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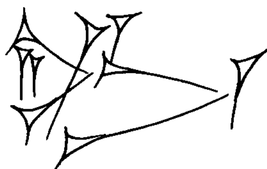
*Chapter 1*

# THE SETTING

The name Dilmun appears on some of the earliest written documents in the world (Fig. 1.1). These are clay tablets inscribed with a rather experimental version of cuneiform which was to become the dominant script of the ancient Near East from about 3000 BC. The tablets were written in the Sumerian language and were found in a temple precinct dedicated to the goddess Inanna in the great southern Mesopotamian city of Uruk. They are dated to the end of the fourth millennium BC. The contents of the documents are strictly practical in nature; they contain lists of goods, of places, and of officials associated with the temple. The adjective Dilmun is used to describe a type of axe and one specific official; in addition there are lists of rations of wool issued to people connected with Dilmun (Englund 1983: 39). We know that the word refers to a geographical location as it is written with letters ki after it, which are only used when writing place names. Although the early texts provide a number of clues about where Dilmun actually was, it is only recently that it has been possible to be reasonably certain of its location, through the piecing together of clues from many different sources. These sources include archaeological evidence and economic, historical and literary documents. Some of these describe the location directly, some its produce and some tell of the stories associated with it.

The early economic texts give us reliable but limited information. They tell us that, from the start, Dilmun was associated with copper, a commodity which is found only in a limited number of geological conditions. This association provided the first, although as it turned out, rather misleading clue to the location (Englund 1983). Timber, dates and 'fish eyes', possibly the ancient name for pearls, are also mentioned repeatedly in the third and second millennium sources. All these goods, as well as other, more exotic ones, were brought by boat from Dilmun to Mesopotamia.

The later economic and historical texts also provide us with further quasi-geographical clues. The land of Dilmun is variously said to have lain 'in the middle of the



1.1 'Dilmun' in the cuneiform script.The determinative 'ki' is not shown.



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sea', 'in the land of the rising sun', and 'at the mouth of the great rivers'. (For a complete list of references in the Mesopotamian texts see Heimpel 1987.) Other texts associate it with two other countries, Magan and Meluhha, placing it nearer to Mesopotamia than to either of them. Magan is usually identified as the Oman Peninsula and Meluhha as the Indus valley (Gelb 1970). For example, Sargon of Agade, *c*. 2350 BC, claims in a famous inscription that ships from Dilmun, Magan and Meluhha moored at his capital city of Akkad. Much later, Sargon II of Assyria describes Dilmun as lying thirty *beru* from Sumer, in the middle of the sea (Cornwall 1946; Alster 1983: 45–6). This confirms the information gathered from the earlier documents suggesting that some or all of the territory of Dilmun was an island. As a *beru* is usually thought to have been a measure of time equivalent to two hours, it also provides us with an approximate travelling time from Mesopotamia. If we assume that a boat could travel about ten miles per *beru* or two-hour period, we deduce that this island lay about 300 miles from the shores of southern Mesopotamia. As the evidence from the Agade inscription and other similar examples suggests that Dilmun was closer than either Magan or Meluhha, modern Oman and the Indus valley respectively, this distance of 300 miles would fit well.

The literary texts also tell us that the island was notable for its sweet water springs. Bahrain is the largest island in the Arabian Gulf north of Oman, it is roughly 300 miles south of the mouth of the Shatt al Arab and is famous for the artesian springs of fresh water which well up on land and even in the sea. In addition, until recently Bahrain was renowned for both dates and pearls. It also served as an entrepot for the copper mined in Oman so, although no copper occurs naturally on the island, the association with copper in the texts from the Uruk III period onwards can be explained by Bahrain's function as a market. On the basis of all these factors it must be the prime candidate for identification as Dilmun.

The convincing but circumstantial evidence for the identification of Dilmun with Bahrain is further strengthened by one of the few cuneiform inscriptions found on Bahrain itself. It was engraved on a large black stone shaped like a shoe, presumably part of a statue, found preserved in a mosque, and first reported by Captain Durand in 1878. Sadly, it has since disappeared and is thought to have been destroyed in the London blitz. The foot was dedicated to the god Inzak of Agarum by a man called Rimum. This god is referred to in the cuneiform sources as the chief god of Dilmun and the son of the Mesopotamian water god Enki (Alster 1983; al Nashef 1986).

The second millennium literary texts from Mesopotamia add another more romantic dimension to the picture of Dilmun. They describe it as a pure and holy place, a paradise of sweet running water and lush vegetation where the great god Enki impregnated the goddess Ninhursag in one of the Sumerian creation myths (Alster 1983: 54–9). Gilgamesh, the Sumerian hero, also travelled to Dilmun across the sea in his quest for eternal life and it was there that he met with Ziusudra, the survivor of the

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great flood, who was granted immortality by the gods for his role in perpetuating the human race.

There is a curious dichotomy in the picture of Dilmun presented by the literary and economic texts. On one hand, as we have seen, it was known as an important market-place trading in copper and a variety of other staples and luxury goods. On the other it was seen as the pure land of streams and gardens, inhabited by gods and demi-gods. The earliest written reference we have to the Paradise Dilmun dates to the early second millennium and so is much later than the references to it as a source of copper and wood. The myths themselves are probably much older than this because it is generally accepted that such stories had a long oral history before they were finally codified and written down (Finley 1954). We can guess, then, that the mythical picture of Dilmun may have evolved in the early third millennium. Significantly, this is a period when there seems to have been little direct contact between Dilmun and southern Mesopotamia.

This lack of actual contact would make it easier to explain how such an idealized picture might have evolved. It is hard to see how hard-nosed merchants and sailors would have painted such an unreal picture if they had been in regular commercial contact with the islands. On the other hand, it is possible to imagine that rumours of Bahrain's springs and vegetation might have been picked up by the traders travelling south down the coast of Arabia from the fifth millennium onwards and that by the time direct commercial contacts were established with the islands, towards the middle of the third millennium, the paradise image was already deeply entrenched in mythology. A somewhat similar situation can perhaps be seen in nineteenth-century Western Europe where Jerusalem, which in much of the medieval period was inaccessible to the West, was seen as a synonym for perfection. By the late nineteenth century enough travellers had visited the city to know that the reality was very different, but its mythical status was too well established to be dented and remained a powerful metaphor. A similar situation may explain the references to an idyllic Dilmun in the early second millennium.

The number of textual references to Dilmun in the Mesopotamian sources, in successive periods of its history, acts as a rough and ready guide to the importance of the region as a trading partner. (The small numbers of tablets involved *in toto* also illustrates the limited and probably unrepresentative nature of the written evidence.) References in the Uruk III texts, *c.*3200 BC, are very few relative to the total number of tablets which exist from this time. This probably reflects the fact that Anatolia was Mesopotamia's major source of metals at this time and that Dilmun copper was not of major economic significance. Raw materials of all sorts seem to have travelled down the Euphrates through the network of so-called Uruk colonies situated in northern Syria and southern Anatolia and this, rather than the sea route up the Gulf, was the primary supply route (Algaze 1993). The number of references to Dilmun then increases very

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slowly from the second quarter of the third millennium and the name also begins to occur on other types of text, such as royal building inscriptions. By the middle of the millennium, it is also found on tablets from the Syrian city of Ebla (Pettinato 1983). In the Agade period we find the first references to Magan and Meluhha, while Dilmun occurs infrequently. In the Ur III period Dilmun is totally eclipsed by references to Magan for a period of about one hundred years. By the early second millennium the situation is reversed and there is a relatively large number of both commercial and literary references to Dilmun, while Magan disappears. This is the period when trade between Dilmun and the southern Mesopotamian kingdoms of Isin and Larsa was at its height. Slightly later in the early second millennium there are one or two references to Dilmun in archives from Mari, on the middle Euphrates, and Assyria in the north, although few are found in southern Mesopotamia itself.

It is a useful exercise to compare the picture presented by the textual evidence with that derived from the archaeology of the Arabian Gulf. The fairly straightforward picture of gradually intensifying contacts between Mesopotamia and Dilmun from the late fourth millennium onwards, briefly interrupted by closer ties between Mesopotamia and Magan in the Ur III period, is not matched by the material remains. In the first place, finds of fifth- and early fourth millennium Ubaid pottery from Mesopotamia on the main Bahrain island show that relations between the two regions predate the first written evidence. A little later, when we have already seen that there is unambiguous evidence from the economic texts of the later fourth millennium for contact between southern Mesopotamia and Dilmun, the islands of Bahrain seem to have been virtually uninhabited. This period in Mesopotamia is represented by the Uruk and Jemdat Nasr periods, but pottery of this type is virtually absent from Bahrain (Larsen 1983b: 77) and the evidence for any contact with Mesopotamia is very thin. When the indigenous pottery sequence is better defined some local wares may be found to plug the gap, but even if this were to happen it would seem that Bahrain was only inhabited by small groups of fishermen or farmers during this early period. It can hardly have been the centre of a trading network.

The islands only seem to have been extensively inhabited in the second half of the third millennium, despite the fact that the texts suggest steadily increasing contacts from about 2600 BC. The final anomaly is provided by the fact that, in the late third millennium, when the tablets only refer to trade with Magan, Bahrain appears to be more prosperous and in closer contact with Mesopotamia than Oman (Magan) was.

A number of possible solutions have been proposed to explain away some of these discrepancies. It seems possible that the name Dilmun, when it first appears in the late fourth millennium, was a generalized term meaning something as vague as 'Lands far away to the south'. Some support for a more generalized definition of Dilmun comes from a text from Ebla, dating to the middle of the third millennium, in which Subir, a poorly defined area to the north of Sumer, is contrasted with Dilmun, perhaps an

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equally ill-defined area to the south (*ARET* 5: 7 11.4–12.2). It would be reasonable to suggest that it was only in the later third millennium, when commercial contacts became more regular and more important, that sailors knew the seas well enough to be able to subdivide the great area to the south, known as the Lower Sea, into different geographical parts, each of which then received its own name. This is certainly the time when Magan and Meluhha were recognized as separate entities and their names first appear on the tablets.

A less radical proposal would be that the name Dilmun referred to a rather more specific area than that suggested above, but to something more extensive than just the Bahrain islands. This is an attractive idea, especially as the east coast of Arabia, immediately adjacent to Bahrain, shows some evidence of contacts with Mesopotamia in the late fourth and early third millennia just at the times when Bahrain itself was only sparsely inhabited. The two areas are, of course, very close to each other both geographically and culturally. By the late third millennium the material cultures of the two were almost identical. If the evidence from the Eastern Province and Bahrain is taken together as representative of a single culture, the archaeological and the textual evidence can be made to agree much better.

The idea that the name Dilmun referred to what is now the Eastern Province, as well as to Bahrain itself, is not new. The suggestion was first made by Burrows and Deimal in 1928 and has been discussed regularly since then (e.g. Cornwall 1946; Alster 1983). In addition, both archaeological and textual evidence suggest that in the first third of the second millennium, when Dilmun was at its most important, the name had even wider implications and included the then newly settled island of Failaka off the coast of Kuwait (Fig. 1.2). Here too, the material culture is identical with that on Bahrain and the Eastern Province (chapter 6). There is some slight evidence to suggest that the name may even, sometimes, have embraced part of the Iranian coast as well, although very little is known of the archaeology of this area. Objects and pottery from early explorations at Bushire are identical to pieces from Bahrain, but this may reflect no more than trading links (Howard-Carter 1972). Further support for the suggestion that the same geographical name might have been used for both the islands and parts of the mainland comes, by analogy, from the early Islamic period when the name Bahrain also covered large areas of the mainland (Rice 1984).

A third possibility is that the name Dilmun may have been applied to different locations at different times. This is undoubtedly true of the name Meluhha which in the third millennium was given to the Indus valley, but from the middle of the second millennium probably described Egypt, Nubia or Ethiopia (Alster 1983: 41). There is no evidence to support this suggestion in the case of Dilmun, but it should not be forgotten.

The above paragraphs present an interesting case study which demonstrates the importance of bringing together evidence from both written and archaeological

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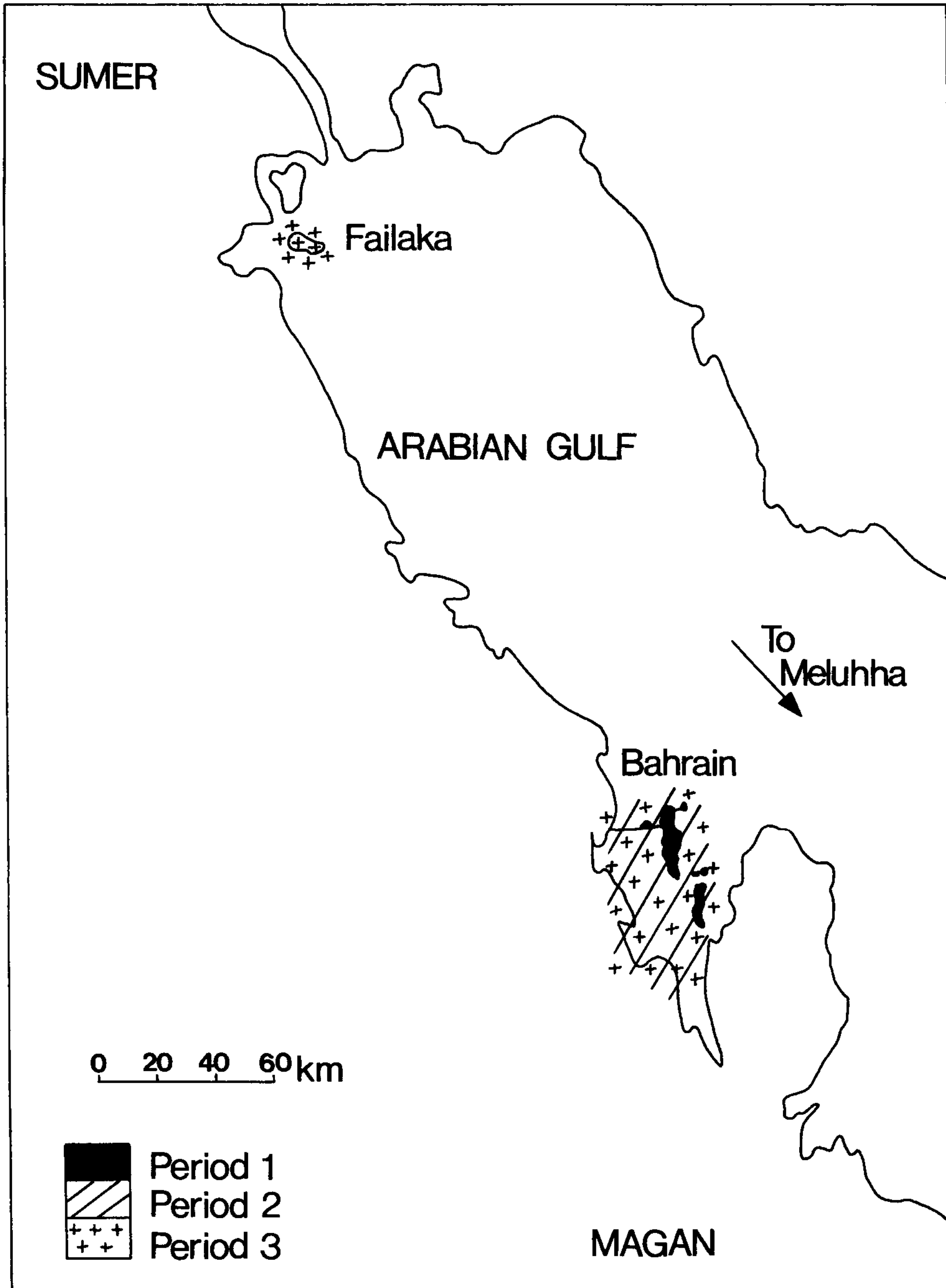


1.2 Map showing extent of Dilmun in the Early Dilmun period and the location of Magan.

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sources if an accurate picture is to emerge. Each category of evidence would have given us an internally consistent picture which, when placed in a wider context, is shown to be misleading. In summary, it seems most likely that the name Dilmun described an area whose size varied at different times in its history and which became better defined as time went on. Contact with Mesopotamia predates the first written records and when the term Dilmun first appeared it was probably being used to describe anything lying south of the Shatt al Arab, including the Eastern Province of Arabia and perhaps even copper-producing Oman. Later, in the third millennium, it was applied to the Eastern Province, and to the Bahrain islands, and eventually to Failaka as well. The changes in the nomenclature probably reflect the state and accuracy of Mesopotamian geographical knowledge and the frequency of contacts. They may also reflect movements in the focus of power within Dilmun from the Eastern Province to Bahrain, and finally to Failaka, as the various internal political centres waxed and waned. In spite of all this change there are certain characteristics which remain constant. Dilmun always lay athwart the vital route linking southern Mesopotamia with the copper of Oman and the luxuries of the Indus valley; copper and timber were always the main commodities traded and the prosperity of Dilmun derived from this trade.

The Sumerian vision of Dilmun as a paradise land heavily influenced early studies of the archaeology of Bahrain. Taken in conjunction with the enormous numbers of burial mounds reported by the early European travellers, it encouraged a picture of the island as a huge necropolis to which people were brought to be buried in its sacred soil (most recently see Lamberg-Karlovsky 1986). The analogy was frequently drawn with the desire of the devout Shia Muslim to be buried in the sacred cities of Karbala and Najaf in southern Iraq. This interpretation was encouraged by an apparent lack of settlement sites contemporary with the burial mounds.

It is only in the last thirty years that settlement sites of the same date as the mounds have been positively identified by survey and excavation. More detailed studies have also shown that the burial mounds were built over a very long period of time, lasting into the Hellenistic age. It had previously been assumed that the vast majority belonged to the Dilmun period itself. These two new pieces of information demonstrate that there is no longer any need to postulate an influx of corpses from outside the island in order to account for the number of burials known. The newly identified towns and villages show that enough local people lived on the island to fill the graves which were built over a period of perhaps two thousand years. The graves should now be seen as the burial places of the islanders themselves throughout its long history and the idea of Bahrain as a necropolis can itself be buried.

Other myths have also accumulated around the islands of Bahrain. Early scholars, influenced mainly by the writings of Herodotus, regarded them as the homeland of the Phoenicians. This view is now also seen as fallacious, and little evidence can be

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produced to support it. (The evidence has been extensively reviewed by Bowersock in his 1986 article.)

Today, with more accurate evidence available to us, we are able to move towards a clearer picture of the history of Dilmun. We can begin to trace some of the fluctuations in its fortunes, to postulate the reasons for them, and to assess its significance in relation to its better known neighbours. The new data, available from excavations and scientific studies of many kinds on the material remains recovered from the excavations, taken in conjunction with textual evidence, underline the unique nature of the culture which emerged in the Arabian Gulf in the middle of the third millennium. In terms of its material culture Dilmun owed remarkably little to the great 'High Civilizations' with which it had important trading contacts and it quickly developed its own distinctive character. This book will attempt to trace this development, using, where appropriate, contemporary evidence from Mesopotamia, Iran, Oman and the Indus valley to try to understand the events described.

## THE PHYSICAL SETTING

The first step in this process must be to look at the physical conditions in which these events took place. Greater Dilmun, by which is meant Eastern Arabia and the area from Failaka in the north to Bahrain in the south, lies in a desert region with a hot and humid climate. Temperatures in the summer months can reach well over 40° centigrade with 100 per cent humidity and more. The fundamental physical characteristics seem to have changed relatively little in the last 8,000 years or so with the exception of a number of important changes in sea level, which can be charted in outline, although local sequences differ and remain to be clarified (Delongeville and Sanlaville 1987). Generally speaking, in about 6000 BC the sea level was considerably higher than it is today. This seems to be true for the whole of the west side of the Gulf, although tectonic movements at its northern end mean that the pattern there is not always the same as it is in the latitude of Bahrain. It has been suggested that this is the time when Bahrain became separated from the Arabian mainland.

The high sea level in about 6000 BC was followed by a general transgression. The raised beaches representing this high level are marked, both on Bahrain, and in the Eastern Province, by sites belonging to a period contemporary with the Ubaid period of Mesopotamia. These would originally have been on the shore, which seems to have been about two metres above today's high tide mark. A second peak in sea levels can be seen in the first half of the third millennium, though this did not reach as far inland as the surviving Ubaid-related sites. It may have destroyed others lying further to seaward. At the Qalaʿat al Bahrain on the north coast of the island, excavators found third-millennium sherds of Umm-an-Nar type, under a layer of water-laid deposits which seem to have been laid down at this time (Højlund and Andersen 1994). This

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secondary high was again followed by a transgression which continued into the second millennium and which allowed large scale settlement on the low-lying island of Failaka for the first time. A smaller rise marked the middle of the second millennium, to be followed by a steady decline into the Hellenistic period to levels below those of today.

These changes in sea level do not seem to have been the result of major climatic changes nor of dramatic changes in the amount of precipitation. Even so, they almost certainly had a considerable effect, through hydrostatic pressure, on the availability of fresh water from the underground aquifers on which the region has always relied for its water supply and which are now seriously depleted (Larsen 1983b: 16–20). At periods when the sea level was higher than today there is some evidence to suggest that fresh water was accessible in areas such as the island of Dalma off the coast of Abu Dhabi, which today have no springs. An important Ubaid period settlement has been found on this island and is being explored by a team from the London University School of Oriental and African Studies (Dr Geoffrey King pers. comm.). The wider availability of springs may be explained by Masry's remark that 'The water table in the major underground aquifers of Eastern Arabia is shown to have very likely been affected by eustatic oscillations' (Masry 1974: 156).

It seems that during the Holocene, rainfall in the northern Gulf region has always been below the 300 mm per annum necessary for reliable rain-fed agriculture. Cultivation has only ever been possible in limited oasis areas with fresh water where simple irrigation techniques could be employed, but these oases were more extensive, at least on the Arabian mainland, until the late fifth to early fourth millennia. Larsen (1983b: 144–5) quotes evidence to show that there was an extensive lacustrine system, joined by small rivers in the Hofuf area which survived at least into the late Holocene. These more hospitable conditions certainly allowed for the development of one large village site of fourth-millennium date here (Adams *et al.* 1977 site 208/38). In addition to oasis cultivation, catch crops of cereals can be grown in wet years. On Bahrain people alive today recall cereals being grown south of the Rifaʿa ridge in the playa which developed north of the Jebel Dhokan. (See photographs in Yateem 1992: 90–1 of Shaikh Salman, the father of the present ruler, inspecting the wheat crop on the island, and of a harvest celebration in west Rifaʿa in the 1940s.) Such catch crops, by their nature, could not always be relied on to provide a major contribution to the diet.

The produce of the land may have been restricted by climatic conditions, but the sea provided a rich resource, with abundant fish and shellfish which could be fed to animals and humans. Fish and seaweed could also be used as fertiliser and fodder. In addition to the edible molluscs, shellfish offered other resources and pearl fishing has a long history in the Gulf. Pearls have been found on archaeological sites in the region from the Ubaid period onwards and fishbones usually outnumber the mammalian remains on archaeological sites. The land, however, was rich in non-agricultural resources. Copper from south-east Arabia was probably the most sought after

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commodity from the area, but stones such as flint, diorite, carnelian and a variety of softstones were also much prized and the sea was a vital link in distributing them. Before the advent of metalled roads and efficient wheeled transport, communications and the movement of heavy goods was far easier by water than by land. Such goods travelled north to Mesopotamia which lacked them all and it was control of the distribution networks which was the key to prosperity in the Gulf. It was its position across this major economic artery and its status as a port of trade, rather than its own natural resources, which gave Dilmun its wealth.

## THE EASTERN PROVINCE

The Eastern Province is a long, thin, eastward-sloping coastal strip of territory stretching over 750 km. It is largely composed of marine terraces and salt flats overlying the rocky Arabian shield. A number of wide, shallow wadis with subterranean aquifers which water the two great oases of Qatif on the coast, and al Hasa inland to the south, run from the central highlands to the sea. Al Hasa is the larger of the two and covers approximately 180 sq. km of cultivated land. It is possible to grow cereals as well as date palms, fruit trees and a wide variety of vegetables in these areas. The wadis also provide access from the coast to central Arabia and its resources. These include deposits of softstone or chlorite which are said to lie south of Riyadh. Another important route lies to the north where the Wadi Batin has always been a major thoroughfare for groups travelling between Arabia and southern Mesopotamia. It has even been suggested that some of the earliest inhabitants of southern Mesopotamia may have entered the country by this route (Piesenger 1983). The Wadi Batin remained an important tribal migration route until the present century (*Naval Intelligence Iraq* 1944).

Although the configuration of the coastline must have changed considerably as the result of the changes in sea level referred to above, it seems safe to suggest that there were always a very limited number of good anchorages on this stretch of the Gulf. The bay east of Qatif and south of the important third-millennium island site of Tarut was probably one such harbour and retained its importance into the nineteenth century when the *Arabian Gulf Intelligence Manual* of 1856 described it as a safe anchorage for small boats (Fig. 1.3). Palgrave sailed from here to Bahrain in 1863 and the journey took three days (Palgrave 1883). The *Manual* also mentions a harbour a little further south at Uqair, fourteen miles from Bahrain and at the mouth of one of the important wadis giving access to the interior via al Hasa and Hofuf. There is no direct evidence for a Dilmun period site here, but it seems possible, given the distribution of sites in the interior, that one existed, linking Bahrain by the most direct route with the interior of Arabia.

Such harbours would have been vital links in the early communication networks. Some idea of the time needed to transport goods and people can be gained from ethnographic evidence dating to the period before motorized transport. A caravan travelling

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