

MAKING THE INCONSPICUOUS,
MANIFEST: AESTHETICS OF THE
BEDOUINS

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ABSTRACT

This research is aimed at exploring the aesthetics of a race that dwells in the region which is the cradle of Islam, habitants of which are generally labelled as uncouth and uncivilised. First half of this paper hence, strives to determine status of the race, probing the ethnicity of people that can rightly be entrusted the sobriquet, Bedouins. While the second half scrutinises about their sense of beauty and creativity by contemplating the annals of history, considering in mind that beauty and creativity is instinctive in man which is hard to be eluded. Religious chronicles and historical facts both are probed about contextually in this respect. Deciphering consequently that art is a human instinct, with which man cannot depart, although it is not one of his basic needs. But being instinctive its outlet emerges at once in propitious circumstances, and tries to peep out in the unpropitious.

In the annals of history Bedouins are labelled as uncouth barbarians, the uncivilised nomads habitual of plundering the riches of others, as their rightful occupation. In the field of aesthetics they are considered deficient. But a closer affinity with the history of Arabs, disapproves this allegation. It asserts that the sense of beauty was not lacking in them, on the contrary the true hindrance lied in the unpropitious conditions they had to face in their unruly abode: the desert. However, they proved to be creators of aesthetics of great calibre wherever conditions were permitted. There is a probing question about their identity. Who were the Bedouins?

In general terms, the word Bedouin is mostly found in the Egyptian history, designated to the nomads roaming around Egypt and Arabia (Hitti 33). But etymology of this word is Semitic which means desert or its dwellers but no nationality is linked with them. Whereas, in the Holy *Qur'an* the term *Arab* is only used for Bedouins (Hottinger 23), so Arab and nomads are synonymous too (Hitti 41). Similarly, in the English version of Bible, the Hebrew word *arabāb* is translated as *desert* or *wilderness* (Montgomery 79). There are references of Arabs and Arabia in the Old Testament, where the word Arab is used for nomadic Bedouins that are the Arab people, not that region. The term Arabia was later coined by Greeks to denote the Arab peninsula (Montgomery 28). Thus it is corroborated by tracing chronicles and religious scriptures that Bedouins were the nomadic people of Arabia, who, when turned to sedentary population, were called Semites.

Semitic affiliation of the Bedouins is generally a moot proposition, considered by numerous Arabists as the immigrants of Mesopotamia, while others entrust Arab peninsula as the original home of Semites. It is still to be determined on philological and ethnological inductions. But it is a historical fact that there had been a constant seeping in of the Semites to the surrounding lands from the Arab peninsula which must be the reservoir of this race (Montgomery 21). So it asserts that the Arab peninsula was the “cradle” of Semites (Hitti 3), who were Hamites of Eastern Africa. From the times immemorial they migrated to this part of land and later received the nomenclature Semites. History approves this fact by disclosing that millions of years ago Cape of Arab was joined with

Africa, particularly with Ethiopia (Munir 7). The topography and arid climate of the region is also similar to the Eastern Africa. Excessive part of the land is occupied by desert with sand and limestone plateaus bordered by mountains which appear to be a continuation of the African continent (Kheirallah 7). Semites of Africa migrated to the coastal lands of Arabia and settled at the fringes of the desert which were the only verdant lands. These Semitic tribes when increased in population moved periodically to the fertile lands surrounding the Arab peninsula because in the Arabian cape, coastal parts were the only areas where promising conditions for life prevailed. The inner part of the cape was barren, which could not allow the coastal dwellers to expand their living quarters there that is inside the desert. So they were bound to migrate to the fertile lands located around the cape. Whereas, some other scholars believe that Semites were the original inhabitants of Tigris-Euphrates valley who, moved to Arabia and elsewhere.

These scholars mostly refer to Bible for the story of the great patriarch Abraham, who with his family migrated from Ur of the Chaldaes: the southern edge of Babylonia. He moved northward to Harran in the upper Euphrates valley, and then trekking south settled in the Western lands now called Palestine (Montgomery 55). In the Biblical genealogy Aramaeans are connected with Abraham, who appeared on the borders of Mesopotamia about middle of the second millennium B.C. It was similar to the movement of Amorites a millennium earlier from the same quarters. Aramaeans were the descendants of Abraham's brother Nahor. It is recorded in the Bible that Isaac, the son of Abraham, married Rabekah, the grand daughter of Nahor. Nahor's son Batheul and grand son Laban retained the cognomen "the Aramaeans". Hence, Aramaeans descended from Nahor. Moreover, Jacob the son of Isac got two wives and two concubines from the Aramaean stock; his wife was the daughter of Batheul (Montgomery 48). The descendants of Abraham, in this respect, were from the Aramaeans. Thus Abraham and Babylonians of the first dynasty are generally regarded as Amorites, who were Semites of the Western land, the land of Amurru¹ (Montgomery 50). But in the Assyrian records, the land extending between Syria and Mesopotamia is considered to be the oldest homeland of Semites (EI. vol-1 524).

Aramaean Bedouins are mentioned in this source as ancestors of the Arabs, who were anti-Assyrian in the 9th century B.C. and interfered in the affairs of upper Euphrates valley. It is historical evidence that Gindibu, from the land of Aribi² (meaning an Arabian

bedouin) in 854 B.C. helped *Bir'idri* of Damascus³ with one thousand camels against the Assyrian vassal, Salmanssar III in the battle of Karkar (EI. vol-1 524). There are numerous other sources defining Mesopotamia and the lands adjacent to it as the cradle of Semites, which is but a debatable issue.

One thing is to be borne in mind that all these races descended from a single ancestral line. We cannot challenge Bible for the story of Abraham or his Amorite pedigree or the Holy Qur'ān for defining Arabs as the Bedouins of the Arab peninsula. Truth lies in the fact that they were all Semites whose place of origin was East Africa which had been attached to the cape of Arabia, millions of years ago. Earliest inhabitants were nomads, who roamed about in search of pastures. Arabia would have provided easy access to these nomads, who must have settled at the coastal fringes. But with the increasing population and scarcity of natural resources they would have migrated to the resourceful lands of Nile valley or Tigris- Euphrates valley. Not the reverse of it because in the course of history it had been witnessed that ancient people had always turned from nomadic to sedentary population, not from settled to nomadic. But the migration of Amorites or Aramaeans and Abraham or Nahor happened very late. Earliest Semitic migration from East Africa to the cape of Arabia was very ancient incident which was followed by numerous other immigrations from Arabia to the adjacent lands.

In the table of nations in Gen: 10, two genealogies have been traced, one from Shem and the other from Hamites, which then "pairs with Shemite Pedigree". The descent from Shem is traced from the Yahwistic source of Pentateuch⁴: the oldest in this source being Shem, then Arpachshad, then Shelah and after that Eber. Eber had two sons: Pelege and Yoktan. From the elder son Pelege descended Abraham: Pelege, Reu, Serug, Nahor, Terah and after him Abraham. Therefore the Paternal ancestor of Abraham was Eber. Eber is actually pronounced Heber and the title Hebrew for the Jewish language has its derivative from Heber (Montgomery 37). From Yoktan descended the people of Arabia. Thus all descended from Eber or Heber. Moreover Bible Pentateuch links Assyrians as the great uncles of Eber (Montgomery 38). But their link with the Semitic race is far earlier.

Breeding and domestication of dromedary: the single humped camel in the cape of Arabia in the ancient times also supports the hypothesis that Arabia is the earliest home of Semites. There are signs that wild dromedary lived in North-Africa and Near-East until about third millennium B.C. and became extinct from both these regions except surviving in Arabia. On the other hand presence of

dromedary in the Arab peninsula is very old but historians are not sure about when and where camel was first domesticated in that region. Referring to the history they had mentioned that by the eleventh century B.C., “sons of the east made incursions on camel backs into Palestine across the Jordan river”. They believed that camel was domesticated in Arabia between 16th to 11th centuries B.C. So the presence of Semites in this region must be earlier than that. (EI. volum-1 881), and South-Arabian desert is considered to be the area where it was domesticated at the earliest. In the Table of People, Genesis 25, camel nomads of central and north-west Arabia are mentioned and a triangle of desert steppe forming between the agrarian lands of South-Arabia, Egypt and Assyria is attributed as their homeland. It is the desert near Yemen. Earliest records of camel riding Bedouins are from cuneiforms, about their fighting against the vassal Assur Nasirpal in 880 B.C. (EI. volum-1, 882)

A cord made of camel hair has been discovered from Egypt belonging to the period of the third dynasty and a relief, stylistically attributed to the New-Empire represents the one humped camel along the other wild animals. This is not enough to prove Egypt as the place of origin of dromedary. Actually the climate of North-Africa as well as of Egypt was not suitable for the breeding of the animal, so its domestication was impossible there (E. I. volum-1 880). So it must be some foreign item, whereas climate of the Arab cape was suitable for its survival. In *Thamūdean*⁵ graffiti camels besides other domesticated animals are represented. Furthermore, a pottery jar with a head of camel has been unearthed from South Arabia in the excavation of Hadiar b. Humayd in Bayhān⁶, dated from about 9th or 10th century B.C. (E. I. volum-1, 882). There are numerous other evidences to claim that dromedary was the creature of Arabia, an essential element of the Bedouin Semites. It did not come from Mesopotamia, on the contrary reached there with the nomadic Semites of the Arab peninsula whenever they migrated there. Because it was the only animal that could withstand the hard conditions of desert and the best means of transportation for the nomads.

So, Semites were the Bedouins of Arabia who came from East Africa and settled at the coastal regions of Arabia, and then surplus population migrated periodically to the adjacent lands for the pursuit of survival. Finding a safe passage on the western coasts that led to an elbow room in the north they moved to the fertile Nile valley. A synchronous migration took place around 3500 B.C from the eastern shores of Arabia to the Tigro-Euphrates valley, inhibited by

Sumerians (Hitti 10). Semitic Bedouins when joined with the locals proved themselves to have productive minds, even in the field of aesthetics.

When they merged in the local populace of Egypt, introduced leading innovations that are still persisting in our civilisation. They are the ones who introduced solar calendar, still used in our times. They also initiated stone structures, the culmination of which is the pyramids, one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient World. Moreover, Semites when entered Tigro-Euphrates valley they encountered the cultured gentry, who were agrarian people, used to erect permanent living quarters and above all, knew the art of writing. Semitics when joined with Sumerians produced Babylonian civilization (Hitti 10) and numerous modern innovations are accredited to these creative brains. In architecture they introduced arch and vault system, originators of wheel cart and also gave the system of weight and measure. Hanging Gardens of Babylonia too are attributed to them.

Hamurabi, famous as “the law giver” was the Amorite Babylonian. By about 1900 B.C. Assyrians excelled in writing, evidence of which survive in the form of 22000 clay tablets, preserved in the British Museum. It is said that 5000 years ago they were accustomed to record their accounts on clay tablets with the help of a stylus. Chaldaean era, also called the second Babylonian age beginning about 604 B.C. is known as the age of “the mother of sciences”. And above all, the earliest known archaeologist was Nabonidus, a Babylonian, who was captured by Cyrus in 539 B.C., while he was engaged in archaeological studies (Kheirallah 14-15). Architecture of Babylonia was also at a developed stage, adorned with sculptures and reliefs. The artisans were masters of the craft of lapidary; Ishtar Gate adorned with glazed tiles depicting coloured animals in relief form is among the best examples. Babylonians introduced basic method of road building, postal system and even earliest musical notation of records are among the innovations introduced by them (Kheirallah 18).

Phoenicians (west Syrians and Palestinians) migrated about the middle of the third millennium B.C. were the sole innovators of a complete alphabetic system of writing consisting of twenty two symbols (alphabets), a brain child of Semites. This context is enough to rule out the notion that Semites, the Bedouins of al- Hijāz were devoid of aesthetics.

Although it retains the charge of lacking aesthetic heritage while its neighbours: Babylonians, Assyrians, Chaldaeans, Aramaeans, Hebrews and Phoenicians are exalted for their artistic creations. But

marked analogy of their languages and physical features compels one to think about certain deep rooted kinship among these people. The similarity of languages is actually another cord that ties these people to one string. All these languages had Semitic roots, emerging from the one called Ur-Semitic (O'leary 24) or Ursemitisch (Hitti 12). Although, original Semitic language was retained by none but numerous words holding similar meaning were commonly used in many of these languages, a mark of affinity among these people. For instance, Maulānā Abu al-Kalām Āzād while commenting on the words "Allāh" and "Rab" in the exegesis of the first chapter of the Holy Qur'ān: *al-Fāṭiha*, asserts that these words were used in all the Semitic languages. The word "Rab" is used in *Ibrānī* (Hebrew), *Sīryānī* and Arabic denoting the One, who nurtures. He further adds that in *Ibrānī* (Hebrew) and Aramaic, "Rabbāh" and "Rabbī" have similar meaning. And in the ancient Egyptians and *Khāldī* languages the word "Rabū" denotes identical connotation. Thus he also stresses that the similarity of these languages proves the ancient Semitic homogeneity of these people (Azad 29).

It was further enhanced in the 19th century when Cuneiform language was decoded. It disclosed the cognate nature of these languages that is Assyro-Babylonian, Hebrew, Aramaic, Arabic and Ethiopic. The grammar and vocabulary of these languages have closer kinship. It means they stem from a single cord. Further investigation disclosed greater similarity of the "social institutions, religious beliefs and physical features" (Hitti 9) of these people. It is inferred thus from the evidences that these people must have emanated from the same ancestral line, which is ascribed to the Hamites of Eastern Africa, who were re-named Semites later.

Semites who were Bedouins in Arabia, Babylonians in Mesopotamia and Phoenicians in Syria were the intelligentsia who best adapted themselves to the circumstances surrounding them. The Bedouins of Arabia represent the optimum adjustment "of human life to the desert conditions" (Hitti 22), which is also an aspect of their aesthetics. When they migrated to the fertile valleys, where their energies were not spent on the hardships of desert, they engaged themselves in the healthy activities. In the creative and aesthetic pursuits they proved superb. But all this arises certain queries about the attribution of the creative acts, such as, whether those creations were by native people or attribution of any sort be given to the immigrant Bedouins that is to Semites, as they had no past heritage likewise. It is true that they had lived in simplicity: their raiment, dwellings, customs and traditions were so simple that did not require

any lavishness. This does not mean that they lacked aesthetic values rather their circumstances did not allow them to ponder on these lines.

It is evident therefore, that creativity can not be placed in the category of the basic human needs but it is one of the basic human instincts. One can survive without it but this survival would not be a pleasant one. So Bedouins of Arabia expressed their creative skills wherever they met propitious conditions. Specimens of their talent are not only auspicious in the lands they migrated but in the Arab peninsula as well, where surroundings were promising, such as, Yaman in the Southern Arabia and Petra and Palmyra in the north.

In the civilised stance south western part of Arabia preceded the rest. The most expressive remains that provide a precise glimpse of a civilisation were its inscriptions and Sabaeans: the sedentary Bedouins, of Yaman used inscription as early as the 8th century B.C. The alphabets of these inscriptions had closer affinity with the letters of the classical Arabic. It was called South-Arabic by the scholars and in the Greek usage it was termed "Himyaritic". These inscriptions disclose that highly developed culture persisted for about 1200 years in this civilisation, peopled with elaborate civic organization (Montgomery 129).

It was not the cuneiform script as defined by many scholars which was adopted by the ancient orient beyond the confines of Babylonia. Cuneiform was surpassed by the Phoenician alphabets: more refined than Cuneiform. It was adopted by the people of Asia, Mediterranean, Greeks, and Romans and eventually by the whole world. These alphabets were early adopted by the northern-Semitic world. People from the southern part of the Arabian cape adopted this script far earlier, almost about the first half of the first millennium B.C., which confirms the civilised culture of these people at a very early date (Montgomery 163).

The South Arabian inscriptions had diversity of content but all were ultimately linked with religion. Even business documents were pasted in temples to acquire approval from deities. There were votive inscriptions on tablets consecrated to their gods. Architectural inscriptions used on temples and public buildings to commemorate historical incidents or to record the patrons and builders of these edifices. Police ordinances were engraved on pillars, and tomb architecture also contained inscriptions (Hitti 51). There were constitutional texts; elaborately defining laws of state as well as numerous inscriptions relating to the confession of sins. It defines that polytheistic religion prevailed there with elaborate system of rituals. The technique of bronze casting was applied for several

inscriptions which had no precedence (Montgomery 130). Such was the organized set up of the southern populace of Arabia. A mature not naive civilisation existed in the southern quarters of Arabia and a pronounced culture, at such an early age with its arts, inscriptions, distinctive theology and polity. Furthermore, there were prolific examples in that part, of the architectural edifices of the peninsula.

In the first century A.D. al-Yaman was called “the land of castles”, and the most illustrious of all, was the castle of *Ghumdān* at *San‘ā’* in al-Yaman erected by Himyarites. It is the earliest sky scraper, a twenty storied fortified citadel. There were astonishing facts about this castle. The upper most storey, where the court of the king was held, its ceiling had such a transparency that it is proverbial that one could look through it skyward and easily distinguish between a kite and a crow. Moreover, each corner of the outer side of building had a brazen lion which roared with blowing of wind (Hitti 57), a witness of the prodigy of Semites. Historians Ili *Shariha* al-Hamdāni and then Yāqūt have recorded this palace in detail in the first century A.D., when it was in shambles (Hitti 57), meaning that it was erected at some early date. Another exceptionally marvellous edifice near ancient al-Yaman was the great *M‘arib* dam.

It was a fine example of engineering talent of the Semites, who may be called cultured Bedouins. A colossal water reservoir in al-Yaman, fifty five miles north-east of *San‘ā’* built under the Sabaeans rule, which extended from 950 to 115 B.C. (Hitti 54). Exact date of its erection is not known but it is suggested that it was built in about 8th century B.C. and remained in working condition for thirteen centuries that is up till the 6th century A.D. It was such a huge water reservoir that the busting of it brought enough destruction, causing migration of its people and devastating the Sabaen kingdom. It was such a great catastrophe that it is even cited in the Holy Qur‘ān. Referring infidelity of the people of Sabā‘, it is quoted, Qur‘ān xxxiv (Saba‘), 16:

(tr.) But they turned away (from Allāh), and We sent against them the flood (releasd) from the Dams, and we countered their two gardens (rows) into “gardens” providing bitter fruit and tamarisks and some few (stunted) Lot trees.

“so they turned aside and we sent on them the flood of ‘*Arim* (34, 15). ‘*Arim* means catastrophic rain or a rat, which is interpreted that excessive rain caused flood by breaking the dam or it might be by a rat that bored the dam which was already over full due to rain. An inscription denotes that the dam was destroyed by flood about 447-450 A.D. and repaired by the Abyssinian ruler Abraha, then again it was destroyed by a later date (O’Leary 90). It was a great irrigation project,

a specimen of scientific engineering, and a major contributor in the prosperity of al-Yaman (Khierallah 19-20). It had thirty regulators to control: reduce or increase the flow of water as required (Munir 8). The mortar or cement used to join stones is so strong that it has not chipped off, even after passing 2800 years. The granite and volcanic stones are so intact that it seems to have constructed recently. The northern outlet of the dam is well preserved with five spillways and in the middle, is a dyke: a solid structure to break the pressure of water (Khierallah 20). A well thought out project, not an incidental construction. Nearby it, is still existing a chain of numerous deep spring-fed reservoirs. The irrigation system related to this dam also provided a safe trade route to the caravans moving between East-Africa, India, Syria, and Egypt, which could be insecure with scarcity of water.

Apart from the southern quarter of the peninsula, a few regions in the north do retain artefacts of exquisite beauty, such as Petra⁷ and Palmyra⁸. Both were though subjugated by the Romans by around 1st century B.C. but the places are renowned for their artefacts. Petra famous for its rock hewn tombs decked with sculptures and high reliefs, particularly in the town of al-'Ula (Hitti 72). Palmyra too had architectural monuments. But thanks to the 20th century excavations that support the anti-thesis that the ancient dwellers of the cape of Arabia were neither uncivilised nor uncultured in the sphere of aesthetics. A few specimens from the excavated sites of other quarters of the cape have also been unearthed.

In Oman, Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, etc. archaeologists have dug out numerous artefacts ranging from domestic and funerary architecture to round sculptures, reliefs, jewellery, and pottery, including a few specimen of wall painting as well, a tangible proof of the sense of beauty and creativity, instinctive in man, proved unavoidable in Bedouins.

Considering in mind the ancient architecture of those regions we realise that in its function and usage it was not confined to a few limited types. There was domestic, funerary, palatial, military and religious architecture that cannot be generalised for its apparent shape or functions because of the variety it kept. It was actually subjected to the diverse climatic conditions of the peninsula and availability of its materials. For example, on the coastal lines of the Gulf, Batina, coast of Oman and Tihama, huts of perishable material such as date palm fronds were erected and dry stone construction especially of the beach-rock was made. In the former, date palm was intertwined in such a way that it provided ample space for decorative patterns, like designs weaved in the art of basketry. It is considered certain that decorative designs on Mesopotamian cylindrical seals of

proto literate period (late 4th millennium B.C. to early 3rd millennium B.C.) and the soft stone pottery pieces of the early Dynastic II and III (2600-23000 B.C.) have some affinity with these ancient examples. For permanent quarters locally available stones such as beach rock or locally available dry stone of any kind were used for construction and gypsum plaster was used as binding material. But beach-rock did not facilitate adornments because it was difficult to be carved out, so houses were just painted from outside to make them decorative.

Plans of the houses were also varied, such as circular, oval, rectangular and square. In the second millennium B.C. that is the Bronze Age, sites of Yemen had square and oval houses of dry-stone, whereas, rectangular houses with multiple rooms were common in Oman and north-west Arabia. From 2000 to 1700 B.C. the region now called Bahrain had a certain generalization of square houses with a large L-shaped room attached to a smaller square one, perhaps a pantry. Windows seem to be a part of domestic architecture because thin alabaster slabs, found from these sites, are still used as window panes in Yemen (Schmidt 247-248). The civilized stance of the Arab cape is obvious not only from their domestic architecture but funerary structures too, had enough elaboration, an evidence of their belief in the life hereafter.

In the Oman peninsula there are several examples of ancient burials with single as well as group inhumations. The most ancient example of single burials labeled as “Haft burial type⁹”, consisted of an inner and an outer ring of stone walls, which were piled up to form a domical structure. It was approached by a narrow entrance leading to a small inner chamber for the keeping of corps. Beehive graves were another type of burials either contemporary to “Haft type” or a little later addition. Here, roof is provided with horizontal placing of flat stone slabs, without mortar, to form tholos¹⁰ (Schmidt 248). Furthermore, the title Umm-al Nār¹¹ was labelled to circular graves with diameters ranging from 5 to 13 meters because these are collective burials. These were different apparently from the Haft or Beehive graves, consisted of dry-stone several feet high walls placed on a huge plinth, faced with lime stone. The whole structure was unroofed and entrance to it was from an apsidal hole in the wall. It was such a colossal structure that it could keep up to 200 corpses. Collective inhumations remained much in vogue even in the 2nd millennium B.C. along with the burial of single corpses within stone lined cists. Now there is much variety in the burial places, there are subterranean as well as above ground collective graves. In Qattara

near al- 'Ayn, Bidya, a place between Dibba and Khor Fakkan, and al-Qusays near Dubai include about 40 meters long semi-subterranean structure covered with a flat or saddle- back shaped roof formed by placing boulders without fixing with a mortar. T-shaped deep subterranean graves were found from Dhaya near Rams and Bithna near Fujayra town, in the north of the Oman. Among the above ground graves there are Shimal type that have rounded ends, it did not include any underground chamber instead the whole was placed on the ground. Khatt graves are another type which are actually Shimal type but with addition of an outer wall encircled around it to keep more corpses. By the end of the 2nd millennium B.C., there were circular and horse-shoe shaped, mostly underground. Shaft grave became popular then, which contain a vertical opening that extends into an oval chamber.

Furthermore, we see rapid advancement in burial architecture by the first few centuries A.D., specimen unearthed from Mleiha in Sharja Qaryat al-Faw in central Arabia. It was based on a subterranean chamber topped by a rectangular shaped mud brick tower, adorned with architectural ornamentation, which then took the shape of a stepped pyramid, which was much like the parapets of fortresses depicted in Neo-Assyrian reliefs. But a more elaborate type of burial from the 1st century A.D. was in the shape of a subterranean rectangular walled chamber, of locally available beach rock or some other stones masonry, and covered with a barrel vault. It had a well constructed shaft entrance, which is also roofed over with another vault. It was like a tomb structure the entrance and barrel vault of which stood above the ground whereas the actual burial chamber lay underneath (Schmidt 248-249). The above mentioned examples were related to the burial places of Oman peninsula. The use of barrel vault in such ancient times is amazing and proof of the aesthetics of those people.

Excessive examples of funerary architecture of Arabia came from its Southern quarters. Five types of burials have been unearthed from Yemen: simple pit burial, stone cairns, rock cut cists for single inhumation, used in mountainous regions, free standing sarcophagi sealed with flat stone slabs instead of lids of the stone coffins and rock hewn chambers with multiple niches. Another specialty of south-Arabian funerary places is the constructed graves. These consist of a central corridor, surrounded by eight to ten narrow chambers to keep corpses.

North-West Arabia did not lag behind the South in funerary monuments; rather it was a step ahead in its ornamentation. For example simple pit burial of each grave was provided with a stone

stele, decorated with a pair of eyes, eye brows and nose. Stepped burial mounds were surmounted by a rectangular burial cist above ground, particularly at Tayma. At Dedan, the cist was divided and frequently accompanied by frontally positioned large lions, carved out in low relief (Schmidt 249).

Rock-cut chambers were treated like large public buildings, elaborately adorned under the Nabataean rule of the north-west Arabia (4th BC. - 4th AD.), specially at Mada'in Salih: a site in Hījāz. Entrances, for instance, to these tombs were decorated with "zoomorphic" creatures like, lions and eagles, and architectural components such as curving pediments, architraves, rosettes, triglyphs, funerary urns, cornices and capitals. Entrance doors were surrounded by elaborately decorative facades, having attached columns topped with cornices (Akiyama, ed. et al. 249). But scholars like Rudolph E. Brunnow, Aferd von Domaszewski and others are of the view that Nabataeans borrowed decorative element from Mesopotamian, Egyptian and Hellenistic Greek art and blended them with their own. For example the capitals of Nabataean columns were shaped by voluted horns, instead of the volutes of Ionic columns, although the usual size and entasis of Greek column are altogether missing here. Moreover, floral decorations, diagonal arrangement of ornamentation of walls and the size of façade and tomb chambers are original Nabataean attributions not resulted from any other source of inspiration (Hammond 419).

The most arresting example of Nabataean tomb complex was in Madā'in al-Sālih, a place in Hijāz, 25 km. north of al-'Ula. There were about forty rock hewn tombs in this region. The most striking characteristic of the structures was *tabula ansata*:¹² placed above the entrance to the tomb, describing the name of builder, date of his death and terms relating to the use of temple by the family members of the deceased and other people (Akiyama, ed. et al. 250). Funerary architecture was not the only type excavated from the Arabian cape; it retained examples of palaces and military architecture too.

From the few excavated sites of Arabia one gets familiar with the magnificent residential quarters. In grandness these were not of lesser merit than their Assyrian, Babylonian or Greek counterparts. A large palace at Qal'at al-Bahrain with 1.1 metre thick walls, reminded archaeologists of the Neo-Assyrian palace of Nimrud, called Fort Shalmaneser (mid 9th century B.C.) and Babylonian summer palace of Nabuchadnezzar (604-526 B.C.). Although it has not been fully unearthed but the exposed parts approve grandness of that complex with its reception rooms, bed rooms and bath. Three other buildings

from Jumayra in Dubai were excavated in the 1970s: a complex of square shops on either side of the street, governor's palace and a large house resembling the hunting lodge. Its plan and outer layout remind the hunting lodges of the Umayyad period: rectangular rooms flanking around courtyard. The external walls intersected by circular corner bastions, semi-circular buttresses etc. The whole was decorated with plaster and stucco in Sasanian style.

There are numerous examples of military architecture too, which is of two types: small fortresses and vast open area surrounded by walls. Best examples of the latter are from east-Arabia: from al-Dur examples from 1st century A.D., at Qal'at al Bahrain specimen of 2nd century A.D. and from Jumayra 5th and 6th century buildings have been executed. The architectural features of Parthian edifices of the 3rd century B.C. can be viewed here, such as round towers, semi-circular buttresses, quarter circular pilasters, instead of square structures. The rounded shapes were adopted by Sasanians which later became important feature of the Muslim architecture (Turner, ed. 250-251).

The story of ancient architecture of the cape of Arabia does not end here but besides military this region is marked by heterogeneous religious edifices as well. In plan these structures are oval, rectangular in the shape of a parallelogram. Example of the last shape is the Barbar temple of Bahrain (2200 B.C.) which is based on a platform retaining the shape of a parallelogram. It is topped by a small rectangular shrine, surrounded by an oval wall, covering an area of 70×58m. It is constructed on a low hill with natural spring in its vicinity which was directed into the temple complex. It was such a marvellous building that it remained in use for almost five centuries that is from 2200 B.C. to 1700 B.C.

Aesthetics of the Bedouins did not lag in the field of sculpture making. Modern excavations have made us familiar with this side of their intellect. There are examples of reliefs as well as free standing sculptures in the round but those people seem more inclined to the former type. There are stone, bronze along with terracotta sculptures, mostly found from the southern quarters of the Arab peninsula, though there are examples found from other sides of this region. Reliefs are mostly linked with funerary edifices in the form of grave steles. In the Oman peninsula the earliest examples dating 2500 to 3000 B.C. are from the umm al-Nār and al-ʿAin graves in Abu-Dhabi. Ashlar masonry provided ample free space for ornamentation which was utilised properly by the artistic brains of Bedouins. On the Umm al-Nār Cairn II, there are five reliefs, three represent animals, while one depicts a creeper and another had a

stylised representation analogous to human figure. Dromedary is rendered on two blocks: on one single dromedary and on the other, dromedary with an Arabian oryx is shown. Third relief depicts a short horned bull with upturned tail. An interesting form exists on the fourth block which consists of a semi-circular shape surmounting a vertical rectangular form that has slightly narrow waist. Most probably it indicates a stylised human figure. The fifth block is perhaps part of a broken offering table that is adorned with a meandering snake carved in high relief. Further specimens are on a large grave at al-'Ain adorned with human and animal figures (Schmidt 253-254).

An interesting relief is found from 'Tayma' in north-west Arabia, which is in the north-east of Madā'in Sālih. A tall bearded figure is represented here, wearing long robes and tiara on his head, holding a sceptre in the left hand, while a winged sun disc surmounts his head. A few scholars consider him as a priest while others label him Nabonidus because of its resemblance with a stele found from Harran in the south-east of Turkey. Madā'in Sālih is a place, where Nabonidus the last king of Neo-Babylonia, had lived for ten years. He is the one, labelled as the first archaeologist of the world. So it is a good reason to assert that this figure must be Nabonidus himself.

Excessive use of relief carving has been unearthed from the southern quarters of the Cape of Arabia which includes ornamentation of public buildings along with grave stelae. There are zoomorphic elements, floral and geometric ornaments as well as human figures along with inscriptions, represented on these reliefs. Among the zoomorphic there are ibexes, gazelles, bucrania, oryxes, horse oxen and dromedary. The architectural ornaments can generally be categorised into two groups: zoomorphic and floral. Interlacing grapevine tendrils with symmetrically arranged bunches of grapes, acanthus leaves, date palms and different other trees belong to the latter category, zigzag chevron pattern is also part of the list, including female dancers in one of the buildings of Ma'in. But all this is rendered with extreme simplicity which is in stark contrast to the sophisticatedly intricate architectural designs of this region. Scholars have linked it with early Christian and medieval art not with Greeks for its simplified renderings (Potts 255), which might be their conscious attempt to remain individual instead of imitating their other contemporaries.

One of the fine examples of the grave stelae of this region identified from the text inscribed as the grave stone of 'Ijil, son of Sa'dlat. Surmounting this inscription is a recessed panel with banquet

scene. On the left is a lute player and on right is a comparatively larger figure with a cup in hand, picked from the table, by its side is a smaller figure that might be an attendant. A band with grapevine separates the lower panel with a horse rider, chasing a camel with a spear in hand. These types of stelae where the deceased is riding an animal or walking with a staff in hand, accompanied a servile figure in series of registers are frequent. A device also adopted by Muslims in the representation of narratives in miniatures.

Stylistically all these reliefs are extremely simplified renditions, where details are indicated just through lines but identity of the figures represented is lost no where. In this respect these are quite akin to the simplified representations of modern abstract renderings or we can anticipate the premonitions of the style evolved by Muslim artists in the times to come. Moreover, these are closer to the Babylonian and Assyrian types. It is another link of relations of the Bedouins with the lands adjacent to the cape of Arabia. Moreover, most of these reliefs carry inscriptions, either related to the deceased person or the name of the dedicant of the stele.

The free standing statues found from the cape include men and women, a dolphin, eagles, horse, retaining Babylonian or Egyptian influences. Best examples are again from southern parts of Arabia, finest among them are in alabaster stone while some coarser ones, which seems to have produced in masses are in lime stone. Despite variations in the quality of workmanship, there are certain generalised features such as all are symmetrically frontal, have angular features and mask-like appearances. Eyes are fully inlaid either with shell, bitumen or hard stone or just pupils are inlaid.

Another exception is the sculptures in bronze that are widely spread in the Pre-Islamic Arabia, from small miniature figurines to the full scale sculptures. They had used lost -wax technique for bronze casting, the only evidence of bronze casting is found from south-Arabia. Many of these sculptures are Greek in influence but the evidence of their casting in the cape proves that these were locally made.

Terracotta figurines, dating 1st century B.C. have also been unearthed from Arabia, where human and animals both are rendered but female statuettes out-number the rest. Human figurines found from south-Arabia are simple and typical in representation having arms bent from elbows, hands in front of chests, stylised faces with eye brows and noses indicated through incised lines. Eyes too were not modelled, just impression created. Numerous examples of camel figurines and a long necked animal with unusual head and ear are also traced from this site. Moreover, from east-Arabia examples of

males and females statuettes, almost identical to the south Arabian type are excavated (Potts 260).

These are a few specimens to prove that in the field of art and aesthetics Semites (Bedouins) did not lag behind any other people. If artefacts had not existed in the barren climes it was not subjected to their talent but in reality their forces were directed to the survival pursuits. And it emerged wherever they found an outlet. It again raises a question about the kinship of Bedouins with Sabaeans or Himyarites.

Basically they all were Semites, who came from East-Africa, settled at the coastal and verdant lands of Arabia. So, various tribes bearing a number of nomenclatures were all Semites. In the fertile lands they were civilized at an earlier date, while others followed this course and remained Bedouins for a longer time. But even these Bedouins were not like usual gypsies, wandering purposeless, on the other hand roaming was essential for their survival. They went after pastures. Hitti has given a pithy statement when he says, “nomadism is as much a scientific mode of living in the Nufūd as industrialism is in Detroit or Manchester” (Hitti 22). But wandering from place to place was not the only occupation of these Bedouins (Arabs) rather they had an additional qualification of eloquence. Arab bards were great orators too. Rhythm of their rhymes produced music, so bewitching that they called it “lawful magic” “*Sibr-e bilāl*”. It was enchanting even for those who could not comprehend the language (Hitti 90). Even modern Persia, boastful for its literary heritage of Firdausi, Jāmi or Nizāmi, can accredit Arab Bedouins for their talent because prior to the advent of Islam, it is hard to find nay ballistic specimens in that land which is renowned for the rich and ancient most artistic traditions.

Although Bedouins did not produce any tangible recognisable form of art but one attribute was quite individual to them, their rich literature of poetry, produced in the period labeled as “*Jabilia*”: the age of ignorance (Hottinger 19). It is well said by Hitti that “their artistic nature found expression through one medium only: speech. If the Greek gloried in his statues and architecture, the Arabian found in his ode (*qasida*) and the Hebrew in his psalm, a finer mode of self-expression” (Hitti 90). Arabians placed greater significance to this mode of expression. Therefore, numerous adages had been evolved in its support, such as, “beauty of man lies in the eloquence of his tongue”. Another pithy maxim in this context defined in the *Majmū’al Rasā’il* by *al-Jābiḡ* and quoted by Hitti, “wisdom has alighted

on three things: the brain of Franks, the hands of the Chinese and the tongue of the Arabs” (Hitti 90-91).

Arabic language has miraculous effectiveness. It is precise and concise. A true delineation of the Bedouin mindset, who is ranked among the uncouth barbarians but the art of poetic expression was his cultural asset (Hitti 92). The poetic creations of ancient Arabia were so highly revered that poems in later times were mostly composed on the standards set by the Bedouins of *Jabilia*. It is similar to the Classical Greek art which remained a criterion of all artistic creations of the Western world till the emergence of the Modern era. Poetry of ancient Arabia is considered both as refined and primitive. In the range of concepts and in emotive field it is restricted but in all the other aspects such as the rules of prosody and rhymes, rich vocabulary of the language, and above all “the variety and diversity of its rhythmic and tonal nuances”, it is marvellous (Hottinger 19). Poems are not necessarily composed to narrate a story or a thought, for which prose is enough. This medium is basically subservient to the beauty of rhythm, the hallmark of Arabic poetry, but it is not impoverish in content.

Broadly speaking, the content of the ancient Arabic poetry can be categorized into two groups: one related to the objective descriptions and the other idealising the heroic deeds of the Bedouins. In descriptive content it was very rich, dealing with the minute details of landscapes, animals, or weather phenomenon, with accomplished command on the use of similes. But the major aim of their poetry was to glorify the clan or individuals. They proudly boast of the bravery to withstand the terrible tempests alone, etc. For this they had masterly utilised all the accessories of a fine poetry: accurate observation and expression, essential details, novel similes and the emotional inspiration to tie the whole in a string (Hottinger 20-21), which is the criterion of their aesthetics.

The poetic culture in pre-Islamic Arabia was so deep rooted that an annual fair was held at ‘*Ukāz*, a place between *Nakblab* and *al-Tā’if* in *al-Hijāz*. It was a sort of literary congress (Hitti 93) of the present day. Poets used to participate enthusiastically to make their name. In the linguistic philosophy the Bedouin’s dialect: Arabic is extolled as the most refined and highly expressive language, “ever fashioned by the mind and tongue of man” (Atiya 22). Poetry is actually a direct form of expression which is not subservient to any tangible material. The visual arts: painting and sculpture do have this sort of servility. So keeping in mind the severe conditions of desert they substantiated their creative urge through words. Beauty of words was Bedouins only tool with which he chiselled his thoughts to expression.

This is the aesthetic of the Bedouin: virtuoso of the verbal discourse. It is also one of the attributes of the sacred scripture of Muslims: the Holy Qur'ān, although written in prose form but retains the rhythm of poetry. Moreover, an exceptional trait of the Bedouin was extraordinary memory, which he developed out of the scarcity of materials in the desert. He modelled his thoughts into words, without longing for pen or parchment to record them. Retained all in his memory and kept them alive through generations by passing on from mouth to mouth. Thus along the beauty of the language, Bedouins are praised for their innate skill of commemoration (Hottinger 19).

These are a few evidences to eliminate the blame that the Arab peninsula which is the cradle of Islam was devoid of artistic traditions of any sort and Bedouins had no consideration for art. It is only that the word Bedouin has been isolated for the people of the barren lands of the peninsula. Though there are multifarious facts that prove them Semites, who had highly aesthetic nature which remained muted in unfavourable circumstances but amplified wherever they find it possible. So, Arabs of the verdant lands, Sumerians, Babylonians, Phoenicians and Bedouins etc. were all Semites because their language too has closer affinity. Consequently, Bedouin Arabs were also Semites who were permeated with their innate faculty for creativity that is their artistic instinct. Because instincts are the innate behaviours in humans with which they cannot apart. Though their expression can be reduced, amplified or modified according to the situations encountered by their possessors but cannot be extinguished.

It corroborated through historical evidences that a magnificent civilisation prevailed in the Arab cape thousands of years prior to the Greeks learnt the art of writing or chiselled his earliest sculptures. But unfortunately the whole world is familiar with the creative activities of Greeks but unfamiliar with the genius of the people bearing the nomenclature of Bedouins. Alloy Springer is the one who tried to make people familiar that Greeks acquired knowledge, culture and even mythology from the East, especially from Babylonia. He asserts that Greeks;

Personified their idols after the Babylonia formula, invented fables in explanation of the reasons and produced poetry which, like their arts, personified their idols. It was the old Oriental fable in a new and more pleasing garment Natural philosophy they gained from Chaldeans and Egyptians, for Aristotle alludes occasionally to these sources; half of their medicines and plants had names of Arabic and Persian origin ... they adopted Babylonian chronology and sciences; therefore, when

Arabs came into their own, they found their own Semitic thoughts beautifully arranged (Kheirallah 23).

It is reasonable then to assert that the civilised cultures of the world emerged through the Semites, and Bedouins were not deficient of it. Whenever they met favourable circumstances they made their talent manifest. Though, the Bedouins of Arab lagged behind in the civilised cultural field only due to the ominous conditions of the desert. But they periodically enriched the surrounding lands with the fresh blood of Semites, who made an outburst of their instinct of beauty in the auspicious lands. So, they can rightly be called artistic not only for their capacity to create objects of beauty but also for their courage to survive in that unruly abode.

NOTES AND REFERENCE

¹ Empire of Amurru is the fabulous land considered by the students of history, located somewhere north of Syria, and resided by the biblical Amorites (Montgomery 54).

² The land of Aribi is designated to the area between Syria and Mesopotamia.

³ Mentioned in the Bible as Benhadad 11

⁴ Pentateuch are the first five books of Bible

⁵ There are references in the Holy Qur'ān of the nations of 'Ād and Thamūd, who were destroyed for their infidel attitudes. Greek geographers had located their settlement as Midian-Salih, at the south of the Red sea. It is a place from where special ancient Arabic inscriptions, titled Thamūdian type has been discovered (Montgomery 91).

⁶ In ancient times Bayhān was called Katakān.

⁷ Petra was a north Arabian state, situated between Sab'ā' and Mediterranean.

⁸ Palmyra was located on an oasis in the middle of the Syrian Desert.

⁹ It is so labelled because the earliest monumental graves were excavated from Jabal Haft, which is close to the borders of Oman and Abu-Dhabi, dated from 3000 to 2700 B.C.

¹⁰ Tholos is circular temple.

¹¹ Umm-al-Nār is an island opposite the modern city of Abu Dhabi.

¹² Recessed panels containing Nabataean inscriptions.