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978-0-521-86231-8 - Cambridge World Archaeology: The Archaeology of Prehistoric Arabia: Adaptation and Social Formation from the Neolithic to the Iron Age

Peter Magee

Excerpt

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## CHAPTER 1

ARABIA AND THE STUDY  
OF THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

## INTRODUCTION

If there is any country which is seen to lie completely outside the stream of ancient history, it is Arabia. In spite of its vast extent; in spite, too, of its position in the very center of the civilized empires of the ancient East, midway between Egypt and Babylon, Palestine and India, – its history has seemed almost a blank. For a brief moment, indeed, it played a conspicuous part in human affairs, inspiring the Koran of Mohammed, and forging the swords of his followers; then the veil was drawn over it again, which had previously covered it for untold centuries. We think of Arabia only as a country of dreary deserts and uncultured nomads, whose momentary influence on the history of the world was a strange and exceptional phenomenon. (Sayce 1889: 406)

Thus wrote Archibald Henry Sayce, the great Welsh professor of Assyriology at the University of Oxford in 1889. Sayce countered his own introduction by then expounding upon how the study of ancient inscriptions during the previous decades had begun to cast light on the rich history of pre-Islamic Arabia. The possibility that Arabia had a prehistoric past, that is, human occupation before the era when inscriptions became common in the eighth century BC, and that these prehistoric cultures were in some way worthy of study did not occur to Sayce, whose views not only were typical of his day but continued to be symptomatic of the position of Arabian studies for most of the twentieth century. To be fair, Sayce was a nineteenth-century Assyriologist par excellence, and for him inscriptions and languages defined ancient cultures. He could write prose in twenty ancient and modern languages, and, according to his obituary in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, his last words included ‘When will more Ras Shamra texts be published?’.

In the past few decades, scholars have focused greater attention on Arabia’s ‘dreary deserts’ and discovered a rich archaeological record. These discoveries are presented at annual published conferences like *The Seminar for Arabian Studies* and in journals such as *Arabian Archaeology and Epigraphy*, which is now

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entering its third decade of publication, and *Atlatl*, the official journal of the Saudi Arabian Antiquities Department. Most recently, an enormous and successful exhibition of archaeological remains from Saudi Arabia entitled *Roads of Arabia* toured France, Germany and the United States to much public acclaim. A *New York Times* (23 July 2010) review announced, 'A new frontier has been opened in the history of Arabia and its connections with the outside world. The Arabs have traditionally been characterized as latecomers on the Middle Eastern scene. For a people whose beginnings are now known to go back 6,000 years, this is not really the word.'

This growing awareness of Arabia's ancient past can be contrasted, however, with the position it continues to occupy within the discipline of Near Eastern archaeology. Consider the fact that between 30 April and 4 May 2012, hundreds of Near Eastern archaeologists descended upon the city of Warsaw for the Eighth International Congress of the Archaeology of the Ancient Near East (ICCANE). Widely acknowledged as the most important meeting of its sort, the conference brings together scholars whose research focuses on the prehistoric to Islamic cultures of the modern countries of the Middle East. In Warsaw, participants listened to more than 250 papers on a wide variety of topics. Of these papers, only 8 (3%) reported on research conducted in the modern countries of the Arabian Peninsula. This is despite the fact that the Arabian Peninsula occupies a land mass greater than Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine, Israel and Turkey combined.<sup>1</sup> When Arabia does enter the realm of Near Eastern archaeology, it is usually limited to the brief periods when incense was traded from the southern part of Arabia to Mesopotamia or the Levant and then onwards to the Mediterranean. It is this interaction with the powerful and well-studied centres of the Old World that largely defines Arabia's entry into scholarship and was responsible for Sayce's and his successors' interest in the epigraphy of southern and northern Arabia. Scholarship that positions the study of ancient Arabia in a broader Near Eastern context (e.g., Tosi 1986b; Wilkinson 2003) or detailed studies that have focused on one part of Arabia (e.g., Potts 1991a) are very rare.

I don't pretend that this book will rectify the situation. However, I do hope that the following chapters not only will provide an overview of the archaeology of prehistoric Arabia, but will illustrate the unique material culture and adaptive processes that characterize Arabian society from c. 9000 BC to 800 BC. I hope that in the process it will become clear that ancient Arabia was an important part of the ancient Near East, yet was unlike it in many ways. It

<sup>1</sup> According to the CIA's *World Factbook* the combined land mass of Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Kuwait, Oman, UAE, Bahrain and Qatar is 3,100,922 km<sup>2</sup>. The combined land mass of Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Palestine (Gaza and the West Bank), Israel and Turkey is 2,535,241 km<sup>2</sup>. Even if one were to add the well-studied countries of Greece, Italy and Cyprus to the former countries, their land mass would still be less than that of the Arabian Peninsula.

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is an appreciation of this diversity of ancient lifeways that makes Arabia worthy of study in itself and in the context of the region as a whole. However, before I begin this task, it is necessary to explore further the biases and assumptions that contour Near Eastern archaeology and continue to marginalize the study of ancient Arabia.

#### NEAR EASTERN ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE STUDY OF ARABIA

The relationship between the codification of Near Eastern archaeology as a Western academic discipline and the actions of colonial powers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is well established (Bahrani 1998; Liverani 2005). A desire to excavate did not drive Western colonial powers to control the Levant, Egypt and Iraq – economic and political reasons were far more important – but these regions figured prominently in the Western mind because of their critical position in the Judeo-Christian tradition. The Western medieval and later notion of *translatio imperii* is important in understanding why these regions were so prominent (Goez 1958). In the Middle Ages, the likes of Richard de Bury and Chretien de Troyes could trace the origins of their own civilizations back to Greece and Rome. European colonialism's opening of the Near East to archaeological and historical exploration provided an opportunity to go one step farther, because, as Liverani has noted, '[a] Euro-centered world view assumed that high culture originated in the Middle East (Egypt and Mesopotamia) then passed to Greece and Rome, the Christian Middle Ages and up to the western European world of the Industrial Revolution' (Liverani 2005: 224).

It was this mindset that prompted Botta, Layard, Sarzec and their nineteenth-century contemporaries to remove so enthusiastically the monumental art and artefacts from the capitals of Assyria and Sumer and transport them to London and Paris, centres of political authority at the time (Caubet 2009). Close political and economic ties between the Ottoman Empire and Germany facilitated the work of German archaeologists, whose explorations at Ashur, Babylon, Tell Halaf, Bogazköy and Uruk continued from the late nineteenth into the early twentieth century. As Bahrani has noted, these early European expeditions were 'unambiguous in defining the purposes of their mission. Since human civilization was thought to originate in Mesopotamia, and this civilization was transferred from the East to the West, the two justifications for the archaeological expeditions were repeatedly stated as being the search for the "roots" of Western culture and to locate the places referred to in the Old Testament' (Bahrani 1998: 166).

By the 1920s, these epistemological frameworks were formally established in the praxis of Near Eastern archaeology as an academic discipline. The single biggest contributing factor had little to do with archaeology or the study of the ancient world. It was, in fact, a meeting of delegates from the United Kingdom,

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France, Italy and Turkey that took place in a porcelain factory in Sèvres in 1920. The concluding Treaty of Sèvres, and earlier the Treaty of San Remo, laid the groundwork for the League of Nations mandate system, which gave Britain control over Iraq and Palestine, and France control over Syria and Lebanon. Colonial administrators like Gertrude Bell, appointed director of archaeology in Iraq in 1922, rapidly took control of the granting of excavation permits and ensured that Western archaeologists had free rein to explore their own 'origins'. She was responsible for the drafting of generous antiquity laws, which, while undoubtedly an improvement on previous Ottoman rules, permitted Western archaeologists to export half of the antiquities they found (Magee 2012). The same situation occurred in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon. Spectacular discoveries like those made by Sir Leonard Woolley at Ur and their subsequent display in museums further ignited Western interest in Mesopotamia. Larger projects fuelled by the private wealth of pre-Depression America resulted in even greater discoveries, such as those of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute in the late 1920s in the Diyala region. Mesopotamian archaeology was born and was to remain the focus of much of Near Eastern archaeology for the next century.

For the most part, Arabia lay outside the confluence of these historical, ideological and political currents. Excluding the area of the Hijaz and areas of western Yemen, much of Arabia also lay outside direct Ottoman control and thus in the aftermath of World War I did not fall under European control in the same manner as Syria, Jordan, Palestine, Egypt and Iraq. The British had forced a truce on the southern states of the Arabian Gulf in the early nineteenth century and continued to attempt to influence politics in that region up until the formation of the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 1971. Similarly, the British attempted to influence local political systems in what was to become Saudi Arabia, Yemen, Bahrain, Qatar and Oman. However, this influence was unlike the wholesale establishment of political control that the French exercised in Syria and Lebanon or the British exercised in Palestine, Iraq and Egypt.

Arabia was not, however, entirely excluded from the nexus of connectivity between the Judeo-Christian tradition and the colonial practice of archaeology. Consider, for example, Fritz Hommel, the German Orientalist who became professor of Semitic languages at Munich in 1885. In addition to writing works such as *Geschichte Babyloniens und Assyriens* (1885) and *Geschichte des alten Morgenlandes* (1904), Hommel considered Arabia an important topic of study. When the German-American Assyriologist Hermann Hilprecht was approached to write a volume that would 'convey to the intelligent English reading public a clear conception of the gradual resurrection of the principal ancient nations of Western Asia and Egypt' (Hilprecht 1903: iii), he called upon Hommel to write the section on the exploration of ancient Arabia. Arabia was of interest to these early researchers and to travellers such as Niebuhr (see Text Box 1) and Palgrave because it was considered to represent the most ancient



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TEXT BOX 1. EARLY EXPLORERS OF ARABIA: CARSTEN NIEBUHR

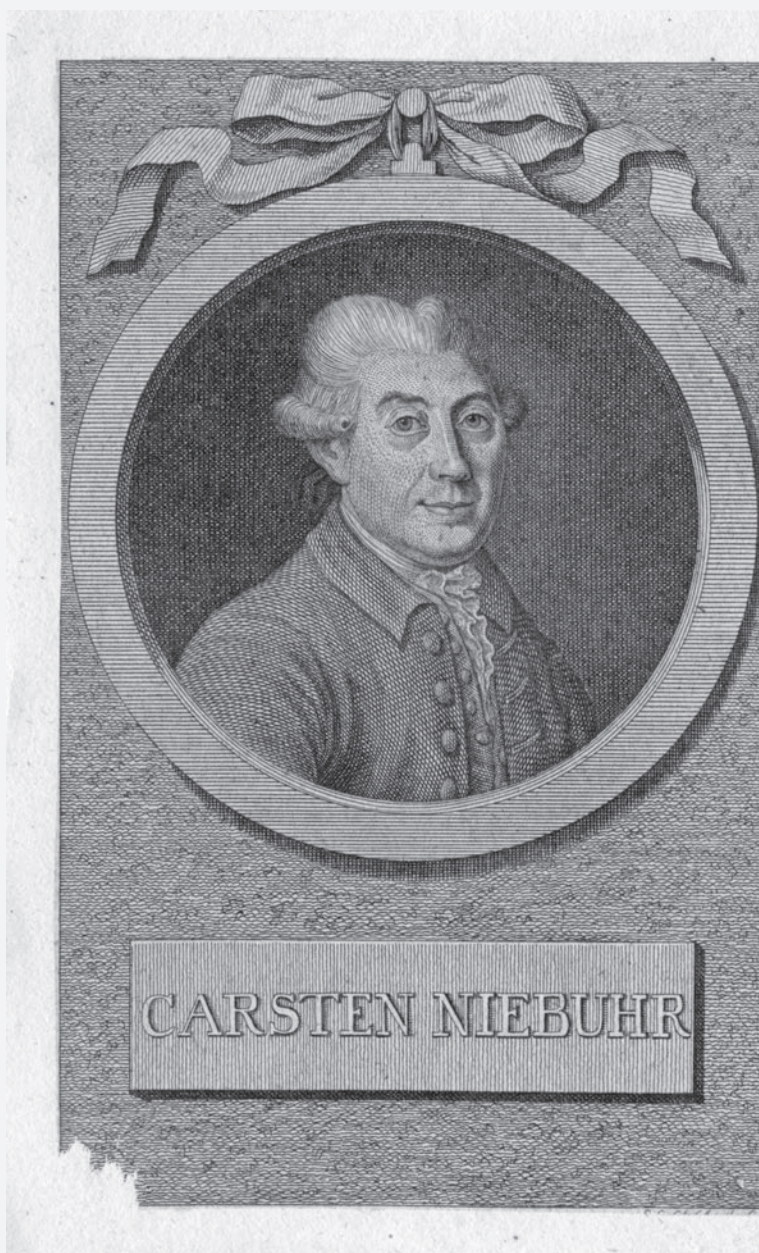


Figure 1.1. Carsten Niebuhr. Print Collection, Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations.

*(continued)*

## TEXT BOX 1 (continued)

The travels of Carsten Niebuhr (Figure 1.1) in Arabia, Egypt, Iran and India occasioned one of the earliest European accounts of Arabian society. Born in what is now Germany in 1733, Niebuhr was asked in 1760 to join an expedition organized by King Frederick V of Denmark at the prompting of Johann David Michaelis at the University of Göttingen in Germany. The focus of this expedition was the people, cultures and ecology of Arabia and adjacent parts of the Near East.

The organization and focus of the project were typical of those emanating from European universities, especially Göttingen. Organized 'scientific' travel was conceived of as a rigorous academic discipline that contributed to an understanding of the world and, perhaps equally important, the place of Europe within the ever-expanding borders of world knowledge. Courses in 'apodemics' (the science of travel) were offered at Göttingen. Given this intellectual background, it is perhaps no surprise that the expedition represented a wide range of disciplines. An outstanding philologist, Frederik Christian von Haven, a contemporary of Niebuhr's in Copenhagen, joined the project. Other than Niebuhr, however, the most well-known member of the project was the young Swedish botanist Peter Forskål, who had studied under Linnaeus, the father of modern botanical taxonomy, at Uppsala. Forskål was one of Linnaeus's 'apostles' whose job it was to travel throughout the world and bring back botanical specimens that could be configured into Linnaeus's taxonomy.

Alongside this scientific component were the academic and racial interests of the project's proponent, Johann David Michaelis, who was a professor at Göttingen from 1746 until his death in 1791. One of the pre-eminent biblical scholars of the eighteenth century, Michaelis believed that the study of contemporary Middle Eastern languages, culture and nature would shed light on the

Old Testament. In a manner that resonates with some of those factors that marginalized the study of Arabian archaeology, Michaelis believed that eighteenth-century Arabia was an immutable case study that could illuminate the ancient biblical world. He writes in his *Mosaiches Recht (Moses Law)*: 'If we did not have these customs of the Arabs, we would very rarely be able to elucidate the laws of Moses in reference to an older customary law. The ancient customs have been preserved in this people, who have been cut off from the world and who have seldom been brought under a foreign yoke. Indeed, when reading a description of the nomadic Arabs, one believes oneself to be in Abraham's hut. Travel descriptions of Arabia, and of neighboring Syria, will be of much greater help for us than one might dare to think given the great distance of time at stake here' (1: 12–13; quoted in Hess 2000: 68).

Michaelis presented to Carsten Niebuhr no fewer than 235 printed pages of questions that were to direct the project's research. Among these were questions about the tides in the Red Sea (so as to better understand the parting of it by Moses) and many linguistic questions the answers to which Michaelis believed would lead to a greater understanding of the Old Testament.

In 1761 the expedition set sail for Arabia manned by Niebuhr, Forskål, von Haven, a doctor called Cramer, an engraver by the name of Bauernfeind and a servant called Berggren. Shortly after arriving in Arabia in October 1762, von Haven and Forskål died of malaria. The remaining members of the team spent the next months in Yemen recording cultural and botanical details and linguistics as per Michaelis's instructions. After leaving Yemen, they journeyed to Bombay, and en route all other members of the expedition, except for Niebuhr, died, probably also from malaria. Niebuhr eventually travelled

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overland back to Europe and on the way made important copies of cuneiform inscriptions at the Achaemenid capital of Persepolis and Naqsh-i Rostam. He finally arrived back in Copenhagen in November 1768. He accepted a position in Danish public service but didn't travel again. He died in 1815.

Despite the disastrous personal costs, the mission was from a scientific perspective hugely successful. In 1772 Niebuhr published *Beschreibung von Arabien*, and this was followed in 1774 and 1778 by his two-volume detailed account of the journey, *Reisebeschreibung von Arabien und anderen umliegenden Ländern*. These texts were widely translated in the decades following and became essential reference works for Oriental research. The latter two volumes contained his engravings of the inscriptions from Persepolis and Naqsh-i Rostam, which were to prove critical to the decipherment of cuneiform (Nyberg 1960).

Such was Niebuhr's influence that Palgrave dedicated his 1865 publication,

*Personal Narrative of a Year's Journey through Central and Eastern Arabia, 1862–1863*, to Niebuhr, whom he called 'the intelligence and courage that first opened Arabia to Europe'. Although Peter Forskål, the young botanist who joined the expedition, died at the age of 32 he is also remembered for his pioneering contribution to the study of Middle Eastern botany. In 1775 Niebuhr published Forskål's notes as *Descriptiones Animalium – Avium, amphiborum, insectorum, vermium quæ in itinere orientali observavit Petrus Forskål*. Perhaps the greatest testament to Forskål was the decision of Linnaeus to name one of the plant specimens he collected in Arabia *Forskkaolea tenacissima* because the plant's hardy and stubborn character reminded Linnaeus of his young student. Several plants that are native to Arabia and adjacent regions bear his name, including the samh seed, *Mesembryanthemum forsskaei*, that grows in the Nafud desert (as mentioned in the main text).

and timeless aspects of 'Semitic' life. As Hommel notes: 'In no other country have old manners and customs been so firmly retained as among the Semites in Western Asia, and here again most of all in Arabia; so that a more exact knowledge of those customs often furnishes an instructive commentary upon the life of the past ages, as we see it in the Bible and in other ancient records' (Hommel 1903: 698). This belief in the timelessness of the inhabitants and landscape of Arabia was to remain a key feature of research through most of the twentieth century (as discussed later).

Arabia also featured in one important part of the Judeo-Christian tradition: the story of the Queen of Sheba, who travelled to the court of King Solomon as recounted in the book of Kings. This story remained prominent in Western perceptions of Arabia and the Orient, and it is hardly surprising that it was with the express purpose of investigating its veracity that the first large-scale archaeological project of the modern era commenced in the Arabian Peninsula. In the 1950s, Wendell Phillips and the American Foundation for the Study of Man excavated a number of sites in southern Yemen in search of the home of the Queen of Sheba and the source of incense, the abundance of which led Pliny to label southern Arabia 'Arabia Felix', or 'Arabia the Blest'.

Phillips (1955) made important discoveries at a number of sites, including the capital of the Sabaeen Federation, Marib.

Nevertheless, in the post–World War I period, the study of Arabia, especially ancient Arabia, become increasingly marginalized. The term ‘Middle East’, coined in 1902 by Captain Alfred Mahan of the US Navy (Culcasi 2000: 585), was increasingly used to refer to those areas that had fallen under the influence of British and European colonial powers. The first institutionalization of the term came in 1921 when Winston Churchill established the Middle East Department of the British Colonial Office. This office had jurisdiction over Palestine, Transjordan, Iraq and Egypt – Arabia was excluded.

In the decades following World War II, the ability of European powers to influence domestic affairs in the Middle East waned. Local archaeology authorities in Egypt, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Palestine and Israel developed with their own sets of laws that sought to protect their cultural heritage and affirm their own national projects through the curatorship of antiquities and archaeology (Magee 2012). Today, very few archaeologists conducting fieldwork in the Middle East would see themselves as operating under a colonial umbrella, nor would they so readily identify the remains they were excavating as a part of their own cultural heritage (for the case of Israel, however, see Abu el-Haj 2001). Given these developments, one might think that the geographical scope of Near Eastern archaeology would have expanded to include Arabia. Indeed, European archaeologists, particularly the Danish, did take an increasing interest in the Arabian Gulf from the mid-1950s onwards, and this has continued with a rich tradition of archaeological fieldwork in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the UAE and Oman. This work is of such scope that substantial syntheses were available by the 1990s (Potts 1991a). In addition, a government-directed ‘comprehensive survey’ was conducted throughout Saudi Arabia in the 1970s. This endeavour, which represented an unparalleled attempt to obtain total coverage of a nation’s visible archaeological remains, revealed a rich and extensive archaeological heritage. Nevertheless, the archaeology of Arabia still rests on the margins of the current practice of Near Eastern archaeology. Why is this the case?

#### ARABIA, ENVIRONMENT AND THE ANCIENT STATE

On one level, the answer to this question is obvious: since the middle of the nineteenth century the study of Egypt, Mesopotamia and the Levant has provided artefacts and texts that have fuelled scholarly endeavour and created the impetus for further research and analysis. In other words, a ‘scholarly feedback mechanism’ has calcified the practice and definition of Near Eastern archaeology. On a deeper level, however, the anthropological conceptualization of the past that has taken hold of archaeology since the 1950s has contoured research towards identifying familiar modes of social existence. In short, the search for



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‘complex societies’ drives contemporary archaeological research throughout the Middle East. These societies ‘differ from simple [societies] (or “complicated societies” in the sense of Hallpike (1986: 278)) essentially in the degree and nature of social differentiation in them. Complex societies have institutionalized subsystems that perform diverse functions for their individual members and are organized as relatively specific and semi-autonomous entities’ (Yoffee 2005: 16). In other words, they have much in common with the contemporary Western or Western-like states within which are located the educational institutions that fund, teach and research Near Eastern archaeology.

The ultimate manifestation of complexity in the ancient Near East was the ‘state’. Although Yoffee (2005) has critiqued and deconstructed this concept, a neo-evolutionary perspective that seeks to gauge how far societies progressed towards ‘statehood’ still dominates research. The state is seen as ‘successful’ because it is viewed as having resolved the vexed relationship between population growth and food production. This is most explicit in descriptions of the emergence of the first state, that of Uruk, in the fourth millennium BC. Current scholarship argues that the presence of continual rivers on which transport occurred combined with rich alluvial soils and changing climate regimes permitted evolutionary success in southern Mesopotamia by c. 3800 BC (Algaze 2001). Thus, new politico-managerial strategies allowed Uruk to ‘surpass their immediate neighbors and potential competitors across the Near East in terms of scale, degree of internal differentiation, and in the degree of hierarchy present in surrounding settlement grids’ (Algaze 2005). In short, the ancient state and its ever-present but problematic (Pauketat 2007) younger sibling, the chiefdom, were the winners (in both ancient and epistemological terms), as they had resolved the dynamic relationship between environment and population. This relationship is dynamic because both variables are subject to positive change: population growth can be maintained because fertile landscapes offer opportunities for cereal agriculture, if controlled through management and intervention, that is, irrigation.

In contrast, the environment of Arabia has been generally perceived as homogenous and static (Culcasi 2000: 591; for the Middle East more broadly see Said 1978: 54–55). The concept of ‘timelessness’ is critical in this regard. This timelessness was a strong rationale for early European exploration such as that undertaken by Niebuhr and continued to motivate travellers well into the twentieth century. In *Arabian Sands*, the renowned British explorer Wilfred Thesiger comments that he travelled to Arabia because he ‘craved for the past, resented the present, and dreaded the future’ (Thesiger 2008: 34). Of course, it wasn’t only the landscape that was considered unchanging – its inhabitants were as well. The Bedouin, in particular, were considered to maintain the same lifestyle as they had for millennia. Indeed, Eliahu Elath, then the Israeli ambassador to Britain, informed the Royal Asiatic Society in 1957 that Bedouin society was ‘a stagnant society – economically, socially and culturally’

(Elath 1958: 125). This lack of change and directionality in social conditions rendered Arabia unworthy of study within the parameters of Near Eastern archaeology and its obsession with recognizable complexity.

Within this conceptualization, not only are the inhabitants of Arabia's deserts seen to be static in their behaviour, but they are actually portrayed as opposing progression and advancement. The Israeli ambassador to Britain, already quoted, was explicit on this matter in his account of the Bedouin of the Negev: 'It is no accident that one who knew him – and his destructive qualities – well has called him not only "the son" but also "the father" of the desert. Like a sea, the desert seemed to have flood and ebb tides of its own, sometimes overflowing its shores and destroying fields and dams, leaving only a barren expanse where later Bedouin might come to graze their flocks for a season then pass on' (Elath 1958: 125).

Of course, this conception of the Arabian desert fits more broadly into a paradigm of alterity that defined European, and particularly British, views of other cultures. As Perkins (1998) has demonstrated, it was part of the dominant colonial enterprise of the nineteenth century and is equally represented in British views of Australian indigenous society, for example. In Arabia, however, it had a particular resonance because it appropriated what was considered by some to be the indigenous Arabic paradigm of the Desert and the Sown, also known as the Bedu and the Hadhar. With its transfer into Western scholarship, initially through Montesquieu, Chardin and others (Gates 1967) and then through the eyes of nineteenth-century explorers who travelled in the Middle East, this complicated paradigm soon became a reductionist climate-based typology that presented two opposing states of existence: one agrarian-based, rich and active (e.g., the Fertile Crescent, Mesopotamia and Egypt), the other one poor, nomadic and violent (Arabia).

When the study of Arabia did enter mainstream Western scholarship, it did so only because the dynamic states of the ancient Near East traded or extracted economic resources. Thus, the importation of incense into the southern Levant has remained a popular topic of scholarly research since at least Sayce's comments noted earlier. The importation of copper from southeastern Arabia into Mesopotamia has also been the focus of recent scholarship. In each case, it has been argued that this economic engagement brought about rapid social and economic change in Arabia which otherwise would not have been possible on a purely autochthonous level.

#### ADVANCING THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF ANCIENT ARABIA

A key theme of this book is that Arabia's unique environment meant that its inhabitants *were* as likely as those of the other regions of the Near East to experience economic and social change. In Chapter 2, I examine the environment