OMAN AND EASTERN ARABIA.

BY

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The growing importance of the Persian Gulf region in Asiatic politics is no longer a secret. Since the entrance of Great Britain through commerce and diplomacy early in the nineteenth century the Persian Gulf had become more and more an English lake, and the bulk of its foreign trade, amounting to about $45,000,000 annually, was mostly in British hands. In the opening years of the present century, however, her supremacy has been challenged by both Russia and Germany—the former power striving for supremacy in Persia and aiming to secure a harbour at Bunder Abbas, the latter, through the Turkish concession of the Anatolian railway, planning an overland route to the East for German commerce. This road will have its terminus at Kuweit or Kozima, a splendid harbour on the Arabian coast at the head of the Gulf, while the total length of the line from the Bosphorus to the Gulf would be about 1,750 miles. The completion of this line would bring Busrah within ten days from Berlin and Bombay fifteen days from London.

The strategic importance of Eastern Arabia was thus described in a recent number of the *Pall Mall Gazette:*

> It is the political future of Arabia and its people which forms the dominant keynote to the further development of the near Eastern question, now extending from the Caucasus to the Indian Ocean, and definitely embracing the great trade routes of the future between Europe and the East. Its position both on the flank of Persia and the sea route to India confers upon it a strategic importance which it is impossible to ignore in the struggle for supremacy in this part of the world, and there can be little doubt is destined to bring the country and its energetic inhabitants into a position of far greater prominence than they have enjoyed for centuries since the days of their victorious Caliphs.

Sixteen years of residence and travel in Arabia have afforded me opportunity to study the country and its inhabitants.

Eastern Arabia consists of the Turkish province of Irak or the river country, Hassa with the island group of Bahrein, and the region known as Oman. The latter is bounded on the west by the great unexplored tract of nearly 150,000 square miles area, known on our maps by the Arabs as *Robaa-el-Khali*, the empty abode. Although this vast area offers opportunity for geographical exploration and perchance archæological discovery, it is of no commercial importance, as most of it is utterly desert and uninhabited. Historically, politically, and geographically, Oman itself has always

been the most isolated part of Arabia, because, as far as outside communication with other Arabs is concerned, Oman was for centuries past an island, with the sea on one side and the desert on the other. The people are more primitive than Arabs in general. Only Maskat has its eyes open to the wide world; that is the only port in all Oman where steamers call. Ottoman rule never extended to Oman even under Suleiman the Magnificent; nor did any of the earlier caliphs long exercise their authority there. The whole country has for centuries been under independent rulers called Imans or Sultans. The population is wholly Arab or Mohammedan, and derived from two different stocks, the Kahtani and the Adnani—rival races at feud or war with each other.

The Jebel Akhdar region, or southern Oman, has been explored

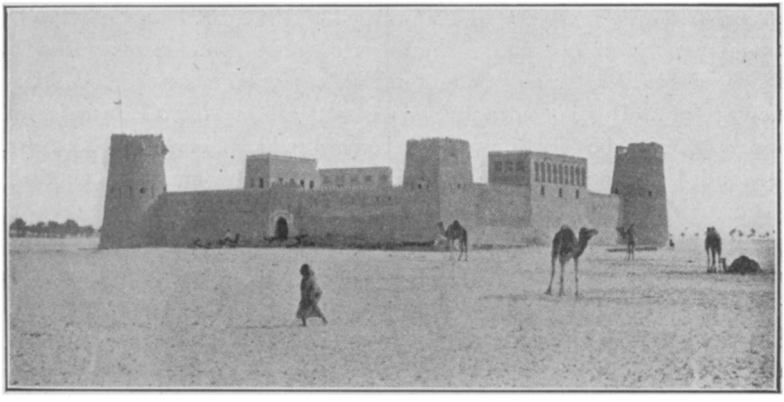

FIG. 1.—CASTLE OF THE SHEIKH AT ABU THABI, OMAN.

in part by Wellsted, Miles, Carter, and others. Northern Oman and the so-called Pirate coasts are less known. It was my privilege, while engaged in missionary labour, to visit this region on three journeys. The first was in May, 1900, when I crossed the Persian Gulf to Shinas and Sohar, on the Gulf of Oman, by way of Wadi Hitta. Afterwards, in February, 1901, I travelled along the Pirate coast, from Abu Thabi to Sharka; and the last journey, in May, 1901, was right across the north of Oman from Abu Thabi to Sohar by way of Bereimi. Abu Thabi (abu Debi) is the first town of importance on the so-called Pirate coast, and was settled some years ago by the great Beni Yas tribe. The town is under an independent ruler, Sheikh Zaid, whose influence is wide and strong over all the tribes inland as far as Jebel Akhbar. He is, however, as are all the tribal chiefs of the Oman coasts, under British protection.

The population of Abu Thabi is not over 10,000, and except a dozen Banyans from Sind, is wholly Arab or Negro (domestic slavery is still prevalent in all Eastern Arabia). With the exception of a dozen houses and an imposing castle, the whole town is built of date mats, and extends along the sea coast for nearly two miles. The only industries of the town and of all the coast are pearl-fishing and drying fish for export. On Ptolemy's map of Arabia this region is named Ichthyophagoi; and Niebuhr wrote, "Fishes are so plentiful on the coast and so easily caught as to be used not only for feeding cows, asses, and other domestic animals,

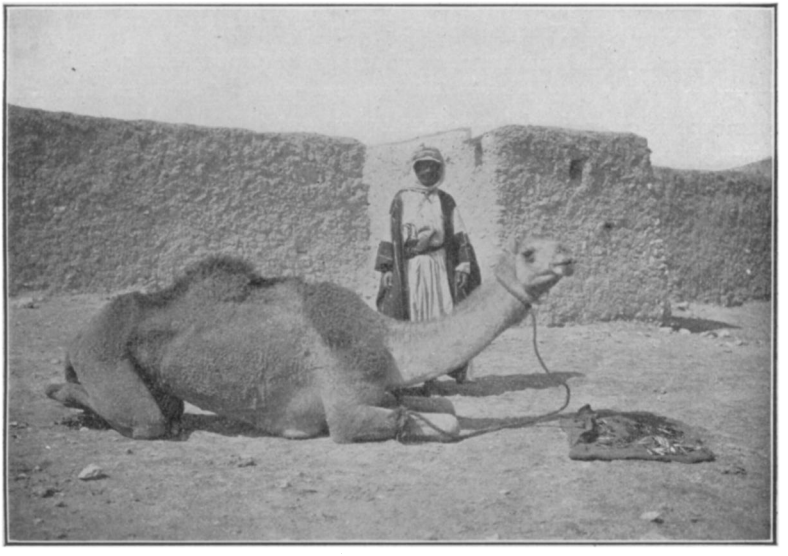

FIG. 2.—CAMEL EATING DRIED FISH AND DATES.

but even as manure for fields." His testimony is true to-day, and it is curious to see camels kneel down to their diet of dried fish!

About 80 miles north-east of Abu Thabi is the real metropolis of northern Oman, the growing town of Debai. In the "Persian Gulf Pilot" (edition 1890), the population of this town was given as 5,000; it is at least three times as large now. Between Abu Thabi and Debai the coast is desert, and so flat that a hill 225 feet high is called Jebel Ali (the high mountain). This is the only landmark on the coast, and visible 17 miles. The town of Debai has many houses built of native stone, and well plastered on the outside; the harbour is an inlet or *khor*, and the town is built on both sides of this, so that ferry-boats ply between continuously, and the

place has a business-like aspect quite unusual in Arab towns. At present the rate of growth is such that Debai will soon outstrip all the other towns.

Sharka is still a Wahabi centre, although this Moslem sect has lost a great deal of its old fanaticism. The people of Debai, however, consider their neighbours heretics, and make sport of a rival bazaar where tobacco is still sold *secretly;* other Arabs are all inveterate smokers. Formerly this entire region was noted for the savage ferocity of its inhabitants. Forty years ago Sir John Malcolm wrote: "Their occupation is piracy, and their delight murder; they are monsters." Thanks to the British trade and influence in the Persian Gulf, these fanatic Wahabis have become tamed, and they have settled down in many places to begin agriculture. Young date-plantations are a sign of the progress of civilization, and commerce is crowding the nomad spirit out.

From Sharka the coast continues flat and sandy until you reach Ras-el-Kheima. The low, sandy coast with coral-rock formation, so characteristic of all the Arabian littoral from Kuweit down the gulf, ceases here and gives place to rugged headlands so well described by Moore in Lalla Rookh as:

> o'er the Sea
> Of Oman beetling awfully;
> A last and solitary link
> Of those stupendous chains that reach
> From the broad Caspian's reedy brink
> Down winding to the Green Sea beach.

Jebel-el-Harim, one of the chief peaks of these headlands, is 4,470 feet high, rugged, precipitous, and as naked of vegetation as are most of the peaks of Ruus-el-Jebel.

Ras-el-Kheima, the largest of the northern towns, was identified by Bochart and Sprenger as the Raamah of Scripture (Gen. x. 7, Ezek. xxxvii. 22), while the Greek geographers speak of it as Regma Polis. There are said to be ancient inscriptions on the rocks in the region back of the harbour, but I did not visit the spot. There is coffee-house talk in Eastern Oman concerning a mysterious race of light-complexioned people who live in the mountains somewhere, shun strangers, and speak a language of their own. I think I have found the clue to this strange story that has puzzled travellers to Maskat. At Khasab, near Ras Musandum, live a tribe whose speech is neither Persian, Arab, nor Baluchi, but resembles the Himyaritic dialect of the Mahras described by Carter (Journal Bombay R. A. Soc., July, 1847). This language is used by them in talking to each other, although they speak Arabic with

strangers. Their complexion is, however, like that of the average Arab, and their religion Islam. Perhaps this is the tribe the rumours refer to and they are a remnant of the aborigines driven northward by successive Semitic waves of immigration reaching the highlands of Oman.

It may be of interest to note our mode of travel in this primitive country, where there are no beasts of prey but where every one goes armed for fear of his neighbour. I quote from my diary:

> We travelled with as little baggage as possible, to avoid awakening cupidity on the part of any Arabs we might meet. There were only four camels in the caravan, and all our belongings in two Bagdad-leather boxes. At noon we rested under the shade of blankets stretched over our boxes; there was no vegetation large enough for shade. It was over 104 Fahr. in the shade one day, and the water in the skins took on a fine taste after hours of jerking on the camels. On our halts we made soup from condensed vegetables, and had dates for dessert, but our companions were afraid of tinned provisions; they much preferred boiled lizards and rice. There are two species of lizards in Eastern Arabia—one is called dabb (*uromastix acanthinurus*), and feeds only on desert vegetation; the other is called waral (*Weranus arenarius*), and eats insects, birds' eggs, etc. The latter kind is considered forbidden but the former lawful food. . . . Our guides proceeded mounted, but with their rifles loaded and cocked; then followed the baggage-camel, to which mine was towed in Arab fashion by hitching the bridle of the one to the tail of the other; in like manner, my companion rode his beast fastened to the milch-camel, followed by its two colts. We were not troubled by the heat at night, but during the day it was intense; and it was refreshing to come to an oasis where water burst from a big spring, and trees and flowers grew in luxury.

In the mountain passes of Oman the roads run almost invariably along the wadi-beds. Sometimes these are sandy water-courses with huge boulders; again deep, rocky ravines or broad, fertile valleys. Vegetation is fairly abundant. Tamarisks, oleanders, euphorbias, and acacias are the most common trees and shrubs.

The population of Oman is estimated at nearly one and one-half million. Very few of the tribes are nomadic; the greater part live in towns and villages along the wadi-beds, and were it not for continual feuds between the tribes, agriculture would prosper, as irrigation is nearly everywhere possible.

Every peasant goes armed, and one does not even pass a greybeard riding a diminutive donkey without seeing a rifle, or at least a crooked dagger at his side. Yet, in spite of continual warfare, they cultivate every fertile spot assiduously, and raise all sorts of crops—barley, wheat, sesame, vegetables, and even tobacco. In one village we rested on the wide threshing-floor, where the old-fashioned "threshing instrument with sharp teeth" lay idle. The Oman plough is better than that of Mesopotamia, where they use a crooked stick with a sharp prong to cultivate the sandy loam. In this mountain region the law of the survival of the fittest has given the peasants skill in making a real coulter of iron, fitted to a heavy frame and braced to an upright handle of three bars set at right angles to the frame.

Maskat, the capital of Oman, and its metropolis, has been so often visited and described that it can be passed over.

Northwest of Oman the peninsula of Katar—low, barren, and unhealthy—projects itself into the Gulf, while the coast northward as far as Kuweit is known as El Hassa. Between Katar and the coast is the island group of Bahrein. The main island is about twenty-seven miles in length from north to south and ten miles in breadth. The total population of the group is about 60,000. The one great industry that makes these islands of importance is pearl-diving. The total value of pearls exported from Bahrein alone is estimated at one million five hundred thousand dol-

FIG. 3.— ROCK FORMATIONS AND CAVES AT EL JARA.

lars annually, and more than 900 boats are employed in the fisheries. The most primitive methods are used in diving. The divers wear no elaborate diving-suit, but descend clothed only in their *fitaam* and *khabaat*. The former is a pince-nez or clasp for their nostrils, made of horn; the latter are metal thimbles or "finger hats" worn on the fingers of both hands to protect them in gathering the pearl oyster. A full account of these pearl fisheries can be found in my "Arabia, the Cradle of Islam," pp. 99–104. The Bahrein Islands came under the protection of Great Britain in 1867, when Sheikh Isa, the present ruler, was appointed. The trade of the islands has greatly increased, and to-day this is the most important

depot for export and import for all Eastern Arabia. It is the gateway to the interior, the threshold of which is the Turkish province of Hassa.

The usual route from Bahrein to Hassa is by way of Ojeir, a roadstead or landing-place for the caravan trade. In October, 1893, and again during the winter of 1905, I took this road to reach the city of Hofhoof, which is the capital of the province and held by a Turkish garrison. Ojeir, although it has neither a bazaar nor a settled population, has a fair harbour, a mud-fort, and an imposing Custom-house, and is therefore the landing-place for the immense quantity of Indian rice and Manchester piece-goods shipped by way of Bahrein into the interior of Arabia. Caravans of 500 or 1,000 camels leave every fortnight.

The country for some miles inland from the coast is desert, with ridges of sand and veins of greenish limestone cropping out at intervals. On the second day at noon you reach the oasis of Hassa, the palm forests which surround the capital and its neighbouring villages, giving it, as Palgrave says, "the general aspect of a white and yellow onyx chased in an emerald rim."

El-Hofhoof dates back to 570 A.D., and was for a long time the centre of the Carmathian sect which devastated large districts in Arabia during their fanatic raids. A relic of the old-time empire still remains in the celebrated *tawila* or long-bit, a copper coin in the shape of a horseshoe nail and worth about two cents!

But the whole of Eastern Arabia has suffered for centuries from the two enemies of progress—excessive taxation of agriculture and tribal warfare, so that on every hand there is little sign of progress. The country could be a veritable paradise under a stable government. It is a land of streams and fountains, subterranean but inexhaustible; and even now, with primitive schemes of irrigation, has wide fields of rice and wheat and extensive date-orchards.

The northern boundary of this fertile tract is at Katif, also a Turkish port. From Katif northward all the way to Kuweit the coast is barren and in the hands of the Bni Hajar tribes, who know neither Turk nor Arab as brother in their predatory warfare.

Kuweit, on the Gulf a little south of the river delta, will, in all probability, before long rise in importance, and be as well known as Suez or Port Said. It has the finest harbour in all Eastern Arabia, and is an important town of from 10,000 to 12,000 inhabitants. Here will probably be the terminus of the proposed railroads to bind India and the Gulf to Europe by the shortest route. The whole country round about being practically desert, the place is entirely

dependent on its trade for support. It possesses more buggalows (sailing vessels) than any port in the gulf; is remarkably cleanly; has some very well-built houses, and an extensive dockyard for

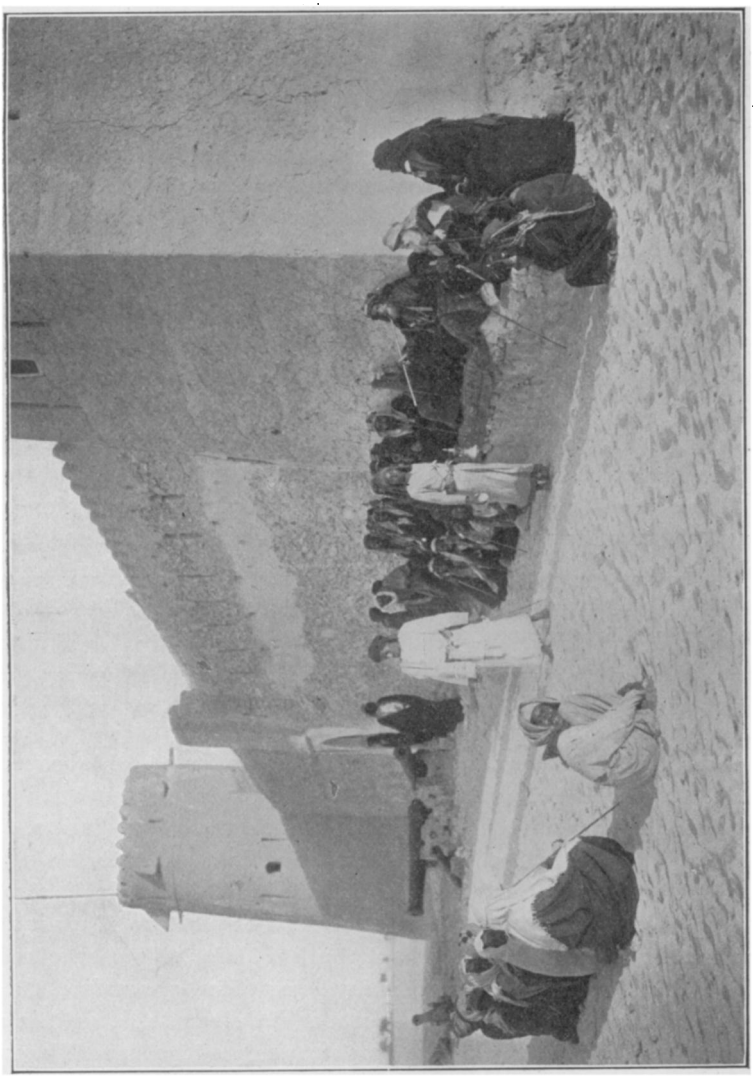

FIG. 4.—ARAB SHEIKH HOLDING COURT AT ABU THABI.

boat-building. The town and tribes are nominally under Turkish subjection, although protection is the better word, and it is rumored that Kuweit will soon be as much in the hands of the English as is Bahrein.

Ancient Busrah, near the present site of Zobeir, was founded in 636 A. D. by the Second Caliph Omar as a key to the Euphrates and Tigris. It reached great prosperity, and was the home of poetry and grammatical learning, as Bagdad was the centre of science and philosophy. After the twelfth century the city began to decay, and at the conquest of Bagdad by Murad IV, in 1638, this entire stretch of country fell into the hands of the Turks. Then the present city took the name of Busrah. Later it was in the hands of the Arabs and Persians, and from 1832 to 1840 Mohammed Ali was in possession. Under the rule of Midhat Pasha, Governor-General of Bagdad, the city of Busrah arose in importance, partly because of the Turkish Steam Navigation Company, which he promoted. But it was a dream-life. English commerce and enterprise aroused the place thoroughly, and the whistle of the steamships has kept it awake ever since the Suez Canal opened trade with Europe by way of the Gulf.

The two Turkish provinces of Bagdad and Busrah are known commonly by the name of Mesopotamia. It is called by the Arabs El Jezira, and was formerly limited to the land lying between the two rivers and south of the old wall by which they were connected above Bagdad. From this point to the Persian Gulf the district was and is still known as Irak-Arabi, to distinguish it from the Irak of Persia. Commonly, however, the name of Mesopotamia (Mid-River-Country) is given to the whole northeastern part of Arabia. It has a total area of 180,000 square miles, and presents great uniformity in its physical as well as its ethnical characteristics. Arabs live and Arabic is spoken for three hundred miles beyond Bagdad as far as Diarbekr and Mardin; but we limit our description to the region between Busrah and Bagdad, including the delta at the mouth of the rivers.

Near Bagdad the two giant rivers, after draining Eastern Asia Minor, Armenia, and Kurdistan, approach quite near together; from thence the main streams are connected by several channels and intermittent water-courses, the chief of which is the Shatt-el-Hai. At Kurna the two rivers unite to form the Shatt-el-Arab, which traverses a flat, fertile plain dotted with villages and covered with artificially-irrigated meadow-lands and extensive date groves. As far up as Bagdad the river is navigable throughout the year for steamers of considerable size. It is entirely owing to the enterprise of English commerce and the Bagdad-Busrah steamship line that the country, so gloomily described by Niebuhr in 1792, and even by Chesney in 1840, has been developed into new life and

prosperity. Even Turkish misrule and oppression cannot do away utterly with natural fertility and productiveness; and if ever a good Government should hold this region it would regain its ancient importance and double its present population.

Two features are prominent in the physical geography of this region. First, the flat, almost level, stretches of meadow without any rise or fall, except the artificial ancient mounds. The second is the date-palm. The whole length of the country from Fao and Mohammerah to the country of the Montefik Arabs above Kurna is one large date plantation, on both sides of the wide river.

Some idea of the immense importance of this one crop in the wealth of Mesopotamia may be gained from the statement of an old English merchant at Busrah, that "the annual date-harvest of the River-country might conservatively be put at 150,000 tons."

What is to be the future of this great and wealthy valley, which once supported myriads and was the centre of culture and ancient civilization? Will it evermore rest under the blight of the fez and the Crescent? The one curse of the land is the inane Government and its ruthless taxation. The goose with the golden egg is killed every day in Turkey—at least robbed to its last nest-egg. The shepherd tribes, the villages, the nomads, the agricultural communities, all suffer alike from the same cause.