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Arabian Peninsula

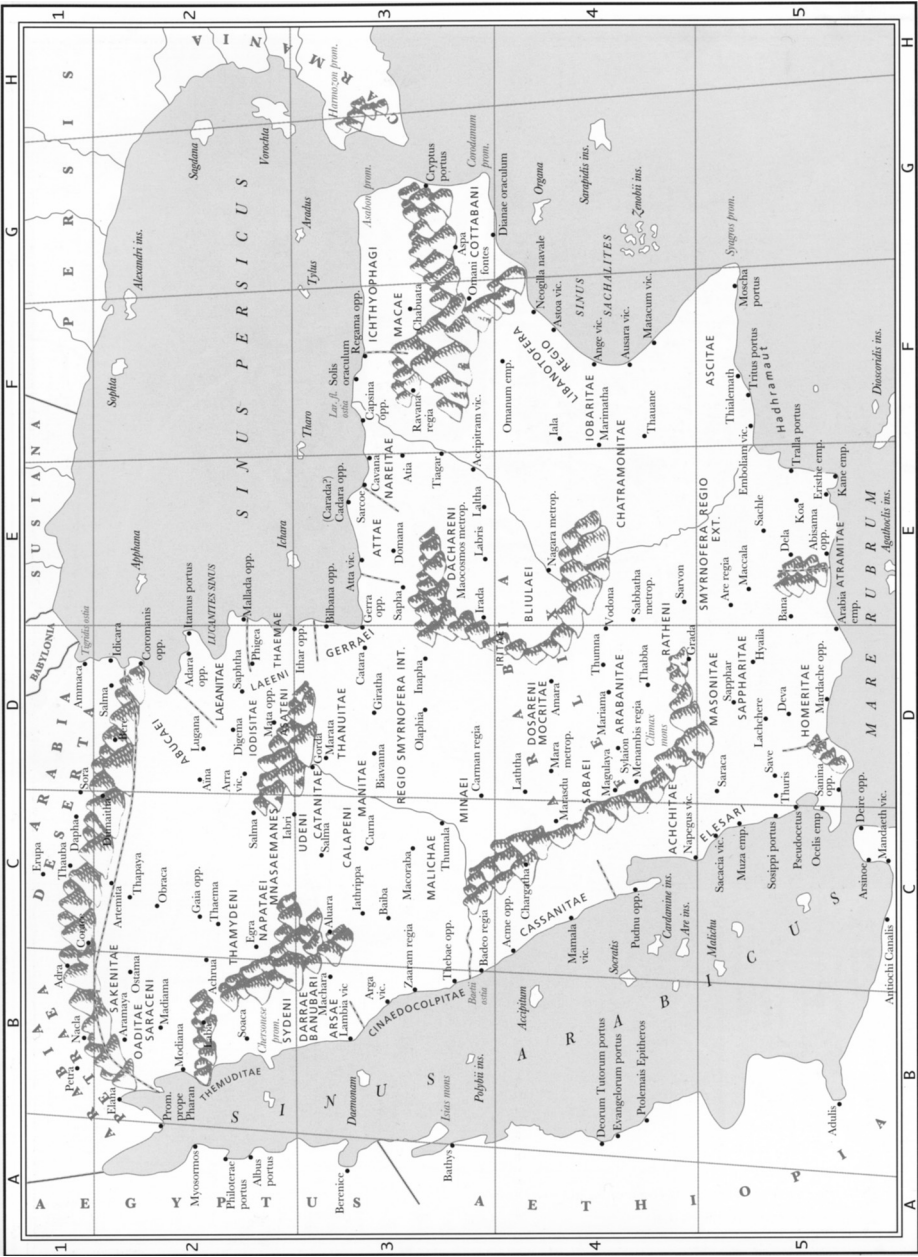
The **Arabian Peninsula**, in Arabic *jazīrat al-ʿarab*, “the island of the Arabs,” Arabia to the ancients, is the land mass that projects southwards from the main body of the Middle East. This article covers the geography of the region and its history up until about 1800 C.E. For the modern period, see the bibliographic survey, country entries, or entries on specific topics.

1. GEOGRAPHICAL EXTENT AND NATURE

The Arabian Peninsula is surrounded on three sides by sea: the Red Sea on its western side, the Indian Ocean to the south and the Arabian/Persian Gulf to the east. In a purely geographical sense, the peninsula’s northern border would be the straight line that connects al-ʿAqaba at the northern end of the Red Sea with Ra’s al-Bīsha at the northern end of the Arabian/Persian Gulf. However, pre-modern writers (see section 2. below) did not choose such an arbitrary cut-off, but rather included the peninsula’s natural northern extension, the Syrian Desert. This formulation constitutes a triangular wedge with its apex in northern Syria and its sides loosely demarcated by the 200 millimetre per year rainfall line, the point at which agriculture can be practised, if at all, only by means of various water catchment and distribution techniques. This vast land mass amounts to almost 3.9 million square kilometres, an area slightly larger than India or all the countries of the European Union combined. It is mostly composed

of a single uniform block of ancient rocks, referred to as the Arabian shield, with an accumulation of younger sedimentary rocks, particularly in the eastern part. Accompanying this structural unity is a fairly uniform climatic pattern: everywhere long, very hot summers; everywhere, except for the southwest (modern Yemen), receiving on average less than 200 millimetres of rainfall per year, and most parts less than 100 millimetres.

The peninsula may be divided into four principal geographical regions. There are the western highlands, which run the length of the Red Sea and reach as high as 3600 metres in the south. Then there is the vast interior, comprising the sandy and stony wastes of al-Rubʿ al-Khālī (“Empty Quarter”) in the south, the Nafūd and Dahnāʾ deserts in the centre, and the Ḥisma, Hamād, and Syrian deserts in the north. The third region and the most famous in antiquity was the southwest, a land of towering mountains, beautiful coastal plains and plunging valleys, which is endowed with the double blessing of monsoon rains and aromatic plants. Lastly there are the hot and humid eastern coastlands of the Arabian/Persian Gulf, where the harsh climate is mitigated by the existence of abundant groundwater. It is the unrelenting harshness and grandiose monotony of much of the Arabian landscape that has fascinated Western adventurers, and yet at the micro-level there is much variety and diversity. There are palm-laden oases, mud-flats and dried salt marshes, extinct volcanoes with their expansive ebony lava beds, uplands such as those of Najd and Oman, and rock formations wind-weathered into strange patterns and shapes which, when the seasonal rains arrive, spawn unexpected water pools and pasture for sheep, goats, and camels.



Map 1. Arabia according to Ptolemy (c. 150 C.E.).
Source: Hugh Kennedy, *An historical atlas of Islam. Second, revised edition*, Leiden 2002.

2. ANCIENT PERCEPTIONS

The earliest authors do not speak of the Arabian Peninsula, but of Arabia, which served as a general term for the steppe and desert wastes bordering on the territories of the settled states and principalities of Egypt and the Fertile Crescent. For Herodotus (d. c. 430 B.C.E.) *Arabiē* chiefly designates parts of eastern Egypt, Sinai, and the Negev (2.8, 11–2, 75, 158; 3.5, 9), which accords with the note of Pliny (d. 79 C.E.) that “beyond the Pelusiatic (easternmost) mouth of the Nile is Arabia, extending to the Red Sea” (5.65). In Persian administrative lists, mostly from the reign of Darius (521–486 B.C.E.), a district called *Arabāya* is usually included between Assyria and Egypt, which is probably Herodotus’s Arabia, plus parts of the Syrian Desert. The latter corresponds to Pliny’s “Arabia of the nomads,” lying to the east of the Dead Sea (5.72). In order to seize the Persian throne from his brother, the young Cyrus led his army of 10,000 Greeks on an epic journey from Sardis to Babylon in 401 B.C.E. On the way “he marched through Arabia, keeping the Euphrates on the right” (Xenophon, *Anabasis* 1.4.19), the reference here being to the province of Arabia in central Mesopotamia. This is qualified by Pliny as “the district of Arabia called the country of the Orroei” to the east of the Euphrates and south of the Taurus Mountains (5.85).

Herodotus knew of the Arabian Peninsula as well: “Arabia is the most distant to the south of all inhabited countries and this is the only country which yields frankincense and myrrh” (3.107). He had little information about it, however, and it remained for him a land of mystery and legend, abounding with aromatics, “vipers and winged serpents.” This was to change after the voyage of Scylax of Caryanda

commissioned by Darius (Herodotus 4.44) and particularly after the journeys of exploration dispatched by Alexander the Great (d. 323 B.C.E.), which made the Arabian Peninsula much better known to the outside world. Theophrastus of Eresus (d. 287 B.C.E.), interested in botanical matters, gives it only a passing mention (9.4.2), but Eratosthenes of Cyrene (d. c. 202 B.C.E.), chief librarian to the Ptolemies of Egypt, furnishes a proper description: “The northern side,” he says, “is formed by the above-mentioned (Syrian) desert, the eastern by the Persian Gulf, the western by the Arabian Gulf, and the southern by the great sea that lies outside both gulfs” (cited in Strabo 16.3.1; cf. Pliny 6.143).

The Muslim Arabs had much the same conception of Arabia, namely the peninsula proper plus the Syrian Desert to the north of it, and they termed it “the island of the Arabs.” In his definition, al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956) lists the regions of the Peninsula proper (al-Yaman, Tihāma, al-Ḥijāz, al-Yamāma, al-ʿAraḍ, al-Baḥrayn, al-Shiḥr, Ḥaḍramawt, and Umān), then adds “the open lands [i.e., steppe and desert] that lie next to Iraq and Syria” (*Tanbīh*, intro.). Lexicographers often explain use of the term *jazīra* by the fact that the land mass is surrounded on all sides by water, the River Euphrates forming a watery arm that reaches round the northern section of this “island” (e.g., al-Zamakhsharī, *Asās al-balāgha*, s.v. *j-z-r*). This conception is made manifest in a number of mediaeval maps of the Arab world that show this region tightly encircled by a thick band of blue water with only a slight chink on the northwest side (for a good example, see the Persian translation of the *Kitāb al-masālik wa-l-mamālik*, by the fourth/tenth-century geographer al-Iṣṭakhrī, in Bodleian MS Ouseley 373, fol. 9v).

3. THE INHABITANTS

The Greco-Roman and Persian terms for Arabia derive from the word *‘arab*, which is the name of a people. “Arabia” is thus equivalent to the Assyrian expression “land of the Arabs” (*māt Aribi*). It must be borne in mind, however, that the Arabs did not initially inhabit all the huge territory designated as Arabia, and this land mass certainly contained many other peoples. Because of differences in topography and climate, these other peoples were often quite distinctive and had distinctive histories. Moreover, the deserts of the interior, especially the Empty Quarter, to a considerable degree isolated east Arabia and southwest Arabia from each other and from north and west Arabia, and so the populations of each region originally evolved largely independently of one another. This became less true in the Greco-Roman period (c. 330 B.C.E.–240 C.E.) when circumnavigation of Arabia became commonplace, and increasing demand from Mediterranean and Mesopotamian elites and other sectors of their populations for the aromatics of south Arabia impelled Mesopotamia to increase its contacts with the rest of Arabia and with the outside world. Isolation became even less true in the Byzantine/Sāsānian period (c. 240–630 C.E.), when competition between the two superpowers of the day intensified and obliged the peoples of Arabia to play a part in world politics. Thus we witness a gradual opening up of Arabia to the outside world over the course of its history and also an increase in the traffic in goods and ideas within Arabia itself.

These events were crucial to the rise to prominence of the most successful of the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula, namely the Arabs. They are first mentioned in Biblical and Assyrian texts of the ninth to

fifth centuries B.C.E., where they appear as nomadic pastoralists inhabiting the Syrian Desert. The fact that the name begins to be used by both cultures during the same period suggests that “Arab” was how these pastoralists designated themselves. What the original significance of this designation was we do not know (though the sense of “pure” features in the root, and this might be relevant), but it came to be synonymous with desert-dweller and a nomadic way of life in the texts of settled peoples. “You waited by the roadside for lovers like an Arab in the desert,” says the prophet Jeremiah (3:2). “Babylon . . . will be overthrown by God,” prophesies Isaiah (13:19–20), “never again will the Arab pitch his tent there or the shepherds make their folds.” “Do not show the sea to an Arab or the desert to a Sidonian, for their occupations are different,” opined a sage of the seventh century B.C.E. (Ahiqar 110). The Assyrian king Sargon II (r. 721–05 B.C.E.) speaks of “the Arabs who live far away in the desert and who know neither overseers nor officials” (Daniel D. Luckenbill, ed., *Ancient records of Assyria and Babylonia*, Chicago 1927, 2:17).

Arabs do feature in one very early south Arabian inscription, most probably of the seventh/sixth century B.C.E. (Jean Baptiste Chabot, ed., *Répertoire d'épigraphie sémitique*, Paris 1933, no. 3945), but in general they are rarely encountered in the texts of that region until the first century B.C.E. After that date they seem to impinge ever more on the lives of the south Arabians, and it is not long before we can trace the same process of impingement taking place in east Arabia.

As numerous pre-modern peoples did, Westerners tend to think of the Arabs in the past as having all been Bedouin, men attired in robe and headscarf leading their

camels across the dune-lands of Araby. The name derives from the Arabic word *badawī* (collective noun *badū*), meaning one who inhabits the *bādīya*, the desert or semi-desert/steppe. In Arabic literature *badawī* is often contrasted with *ḥaḍarī*, meaning a denizen of settled lands (*ḥaḍira*). A synonym of Bedouin is *ʿarabī* (collective noun *ʿarab*), which is the word used in pre-Islamic south Arabian inscriptions and also in the Qurʾān, referring to desert dwellers (e.g., “If the anti-Muslim groups/*aḥzāb* would come again, the laggards would wish they were in the desert/*bādūn* with the *ʿarab*,” Q 33:20). However, though *ʿarabī* shares the same root as *ʿarab* (Arab), it has a narrower definition.

Arab is the name of a people, some of whom would have been *ʿarab*/Bedouin, but many of whom would have been residents of urban and rural areas. It is important to stress this latter point, but it is nevertheless true that a good proportion of the inhabitants of the Arabian Peninsula would have been Bedouin. Yet even accepting this, we still need to understand that considerable variation in lifestyle across space and time is implied. Bedouin were typically pastoralists, though they might engage in opportunistic farming when rainfall was unusually high, and would also hunt wild animals and birds and gather wild herbs and roots when the chance arose. Given that they inhabited very dry areas, they were obliged to practise varying degrees of nomadism, often having to travel long distances in search of food and drink for their animals, following migratory routes determined by the availability of water and pasture. Some Bedouin would move around the arid enclaves located within settled lands, practising what anthropologists call enclosed nomadism. Others would traverse the “sandy deserts spacious as the air in magnitude” and “make their

camps in plains of immeasurable extent” (Diodorus Siculus 2.54), practising what is called excluded or external nomadism.

The most significant advance in Bedouin life for Arabia was the domestication of the one-humped camel (dromedary), a process that was probably begun in southeast Arabia in the third millennium B.C.E. The animal was very likely exploited first for its dung, burned as fuel, and its milk and flesh, consumed for sustenance. At the end of the process would have come its use for riding and transport. When this latter event occurred is a much-debated question. It has been suggested that the emergence of a new, larger type of storage jar (the collared-rim pithos) in the southern Levant during the thirteenth and twelfth centuries B.C.E. is linked to the camel, for the animal’s strength and endurance would have made it ideal for transporting these new containers, so heavy when laden (80–120 kilograms). The Egyptians were active in southern Palestine and northwest Arabia at this time, as is illustrated by pottery and inscribed Egyptian objects, and they may have used the local inhabitants as their agents in this trade (such as, perhaps, the Midianites of the Bible, who were nomadic pastoralists: “they came... with their tents, and they and their camels were innumerable,” Judges 6:5). In any case we have clear pictorial evidence of camels being ridden from Syria and Assyria of the ninth century B.C.E., and with this innovation camels now offered a full range of benefits to their owners: “They (the Debae of west Arabia) employ them for the conveyance of their wares and thus easily accomplish all their business, drink their milk and in this way get their food from them, and traverse their entire country riding upon their racing camels” (Agatharchides in Diodorus Siculus 3.45). Moreover, because the camel can

go without water for up to a month in the wintertime and for a number of days even in the height of summer, and can subsist on parched grass and desiccated shrubs, it is able to survive under the least favourable of watering and pasturing conditions. This allowed Bedouin to penetrate much farther into the interior of the Arabian Peninsula than before and made possible direct traffic between centres of civilisation separated by desert regions that had previously been regarded as impassable barriers.

4. HISTORY OF THE ARABIAN PENINSULA AND ARABIA

4.1 *Pre-History*

Though the Arabian Peninsula now has no natural permanent lakes or rivers, this was not always the case. The deep erosion channels of the main *wādī* systems, as well as the enormous gravel fans associated with them, indicate tremendous surface runoff and hence, at certain times at least, a high level of rainfall. Suggestive also of a one-time relatively lush environment is the abundance of floral and faunal remains, the latter including members of the giraffe, bovine, pig, crocodile, and rhinoceros families. The most recent major wet period lasted approximately from 8000 to 4000 B.C.E. and this led to an explosion in the number of late prehistoric sites, with the activities of hunting, gathering, animal husbandry, and rock art all well attested in Arabia during this time. The onset of arid conditions affected the north and centre dramatically, but had far less impact on south and east Arabia, the former having monsoon rains, the latter abundant groundwater. It was therefore in the south and east that the first civilisations of Arabia emerged. Contact with Mesopotamia stimulated two closely related but distinct

cultures in east Arabia in the third millennium B.C.E. Dilmun, located in modern Bahrain and the adjacent coastland, thrived as a result of the maritime trade passing between the Middle East and Iranian and Indian ports. Magan, the ancient name for the Oman peninsula, was important for the mining and smelting of the local copper ore as well as other minerals. Though relatively meagre, there are Mesopotamian records detailing these activities, and so one can begin discussion of east Arabia from this point. For the rest of Arabia, and especially in the south, there is Bronze Age evidence for irrigation; animal husbandry; manufacture of practical, ornamental, and ritual objects from stone, clay and bronze; erection of funerary structures, and so on. But it is not until the late second or early first millennium B.C.E. that we have any written information, and thus it is only from this time that we can begin to write its history.

4.2 *Pre-Islamic*

Almost the only texts that the inhabitants of historic pre-Islamic Arabia themselves have left us are the inscriptions found in the tens of thousands all over the land. Most are brief and treat only a limited range of subjects, but they are precious for being testimonies of the people themselves. From the sixth and early seventh centuries C.E. there is also Arabic poetry, which is invaluable for the vivid scenes it paints and for the moral world it conjures up, though inevitably, given the nature of the genre, it does not provide a sustained narrative of events. Otherwise we are forced to rely upon the observations of non-Arabian peoples, such as Assyrians, Babylonians, Israelites, Greeks, Romans, and Persians. These are very useful for giving us an outsider's view, but will for that very reason

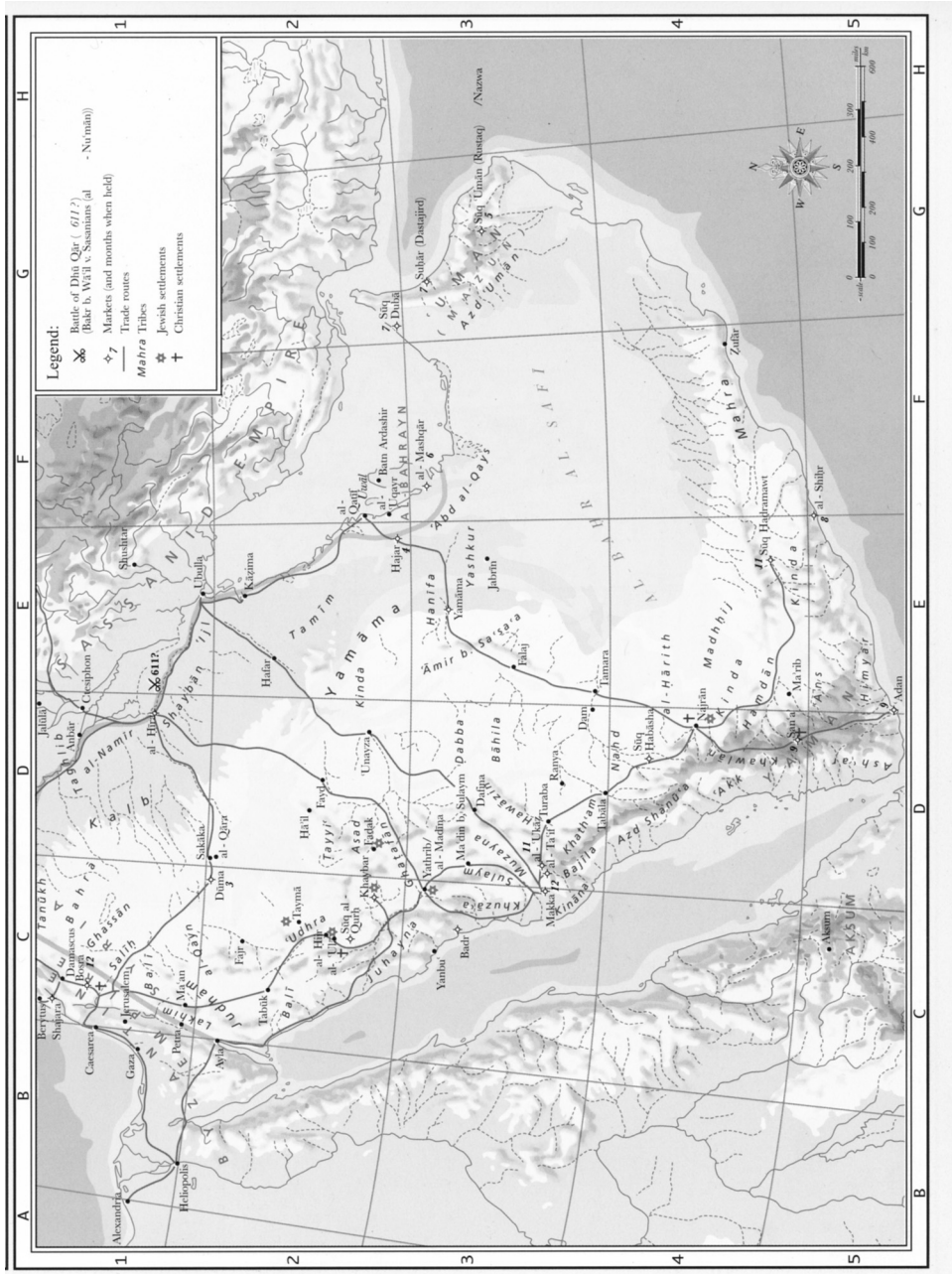
be potentially biased or misinformed. Then there are the findings of archaeologists, which are very often all we have. Until recently, excavations have been few and in limited areas, but this is now changing and we can certainly look forward to many new discoveries in the future that will greatly enhance our understanding and knowledge of Arabia.

It is clear from the above list of sources that our knowledge of ancient Arabian history rests on meagre foundations. There is no Arabian Tacitus or Josephus to furnish us with a grand narrative, or at least not until the Islamic period. The prophet Muḥammad made Arabia the centre of the Muslim world, politically for a brief period (11–35/632–56) and spiritually until today. This meant that Arabia became a worthwhile subject in its own right and attracted its own historians. However, though some wrote from the perspective of an antiquarian, such as Hishām al-Kalbī (d. 204/819 or 206/821), or a linguist, such as ‘Abd al-Malik al-Aṣma‘ī (d. 213/828), most were drawn by the religious significance of Arabia. Thus historians chiefly focused upon the lifetime of Muḥammad, as they were either storytellers wishing to instruct converts in the essentials of Islam or lawmakers seeking to formulate Islamic law. In both cases the Qur’ān and the sayings and deeds of Muḥammad were their two major concerns. Moreover, they entertained a certain ambivalence towards the age preceding that of the Prophet: Some early Muslim scholars would perform expiation after studying pre-Islamic poetry, just as mediaeval Christian monks might do penance after reading the Classics. As an envoy from Muḥammad’s Mecca said to the ruler of Ethiopia: “Previously we were a barbarous people who worshipped idols, ate carrion and committed shameful

deeds... Thus we were until God sent us an apostle whose glorious lineage, truth, trustworthiness and clemency is well known to us” (Ibn Hishām, *Sīra*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld, Göttingen 1858–60, 219). Consequently these Muslim historians of pre-Islamic Arabia mostly offer us a presentation of the past that reflects the changes that Islam had wrought upon Arab society.

4.3 *Islamic*

The Arabian Peninsula has been important to Muslims since the time of the Prophet as spiritual home and a site of pilgrimage. However, it was only in the first few decades of Islam, when it was briefly the political capital of the Muslim Arab empire and when the military and political elite of the empire still had homes there, that Arabia enjoyed real political and economic prestige, not to happen again until the discovery of oil in the modern age. Between these two eras we hear relatively little about Arabia except for pilgrimage traffic to the two holy cities of Mecca and Medina and commercial traffic to the ports scattered along its coasts. Politically it reverted to the situation that had obtained before Islam, that is, it became the preserve of numerous tribal dynasties that were mostly short-lived and geographically localised. (See, for example, Ziyādids, Ya‘fūrīds, Ma‘nīds, Ṣulayḥīds, ‘Uyūnīds, Zuray‘īds, Najāḥīds, Maḥdīds, Makramīds, Rasūlīds, ‘Uṣfūrīds, and Nabḥānīds.) A good number of these tribes, taking advantage of Arabia’s distance from the main seats of power and the harsh terrain that covers most of the peninsula, were opposed to the governing authorities of their day. For example, a sect of the Khawārīj known as the Ibāḍiyya set up its own imāmate in Oman, which endured, with intermissions, until



Map 4. Arabia in the time of the *hijra* (622 C.E.).
Source: Hugh Kennedy, *An historical atlas of Islam*. Second, revised edition, Leiden 2002.

the twentieth century. The same is true of various branches of Shī'ism, in particular the Zaydī imāmate of the Yemen.

The most famous opposition movement to operate in Arabia was, however, the Ismā'īlīyya. Their missionaries had great success in spreading their message along the Persian Gulf coast and in the Yemen. In the latter, Ismā'īlism was introduced by Ibn Ḥawshab (known as Maṣṣūr al-Yaman) and 'Alī b. al-Faḍl in 266/879–80. Collaborating closely, these two won many followers, and 'Alī occupied both Ṣan'ā' and Zabīd for brief periods, though he faced stiff resistance from the local dynasties of the Ya'fūrīds in Ṣan'ā' and the Ziyādīds in Zabīd, and subsequently, from the newly arrived Zaydīs. In eastern Arabia Ismā'īlism appeared c. 286/899 when, under Abū Sa'īd al-Ḥasan al-Jannābī and his son Abū Ṭāhir Sulaymān, a strong state was established, which for a time held the greater part of Arabia and gained international notoriety when its army entered Mecca in 317/930 and carried off the Black Stone to the new capital al-Aḥṣā' (al-Ḥasā). The name Qarmaṭiān, the origin and meaning of which are still disputed, remains the usual designation for this particular manifestation of Ismā'īlism, though its application is not restricted to this region.

The tenth/sixteenth to thirteenth/nineteenth centuries were characterised by competition over the Arabian Peninsula and the waterways around it among foreign powers, principally the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and the Ottoman Turks, and on a few occasions the Persians and the Egyptians (notably the Egyptian invasion, 1811–8, led towards the end by the Ottoman governor in Egypt, Muḥammad 'Alī). The British occupied Aden in 1839, after which their influence advanced along the

southern and eastern coasts and increasingly spread into the hinterland. Meanwhile in the mid-eighteenth century in Najd, Wahhābism, a reformist Islamic movement elaborated and preached by Muḥammad b. 'Abd al-Wahhāb (d. 1206/1792), began to take shape. Placing the unity of God above all else and demanding that the popular religious practice be cleansed of innovation, his call reverberated throughout the Islamic world. His alliance with Muḥammad b. Sa'ūd (d. 1179/1765), ruler of the insignificant town of al-Dir'iyya, was propitious and led ultimately, over many ups and downs, to the rise of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia.

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ISLAMIC

With the coming of Islam scholarly attention turns to the progress of the Muslim state. Only for the first four decades of its life (622–61) was this state based in Arabia, in its first capital of Medina. Thereafter the capital moved to Damascus (661–750), then to Baghdad, and then, as the Muslim empire disintegrated into a myriad of smaller Islamic dynasties, a whole new crop of Muslim capitals emerged, such as Fez, Cairo, Aleppo, Mosul, Nishapur, Bukhara, and others. A few such dynasties established themselves in Arabia, such as the Qarmatians of al-Bahrayn and the Rasūlids of Yemen, but they were very minor in world-historical terms (though the Qarmatians caused a brief sensation when they seized the Black Stone from Mecca in 929). Arabia had now lost the pre-eminence that it enjoyed for a

brief time under the Prophet Muḥammad and his first successors and it is only with the arrival of modern technology, allowing swift navigation of Arabia's vast deserts, and the discovery of oil, attracting the attention of the energy-hungry West, that Arabia once more entered the limelight. This has meant that study of the history of Arabia from approximately the mid-first/seventh to the mid-thirteenth/nineteenth century is woefully inadequate. There is no single "History of Arabia" after the fashion of the Cambridge History of China/India/Iran etc., and this dearth of sources makes accessing its history very difficult. A useful place to start is the entry on Arabia by G. Rentz, *Djazīrat al-ʿArab*, *EI2*. One can also now use the electronic version of *Index Islamicus* to generate a bibliography. Because of the importance of oil to the modern world there has inevitably been much material published on the different countries of Arabia in recent decades. Only a very small selection follows here.

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ROBERT HOYLAND

Arabic Language, the Dialects

Traditionally, the modern Arabic dialects are divided into five main branches on the basis of their geographical distribution. These are the dialects of: (1) the Arabian Peninsula, (2) Mesopotamia (comprising, besides Iraq, the Iranian province of Khūzistān, northeastern Syria, and south-eastern Turkey), (3) Greater Syria (including Lebanon, Israel, Palestine, and Jordan), (4) Egypt (including northern Sudan), and (5) North Africa. A sixth branch, peripheral dialects, could be added to these, comprising all the dialects spoken in isolated pockets or *Sprachinseln* from Central Africa (Chad, Nigeria, and Cameroon), via Malta and Cyprus (Kormakiti), to Uzbekistan (the Bukhara and Qashqa Daryā dialects).

This geographic classification is corroborated by a number of linguistic features