Northeastern Arabia
From the Seleucids to the Earliest Caliphs

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The course of Near Eastern archaeology, as we are seeing very vividly today, is highly susceptible to the winds of political change. Iran and Afghanistan, to name but two examples, are lands in which it is at present impossible for western archaeologists to work. Yet this trend is hardly new, and in the Arabian peninsula political conditions have always played a very important role in determining where and when research was or was not possible.

In the late 19th and early 20th century, for example, both the northwestern and southwestern parts of the peninsula were investigated by European scholars, whether searching for remains of the Nabataean kingdom, ancient Dedan, the land of Midian, or Qataban and Saba. But in the northeastern part of the peninsula, with the exception of politically motivated explorers cum agents (Potts 1984a: Table 1), such was not the case, and indeed until very recently, the only exploration of any kind was that carried out by members of the ARAMCO (Arabian American Oil Company) community. In the last several years, however, research teams from the Peabody Museum, Harvard University, and the Institute of Near Eastern Archaeology, Free University of Berlin, in cooperation with the Saudi Arabian Dept. of Antiquities, have helped to throw light on this forgotten corner of the Near East, traditionally known as Al-Hasa. A season of survey in 1977 (Fig. 1) between Dahran and Kuwait (Potts et al. 1978) was followed up in 1982 by a brief reconnaissance (Potts n.d.) of the site of Thaj, the largest site (ca. 8 sq. km.) in northeastern Arabia and one inhabited between ca. 300 B.C. and A.D. 300. Finally, in 1983, a very productive season of excavations was carried out at Thaj (Potts, Pedde, and Fanelli n.d.).

In the following pages, some of the results of our research on ancient Hasanean society will be discussed, focusing on one of the least understood periods in the region's history, the 3rd century B.C. to the 7th century A.D. The area is of extreme interest given the fact that here we have an indigenous, North Arabian culture that was influenced in turn by its
literally, make the desert bloom, as a result of which the wildflowers of the Arabian desert have become justly famous. In addition, it is surely of importance for the Bedouins whose herds of camel, goat and sheep graze here, and for the wild asses of Thaj, mentioned by the pre-Islamic poet ‘Abd al-Khalid in the 6th century A.D. (Thilo 1958: 103) and still to be found here today.

3 Distribution of sabbaks between Hofuf and the Gulf. Site 76 is a site by the 'banks' of this former wadi system, and dates to the period ca. 200 B.C.-A.D. 300.

4 LANDSAT photograph of eastern Arabia, scale 1:750,000, showing the course of the 'Hofuf-Mahallim/Murmannat river as it ran from Hofuf to the Gulf, now reincorporated and used for draining irrigation water to the sea.

But there can be no comparison between this meager and sporadic source of water and the abundantly endowed Umm ar-Radhumah aquifer, located at a depth of 290-600 m. below ground level, whose course is shown in Fig. 2. Naturally, prior to the advent of deep drilling, there could be no question of directly tapping this rich water source, but we know that three other aquifers which are much shallower receive their water from the Umm ar-Radhumah formation, and it has been possible at least since the Sasanian era, when the first stone-lined wells at Thaj must have been dug, to reach water at depths of 15-35 m. below ground level. These wells have been cored for over the years, replastered or in some cases repaired with cement, and elsewhere is their effect more impressively shown than in the Qatif oasis, where 32 hand-dug wells have a total discharge of no less than 36,000 cubic meters per day, the largest spilling forth 30-50 liters of water per second (Jettis 1984: 24). This water supply has enabled the large-scale emigration of dates in both the Qatif and Hofuf oases, so famous throughout the Islamic world and praised by early Arabic poets such as Lahlud, al-Balhak (d. A.D. 964) and Ibn-Bunnin (d. A.D. 729).

But garden cultivation was not the only form of subsistence production in ancient Huna. Large-scale agriculture was also important for the sustenance of the many towns and cities whose names are preserved on Ptolomy's map of Arabia. In this regard it is particularly interesting to note that Pliny (Nat. Hist. VI.145) speaks of a river Murmannat flowing from inner Arabia towards the Gulf, just as Al-Áfifa (d. A.D. 629), Lahlud (d. A.D. 666), Al-Hamdan (d. A.D. 943) and Yacut (A.D. 1179-1229) did, calling it the 'Maballim', and writing that the 'Mulannah is a great river, and it is for Arabia, what the Ovin is for Biskh.' Although the existence of this river was much debated by later authorities, both Arab (e.g., Abu'l-Fida', A.D. 1279-1331) and European (e.g., G. F. Sadler, in 1819), there is hardly a pre-cambrian map of Arabia that does not show it. Furthermore, it is important to note that a series of sabbaks - salt lakes which are dry in summer and wet in winter - stretches from Hofuf north-eastwards towards the Gulf (Fig. 3), indicating that a fluvial system could have once existed here, of which the sabbaks are the mere residue. In fact, low-level aerial photographs of the area almost equidistant between Al-Uqayr and Hofuf show a series of river channels and traces of irrigation canals.

We know from pottery found on its surface that the site associated with this irrigation system was occupied in the period of our concern. Indeed a recent satellite photograph (Fig. 4) shows the course of Ptolomy's Murmannat river quite clearly, now in use again for drainage as part of the new irrigation project. Geomorphologists have determined that the Jaffarli sands, which currently stand between Hofuf and the Gulf, were responsible for the original blockage of the river, moving across its outlet to the sea and thereby causing pools of stagnant water to form the chain of sabbaks mentioned above.
Chaldean Origins?
Let us turn briefly now to another problem, namely, what were the origins of the culture of which we find the first traces in the 3rd century B.C.? Without reaching back into the remote past of the 2nd, 3rd, or 4th millennium B.C., we have little more than a handful of unpublished seals of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian type from eastern Arabia to let us know that the area was inhabited during the first half of the 1st millennium B.C. What is perhaps of potentially greater importance, however, is a dedicatory inscription (Fig. 5) carved on a rock face in the Hofuf oasis which represents that rare genre of texts variously called Old-Aramaic, Chaldean, or, more commonly, Proto-Aramaic, dated to between the 7th and 8th centuries B.C. While the actual dedicatory content of the text is of considerable interest, the mere fact of its existence in northeastern Arabia is of even greater significance, for it was W. F. Albright's belief that such inscriptions, known also from Ur, Uruk, Abu Salabikh, Nippur, and Anah on the Middle Euphrates (Potts 1986a: Table 7), represented the earliest traces of the Chaldeans. Fifteen years before the Hofuf inscription was known to the scholarly world, he suggested that the last dynasty to rule Babylon before the Persian conquest, the dynasty which included the illustrious Nebuchadnezzar, had originated in "an undetermined part of east Arabia." Does this inscription then provide confirmation for Albright's thesis? At this point it is still too early to tell, although this is the southernmost Chaldean or Proto-Aramaic inscription thus far discovered. It is also interesting that the Chaldeans appear in yet another context, namely as exiles expelled from Babylon to Gerra in the 6th century B.C. By whom they were expelled we do not know, although it is sometimes said that, if indeed the tale is true, they were expelled by Nebuchadrezzar in the early 7th century B.C., or else following the Persian conquest of Babylonia.

Gerra
Gerra, regardless of whether or not it was founded or in part populated by Chaldeans, is famous as that fabulously wealthy emporium to which Antiochus the Great made an expedition in 205 B.C. As Strabo tells us, the excavators of Gerra went to the Hadhiramaut in 40 days' time to purchase incense (for the route followed, see Potts 1986a) and were the main suppliers of that most coveted commodity to their contemporaries in Babylonia. In an exceptional case, according to Apian anecdotes, they even went to Petra to sell incense. This was not necessarily a case of carrying goods to Newcastle, but perhaps, as W. M. Tur assigned more than a half century ago, came about because the Potomans had penetrated western Arabia and diverted the curious bearing incense from southern Arabia away from Petra to their own advantage (Potts 1986a: 122, n. 55).

"But what of the location of ancient Gerra?" Many suggestions have been made, but new evidence is emerging which suggests that the site of Thaj is the best candidate (Potts 1986b). To understand why this may be the case, however, we must first consider the etymology of the name Gerra. W. M. Miller has suggested that Greek 'Gerra' derives from North Arabian 'HGB' via an Aramaic form 'Hagara.' Indeed there is plenty of evidence from ancient Hana for the use of Aramaic in addition to the indigenous 'Hasean' dialect of ancient North Arabian, and it is not unlikely that Aramaic eventually superseded Hasean as the popular language of the area. Among the inscriptions, Hasean-Aramaic bilinguals, and Aramaic toponyms on Potomans' map of Arabia, including Mabkhatu, Bilbasa, Hattu, and Masthala (Altich and Stiel 1968: 94-95).
Ancient Hana and the Parthians

The decline of Gherba is usually attributed to the rise of Parthia, the consequently greater importance of the land route from the east through Iran, and the activities of those successful merchants of Charma Spastnau, the city from which Isidore, author of Parthian Stations, hailed. Another competitor, of course, was Palmyra, a city in the Syrian desert with enough influence in the Gulf to have had a satrap on Bahrain attested in A.D. 211 and well-carved tombs on the Iranian Island Kharg.

However one wishes to look at the decline of Gherba, it must be stressed that Parthian contact with northeastern Arabia was not insignificant. Ardashir, the founder of the Sassanian empire, waged a campaign against eastern Arabia in A.D. 228. In Tabari’s account of that campaign we read that he encountered and captured the local king, whose name was Sanatrak. Now Sanatrak is a distinctively Parthian name (maybe, also attested in the Parthian royal family and among the rulers of Hatra, Armenia, and Adiabene. Despite objections from various scholars, such as Franz Altheim (Altheim and Stiehl 1905:228) and Geo Widener, as to the veracity of Tabari’s testimony, there is no reason to doubt that a Parthian governor may have been resident in eastern Arabia. Certainly this would explain the otherwise enigmatic fact that, as Ardashir’s first act upon becoming king, he chose to invade the area.

If we look to our area for archaeological indications of Parthian presence, moreover, we find several of interest. At the site of Ayn Jawan (Fig. 9) a T-shaped tomb of cut limestone ashlar was opened in the late 1940s by several American oil men (Bowen 1950). It was obviously a wealthy tomb as shown by the tomb stone door and the large number of inscriptions.

Ancient Hana was the only site at which the Parthian type of tomb was found. It was also at Ayn Jawan that the only other known example of a Parthian inscription was discovered (Fig. 11). This inscription has been translated as “son of the son of the son of...” A similar form was found in the inscription at Ayn Jawan by F. Altheim and E. Stiehl (1905:228). However, a more recent analysis by Geo. Widener suggests that the inscription at Ayn Jawan may have been a false inscription, and the true inscription may have been at Ayn Jawan.

Ancient Hana Society

Now that we have discussed Gherba, Thaj, and the environment of Al-Hasa, one may well ask what do we know about the ancient inhabitants of the area? Mention has already been made of their inscriptions, which represent a local North Arabian dialect written in South Arabian characters, and it may not be too speculative to suggest that here lies the language encountered by Aushich III when he came to Gherba seeking to neutralize its economic power. For, as Pothinus reports (Hist. XIII.39), Aushich required an interpreter to understand the letter written to him by the people of Gherba, and the Hanean dialect, represented by the small corpus of no more than 30 inscriptions, seems a likely candidate for the language in which this letter was written.

But what do these texts tell us of the people of Gherba or the region as a whole? C. Robin and J. Hylander date them to the Seleucid era, and as such they should be examined in every way possible for information which could throw light on early Hanean society. In fact, although the known inscriptions are all funerary (for a complete listing of these inscriptions see Potts 1984a), Table 1, they do serve as a mirror of the society which created them, when examined from an anthropological perspective. For the inscriptions, although standardized, contain not only the name of the deceased, but also different formulae of descent which tell us something about the organization of their society. Six formulae of descent are to be found in these inscriptions. In the simplest, of which eight examples are known, the deceased’s name is given (“grave-stone and grave of X”), followed by those of his/her ancestors in up to three genealogical steps, e.g., son/daughter of A, son/daughter of B, son/daughter of C. One should be careful not to assume that these represent true genealogical steps, i.e., the actual mother/father, grandmother/grandfather, etc., of the deceased, since we know from other cases in the ancient world that the “father” in a funerary inscription could in fact be several generations removed from the deceased, while the “grandfather” might be an eponymous or even mythic ancestor.

Other inscriptions include not only the genealogical steps, but additionally the name of the deceased’s clan, the family name, family and clan names together, clan and tribe names, and in one case, family, clan, and tribe names. Two inscriptions may be considered exemplary, and are of particular importance, namely, the inscriptions Ja 1045 and Cornwall 2. These are shown in Fig. 8 where they have been diagrammed, using triangles for the males and circles for the females; the deceased in each case is shown in black. Ja 1045 shows that a male might indicate descent exclusively through the female line, while Cornwall 2 shows that the opposite was also true, for here a female names three male ancestors. This shows clearly that, contrary to the thesis of W. Robertson Smith, whose 1885 work Kinship and Marriage in Early Arabia still exerts great influence, pre-Islamic Arabian society was not exclusively matrilineal.

Many interpretive problems remain to be solved before it can be said that we understand these inscriptions fully. Their study, however, could yield unexpected new insights into ancient Hasanean society.
Before leaving Ardashir and his time, there is another interesting point which should be mentioned. Tabari tells us that, in addition to defeating Sasntruk, Ardashir founded a new city in eastern Arabia on the site of Khajt. The name of this city has been rendered variously in the sources, but Frye has recently reaffirmed Albreim’s suggestion that it should be read Peres-Ardashir, i.e., “Victrious is Ardashir.” Now it is interesting that the district Khajt is normally identified with, at least in part, the modern Qatif oasis (Thilo 1955:39), and here in 1941, P.B. Cornwall heard of a headless statue found there some years before and subsequently reburied, which he then succeeded in re-excavating (Cornwall 1948:8). The dress of the statue (Fig. 12), with its long coat and skirt, is not at all like the typical Persian baggy trousers and kandys (type of coat) in many ways, but rather calls to mind the relief showing the investiture of Ardashir himself at Naqš-i Rajab. We may well wonder whether this slightly smaller than life-size statue is not a relic of Ardashir’s campaigns in the area and subsequent foundation of Peres-Ardashir. Unfortunately, the whereabouts of this important piece are not known, but I am in touch with a number of retired ARAMCO employees who were in Arabia in the late 1940s and early 50s, and they may be able to help in locating it.

Lakhmids, Sassanians, and Nestorians

A text known as the “Provincial Capital of Eranikuh,” composed between A.D. 754 and 775, tells us that Ardashir installed a governor or marzbân in eastern Arabia, and this marks the beginning of ca. 400 years of direct or indirect Sassanian domination in the area. Under Ardashir’s son, Shapur I, however, actual administration of the area passed to the Sassanians’ clients, the Arab dynasty of Al-Hira in Iraq known to us as the Lakhmids. It was perhaps at the hands of one of the Lakhmids, Mar al-Qays, that Thaj was destroyed ca. A.D. 300 (Potts n.d.). At any event, we do not hear of it in Tabari’s account of Shapur II’s campaign against eastern Arabia in 232. Obviously Lakhmid control in the early years of the 5th century was not a great success, for Shapur found it necessary to make a punitive expedition into the area, penetrating deep into central and even western Arabia.

It is about 30 years after the death of Shapur II, in the year A.D. 410, that we read for the first time in the acts of a synod held by Bishop Isaac at Selenikta-Ktesiphon of the existence of Nestorian bishops in northeastern Arabia. Present at the synod was Paul, bishop of Ardai and Todorn. These names have been maintained down to the present day in slightly altered form. Darrin, i.e., Ardai, is the name of the main town on the island of Tarut, i.e., Todorn, just opposite the Qatif oasis. The only relic of the Nestorian community, which flourished in northeastern Arabia from at least the beginning of the 5th century until perhaps the 10th century A.D., are three greef stones. These were originally found at Darin, but by 1914, as we learn from a letter written by an American missionary to the German orientalist Eduard Sachau, the objects were on Bahrain, and indeed they are now on display in the Bahrain Museum.
The Coming of Islam

The breakup of Sasanian control in northeastern Arabia began by A.D. 629 when the Arab governor of the area, al-Mundir b. Sawa, received an invitation from the Prophet to convert to Islam. Seeing this as an opportunity to overthrow his Sasanian overlord Sēboxt, al-Mundir sent a delegation to Medina, concluding a treaty with Muhammad, and providing the new Moslem regime with their very first taxes, namely, dates and grain from eastern Arabia. This act of conversion, however, was principally aimed at overthrowing the Sasanians' control, not at taking up a new religion, and as soon as the Prophet died, the movement known as ridda (apostasy) began, in which the eastern Arabians renounced Islam. But this movement was short-lived. At Juwaytha, later the site of the first mosque in eastern Arabia (said to have been built in 635), the defeat of al-Mundir b. an-Nu'man in 633 opened the way for an advance towards the coast. In 635 Darin was the object of the final assault which destroyed the ridda movement once and for all. Yacut tells us that the conquest of Darin required boats, and that the Moslem army had none. Sayf says that the journey to Tarut would have taken a day and a night's sailing, but God performed a miracle by parting the waters separating Tarut island and the mainland, thereby allowing the Moslem army to advance. He says that the water barely went over the tops of the camels' feet as they crossed Qatif bay. In fact, at low tide one can today walk across the bay with no trouble, and there are obviously shades of God parting the waters of the Red Sea for the Hebrews in this apocryphal tale. Nevertheless, the Moslem conquest did not put an end to the Nestorian community here, and we possess records of an important synod held on Tarut in 676 (Potts n.d.), as well as later references to Christians and Jews in the region.

Research on northeastern Arabia is still in its infancy, but it is hoped that this brief review has shown how many fascinating topics await the researcher who enters into this field of study. For here one has an opportunity to combine the fruits of over a century of archaeological, philological, anthropological, and historical scholarship on Iran, Iraq, and Arabia, with the results of surveys and excavations undertaken within the last few years.

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