From James Mandaville

Charles Lothian’s letter in the July 1989 issue of the Geographical Journal, differing with H. St John Philby’s conclusions about the Hadida meteorite craters and legendary Wabar, prompts me to the defence of our illustrious former Fellow with some additional observations.

Having examined the sites referred to on three occasions, first in 1965 when a considerably larger area of the crater field was clear of sand than in recent years, I would submit that Philby’s conclusions are still valid. There is no indication at Al-Hadida of any former settlement, nor is there any around the neighbouring wells of Faraja and Umm Al-Hadid, used by Jarabi’s section of the Al Murrah tribe. Nor are those wells remarkable in depth (c. 16 metres) or construction; one of them was dug by Philby’s guide, others in the preceding two generations. They are like scores of other wells in the Rab’ al-Khali and thousands elsewhere in Arabia quite unassociated with ancient settlements or kingdoms. Considerably more spectacular diggings arise from ordinary Bedouin enterprise, and Al Murrah are famous as well diggers. Only some 15 years ago, for example, Salih ibn ‘Amir al-‘Irq of their Ghufran section created a new well, at-Tawila, 130 kilometres south of al-Hufuf on the edge of the Jafura. His hired labourers worked for three months, using only hand picks and bars, to sink a shaft through solid limestone to a depth I measured as 72.3 metres.

Yaqut (who, incidentally, nowhere in his long article ‘Wabar’ in the Mu’jam refers to ‘fire’ or a ‘thunderbolt’ or to ‘Ad ibn Kin’ad’s 90 concubines’) lists several traditional locations for ancient Wabar. These include areas ‘between al-Shihr and San’a’, ‘between Hadramawt and al-Subub’, ‘between Najran and Hadramawt’, and ‘between the land of Mahra and al-Shihr’. These are places in far southern Arabia, consistent ecologically with the traditions of Wabar as an extensive, well-built and highly fertile kingdom—not one of tent-dwelling nomads. They also remind us of Bertram Thomas’ discovery of old caravan tracks, on the far southern edge of the Rub’ al-Khali, that by Bedouin tradition once led to Wabar. Perhaps Yaqut’s most interesting variant is the one placing Wabar ‘between the sands of Yabrin and al-Yaman’, which could fit the crater site and suggests that the Wabar legend was associated with it at a very early time. It is just as suggestive, however, of other points farther to the south-west, including known pre-Islamic ruins such as those at Qaryat al-Faw on the edge of the sands. Philby himself suggested the latter based on Bedouin accounts.

Yaqut’s and other early writers’ accounts are based on other sources and ultimately on oral tradition, almost surely not on first-hand knowledge of any Wabar site. The basic story of the destruction of ‘Ad’s kingdom is of course known from the Qur’an, where the primary instrument seems to have been a great wind.

Bedouins or other early travellers would quite naturally take the Hadida craters as works of Man; their folk astronomy was sophisticated but hardly dealt with the physics of meteorite impacts. Even today near circular remains in desert Arabia are generally safely attributable to Bani Adam, especially when strewn with evidence of ‘fire’. It would take little more imagination to invoke a theme deeply rooted in Islamic and folk tradition and to ascribe the crater ‘ruins’ to ‘Ad ibn Kin’ad or his clan. The same has happened with other imposing ruins in Arabia, such as the Hellenistic caravan town of Thaj to the far north-east. Such an association with Al-Hadida could have arisen a thousand or more years ago.

Philby was wrong on one point; his belief that the meteorite he carried back was the big one called ‘the iron as big as a camel’. In 1965 we removed from the site two nickel-iron meteorites now at King Saud University, Riyadh. One is a beautiful, oriented iron weighing 4500 pounds; the other, irregular, tipped the scales at 470. In 1967 we found 30 pounds of oxidized meteorite fragments near Umm Al-Hadid, suggesting that the name of those wells was of immediately local origin.

Mr Lothian misreports Philby’s views in saying the explorer held the ‘opinion that there was no truth in the ancient legend . . . of Wabar’. Philby did not say that; he in fact explicitly bequeathed the Wabar search to ‘younger men or women’ (Empty Quarter, 175). His point was that Wabar was not to be found at Al-Hadida, and probably not elsewhere in the Rub’ al-Khali. Speculating about the location of Wabar still provides good sport, but hard facts must also be given their due. Based on today’s much increased knowledge of the area—and apart from our scratchings the sands have been combed rather well by oil prospectors—Philby’s conclusion still appears to be sound.

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