

# **The Arabian Peninsula, the Rise of Arabia Felix, and the Himyarite Era**

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The history of the Arabian peninsula must take into account three different geographical areas, the north with the Syrian desert but extending on both sides of the 'Fertile Crescent' along the Red Sea and the Persian Gulf, the middle, home of Bedouin, and the south, with Oman, the Hadhramut and Yemen. The northern Arab states were either clients of, or closely bound with, the settled kingdoms of Syria or Iraq and their trading arms extended down the eastern or western coasts of the peninsula. The middle was occupied by nomadic tribes around small oases where water from wells and palm trees provided sustenance to the herds of camels, horses or goats of the Bedouin. Finally, the southern regions looked to the Indian Ocean with maritime trade from early times. The dialects, or even languages, spoken by the various tribes in the peninsula varied considerably from each other to judge from inscriptions in various alphabets. Outside influences were always operative on the peoples of the peninsula, more, of course, on those who lived on the coasts than in the interior.

The constant interchange between the settled folk and the Bedouin existed throughout the peninsula and tribal society both in the desert and in the oases, or even in the southern towns, was dominant. In the time from the eighth century B.C. to the third century A.D. the states which we find in the south usually were created by nomads coming from the desert. For the early period we rely on archaeology and inscriptions to aid us in reconstructing history, for Classical sources tell us little and later Arabic sources are full of legend and myth. From inscriptions we learn of the creation of a number of states in the south in the pre-Christian era. In the eighth century B.C. we find in Yemen two kingdoms the Minaean (Biblical Ma'on) and the Sabaeen about which, unfortunately, little is known. Later the kingdoms of Hadhramut and Qataban to the south of the others are mentioned in inscriptions. In the second century B.C. the Himyarites from the region of modern Aden become dominant, and they destroyed the kingdom of Qataban about the beginning of the first century A.D. They maintained their power well into the Christian era.

Trade between India and Egypt brought prosperity to the towns of southern Arabia and after the discovery of the monsoons in the first century of our era boats no longer had to hug the coasts but sailed on the high seas between east and west. In the geography of Ptolemy and other Classical sources the western coast of the peninsula including Yemen and the Hadhramut was called Arabia Felix because of the wealth of the inhabitants, based on long distance trade, mainly spices from India and ivory and other products from Africa, as well local luxury items such as frankincense and myrrh much prized in Egypt and the Roman world.. The Romans tried to control the trade with the east but an expedition in 24 B.C. into northern Arabia ended in disaster. Archaeology has revealed extensive irrigation works, including large dams and canals, which enabled the people of the south to extensively cultivate cereals, such as wheat, barley and sorghum, as well as other agricultural products, and as a result to prosper. Also metal work was highly developed in the south especially bronze articles. The prosperity of the south is revealed by elaborate, several storied buildings of stone, rock cut tombs and temples.

In the center of Arabia pastoral nomads whose livelihood was based on animal husbandry migrated to areas of rainfall during winter and spring, while in the summer they halted at places where water was available. Archaeology has revealed the existence of underground water canals, called *qanat*, in areas now desert, but nothing rivaled the extensive agriculture of the south. The Bedouin of the desert were both admired and feared by the settled folk but conflicts were tribal rather than between nomadic and settled folk, for the settled people also belonged to tribes. It is hardly possible, however, to reconstruct a history of the interior of Arabia in this period because of lack of information.

In northwestern Arabia, modern Hijaz, the oldest state was that of Dedan which gave place to the kingdom of the Lihyanites who have left many inscriptions and whose center was the oasis of al-'Ula in northern Hijaz. The Lihyanites grew rich on the inter-coastal trade until they were overthrown by the Nabataeans in the first century B. C. The latter are best known for their rock red town of Petra in Jordan, but to the south their center was in the oasis of al-Hijr (present Mada'in Salih) where they left numerous magnificent stone buildings and tombs which bespeak their prosperity resulting from control of the northern ends of the frankincense trade route. The Nabataean kingdom was brought to an end in 106 A.D. by the Romans who turned their domains into the Roman province of Arabia. The southern part of the Nabataean kingdom, however, was taken over by the tribe of Thamud related to the Lihyanites. Trade continued and flourished, however, even with the changes in political power.

During the early Christian era Arab Bedouin moved into both sides of the 'Fertile Crescent' and until the third century the caravan cities of the north were ruled by Arab princes. The most famous of them were Palmyra in the Syrian

desert and Hatra in northern Iraq. The former grew rich on the northern caravan trade between the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, but it was destroyed by the Roman emperor Aurelian in 273 A.D. Likewise the desert oasis town of Hatra flourished until it was destroyed by the Sasanian ruler Ardashir in 239 A.D. After that time the Sasanians established an Arab client state of the Lakhmids, later to be followed by a Roman, then Byzantine, client state of the Ghassanids in the western Syrian desert. The richness of both Palmyra and Hatra has been revealed by archaeologists, but in the third century A.D. the Byzantine and Sasanian empires usurped the role of the many Arab caravan cities in vying for control of the profitable trade routes between east and west.

Towards the end of the independent Arab mini-states, such as Palmyra, Hatra and the Nabataean kingdom, both Jewish migrants and Christian missionaries penetrated the Arabian peninsula. The Arabs of the peninsula were polytheists but certain deities were proper to particular sites or regions. It seems the Lihyanites were the first to worship the deity Allah, which under Islam spread far and wide. Religious influences from the south probably spread to the north, and the oasis of Ta'if southeast of Mecca, where trade routes from the south split going northeast and north, became a center of religious activity. Only after the period under discussion did Ethiopia accept Christianity and the latter gain a strong foothold in Arabia. But Ethiopian interest in south Arabia was manifest before this time, for in 190 A.D. a military force came from Axum on the west coast of the Red Sea to fight against the Himyarites, a presage of later developments. It must be emphasized that southern Arabia was much more developed than the center or even north, and many ideas from the south spread over the entire peninsula.