

The origin of the word "Arab"

Hitherto, the first actual use of the word Arab in history is to be found in an Assyrian inscription of 853 B.C., commemorating the defeat of a mutinous chieftain, called Gindibu the Aribi during the reign of king Shalmaneser III (858-824 B.C.). Arabs are then mentioned quite often, until the 6th century B.C. as Aribi or Arab that indicates a vassalage to the Assyrians. The first Greek who is accredited to have acquired some geographical knowledge was Homer, who flourished in 1000 or 800 B.C. He has referred to the Syrians under the name Arimi (the Biblical, Aram) and the Arabs under the name of Erembi. The place-name Arabia occurs for the first time in Greek writings. Herodotus (484-425 B.C.), followed by most other Greek and Latin writers, extended the term Arabia and Arab to the whole peninsula and everything in it, even including the eastern desert of Egypt between the Red Sea and the Nile. References to the Arabs, in addition, are also found in the anonymous "Periplus of the Erythraean Sea" (between 95 A.D. and 130 A.C.). The word Saracen, first used in Greek literature too, is a transcription of an Arabic word meaning "easterner." As for the Arabs' use of the word, it occurs for the first time in the ancient epigraphical material originating in southern Arabia, where it is clearly used for Bedouin. In the north, the word is used firstly in the 4th century A.D., in one of the oldest surviving records of the language that became classical Arabic.

Further account of the Arabs comes in the 10th chapter of Genesis of the Old Testament, which names the descendants of Noah, whose elder son, Shem is regarded as the ancestor of the Hebrews, Arabs and Armaens, - the speakers of Semitic language. But the term Arabs is not explicitly mentioned in Genesis. It is however suggested that the "mixed multitude" (Hebrew, erev) mentioned in Exodus (xii, 38) as having accompanied the Israelites into the wilderness from Egypt may be for Arabs. According to "Dictionary of the Bible" (ed. by James Hastings, New York, 1898, 1st vol., p. 135), "The employment of the name Arab for an inhabitant of any portion of the vast peninsula known to us as Arabia, begins somewhere in the 3rd century B.C., though the only trace of it in Old Testament is in the 2 ch., 21, where the Arabians that are near the Ethiopians' would seem naturally to refer to the neighbours of the Habasha, whence there are grounds for placing in the extreme south of Yamen." The word arabia is expressly given to this country in the Old Testament (I Kings x. 15) when describing the visit of the Queen Sheba to Sololmon, which took place 1005 B.C. We also find the word arabah in Deut. i. 7 and ii. 8. Some writers hold that the village called Arabah, situated near Tehama, may be the name for the whole peninsula, an opinion scarcely deserving the least notice.

In the Bible, the name Arab is the first word used in the second book of Chronicles (xvii, 11) to refer to nomads from the east bank of the Jordan river in the time of king Jehosophat (900-800 B.C.), such as "...and the Arabians brought him flocks, seven thousand and seven hundred rams, and seven thousand and seven hundred he-goats."

The word arab or arabah is probably derived from a Semitic root related to nomadism. In the Arabic language, the word arab (derived from i'rab), means "those who speak clearly" as contrast with ajam (those who speak indistinctly). In Holy Koran, the word arab has never used for the country of Arabia, but characterised the residence of Ismail, the son of Abraham as an "uncultivated land." In the time of Ismail his place of residence had no name, therefore, it was given the name of an "uncultivated land." In the Old Testament, the word midbar is used for Ismail's home, meaning a desert or a barren land, which closely corresponds to the Koranic description.

The peninsula was divided by the ancient geographers into Arabia Petraea, Arabia Felix and Arabia Deserta. The Arabia Petraea corresponded to the present Hijaz and eastern Najd. Arabia Felix to Yamen and Hazarmawt and Arabia Deserta comprised the rest of the country. Arab Peninsula (jazirat al-Arab) is situated in south-west Asia, embosomed with sea waters on its three sides, i.e., the Red Sea in the west, the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman in the east, and the Arabian Sea in the south; is considered to be a largest peninsula in the world with an area of about 1,230,000 sq. miles, i.e., about one third of Europe, or almost six times bigger than France, ten times that of Italy and eight times bigger than Switzerland. Geographically it is an extension of the Sahara desert. It is divided into various parts of which Hijaz, Najd, Yamen, Hazarmawt and Oman are most important. The

whole land is almost barren. The climate is extremely hot in summer and the coastal tracts are among the most torrid regions.

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