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AL-‘ULĀ (SAUDI ARABIA): A REPORT ON A HISTORICAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL SURVEY

Abdallah Al-Nasif

Al-‘Ulā is situated 3 km. south-west of the ruins of the Biblical Dedan, which, lying as it did on the main route connecting the south of the Arabian Peninsula with the countries of the Mediterranean, became one of the most important centres in northern Arabia. It retained its position as such until the period of the Nabataean rule of Al-Ḥijr in the first century B.C. The Nabataeans then diverted the trade route from Dedan so that it ran 15 km. to the east of it. The decline and fall of Dedan followed, and al-Ḥijr, under the classical name of Hijra, lying 18 km. north of Dedan, became the main centre of the area.

When the Romans overthrew the Nabataeans in A.D.106 and the trade route was once again changed, this time from land to sea, Al-Ḥijr declined. The classical Arabian writers tell us that the main city in the area during the pre-Islamic and the medieval Islamic periods was Qurḥ, known also as Wadi al-Quṣrā, situated at a distance of one night's journey south of al-Ḥijr. During the thirteenth century, with the fall of the Abbasid dynasty and the spread of unrest throughout the peninsula, Qurḥ declined, and eventually even its name was forgotten. Al-‘Ulā then became the chief town in the area, and so it remains to this day. The valley is no longer known as Wadi Dedan or Wadi al-Quṣrā, but as Wadi al-‘Ulā.

Hence there are three archaeological sites in the valley: the ruins of Dedan, known as al-Khurayba; the ruins of al-Ḥijr or Hijra, known as al-Ḥijr, or Mada'in Ṣāliḥ; and the Islamic site, known as al-Mābiyāt, or al-Mibyat, which has been identified by myself as that of the ruins of Qurḥ (see Arabian Studies V (1979), pp.1-19). A number of Europeans have visited the area, the first of whom was Charles Doughty in 1876. The most recent visit was that of the expedition of the Institute of Archaeology of the University of London, in 1968. This is the only expedition ever to have visited the site of al-Mibyat. The most detailed study of the area was made by the French priests, Jauussen and Savignac, who visited the area three times in the years 1907, 1908 and 1910 respectively. They studied the remains at al-Khurayba and al-Ḥijr and collected a large number of Libyanite, Minaean, Thamudic and Nabataean inscriptions. Accordingly, it was their work that came to constitute the basis for all further study and research in the history of the area.

In spite of the work of historians in the area, it seems clear that the historical picture is still incomplete. Indeed, it is certain that fresh materials need to be brought to light. It might well be thought that such material cannot be made available without excavations, and indeed it is true that excavations would provide new sources of study and food for thought. However, the fact is that al-‘Ulā has not so far been the subject of a complete archaeological survey; there are a number of sites as
yet unexplored, and there is also a whole network of ancient underground water-channels (ganāt) which have not so far been studied, despite the fact that without that network the area would probably have remained completely deserted.

With these considerations in mind I decided to visit the area, and, in the event, the visits which I made between 1978 and 1980, yielded a considerable amount of fresh material found at sites not previously visited. My discoveries stimulated fresh thought and speculation, inspired by the numerous inscriptions, shards of pottery, buildings and miscellaneous objects which I found there. As regards the ganāt network, I undertook a practical survey during the winter of 1978, of five of the ganāts at al-‘Ulā. So far as I am aware, this was the first survey ever to have been made of the ganāt systems in Saudi Arabia. The survey included an examination of the topography of the sites and an ascertainment of the levels of subterranean passages of several of the ganāts. In addition, I carried out a survey of the lands irrigated by certain of these ganāts, and the ‘ilmān, or sunclocks, regulating times of water distribution.

The regulations covering the ganāt system at al-‘Ulā, including ownership, exploitation, maintenance and methods of distribution of land and water, are unique. They have been handed on from one generation to the next, and, with the exception of several basic laws, form an unwritten code. Written laws were first put into writing and submitted to the Saudi government in 1942 for purposes of official authorization. Most of the ganāts have, however, now fallen into disuse, and so the customary law has become unnecessary, and, being unwritten, it will eventually be forgotten completely. The sunclocks are also decaying and have not so far been photographed.

For these reasons my own reaction is a strong feeling that there is a pressing need for these ganāts to be surveyed and photographed, and for the ganāt laws to be committed to paper. The record of such laws can only be based on verbal accounts from members of the community who were involved in the ganāt organization, one of whom was my own father. (I should mention in passing that I myself have taken part in work in the ganāts and therefore have first-hand working experience). As for the basic regulations which were set down, I have been able to obtain a copy of these from the records of the now dissolved Committee of ‘Urf (customary law and agriculture at al-‘Ulā) and I have translated these into English and included them as a supplement to a PhD thesis which I shall shortly be submitting to the University of Manchester.

There are a number of villages and agricultural towns in the northern Hejaz, such as al-‘Ulā, which also relied on ganāt for their water supply. As nothing has ever been written about these ganāt systems, I have been obliged to visit several of the towns and villages, such as Yanbū’ al-Nakhl, Khaybar, Medina and even Dūmat al-Jandal in the far north of Arabia. Although Dūmat
al-Jandal is not in the Hejaz, it is, like al-‘Ula, a very ancient settlement. My purpose in all these visits has been to gain some understanding of customary law. What they have shown me is that these systems, like other systems throughout the Islamic world, differed considerably from the system obtaining at al-‘Ula.

May 1981.