

MLU-11.1: Arabia the Cradle of Islam

The Arabian Peninsula is the cradle of Islam. Islam was "born" in it, and "grew up" in it, and was already "full-grown" when it came out of it. It was in the Arabian cities of Makkah and Medina that the classic Islamic identity was evolved." A grasp of the geography of Arabia, therefore, is necessary for the understanding of the drift of its history.

Following is an outline of the geography of the Arabian Peninsula:

Like any other place, Arabia has the kind of terrain that shapes and changes the people who live there and pass through it. Despite what many people believe, Arabia is not just a desert. Broiling sand, mauve mountains, horrific peaks spiking a copper sky, fragile rocks, startling geometrical and circular shapes of crags and mirages of lakes, streams, and gardens are some of its most notable surface configuration variations.

Arabia is the world's largest peninsula but the Arabs themselves call it *Jazirat-ul-Arab* (the Island of Arabia), which in a sense it is. Bounded on the east by the Persian Gulf, on the south by the Arabian Sea, and on the west by the Red Sea, it is bounded on the north by the great "sand sea" of the Syrian desert.

In configuration, Arabia is a vast plateau rising gently from east to west. Except for Yemen and the valleys interspersed in the western mountain ranges, the whole country is sandy or rocky, and dry and barren.

Following are the political divisions of the Arabian Peninsula (1992):

1. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia
2. The Republic of Yemen
3. The Sultanate of Oman
4. The United Arab Emirates
5. The State of Qatar
6. The State of Bahrain
7. The State of Kuwait

Vegetation

Vegetation is generally very sparse due to lack of rain and due to the high salt content of the soil. True trees are rare, and shrubs are common. All plants have had to adapt themselves to the conditions of desert existence.

The date-palm grows wherever there is water. It is the most important cultivated tree in the whole peninsula. Date fruit is the staple of many Arabs, and the tree supplies valuable wood and other by-products.

The principal cereals of Arabia are wheat, barley, oats, maize and millet. Coffee grows in Yemen; and cotton grows, in varying quantities, in Yemen and in Oman. The mango fruit has been successfully cultivated in the oases of Al-Hasa province of Saudi Arabia, and the coconut palm grows in Oman. Such "forests" as Arabia has, are a few clusters of junipers in the highlands of Yemen.

The Ecology of Arabia

The most important component of the ecology of the Arabian Peninsula is water. Its presence or absence has shaped its history to a great extent. Settlers were attracted to the site of Makkah in Hijaz by the presence of the spring as *Zamzam*.

A new and complex factor of tremendous geopolitical significance is the presence of vast reservoirs of oil in the Arabian Peninsula. In 1900 the whole peninsula was thinly populated, and was desolate, poverty-stricken and isolated. It was one of the few regions in the world almost untouched by western influence. Then came oil and everything changed.

The most important animal in Arabia was the camel. The Arabian camel is the single-humped variety, or dromedary, as against the two-humped camel of Central Asia, the Bactrian. The dromedary has flat, broad, thick-soled cloven hoofs that do not sink into the sand, and it can travel long distances in the desert. The milk of the camel formed an important part of the diet of the desert Arabs, and camel hair was used by them to make their tents.

Political Conditions in Arabia before Islam

The most remarkable feature of the political life of Arabia before Islam was the total absence of political organization in any form. With the exception of Yemen in the south-west, no part of the Arabian Peninsula had any government at any time, and the Arabs never acknowledged any authority other than the authority of the chiefs of their tribes. The authority of the tribal chiefs, however, rested, in most cases, on their character and personality, and was moral rather than political.

Since there was no government, there was no law and no order. The only law of the land was lawlessness. In the event a crime was committed, the injured party took law in its own hands, and tried to administer "justice" to the offender.

Since there were no such things as police, courts or judges, the only protection a man could find from his enemies, was in his own tribe. The tribe had an obligation to protect its members even if they had committed crimes. Tribalism or *ʿasabiyya* (the clan spirit) took precedence over ethics. A tribe that failed to protect its members from their enemies exposed itself to ridicule.

War was a permanent institution of the Arabian society. The desert could support only a limited number of people, and the state of inter-tribal war maintained a rigid control over the growth of population. But the Arabs themselves did not see war in this light. To them, war was a pastime or rather a dangerous sport or a species of tribal drama.

War gave them an opportunity to display their skills at archery, fencing and horsemanship, and also, in war, they could distinguish themselves by their heroism and at the same time win glory and honor for their tribes.

Economic Conditions

Economically, the Jews were the leaders of Arabia. They were the owners of the best lands in Hijaz, and they were the best farmers in the country. They were also the entrepreneurs of such industries as existed in Arabia in those days, and they enjoyed a monopoly of the weapons industry.

Slavery was an economic institution of the Arabs. Male and female slaves were sold and bought like animals, and they formed the most depressed class of the Arabian society.

The most powerful class of the Arabs was made up by the capitalists and money-lenders. The rates of interest which they charged on loans were very high, and were especially designed to make them richer and richer and the borrowers poorer and poorer.

The most important urban centers of Arabia were Makkah and Yathrib, both in Hijaz. The citizens of Makkah were mostly merchants, traders and money-lenders. Their caravans traveled in summer to Syria and in winter to Yemen. They also traveled to Bahrain in the east and to Iraq in the northeast. The caravan trade was basic to the economy of Makkah, and its organization called for considerable skill, experience and ability.

Social Conditions

Arabia was a male-dominated society. Women had no status of any kind other than as sex objects. The number of women a man could marry was not fixed. When a man died, his son "inherited" all his wives except his own mother. A savage custom of the Arabs was to bury their female infants alive. Even if an Arab did not wish to bury his daughter alive, he still had to uphold this "honorable" tradition, being unable to resist social pressures.

Drunkenness was a common vice of the Arabs. With drunkenness went their gambling. They were compulsive drinkers and compulsive gamblers.

The State of Religion in Pre-Islamic Arabia

The period in the Arabian history which preceded the birth of Islam is known as the *Times of Ignorance*. The Arabs were the devotees of a variety of "religions" which can be classified into the following categories.

1. Idol-worshippers or polytheists. Most of the Arabs were idolaters. They worshipped numerous idols and each tribe had its own idol. They had filled Kaaba in Makkah with 360 idols of stone and wood which had been built by the Prophet Abraham (AS) and his son, Ismael to the service of One God.

2. Atheists This group was composed of the materialists and believed that the world was eternal.

3. Zindiqs They were influenced by the Persian doctrine of dualism in nature. They believed that there were two gods representing the twin forces of good and evil or light and darkness, and both were locked up in an unending struggle for supremacy.

4. Sabines. They worshipped the stars.

5. Jews When the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in A.D. 70, and drove the Jews out of Palestine and Syria, many of them found new homes in Hijaz in Arabia. Under their influence, many Arabs also became converts to Judaism. Their strong centers were the towns of Yathrib, Khayber, Fadak and Umm-ul-Qura.

6. Christians. The Romans had converted the north Arabian tribe of Ghassan to Christianity. Some clans of Ghassan had migrated to and had settled in Hijaz.

7. Monotheists There was a small group of monotheists present in Arabia on the eve of the rise of Islam. Its members did not worship idols, and they were the followers of the Prophet Abraham (AS). The members of the families of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), the future prophet, and Ali ibn Abi Talib (RA), the future caliph, and most members of their clan – the Banu Hashim– belonged to this group.