

CHAPTER I

THE DESERT HOMELAND

Defining and Describing the Desert

Because of the distinction drawn above between the terms *bādiya* and *ṣaḥrā'*, I do not think that the Arabic dictionaries can be of much use to us in defining what a desert is. Under the root *b-d-w* in the *Lisān al-'arab*, we read as follows:

The *bādiya* is so called because of its open and uncovered character. A *barrīya* is also called *bādiya*, because it is open country in full view.

And under the root *ṣ-ḥ-r* we find:

A place said to be like a *ṣaḥrā'* is expansive, and a people are said to be folk of the *ṣaḥrā'* when they go out to a vast open space where there is nothing to conceal them from view. A land called a *ṣaḥrā'* is generally level terrain, with both smooth and rugged places, but no prominent hills. When the people go out from the settled areas to the grazing grounds of the *ṣaḥrā'* lands, they are called bedouins (*badw*).

It is obvious from this that there is no great difference between the two terms. Indeed, some of the dictionaries draw no distinction at all between them; in such works we find that “the *bādiya* is the *ṣaḥrā'*, and the *ṣaḥrā'* is the *bādiya*.”¹

¹See Ibn Manẓūr, *Lisān al-'arab* (Beirut, 1374-76/1955-56), under the roots *b-d-w* and *ṣ-ḥ-r*.



Figure 5: A hobbled mare and her colt in al-Daww, part of the Syrian Desert.

When one of these two words is mentioned, the first thing that comes to the mind of the Arab listener is a vast expanse of desolate arid land of shifting sands under the burning heat of the sun, of dunes or sandhills stretching for hundreds of miles. There are, in fact, vast sand-deserts in Arabia, Africa, and elsewhere in which there are only rare traces of life. No one comes to these unknown lands, except for certain bedouins forced by circumstances to live there, and a few daring explorers. On the other hand, there are deserts which, although not devoid of sands and dunes, are nonetheless inhabited by people and animals. Nor are they arid wastes. Rather, they contain plants and trees, and along their fringes there are oases containing an astounding array of vegetation and wildlife.

The alluring and fascinating qualities of some of these desert areas have attracted many seekers of knowledge or adventure. Eminent explorers and specialists in anthropology, zoology, and botany have been lured to the desert, risking their lives and exploring the unknown regions of many of these lands. There were those who survived, but some also who perished. So many memoirs have been recorded and books written that it has now become difficult for the researcher to gather

together everything that has been written in the last two centuries on certain specific desert regions and the life in these lands.

Today the deserts are a focus of world attention because of their resources, primarily oil and petroleum by-products, and because of their vast extent, which according to some scholarly estimates comes to a total of approximately eight million square miles, or about one seventh of the land surface of the earth. If part of this land could be reclaimed, it would provide living space for hundreds of millions of people that will otherwise crowd the world in only a few years' time. This is a point of special importance now, when it has become possible for man to desalinate the waters of the seas near the deserts to produce fresh water for irrigating these lands. It is interesting to note that most of the great deserts—the Sahara in North Africa, the Rub' al-Khālī (the Empty Quarter), the Dahnā', and the Australian Desert, for example—lie along seacoasts. And oddly enough, most of the earth's deserts lie not at the equator, but north and south of it, at or beyond the Tropic of Cancer and the Tropic of Capricorn. And most of these deserts are in the Arab countries.

Returning to the terms *bādiya* and *ṣaḥrā'*, I should point out that in this study I will deviate from the definitions we find in the dictionaries. The word *bādiya* I restrict to the desert lands that are not all of sand, and where the ground in many places would be suitable for cultivation if water supplies were readily available. The term *ṣaḥrā'* I use only in reference to the sand-deserts full of dunes, where vegetation only rarely grows; if any plant life at all is to be found there it consists of the thorn tree, which lives on the plains and slopes of this kind of desert. Hence, and in accordance with this new usage, the *bādiya* is a vast expanse of open level steppeland, perhaps interrupted by occasional hills and prominences, with its soil sometimes mixed with and covered by a film of sand. In such terrain one finds no flowing streams, no extensive vegetation, and no trace of the cities and villages of settled civilized life except for those found here and there in the isolated oases.² But even in such desert land itself, one can still find good soil in which trees take root and grow tall enough to provide shelter for animals seeking

²[In keeping with the distinction drawn by Professor Jabbur, this translation will render *bādiya* as "desert," and *ṣaḥrā'* as "sand-desert."]

protection from the sun. Plants grow in such shaded areas, and in certain seasons there is good grass that can support the camel and many other animals, especially such wild animals as the "wild cow," ostrich, gazelle, and onager. Indeed, there are plants that will take root even in the sandy lands of the desert, and some of these grow as high as large shrubs.

In his book *Three Deserts*, Major Jarvis said that he used to own three feddans of sandy desert land near the garden of his house in al-'Arīsh. He enclosed the land with a wall, and for a period of fourteen years protected it from goats and camels. Over the surface of that land there spread a variety of wild scrub bushes, some of them growing about eight feet high and twenty feet in diameter. The soil under and between the bushes was eventually covered by a layer of decayed leaves, with the result that the sand became so stable on the ground that the strongest gales did not move it. "This," Jarvis says, "gives one an idea of what Sinai must have been before the Arab came to lay it waste with his grazing flocks." He also observes:

There is no doubt that the responsibility for the sand-dune area which has advanced over a mile on a 120-mile frontage during the time I have been in the Peninsula rests at the door of that accursed animal, the goat, ably assisted by his ruthless companion, the camel, and connived at by their feckless owner, the Beduin Arab.³

One of the usual characteristics of the desert is that rainfall is rare and occurs only on a few days during the winter season. Nevertheless, this small amount of rainfall is sufficient to water sprouting plants and trees, or to allow the seeds scattered in its soil to germinate and grow, presenting one with the radiant splendor of greenery spreading across the surface of the soft ground. Indeed, it is not uncommon for such rainfall to send torrential streams pouring down the watercourses, leaving pools of water behind them in the bends and depressions at the bottoms of the wadis. At some places in the desert, such torrents pour onto isolated expanses of level ground, where the water collects into pools called *khabrāt*. The bedouins, seeking water for themselves, their

³C.S. Jarvis, *Three Deserts*, cheap edition (London, 1941), pp. 152-53.

camels, and the other animals they own, come and camp around these pools.

The desert climate is harsh during the day, hot and dry, the relative humidity sometimes dropping as low as about seven percent. The level then rises during the night, and water vapor condenses as drops of dew that after dawn one can see soaking the ground and revitalizing the herbage. There is so much of this that plants can almost gain sufficient water from the dew collecting on their leaves. In spring, some women go out to places thick with herbage and collect the dew in their waterskins; and livestock that grazes on such herbage may sometimes go, if only for a short while, without finding water, as we shall see when we take up the subject of desert animals and birds. Some researchers claim that in certain deserts this dew condensed on the surface of the ground and on the leaves of plants reaches the equivalent of 25 centimeters of annual rainfall.⁴

The desert heat is intense, in the summer sometimes rising to more than 50° C. in the shade, and at night falling to about 20°. The combination of dry climate with the extremes and erratic fluctuations in temperature during the summer permits only certain special kinds of trees and plants to live in the desert. These are thorny or thorn-like types (if I may be permitted this term), the leaves of which do not have a large surface area through which water would evaporate during the intense heat of spring and summer. Animals must be of those particular species that can live from these plants, both green and dry, and that can go without water for a longer period of time than other animals can endure.

Over a long period of time, this harsh natural environment forces the animal or bird that lives in the desert to evolve and adapt, even with respect to the color of its skin or feathers. With its coloring having become similar to that of its surroundings, the weak is camouflaged from the strong, thus protecting the species or ensuring its survival. The gazelle, sand grouse, and ostrich, for example, are all protected by the similarity of their coloring to that of the ground in the desert. Even predatory animals, which would perish in the desert if finding food was inordinately difficult for them, have developed col-

⁴A. Starker Leopold, *The Desert* (New York, 1961), p. 102.

orings that enable them to catch enough prey to survive in the desert lands.

The desert environment may be harsh and life in it miserable, but its climate is generally salubrious. As al-Maqrīzī reports:

‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb related that he asked Ka‘b al-Aḥbār about the natural characteristics of the lands and the innate dispositions of those who lived in them. Ka‘b replied: “When Almighty God created things He made for each of them a partner. Intellect said, ‘I am setting out for Syria;’ and Discord said, ‘And I go with you.’ Fertility said, ‘I am setting out for Egypt;’ and Disgrace said, ‘And I go with you.’ Hardship said, ‘I am setting out for the desert;’ and Salubrity said, ‘And I go with you.’”⁵

In the Umayyad period, the caliphs used to send their sons to the desert when pestilence broke out in the city. Hence, by reason of this harsh desert environment the bedouin himself is compelled to adapt his way of life to harmonize with his surroundings. This desert thus exerts its influence on his customs and manners, as we shall see when we consider bedouin matters in this book.

Deserts and Sand-Deserts of Arabia

In Arabia there are many desert areas suited to the life of the bedouin and from which he derives his name. As already mentioned above, one tends first to think of such lands in terms of sand-deserts. The largest of these is the Rub‘ al-Khālī (the Empty Quarter), the famous sand-desert in southern Arabia extending from ‘Umān in the east to the Yemeni frontier in the west and to Najd in the north. Its area is about twice that of all of France and many regions of it remain unknown, despite the writings about it by Western explorers, most notably Bertram Thomas, St. John Philby, and Wilfred Thesiger.⁶ To

⁵See al-Maqrīzī, *Al-Mawā‘iz wa-l-i‘tibār bi-dhikr al-khiṭaṭ wa-l-āthār* (Cairo, AH 1324), I, 79.

⁶In former times its fearsome prospect was described in the verse transmitted from the poet al-Marār ibn Sa‘īd al-Faq‘asī:

It was as if the hearts of its guides

the north it merges into the second sand-desert, the Dahnā', which lies to the west of the Aḥsā' region, runs parallel to it and to the Arabian Gulf, and connects the Rub' al-Khālī to the sand-desert of the Nafūd. Some geographers consider the Dahnā' as part of the Rub' al-Khālī. The third is the sand-desert of the Nafūd, which covers the northern Ḥijāz as far as the Gulf of al-'Aqaba. According to some estimates, there is enough sand in these deserts in Saudi Arabia alone to encircle the entire world with a belt of sand nine meters wide and one meter deep. There is also the sand-desert of Sinai, to the north and west of al-'Aqaba, and finally the northern sand-desert, the major part of which is called the Syrian Desert, or Bādiyat al-Shām.

Although it does contain broad expanses of sand here and there, the Syrian Desert is not a sand-desert comparable to the other four. Indeed, in many parts of it there is good soil, where many more kinds of herbage will grow than in the other sand-deserts, making it a paradise for the bedouin seeking a place to stop and graze his animals. The Syrian Desert spreads itself out in the form of a great triangle. One base angle lies above the Iraqi city of al-Baṣra on the Arabian Gulf, and is connected to the other, above the Gulf of al-'Aqaba on the Red Sea, by an imaginary line cutting across Iraq, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the Hashimite Kingdom of Jordan. The third great angle (in the shape of an arch) lies west of Tadmur in Syria and near the peripheries of the Euphrates in the Jazīra. As already suggested, this desert should more properly be called by this name in order to distinguish it from the sand-deserts mentioned above. Traditional Arab usage divides the northern desert into three desert zones: the Syrian Desert in southern Syria, the Jazīra Desert adjoining Turkey in northern Syria, and the Iraqi Desert in southern and western Iraq. In these three deserts there is little rain, the annual average not exceeding a few centimeters. It is more plentiful in the north than in the south, and usually occurs only in the winter, though some rain may occasionally fall in the autumn or early spring. Southeasterly or northwesterly winds are conducive to

Were suspended on the horns of gazelles.

See Aḥmad ibn Fāris, *Mutakhayyar al-alfāz*, edited by Hilāl Nājī (Baghdad, 1390/1970), p. 144. Here we read that the bedouins say of something that is unstable: "It is on an ill-fated footing," "It is caught amongst the claws of misfortune," and "It is on the horn of a gazelle."

rainfall; but when the wind shifts to the north, the clouds disperse and rain ceases.

All these desert lands are extremely hot in the summer, the temperature occasionally reaching the upper 50s on the Centigrade scale.⁷ In winter it becomes cold and the temperature falls to nearly 0° C., especially in the north, where in some years snow falls and part of it lays. Musil mentions that he witnessed snowfall in the desert in early December,⁸ and I know from my own experiences that one year in the 1960s the snow killed many head of livestock that were far from the camps of their owners. A similar disaster occurred during the winter of 1972–73. Within the same season there is considerable variation between the day and nighttime temperatures, particularly in the spring, when the difference can be as much as 30° C. At night during the summer, the temperature is moderate and there are refreshing breezes.

During the summer and late spring in some of these desert areas, there may occur storms and whirlwinds that blow the dust and sand with practically blinding force. Whirlwinds will sometimes rise in a column to a tremendous height from the ground, rapidly moving along and engulfing within themselves whatever vegetation and soil they may scour up from the ground. I have actually seen many such storms, but they are hardly of the force so eloquently attributed to them by Professor Waṣfi Zakaṛīyā:

Between heaven and earth rage the whirlwinds and sandstorms of the desert, whirling like a pillar of tremendous height and stirring up a tempest of dust and soil. They are truly harrowing weather phenomena, and among the most frightening spectacles of nature that could ever rob one of his night's sleep. You see it approaching from the bowels of the sandy waste or the heart of the desert steppe, at first almost resembling a line drawn across the horizon, then rising and swelling into the air, its winds intensifying to driving blasts that carry the soil and dust away, whirling

⁷Dickson claims that in the desert of Kuwayt the temperature reaches 170° F., or more than 76° C., and in the shade 120° F., or about 49° C. See his *The Arab of the Desert*, pp. 258, 358.

⁸Alois Musil, *In the Arabian Desert* (New York, 1931), p. 20.

it along the ground and lifting it up into the air, a twisting gale encompassing huge vortices of different hues, varying according to the color of the soil and the places where they originated. The storm blows and lifts soil from tens of kilometers away. It appears like a wall towering to the clouds in the sky, soaring, surging, and looming closer, and then suddenly it engulfs you and plunges you into a dark cloud, a deep sullen shimmering red. Caught out of doors, there is no possible way for you to avoid its horror and torment. By now you can hear the pattering of sand grains and the echo of their constant turbulent scratching. You see fine specks of soil surging and colliding together, grains and specks that lash the face like a whip, parch the throat, and sap the strength of one's soul. The rising dust blinds the eyes, and the animals wander in lost confusion... Those who live in Dayr al-Zawr and other such places in the lands of the Euphrates recognize the magnitude of these gales and storms by their characteristic features and the effects they have.⁹

I recall that once I took off on a flight from Baghdad as it was engulfed by a sandstorm; the storm eclipsed the city from our view, and we could see nothing but a cloud of sand. In the early years of this century, D.G. Hogarth claimed that the desert extended right to the settled areas, and that it even "licks the very walls of Baghdad."¹⁰

As I have already mentioned, the Syrian Desert is the desert with the most productive land, the richest plant life, the best pasturage, and the most people. There are many oases in the north, where it borders the settled lands of the Fertile Crescent, as well as villages known as the villages of al-Manāẓir. These oases were once populous villages or small towns, some of which have disappeared, their ruins obliterated and forgotten, while others survive to this day. One of these is al-Qaryatayn, which had a population of 4000 souls at the turn of the century and today has close to 20,000 inhabitants; and others are al-

⁹Zakarīyā, *'Ashā'ir al-Shām*, I, 31–32. In the 1950s, a storm of this kind caused a Syrian Dakota aircraft carrying about twelve passengers to crash south of Aleppo. All on board were killed, including the son of a friend of mine in al-Nabk.

¹⁰D.G. Hogarth, *The Nearer East* (New York, 1915), p. 260.

Sukhna and Arak. In ancient times, there were some desert settlements, such as Petra in Nabataean times and Palmyra in the days of Odenathus and Zenobia, that flourished to such an extent that they became the capitals of great kingdoms. Were it not for the constant conflict between nomadism and settled life, the continual depredations of the bedouins in centuries past, the menace they posed to security and settled life, their pillaging of fields and villages, and the resulting impoverishment and emigration of the villagers, there would have arisen in a large part of this desert an agrarian civilization similar to that in certain areas of the Fertile Crescent itself. In fact, the Romans exploited parts of this desert to the benefit and glory of their empire; and their example was followed by the Umayyad caliphs in Syria, who undertook building projects the ruins of which can still be seen today.

There is a Roman road (*stratum*) connecting Khān al-Shāmāt and al-Ruṣāfa and today known as *Al-Ṭarīq al-raṣīf*, "the Paved Way," many paved stone sections of which still survive and extend for long distances. There is another road, linking Damascus and Tadmur, that was built during the reign of Diocletian; and yet another road intersects the route of the pipeline north of the town of al-Ghunthur, between al-Furqulus and the T-4 pumping station. About 60 kilometers east of al-Qaryatayn there is a Roman dam stretching between the mountains of al-Bārida and al-Naḡnaḡīya. This dam once held back the water flowing down from the two mountains and the hills beyond them. It rises to a height of eighteen meters above ground level, with a width of 18.5 meters at its base in the wadi bed, and about seven meters at the top, easily wide enough for the passage of two cars. It extends for a length of about 320 meters between the two mountains, so that the waters flowing in from the mountains and the plains and trapped behind the dam would form a lake that, when filled, would amount to millions of cubic meters,¹¹ not 140,000 only, as Zakarīyā states.¹² These waters were used during the spring, summer, and autumn to irrigate the lands and fields of the settled regions downstream at al-Daww al-Faṣīḥ, near Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī, and traces of the canals are still visible today.

¹¹See the detailed study of this dam in A. Poidebard, *La Trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie* (Paris, 1934), pp. 188–89.

¹²Zakarīyā, *'Ashā'ir al-Shām*, I, 65.

There are remains of other canals in other locations, and it is claimed that one of these connected with the Orontes River and was intended to irrigate some areas of the eastern desert. So it is surely not strange that some of the ancients should have populated and settled various parts of this Syrian Desert. Among them were those who dug the pits in the centers of the depressions where the rainpools form, features we can still see in the desert, where rain and floodwaters collect and where the bedouins come to water their livestock in the late spring months when rainfall ceases.

Today the dam and the land around it are owned by Amīr Nāyif al-Sha'lān, the grandson of Amīr Nūrī al-Sha'lān. When he gained possession of it, it was a desolate place called Kharbaqa.¹³ With the passage of centuries, the outlets of the dam had become blocked, the lake bed had become filled with soil, debris, and silt, and water began to pour out over the top of the dam. Then it happened that the bottom of the dam was breached, with the result that water began to leak and pour through the wall of the dam and gradually to erode away with it some of the dirt and sediment. This created in the bottom of the filled-up lake a channel, with many twists and gullies, called the Kharbaqa. From end to end of the sediment in the lake bed, the channel widened until it became like a wadi, extending back from the dam for a distance of 200 meters or more, and bordered on both sides by accumulated soil to a height equal to the depth of the lake, or eighteen meters. As it was full of gullies, ravines, and twisting bends, the bedouins gave the place the name Kharbaqa, "the Fissured Land." I saw it while it was in this state, and noticed at the bottom of the inside of the dam an inscription from the Roman period and a well-constructed covered channel for fresh water flowing from a spring, probably the one today known as 'Ayn al-Bārīda at the edge of the cultivated area. Amīr Nāyif concluded an agreement with some of the villagers allowing them to cultivate the part to which the gullies had not yet extended. This was rich soil and produced fine yields of cotton and other crops, and it therefore occurred to him to exploit the eroded area as well. So he closed the breach in the dam, and after some years the land began to refill with the soil washed into the lake bed by tor-

¹³Not Harbaqa, as Zakarīyā states in *'Ashā'ir al-Shām*, I, 64.

rential streams from the plains and hills. When I saw the lake bed after that, it was full of soil that had dried out in the summer, its surface cracking in beautiful geometric designs. The *amīr* considered taking up with the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture the idea of restoring the dam and the lake to their condition in Roman times and in the caliphate of Hishām ibn ‘Abd al-Malik, so as to provide water for the lands around Qaṣr al-Ḥayr al-Gharbī (excavated by the French archaeologist Schlumberger). This could be done by digging large outlets, causing all of the soil and silt to wash away and cleaning out the lake bed when the torrential streams were in flood. He then proposed to close the breaches and construct controlled outlets that would allow water to flow through to the expansive flatlands downstream during the summer.

This is a project worthy of the state’s consideration, although considerable problems would be posed by silting during the winter floods and rapid water evaporation in the summer. In my view there is space to build still other dams in locations among the eastern mountains of Syria as a means of conserving the flood waters of winter for use during the summer to irrigate the lands of the nearby plains. It is worth noting that the ancients made use of similar dams, even in the heart of the Ḥijāz.¹⁴

This vast Syrian Desert includes regions that differ with respect to their soil, pasturage, and climate. Detailed consideration of Syrian desert geography and discussion of the distinctive features of each area are beyond the scope of this study. The explorer Alois Musil has already dealt with such matters in detail in his various books about the desert; he even went so far as to measure and record the temperature almost every day, summer and winter, that he spent in the desert lands. Waṣfī Zakarīyā also gave a general description of the desert in his book on the

¹⁴K.S. Twitchell states that near al-Ṭā’if he saw a dam, still in excellent condition, that had been built during the reign of the Umayyad caliph Mu‘āwiya and his son Yazīd; it bears a Kūfic inscription dated 58 AH/677–78 AD. See Twitchell’s *Saudi Arabia* (Princeton, 1947), p. 38. Similarly, Philby refers to the existence of two dams, both of which he described and one of which he photographed. These are the Ḥasīd Dam and the Qaṣr al-Bint Dam, in the mountains near Khaybar, about 165 kilometers from Medina. See his *The Land of Midian* (London, 1957), pp. 22–29.

Syrian tribes, and Professor Eugen Wirth has included much valuable information in his geography of Syria.¹⁵

Here, however, I cannot avoid commenting, albeit quickly, on the Jazīra region lying on the left bank of the Euphrates, east of Aleppo. This was an important area of the Syrian Desert that until recent times remained a bedouin domain and the scene for their raids; the strife between the various tribes, including 'Anaza, Shammar, and others, was of such violence that in former times the area became practically, if not entirely, devoid of inhabitants. Today, however, with the introduction of modern agricultural methods, this Jazīra region of the Euphrates has begun to produce a harvest so rich that it has placed Syria in the forefront of the grain-producing nations of the Arab East. The same can be said of the al-Manāzir region around the eastern oases—Arak, al-Sukhna, Tadmur, and al-Qaryatayn—where the village folk have begun to expand their fields into the vacant lands of the wadis and the dry beds of the torrential streams. There have also begun to appear certain state-sponsored industries. Phosphates, for example, are mined from the eastern mountains overlooking the desert close to 'Ayn al-Bārīda, and farms and villages have been established nearby.

Among the principal areas of this desert are Wādī Sirḥān, which extends as far as the town of al-Jawf in Saudi Arabia, and the Ḥamād, the heartland of this desert and the area to which the bedouins come during the winter in search of pasturage. You can see them coming there from all the peripheral areas we have mentioned, and then returning during the summer when the rains stop, the rainpools dry up, and the livestock has consumed whatever plant life parts of the area had provided.

The ground of the Syrian Desert is for the most part calcic soil conducive to the growth of herbage and trees, although in certain places the soil is partially mixed with sand. In fact, in some regions of the desert I have seen during the spring season species of flowers the likes of which, before I began to frequent the desert, I would never have expected to see in that land. I have seen plant life at al-Daww, where during the spring the waters of torrential streams flow down from the mountains overlooking the desert and flood the land

¹⁵Eugen Wirth, *Syrien. Eine geographische Landeskunde* (Darmstadt, 1971).

to a depth of one meter, most particularly on the flatlands, where there accumulates a thick layer of sediment deposited there by the streams. At the bases of some of these prominences, such as Jabal al-Ghaṭṭūs, Jabal Kaḥla, Jabal al-Ṭiwāl, Jabal Khunayzīr, Jabal Qannāṣ, and ‘Ayn al-Wu‘ūl, there are many species of flowers, among them a variety of the lily of the valley that one botanist claims is not found anywhere else in the world. Some of the European explorers who visited these areas did not fail to mention the many kinds of plants they contained and to record their names in their writings. I have used a number of these to compile a table of the names of all those I could mention. There were those who discovered species previously unknown among Western scholars, and so gave them new names.

Doctor George Post, a professor at the Syrian Protestant College in Beirut, now the American University of Beirut, compiled late in the last century a two-volume work on the plants of Syria, Palestine, and Sinai. The book was revised and republished in 1932 by Professor John Dinsmore, and that edition listed about 4200 species of plants from about 1000 different families. Many of these the author says are found in the Syrian Desert. And this is to say nothing of the numerous observations made by other explorer-scholars about the plants and flowers that grow in this desert. I myself have seen there a kind of lavender (*khuzāmā*) similar to what we call *lāwandah* in Lebanon, and red anemones spread like a scarlet carpet in some areas. Among the hills overlooking and adjoining the desert near Tadmur, there is even a terebinth woodland on Jabal al-Bal‘ās some trees of which are still growing to the present day, despite the number felled by both bedouins and settled folk in recent centuries.

On the desert fringe there are localities the current names of which suggest that they are places where many trees once grew. Al-Buṭmīyāt (“the Terebinths”), al-Khaḍrīyāt (“the Green Ones”), and Wādī l-Ṭīn (“Wadi of the Fig Trees”) are all names that refer to the presence of trees in these places in earlier times. There are those who maintain that the truffle, which grows in the Syrian Desert after the autumn rains, only appears in land that had been covered with trees in ancient times, and now lives as a parasite on the decayed and disintegrated remains of tree roots.

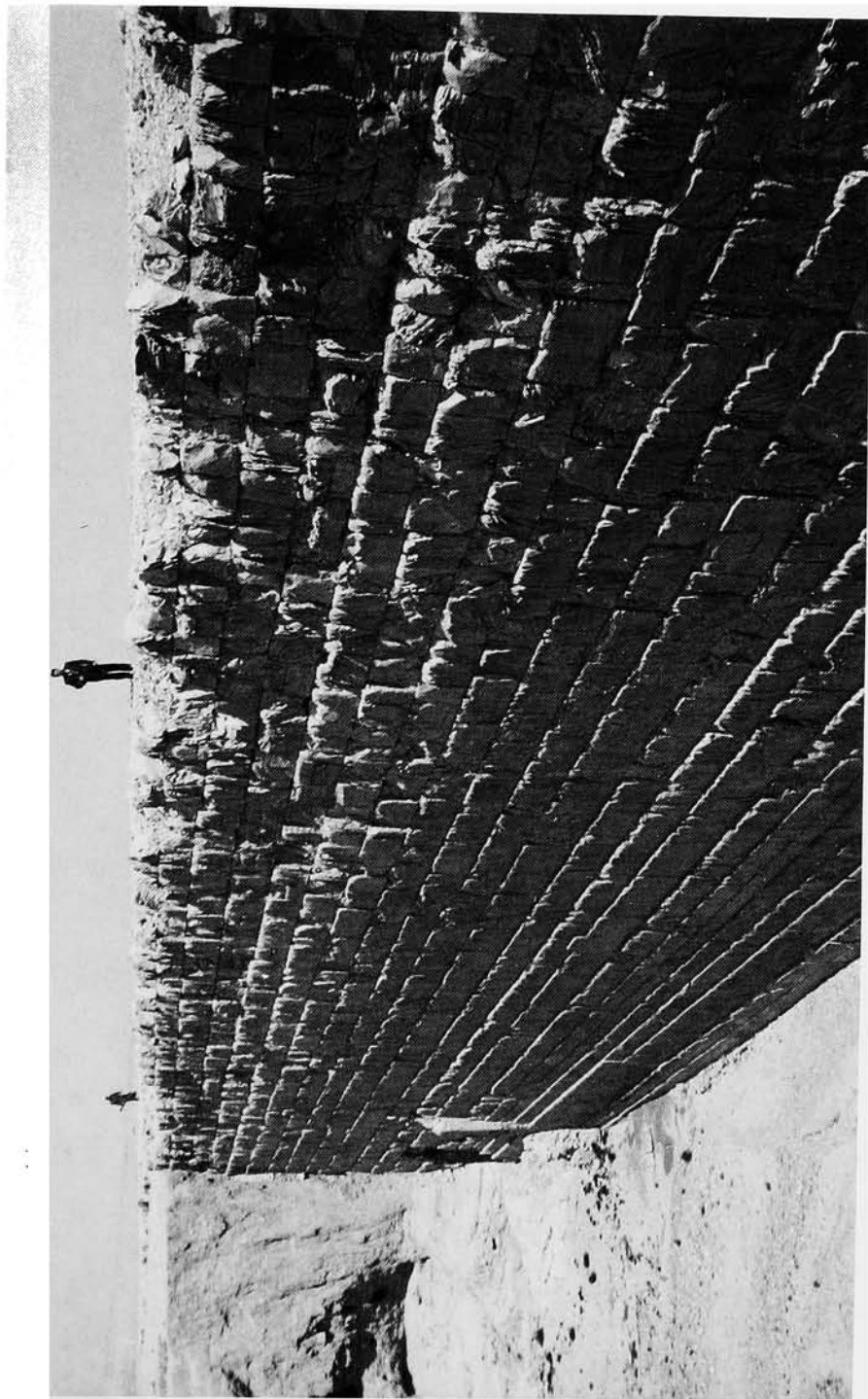


Figure 6: The Kharbaqa Dam.

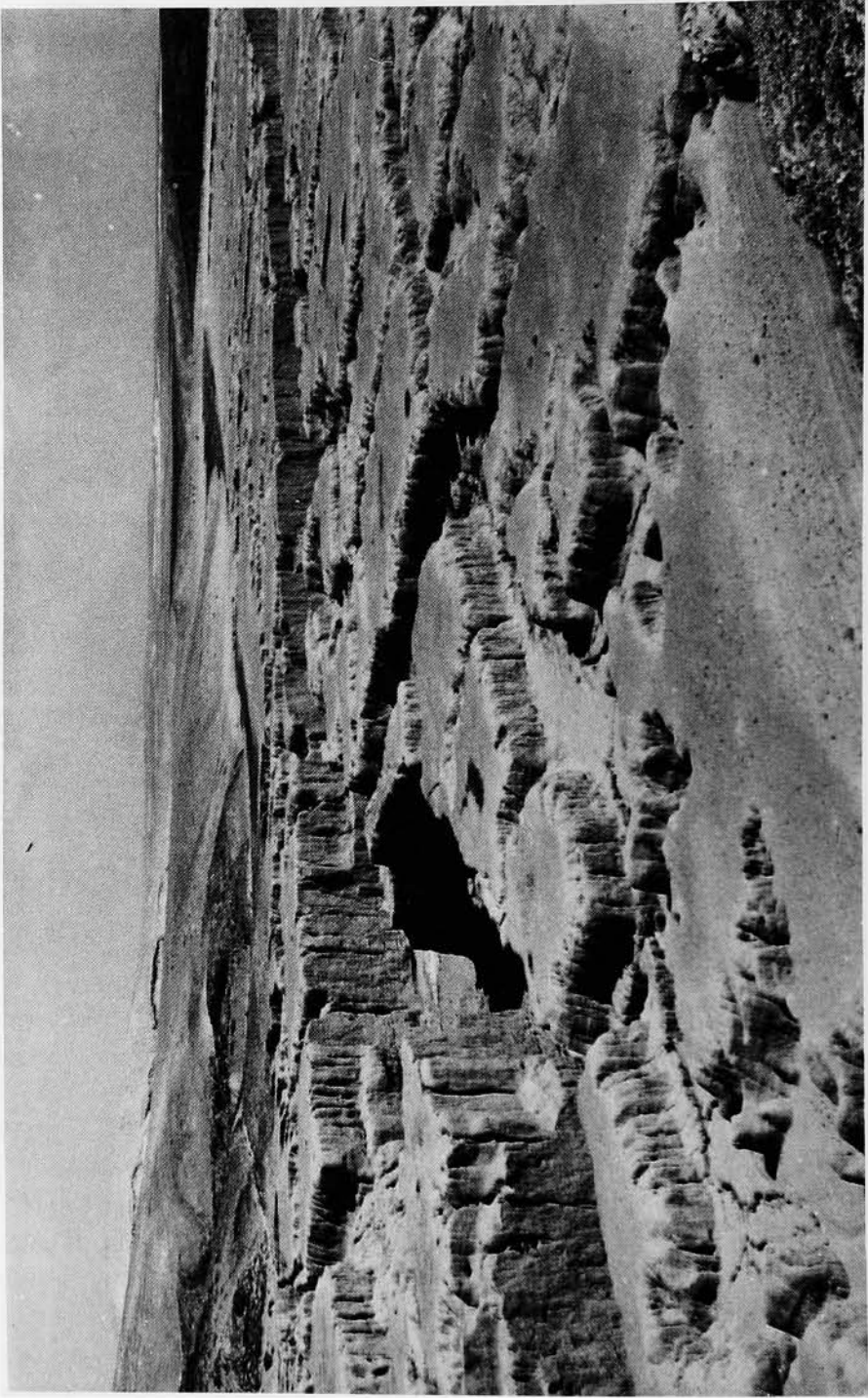


Figure 7: The bed of the lake, once the outlets of the dam had become blocked and the lake was filled with sediment from the flood waters.

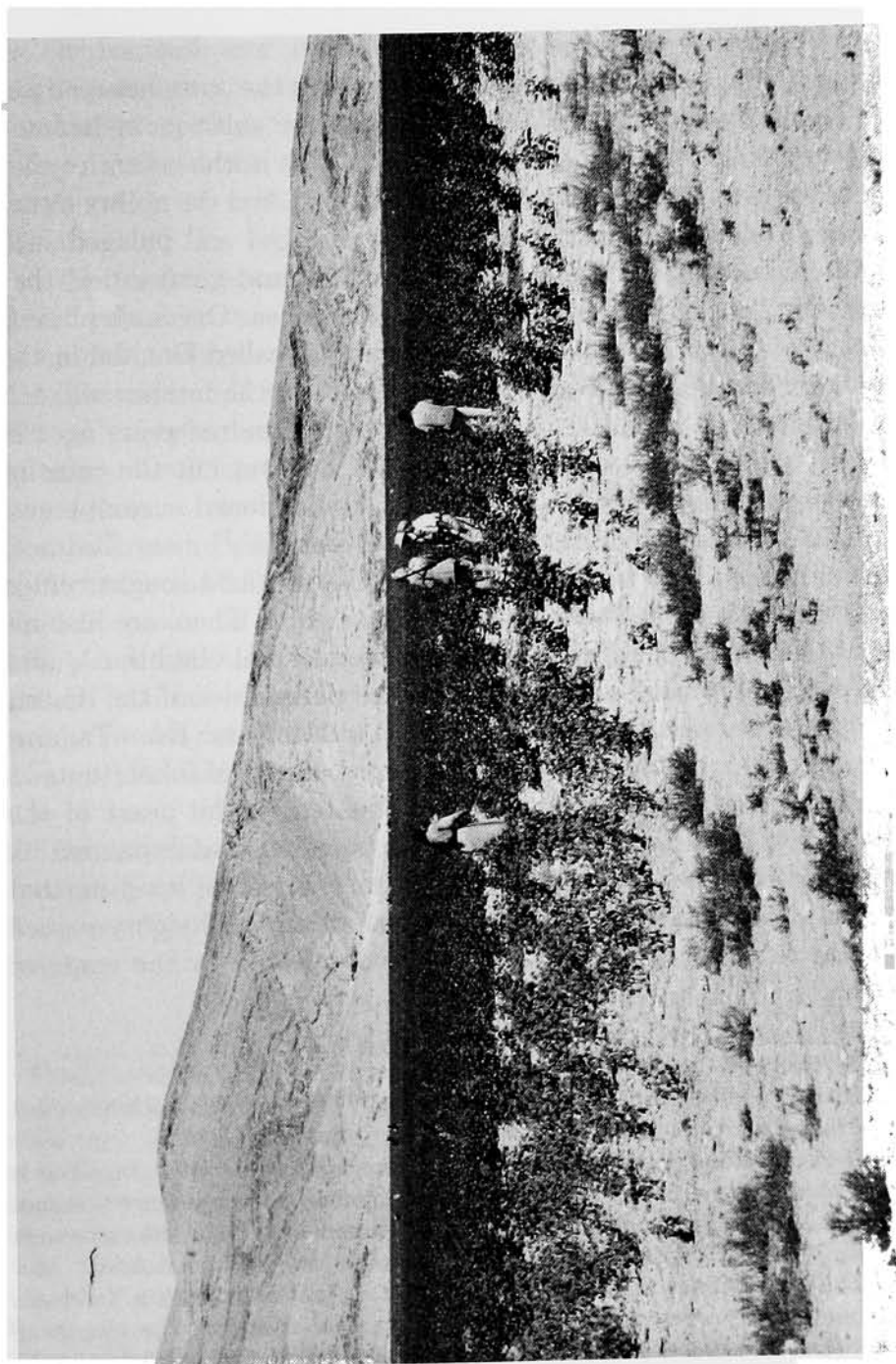


Figure 8: The lake, its sediment-filled bed planted with cotton.

The sedentary culture of the Syrian Desert was destined, as we can see, to suffer setbacks and afflictions during the wars between the Persians and the Romans, and then through the subsequent bedouin onslaughts against the fringes of the settled lands in the centuries that followed. In these latter times the ruling power lacked the ability either to repulse or to deter the bedouins, who so ravaged and pillaged such areas, far removed from the capitals, entrepôts, and great cities, that today nothing remains of the places but their names. One such place is the village of al-Baṣīrī, which Musil maintains is called Danābā in the ancient Arabic sources.¹⁶ People of the villages of the interior will tell you about the village and its agriculture only a hundred years ago. It faded into oblivion, and today nothing of it survives but the ruins of an old church, looking like the remains of an abandoned encampment, and a well.¹⁷ The same can be said of al-Bakhrā',¹⁸ near Tadmur, which was a populous village when al-Walīd ibn Yazīd sought refuge and was killed there.¹⁹ Today it is a desolate ruin. There are also al-Jabāh, al-Kamkūm, Ḥammāmāt al-Hummā (near al-Ghunthur), and hundreds of empty ruins scattered along the peripheries of the desert, all of which were once populous agricultural settlements. Even Tadmur itself, today a populous town, was practically devoid of inhabitants in the late nineteenth century.²⁰ Though situated in the heart of the Syrian Desert, it was once the capital of a kingdom that expanded its territory and extended its authority to such an extent that it subjugated Egypt and made it a dependency of Palmyra. Then sovereignty passed from Palmyra when its queen, Zenobia, was defeated by the emperor Aurelian.

¹⁶Musil, *Palmyrena*, p. 129.

¹⁷I was once told the name of a man from the family of Ḥabīb Ḥannah who owned a farm in the village, and I remember knowing him when I was a boy.

¹⁸Most of the European explorers misspell the name of this ancient town. This is because they displace it from the dialect of the bedouins, who pronounce no vowel after the *bā'* and *a* after the *khā'*. Some of the explorers even go to the extreme of writing it as "Bukhārā" [the name of a famous Islamic city in Central Asia].

¹⁹Sir John Bagot Glubb is mistaken when he claims that al-Walīd ibn Yazīd was besieged and killed in one of the villages of Damascus. See his [*The Empire of the Arabs* (London, 1963), p. 200 =] *Imbarātūrīyat al-'arab*, Arabic translation by Khayrī Ḥammād (Beirut, 1966), pp. 381–82.

²⁰Lady Anne Blunt, *Bedouin Tribes of the Euphrates* (New York, 1879), p. 207.

There was a series of wars between the Persians and the Romans, fought mainly in Syria and the surrounding areas. First the Romans were defeated, then the Persians were defeated, but all the while the villages suffered the setbacks and afflictions of the wars and oppressive taxation as well. Finally, with the Arab conquest and the rising power of the bedouins, who gained mastery of the desert, settled life there eventually disappeared. Many of these centers on the desert outskirts were captured on terms of capitulation (*sulḥan*), and concluded treaties with the conquerors in order to save themselves from destruction;²¹ but the bedouin spirit, which glorified raiding and martial exploits, was not particularly favorable to settlement in the agrarian districts, to life dependent upon agriculture, or to sedentary concerns relevant to it. Add to this the outbreaks of civil strife that occurred in early Islamic times in the later years of the caliphate of 'Uthmān ibn 'Affān and after his death; Mu'āwiya's rise to independent power as governor of Syria; the quarrels among the Arab tribes over issues between them and their division into the Qays and Yemen factions; the attacks launched against each other by opposing groups in the desert lands of Syria; the concern of the ruling authorities to alleviate the internal discord; the pursuit of conquests outside of Syria; the regime's need for troops, who were mostly men from the Arab tribes; and finally the transfer of the caliphate to Baghdad and the penetration of Persian elements in the 'Abbāsīd regime—all these developments diverted attention from the protection of the desert fringes.

²¹See Donald R. Hill, *The Termination of Hostilities in the Early Arab Conquests: A.D. 634-656* (London, 1971), pp. 59-84. Shaykh Nāyif al-Sha'lān told me that when they were digging among heaps of debris on the site of a church in a field of al-Baṣīrī in the desert, they discovered a practically crumbling shoulder-blade bone on which were still visible some traces of words written in Arabic. Of these the name of the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb could be read, and also the word '*ahd*, "covenant." This was believed by some to be a covenant from 'Umar to the Christian inhabitants of the village, who preserved it in their church. As some of the bedouins told me, the church fell to ruin when the entire village was abandoned. The bone was given to Iḥsān al-Ḥuṣnī, a deputy in the Syrian Chamber of Deputies, in 1954. The story is of course doubtful, and the present location of the artifact is unknown.

The bedouins grew stronger in authority, but throughout the Umayyad caliphate and part of the reign of the 'Abbāsids, they were not sufficiently powerful to efface the landmarks of civilization on the peripheries of the desert.²² But when the empire began to disintegrate, we hear from al-Mutanabbī himself how in the Ḥamdānid period Sayf al-Dawla pursued the remnants of a band of bedouin raiders and attacked them in the areas between al-Furqulus and Tadmur and at al-Jifār and al-Jabāh, as will be considered later.²³ From that era until the end of the First World War, it was the bedouins who held dominion in the desert and its adjoining areas, launching raids on the villages, plundering remote agricultural areas, ravaging the pilgrimage routes, and raiding each other as had been their practice in pre-Islamic times. As their poet said:

On the camp of Dībāb and Ḍabba fell the force of our raid;
For verily, the debt of a man's fate must be paid.
And sometimes our onslaughts may turn on our brother,
Should quest for a target avail us no other.²⁴

The territory of the desert thus began to expand at the expense of the settled area,²⁵ and fine agricultural lands became part of the Syrian Desert. It was this that gained it a reputation for its excellent grazing, even in its heartlands, for many parts of it are rich in the kinds of herbage upon which camels and sheep thrive. In the summer of 1954 I met bedouins from tribes in the Najd whose land had been wasted by

²²Abū l-Faraj al-Iṣfahānī mentions how the bedouins used to attack caravans in the desert. See his *Kitāb al-aghānī*, edited by Naṣr al-Hūrīnī (Cairo: Dār al-ṭibā'a, AH 1285), IX, 111.

²³See al-Mutanabbī's ode rhyming in *rā'*:

The long spears can naught but lose their length
When against them you turn your arms to fight,

p. 418 in his *Dīwān*, edited by Naṣīf al-Yāzījī (Beirut, 1887). [The phrase comprises the first hemistich of the poem; see Chapter XIX, n. 48 below.]

²⁴Abū Tammām, *Ḥamāsa*, I, 136. [The verses are from the *dīwān* of the pre-Islamic poet al-Quṭāmī. For an earlier citation from this same poem, see p. 19 above.]

²⁵There are those who by way of exaggeration say that it was not the desert that gave rise to the bedouins, but rather the bedouins who gave rise to the desert and expanded its frontiers.