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THE YEMENI HIGHLAND PILGRIM ROUTE BETWEEN ṢANĀ' AND MECCA: ITS HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY

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To date, extensive research has been carried out concerning three of the principal northern pilgrim routes of the Arabian Peninsula, namely Kufa – Mecca¹, Egypt – Mecca, and Syria – Mecca², whereas fieldwork aimed specifically at examining the southern routes in their entirety has hitherto been lacking (see map 1). The most significant of the southern routes is the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route, and this has been the subject of a piece of research recently completed by the present writer³.

The importance of studying the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route stems from the fact that it enjoyed continual popularity in the pre-Islamic and post-Islamic eras. Prior to the emergence of Islam, the commercial caravans of Southern Arabia favoured this route in travelling to and from the Mediterranean coasts. This pattern of commercial activity was ultimately superseded at a period during which the Meccan community (*Quraysh*) played the dominant role, pursuing its mercantile interests in the form of two seasonal journeys to Syria and the Yemen⁴. The commercial prosperity of the *Quraysh* was eventually curtailed by the advent of Islam.

According to classical writers⁵, the southern part of the principal overland incense road (*Darb al-Bukhūr*) appears to have begun at Shabwah and to have included stops at Timna^c and Ma'rib, whence it proceeded north through or near Najrān (*al-Ukhdūd*), and then went to Bishah and Tabālah. From the latter place, it would have been about 350 miles to Yathrib on a direct journey, but before reaching Yathrib the route must have passed through Mecca, probably via Turabah. Its survival would seem to have been due to the Arab merchants who avoided sailing up and down the Red Sea. It should be stated, however,

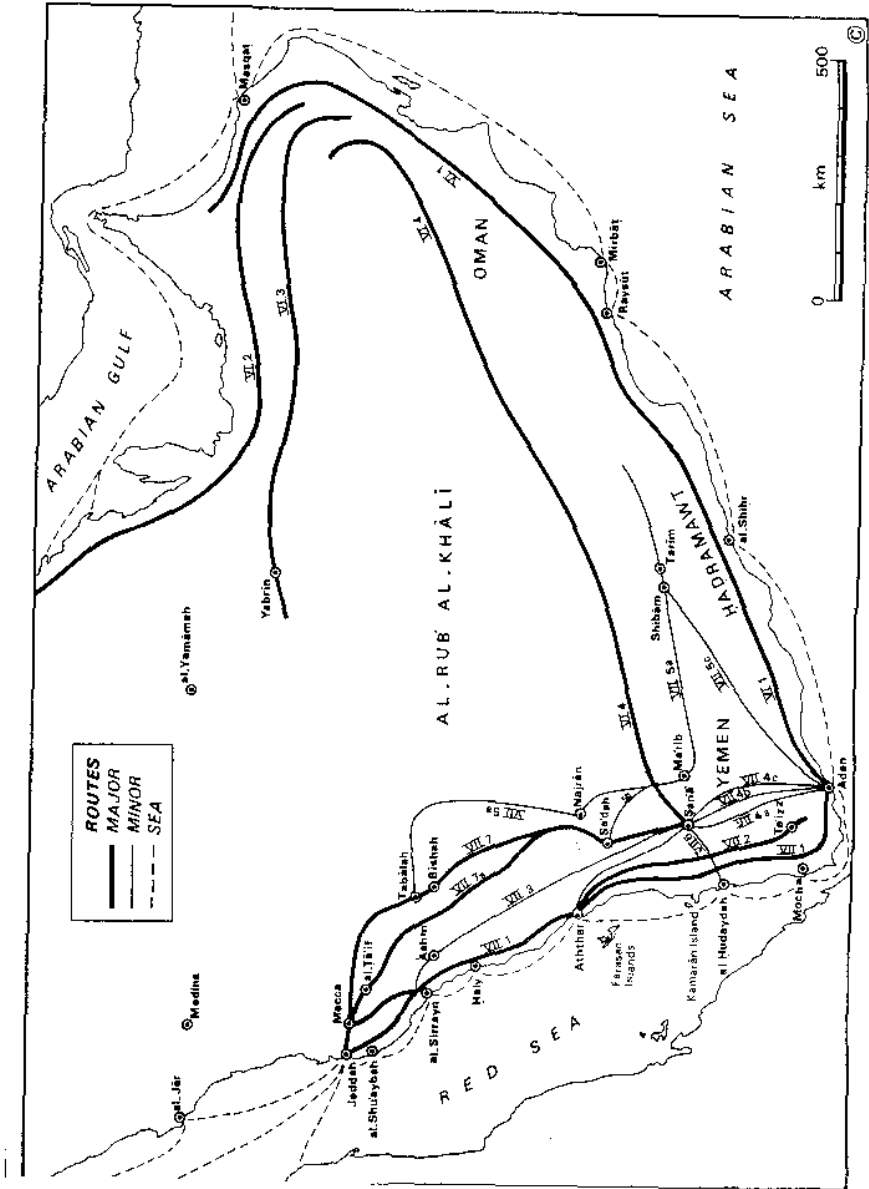
¹ This pilgrim route has recently been studied by Dr. Sa'ad A. Al-Rāshid for the degree of Ph.D. See *Darb Zubaydah*, (1980), passim.

² These two pilgrim routes have recently been studied by Dr. 'Ali Ghabbān for the degree of Ph.D. See *Introduction*, (1988), passim.

³ See al-Thenayian, *An Archaeological Study of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route Between Ṣanā' and Mecca*, Ph.D. thesis, (Durham University, 1993).

⁴ See Qur'ān, CVI (S Quraysh), where God refers to the two journeys and urges believers to "worship the Lord Of the Ka'bah, who fed them against a hunger, and gave them security from a fear". Cf. Watt, *Muhammad at Mecca*, 63.

⁵ Pliny, *Natural History*, bk. XII, ch. xxxii, 63-65; cf. Bk. XII, ch. xxx, 54, Strabo, *Geography*, bk. XVI, ch. iv, 4.



Map 1: The major southern pilgrim routes of Arabia

that the course of this route might have altered at various times on account of fluctuations in the stability of areas through which it passes⁶.

At the point at which most of the population of the Yemen had converted to Islam by a process of gradual assimilation, caravans were introduced to guide the pilgrims between the Yemen and Mecca. A number of routes were available to these caravans⁷, but the one leading via the Highland came to be the main corridor connecting Ṣanʿāʾ with Mecca. It seems most likely that this Islamic pilgrim route, particularly the current Saudi section, might have followed the same course as the corresponding main incense trade route. Consequently, it is safe to assert that the Highland route was not an Islamic innovation: its adoption should be linked directly with the pre-Islamic commercial activities of the ancient kingdoms and states of southern Arabia. Notwithstanding the fact that scientific evidence is sparse thus far, it is nonetheless conceivable from the evidence that certain of the commercial settlements along the route, such as Bīshah and Tabālah, came to serve as pilgrim stations in due course.

It is documented that, with the advent of Islam, certain stretches of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route was initially used by the Islamic armies which included:

1. The military detachment (*sarīyyah*) of ʿUmar b. Al-Khaṭṭāb (in 9/630), which was sent against the Hawāzin tribe settled in the vicinity of Turabah⁸.
2. The military detachment (*sarīyyah*) of Quṭbah b. ʿĀmir (in 9/630), which was sent against the Khthʿam tribe settled near Bīshah, Turabah and Tabālah⁹.
3. The military detachment (*sarīyyah*) of Khālīd b. Al-Walīd (in 10/631), which marched against B. Al-Hārīth b. Kaʿb of Madhḥij in Najrān¹⁰.
4. The military expedition of al-Muhājir b. Abī Umayyah (in 11/632-3), which was launched to fight the supporters of the "false prophet" ʿAbhahah¹¹.

The Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route is identified variously in the available Yemeni sources¹², as follows:

1. The road of Najd (*ṭarīq Najd*),
2. The road of Ṣanʿāʾ (*mahaḥjjat Ṣanʿāʾ*),
3. The mountain Road (*al-jāddah al-jabalīyyah*),
4. The Upper Road (*al-ṭarīq al-ʿulyā*), and
5. The Road of al-Sarāt (*darb al-Sarāt*).

⁶ Cf. Groom, *Frankincense*, 193.

⁷ Cf. e.g. Ibn Khurrādādhbah, *al-Mamālik*, 147f.; Qudāmah, *al-Kharāj*, 192f.; al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifāh*, 341.

⁸ Al-Wāqidī, *al-Maghāzī*, II, 722.

⁹ Ibn Saʿad, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, II, 117.

¹⁰ Ibn Saʿad, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, I, 339f.; al-Tabarī, *Tārīkh*, IV, 1724f.

¹¹ Ibn Samurah, *Ṭabaqāt*, 35; Ibn al-Daybaʿ, *al-Mustaḥfid*, 22.

¹² Cf. e.g. al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifāh*, 338; Kay, *Yaman*, 7; ʿUmārah, *al-Muḥfid*, 67; Yahyā, *Ghāyah*, 248.

Elsewhere, still further appellations are used¹³:

1. The Road of Ṣanʿāʾ (*ṭarīq Ṣanʿāʾ*),
2. The Road of Najd (*ṭarīq Najd*), and
3. The Najdiyyah Route (*darb al-Najdiyyah*).

Nowadays, the same route is known locally as:

1. The Road of Asʿad al-Kāmil¹⁴ (*ṭarīq Asʿad al-Kāmil*),
2. The Road of the Elephant¹⁵ (*darb al-fīl*), and
3. The Army Route¹⁶ (*ṭarīq al-jaysh*).

We noted that the early and medieval Islamic sources at our disposal show that, in contrast to the northern pilgrim routes in Arabia, the Highland route in its entirety received almost no attention, in the form the establishment and development of its facilities and the securing of its safety, from the central Islamic authorities. This neglect is very likely attributable to the fact that the Yemen as a whole enjoyed neither enduring political unity nor a close relationship with the central Islamic governments during its early and medieval history. In the light of this period of neglect, and bearing in mind that certain of the rest-stations (such as Raydah, Khywān, Bishah, and Tabālah) were definitely pre-Islamic in origin, we may conclude that the continued success of the route was in some measure owing to the stability of the pre-Islamic settlements. However, there were measures introduced by those authorities who are credited, in the Islamic history, with the successful development of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route, and an account of these follows:

1. THE ABBASID CALIPH AL-MAHDĪ B. AL-MANṢŪR (158-169/774-785)

Of all the caliphs, al-Mahdī b. Al-Manṣūr was the only one, as far as we are aware, to contribute to the improvement of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route. He is credited with establishing the postal-service (*barīd*) which operated between the Hejaz and the Yemen¹⁷. It is quite likely that the inauguration

¹³ Cf. e.g. al-Ḥarbī, *al-Manāsik*, 643; Ibn Hawqal, *Ṣūrat al-Ard*, 22.

¹⁴ This name refers to the Sabaeen ruler (tubbaʿ) who held office between ca. AD 378 and 415. It is believed that, after his conversion to the Jewish faith, he travelled to Medina by way of this route. See al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj*, II, 76f.; Philby, *Arabian Highlands*, 259.

¹⁵ This term almost certainly relates to the unsuccessful military campaign of Abrahah, the Abyssinian viceroy of the Yemen, in ca. AD 570. See Qurʾān CV: 1-5; Beeston, "Abraha", EI², I, 102f.

¹⁶ This appellation, used only in Saudi Arabia, is a reference to the military conflict between Saudi Arabia and the Yemen in 1934, during the course of which the Saudi forces advanced along certain stretches of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route.

¹⁷ Al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, III, 517; Ibn al-Athīr, *Kāmil*, V, 73.

of this service in 166/782 necessitated the installation of certain facilities along the route, such as accommodation for the postal official (*ṣāhib al-barīd*), watch-towers and milestones.

2. THE ABBASID GOVERNOR OF ṢANĀ', MUḤAMMAD B. KHĀLID AL-BARMAKĪ (83-4/799-800)

This governor introduced a range of significant reforms in and beyond the city of Ṣanā'. His commitment to maintaining and improving the services which operated in connection with the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route was confirmed by the measures taken to promote security along the route and to upgrade its track and water facilities¹⁸.

3. THE ZIYADID PRINCE AL-ḤUSAYN B. SALĀMAH (OB. 402/1011)

This prince initiated a comprehensive scheme of development of amenities along the Yemeni pilgrim routes¹⁹. The measures taken included the construction of great mosques, lined as well as unlined wells, and water-tanks at all stations on these routes. Milestones, recording the distance in miles, parasangs, and postal-stages, were positioned along all the Yemeni routes. We also learn that he ordered the construction of the pass of al-Ṭā'if²⁰.

4. THE QUEEN ARWA BINT AḤMAD AL-ṢULAYHĪ (OB. 532/1138)

This queen ordered the construction of the caravanserai / khan of Dīn (Marmal) on the Ṣanā' – Ṣa'dah pilgrim route²¹.

Unfortunately, it is not possible, with any degree of certainty, to determine the exact date when the route as a whole fell into decline. However, it seems plausible that the ultimate decline of the northern part of the route, that is to say, of the present Saudi section, was marked by the practice of the Yemeni pilgrims of following the ancillary Sarawāt route in preference to the present Saudi section of the Highland Route²². This theory is ventured on the basis of the fact that there is no mention of the present Saudi section of the Highland

¹⁸ Al-Janādī, *al-Sulūk*, I, 213f.

¹⁹ 'Umārah, *al-Mufīd*, 72f.; Kay, *Yaman*, 8f.

²⁰ Yāqūt, *al-Buldān*, IV, 8f. s.v. "al-Ṭā'if".

²¹ Lewcock, "Building", *Ṣanā'*, 277f.

²² For more information about the Sarawāt route, see Ibn al-Mujāwir, *al-Mustabṣir*, I, 37f.; cf. 'Umārah, *al-Mufīd*, 69f.; Burckhard, *Travels*, II, 373f.

Route in the available historical and geographical sources after the 6th /12th century, whereas from this period onwards reference is made to the Sarawāt route. The works of ʿUmārah²³ (ob. 569/1173-4) and ibn al-Mujāwir²⁴ (ob. after 626/1728-9) exemplify this point. Lending further credibility to this view is the fact that from the 6th / 12th century onwards, Yemeni (such as al-Janādī²⁵, 732/1331, and Ibn al-Dayba²⁶, 943/1536) as well as non-Yemeni (such as al-ʿUmārī²⁷, 749/1348, and al-Jazīrī²⁸, 10th / 16th century) geographers and historians refer in their writings concerning the journey from the Yemen to Mecca exclusively either to the itinerary recorded by ʿUmārah or to the Yemeni coastal route.

Turning now to the results of our fieldwork, conducted in 1989, these can be divided into three categories pertaining to separate aspects of the Yemeni Highland Pilgrim Route.

1. The identification of the physical features, including orientation.
2. The identification of certain major facilities, including most of the rest-stations.
3. The documentation of the Arabic rock-and milestone-inscriptions.

The documented starting-place of the route is Ṣanʿāʾ, or more precisely, Wadi Shaʿūb / Shuʿūb, and its terminus is al-Manāqib, which is situated near the “meeting-place” (*mīqat*) of al-Sayl al-Kabīr. From Wadi Shaʿūb the route leads (north) north-west towards Ṣaʿdah, following approximately the same course as the modern motorway connecting Ṣanʿāʾ and Ṣaʿdah (see map 2). In contrast to the Saudi section, which is largely demarcated by, and consumed in, mountainous terrain, the Yemeni part is demarcated in only three areas, Ghūlat ʿAjīb, al-Maṣraʿ, and al-Faqʿ, and, with the exception of three major passes (Ghūlat ʿAjīb, al-Faqʿ, and al-Hūariyan), it traverses relatively flat land.

As far as the structure of the Highland route is concerned, its Saudi section (see map 3) is a remarkable example of road-building in the Arabian Peninsula. Crossing the present Yemeni-Saudi international border, the route maintains the same course as far as Mecca, passing through landscape presenting a variety of topographical features. The most rugged areas are the mountain range of al-Sarāṭ and the lava-field of al-Buqūm, whereas more even stretches are the vast flat plains, namely al-Qāʿah, Ṣahr, and Rukbah.

The following examples are certain features of the Saudi section of the route:

²³ *Al-Muḥīd*, 69f.

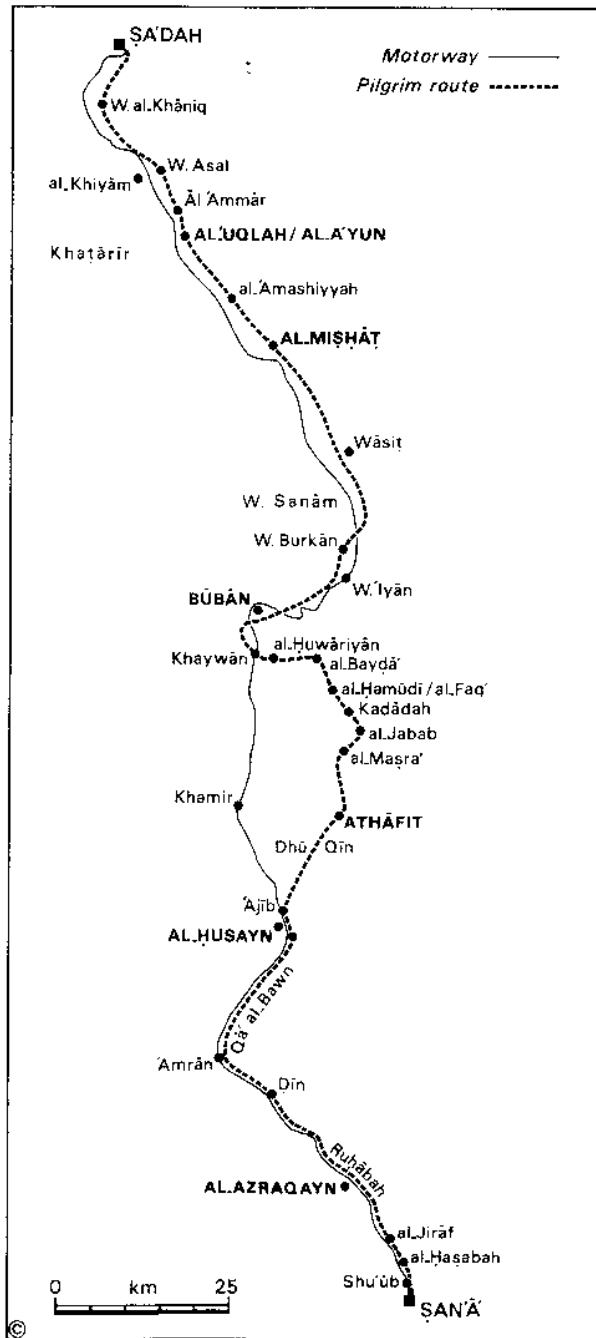
²⁴ *Al-Mustahṣir*, I, 37f.

²⁵ *Al-Sulūk*, II, 479f.

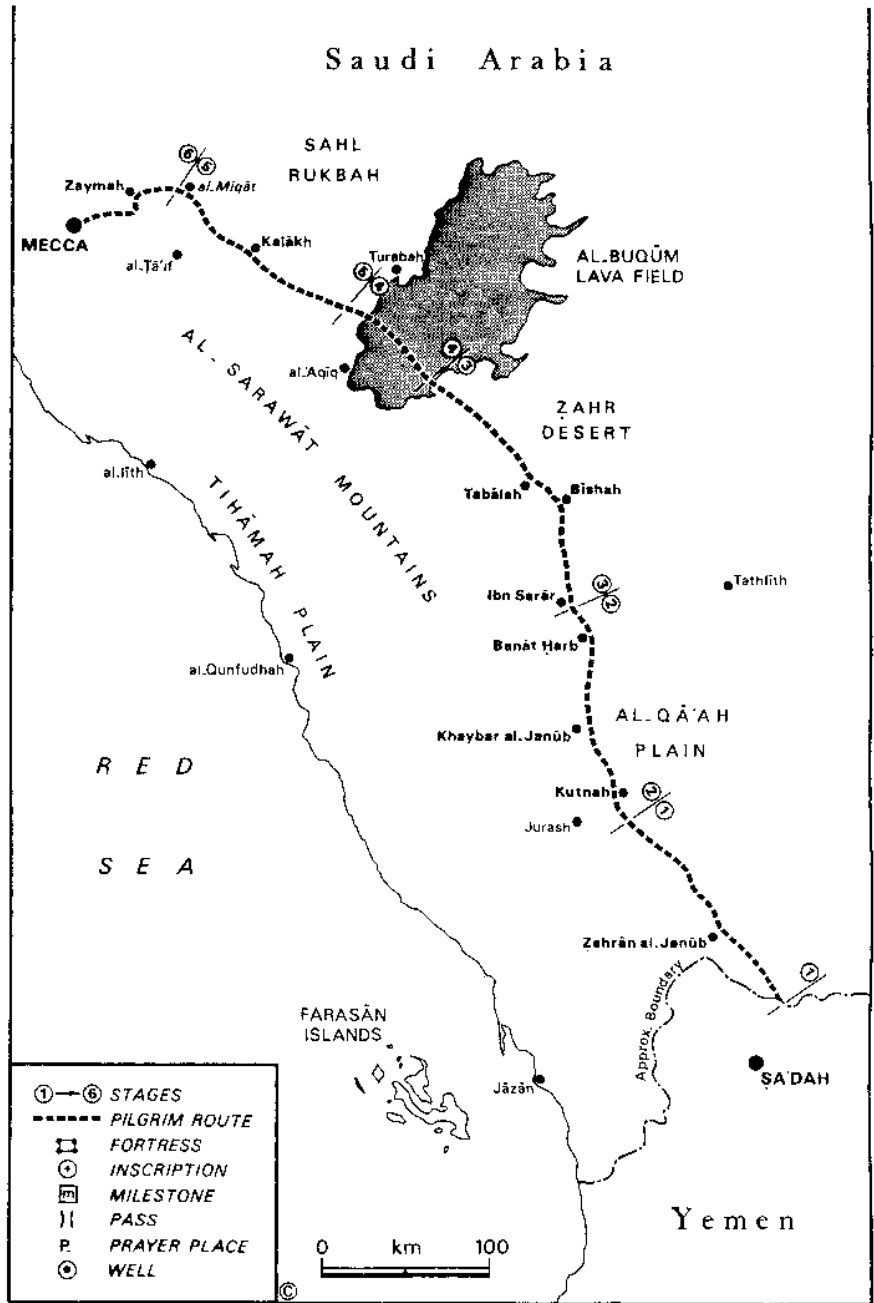
²⁶ *Qurrah*, I, 325f.

²⁷ *Al-Aḥṣār*, II, 341f.

²⁸ *Durar*, II, 129lf.



Map 2: The Yemeni section of the Yemeni highland pilgrim route



Map 3: The Saudi section of the Yemeni highland pilgrim route

1. PAVED DEFILES

It is evident that most, if not all, of the mountain passes of the route were paved. They are similar in design and construction. The defile of al-Maḍaj, or al-Maṣlūlah as it is known locally at the present time, is the longest and the best preserved paved segment of the route situated within the southern territories of Saudi Arabia.

2. PAVED PORTIONS

The route is well paved and cleared as soon as it reaches the lava-field of al-Buqūm. The main track of the route passes steadily through the main body of this lava tract towards the north-west. Due to the harsh nature of the *ḥarrah*, the main course of the route is perfectly paved, cleared of rocks, stepped, and shouldered. In various places, it also diverges into dual pathways and is provided with low shoulders.

3. LEVELLED SEGMENTS

Clearing the actual main track of the road of natural obstacles is an engineering method of road-building which is frequently and extensively applied along the Saudi section. It is used especially wherever the course of the route goes over plains or moderately rough terrain. It is also noticeable that this method of construction is usually combined with the practice of providing low shoulders on both edges of the main track.

4. CAIRNS

The Saudi section is heavily dotted with stone cairns on both of its sides. It is still possible to recognize these cairns from their remains. They have been constructed in the form of towers piled up from local slabs of stone. Their diameters are between four and six metres, whereas their heights range up to about two metres. It has been observed that they were sited on commanding positions, such as high hills, mountain passes, and the edges of wadis. They also appear in flat areas. Their location was always chosen so that they would be as near as possible to the course of the route.

Reference to published records of pre-Islamic route structure in the Yemen and Ḥaḍramawt generally²⁹, and in the vicinity of the ancient south Arabian Kingdom of Qataban (400 BC – 2nd century AD) specifically, allows that certain features of construction and design (including paving, levelling, shouldering, and ramping) thus located are repeated on the Saudi section of the Highland route. We may, furthermore, observe that engineering methods similar to

²⁹ See Bowen, "Archaeological Survey", *ADSA*, 12f.; Groom, "The Northern Passes", *PSAS*, 37f.

those used in building the route were employed extensively during the early Islamic eras in the construction and design of the northern Arabian pilgrim routes of Kufa-Mecca and Egypt-Mecca³⁰.

The water resources discovered, many of which are fully operational today, undoubtedly determined the sites of the pilgrim stations. They fall into four categories:

1. Water-tanks (sing. *birkah*).
2. Rain-water ponds (sing. *māʾijl*)³¹.
3. Wells (sing. *b'ir*).
4. Permanent water-flows (sing. *ghayl*).

We have noted that the Yemeni section was served predominantly by the first two types of water resource, whilst the third is identified as a common feature of the Saudi section. The fourth type occurs on both sections of the route.

In addition to these water resources, a great number of minor and major rest-stations have been identified, some of which are major towns (such as Raydah, Khaywān, Bīshah, and Tabālah) nowadays, whereas the remainder are now archaeological sites (such as Athāfit, Kutnah, Banāt Ḥarb, and Jurash).

Let us now briefly illustrate the presence of the Khans³² / caravanseries which are generally situated along the course of the Yemeni section of the route. It appears that the area of al-Miṣḥāṭ, approximately 45 km to the north of Khaywān as the crow flies, is the farthest point on the track to which the string of Khans extends.

Due to the fact that these Khans (*samāsir*³³) can all be categorized as of one type in style and design, we shall now point out some general architectural characteristics and the main features of design which are shared in their construction.

1. The location of a Khan is usually chosen near a water-source, and in a slightly elevated position relative to the adjacent ground level.
2. Khans, in general, are comparatively small in size. They consist of only one storey. The common shape of their plans is roughly rectangular. The majority of Khans have been supplied with such facilities as an alcove for cooking and a chamber for storing personal effects and foodstuffs. These utilities open into the central hall.

³⁰ Ibn Khallikān, *Wafāyāt al-A'yān*, II, 314.

³¹ For information about this coinage, see al-Hamdānī, *al-Iklīl*, VIII, 56, n. 141; cf. Beeston et. al., *Dictionary*, 3.

³² The term "*Khan*" is a Persian Loanword in Arabic. For details, see Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, XIII, 146. Cf. also Yāqūt, *al-Buldān*, II, 341.

³³ In the Yemen, the term "*Samsarah*" is used in lieu of Khan. This term is Persian in origin. See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān*, IV, 380, s.v. "samsar".

3. Various shapes and sizes of locally-hewn blackish stones form the main construction material.
4. Arches, both round and pointed, are widely used in the construction of these Khans.
5. Each Khan has been provided with only one entrance, and gate-steps are built across each entrance.

We understand that the Khans were in existence in Ṣanʿāʾ as early as the time of Ibn Rustah, that is, in the 3rd / 9th century. It is believed that certain Yemeni Imams, such as Aḥmad b. Al-Manṣūr, d. 1006/1597, and the Imam al-Mūʾayyad, d. 1053/1643, ordered the construction of certain Khans³⁴.

A further feature of archaeological interest discovered on the Saudi section is the "Mosque of Khālīd". This is the only mosque mentioned by the Yemeni poet Aḥmad b. ʿĪsa al-Radāʾī (d. 3rd / 9th century), the composer of the *Urjūzah*, which is the earliest published piece of writing focusing wholly on the description of the entire length of the course of the route³⁵. Al-Hamdānī, in his turn, clarifies al-Radāʾī's verses by adding that "the Mosque of Khālīd is situated at the foot of al-Thuwaylah. It has short walls; and it is roofless³⁶". Nowadays, this small mosque is still known to the local inhabitants by this ancient appellation. It presently demonstrates exactly the same design and construction as that described by al-Hamdānī.

As far as we are aware, there is no data given by either Arab geographers or historians regarding the actual inland road over which the commander, Khālīd b. Al-Walīd, and his troops marched when they were despatched by the Prophet Muḥammad in 10/632 against Ibn al-Ḥārīth b. Kaʿb of Madhḥij in the vicinity of Najrān³⁷. We may nonetheless suggest that Khālīd b. Al-Walīd and his warriors might have taken the Highland route on his march from the Hijaz to Najrān. Since the Mosque of Khālīd is situated approximately 90 km to the south-west of Najrān, it might indeed have been marked out by this commander in order to commemorate that event. However, the present circumference of the mosque (15 x 21 m.) seems too small communally to have accommodated the men of Khālīd's army, who numbered four hundred.

The fieldwork undertaken on the Yemeni section of the pilgrim route yielded no examples of either Arabic rock- or milestone-inscriptions; the same is not true of the Saudi section. A total of three hundred undated Arabic rock-inscriptions were recorded. They were collected from areas which, if not traversed directly by the Saudi section, are at least in its vicinity. They have been engraved into the rock faces overlooking the main course of the Saudi section. Since none of these Arabic inscriptions were dated at the time of execution,

³⁴ Lewcock, "The Building", *Ṣanʿāʾ*, 277f.

³⁵ See al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifāh*, 419.

³⁶ Al-Hamdānī, *Ṣifāh*, 419.

³⁷ Cf. Ibn Saʿd, *al-Ṭabaqāt*, I, 339f.; al-Ṭabarī, *Tārīkh*, IV, 1724f.

our analytical study suggests to that they are collectively dateable between the 1st / 7th and 5th / 11th centuries.

Three milestones were discovered, each of which has a text consisting of two words which state the distance in miles. All of these milestones are located separately in a vast desert area called Zahr, through which the pilgrim route advances. Despite their sideways position when discovered, there can be no doubt that they were originally erected in a vertical position.

In addition to the Arabic rock-inscriptions, it must be stated that pre-Islamic graffiti, including rock-drawings of human and animal figures, were documented in the course of the fieldwork completed on the southern part of the Saudi section. The very presence of these pre-Islamic inscriptional relics confirms, of course, that the route was used by the south Arabian commercial caravans.

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