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THE DHOFAR DISTRICT

Lieut.-Commander C. Craufurd, R.N.

THE seaport of Dhofar, a little Arab village on the southern coast of the Arabian peninsula, is in lat. 17° 1′ N. and long. 54° 5′ E. This port, which we term Dhofar, is undoubtedly the town of Al Hafa in that most interesting book 'Southern Arabia,' by Mrs. Bent. At the time of our visit to Dhofar we had not read Mrs. Bent's book, and the town had been distinctly referred to as Dhofar by the Sultan of Makalla; and also by the Dhow Nacodah, to whom he had referred us for further information. We recollect that in our conversation with that Nacodah he sometimes called the place Hafa; but the two names Hafa and Dhofar are not so distinctive as the English rendering suggests. Upon consideration of this small geographical discrepancy, it seems probable that the town, which is losing its trade importance, is therefore losing its descriptive term "Al," and is now generally referred to as Dhofar, the town of that district. Our ship was on patrol in the neighbourhood of this small seaport town. After many days' patrol off a sandy and dust-laden coast, the sailing directions in the 'Red Sea Pilot' sounded extremely attractive. There was mention of a freshwater khor—the Arabic term for a small coast inlet—and fresh water suggested green vegetation. After five years' continuous service off the bleak Arabian coast, the sight of green vegetation would be particularly grateful to a sun-scorched ship's company. We arrived off Dhofar anchorage in the first morning mists of an April dawn. The shore soundings shelved gradually; our ship had a draft of 15 feet, and we were able to come to an anchorage very close to the shore. In the less-frequented Arabian anchorages there are many advantages in being able to select an inner anchorage very close to the shore. Should a ship's boat get into difficulties upon a surf-ridden shore, the ship's signal staff can keep the matter under close observation, and the ship can render prompt assistance. A matter of more importance is that a small ship may make the most of her size, if anchored close enough for the shore-natives to note her guns, and to thereby realize that unfriendly receptions are apt to meet with prompt reprisal. We will, however, hasten to add that our personal experience of unfrequented Arabian seaports is sufficiently extensive to permit the assertion that the sea-coast Arab is far more hospitable than travellers' tales may suggest.

On our visit to Dhofar we had no reason to anticipate any unfriendly reception from the natives; but when a white man sets foot ashore for the first time, misunderstandings are within the bounds of possibility, even in Arabia, where hospitality is enjoined by the religions of the country. Our ship crept slowly shoreward, carefully sounding her way in.

The chart of the Dhofar coast is of small scale; many of the Arabian coasts are coral-fringed. The lead gives very short notice of approach to coral; the sun was not yet high enough for the easy detection of banks; and a southerly surf was rolling on to a lee shore. It was therefore advisable to use every seamanlike precaution in approaching Dhofar anchorage for the first time. We were able to approach within 15 cables (1½ sea miles) with an anchorage of 6 fathoms. It is possible that we should have found a perfectly safe anchorage even closer in, but the possibilities of an increasing swell or a blow from seaward rendered undesirable any closer proximity to a lee shore. We dropped anchor in good holding ground of coral sand, veered to five shackles, got a second anchor ready for dropping, rang off our engines, and waited.

The rudiments of good behaviour suggest that you should not enter your host's house before you have been invited to do so. We have found that the same principle holds good with the sea coast from Koweit to Ras El Hadd; from El Hadd to Manhali, and right up from there to Akaba. We wait for our host to call upon us, and if he proves too dilatory, we send an interpreter ashore to say that we intend to visit the ruling Sheikh later in the day. We have always found our Arab hosts are most obliging; with rare exceptions, which only serve to prove the rule, we have received hospitality where we have asked for it; and on the very few occasions when we have been looking for trouble, we have always found our Arabs surprisingly prompt and ready to supply all necessary concomitants. On this occasion we had hardly finished satisfying ourselves regarding the safety of our anchorage and surrounding depths, when our signalman reported a boat as coming off from the shore. We had coffee prepared according to the customs of the land, not attempting spiced coffee flavoured with cinnamon or ginger and sweetened with honey, but merely strong black coffee well sweetened with brown sugar; and proud of our knowledge, we were also prepared to offer well-sweetened tea flavoured with mint.

While our coffee was boiling we watched our guests approaching in a quaint-looking surf-boat. As seamen, we were very interested in their boat and the way she was handled. Ashore a boiling surf was rolling up an open beach. No naval-built boat could have landed with safety, and it would have taken very expert handling to have forced an English-built whaler through the heavily breaking combers; yet here was a boat some 40 feet in length manned by eight cheery Arabs, pulling and singing their way to the ship. She had also a coxswain, and one passenger very self-conscious of the fact that he was wearing the village sword of state. He stepped on the gangway, nervously gave a salaam to nobody in particular, tripped over his state sword, and would have met irreparable disaster had not the saving hand of a Sudanese slave in the boat steadied him and saved the representative of Dhofar from an unpremeditated plunge. Our

Arabic interpreter was handy to the gangway, and heartened our visitor with the sound advice that he had better come up the gangway barefoot, as he did not look quite at home with the sandals that he was wearing. We conducted our guest to the captain's cabin. The boat's crew made their boat fast to the gangway, and also crowded toward the cabin unwilling to miss an item of the novel experience. There was not room for all of them in the small cabin, but six of them crowded in, although there were only seats for three. The senior members used the chairs, sitting up stiffly and somewhat ill at ease on furniture that they can never have seen before. The remainder squatted down and felt at ease. The coffee was served, and with it we opened a tin of mixed biscuits, which always go down well with our Arab guests. The sugar-topped biscuits are especially popular, and a full-sized cracknel is a useful gift for the talkative member, while it is apt to cause a certain amount of innocent amusement to the audience.

Our chief guest said that he had been sent by the Sheikh of Dhofar to offer us the hospitalities of the port. He regretted that he had not brought any fat sheep as presents, and excused himself by remarking that his sheep were out on pasture; we had arrived and anchored too swiftly for his hospitable intentions. He had, however, brought us off some coconuts. This surprised us, for though we are tolerably well acquainted with all the coast from Yembo right round to Koweit, this is the first time that we have found a coconut grove on the Arabian littoral. We thanked our guest for his kindly hospitality, and informed him that we intended to return the Sheikh's call in about two hours' time. We asked the Sheikh to provide his boat and boat's crew, as our own boats were not well suited for surf-landing. We then bade good-bye to our guests, asking them to return a boat to us later. The same surf-boat arrived in some two hours' time, with practically the same crew, and we had more leisure to examine the quaint craft. She was manned by six Arabs; four were pulling, one was steering, and the other shouted. They promised to land us and to bring us back to the ship without a wetting. As the swell was now rolling in more heavily, to us seamen this seemed to be no mean undertaking.

The boat was a crank-looking craft pointed at both ends, some three or four feet in height from keel to gunwhale: a typical Hadrami surf-boat. In these craft each oar is made by lashing or nailing a piece of boarding to a six-feet wooden staff. The board is generally fashioned as a diamond-shaped blade, but sometimes the blade is rectangular, which looks still more quaint and slovenly. The loom of the oar is of a wood which seems somewhat akin to ash. The span of the blade varies according to local tastes, and the breadth of the span does not appear to bear any relation to the local swell and surf conditions. The boat was of an interesting type, and well repaid the few moments of inspection which we gave to her. She was about 40 feet long, made with light

planking of some native wood. She was very well ribbed and had four thwarts in her, two for the oarsmen, and the other two short bow and stern thwarts built well into the eyes of the boat. She was carvel built, her planks being seamed with coir rope of native weaving. Although she was so well ribbed, she had not a nail to her; every plank was sewn to its rib and to its neighbour plank, the coir caulking rendering the seams fairly watertight. Still the boat did leak very generously. While she lay alongside the ship, one of the Arabs kept her fairly dry with a very efficient bailer made of an unshredded half coconut shell. She looked a fairly strong boat as she bobbed and curtsied to the rising swell, but when we jumped into her we came near to disaster, for we had not realized how crank and light she really was. The coxswain was very solicitous in assuring us that we were quite safe as long as we sat quite still. His solicitude came to us rather quaintly with our twenty years of sea experience.

The old coxswain grasped his tiller and took charge of his boat in a very efficient way. We rowed ashore to a typical Arab chanty which served to preserve the stroke, while it extolled the physical charms of a lady named Nur en Nissa, the Light of Womanhood. Considering the very primitive oars, the slanting stroke so wasteful to power, and the general makeshift haphazard outfit, it was surprising to note the amount of way the Arabs could give to their boat. They could not have kept up with a British racing crew in an English naval galley, but they could compete very favourably with the average crew of a service whaler. Their manner of working through the surf was exceedingly clever, and evidently the outcome of long experience. A naval officer with many years of experience could hardly have brought a service boat ashore, the swell was so heavy, but these Arabs brought their boat in without shipping a drop of water. They worked their boat in on the general principles taught us by experience, pulling strong with the surge and easy to the backwash. But they preferred to keep the outer swell, which did not break, slightly on the quarter instead of dead astern. Usually the Hadrami surf boat goes in bows on, and then turns round when near the inner line of breakers, so that she shall have her bows to seaward before grounding. This manœuvre is very interesting and requires a lot of judgment. The bowman slips overboard when the boat is just on touching, and the boat is slewed in the calm pause after that last heavy breaker which is often termed the "seventh wave." On this occasion the swell was too heavy. The boat was driven inshore bows on, riding gently in on the crest of the inshore wave. When the boat was only eighteen inches deep with the surge and half dry with the retreating swell, the stern sheetman jumped out and assisted to steady her. We were able to jump out on to the wet sand, almost dry shod. The Hadrami is always a noisy fellow in a boat, but making due allowances, it seemed that the difficult operation of landing a surf boat was carried out with care and with no confusion.

MAKALLA, HADRAMAUT

CAMELS DRAWING WATER, DHOFAR

RUINS OF THE TEMPLE, AL BILAD, DHOFAR

We were ashore at Dhofar where hardly a white man had been before, and it may be natural to inquire what had brought us out to this out-of-the-way little spot. There were rumours of an El Dorado land, and we had heard that the site of ancient Ophir lay in this neighbourhood. We expected to find a few Himyarite stones, and intended to take home a suitable specimen as a present from the Sheikh of Dhofar. Tales had reached us from Dhofar *viâ* London that we should find abundance of grain stored in the district and merely awaiting a market. No Englishman had recently been to the place to substantiate or destroy the rumours, and the latest English reports which Aden had received from Dhofar were somewhat out of date for these strenuous days. There the rumours lay to weave or to dispel. With the confidence born of inexperience, we proposed to spend some eight hours of our patrol in settling the problem with a positive answer. We need not go into much detail about our visit to the Sheikh. It was typical of a dozen such interviews we have paid in little-known Arabian ports; indeed it was less interesting than many a past interview, for there were not the slightest pretensions of anxiety, and no motives for hostility or treachery, motives which may sometimes seem to be present when misunderstandings are likely to occur.

A whitewashed stone house, the only one in the village, surrounded by a wall some nine feet high, is guarded by a heavy gate, and the entrance to the Sheikh's house has many blind corners where dirty work could be perpetrated if necessary. The guest is received near the house by a guard armed with many quaint rifles, richly sheathed swords, and dangerous-looking daggers. Sometimes the whole guard and any onlookers who care to come will accompany the visitor into the Sheikh's room. At other times the Sheikh with his secretary will receive the visitor, and the guard is left outside peeping through the door. A cup of coffee, a courteous interview, and offers of the hospitalities and resources of the port are the main ingredients of an interview with the Sheikh of any small Arab seaport. We made inquiries for the ruins of ancient cities, queries regarding the resources of the land, and requests for a suitable escort to accompany us for a long walk, as we felt very cramped after being cooped up for many days in a small ship. Our host's replies were most courteous; we might go into the country: his son would accompany us. The oldest ruined city was about one hour's journey away, but we should find no Himyarite stones in these parts; they were a day's journey further east, in the neighbourhood of Merbat. There was no objection to the camera provided we could guarantee its effects to be harmless.

A light south-westerly breeze, the first of the monsoon winds, was blowing from seawards and kept the thermometer down to between 75° and 80° Fahrenheit: very cool for a day on the Arabian littoral. We started out a cheery party about twenty strong with the Sheikh's son, a young man of about twenty-two, courteous and very ready to assist us in our attempts to gain knowledge of his difficult language.

About half a mile from the Sheikh's house we came to a deserted town. A few inhabitants still used the ruined houses, the rafters of which were in good repair. This town was far larger than the present village of Dhofar; in its prime it may have been about the size of Makalla, the largest port on the Hadramaut coast. Our hosts offered no explanations as to why the town had died. Their answers seemed to suggest that the place was well inhabited up to about fifty or a hundred years ago, and that it died mainly through lack of trade. Mrs. Bent mentions that in 1889 Al Hafa was the main port of the Hadramaut and Dhofar frankincense trade. Since that date the incense export has been diverted to Makalla, which has brought its harbour up to date with a fine jetty, a well-regulated customs service, and good warehousing. From Makalla roads have been laid to the interior. Makalla has captured the trade of Dhofar, Seihut, and other small sea-coast towns, but in our opinion there are ample resources for the development of these smaller ports, as well as for Makalla trade. Deserted coastal ports are fairly common along the coast. The neighbouring khor may silt up somewhat, which would rob the town of its main *raison d'être*. A passing plague would place the finishing touch to the life of the town.

In these districts, where limestone is easily obtainable, houses are readily built. If plague attacks the town it is a simple matter to leave the infected place and start a new settlement, for there is plenty of room, and no ground-rent in Arabia. This dead seaport seemed to suggest that the land is perfectly capable of supporting a larger population, but that there is no live trade incentive to draw people to this land. The Sheikh's son pointed out to us that the inhabitants of Dhofar are perfectly satisfied with the smaller means of life. They have the powerful Sultan of Maskat to the eastward. The British protectorate lies westward. There is therefore no anxiety from the restless tribes of the interior. If they began to trade they would merely be exciting cupidity. They have plenty of ground to cultivate, and water is easily obtainable. The climate is good, and the simple life has its many attractions which the Arab well understand, while the European may busy himself gathering riches and their phantom pleasures. During a four or five hours' walk we had plenty of leisure to note the force of the simple philosophy of our Arab friend.

As we walked through the deserted city we met an Arab who was hard at work digging a pit with the aid of a crowbar. He had dug about 7 feet, and was already standing in 18 inches of water. We tasted the water and found it very salt, but the Arabs assured us that when he had dug a few feet deeper the water would be quite sweet and very plentiful. They told us that the water came down from the hills which we could see rising some 2000 feet with a gentle incline from the shore to their crests some 12 miles distant inland. It seemed to us quite probable that the water which we had tasted was a filtration from the sea, and past

experiences of thirsty journeys reminded us that the natives of Arabia can exist on very salt water, and will be quite ready to extol its excellence to unappreciative Europeans. However, about 2 miles further on we came across a big well with camels drawing the water and irrigating fields of jowari. If the water were from the hills, it would indicate a stretch of fertile land from the crest of the hills right down to the shore-line and extending the whole length of the hill range. On the other hand, if the water was merely sea filtration its quality might improve, but its quantity would rapidly diminish further inland. A saline water would be good enough for slight jowari crops, but would not produce a fertile land. We found the well was wide mouthed, but not very deep; the water-level about 12 feet from the land-surface, and the well itself was not above about 20 feet deep.

A steady stream of water was being drawn by the camels. There were some steps cut down from the ground to the water-level. We descended and took a long draught of deliciously cool sweet water. There was no doubt that the water came from the hills. Taking into account the lie of the land, the gradual trend from the shore to the hill crests, the known length of the coastal hill ranges, and the information supplied to us by the natives as regards road possibilities, it seemed that in the Dhofar district there lies a fertile land of some 40 miles from Bander Reisut to Merbat, with an average depth of some 12 miles. The whole of this presumably fertile region is practically virgin soil uncultivated for lack of incentive. At either extremity of this district there lies a fairly good undeveloped harbour. The harbour of Bander Reisut should be well sheltered from the south-west monsoon and quite easy of approach. The harbour at Ras Merbat should provide safe anchorage from the north-east monsoon. Navigation reports suggest that these surmises are correct, but we have no personal knowledge of either Ras Merbat anchorage or of Bander Reisut. The jowari which we saw, standing about 7 feet high, seemed a good heavy crop, and likely to be fully ripened by early May. The natives informed us that the second crop would be a better one, though it only grows to a height of about 18 inches.

While inspecting the jowari crop we made inquiries regarding any grain stored in the country. They knew nothing of such stores, and did not give credence to any such rumours. Had there been any knowledge of stored grain it seems fairly certain that we would have heard of the matter, for some of our companions were among the head men of the village. They would have been perfectly alive to any trading interests which might be opened up by our inquiries. There seemed a good deal of common sense in their comments: "Why, in the name of Allah, should man trouble to grow and to store grain when every season gives a satisfactory harvest?" There is no trade incentive in these regions, and the requirements of simple life are easily satisfied.

The ruins of Al Bilad have been imagined the site of ancient Ophir. The town lay some 4 miles distant in an easterly direction. There was no road, but the going was very level and the way was often shaded by coconut palm groves.

We found Al Bilad in complete ruin, clustering round a little hill some 100 feet high, on which there was probably a fort and Sheikh's palace, for there were still the remnants of a thick wall, and the ruins of buildings suggested strongly built houses with well-founded basements. At the foot of this hill a litter of stone represented the town, which may have held some 3000 or 4000 inhabitants, but we hesitate before offering this estimate, for our knowledge of Arab housing problems is strictly limited. In our imagination we picture a bygone town girt by a pretty fresh-water khor. Along the banks of this khor there may have been many date-palms. The surrounding country must have been very prosperous with its coconut palm groves and its rich green jowari.

We had seen a few gardens of cotton plant, and in the days of an older civilization Dhofar district may have appreciated the value of its cultivation; but at present very little cotton is grown there, and we are not qualified to express any opinion as to its quality.

"Come and see the temple," remarked our host, as he watched with interest our awkward handling of a tripod camera. We asked him how he knew that it had been a temple. "I don't know," he replied, "but tradition holds that this was their temple." Tradition is probably correct, for there still remained a fair collection of round columns and the pillars of a gateway. We looked very carefully, but we were unable to find any inscriptions. The whole place is now merely a ruined desolation of tumbled stones. But the size of the cut stones and the proportions of the broken pillars showed to us that we were gazing on what once must have been a well-built town, with what may be the remnants of a fine temple, still in better preservation than the other buildings. We had not then read Mrs. Bent's able description of Al Bilad. The ruins offered us no clue as to their age. Such inscriptions as we did find were at the head and foot stones of a graveyard just west of Al Bilad. The inscriptions were not elaborate. That graveyard appeared to us to be of more recent date than the ruins of Al Bilad. Either our inexpert observations are at fault; or, as is quite probable, the neighbouring Arabs use such carved stones as ornaments to their modern graveyards.

We did not investigate the khor, but our friends informed us that it is still quite deep enough for a full-sized dhow: about 7 feet deep during the dry seasons, but with the entrance somewhat silted.

They had tales of a larger fresh-water khor in the neighbourhood of Murbat, and of more extensive ruins with many Himyarite inscriptions in those regions. Had we been acquainted with the book 'Southern Arabia' we would have made more extensive examinations of Robat and the outlying districts of Al Bilad, but with the very limited information which was

then to hand, we felt convinced that we would be unlikely to find any inscriptions of real interest or of scientific value. This much is certain, that Al'Bilad was built when the Dhofar sea-coasts supported a larger and more flourishing population of Marwari tribes than may be found in these modern times.

We asked them what use they made of the coconut. They roof their huts with the palm-leaves, use the shells for spoons and basins, and weave a little rope for their own use; but they were not alive to the possibilities of trade in copra and coir. Their coconut palms do not seem to be irrigated to any extent. The young tree is watered about once a week, but it seems that its tap-root strikes to the water, which is sufficiently plentiful at less than 7-feet depth. In Dhofar a tree yields about six years after planting. The coconut grove fringes the shore to a depth of about half a mile. Further inland is devoted to jowari, but very little of the ground is under cultivation, for the needs of the inhabitants are very modest.

With cordial farewells to our friends of Dhofar, we re-embarked in the surf-boat; but working the boat out again was a difficult matter. We were carried aboard when the boat was just afloat and bumping slightly. It saves confusion if the passenger knows the best method of being carried aboard for embarkation. A lusty Arab squatted down. We placed one leg over each of his shoulders and steadied ourselves by putting our hands to his head. He was able to carry us steadily to the boat against the strong surge of the breaking surf, disengaging easily as we climbed into the boat. The boat was worked out through the breaking swell with her bows slightly aslant to the surf. It was surprising to see how the boat rose to the crest of an overhanging and almost breaking wave; an English service-built boat would be too heavy to work out through the surf which we encountered at Dhofar. It was not till we were through the surf that we had time to note the details which had occurred during that rather exciting interval. Of four oars, two were broken during the passage, a very usual incident. It is seldom that the boat works through without at least one oar being broken. Some of the men use a thole-pin to their oars. Some of them merely lash the oar to the top strake with light palm-leaf twine. If the oar does not break, either the thole-pin snaps or the palm-twine bursts.

CTESIPHON AND THE PALACE OF KHOSROES

WE have received from Lieut. H. F. S. Butt-Gow two photographs (here reproduced) of the ruins of the old palace at Ctesiphon in which the great Khosroes or Anushirwan, of the Sassanian dynasty of Persia, held his court in the sixth century A.D. It is of interest to compare them with the third photograph, taken in 1864 and presented to our