Oman – Magan, it was called then – and already, excavations suggest, Dilmun had trade connections with that area. So to Dilmun's luxury trade with India was added smelted and sometimes worked copper. Indeed, this commodity came to be the staple item of Dilmun's international trade network and as a result Dilmun founded a maritime network unrivaled for its breadth by any other in the early days of man's world. Based on that trade, Dilmun also established what came to be a city state on the east coast of Arabia.

Like any other trading city, Dilmun's fortunes were tied to its biggest buyer. If Sumer had years of economic troubles, so too did Dilmun. At the same time the Dilmun trade had its effect on the Sumerian economy – especially as copper came to be a staple of everyday life – and on Sumer's ability to wage war. Thus control of the Dilmun link became a *sine qua non* in larger Sumerian politics. When Sargon the Great, for example, conquered the Mesopotamian cities for his empire, he didn't stop at the headwaters of the Gulf; as a matter of course, he went south to Dilmun, annexing it and its trade as well. Later empires followed his example. Clear down to Hammurabi, the Babylonian period and after, Dilmun trade is a matter of significant wealth and politics in the north.

Yet long before the time of Hammurabi, other states had arisen, other imperial ventures. The innovations which had given southern Mesopotamia her strength had been adopted by the peoples around her. The Fertile Crescent had filled out into a complex web of intense politicking and trade. The focus of power moved northwards from Mesopotamia, now; north and west toward Palestine, and toward an Egypt unified and looking beyond its African boundaries for commerce, north toward the rising power of the Hittites of Anatolia. Sumer is no longer the center of the stage.

With this northern focus, there was little time to concentrate on the affairs of a distant trading town in the Arabian Gulf, however important it had once been, so beginning with the Hittite invasion of Mesopotamia in 1594 B.C., Dilmun, increasingly neglected, its markets to the north destroyed by war, begins to decline. The upper levels of excavations on Bahrain show signs of violent sacking and looting, painful rebuilding on a smaller scale, then burning again. Then, finally, it is abandoned.

But the Indian trade was too important to the north to be neglected for long. When the next great empire in the eastern Fertile Crescent arose – this time a *world* empire – the shores of eastern Arabia would once again flourish on trade. The Macedonian, Alexander, was coming.

Enter the Greeks

Enter the Greeks

As Great Britain clearly demonstrated in the 19th century, empires mean big money in international trade, and that of Alexander the Great in the fourth century B.C. was no different. He and his army, in a lightning campaign of nine years against the world, attached an enormous eastern empire to the Mediterranean mercantile network of Greece. Founding some 70 cities called Alexandria, judiciously scattered across this territory, he knotted the whole together, "making," as one illustrious historian put it, "international economic routes the basis for a universal empire."

Suddenly, governments from North Africa to India shared a common Hellenistic style of government. Not the same government; Alexander and a few of his advisers had the sense to allow each region to retain its traditional gods (though Alexander made himself, in every case, the latest) and usually its style of bureaucracy too. But the highest positions, in military affairs especially, were held in each region by Greeks.

Thus a slight mix of Hellenistic practice was added to regional cultures wherever, and however briefly, these Greeks ruled. More to the point – the economic point – a common currency came to be accepted throughout the empire. Alexander's silver drachma has been found – and forged – more widely than any other ancient coin we know.

Under this umbrella of common style and currency, the traditional barriers of war and politics, and the usual suspicion of foreigners, were lowered a little and international trade bloomed as it never had before, even on the Arabian Peninsula, where the increase in trade brought Greek traders and trading towns and the contact and influence of a new civilization. Hellenism had come to the Peninsula.

To understand why it did so, however, we must cast our minds back in time. For Alexander, once, wouldn't have given two cents for Arabia, nor would have any of his traders, were it not for the fact that profound changes had already taken place within the Peninsula itself in the preceding centuries. In the 700 years before Alexander's conquest of the East, the Peninsula's peoples had experienced an economic and social revolution of their own. It was brought about by the domestication of the camel, probably about 400 B.C., and by the rise in demand – by northern civilizations – for incense, the aromatic gums called frankincense and myrrh, the sole source of which were the regions now called Yemen and Oman.

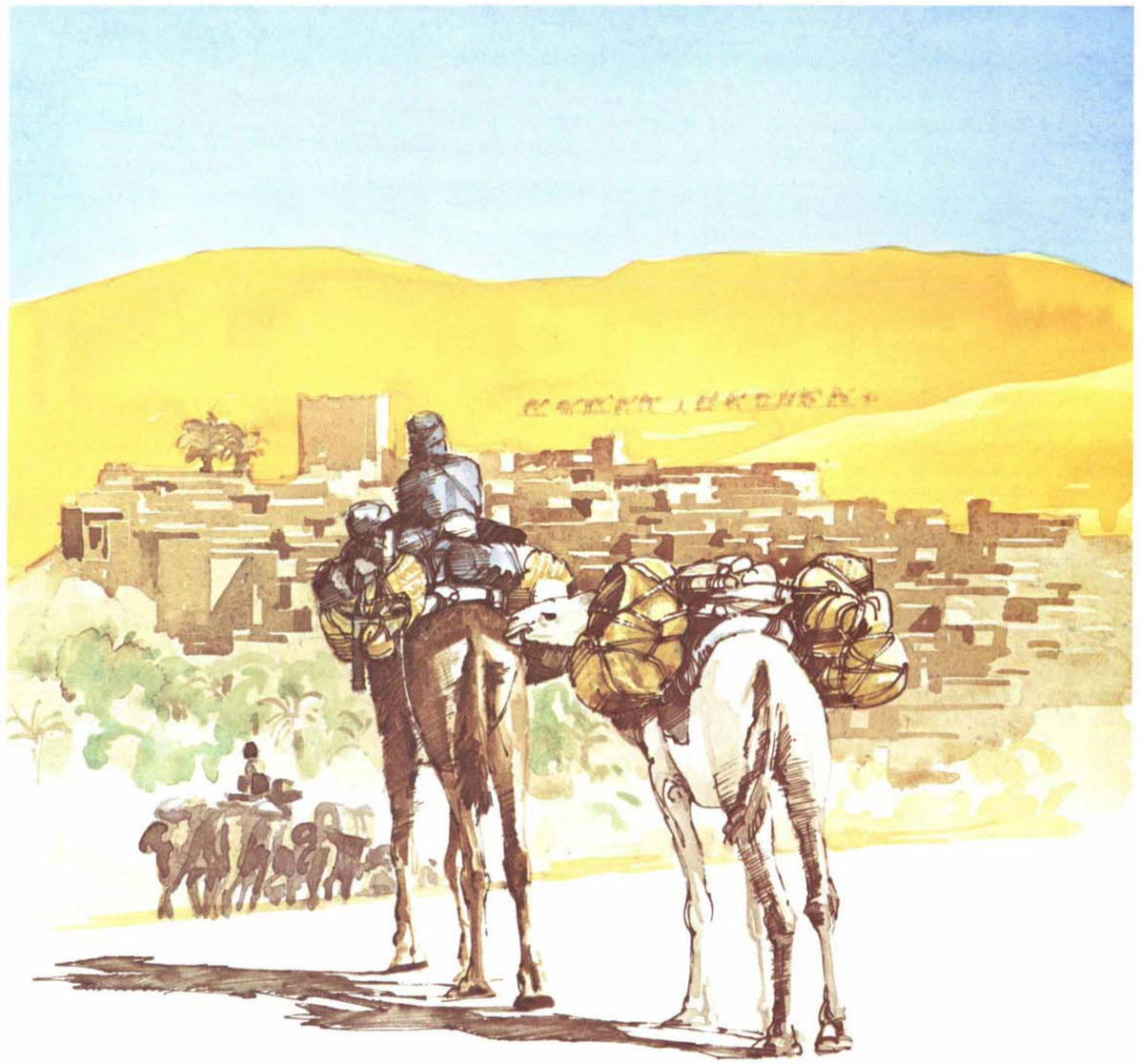
The silver drachma of Alexander the Great.

The peoples of these regions – the South Arabians – responded to the demand by developing a web of secondary roads that, by 330 B.C., knitted the southern highlands of the Peninsula together, from the Yemen coast on the Red Sea across the southern edge of the Peninsula, and through the Hadhramaut to the edge of Oman. Over these roads traders moved the frankincense and myrrh from hillside villages down to the towns, there to be purchased by agents representing international trading firms and more than a few Middle Eastern states.

But that was just part of the trade; the agents also gathered consignments of cinnamon and other spices and goods brought from India on coastal vessels that sailed in short hops from port to port along the coast of India and then crossed to the Peninsula near the narrow mouth of the Arabian Gulf. These other goods along with the incense were then shipped to the north and this, in turn, involved what are called the Northern Arabians – actually the early Bedouins. By domesticating the camel these peoples had been able to penetrate the desert, and as the demand for incense grew they became a vital part of the trade since they, and only they, knew how to transport the South Arabian products. They developed the routes that criss-crossed the vast deserts of the Peninsula – routes that, in effect, were highways with watering stops set far apart between stretches of barren sand. Like the freeways of today that emerged from the proliferation of the automobile and truck, the caravan trails emerged from the use of the camel – and were useless without the camel.

The North Arabians, eventually, formed what were really large transportation companies which organized huge camel caravans – some including hundreds of camels – and contributed to the development of commercial centers along, and at the terminals of, the routes.

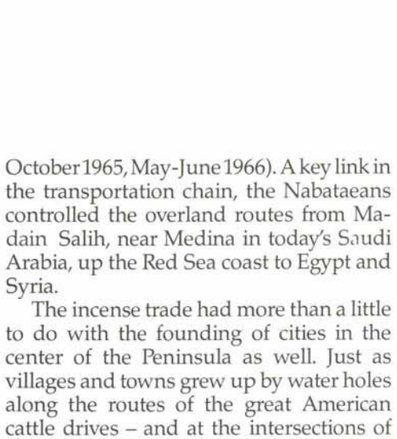
This was a lucrative business, the incense trade. Along with trade in Indian goods, the South Arabians, by controlling the collection network, founded and enriched the state called Saba – sometimes known in the West as Sheba – and other powerful states. Revenue from the incense trade provided the capital to build the magnificent dams and irrigation systems for which the Sabaeans are famous (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1978) and also, further north, contributed to the vitality of the Nabataean state that built the famous Petra (See *Aramco World*, September-



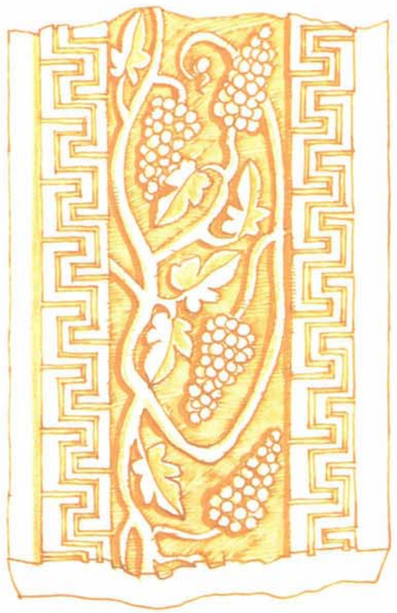
October 1965, May-June 1966). A key link in the transportation chain, the Nabataeans controlled the overland routes from Madain Salih, near Medina in today's Saudi Arabia, up the Red Sea coast to Egypt and Syria.

The incense trade had more than a little to do with the founding of cities in the center of the Peninsula as well. Just as villages and towns grew up by water holes along the routes of the great American cattle drives – and at the intersections of federal highways later – so they grew up on the caravan crossings running from Yemen, on the northeast diagonal, to Babylonia and the Assyrian and Persian empires, skirting the edge of the Empty Quarter to al-Hasa and Tarut, the old Dilmun territory.

Everyone in business in the civilized world – and some beyond it – knew of this trade. In the fifth century B.C., Herodotus says, the Scythians of southern Russia used incense in their religious services. But the heaviest consumers lay closer to the source. By 2300 B.C., when the first Egyptian



The influence of Hellenistic art and its motifs are visible in this bronze horse and stone frieze, both found in southern Arabia.



expedition sailed south from Suez in search of aromatics, incense had long been a major commodity in Egypt, where incense meant embalmment and embalmment meant immortality. Further east around the Fertile Crescent it was central to everyday prayers and festival celebrations in Palestine, Syria and Mesopotamia, and in Rome it was so popular that the empire, at one point, nearly went bankrupt paying for its vast imports.

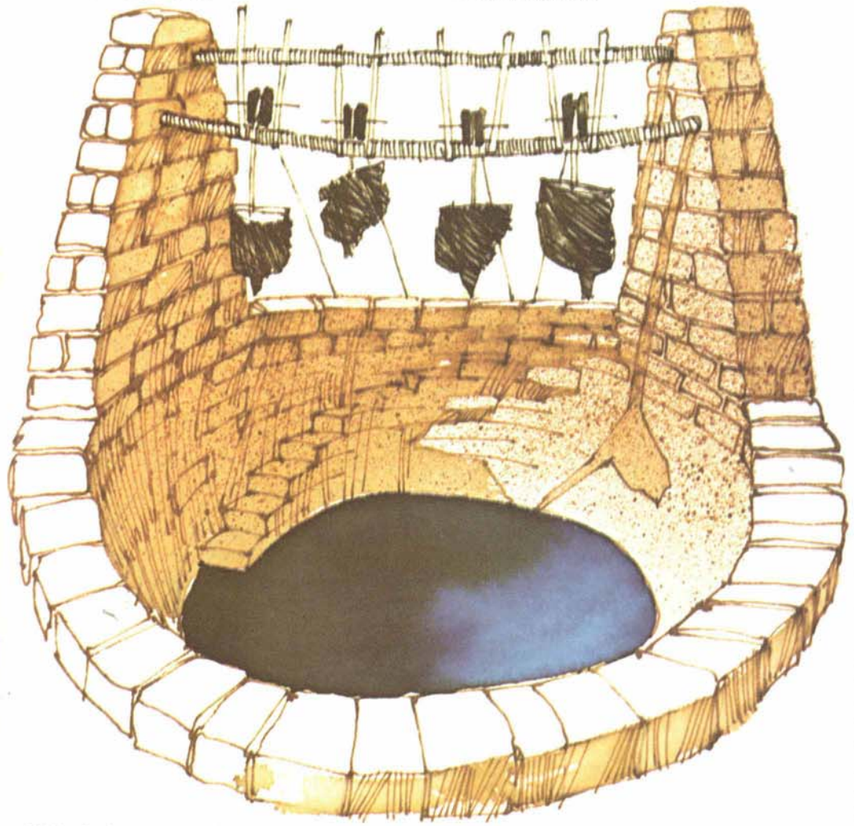
In return for the incense, Egypt and the other civilizations sent great quantities of precious metals and finely finished goods south. For thousands of years, in fact, this trade enriched Nabataean shippers, the caravan companies in the south, the agents in the South Arabian states, the growers and gatherers, and, in the form of taxes, rulers such as the fabled Queen of Sheba.

Because of the mark-up necessitated by the long land route, the northern powers routinely searched for a sea route to both India and the South Arabian states; even then shipments by sea were the cheapest form of transport. King Solomon, for example, approached the Phoenicians, the master merchant seamen of the day, hoping they could bypass the Peninsular middlemen, and so did the Egyptian pharaoh Necho II and the Assyrian king Sennacherib. But even the Phoenicians failed.

In the last decades of the sixth century B.C. still another power entered the scene. Under a leader called Darius the Great the Persians acquired all of the Fertile Crescent and placed it, along with Persia and northern India, under one ruler. Like Solomon, Necho and Sennacherib, Darius also attempted to find a sea route to India and the South Arabian incense states. Hiring shipwrights and mariners, he built a fleet and about 510 B.C. dispatched it from the other end of the trade route – the mouth of the Indus River – with orders to work its way along the South Arabian coast to Egypt. Unlike the predecessors, this fleet succeeded; it reached Suez. But as it took two and a half years of trial and effort, the camel, even allowing for the middlemen's mark-up, still made better business sense.

In economic terms, Darius' decision to send that fleet to Suez made sense, but it also had, much later, political effects that he couldn't have conceived. It brought the Greek leader Alexander, later to be called the Great, to Persia. The head of the Persian expedition, it seems, was Greek, as were many of the seamen, and they, apparently, sent word back to Greece, then a rising young challenger of the long-established Phoenician maritime power. On the lookout for any intelligence that might help them, the Greek merchants carefully filed those reports away. No opportunity presented itself then, but 180 years later – by which time the Athenian imperium had both risen and fallen – the Persian Empire had declined and Alexander had emerged as the ruler of Greece.

The world of that time was a world of turmoil. It was a world too wherein the Greeks were known not as moralists and philosophers, but as generals and mercenaries, serving in the Persian and Egyptian armies. Alexander, who had been tutored by Aristotle, learned too that Greece with her expanding population was desperate for markets for ceramics and other exports. In short, it was a world ripe for conquests and in 334 B.C. Alexander set out to make them.



Originally dug in the time of Greek trade with Arabia, the superstructure of this well has been rebuilt many times since.

Initially, Alexander's goal was to avenge earlier Persian defeats of Greece and Greek colonies, but almost immediately he found himself grappling with Greece's other age-old trading rival Phoenicia. From their base in Tyre in today's Lebanon, the Phoenicians put up a stubborn resistance – more so than either Persia or Egypt would – but Alexander prevailed and then turned toward Persia, determined to take all of what the greatest of the Persians had ever held and more.

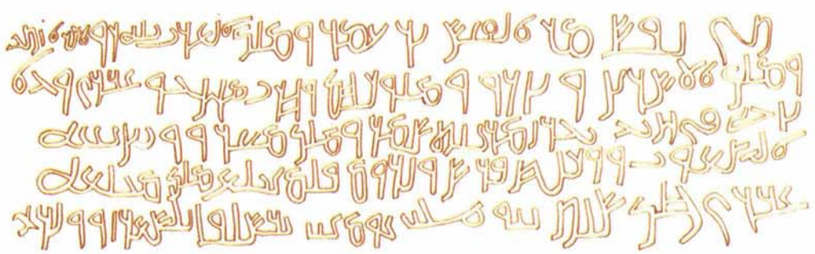
It was during this period that Alexander won his reputation. In three years, he fought his way to the Indus River – searching, no doubt, for an immortal reputation, but also, a more prosaic goal, for a means of controlling the Indian trade, the northern terminus of which he now held in his hands, as Darius had before him.

Like Darius before him, Alexander sent out a fleet from a small river town near present-day Karachi to chart a prospective sea passage back to home territory. The expedition was more practically designed than that of Darius; the fleet, under the command of his admiral Nearchus, was to coast northwest from India up into the Arabian Gulf and along the coast of Persia, with Alexander and a large section of his army paralleling it on land. The voyage was made without incident in four months (November 327 B.C.–February 326 B.C.), with a break halfway at Hormuz, at the entrance to the Gulf, for repairs and a conference with Alexander, five days' march inland.

A voyage without incident, and without success. No great shipping lane grew out of it; only the report of Nearchus of shoals and hostile peoples, of shoals and dozens of place names on the Persian coast to fill out that *terra incognita* of the Greek geographers, of shoals and coral heads. Was it the shoals that ultimately discouraged development?

More likely, it was the report picked up by Nearchus near Hormuz Island off today's Iran that the people opposite, on the Arabian coast, were already experienced traders in Indian goods with Mesopotamia. As control of such trade fitted in neatly with his plans, Alexander, when his fleet rejoined at the head of the Gulf, ordered construction of another new city near present-day Mohammara; like 69 other cities it would be another Alexandria, although later it would be called Spasinou Charax. Then, ready at last, he began to

Enter the Greeks



"This is the monument of Umru al-Qays, son of 'Amr, king of all the Arabs, who sent his troops to Thaj . . ." reads the beginning of this Nabataeo-Arabic inscription found at Wadi al-Sham.

organize a campaign against the Arabian coast.

Wood was ordered from the north to build a larger fleet at Spasinou, and small scouting expeditions were sent south to Bahrain and around the Qatar peninsula. Nearchus himself was ordered to prepare for the circumnavigation of the Arabian Peninsula, around to Suez. All in vain; scarcely a year passed and Alexander was dead.

Even so the Greeks continued to influence the Gulf. For although the Arabian Gulf India-to-Spasinou line, outflanking the South Arabian traders, never came to pass, the Greek-dominated cultures of the north came to dominate the area. Rather than conquering or outwitting the South Arabians, traders from Hellenized Parthian Persia, Seleucid Syria and Mesopotamia came down and worked with them. By all accounts the partnership was profitable to all concerned.

The Greeks also continued to found cities. On the island of Failaka, off the coast of present-day Kuwait, a Greek trading colony was established shortly after Alexander's death. Further down the coast Greeks traded heavily at Thaj, a town inland from today's Jubail, which occupied about 500 acres. There and at al-Hinnah, another Greek trading town of similar size 10 miles to the northeast, great wells were dug and beautifully lined with fitted stone; some are still in use today.

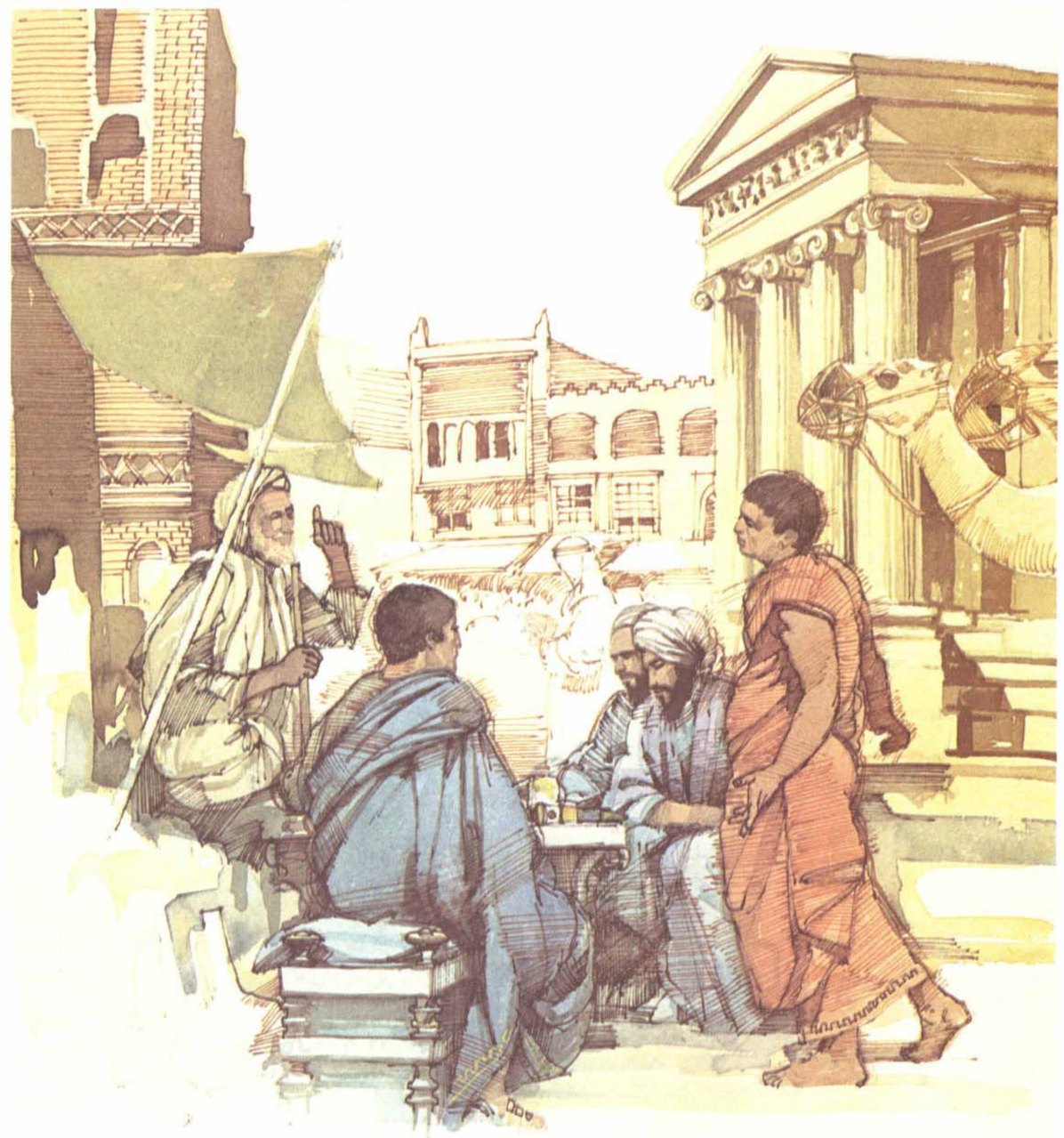
Other towns were scattered down the eastern coast, their carefully built structures a testament to the solid business activity carried out there by both Greek and Arab alike. (South Arabian inscriptions are commonly found on the walls.) But the greatest of them all was Gerrha, the capital of trade on the east coast of the Peninsula. The riches of Gerrha were fabled among the Greeks. In the second century B.C. the Greek geographer Agatharchides described the "Gerraei" as having become through trade, along with the Sabaeans of South Arabia, "the richest of all the tribes," possessing "a great quantity of worked articles in gold and silver, couches, tripods, basins, drinking vessels, to which we must add the costly magnificence of their houses – for their doors, walls, and roofs are variegated with inlaid ivory, gold, silver, and precious stones."

Enough to make archeologists stammer with anticipation? They're still anticipating. Gerrha is lost.

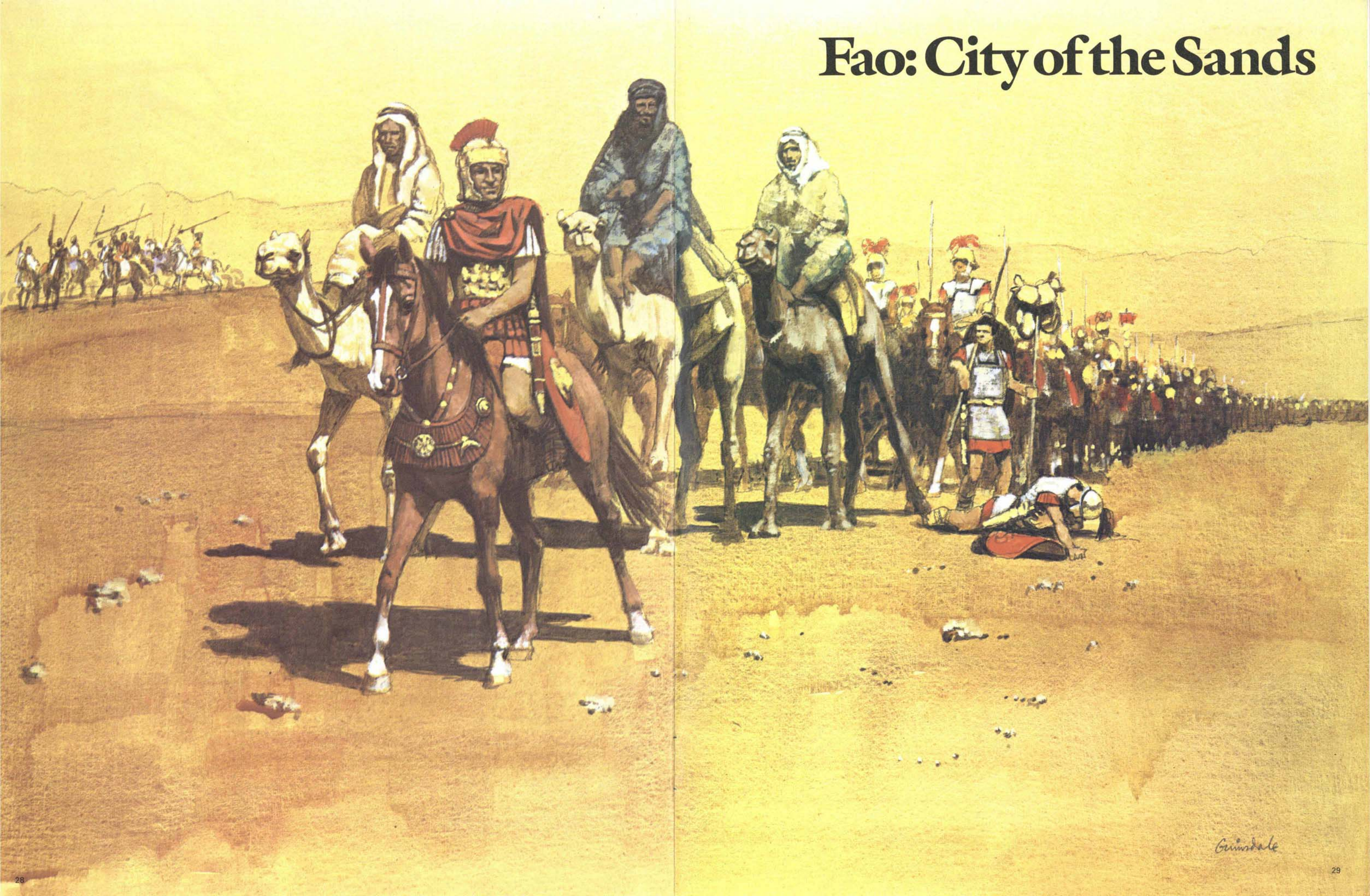
Considering the reports of later geographers, it's difficult to believe. It was a town five miles in circumference, says Pliny, writing around A.D. 50. He even seems to locate it precisely, this town with towers built of great blocks of salt, by saying that opposite Gerrha lay the island of "Tylos," and that inland 50 miles lies the "region of Attene." Fair enough. Archeologists know that "Tylos" is Bahrain and are relatively certain that "Attene" is today's al-Hasa, a huge agricultural complex. Thus Gerrha should lie between the two. But where, precisely? It is not the small, nearly deserted port town of al-'Uqair, our new historians assure us, though the similarity of names *is* tantalizing. They have looked and they know. So where is it, this city five miles in circumference? Buried beneath the wind-blown sand dunes behind al-'Uqair? Or beneath Dammam, the modern capital of the Eastern Province? Or is it Tarut Island?

Wherever it is, I have no doubt that it will be found, one day, by the energetic crews of the Department of Antiquities and the universities of Saudi Arabia. And when it is found, we will know still more about the passage of Hellenism, on the currents of trade, into the Arab culture of the Peninsula, a culture already variegated and complex enough through contact and cooperation with civilizations which were influential there thousands of years before Alexander and his men set foot on the shore of the Arabian Gulf.

So Hellenism was added to the world of the Peninsula. Alexander's empire would last scarcely another two hundred years, to be replaced by larger empires still – the Parthians in the east, the Romans in the west. Yet the Parthians, the Romans, and the Arabs of the Peninsula between them were equally inheritors of the Hellenistic spirit, adding it to their storehouse of experience, working it into their architecture and fine arts, law and government, poetry and history. All remembered Alexander.



Fao: City of the Sands



Grimdale

Fao: City of the Sands

It is a classic lost city buried in drifts of sand with just the broken ramparts showing. It sits in the middle of the Arabian Peninsula, an ancient city where, at first glance, no city ought to be: such towns were founded on the banks of rivers or by ocean inlets.

Actually Fao too was built on a river, but a river of sand, not water, a golden stream pouring out of an ocean of gold – the Empty Quarter – and its name, which means "fissure" or "gap", suggests it. The ruins of Fao (also written Fau or al-Faw) rest in the shadow of the high cliffs of the Tuwaiq Escarpment, on the south side of a gap in that long ridge that runs 1,000 miles down the center of the Peninsula. The vertical cliffs tower 450 feet above the floor, a nearly impenetrable wall save where the rare breaks occur.

The excavation of Fao, begun in 1970 under the direction of Dr. 'Abd al-Rahman al-Ansary of the University of Riyadh, is proving the town to be one of the most important finds in Peninsular archeology today. Digging has been underway for a relatively short time, yet already, in the market sections, our new historians have uncovered Hellenistic alabaster busts, bronze lion heads, frescoes of horseback hunting of wild camels and inscriptions in South Arabian script documenting names and places, trade, politics and religion.

Still, it will be a long time before the full importance can be seen. Because, al-Ansary explains with a smile, "It's rather warm down there." Al-Ansary has picked up a British taste for understatement, along with excavation technique, at Leeds. Temperatures, he continues, run a daytime average of 120 degrees Fahrenheit around the Empty Quarter for half the year. At most, only three months are open for full-scale work, so the digging season is short.

"And that's not our only problem," al-Ansary goes on. "We're terribly short of trained workers. I'd give the world for a surveyor, someone who can handle a transit. But where am I going to find one? Every surveyor in the country is tied up in road work and development projects." He doesn't mention it, but he himself clearly has trouble finding the time to work on his dig; digging season falls while the university is in session and he has to teach and administer his department. In America and Europe, universities have faculty enough to cover both teaching and excavation; not in Saudi Arabia, yet. And in Saudi Arabia, teaching must come first.

Despite all these problems, each year since 1970 al-Ansary has come back to this sun-beaten, wind-blown mound at the mountain gap to clear a few more walls, sift another cubic yard of sand and dust and rubble.

"Why?" I asked. "What keeps you going on it? What do you think you've found here?"

It took a while – good academics blanket their discussion with paragraphs of conditionals, particularly when it involves their own research – but eventually the answer came.

"There's a good chance, a good *chance*, mind you, that we're dealing with Kindah here."

Kindah?

Two great empires ruled Europe and the Middle East in the first 600 years of our era: Rome and Persia. Between them, but south of the main battlefields, as neutral as any region could be in this polarized world, were the Arabs of the Peninsula.

There, since the flourishing heyday of Hellenistic times, trans-Arabian trade had fallen off a little; constant wars in the north periodically disrupted passages and impoverished markets. Between 100 B.C. and A.D. 100, seamen discovered that they could ride the monsoon winds of the Indian Ocean directly from India to the mouth of the Red Sea and back. It was an important discovery; until then they had been restricted to short coastal hops to ports along the rim of the peninsula and then along the coast of India. As a result South Arabian ports – in today's Yemen and Oman – began to decline. Persian occupation of the southeastern coast of the Peninsula, today's Oman, limited still further the opportunities of the coastal ports to join in the Indian trade that had once made them rich.

Though fluctuating more widely, the markets were still there. And though the ships now came direct to what is now Yemen, there remained the problem of moving the goods from there north, to Egypt, Syria and Mesopotamia. Although they could have now ridden the monsoons up the Red Sea, navigation among the dangerous shoals was still too hazardous. So the caravan routes running north and diagonally northeast stayed busy; for Rome and later for Byzantium, these were still the only routes to the treasured incense, and so remained as important as ever.

A near monopoly of a commodity desired by others generally means money for a better life; politically speaking, however, it can be risky. The lands on the southern rim of Arabia were to learn this when Rome, seeking control of the world market, attempted to secure control of the Red Sea trade. In June of 25 B.C. – yes, June, with the heat of summer already burning the land – Octavian Augustus, newly victorious over Mark Antony as successor to Julius Caesar, and with *carte blanche* from the Roman Senate, ordered out the Egyptian Legion under the command of Prefect Aelius Gallus for a 1,300-mile march down the Red Sea coast to the center of Yemen.

In retrospect it was a desperate venture, but then Octavian Augustus, new to the East, *was* desperate – for money to pay off the troops and politicians who had helped him to power. And it did seem, as Strabo, the narrator of the story, says, that the venture would be worthwhile. Advisers had told Augustus that Yemen had, for centuries, continuously sold aromatics and precious stones to the north – paid for with gold and silver – but had bought little from the north in return. Rome, in short, suffered from an imbalance of payments. What Augustus proposed to do was correct the imbalance – and incidentally pay off his debts – by simple conquest.

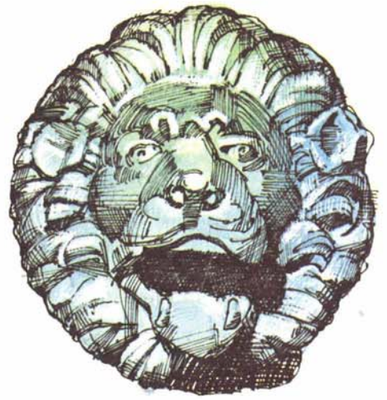
Another factor encouraging Augustus in his plan was that the Nabataeans – the Arab state in northwest Arabia which controlled that section of the trade highway – had volunteered to provide guides and troops for the expedition.

Strabo, and nearly all of the Romans after, were convinced that the guides deliberately led the expedition astray – and someone certainly seems to have done so. Following Nabataean recommendations, for example, the Romans staged their proposed amphibious attack at Cleopatris, an Egyptian port on the Red Sea opposite modern Yanbu' in Saudi Arabia.

It would be much faster, the Nabataeans said, than marching through the Sinai Desert (and thus through their own territories, one might add) and they were probably right. Except that the Roman shipbuilders at Cleopatris, expecting to fight naval battles instead of simply transporting soldiers, built galleys so big that they were worse than useless for the shoals and shallows of the Red Sea. Before the mistake was noticed, 80 galleys lay on the ways, ready for launching, and more time was consumed rebuilding them as transports. Thus it was the end of July before they could ferry the 10,000 men to Yanbu.'

Already ill from the well water that they had drunk in Egypt, the Roman troops were in no condition to continue. So there Aelius Gallus was obliged to camp through the worst of the summer.

Yet once begun, the march moved remarkably well, considering the terrain. Strabo declares that the Nabataean guides took them deliberately over the worst terrain, having no intention of leading them to the Yemeni capital of Marib,



hoping that they would perish on the way. That may or may not be true, but certainly the Romans had no easy time of it.

It is true that they met little resistance; only two Romans fell, for example, in one of the larger engagements south of Najran. Moving down the eastern side of the Yemeni highlands, they came at last to a walled city; called "Marsyaba," it was, by every indication, Marib.

But by then the Legion had reached the end of its tether; climate, disease and accident had taken a large toll. Thus, when prisoners told Aelius Gallus that "the land of incense" was only two days' march further south, the Roman was skeptical. The expedition had been on the road for six months, and he knew by now that a vague "two days" could well mean a year. Aelius Gallus turned back.

It took two months of fast marching through the spring weather to bring the Legion back – what was left of it. Only seven men, says Strabo bitterly, were lost in actual fighting; the rest, perhaps a third of the whole, fell to hunger, sickness, exhaustion and accident. Aelius Gallus, therefore, had some explaining to do when he was called up before a commission of inquiry in Alexandria.

"You were told to find Marib," they said.

"I did," he replied.

"In that case, where is the gold, the silver?"

"Marsyaba," he responded wearily, "was a heavily fortified town . . . I should also like to point out that every information I had showed the source of the incense to be further south . . ."

The Nabataean leaders were questioned; they supported Gallus' story. None of them was believed. The career of Aelius Gallus was truncated, the leader of the Nabataeans decapitated and Rome – after one subsequent failure in trying to seize control of the head of the Gulf – gave up on direct intervention.

In place of direct conquest, then, Rome shifted to the annexation of territories closer to Egypt and Syria and the signing of treaties of friendship with peoples further to the south to do her work for her. Rome, after all, had to keep a wary eye on the Persian Empire.

In A.D. 106, Nabataea, today's Jordan and northwest Saudi Arabia, was occupied and made a Roman province; this gave the Romans direct control of at least the trade approaches to Egypt. In 120, Palmyra, a

desert trading capital to the east of Damascus, was also annexed, giving Rome control of the entrance of Indian goods to Roman territory from the Gulf.

And so the frontiers between the Roman and Persian Empires were drawn in Arabia. The northeast of the Peninsula, old Sumer and Babylon, was an ongoing battleground, tenuously held by Persia. The north central region fell under the Roman influence of Palmyra. The northwest, covering the approaches to Rome's richest province, Egypt, was strongly controlled by the Roman province of old Nabataea.

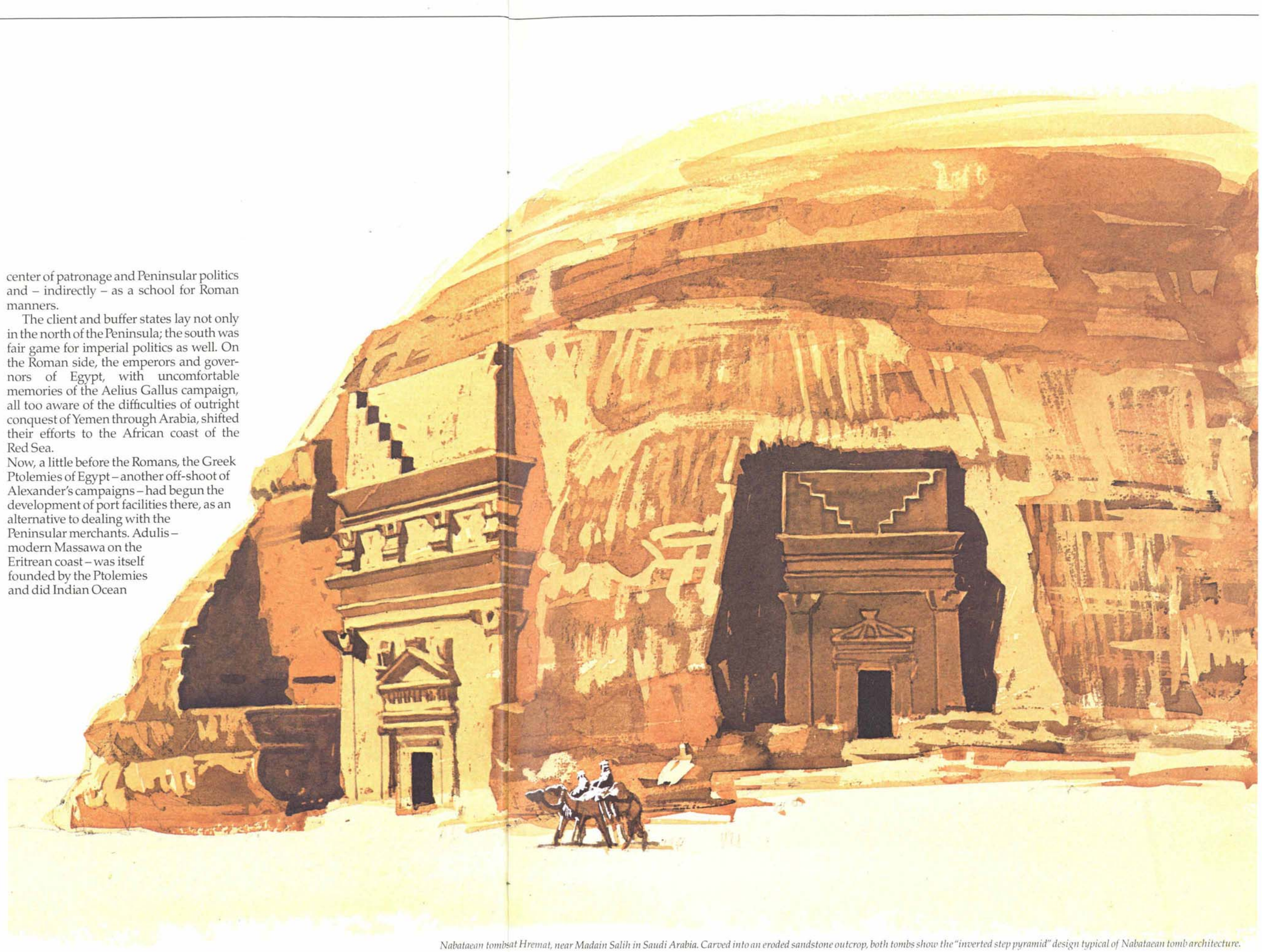
The fourth century saw a new layer of buffer states added to these frontiers. A strong Arab state emerged on the desert side of southern Mesopotamia, in close alliance with Persia: the Lakhmid dynasty of Hira. The Persians found it easier to let their Arab friends, the Lakhmids, deal with the Arabs of the south and center of the Peninsula in trading matters and warfare. It was also infinitely preferable to have the Lakhmids take the first brunt of the next Roman invasion of Persian territory.

At the same time, the Lakhmids came to have considerable influence in the Persian court, on at least one occasion choosing the successor to the Persian throne. Their court life at Hira was a lavish one, attracting businessmen – and poets in search of patronage as well – from all over the Peninsula. They carried their share of influence into central Peninsular politics, and along with it brought knowledge of Persian cultural and administrative style.

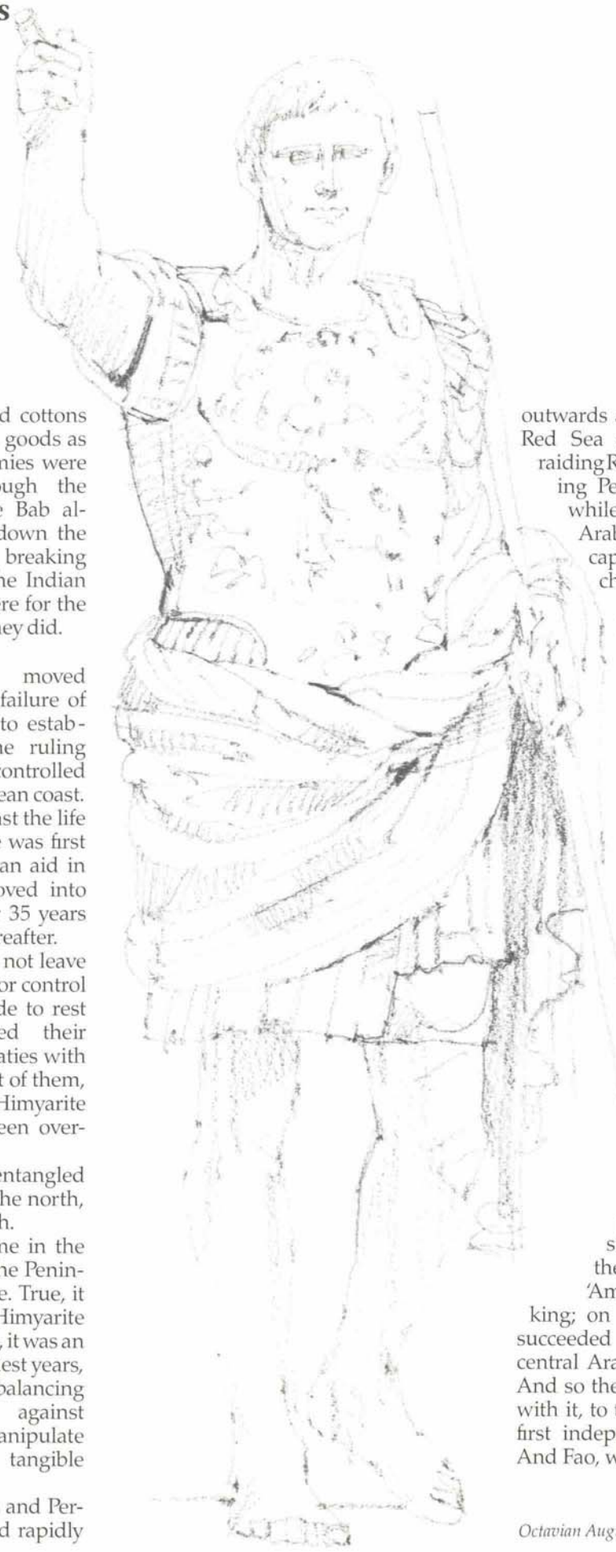
Shortly after the establishment of Lakhmid Hira and parallel to it, a Roman buffer state appeared in the northwest, taking in at its height Jordan, Syria and Palmyra: the state of the Arab Ghassanid dynasty. Subsidized by the Romans, it functioned, like Hira, as a buffer state, a center of patronage and Peninsular politics and – indirectly – as a school for Roman manners.

The client and buffer states lay not only in the north of the Peninsula; the south was fair game for imperial politics as well. On the Roman side, the emperors and governors of Egypt, with uncomfortable memories of the Aelius Gallus campaign, all too aware of the difficulties of outright conquest of Yemen through Arabia, shifted their efforts to the African coast of the Red Sea.

Now, a little before the Romans, the Greek Ptolemies of Egypt – another off-shoot of Alexander's campaigns – had begun the development of port facilities there, as an alternative to dealing with the Peninsular merchants. Adulis – modern Massawa on the Eritrean coast – was itself founded by the Ptolemies and did Indian Ocean



Nabataean tombsat Hremat, near Madain Salih in Saudi Arabia. Carved into an eroded sandstone outcrop, both tombs show the "inverted step pyramid" design typical of Nabataean tomb architecture.



business in spices and silks and cottons along with such prosaic African goods as gold and elephants. (The Ptolemies were obsessed by elephants.) Though the Ptolemies pushed through the Bab al-Mandab strait of the Red Sea down the Somali coast, they had no luck breaking South Arabian dominance of the Indian trade. But the precedent was there for the Romans to follow, and follow it they did.

Octavian Augustus moved immediately after the failure of the Yemen expedition to establish friendly relations with the ruling dynasty of Aksum, which controlled northern Abyssinia and the Eritrean coast. It was an alliance which would last the life of Rome. Its value to the empire was first proven in 340 when, with Roman aid in arms – not men – Aksum moved into Yemen, occupying it wholly for 35 years and its coastline sporadically thereafter.

The Persians, of course, could not leave this southern threat to *their* bid for control of the Indian Ocean transit trade to rest unchallenged. They reinforced their settlements in Oman, signed treaties with Arab tribes to the north and west of them, and built a solid alliance with the Himyarite dynasty of Yemen, who had been overthrown by the Aksum invasion.

And then, surrounded by the entangled politics of these buffer states to the north, south, east and west, came Kindah.

Kindah, established some time in the fourth century in the center of the Peninsula, was a buffer state to no one. True, it had friendly relations with the Himyarite dynasty of Yemen; initially, in fact, it was an offshoot of it. But after those earliest years, the Himyarites were too busy, balancing ostensible Persian friendship against Roman/Aksum threats, to manipulate Kindah – or even offer much tangible support.

Independent of direct Roman and Persian pressures, Kindah expanded rapidly outwards and to the north, touching the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf coastlines, raiding Roman Ghassanids and conquering Persian Hira. It was, for a little while, a powerful state the heartland Arabs could call their own. And its capital might be – there's a "good chance," says al-Ansary – Fao.

Greater knowledge of Kindah hangs on the work of al-Ansary and other new historians of the Peninsula; precious little is known now. The Ghassanids were written about by prolific Roman historians and geographers; the Lakhmids also are reasonably well described by outside contemporary writings. What we have on Kindah are elusive poetic references; oral traditions copied down centuries after the events they describe, and twisted by later family jealousies; occasional references in Byzantine chronicles to raids on the southern frontiers.

Tradition tells us this much: Hujr, a distant relative and friend of a Himyarite king, was appointed to govern the territories to the south of present-day Riyadh following a successful Himyarite campaign there. Later, Hujr married his son 'Amr to a cousin of the Himyarite king; on the death of his father, 'Amr succeeded to what was now a state in central Arabia, taking on the title "king." And so the dynasty was established, and with it, to the best of our knowledge, the first independent central Arabian state. And Fao, which apparently was there as a highway trading town centuries before Kindah developed into a state, seems to have grown with it, and to have become the capital. It isn't certain, but it's likely.

Octavian Augustus, first Roman Emperor.

The state's source of income was its control of the cross-country traffic in goods from Yemen destined for Persia and Rome; with the money, more towns and fortresses were built, and alliances sealed with independent-minded tribes on the fringes of Roman and Persian territory. The money also bought the loyalty of the tribes around and among the Kindites.

It was a world of tribal politics and tribal society, after all, here in the middle of the Peninsula. Merchant, baker, farmer, or herder, they all belonged to their tribes first and to the Kindites second. As long as the dynasty could hold their tribal confederation together – for that is what the kingdom was – it was a power for empires to reckon with. But once the alliances frayed the confederation loosened.

The last 100 years before the emergence of Islam brought war to the Peninsula and throughout the Middle East. The two world powers, Byzantium – heir to Rome – and Persia, locked themselves for the last time in a struggle for supremacy, 100 years of warfare so costly in lives and money that it brought supremacy to neither and collapse to both. All of the Peninsula, ultimately, was involved.

In the south, under orders from Byzantium in A.D. 525, Abyssinia launched a major invasion of Yemen once again. After successful campaigns and years of consolidation there, further pressure from Byzantium was exerted on the Aksumites to secure control of the entire Red Sea coastline of the Peninsula. Thus, about 570, an expedition was sent out against Mecca, midway up the coast, the only major commercial center still stubbornly resistant to Byzantine influence. The expedition failed; but it disrupted further the peace and security of southwest Arabia. Worse, it was one threat too many against the Indian trade for the Persians, who were now ruled by the ambitious and aggressive Chosroe. In 575, with the cooperation of the desperate Himyarites, the Persians struck back, routing the Abyssinians and occupying Yemen for themselves. They held it for 50 years, up to the eve of the coming of Islam.

In the north, Byzantine and Persian armies marched with their Arab allies back and forth over the plains of Mesopotamia and Syria, a series of campaigns which culminated in the military occupation of Syria, Palestine and Egypt by Persia between 610 and 618.

Kindah could not withstand the pressures of the long, intense struggle that went on all around her. The trade from the south was cut to a trickle by the destructive wars fought in Yemen; the wars in the north in any case left her with uncertain markets to receive whatever goods there were. Her income thus diminished, it became wellnigh impossible to hold the tribal confederation together, vulnerable as these tribes were to the blandishments offered them by a Byzantium or a Persia needful of allies.

Only a few years before the Abyssinian invasion of Yemen, al-Harith, king of Kindah, had successfully overthrown the Lakhmids of Hira and bade fair to unite all of the Peninsula under his independent rule. Yet the Lakhmids returned with more than a little Persian help in 529, al-Harith was killed, and the major tribal groups fell to fighting among themselves over policy and power. There was neither money enough nor leadership to put the confederation solidly together again.

Though Kindah was gone, memories stayed strong in the scholarly histories and campfire talk of the Peninsular people, not only because it was the first great Arab state of the center, independent, entirely their own, but because of the story of a grandson of al-Harith, Imr al-Qays by name – his story, and his poetry.

Imr al-Qays, known as the "wandering king," spent his life roaming in exile, seeking far and wide for vengeance against the murderers of his father and grandfather, for the opportunity to regain his patrimony. He traveled beyond the Peninsula; he knew perfectly well that the source of strength in those times of world struggle lay with the great powers. The hated Lakhmids were allies of Persia; he went therefore to Constantinople, with a letter of recommendation from the ruler of the Byzantine client state of Ghassan.

Did Justinian welcome him there on the Bosporus, promise him aid and support? The story says so. But it came to nothing in the end; Imr al-Qays died in Ankara on the way home.

Perhaps the story is not entirely true; we have no solid documentation for it, though the names and places ring right. There seems no question that the man himself existed. His poetry is magnificent; his Ode, full of references to Kindite names and places, is numbered by all literary scholars as one of the Golden Seven, which together stand – like Shakespeare's works in English – as the epitome of Arabic literature.

So, all across the land, Kindite towns – including, perhaps, Fao – collapsed into obscurity, to be revived only by medieval Arab literary antiquarians and now, more fully, by the archeological crews of the University of Riyadh. The walls are collapsed and half buried; broken pottery is scattered in the wind-blown hollows. Imr al-Qays spoke better than he knew:

Halt, friends! Let us weep, remembering a love and a lodging

By the edge of the twisted sands between al-Dakhul and Hawmal,

Tudih and al-Miqrat, their trace not yet effaced

For all the swirling of the south winds and the northern blasts…

The Fair at Ukaz

The Fair at Ukaz

Empires come and go. Governments topple, dynasties pass; but through it all, year in, year out, the fair came out to the edge of town.

All around the Peninsula every settlement had its market day once a week; larger towns had theirs every month. Families came in from the smallest outlying hamlets, their donkeys and camels loaded with grain and baskets, homespun cloth and woven rugs, products from the farm to trade for finer woven textiles brought from outside, perhaps from India, by town merchants, for farming equipment from the town blacksmiths, for fired and glazed dishes from the town potters. There were toys for the children, jewelry and cosmetics for the ladies, a chance to talk and gossip with neighbors, hear a wandering minstrel. Far-away imperial wars were interesting, but *this* was really important.

Each market was an American county fair in small. The largest of all were held once a year, and there on the edge between settled land and pastoral they drew in crowds of desert people, tribes with friends and relations in the towns of the region.

Fair day was filled with dust rising from the hooves of nervously milling animals, the noise of roaring camels and lowing cattle, of arguing traders. In the evening, with the major deals completed, the wives returned from a long day of shopping with the children scarcely awake, exhausted by the games and excitement; the men gathered on blankets before a fire, talking late into the night of animals and men, weather and politics, land and hunting. No one packed for the long trip home on the morrow. The business of the fair was over, perhaps, but the best was yet to come. The following day brought the races.

Everyone was up early on race day for the best seat along the straight, roughly laid out course. Horses were run, then camels. They ran family against family, town against town, tribe against tribe. Honor was at stake for the year; bragging and betting went on continuously among the crowds lining the track. It was good-natured competition for some, the settling – and making – of grudges for others. It was the culmination of the fair. Of all the fairs, that is, save one.

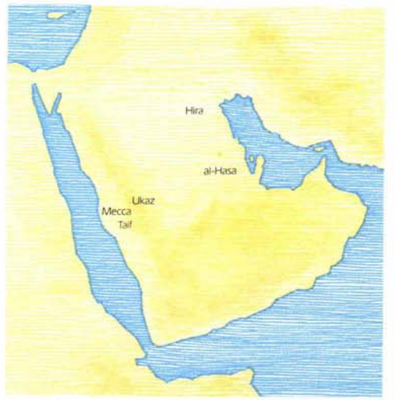
In that one, a single competition remained for the evening which drew competitors not only regionally but from all over the Peninsula as well. To win it was the ultimate in honors. The competition was in poetry; the location, the Ukaz Fair.

Some have alleged that this national poetry competition never took place, that it is the fairy-tale production of ninth-century Arab literary figures. Perhaps; but Ukaz the place exists. A few miles toward the desert from Taif, on the high plateau east of Mecca, the jumbled piles of hewn rocks have been known far back into history as Ukaz, and are earmarked for excavation by the new historians. Bits of pottery, glass, and metal are scattered about between the rocks and under the thorny acacia trees. You might scratch your head; but after all, what does a fairground look like when the crowds go home?

The poetic form set for the competition was the *qasidah*, an ode. Control of this form demands tremendous technical craftsmanship. Beyond the line-end rhyme, there are rigid internal patterns to follow, with complex rules governing variations on patterns. By the sixth century even the general theme was dictated: happening upon a deserted campsite and the memories this evoked of past loves, past battles, a lyric description praising one's tribe and homeland.

No one questions the central place of poetry in the lives of the pre-Islamic Peninsular people. It was their song, their painting; it was their main instrument of cultural creation. Like the Welsh eisteddfod, the Ukaz poetry tourney was entirely in keeping with the people and the land.

Though the tents of Ukaz are gone, the events of the competition come back easily with a little imagination. The crowd, sitting, standing, murmurs quietly in anticipation as a figure makes his way forward. The evening star is out and the rest will follow quickly. The contestant stands a moment while the whispers trail into silence. Then he lifts his head and slowly, deliberately, staring unseeing at the dark line of the hills before him, recites the first line.



The tension among the people eases a little; the pattern of the ode is right, and the variation is interesting. The next line follows, and the next; tension once again rises as the end line is recognized as difficult and the imagery complex. By the halfway mark one can know that he is very good, as the rhythm takes hold and the picture unfolds line upon line. Yet even the slightest break, the slightest misalignment, will bring the whole poetic edifice down. Can he sustain it to the end?

Now each line is met with an "Ah!" of appreciation. When the last line is finished and the tension released, a great roar goes up from the hundreds of listeners. A new poet laureate is born.

Who were these great poets of Ukaz? We know some of them and their poetry from the sixth century. Later literary critics agreed (to the extent that critics can) on seven, at least, whose odes they put together in one collection. They were called the "Golden" or "Suspended" Odes. The name comes from stories which were told of each victorious ode having the honor of being painted in gold on fine linen and hung on the building of the holy shrine in Mecca.

'Antar, the Black Knight, was one: no one better at describing the excitement and terror of the battlefield. Tarafa was another, from the lands around al-Hasa; he went to Hira around A.D. 564 to seek his fortune, antagonized the ruler there with a satirical line and was poisoned for his pains. There is Zuhayr the Moralist from northern Najd, who dwelt on the iniquities of war rather than its glories. His sisters wrote poetry also; his son Ka'b, upon his conversion to Islam, wrote a famous ode entitled "The Cloak," about the Prophet. Imr al-Qays, the Himyarite prince, found patronage for both his politics and his poetry in Damascus, while al-Harith, reputedly a leper, found his at Hira. Hira also attracted 'Amr ibn Kulthum, long-lived leader of the Taghlib tribe and Labid, the Man with the Crooked Staff.

With Labid ends the seven, and rightly so. Labid's life spanned the birth and death of the Prophet. He died in 662, a weary old man of 140. (On his 120th birthday he wrote, "I have grown tired of life, of the length of my days dragging on, and of men forever asking, 'How is Labid today?'") At about 102, he converted to Islam, whereupon he swore never to write pagan poetry again. A new time had begun for the Peninsula.

Not long ago it was common in the West to speak of Islam as emerging from "the desert." It is becoming clear, as the work of the new historians progresses, that the reality is enormously more complicated than that. The Prophet, as quoted in the Hadiths, condemned the days before Islam as "Days of Ignorance." But not ignorance of civilization; rather, ignorance of God and His way; not the ignorance of primitive, isolated peoples, but the ignorance of paganism, the paganism of Dilmun and Babylon, Greece and Rome and Persia.

All of these great world civilizations, pagan though they were, formed, with others, part of the heritage of the Arabs of the Peninsula on the eve of Islam. Like Labid's poetry, Islam took this heritage and molded it; and with the guidance of a man of God led the Arabs out to take their turn in the shaping of our modern world.