Chapter 3

Ecology, Knowledge, and Trade in Central Arabia (Najd) during the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

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Introduction

Most scholars dealing with Saudi Arabia still write its history by focusing exclusively either on political, economic, or cultural matters. For example, treatment of religious aspects in writings on politics and economy are often confined to some superficial remarks insufficient to clarify the interrelations among the Weberian dimensions of culture, politics, and economy, which still dominate writings on the region. On the other hand, many of those dealing with religious issues still seem to think that a treatment of religious developments alone provides us with valuable insights into the region’s history. While historians of other parts of the world and other countries of the Middle East have realized that an artificial isolation of dimensions of history—even if only for analytic purposes—should be considered a thing of the past, studies of Saudi Arabia still suffer from a serious lack of methodological sophistication, not only in this regard. Not surprisingly, anthropologists have become the better historians of the Peninsula in general and Saudi Arabia in particular. One possible method of applying up-to-date historical methodology on the Peninsula could be to focus on the various interrelations between the historical “dimensions,” thereby identifying new directions for historical research concerning
Saudi Arabia. While writings on religious aspects neglect the decisive role of ecological factors and material conditions for the intellectual history of Arabia, the most serious gap in the literature is its pre-oil economic history. In the following, I will therefore try to focus on the interrelations between economy and culture in Central Arabian society during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Ecology and History in Central Arabia

Up to the 1950s, life was precarious in Central Arabia and the living conditions of its inhabitants more than humble. The climate was generally very hot and dry, with temperatures rising over 45° centigrade in summer. In winter, cold winds blew over the open deserts and the temperature quite frequently fell several degrees below zero. In some cases, extraordinarily cold weather destroyed the crops and even killed animals. For example, in 1879/80, the “bard” (arb.: cold) took a pilgrimage caravan in southwestern Qasim, that is Central Najd, by surprise. The Qasimi pilgrims had to interrupt their journey for 18 days and when the weather improved, most of their riding camels had perished. Even in cold winters, however, it rained only rarely, so that water became the one commodity on which life and death in Central Arabia ultimately depended. In good years, the winter rains filled the underground basins and streams, which ultimately found their outlet in Eastern Arabia, in the oases of al-Hasa and Qatif. Where this water was closest to the surface, in the wadis like the Wadi al-Dawasir, the Wadi Hanifa, and the Wadi Rimma, the inhabitants of Central Arabia had established urban settlements, some of which became centers of economic, political, and cultural life on the Peninsula. However, if compared with the cities of the neighboring territories like Mecca, Medina, and al-Hufuf, cities in Najd were merely big villages, where economic life was based on agriculture and modest trade with the bedouin and the trading centers of the surrounding regions.

Around 1900, the biggest towns in Najd were Ha’il in Northern Najd, ‘Unaiza and Buraida in Central Najd or Qasim and Riyadh in Southern Najd. Ha’il was the main transit point on the trade route between Damascus and Najd and, from the 1860s on, the capital of the Rashidi state, which dominated Najd for several decades until the early twentieth century. While Ha’il is said to have hosted a population of up to 20,000 people during the reign of Muhammad ibn Rashid (d. 1897), the decline of the Rashidi state in the early twentieth century was accompanied by falling population numbers. ‘Unaiza and Buraida, the big trading centers of