

THE SYRIAN DESERT

CARAVANS, TRAVEL AND EXPLORATION

Christina Phelps Grant



THE SYRIAN DESERT

This historical survey written by a scholar and traveller gives the reader a well informed and readable account of an area of the world which has held and still holds a most significant geographical location in the Middle East - both culturally and commercially. Topics covered include - the bedouin trouble in the area, their origins and organization, ancient and medieval trade, early travelers, accounts of the important Altar of Damascus, Aleppo, Baghdad, Al Wasera, the caravan, state, the 'hajj', and much more

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First published in 2003 by
Kegan Paul International

This edition first published in 2010 by
Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

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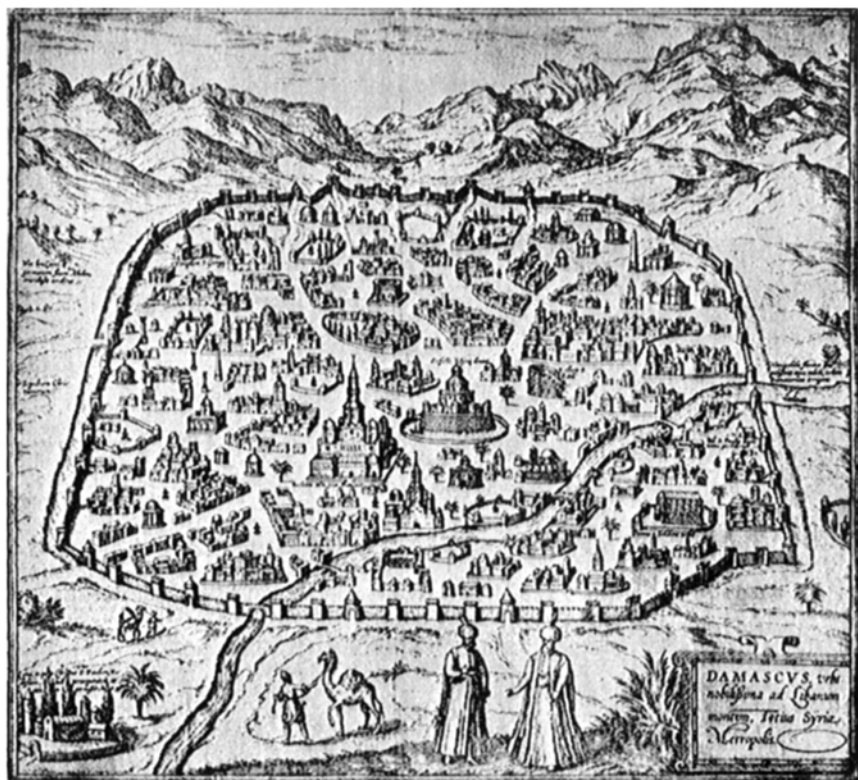
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British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 10: 0-7103-0845-0 (hbk)
ISBN 13: 978-0-7103-0845-0 (hbk)

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DAMASCUS IN THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

British Museum

DEDICATED TO
ALAN FRASER GRANT
WITH WHOM WERE SHARED IN COMMON
THE SERIES OF UNCOMMON EXPERIENCES
WHICH RESULTED IN
THE WRITING OF THIS BOOK

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

THE writer of any outline such as the following must obviously and inevitably be indebted to a great many people. The nature of this indebtedness is indicated below, but its full extent can only be realized by the author.

My first and most heartfelt thanks are due to Professor Eileen Power of the London School of Economics and Political Science. She has been the good and guiding genius of this book from the first to the last page. Although herself busy with innumerable things, Miss Power has never been too rushed to read typescript, suggest improvements in the text, and give much-needed advice and help in the matter of publication.

No less sincere is my gratitude to Mr Douglas Carruthers, who, out of his far greater knowledge of the subject in general and his own desert experiences in particular, has read and amended for me a number of sections of the text. Mr Carruthers has also, with great kindness, advised in the important matter of maps and photographs.

During four years spent in the Near East, I was assisted in my researches by a number of kindly and interested people. Sir Harold Satow, then H.B.M.'s Consul-General at Beyrout, enabled me to obtain a great deal of information relating to communications, both past and present, between Syria and Irak. President Bayard Dodge of the American University of Beyrout aided me in a variety of ways, as did Professor J. S. Crawford and Professor Assad Rustum of the same University. In the field of archaeology, I was privileged to have a most illuminating interview with the Reverend Father Antoine Poidebard of the University of St. Joseph, Beyrout; as also with Monsieur Daniel Schlumberger of the *Service des Antiquités*. The former was then engaged upon making aerial surveys of the Northern Syrian Desert, and the latter was excavating in Palmyra. Mr Norman Nairn was of the

greatest assistance in helping me to collect material for the section on motor transport; and in addition to giving me a good deal of personal and private information concerning the Nairn Transport Company, he also introduced me to a number of other helpful people in Beyrout, Damascus and Baghdad, including—in particular—Mr Francis A. Kettaneh of the Eastern Transport Company. While in Egypt, two of the late King Fuad's Ministers, namely, H. E. Hassan Anis Pasha (then Controller of Civil Aviation) and H. E. Ahmed Mohammed Hassanein Bey (then First Chamberlain), gave me some interesting sidelights on personalities, and on some of the practical aspects of desert exploration. From Hajji Selim Sawwaf of Damascus a good deal of information was obtained for the chapter on the Great Hajj caravans. Last, but in nowise least, were numerous officers of the Royal Air Force stations at Amman, Baghdad and Heliopolis, and various pilots of Imperial Airways Limited, all of whom contributed odds and ends of relevant information.

In London was done the greater part of the historical searching for this study. It would be difficult for me to acknowledge adequately the extent of my indebtedness to the Staffs of the British Museum, the Royal Geographical Society and the London Institute of Historical Research. Every member of these institutions whom I had occasion to consult was kindness and consideration personified. I owe most especial thanks to Mr A. I. Ellis, Deputy Keeper and Superintendent of the Reading Room of the British Museum; Mr Sidney Smith, Keeper of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities; Mr E. W. O'F. Lynam, Assistant Keeper of the Department of Printed Books, Maps, Charts and Plans; Mr A. S. Fulton, Assistant Keeper of the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts; Professor Albert F. Pollard and Mr Guy Parsloe of the Institute of Historical Research; and Mr W. D. Woodrow of the Royal Geographical Society. I am also obliged to the Librarians of the India Office and the Record Office for their assistance during my occasional use of the manuscripts in these archives.

Finally, there are a few individuals each one of whom granted

me a single interview: namely, Sir Arnold Wilson, the late Colonel T. E. Lawrence, Major C. G. Lynam, Mr R. V. Vernon of the Colonial Office, Professor H. A. R. Gibb of the School of Oriental Studies (University of London), Professor W. L. Westermann of Columbia University (in New York), Professor W. R. Taylor of the University of Toronto and Professor Arnold Toynbee of the Royal Institute of International Affairs, London. Their helpfulness, one and all, can most emphatically not be gauged by the length of my conversations with each of the above-named gentlemen.

There is, of course, one patient individual who has counselled and advised, read and re-read, corrected and amended manuscript and typescript; one who, in addition to all these labours, has also prepared the data for the two principal maps. Namely, Mr Alan Fraser Grant. For the painstaking effort of the ultimate proof-reading, I am indebted also to the timely assistance of Miss Mary Grant and Mr John Cook.

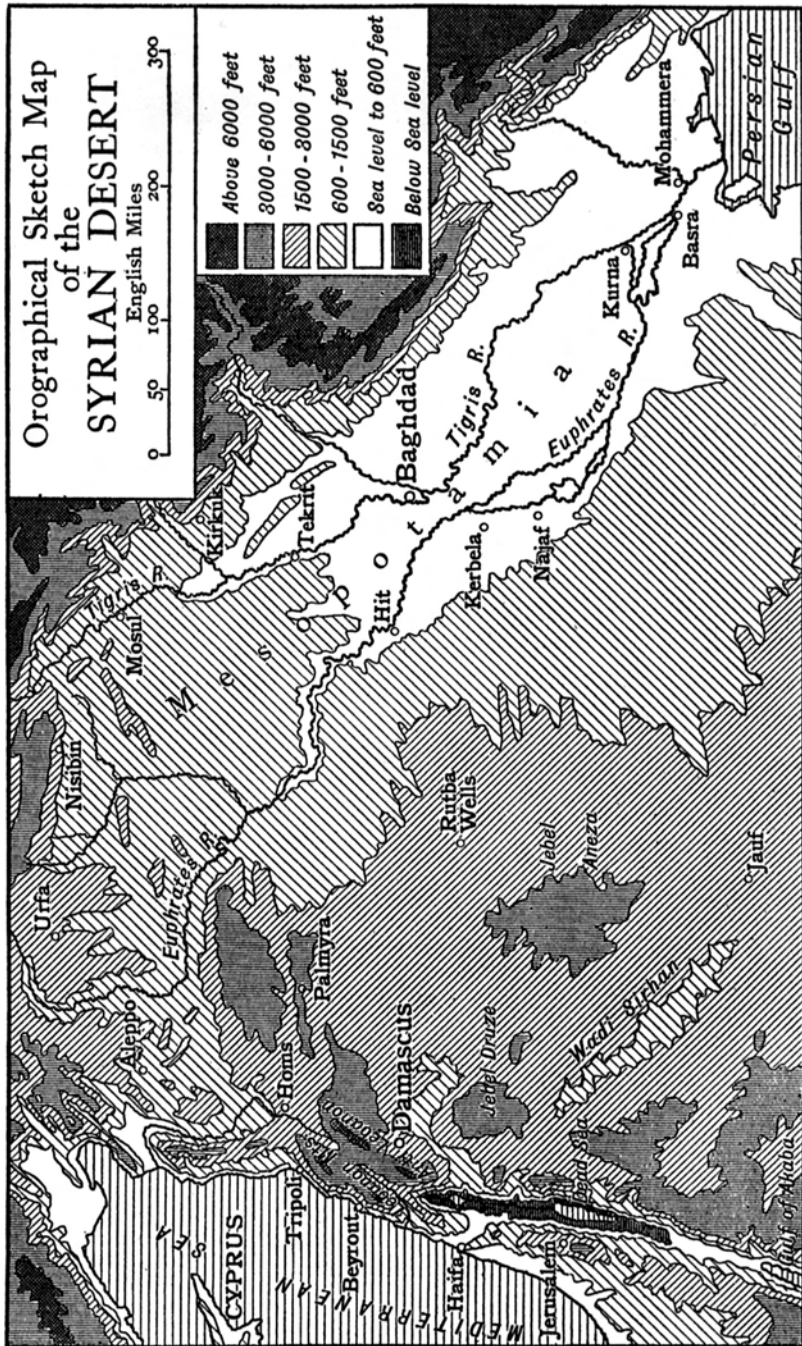
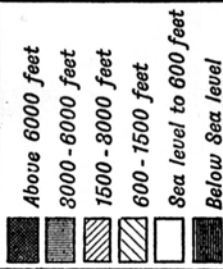
To each and every one of the above-mentioned, I would tender my profound gratitude for all they have done, and for what of interest there may be in the following pages.

CHRISTINA PHELPS GRANT

LONDON, 1936

Orographical Sketch Map of the SYRIAN DESERT

English Miles
0 50 100 200 300



THE SYRIAN DESERT

CHAPTER I

THE SYRIAN DESERT AND ITS INHABITANTS

I

PROLOGUE

IN recent years the cartographical face of the Syrian Desert has become increasingly familiar to the general reader. The press, post-War writers of near-eastern reminiscences, and various students of the mandate system (as it has been applied in Syria, Palestine and Irak) have all contributed to arouse interest in this relatively small and arid plateau.

Certain deserts divide countries and their civilizations, inexorably; others unite them. The Syrian Desert is one of those which unites adjacent lands; and during the last twenty years, the uniting of those lands has acquired a new importance. Since the Great War, the desert regions have been the scene of a mechanical revolution; medieval methods of transport have suddenly, almost magically, given place to the most advanced exponents of modern transport. For more than three thousand years the trade routes of this desert have linked the eastern seaboard of the Mediterranean with Mesopotamia; they have fostered cultural and religious, as well as commercial exchanges between the Near and the Middle East. Furthermore, until the opening of the Suez Canal, the Syrian Desert was almost universally recognized as a short-cut between the Occident and the Orient. For a brief period after 1869, however, the desert highways were first neglected, and then forgotten.

Camel caravans could have no place in the development of modern transport systems. Trans-desert railways were visualized, but all plans for such were vetoed. The desert was not considered a potentially modern link for the purpose of connecting the West with the East. Instead, the building of a "Berlin to Baghdad" railway was undertaken; but before its completion the Great War intervened. During and after the War, armoured cars were used in certain parts of the Syrian Desert, and its arid plains were found to be suitable for motor transport. Also, Royal Air Force machines flew from Cairo to Baghdad, after the beginning of 1921, thus inducing a new awareness of this ancient short-cut to the East.

During 1923-24 popular interest was stimulated by the opening of a trans-desert motor route between Damascus and Baghdad. The exploits of the Nairn Transport Company, the development of a desert mail and of various passenger motor services, the alarms and excursions of the Druze rebellion (in 1925-26) increasingly focused attention upon the new motor highways. Thereafter, the public imagination was further stirred by the opening of imperial air routes. First Imperial Airways, next the French Air Orient, then the Dutch "K.L.M." flew the desert from Gaza, Galilee and Damascus to Baghdad and Basra. Most recently of all, two great pipe-lines have been laid across this desert, through which oil is pumped from Kirkuk to Tripoli and to Haifa. Sketch-maps in the daily papers have made us familiar with the course of motor tracks and pipe-lines, and with the outlines of the great space which they all traverse: an expanse long empty of any permanent human habitation except the ancient city of Palmyra and its neighbouring mud villages. Today, in the emptiness, there stands the rest-house and fort at Rutba Wells, and nine pumping-stations of the Iraq Petroleum Company.

So rapid and many-sided a development of transport services does more than stir the imagination; it stirs the curiosity as well. One becomes intrigued by the story of desert travel as a whole, and by the experiences of previous desert travellers. There grows a desire to learn something about the ancient and medieval methods

of transport which have been so completely transformed within the past thirteen years. Former conditions of desert travel, its peculiarities, the nature of its hardships and all related problems have acquired an especial and comparative significance of their own. Hurried voyagers who cross the modern desert track between Damascus and Baghdad are tempted to compare previous varieties of caravans with their own convoys; and to wonder how merchants used to go about their business: how they conducted their affairs and carried on their trading ventures under more primitive conditions. Similarly, a modern traveller who looks upon the ruins of Palmyra, Jerash or any other caravan city, feels inclined to ask questions about its origin and place in caravan life, and its role in desert history. It is hoped that this book, which is a condensed summary of caravan life and desert travellers, may give a partial answer to the unvoiced questions of the historically curious. There is no chapter included in this survey which could not be indefinitely expanded and elaborated; each one is in itself a potential book; so that the sum of these chapters is, obviously, no more than an outline of the methods and conditions of travel in the desert regions, from Roman times to the present day.

This book has another, a secondary purpose. It is intended as an introduction to the classics of desert travel—those to come, as well as those already written and appreciated. Taken collectively, the following chapters are meant to serve as a background for the adventures and experiences of all who, for whatever reason, have travelled in and across the waste spaces which intervene between Mesopotamia and the Mediterranean. Some desert travellers have been men, and even women, of great reputation, such as Ibn Battuta, Pietro della Valle, Huber, the Blunts, Colonel Chesney and Gertrude Bell. Others, like Burckhardt, Doughty and T. E. Lawrence, never crossed the Syrian Desert; but they made an intimate study of its south-western territory. Still others, less famous, have voyaged thither for various reasons; and these have become known, indirectly, through the writings of fellow travellers, or else their own meagre writings have been found scattered among the greater travel collections (such as Hakluyt and Purchas),

or the lesser compilations (such as Ray and Murray). The vast majority of travellers, however, have been individually unknown; nameless because of their numbers. Merchants, Mohammedan pilgrims, soldiers and civil servants, couriers and dispatch-bearers have all played their part, as well as explorers and men of science. Their private concerns are no longer—if they ever were—of general interest; but the manner of their voyaging will always stir the curiosity of those who are interested in desert travel. In order to create a common setting for travellers of the Syrian Desert, down the ages, their various narratives have been taken into account and welded into a single story. Many of these men lived or travelled in the desert during different epochs of its history, so the elements of contrast, as well as those of similarity in their respective periods, have necessarily been noted. Moreover, with the exception of Alois Musil, no one of them ever attempted to traverse the whole of this arid region; so that it has been possible to paint only a collective picture of the desert as seen through their eyes.

Geographically speaking, the Syrian Desert is the shortest highway between the Orient and the Occident. This means that Syria, Palestine and Mesopotamia have automatically become intellectual and commercial middlemen between these two geographical extremes. Immemorially, also, it has served as a bridge between the successive civilizations which have centred in the Near and Middle East. Of course, *the highway* is collective in its meaning. It must be understood to include each and every one of the numerous caravan tracks that cross the desert, by all of which the contacts between east and west have been maintained.

In modern times the desert has become a subject of interest in itself, over and above its use as a highway. Before the nineteenth century, Europeans journeyed across it from necessity; since then, many have travelled in it from curiosity, and to advance some one of the branches of human knowledge. Various geographers, geologists, zoologists, botanists, archaeologists and ethnologists have found food for thought therein, and material for study.

Greece, Rome and Byzantium have left their traces in this desert: temples and caravan cities as well as route-markings. Ruined palaces, castles and the remains of ancient fortifications in mid-desert testify, similarly, to the occupation of early Arab princes, Lakhmid and Ghassanid, and to the rule of medieval Saracens. Primitive Safaitic inscriptions furnish clues to the later Arabic scripts; and modern Arab nomads preserve ancient customs in their age-old surroundings. Thus the Syrian Desert has an inherent interest of its own, apart from the travel to which it has perennially given rise.

Before embarking upon a description of any one of the various phases of desert life and travel, some preliminary remarks must be made. A few words are needed concerning the nature—geological and otherwise—of the Syrian Desert; concerning its history also, and its boundaries in successive historical periods. Something must likewise be said on the subject of the migratory inhabitants of these waste spaces; the principal Beduin tribes; the general characteristics of both the settled Arab and the nomad; and their beasts of burden. The reader who desires to know what sources of information are at his disposal, concerning trade, travel and transportation across the Syrian Desert, will find a selected bibliography at the end of the book. Lastly, a special appendix (No. 1) is devoted to an explanation of the writer's personal system of Arabic transliteration, and to a discussion of the phonetic rendering of certain words and place-names. This note on transliteration is of peculiar importance, because of the unique character of the Arabic language and its many dialects. It needs more than a paragraph to make clear the difficulties which confront anyone who tries to follow or establish a consistent phonetic system, amidst the chaos of existing and conflicting systems. Nevertheless, some understanding of the problem is an essential and prerequisite part of any discussion of the various regions where Arabic is spoken. For the greater convenience of the reader, this note on transliteration is followed (on pp. 302-315) by a short glossary of the Arabic words which occur in the text; and by a separate glossary of geographical names.

GEOGRAPHY OF THE SYRIAN DESERT

The aspect of the Syrian Desert is a great surprise to many travellers; because the word desert is apt to conjure up a picture of golden sands blown into dunes, only less mobile than the sea. Whereas the traversible part of this particular desert is flat in appearance, like a vast undulating plain; and the warmth of its colours astonishes even those who have become accustomed to their variety. The plain is in part gravel-strewn; in part sand-covered; and in part hard caked with whitish, glittering dried mud. Then, after first getting used to the sight of a plain, the traveller is again surprised to find any number of green plants scattered thinly over most of its surface. These plants are small and aromatic; gray-green, tinged with red; and they grow on all the desert lowlands. On the north and west desert hills are etched along the sky-line; to the east and south deeply-cut wadis, or dry water-courses, indent the plain's surface. The rocky hills of sand and limestone give changing colours to the desert plain. At mid-day, these are fused into a yellow-tinted gray by the sun's glare; but early in the morning, and late in the afternoon, they run the gamut of a rainbow in which lustrous reds and violets predominate.

In order to understand the peculiar significance of the Syrian Desert routes, and the reason why they have always made so convenient a short-cut to the east, one must consider the geological nature of the desert: its divisions and limitations, as well as its points of vantage. To do this one is also forced to take into account Arabia, which intervenes between Africa and Asia. The southern fringes of this great peninsula, famed as the "incense lands", are Oman, Mahra, Hadramaut and Yemen. The principal town of Oman is Muscat, so well known in the seventeenth century; and the fleetest dromedaries, or riding-camels, of all Arabia are bred by the Beduin of Mahra. The interior of the peninsula, which stretches across more than ten degrees of latitude,

is divided into three parts. There is a southern desert of reddish sand, the "Empty Quarter" (*el-Rub el-Khali*) formerly held to be impassable; a central plateau, the great highland called Nejd, which is a relatively healthful and fertile country (especially in the Kasim district, which is traversed by the *Wadi er-Rumma*); and a northern mountainous area, the *Jebel Shammar* region, which forms the southern rampart of another vast sand-wilderness. This northern desert, similar to that south of Nejd, is called the *Nefud*, an Arabic word signifying high sand dunes; its dune crests vary in height from 150 feet on the north and north-east to 600 feet on the south-west. East of the Nefud are long fingers of ridged sands, called the *Dahana*, which taper off (toward the Persian Gulf) into desert country of the smooth, stony type. The northern limits of Arabia may be said to coincide, roughly, with the thirtieth degree of latitude.¹

Until the nineteenth century, the interior of Arabia was never penetrated by Europeans. But a few westerners had made tentative excursions through some of Arabia's coastal lands, especially those which border the Red Sea, from Sinai in the north to Aden at the southern tip of the peninsula; and the Hejaz, which contains the Holy Cities of Mecca and Medina, had been frequented by Moslems of every sect and nationality. On the eastern, or Persian Gulf side, Oman is divided from Kuwait (in southern Irak) by the Hasa,

¹ Some students of these regions insist that *Jebel Shammar*, as the frontier of Nejd, should also form the northern boundary of Arabia; but the *Nefud* and *Dahana* sands form, with equal emphasis, the southern frontier of the Syrian Desert; and their only parallel are the sands of the *Rub el-Khali* in Southern Arabia. The 700 miles which separate the sands of the *Rub el-Khali* and the *Nefud* are actually crossed by sand stretches of the southern *Dahana*. Carl Ritter, in the famous map of Arabia which he published in 1852—which was the first modern map to distinguish between the deserts of Arabia and of Syria—places the Jauf-Sakaka oases on the southern edge of the "Badiet e' Scham" (or Syrian Desert). Fifty years later D. G. Hogarth, the great student of Arabia, led the way in asserting that the thirtieth parallel was the logical boundary between Arabia and the Syrian Desert.

For a description of the great sand-filled depression—the 30,000 square miles of sand-barrier—which is the Nefud, see chap. v of Mr Douglas Carruthers' *Arabian Adventure* (1935), pp. 114-130.

with its ancient port of Gerrha and the pearl fisheries of the Bahrein Islands. The best known towns of central Arabia are Riyadh, the capital of southern Nejd; Hayil, the capital of northern Nejd; and Tayma, near the south-western border of the Nefud.

Geologically speaking, the Syrian Desert is a continuation of the Arabian plateau. It may be thought of as a triangle whose base rests on the thirtieth parallel of latitude, and whose apex projects itself north-westward towards Asia Minor—to where the fertile lands of Syria and Mesopotamia converge (see map, p. xvi). The shortest side of this desert triangle is on the west, where it is bounded by the Sinai Peninsula, the Dead Sea and Jordan valleys, and the Anti-Lebanon Mountains of Syria. In the north, the city of Aleppo is—to all intents and purposes—at the apex of the triangle, because the plain which extends from this city to the Taurus Mountains is now under cultivation. The third side of the triangle stretches south-east from Aleppo, and is bounded by the river Euphrates. Near its mouth, at the south-eastern angle of the triangle, the Euphrates is joined by the Tigris, and the two great rivers—known in their conjunction as the *Shatt el-Arab*—empty into the Persian Gulf.

These rivers have not always joined as they do today. Between the seventh and the fifteenth centuries, the main stream of the Euphrates (called *el-Frat* by the Arabs) held to a more westerly course, from just above Babylon; and just below Kufa (or Meshed Ali) it discharged its waters into what was called the “Great Swamp”. Some time after the eighteenth century, the “Great Swamp” (the lower part of which is now a lake) drained into an estuary that passed the site of Medieval Basra, and emptied into the Persian Gulf at Abadan. At some unknown time between the middle of the fifteenth and the middle of the seventeenth centuries the Tigris changed to its present eastern bed; and the head-waters of the Persian Gulf gradually receded. Abadan now lies some twenty miles up the estuary. Since the eighteenth century, the Euphrates has flowed through a more easterly bed to the ancient lagoons of the Tigris, in what used to be the “Great Swamp”. Today, the *Frat* joins the Tigris at Kurna, and their joint stream

becomes the *Shatt el-Arab*. The records describing the changes of these two great rivers are not altogether satisfactory, and leave considerable gaps of time to the imagination; but at least the original changes appear to have been caused by a great flood that occurred in A.D. 629. It is interesting to note that the modern course of the Tigris, since the seventeenth century, is apparently the same as the channel which the Tigris followed in pre-Islamic days.

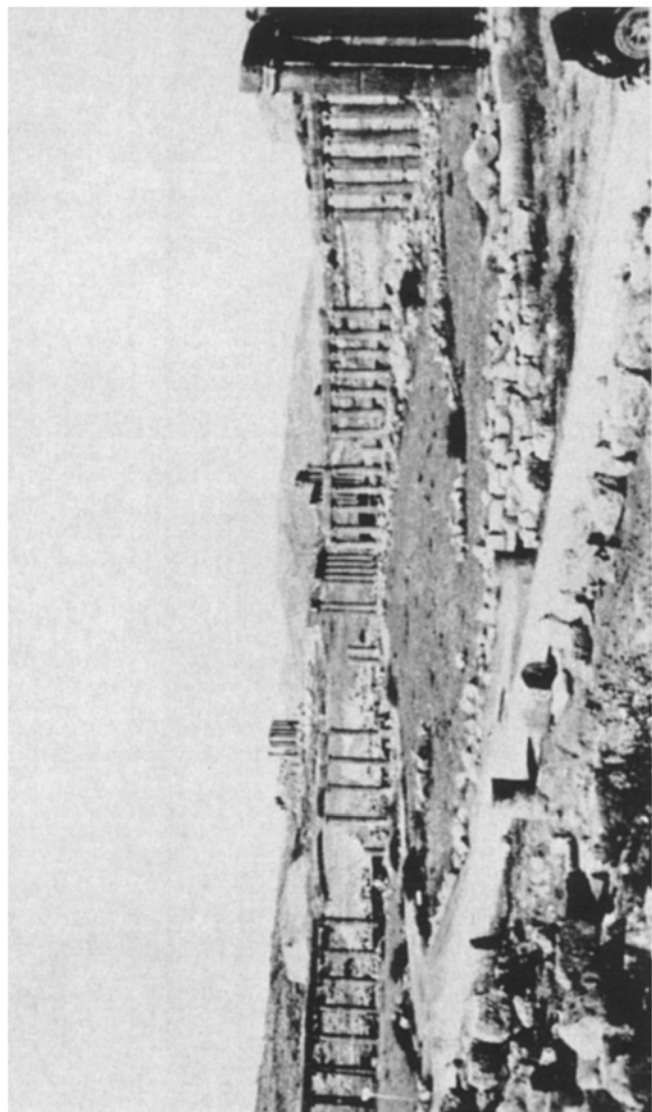
The Syrian Desert plateau is between two and three thousand feet above sea-level. In the south, the highlands of *Jebel Aneza* rise to an altitude of 3300 feet; in the west, *Jebel Druze* does the same; and in the north, a chain of sand and limestone hills, 3000 feet above sea-level, stretch diagonally north-east across the desert, from Damascus to Palmyra and thence to the Euphrates (north of Deir ez-Zor). There is also a range of low hills, the *Jebel Melossa*, which run south-east from the salt marshes of Palmyra. These are the only important exceptions to the general flatness of the plateau, although the occasional isolated mountain, called *jebel* by the Arabs, or hill, called *tell*, raise their heads above the plains. *Jebel Tenf*, a landmark near the modern Damascus motor route, is one of these. On the limestone plateau east of *Jebel Aneza*, sinter cones have been found which suggest extinct geysers. From the vicinity of Palmyra a volcanic zone extends southwards into Arabia, as far as Mecca. Even in historical times there have been eruptions, the most recent of which was recorded in 1256. Naturally enough, earthquakes have also occurred; and to this cause must be attributed the ruins of the caravan cities and walled towns, those in the desert (like Palmyra and Resafa) as well as those on its edge (like Jerash and Umm el-Jemal). In the neighbourhood of Aleppo there are patches of low-lying waste land, with an altitude of only 1000 feet, much of which is composed of crystallized salt marshes, known as *sebkha*. Eastwards from Palmyra there lies a broad belt of similar low-lying land, also containing a wide *sebkha*. East of Rutba Wells the hard surface of the desert is dotted with mud-flats—some of which are bituminous. Since the whole desert plateau declines gradually toward the Euphrates valley, sloping

from north and west to south and east, its altitude naturally decreases until, near Basra, it approximates sea-level.

This great triangle of land has not always gone under the name of the Syrian Desert. Ptolemy, for example, divided it, like Gaul, into three parts. He named its south-western third "Arabia Petraea", after the then flourishing caravan city of Petra; the central and south-eastern portions he named "Arabia Deserta", and all the rest—which had been lavishly Romanized—he called Syria. Thus was the Desert of Syria triply-named (by Occidentals) until the seventeenth century, as may be seen in the various maps of these lands which were made by the distinguished French geographer Sanson. In the Ottoman period, Arabia was held to embrace all three of these regions, and the northern limit of "Turkish Arabia" was the so-called fertile crescent which connected Damascus with the Euphrates. This designation was as convenient as it was necessary, because the Porte never had more than a nominal control over its Arabian "subjects", and was never able to collect taxes from any desert nomads. Today the frontiers of Syria, Irak, Trans-Jordan and "Sa'udi Arabia" all meet in the Syrian Desert, and have artificially divided it once more into several new sections.¹

¹ Beazley has shown, in *The Dawn of Modern Geography*, how hazy were European conceptions of *Arabia Deserta* and *Syria Deserta* during the Middle Ages. Take, for example, Burchard of Mount Sion, who was a pilgrim traveller in the Levant in the second half of the thirteenth century. He vaguely applied the name "Greater Syria" to all the regions between Egypt and the Tigris, and he conceived of Arabia as extending northward to the Jordan. Other and later medieval concepts, when comprehensible at all, appear to reproduce the Ptolemaic system, with its triple division of the Syrian Desert.

Nicolas Sanson was a very distinguished French geographer and engineer; Louis XIII was a pupil of his, and later—after Richelieu had appointed him geographer to the king—Louis XIII paid his former teacher a state visit. Sanson's maps of the Near and Middle East are representative of the most advanced geographical knowledge of his time; and they illustrate the prevailing European ignorance of that part of the world. Maps of his dated 1652 show that he relied principally upon Ptolemy; in detail they are inconsistent. A general map pushes Arabia as far north as the plains of Aleppo; a more specific one reproduces the Ptolemaic divisions. Syria and its deserts he designates as follows: "Barraab ou Arabie Petrée"; "Beriara ou Arabie Deserte"; "Sourie ou



ROMAN RUINS AT JERASH

Photograph by the author

The Arabs of the Syrian Desert have their own name for this nomad's-land. By them it is called the *Badia*, which signifies waste or open country—the untilled or empty regions where no permanent habitations exist. But the *Badia* is not necessarily desert country; parts of it are potentially capable of cultivation. Sometimes the Beduin distinguish between the *Badiet esh-Shem* and the *Badiet el-Irak*, the waste lands of Syria and of Irak respectively; but not always. Incidentally, since the Saracen period, Arabs have called Syria by the name of *esh-Shem*—for rather an interesting reason. The word *shem* is a contraction of the Arabic word meaning left, or left-hand. Now Syria is on the left hand of all Moham-medans who look toward Mecca, when they are in the west, or on the Mediterranean sea-board. According to the same reasoning, the *Hejaz* (meaning middle or centre) is where Mecca is situated; and the country to the right of the *Hejaz* is called *Yemen*, which is a derivative of the Arabic word which means right, or right-hand.

For our purposes it is both permissible and logical to think of the Syrian Desert, this plateau some 2000 feet in elevation, as a geographical unit; which unit resolves itself into two principal component parts. In the eighteenth century, English travellers christened the southern part, which is quadrilateral in shape, the *Great Desert*; and they called the northern part, a triangle which is

Soristan"—according to Ptolemy's triple division. Palmyra, under the name of "Fayd ou Tamoz", is correctly placed in "Sourie", though too far to the east of Damascus; but the one or two other key towns are placed differently on his various maps. "Sukana" (Sukhna) is consistently located close to Anna, but on one map Anna is more or less where it belongs, whereas on another it is placed near "Retsafa" (Resafa), and the great bend of the Euphrates is straightened out of recognition.

The only clue to the origin of the name Beriara is the name of a hamlet west of Palmyra: el-Beida, which is alternatively called Beriarc by some French archaeologists. To confuse the name of a village with that of a district whose limits might be only vaguely ascertainable is far-fetched, but not entirely improbable.

C. Raymond Beazley (1897-1906), vol. iii, p. 385. Le Sr. d'Abbeville Sanson, *Geographe Ordinaire du Roy*, "L'ASIE"; "En plusieurs cartes nouvelles, et exactes; et en Divers Traictes de Geographie, et d'Histoire". Paris, 1652. Philips' *Historical Atlas* (1927), maps, Nos. 2, 32, 40 and 82. R. Dussaud, article in *Syria* (1929), vol. x, p. 54 and map.

set within the larger triangle of the whole, the *Little Desert*. It is the southern, or *Great Desert* which divides, and the northern, or *Little Desert* which connects the fertile lands of the Mediterranean seaboard with the equally fertile valley of Mesopotamia.

Most early Arab geographers (including el-Bekri) called the whole of the *Great Desert* by the name of *as-Samawa*. It extends, roughly, from the thirtieth to the thirty-third parallel of latitude; and it divides itself into three natural parts, each of which has distinctive physical features of its own. The *Hauran*, on the northwest, includes *Jebel Druze* (formerly known as *Jebel Hauran*) and some of the worst of the lava country; the *Hamad* is a central strip of stony, waterless desert, dominated by the heights of *Jebel Aneza*; and the *Wadian*, which slopes down towards the Euphrates, is a network of wadis whose sands are alternately loose and hard-packed. *Jebel Aneza* is the great watershed of the Syrian Desert; in its foothills the larger wadis have their rise. The Wadi Hauran, for instance, slopes from the summit of *Jebel Aneza* to the Euphrates, for a distance of about 300 miles; in places it is 200 feet deep and as much as a mile wide. After a winter rain this wadi, like all the other dry water-courses of the desert, is temporarily flooded. More than two degrees south of *Jebel Aneza* lies the large sandstone depression (sometimes called the "Juba Depression") which contains the Jauf-Sakaka oases. Between Trans-Jordan and this group of oases extends (for more than 200 miles) that other unique depression known as the Wadi Sirhan. *As-Samawa*, or the *Great Desert*, coincides (for all practical purposes) with Musil's "Arabia Deserta"—which thus recalls, but is not identical with, the "Arabia Deserta" of Ptolemy. The nature of its terrain will be described more fully in the next chapter, where the origins and courses of certain ancient trade routes are discussed.

The *Little Desert*, called the *Shamiya* by the Beduin, is conspicuously different from *as-Samawa*; and it is the only easily traversible part of the Syrian Desert. It has been spoken of as triangular in shape, and its apex, like that of the greater desert triangle, is the narrow strip of semi-arable land between Aleppo and the westernmost bend of the river Euphrates. The broad base

of this triangle corresponds, roughly, to the thirty-third parallel of latitude. It rests on the northern fringes of the *Hauran* and the *Hamad*, so the common frontier of the *Great* and the *Little* deserts is a broad strip of excessively hard, stony and barren desert; and this is completely waterless, except for Rutba¹ and the other ancient wells of the Wadi Hauran. The peculiar flatness of the Little Desert has already been commented upon. Actually, it has often been called arid steppe land rather than desert. During the winter there is a rainfall of from three to five inches, so that—in spring—patches of the desert are thinly covered with a kind of tall feathery grass; and all the year round most of the plain is sparsely covered with camel thorn, and a variety of gray-green aromatic plants. Water is near the surface in every wadi or depression; natural springs (*ain*), and wells or dug-out springs (*bir*) occur frequently; also the less reliable water-holes (*maurid*). In the lowlands, mud-flats are numerous as well as salt marshes (*sebkha*), but these are dry and hard-caked, except just after a winter rain. In many places the surface is hard and relatively smooth, so that it is adapted to the use of any sort of travel—camels and motor cars alike. Sand-dune formation is unknown (except near the banks of the Euphrates), and patches of soft sand are rare. It is small wonder that many tribes migrate northwards every summer, in order to pasture their flocks and their camels in this comparatively fertile and well-watered region; or that the black tents of certain nomad tribes are to be seen there the whole year round.

There are only two serious obstacles to transport in this steppe land. For one thing, numerous wadis on its eastern edge slope down to the Euphrates; several of these, notably Wadi Hauran and Wadi Suab, are difficult to cross. For another, there is the range of desert hills (previously mentioned) which crosses the great plain diagonally, from the neighbourhood of Damascus to

¹ A group of half a dozen Roman wells are situated about 500 yards W.N.W. of the Iraki fort at Rutba. They are all well constructed, stone-lined (at least at the top) and between forty and fifty feet deep. The well-tops are flush with the ground, and the stone-work at their mouths is deeply scored by the friction of the ropes.

the Euphrates, just north of Deir ez-Zor. Between Palmyra and the river, this hilly divide is rather broad, rocky and irregularly spread out; but from Palmyra to Dumeir (near Damascus) the highland narrows into a single range of mountains called *Jebel Rawak*. There are of course mountain passes, leading from the north-western to the south-eastern parts of this plain; and these have naturally predetermined the course of its various routes. Palmyra, situated on the eastern mountain slopes, commands the most strategically important of these passes; which was the reason for the commercial supremacy of this famous caravan city during so many centuries of its history. For this reason, Musil and certain noted French archaeologists, Dussaud and Poidebard in particular, have named the *Little Desert* "Palmyrena". The region has an essential and effective unity which is rendered the more striking by the fact that the whole of its territory was once within the frontiers of the Roman Empire. Today, whenever the *Little Desert* is distinguished from the Syrian Desert as a whole, it is most commonly called Palmyrena. Nevertheless, whenever the southern and the northern parts of the Syrian Desert have to be contrasted or compared, the writer prefers to use the older and more distinctive designations of the *Great* and the *Little* deserts.

The wild animal life which supports itself on the Syrian Desert is quite varied—considering the general aridity of the region. Gazelles and hares are plentiful, especially in the *Little Desert*; so also are the scavengers: vultures, hyaenas and a variety of jackal. Ostriches used also to be plentiful, but are now found only in the *Great Desert*. Wild asses (or "onagers"), once numerous throughout the Syrian Desert, disappeared therefrom during the eighteenth century; and the Arabian oryx antelope—described by Tenreiro (in 1528) under the name of "wild cow"—must have retreated southward, into Arabia, even before then. Douglas Carruthers, who hunted the oryx in 1909, found that rarest of antelopes only in the north-western part of the Great Nefud, and just to the south-west of the Wadi Sirhan. Foxes are not uncommon in the Syrian Desert; and the jerboa, or desert rat—often described by travellers after the sixteenth century—is seen occasionally. This

animal is larger than a rat, sandy-white in colour, and is constructed like a kangaroo. A seventeenth-century traveller (M. Carré) claims to have killed a crocodile in a salt marsh between Taiyiba and Aleppo, and it is possible that he did see and kill what may have been a so-called "relict survivor" from a crocodile colony of an earlier age. Travellers, as late as the end of the eighteenth century, reported seeing lions and tigers near the Euphrates. Tigers have never existed within the historical period in the Syrian Desert; but lions have been seen (and killed) along the whole length of the Euphrates, from Birejik to Basra, at least as late as the middle of the nineteenth century—although they are now wholly extinct in the river valley. Wolves are the only large animals to be met with in the wilderness today. Game birds, the bustard and a species of small partridge are still hunted in the *Little Desert*. Lastly, there are several kinds of harmless snakes and insects, including locusts; and there are scorpions—particularly the black scorpions—whose sting is poisonous.

Three kinds of domesticated animals can also find enough food in the desert to keep them alive. Camels, the single-humped pack-camels from north-eastern Arabia and the Hasa, and the fast riding-camels or dromedaries (also single-humped) from Oman and Mahra; both kinds have been used on the desert, and have been bred to sell, since the ninth century B.C. They live on camel-thorn and any other green plants which they can find; and they are able to go from four to ten days without water, according to the season of the year (that is, they need less water in cool weather, and when their "green" food contains some moisture). When camels are working and heavily freighted, their owners often supplement their grazing food by giving them barley "cakes" or little balls of a kind of dough, and sometimes even dates. The two-humped Bactrian camels were once tried in the *Little Desert*, before those from Arabia were imported; but, though surer-footed in the rainy season than the single-humped camels, they did not long withstand the heat of summer. Horses, which the nomads breed chiefly for their own use (rather than for sale), are able to live in the desert; but they require relatively careful treatment. They must

have more food, and that of better quality, than camels need; and they must be watered much more often and more regularly—usually once in every twenty-four hours at the least. Many nomad tribes perform all their raiding sorties on horse-back; their shaykhs always own either a mare or a stallion; and a brood mare is the most valued possession of any Beduin family. Sometimes several families will own such a mare in common. Desert-bred asses are also used; but—though hardier—they are valued less highly than horses, and are of less use than camels.

3

BEDUIN TRIBES, THEIR ORIGINS AND ORGANIZATION

The human inhabitants of the Syrian Desert have always been Arabs. From time immemorial Arabian tribes have left their native Arabia and pushed northward into the *Badia*. These migrations have been prompted by various conditions. A succession of bad seasons in northern Arabia, extremes of drought or famine, the pressure of an increasing and therefore expanding population in Nejd or even more remotely in Yemen, have all had their share in stimulating tribal movements. The least change in their physical surroundings disturbs the ever-precarious equilibrium of Arab tribes. Therefore, since there are no political frontiers, in the European sense of the word, and because the *Great Desert* is easy of access, infiltration from Arabia is not only possible, it is inevitable. An Arabian tribe, having once wedged itself into the *Badia*, must either exterminate or expel the majority of whatever tribes may happen to be already in occupation of the inner Syrian Desert. The newcomers, accordingly, displace its inhabitants gradually, or else push them northwards—by force of arms.

Occasionally there is a religious motive for tribal migrations, especially when they occur on a large scale. This was the case in the seventh century, after the death of Mohammed, when Arabian tribes (called Saracens by the Byzantines) invaded not the desert only, but the settled districts of Syria and Mesopotamia as well.

A recrudescence of this spirit, another *jihad*, or holy war against Unbelievers, occurred in the second half of the eighteenth century, but with a difference. The Wahhabis, a "fundamentalist", puritanically-minded sect of southern Nejd, inspired by Mohammed ibn Abd el-Wahhab and led by Abd el-Aziz ibn Sa'ud of Dariya, founded the first Wahhabi state. In order to cleanse and reform Islam, the Wahhabis conquered and converted the whole of central Arabia. Then they sacked Kerbela and occupied Mecca; and finally, under the third ibn Sa'ud, they raided the Middle Euphrates and Syria—carrying their campaigns (between 1803 and 1808) to the very outskirts of Basra, Damascus and Aleppo. Not until the Turks became sufficiently alarmed to send an army against them, were the Wahhabis driven back into central Arabia. First Tusun and his father, Mohammed Ali Pasha of Egypt, led an expedition against the Wahhabi Empire; later Ibrahim Pasha (the adopted son of Mohammed Ali) invaded Nejd, sacked Dariya, and captured the Sa'udi leader in 1818. After the evacuation of Nejd by Ibrahim Pasha, a few (ephemeral) Turkish and Egyptian garrisons were left behind, to guarantee the enforced peace in Arabia. Thus the Wahhabis, unlike the Saracens, did not long continue in occupation of the Syrian Desert. However, Wahhabism did not die: it lay dormant; and Riyadh became the capital of a reviving Wahhabi state. Another outbreak was threatened in this twentieth century. During the World War and the difficult period that followed the inauguration of the Mandate system in the Near East, Abd el-Aziz of Riyadh, a descendant and namesake of Abd el-Aziz I, made himself King Ibn Sa'ud of a united (central) Arabia. After 1928 he added the Hejaz to his kingdom; his nomad armies occupied most of the *Hamad*, as far north as Syria; and the Wahhabis raided into Trans-Jordan and Iraq, upon more than one occasion. Sir Gilbert Clayton's mission eventually forced a compromise upon Ibn Sa'ud, and he gave up most of the land that he had annexed in the *Hamad*. Nevertheless, "Sa'udi Arabia" still projects itself into the Syrian Desert, and includes all the territory that belonged, before 1913, to the Rashids of Hayil and Jauf.

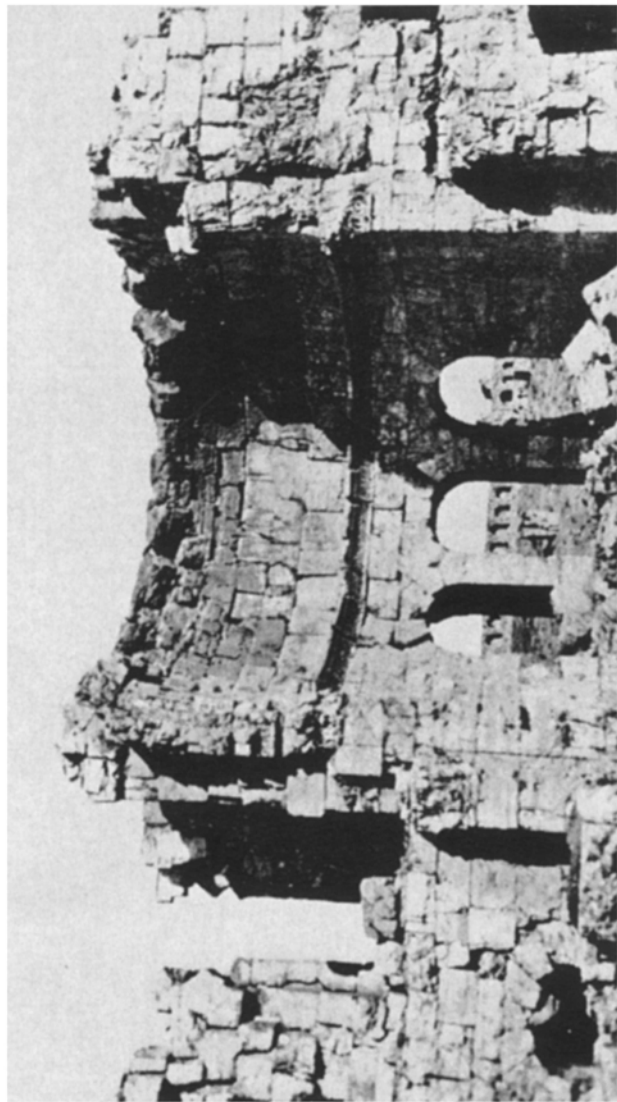
Several of the most powerful tribes of the Syrian Desert have

continued to live partly in Arabia. Certain sections of the Aneza and (more particularly) of the Shammar tribes live in northern Arabia in the winter, and migrate northwards through the Syrian Desert in the early spring. They travel leisurely across the *Great Desert*, and do not reach the *Little Desert* until the summer-time, after water and pasturage has become too scarce in the more southerly regions. When on the move, tribes generally do not camp in one place for more than two nights at a time. Other sections of these same tribes, on the other hand, confine their migrations to wandering to and fro between the *Great* and the *Little* deserts. Other tribes again, who live nearer the desert frontiers, the outer fringes of cultivation, have less need to migrate. Those on the borders of Syria or Mesopotamia, or near the oases and waterholes of the Wadi Sirhan, do not wander far. Their *dira*, or tribal orbit, is relatively small, because their means of subsistence is relatively great.

To nomads, the term Arab means "the people"—all the people of all the tribes, both east and west. Arabs of the Syrian Desert may be divided into two principal groups. There are the Beduin, or nomads, whose tribes range the waste spaces of the desert; and there are the settled Arabs, originally nomads, who have anchored themselves in such parts of the desert and its fringes as are tillable. The nomads derive their name, Beduin, from the *Badia*, the great waste wilderness which they roam. A single nomad of the Syrian Desert is called a "Bedu", and the plural of the word is "Bedawi". Beduin (literally Bedui) is a collective, dual or impersonal form of the noun, which is a case much used in colloquial Arabic.

When first westerners heard of the Beduin, Arab kingdoms were also in existence, on the frontiers of the civilized states. In the *Little Desert* there was the ancient caravan centre of Tadmor, which was an Arab kingdom long before its greater Palmyrene days. Further south, the Nabataeans, first mentioned in Roman sources in 312 B.C., founded a kingdom which became the caravan empire of Petra. They were, supposedly, the heirs of the Lihyanites, who had succeeded the Sabaeans in north-western Arabia, and—more remotely still—the Minaeans of the first millennium B.C.

After the Roman period, the Byzantine Empire held its



BYZANTINE RUINS AT RESAFA

Photograph by the author

southern and Syrian frontiers—against both the Beduin and the Iranians—with the help of the Ghassanid princes. From the end of the fifth century until the invasion of the Saracens in the seventh, the Ghassanids—whose tribe had come originally from the Yemen, by way of the Hejaz—ruled over a kingdom which included Phoenicia (as far north as the Lebanon Mountains), Palestine and the Jordan valley, the *Hauran* and the *Little Desert* (as far north as Resafa). They were subsidized by the Byzantine emperors; and Justinian appointed the Ghassanid ruler “lord over all the Arab tribes in Syria”. He also made the Arab prince next in rank to himself, by conferring upon him the titles *Phylarch* and *Patricius*. The Iranians, on their side, were protected by the Kingdom of the Lakhmids. The Lakhmid kings were vassals of the Iranians, and had been installed by the latter—about A.D. 300—on the ancient Babylonian–Arabian frontier, as outposts against the Beduin. The realm of the “Lakhmids of Hira” extended south and west of seventh-century Kufa, which was near the still later site of Meshed Ali; and, in contrast to the Ghassanid princes, these kings had a fixed residence. Also of South Arabian stock, the Lakhmids were the natural enemies of the Ghassanids; but they were inferior to them, culturally speaking, because they had not had their rivals’ close contact with Byzantine civilization.

During the seventh century, both the Ghassanid and the Lakhmid kingdoms were destroyed by the newly Mohammedanized tribes of northern and western Arabia. These proselytizing hordes filled the *Badia* to overflowing, and then pushed further north, west and east in their triumphal progress. The descendants of the conquerors, known to Europeans as Saracens, inhabited the *Badia* and its borderlands throughout the Middle Ages.¹ The centre of

¹ The word Saracen has an interesting history. The original Saracens were Arabs belonging to a small tribe of the Sinai Peninsula. Their district was known to Ptolemy as *Sarakene*. Later, *Saraka* was defined by Stephanus Byzantinus as “a district beyond the Nabataeans”. In the third century A.D. the tribesmen of Saraka (or Sarakene) grew relatively powerful, incorporated all the smaller tribes in their vicinity, and disturbed the Roman frontier. Gradually, among Byzantine writers, the term Saracen came to be used synonymously with Arabian.

After the founding of the Arabian Empire by the successors of the Prophet

Islamic civilization and political power shifted, in the middle of the seventh century, from Medina to Damascus; and a century later it shifted again, to Baghdad. Then, five centuries later, after the sack of Baghdad in 1258, Cairo inherited the power and the prestige of Islam. During these successive changes, however, and even under the Mamluk Sultans of Egypt, the shaykhs of the Syrian Desert managed to maintain their practical, if not their theoretical independence; an independence which they had arrogated to themselves when first they occupied the *Badia* in the seventh century.

In the early Saracen period, the *Little Desert* was exceedingly popular as a health and holiday resort; and it was much used by the Omayyad Caliphs and their retainers. The wind-blown highlands were considered very healthful, as compared with crowded cities; and the excellent hunting which the desert afforded gave varied sport to the Caliph and his court. The Saracens built summer palaces and royal hunting-lodges in the *Badia*, as the Palmyrenes had done before them. In addition, the wide-open spaces had another, very special use. They were well suited to be a training-ground for young princes and nobles, where they might learn the arts of war and of the chase.

When, in the sixteenth century, the *Badia* came under the nominal rule of the sultans of the Ottoman Empire, there was scarcely any change in the status of its inhabitants. The Beduin never paid taxes to the Turkish government, and they were very rarely intimidated by Turkish troops, whether spahis or janisseries. Always the Beduin have looked upon the *Badia* as their own territory; and they possess its lands in the truest sense, for only Arabs could live in it year in and year out. It is this belief, this confidence in their ownership of the waste lands, that has led them to

Mohammed, in the seventh century, the Byzantines called all the Moslem subjects of the Caliph by the name of Saracens. During the Crusades, the word Saracen was transmitted to Western Europe through the medium of the Byzantines.

Modern Arabs, strangely enough, do not know the name, either as applied to a small tribe or as a collective name for the tribes of North Arabia. Cf. *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, article on the Saracens.

resist the encroachments of all outsiders; that has caused them to refuse to pay taxes to the Ottoman or any other government; and that has encouraged them to levy tolls (at the point of the sword) upon all caravans, commercial or otherwise, which have crossed the *Badia*. Even modern motor caravans, for their own safety, had to subsidize the Beduin for a number of years; and few Beduin have as yet been genuinely reconciled to the laying of the Iraq Petroleum Company's pipe-line. When the line was being laid they demonstrated their resentment, time and again, by mutilating or even stealing sections of the pipe. It must be admitted that, in some people's eyes, this interference with the pipe-line was merely an instance of their mischievous or wantonly destructive disposition.

In the seventeenth century a great tribal change occurred. Arabs of a kindred stock, from the Shammar district in Nejd, swept northwards into the Syrian Desert. They displaced and drove out to the desert frontiers its existing Saracen occupants. Before the end of the same century the *Badia* was invaded by another tribe of Nejd Arabs, called the Aneza. During a century and a half of inter-tribal warfare, they in their turn established their supremacy in the *Great* and the *Little* deserts, and drove many of the Shammar tribes across the Euphrates—where the latter settled in Mesopotamia. From the early nineteenth century to the present day, the Aneza has been the principal and ruling tribe in the Syrian Desert. Moreover, throughout the Ottoman period, they remained politically—if not economically—independent of the Turks.

The subdivisions of the Aneza are numerous. When they were listed by the Blunts, in 1879, there were nine Aneza tribes, each one of which was composed of minor sections or clans. Of all these, the Rualla was then, and is today, the largest and most powerful. The size of a tribe is reckoned according to the number of its tents, and the Rualla tents were accounted 12,000 in the nineteenth century; and their camels numbered 150,000. Today the Rualla are said by Raswan to number 35,000, with only 7000 tents; although their camels have increased to the approximate

number of 350,000. Many other tribes also range the *Badia*, north, west and east of the Aneza. A few of them, like the Moali—in the neighbourhood of Aleppo—are allies, or else tributaries of the Aneza. Others are entirely independent, like the Sherarat of the Wadi Sirhan. Others again have become more or less settled, like the Montefik Arabs between Hilla and Basra.¹

Reference has already been made to the seasonal migrations of the Beduin, which they undertake for the purpose of procuring adequate food and water for themselves and their animals. As everyone knows, the Beduin live by breeding and raising camels to sell. Each tribe has its own allotted district, or *dira*, in the *Badia*. The extent of every *dira* depends upon its available water supplies and the nature of its scattered pastures; because each district must, in normal years, be capable of supporting the herds of camels of a given tribe, and of supplying the tribal households with water as well. The extreme scantiness of desert pasturage, and the inadequacy of water sources make it impossible for any large tribe to live as a unit; so every tribe splits up into sub-tribes. These resemble Scottish clans; and each clan lives unto itself alone. As has been well said, these clans wander each apart in their own

¹ There is a species of "Gipsy" tribe called the Suluba, which comes under none of these categories. They are supposedly of Indian origin; at least they are not "pure" Arab. Like the Aneza, the Suluba inhabit the inner Syrian Desert, and range from Nejd in the south to northern Palmyrena. But unlike the Aneza and other Beduin tribes, they possess no camels, preferring to breed asses for sale along the desert frontier. They follow the herds of gazelle, in their seasonal migrations, and hunt these animals for food. The Suluba are noted for the work they do as tinkers, smiths and workers in wood. Less recently, the name Suluba was spelled Sleb, Sleyb, Solubba and Suleib.

For information concerning these and other tribes of the Syrian Desert, see Lady Anne Blunt, *The Bedouins of the Euphrates* (1879), notably vol. ii, chap. xxiv, especially pp. 187-193. Charles M. Doughty, *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (preferably ed. of 1933), *passim*. J. L. Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins and Wahabys* (1831), especially i, pp. 1-32; ii, pp. 1-50. Burckhardt's information, though interesting, is a century out of date; and some of his "notes", such as those concerning the habits and locations of certain tribes, is therefore inaccurate.

For more modern material, see Ct. Victor Müller, *En Syrie avec les Bédouins. Les Tribus du désert* (1931). Carl Raswan, *Black Tents of Arabia* (1935).

cycles, within the orbit of the tribal whole. Fighting occurs among the Beduin, spontaneously, whenever years of drought force a tribe, or some one of its clans, to seek water or pasturage outside of its customary cycle or the tribal orbit. Such fighting engenders blood-feuds, and blood-feuds are transmitted from generation to generation. The Beduin press upon one another, as they do upon the semi-fertile frontiers of the states which surround their *Badia*. This pressure is more acute in years of drought; but at all times, in every year, the tribesmen are impoverished, restless, and in a state of chronic flux and instability.

They are a hardy people, these Arab nomads, whose trade is hunting and fighting as well as the breeding of camels and horses. Frequently also they are bandits. Faced with the arduous conditions of life on the desert, only the very fit are able to survive at all. As Mohammedans they are trained to endure want and privation; their religion and their environment equally force them to live abstemiously. Doubtless the Prophet considered the physical as well as the spiritual needs of his people, and laid down his rules accordingly. It is true that the modern Beduin are neither deeply nor fanatically religious, excepting always the Wahhabis; but the force of religious custom is strong among them. In fact, custom and tradition is the nomad's only law. A certain English traveller, while crossing from Aleppo to Basra, once remarked upon the great fatigues of desert travel. He expressed surprise that the Arabs themselves could endure it, year in and year out. "They are certainly in many respects so very like their camels," said he, "that Providence seems to have equally designed them for the desert. I have observed them to walk and work all day, watch at night, and repeat their labour next day without any sign of fatigue, and have likewise remarked that, like unto their beasts, when food and water have been plenty their chops were never still, but can in proportion to their strength go as long without either."¹ Nevertheless, and in spite of their hardiness, a daily existence of

¹ William Beawes (1745). Quoted from the edition of his narrative which is printed in No. LXXIII, Second Series, of the Hakluyt Society's publications, London (1929), p. 30.

unremitting hardship shortens the lives of the Beduin; so that neither the old nor the accidentally infirm can hope to outlive their strength. Consequently they usually die young, in comparison with Europeans.

Each Beduin tribe governs itself along quasi democratic lines. The group council of its shaykhs in assembly—of whom the principal shaykh or *saiyid* is but *primus inter pares*—decides all important matters, whether of war and peace, of justice, raids and blood-feuds. The *saiyid*, or lord of a tribe, is the chosen leader of his tribesmen. In theory, the dignity is not hereditary; but actually, the son of an able leader automatically fills his father's place, unless he is personally disqualified through physical or mental weakness. Shaykhs are seniors, or men of authority, because they are proven leaders, or else the heads (often the very young heads) of a powerful family; not because they are venerable with age. The office of judge (*el-kadi*) is the one dignity that is hereditary; and that is because a thorough knowledge of the Moslem or Koranic Law and of tribal customs is requisite; and this knowledge is most satisfactorily handed down from a father to his son.

The reader must look elsewhere for interesting descriptions of Beduin customs. There is, unfortunately, no place in this survey for the minutiae of tribal organization, or for the details of clan councils and the less formal coffee-gatherings, where all family and tribal matters are discussed.

Those who desire insight into their daily and precarious lives should turn to the narratives of such travellers as have lived amongst them, and of these, one can learn more about the Arabs in Doughty's *Arabia Deserta* than in any other one book. It is only where Beduin character is influenced by certain aspects of commercial life; or when either religious fanaticism or the greed which grows out of enforced abstemiousness affects their treatment of foreigners, that Arabs and their characteristics enter into this story of travel and commerce and trade-routes.

On the commercial side the Beduin are surprisingly flexible. Their extreme independence of spirit, coupled with a necessarily narrow outlook on the world, might have been expected to make

them unadaptable to new ideas or to a changing environment. But the reverse is the case—within the limits of their natural poverty. They have proved susceptible from the first to such innovations as coffee and tobacco, cottons and coarse cloths—for their wearing apparel—and firearms. The most recent instance of their suggestibility is provided by motor cars. Many Beduin shaykhs own (or are in debt for) cars which they have learned to drive—although they have not yet learned to take care of them; and the Rualla even organize and carry out most of their raids with motor cars. During the drought of 1932, Beduin tribesmen actually came into the settled districts between Palmyra and Damascus and hired Chevrolet lorries to carry skins of water out to their thirsting herds. They are, in fact, modernizing themselves as much as such a process is compatible with the conditions of nomadic life.

In spite of their adaptability as consumers, however, the Beduin have never taken part in commerce on a large scale. Even the Agail Arabs, whose activities will be described in the chapter on desert commerce, were in the habit only of providing camels for the trading caravans, and of defending these *en route*, against the attacks of marauding nomads. For this purpose the Agails hired out the services of themselves and their camels; but they never became merchants on their own account. Other Beduin tribes, that had no personal connection with commercial caravans, levied transit tolls. They habitually exacted money payments (*khifara*) from the merchants of such caravans, in exchange for a guarantee of immunity. This custom has been called blackmail; and in the old meaning of the word—“tribute exacted by freebooters for protection and immunity”—the term was fair enough (even though the Beduin are not freebooters in the ordinary sense at all); but the word blackmail is misleading, and should be avoided, because of its modern connotation. In addition to this system of tribute-collecting, there was another time-honoured institution—still in existence today—which has long brought a certain amount of profit to desert-dwellers. All townspeople who travelled in the Syrian Desert were under the necessity of establishing the bond of