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Michael E. Meeker

Excerpt

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## Part I

# The epoch of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism in Arabia

There is, however, among the Bedouins themselves, a great variety of dialects . . . but they all agree in pronouncing each letter with much precision, expressing its exact force or power, which . . . is never the case among the inhabitants of towns. The Bedouins also agree universally in using, as common, many select words, which in the towns would be called “literal terms” . . . and in speaking with grammatical accuracy.

Burckhardt, *Notes on the Bedouins  
and the Wahabys* (1831), pp. 372–3.

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# 1. The ethnography of Near Eastern tribal societies

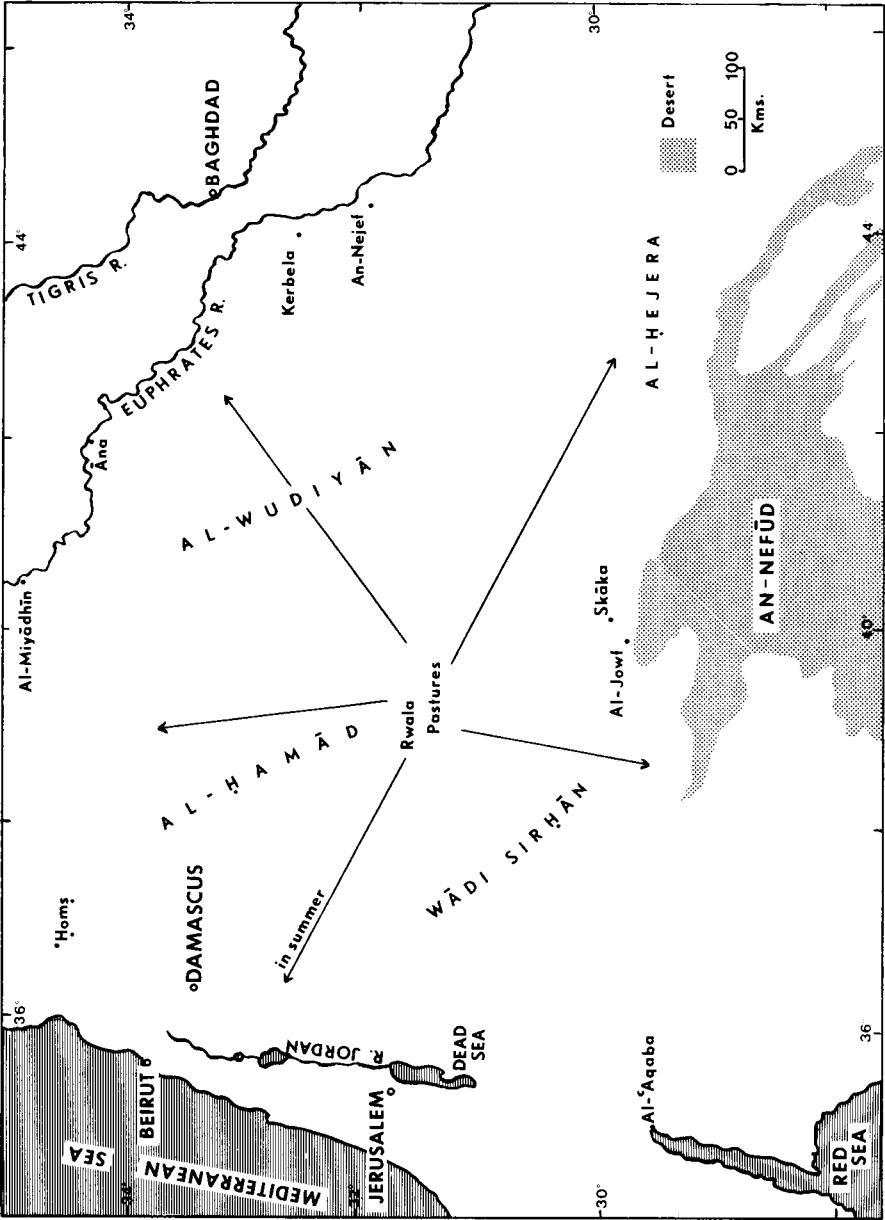
## 1

The Rwala are one of the tribes of the 'Aneze group of Bedouins found in North Arabia (the desert areas now divided between Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Syria, and Iraq). At the turn of the century they were camel-herding nomads. As one of the most vigorous and militant Bedouin tribes, they were an important factor in the politics of North Arabia and, to a lesser extent, in the politics of the Arabian peninsula. Their chief, Prince an-Nūri, was perhaps the most noted Bedouin chief of the northern deserts and steppes. On some occasions, he was recognized as the leader of a confederation of many tribes in this part of Arabia. He was also able to dominate various settled peoples. One of his sons, for example, was for a time the lord of the oasis of al-Jowf. During World War I, the Rwala, led by the prince, were among the tribes who fought against Ottoman military contingents. Following the war, they and their chiefs were also important elements in the political disputes and conflicts among the Grand Sherif of Mecca, the House of Eben Rashīd, and the House of Eben Sa'ūd.

During these troubled times, Alois Musil, a Czech Orientalist, traveled in North Arabia and became a close friend of the prince. While there he devoted himself to a study of Bedouin ethnography and Arabian topography.<sup>1</sup> The result was a painstaking documentation of Bedouin life during the last years in which these peoples would play their traditional role in Arabian affairs. The Arabian Bedouins of today are much milder men than their nineteenth-century forebears. They serve in a national army, receive the benefits of state schools and subsidies, and concern themselves with the profits and losses of animal herding.<sup>2</sup> The times in which Bedouin tribes dominated large sections of Arabia as free and independent political agents are past, and Musil's books present as detailed a glimpse of those times as we shall ever have.

One of Musil's most important works, *The Manners and Customs of the Rwala Bedouins*, borrows its title from Lane's book describing the Egyp-

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Map I. North Arabia

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tians in the first half of the nineteenth century.<sup>3</sup> Musil may have thought of this ethnography as a Bedouin counterpart to Lane's remarkable portrayal of Cairene society. If so, it is an impressive fulfillment of this ambition and may be ranked among the best ethnographies. The unique aspect of this work is its inclusion of Rwala poems, songs, ditties, narratives, and expressions along with an extensive number of notes regarding these materials. The poetry in particular could be termed the flesh of the ethnography. Again and again Musil ends his discussion of chiefs, camping grounds, food, marriage, children, camels, horses, hospitality, vengeance, and war with poems that deal directly or indirectly with the ethnographic category. Unlike other Western ethnographies of the Bedouins, this record of Rwala oral traditions provides us with a window from which to view Bedouin thoughts and Bedouin passions. It is the only opportunity we have to examine at firsthand just what kind of men the Bedouins were.

The portion of Musil's book that is of interest here, Chapter XXI, entitled "War and Peace," deals with Rwala political traditions. This is the longest chapter in the book, and the largest part of it is devoted to narratives, stories, anecdotes, songs, poems, and ditties having a direct relation to raiding or warfare. One section of the chapter presents several narratives of warfare accompanied by poems that refer more or less directly to the warfare recounted by the narrative. Unfortunately, the narratives, unlike the poems, are not given in Arabic, although they are frequently interspersed with Arabic phrases when a technical or figurative expression is used. This omission presents certain difficulties, and others arise with regard to deficiencies in Musil's transcriptions of Rwala poetry. Nevertheless, Musil's materials are the best Arabian Bedouin source materials that we have. They are far better than the materials with which anthropologists must often work, and they can be checked against the North Arabian texts collected by Carlo Landberg (on the fringes of the tribal area) and by Robert Montagne (after the political independence of the tribes had been compromised).<sup>4</sup>

Musil's study can in addition be supplemented with the work of others. Landberg, who also traveled and lived in Arabia around the turn of the century, has provided us with a small glossary wholly devoted to the Bedouin dialects of North Arabia and another extensive glossary of three volumes on the dialect of Dathînah, which includes numerous comments on North Arabic.<sup>5</sup> Cantineau has written two long articles on the phonetics and grammar of the Bedouin dialects of North Arabia.<sup>6</sup> And finally, Doughty and Montagne are important ethnographic sources for the Bedouin neighbors of the Rwala.<sup>7</sup> There are significant gaps in this body of material; nevertheless, it represents an unusual and impressive amount of ethnographic, lexicological, and grammatical documentation. Certainly very few tribal peoples have had so much attention devoted to their tradi-

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tions before their independent political status was compromised. And it is possible that Musil's account of a nomadic people's way of life accompanied by an extensive collection of their oral traditions might well be unique. Seventy years after the completion of his Rwala expeditions, a close examination of his Rwala materials seems well overdue. This is especially the case since the Bedouin world he described has not persisted into our time, and there is no possibility of an addition to the ethnography of the free Bedouin tribes of Arabia.

## 2

Musil's Rwala materials exemplify the best efforts of Western ethnographers over the past century, but are also important for other reasons. They are drawn from a kind of peoples, the pastoral nomads, who had a great impact upon Near Eastern history. Until very recently such peoples were found throughout the arid zone that stretches from western North Africa, through the central Near East, and into eastern Central Asia. The way of life of these peoples was so intimately bound to the peculiar environment of this area that they were found almost everywhere within it and very few places outside of it.

It is tempting to consider that the influence of these peoples might even explain, more efficiently than any other single feature of Near Eastern history, why the arid zone today is one of the world's distinctive ethnographic regions. Perhaps the values of the pastoral nomads have somehow left their mark upon the traditions of all the peoples of this region. In this way, an unusual environment that led to an unusual way of life would be the basis for understanding why the peoples of such a far-flung area share so much in common.

Strong arguments can be advanced against such a perspective. Pastoral nomadism, as a way of life, is only vaguely associated with any particular cultural pattern. It is true that pastoral nomads everywhere usually have a reputation for aggressiveness. It is also true that they typically have an impressive concern with the political alliances of tribal groups and subgroups. Such a concern is not surprising given their aggressiveness. But besides these very general features, pastoral nomadism as a way of life cannot be associated with any particular cultural pattern.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to this, the similarity of popular traditions all over the arid zone is very likely a product of the history of our own era. If we had at our disposal an ethnography of the ancient world around 1500 B.C., it is questionable whether we would perceive the arid zone as a distinctive ethnographic region. About two millennia later, however, a large part of this vast region was swept by Islamic politico-religious movements, and by 1500 A.D., the townsmen, peasants, and tribesmen of this part of the

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world shared a moral tradition in common. Pastoral nomadism, on the other hand, dates from much earlier times. The domestication of goats and sheep, a process which is surely coordinate with the beginnings of pastoral nomadism, is thought to have taken place by the sixth millennium B.C. at the very latest.<sup>9</sup> The early appearance of pastoral nomadism, therefore, precludes it from explaining a cultural uniformity which has come about only in recent times.

We should not, however, dismiss too hastily such a peculiar way of life as a crucial feature of Near Eastern history. In the Near East today, we find a remarkable similarity among the traditions of many peoples throughout a large region. The explanation for such a phenomenon among peoples who have never been politically united in an important way and who have never been part of a tightly integrated economic order indicates that a force was at work all over the arid zone and only in that zone. Islamization, the spread of a religious faith, is usually offered as an explanation for this uniformity. But could Islam by itself have become so deeply rooted among the diverse peoples of such a vast area, unless it was somehow a response to a life experience which all these peoples shared in common? Let us consider pastoral nomadism once again, but not as a way of life that was everywhere and at all times the same way of life. Let us consider what might have made pastoral nomadism in the arid zone proper quite different from such a way of life on the various peripheries of this region.

The crucial feature which all forms of pastoral nomadism share in common is the problem of vulnerable domestic wealth. It is hard to protect wealth in herds. It is easy to plunder wealth in herds. This is why almost all, if not all, pastoral peoples are aggressive and concerned with their political organization. Historically, they are in contest over the possession of vulnerable domestic wealth. However, in the arid zone proper, this vulnerability is coupled with a certain form of pastoral nomadism. Here extreme arid conditions resulted in independent little herding groups across the desert and steppe. The domestic wealth of such groups was that much more vulnerable because the strategy of organizing scattered and independent little groups in protective political alliances was less effective. This situation is reflected by the atomistic form which political alliances tended to take among the pastoral nomads in the arid zone proper. They had to be constructed upon the relationship of individual political actors rather than be based upon the systematic relationships of clans and tribes.<sup>10</sup>

More crucial than this, the pastoral nomads of the arid zone proper were in contact with the centers of civilization from very early times. This contact, I suggest, is the key to a historical process. These pastoral nomads had ready access to the technological advances which were continually taking place in the centers of civilization. They tended to acquire not

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the technology itself, but those items which seemed to be of use in a struggle with other men over vulnerable domestic wealth. In particular they tended to acquire personal instruments of aggression. Their herds gave them the wealth to purchase outright such instruments. And their problem of vulnerable domestic wealth inspired in them the desire for such instruments. This volatile combination of motivations and circumstances will be termed "Near Eastern pastoral nomadism." Such a distinctive form of pastoral nomadism was simultaneously a way of life and a historical process. It was a way of life with anarchical tendencies, which tended to become increasingly anarchical as a result of a steady popular investment in increasingly efficient personal instruments of aggression.

The forces which led to Near Eastern pastoral nomadism may well have been at work at a very early date in certain parts of the arid zone. It is even possible that the evolution of the state in the Near East is intertwined with the relationship of settled and nomadic life. In any case, Kupper's study of the nomads in Mesopotamia during the time of the kings of Mari indicates that, by about 2000 B.C., nomadic sheep-herders, some of whom were more turbulent and some of whom were less so, were exerting considerable pressure upon sedentary peoples there.<sup>11</sup> And Bulliet's recent study of the place of the camel in the ancient world suggests that by about 1000 B.C. the forces of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism were beginning to play a significant role. Tribes of camel-herding nomads appeared in North Arabia, and the effort to convert the camel into a mount of war was under way.<sup>12</sup>

In his book, *The Camel and the Wheel*, Bulliet is concerned with the gradual replacement of carts and wagons by camels as beasts of burden, particularly in ancient long-distance trade. He has argued that this replacement came about primarily because the use of camels as pack animals was more efficient than the use of wheeled devices and draft animals. In developing this view, he has suggested that the gradual increase in the economic importance of camels in ancient times may have been closely related to the spread of camel-herding nomadism during the same period. His views also imply that a good deal of the technology necessary for using camels, not only as pack animals but also as riding mounts, may have been developed in connection with long-distance trade. Whatever the case, the camel-herders who appear on the scene in North Arabia around 1000 B.C. were, or soon became, riders of camels, unlike other early camel-herders. And in the course of the first millennium B.C., these camel-riders gradually converted their beasts into formidable mounts of war. Bulliet believes that the decisive turning point in this conversion was the development of the North Arabian camel saddle, sometime between 500 and 100 B.C.<sup>13</sup> Such an advance enabled the North Arabian Bedouins to enter our own era with a popular military capacity that was truly awe-

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some in its setting in the desert and steppe. The camel was a personal instrument of aggression, which far and away transcended any defensive capacity that nomadic or sedentary peoples outside the centers of civilization were able to employ against it. To seek protection from camel-herding tribes, the peoples of the desert and steppe were themselves obliged to become riders of beasts or to become the subjects of such riders.<sup>14</sup>

During the first millennium A.D., various kinds of peoples, who were either themselves mounted pastoralists, associated with mounted pastoralists, or associated with the political conditions of mounted pastoralism, began to have a considerable impact upon the entire arid zone including the centers of civilization. The most dramatic example of this impact is the brief political domination of a large part of the arid zone by Arabian peoples during the seventh and eighth century A.D. and the eventual Islamization of so many Near Eastern peoples as a result of this domination. The early Muslims, of course, were not simply a group of pastoral nomadic peoples, although such peoples were an important element among them. But they were very much representatives of a society which was marked by a background of mounted pastoral nomadism. Indeed, this background was the crucial fact of Arabian society which did much to determine the very character of both urban and rural life in this part of the world until very recent times.<sup>15</sup>

The move of the Arabians into areas beyond their homeland was followed by more or less similar moves on the part of other peoples whose societies were marked by a background of mounted pastoral nomadism. However, it would be difficult to argue that the cultural uniformity of the peoples in the arid zone could be explained even as a result of the combined influence of the Arabian, Turkish, and Mongolian domination of various parts of this zone. Rather these movements of peoples, like the process of Islamization, represent only the most visible results of forces at work within popular political experience all over the Near East. There was constant pressure among the pastoral nomads all over the arid zone to invest in personal instruments of aggression. With time, this investment embroiled men increasingly in political strategies and struggles. This problem inevitably touched the sedentary peoples who were in contact with the pastoral nomads - that meant the vast majority of sedentary peoples in the arid zone proper. Indeed, since there was never any clear boundary between nomadic and sedentary life, the threat of popular political turmoil was very much a problem of sedentary life, even though it originated in the conditions of nomadic life. And so in the course of time, a cultural uniformity crystallized as a result of a sweeping process which was imperceptibly at work on the level of popular motivations and circumstances and quite visibly at work in connection with dramatic histori-



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The cultural uniformity which we now find in the arid zone, however, does not reflect the traditions of a people bent upon violence. On the contrary, it does reflect by and large a moral reaction to the *threat* of popular political turmoil. The process of Islamization itself can be viewed in part as a moral response to the problem which arose from the circumstances of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism. All over the arid zone, different social elements and diverse peoples found a solace in a religion which announced the possibility of a community of peace based upon the sober and decent behavior of the individual. There was such a response because men everywhere shared the problems of a life experience that was touched by the threat of popular political anarchy.

Islam was forged in an area that was troubled by one of the most anarchical forms of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism. The spread of Islam is even closely linked with the spread of the Arabian mounted pastoral nomads themselves. In a sense, the Arabians afflicted the Near East with one of the most vigorous forms of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism at the same time as they were the carriers of an effective moral response to the problems created by Near Eastern pastoral nomadism.<sup>16</sup>

The peculiar character of the cultural patterns which peoples all over the arid zone share suggests the important historical role which the forces of Near Eastern pastoral nomadism played. All over the arid zone proper, popular traditions can be described in terms of three cultural themes. First, we find, more or less everywhere, an agonistic rhetoric of political association. The public world is conceived of as the scene of an uncertain struggle among men. The very concept of an individual or an association cannot be entirely separated from a political interest or concern.<sup>17</sup> Second, we find, more or less everywhere, humanistic religious values. These values are sometimes exemplified by a religious personality such as a saint. They are sometimes invoked as a moral standard of proper personal acts and proper personal beliefs. In both respects, they tend to turn upon conceptions of exemplary personal behavior. Third, we find, more or less everywhere, social norms of personal integrity and familial propriety. The norms of personal integrity often take the form of concepts of honor whereby an individual or group is under the constant scrutiny of others. The norms of familial propriety are usually most impressively elaborated in connection with the seclusion of women.

Only one of these three cultural themes - the political - is obviously related to Near Eastern pastoral nomadism. However, the other two themes, which are more characteristic of traditional Near Eastern urban and peasant societies, can be plausibly related to the political theme.<sup>18</sup> Where relationships in general are considered uncertain, would not religious values crystallize around the sanctity of the person? Would not men find the promise of peace, the promise of respite from the uncertainty of

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relationships, in examples and definitions of a common, simple humanity? And where relationships in general are considered uncertain, would not social norms proliferate around the proper forms by which men recognize and cope with this fact of life? Is not the Near Eastern man of honor a man who faces other men more or less aggressively with mutual self-respect? Is not the Near Eastern proper family a family which is designed as a peaceful interior that is protected and concealed from a disorderly exterior?

Quite plausibly, the characteristic cultural themes of Near Eastern traditions indicate a history of popular political turmoil. And quite plausibly, the Near Eastern pastoral nomads, a people afflicted by political disorder, but also a people who thrived upon political disorder, were an important source of this turmoil. An understanding of the traditions of these peoples therefore promises some insight as to why the Near East today is a distinctive ethnographic region by and large different from any other ethnographic region of the world.

## 3

Fully aware of the historical importance of Near Eastern tribal peoples, some Orientalists, such as Musil and Landberg, worked to lay the ethnographic and philological foundations for a study of their traditions. They failed, however, to advance any important interpretative view of these traditions. More recently, Near Eastern anthropologists have developed various interpretations of Near Eastern tribal societies, but they have pursued an excessively narrow approach. An inordinate amount of attention has been devoted to the implications of tribal genealogies whereas many other features of tribal traditions have been neglected. And in general there has been very little concern with the importance of tribal materials for an understanding of Near Eastern history.

Yet it is appropriate to begin with what the anthropology of Near Eastern tribal society has accomplished in recent years. This consists of a body of discussion which anthropologists term "segmentary theory." This theory not only provides the lens with which more or less all anthropologists today perceive Near Eastern tribal societies, it also raises, despite its narrow conception, a central issue about the character of these societies.

The first important elaboration of segmentary theory appears in E. E. Evans-Pritchard's book on the Nuer, a group of cattle-herders and agriculturalists living in the southern Sudan.<sup>19</sup> In this study, Evans-Pritchard advanced a thesis about the political functions of Nuer genealogies. He next applied a similar thesis to the Cyrenaican Bedouins; others later developed his ideas in connection with other peoples.<sup>20</sup> With time, the opin-