

Life and Trade on the Arabian Peninsula

Water has always been central to life on the Arabian Peninsula. On the one hand, a scarcity of water has shaped every aspect of people's lives, from where they lived to what they did. But the peninsula itself was surrounded by water. Seas and gulfs separate Arabia from the rest of the world. The peninsula's location made it an important trade center in the Middle Ages and brought its people into contact with other ancient civilizations.

The Arabian Peninsula has a dry, harsh climate. Although the peninsula is nearly surrounded by water, fresh water, which is essential for life, is scarce there. Because there was so little water, the peninsula's early people were nomads. They lived in small family groups, and moved from oasis to oasis, seeking water and grasslands where their camels, goats, and sheep could graze. Romans called these Arab nomads *Bedouins*.

Arabia has no rivers or lakes. To grow food, people had to use water from rainfall, springs, and groundwater. Some of the oases in the middle of the peninsula had enough water to support farming. Small groups of Arab families settled in these



Sahara Desert oasis

oases. They grew grain and vegetables. When nomadic members of their clan or tribe visited, the residents in the

oasis offered them food in exchange for animals, meat, or other things. The paths between these oases that the

Bedouins traveled were the first “trade routes” on the peninsula.

Where fresh water was easier to get, Arab people settled and built larger communities. Springs that flowed from the mountains provided enough water for farming on the west coast, called the *Hejaz*. However, the best place for farming was on the southern coast. Most of the rain falls in the southern part of Arabia. Monsoon winds from the Indian Ocean bring seasonal rain to the mountains there. This rain allowed the people of southern Arabia to farm almost year round. In this area, the population grew and Arabia’s first kingdoms arose. The best known of these was Sa’ba. The people of Sa’ba built dams and reservoirs to help store water from the rainy season for use during the dry season.

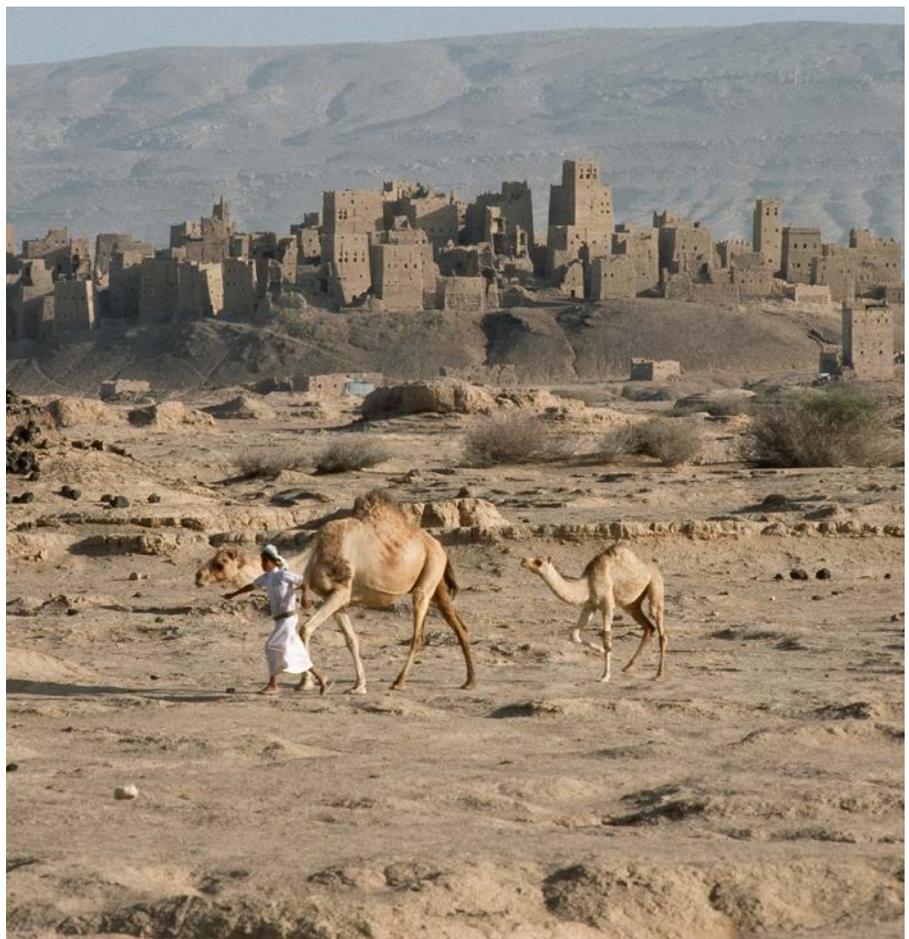
Al-Ta’if, to the north of Sa’ba, on the west coast of Arabia, came to be known as the “garden of the *Hejaz*.” Al-Ta’if was a small town in the mountains. People grew wheat, grapes, apples, figs, pomegranates, and dates there. The land had plenty of freshwater springs. The

people of Al-Ta’if dug wells and perfected irrigation tools and methods invented in ancient Egypt. They passed on what they learned to Arabs living in the oases in the middle of the peninsula.

Arabia was surrounded by the ancient empires of Europe, Asia, and the rest of the Middle East. These ancient empires were trade partners. Goods traveled between Rome and the

kingdoms of Africa, India, and China. The empires battled with one another for control of the trade going on among them. The people in these empires knew of Arabia. The Romans had a special name for Arabia. They called it *Arabia Felix* (“Happy Arabia”).

Most of this trade took place across the Indian Ocean. The monsoon winds that brought rain to the southern part of the Arabian Peninsula every year



Overland caravan route



Arab cloth merchants

powered the ships crossing the ocean. The winds blow from the east to the west in the winter (the dry season), and from the west to the east in summer (the rainy season). Trading ships from China and India used these winds to sail across the Arabian Sea to the west in winter. Ships from Arabia sailed across the sea to the east in spring. The cities of Aden and Cane, on the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula, soon became popular places for these ships to stop before making the journey east, or north into the Red Sea.

Soon, two major trade routes were passing through

Arabia. The first was the maritime route between Africa and India. Goods from the east and west were unloaded from ships at Aden and Cane, and goods from Arabia itself took their place. Products such as frankincense and myrrh—made from the sap of trees that grew in the mountains around Sa’ba, and used as incense and in perfumes—brought great wealth to the area.

The other trade route crossed overland using camel caravans. The caravans went up and down the west coast and crossed over the middle of the peninsula between Mecca and Medina, and the Persian

Gulf. Goods on these caravan routes came south from Egypt and the Mediterranean to the port cities in southern Arabia. There they were loaded onto ships bound for Africa or India. Goods from India and Asia that were unloaded at Aden or Cane traveled north on these overland routes to cities in eastern Arabia and the rest of the Middle East.

As trade on the Arabian Peninsula grew, Sa’ba became a center of power. Sa’ba was located on the overland trade route and near the popular port of Aden. Because of its location, Sa’ba was soon known throughout Europe and Asia as the place

to go to find exotic plants, spices, new and interesting beverages, and fabrics. People from Rome to China wanted goods from Sa'ba and sent merchants there to

find goods to trade. Some of those merchants settled in Sa'ba permanently.

Another Arab city that rose in importance at this time was Mecca. Mecca was located

on the caravan route across the desert and close to the port city of Jeddah. Like Sa'ba, Mecca grew powerful from the trade and goods that passed through its streets on its way to other lands. Mecca was also important in another way. Many Arab people came to Mecca to worship at the temples and mosques there. The people visiting Mecca for religious reasons helped business, and the population of Mecca and the surrounding towns grew.

Baghdad and the cities to the north of the Arabian Peninsula became popular among traders using the old Silk Road. Almost a million people lived in Baghdad by 1200 CE (Common Era). It was one of the most important commercial centers in the world, its leaders controlling all overland trade between Europe and China. To the west, the cities of Damascus and Aleppo grew in importance as they exchanged goods with Baghdad. From Damascus and Aleppo, goods made their way to markets in Constantinople and the rest of Europe. Nearby Basra grew to become the most important town on the Persian Gulf.



Spices at an Arab market

Key Unit Vocabulary

Lesson 1

Afroeurasia: The continents of Africa, Europe, and Asia.

Bazaar: A permanent market or street of shops and stalls.

Caravan: A group of travelers, such as merchants or pilgrims, who travel together.

Climate: The prevailing, average weather conditions of a particular area over time.

Dhow: An Arab, single-masted, sailing ship rigged with one or two lateen (triangular) sails.

Dirham: An Arab coin.

Export: (verb) To send goods or services to another country for sale. (noun) A product that is sent to another country.

Foodstuff: An item that is consumed as food.

Import: (verb) To bring goods or services in from another country. (noun) A product that is brought from another country.

Maritime: Relating to navigation or commerce on the sea.

Medieval: Associated with the Middle Ages (476–1450 CE [Common Era]).

Mosque: A building where believers in Islam go to worship.

Natural resources: Materials, such as water, minerals, energy, and soil, that people use from nature and natural systems.

Nomad: A member of a tribal people with no permanent home, who travels to find food, pasture, and water for livestock.

Oasis: A fertile area in a desert where there is a supply of water.

Pandemic: An epidemic disease that spreads across many countries and affects large numbers of people.

Plague: A contagious epidemic disease, such as the bubonic plague.

Port: A town or city with a harbor where ships can be loaded or unloaded.

Sedentary: Remaining in one location and not migrating.

Spices: Aromatic plant materials used for flavoring food or creating a pleasant odor.

Sultan: The Arabic name for the ruler of a country or place.

Surplus: The quantity of goods or services above the quantity needed to meet one's own needs.

Textiles: A cloth or woven fabric.

Topography: The surface features of an area or the use of symbols and colors on a map to show surface features of an area.

Trade: (noun) The exchange of goods by buying, selling, or bartering.

Name: _____

Instructions: Think about how the growth of trade brings about change in different parts of the environment. Fill in the web below with your ideas, based on what you have read and discussed about the development of trade in California. (2 points each idea)

