

Chapter 1: Arabian Peninsula the Cradle of Islamic Culture

Arabia is a big peninsula situated in the south-west of Asia. Its area is three million square kilometres, almost double the area of Iran, six times that of France, ten times that of Italy and eighty times that of Switzerland.

This peninsula is of the shape of an irregular rectangle and is bounded by Palestine and the Syrian desert in the north, by Hira, the Tigris, the Euphrates and the Persian Gulf in the east, by the Indian Ocean in the south and by the Red Sea in the west. Hence, it is circumscribed on the western and southern sides by sea and on the northern and eastern sides by the desert and the Persian Gulf.

From olden times this territory has been divided into three regions: (1) The northern and western region which is called the Hijaz. (2) The central and eastern region which is called the Arabian Desert; and (3) The southern region which is called Yemen.

Within the Peninsula one comes across plenty of vast deserts and hot sandy tracts which are almost uninhabitable. One of these deserts is Badyah Samawah which is nowadays called Nafud. There is also another vast desert which extends up to the Persian Gulf and is now called ar-Rub'ul Khali. Formerly one part of these deserts was named Ahqaf and the other was called Dehna.

On account of the presence of these deserts about one third of the area of the Peninsula is barren and unfit for habitation. Only at times small quantities of water can be found in a few areas, as a result of rains in the heart of the deserts, and some of the Arab tribes drive their camels and cattle to those places for grazing.

The climate of the Peninsula is extremely hot and dry in the deserts and central tracts, humid in the coastal areas and temperate in some localities. It is due to its unwholesome climate that its population does not exceed fifteen million.

In this territory there is a mountain range which stretches from south to north. Its maximum height is

about 2470 metres

From times immemorial gold and silver mines and precious stones have been the sources of the wealth of the Peninsula. From amongst the animals the Arabs reared camels and horses. As regards birds, pigeons and ostriches were more abundant than others.

In modern times the biggest source of income of Arabia is extraction of oil and gas. The centre of oil reserves of the Peninsula is the city of Zahran, which is called Dahrán by the Europeans. This city is situated in the Saudi Arabian district called Ahsa' in the neighbourhood of the Persian Gulf.

In order that the esteemed reader may become more acquainted with the conditions of Arabia we now proceed to give a somewhat detailed description of the three regions mentioned above.

1. The Hijaz constitutes the northern and western region of Arabia and extends from Palestine to Yemen, adjacent to the coast of the Red Sea. It is a hilly tract which embraces many barren deserts and rugged areas.

This region enjoys more fame in history than all others. It is, however, evident that this fame has been occasioned by a chain of spiritual and religious matters. For example, even during the present times the Ka'bah, the House of God which is situated in this region, is the Qiblah of hundreds of millions of Muslims of the world.

The area surrounding the Ka'bah has been revered by Arabs as well as non-Arabs for centuries preceding the birth of Islam. As a mark of respect to it they considered warfare within the precincts of the Ka'bah to be unlawful and even Islam has recognised the area circumscribed by these limits to be inviolable.

Makkah, Madina and Ta'if are important cities of the Hijaz. Since ages the Hijaz has had two sea-ports. One of these is Jeddah which serves the people of Makkah, and the other is Yanbu' through which the people of Madina import most of their requirements. These two ports are situated on the coast of the Red Sea.

Makkah

It is one of the most famous cities of the world and the most populous city of the Hijaz and is about 300 metres higher than sea level. As this city is located between two mountain ranges it cannot be seen from a distance. The present population of Makkah is about 200,000.

A Short History of Makkah

The history of Makkah dates from the time of Prophet Ibrahim. He sent his son Isma'il along with his mother Hajar to the territory of Makkah to settle there. His son married in a tribe which lived at a nearby

place. Prophet Ibrahim constructed the Ka'bah under Allah's command and thereafter settlement at Makkah commenced.

The land in the suburbs of Makkah is somewhat saline and not at all cultivable. According to some orientalist its poor geographical conditions have no parallel in the world.

Madina

Madina is a city located at a distance of 90 leagues to the north of Makkah. It has gardens and date-palm all around it and its land is better suited for plantation of trees as well as for cultivation of crops.

Before Islam this city was called Yathrib, but after the Holy Prophet's migration to this city it was renamed as Madina tur Rasul (City of the Prophet). Later, however, the last word was dropped for the sake of abbreviation and it began to be called only Madina. History tells us that the first people who settled here were a group of Amaliqah. Those who followed them were a sect of the Jews and the tribes of Aws and Khazraj who came to be known amongst the Muslims as Ansar (helpers).

Unlike other regions of Arabia the Hijaz remained safe from the raids of the conquerors and the traces of the civilisations of Rome and Iran, two big empires of the world before the birth of Islam, cannot be observed here. This was so, because its barren and uninhabitable lands did not make it worth while for the foreigners to undertake military expeditions to occupy it and then to return empty-handed, after facing thousands of difficulties necessarily involved in gaining control over it.

In this connection the following story may be studied carefully. It has been quoted by the Greek historian, Diodore (B.C.): "When the great Greek Chief Demetrius arrived at Patra (one of the oldest cities of the Hijaz) with the intention of occupying Arabia, the residents of the city said to him, "O Greek Chief! Why should you fight with us? We live in a desert in which indigence of all sorts is the source of livelihood.

We have selected this dry and barren desert so that we may not have to obey the orders of anyone. So please accept our insignificant gifts and presents and refrain from occupying our territory. And incidentally, if you are inclined to persist in your intentions, we do hereby announce that in the near future you will be confronted with thousands of difficulties and hardships.

And be it known to you that the 'Nabtis' are not inclined to give up their way of life. In case, therefore, you held some of our people as captives by force and wish to carry them away this will be of no use to you, because they will be malevolent and misbehaving slaves only and will not be prepared to change their way of life". The Greek chief accepted their message of peace and good-will and abandoned the idea of attacking and occupying the Arabian territory ". 1

2. The central and eastern region, which is called 'The Arabian Desert' and is inclusive of the Najd Zone, is a sparsely populated plateau. After coming into power of the Saudi family the district of Riyaz, which is their capital, has become one of the important centres of Arabia.

3. The length of Yemen, the south-western region of the Peninsula, is about 750 kilometres from north to south and about 400 kilometres from west to east and its area has been estimated to be sixty thousand miles. However, formerly its area was even more than this and during the last half century part of it (Aden) remained the protectorate of Britain. Thus Najd and Aden constitute its northern and southern boundaries respectively, the Red Sea is on its west and on the eastern side it touches the ar-Rub'ul Khali desert.

The most well-known city of Yemen is the historical city of San'a and its most important sea-port is Hudaydah, which is situated on the coast of the Red Sea.

The territory of Yemen is the richest in the Peninsula and possessed a brilliant and dignified civilisation in the past. Yemen was the seat of government of Tababi'ah Kings who ruled for a very long period. Before the advent of Islam Yemen was a great centre of business and commerce and was, in fact, considered to be the 'cross-roads' of Arabia. It possessed very rich mines like gold, silver and other precious stones extracted therefrom. They were exported to other countries

The traces and relics of the civilisation of Yemen of those days are still available. During a period when means for executing burdensome tasks were not available to man the ingenious people of Yemen managed to erect attractive and lofty buildings by dint of their hard labour.

The kings of Yemen, though undisputed rulers of the territory, did not hesitate from enforcing the constitution drawn up and approved by the learned men of the land, and excelled others in the promotion of agriculture and horticulture. Minute regulations were drawn up and enforced for cultivation of farms and irrigation of agricultural lands and gardens. In this respect this country is considered to be one of the distinguished and developed countries of that age.

The famous French historian Gustave Le Bon says, "In the whole of Arabia there is no region more luxuriant and more fertile than Yemen".

Idrisi, the celebrated historian of the twelfth Century, writes thus about the city of San'a, "Here is situated the capital of Arabia and the seat of the government of Yemen. The buildings and palaces of this city are famous throughout the world. Even its ordinary buildings and houses are built of hewn stones"

These surprising monuments, which have been discovered as a result of recent excavations and investigations by the orientalist, prove the existence of a wonderful civilisation in different parts of Yemen of olden times, namely Ma'arib San'a and Bilqis.

In the city of Ma'arib (the famous city of Saba) there existed many lofty buildings with doors and arches ornamented with gold. Similarly gold and silver vessels as well as bedsteads made of metal were found there in abundance".²

One of the historical monuments of Ma'arib was its famous dam, whose traces are still available. It was

destroyed by a flood which has been referred to in the Qur'an as the 'Iram flood'.

1. Tamaddun-i Islam wa Arab, pp. 93 – 94

2. Tamaddun-i Islam wa Arab, page 96

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