

THE SULTAN'S SHADOW

One Family's Rule at the Crossroads
of East and West

Christiane Bird



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Sultan's Shadow



*One Family's Rule at
the Crossroads of East and West*

CHRISTIANE BIRD



Random House
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*When one plays the pipes in Zanzibar,
they dance on the Lakes [of Central Africa].*

—POPULAR NINETEENTH-CENTURY PROVERB



*Surely in the creation of the heavens
and the earth;
In the alternation of night and day;
In the sailing of ships through the ocean
For the profit of mankind ...
Here are signs for a people who understand.*

—THE QURAN, II:164

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Preface

THE INSPIRATION FOR THIS BOOK BEGAN WITH AN ALLUSION TO the “Arab slave trade” in an article I was reading. My curiosity sparked, I searched the Web, when I came across several references to a woman named Seyyida Salme, or Emily Ruete, and a book she had written, *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess*.

Wondering what an Arabian princess had to do with the slave trade, I began to read what proved to be the story of a remarkable nineteenth-century Omani woman, raised in a harem on the African island of Zanzibar. The daughter of a powerful ruling sultan and a Circassian slave, Salme had scandalized the royal family—and the entire island—by eloping with a German businessman, converting to Christianity, and fleeing to Hamburg. Three years later her husband died in a freak accident—trampled beneath a horse tram—leaving her alone in a foreign land with three small children and dwindling economic resources. The strong-minded princess was not one to be undone by circumstance, however, no matter how tragic, and she fought doggedly to regain her status, eventually coming to the attention of Germany's chancellor Otto von Bismarck. He then used her as a pawn¹ in his bid to establish colonies in East Africa.

As for the slave trade, it had been the basis of nineteenth-century Zanzibar's economy. Salme had grown up in the shadow of what was then the busiest slave market in the Indian Ocean. The island had been home to tens of thousands of slaves, imported to work its many clove plantations, and had shipped tens of thousands more slaves farther north to other Muslim lands.

Captivated by the drama and scope of Salme's story, I decided to look for her autobiography. Much to my surprise, it was in print, and I ordered a copy. Later, I learned that Salme had begun writing it in Germany in 1875, when she was thirty-one years old,² and had completed it in 1886. The first known autobiography published by either an Arab woman or a Zanzibari, it debuted in Germany that same year. Two years later, two English-language editions appeared. One, published in London, did not name either an author or translator, and the other, published in New York, cited its author as “Emily Ruete, Born Salme, Princess of Oman and Zanzibar.” A French translation appeared in Paris in 1905, and a third English translation by Lionel Strachey was published in New York in 1907. Nonetheless, the book soon disappeared from public view.

The edition I initially obtained was the 1888 version published in New York, reissued in 1989. The book began with a brief preface written by the princess: “Nine years ago I made up³ my mind to write down some sketches of my life for my children.... Tired out in body and in mind, I did not then expect to live to be able to tell them, when they had grown up, of the many changes in my life, and of the recollections of my youth. I therefore resolved to write my memoirs for them.”

The book went on to describe Salme's years in Zanzibar and the customs that had prevailed

there at the time. Chapters covered such subjects as “Daily Life in Our House,” “Our Meals,” “Schooling in the East,” “Woman’s Position in the East,” and “Slavery.” I was intrigued ... but also frustrated. Salme’s account of her childhood was magical, but she gave few details about her elopement or her life in Germany. The book’s tone was direct, yet distant, and often seemed to be addressing a wider and less personal audience than just her children. Salme also offered little insight into slavery or the slave trade as it had been practiced in the East. Her “Slavery” chapter was a brief seven pages and did little more than reflect the prevalent attitudes of her day; she called the slaves “great children” who “worked only when compelled to.”

Later, I discovered that in addition to her memoirs, Salme had left behind a collection of letters, written while she was in Germany, which shed some light on her life there. Translated and published in English by scholar E. van Donzel, the letters were addressed to an unidentified “dear lady friend” in Zanzibar. It is likely, however, that the letters were never sent, and were never intended to be sent. They are not dated and seem to have been written well after the events they relate. Salme probably used them for catharsis, a way to help her make sense of her strange new world.

The princess’s writings left me with more questions than ever, and I began to read more generally—about slavery in Muslim societies, about East Africa, about the Indian Ocean—I soon realize that Salme’s story, and the story of the slave trade through Zanzibar, did not begin on the island but in Oman, a tiny country with an extraordinary history. Located on the southeastern edge of Arabia, where it was cut off from the rest of the peninsula by mountains and deserts, ancient Oman had developed a culture that was distinctly separate from that of other Arab peoples. Millennia before the birth of Christ, and again during the Middle Ages, Oman was one of the wealthiest and most powerful nations in the world, trading with other early civilizations such as Mesopotamia, Persia, India, and China. Oman also had its own distinct brand of Islam, Ibadhism, which is practiced virtually nowhere else in the world and is known for its great tolerance of other religions and races.

Salme’s father, Seyyid Said Al Busaid, had been Oman’s most remarkable modern ruler, and with his ascent to power had begun an improbably romantic and ruthless century in Eastern history. During a reign that lasted fifty years, Seyyid Said established a loose commercial empire all along the East African coast, opened up international relations with Europe and the United States, moved his country’s capital from the Arabian peninsula to Zanzibar, and transformed that once-sleepy island into both the clove-producing capital of the world and the center of the Indian Ocean slave trade. After Said’s death, his legacy was carried on by his sons Seyyid Majid and Seyyid Barghash.

The story of the Zanzibar slave trade also began in Africa—but not just the Africa I was accustomed to reading about. There was also another Africa involved: the Africa of the Swahili, a highly developed people who, during the Middle Ages, established sophisticated cultured cities all along the East African coast. Like the Omanis, the Swahili were seafarers—they shipped giraffes to Beijing, China, around 1415, to the astonishment of the Chinese, who had never seen giraffes before—and were heavily involved in the slave trade, acting as middlemen between the Africans of the interior and the Arabs.

The Portuguese arrived in the Indian Ocean in the late 1400s, the English became

presence in the 1700s, and the Americans frequented the region from the 1820s to the era of the U.S. Civil War. Reading the letters and journals of some of the Westerners who were in the area during those centuries, I was struck by how convinced they all were that they knew what was best for the East and for Africa. They had God on their side. The world was the oyster. Shades of our own times.

Other aspects of the Zanzibar-Oman story also resonated in the twenty-first century, drawing me deeper into the historical tale. There was Salme herself—a strong, independent woman who flatly refused to obey the mores of her day. There was her father, Said—a man who not only reached out to the West, but who also took a determined stand against a violent Islamist sect that was threatening to destroy his rule. And there was Salme's brother Barghash, who shared his father's international outlook, only to be betrayed by the British.

Though when it came to betrayal, the Omanis were in no position to complain. The history is studded with one gut-wrenching, near-unbelievable story of betrayal after another. In the heartless world of premodern Arab politics, it was often deceive or be deceived, kill or be killed.

To the modern sensibility, the violence that prevailed in the Arab region up to and through the 1800s boggles the mind. At times, hundreds and even thousands of innocents were brutally slaughtered—and not always by Muslim hands. The Portuguese were especially savage, at times burning to the ground entire mosques filled with worshippers.

As for slavery, Oman began using slaves sometime in prehistory, as did virtually every other ancient civilization. But because of their seafaring skills, the Omanis were especially complicit in the brutal institution. Their merchants and sea captains were probably involved in the slave trade as early as the 800s, when tens of thousands of East Africans, or "Zanj," as they were known, were toiling in the Euphrates valley of Mesopotamia—where they staged the greatest slave uprising in world history.

During the mid- to late 1800s, Seyyid Said and his sons—along with Arab and Swahili merchants, African chieftains, and Indian businessmen—escalated the slave trade in East Africa to unprecedented levels. During that period, more than a million Africans may have been transported from the interior to Zanzibar.

Oman's slave trade only ended at the instigation of the British, who pressured the Al Busaidi sultans into signing a series of anti-slave trade treaties. The process took decades and involved, directly or indirectly, an interesting cast of Western characters—explorers, missionaries, and journalists—all of whom spent much time in Zanzibar. The British presence on the island grew steadily, and in 1890 it became a British protectorate.

For most of the nineteenth century, the Al Busaidi sultans held sway over a loose empire that stretched for thousands of miles and incorporated dozens of peoples. During the family's rule, Islam reigned supreme in the region, the righteousness of the slave trade went unquestioned, and Zanzibar flourished. But by the time the nineteenth century was over, Christians controlled the Indian Ocean, the slave trade had been abolished, and the power of Zanzibar was no more.

The story of Seyyid Said and his children is both a personal and a public one, tracing as

does the rise and fall of both a family and an empire. It is a tale rich with modern-day themes: Islam vs. Christianity, religion vs. secularism, women's rights, human rights, multiculturalism, and a nation's right to construct its own destiny. The chronicle of the nineteenth-century Omanis is also a chronicle of the Indian Ocean slave trade, which runs like a polluted stream beneath a romantic surface. At times, Zanzibar itself mirrored the dichotomy: from afar, the paradise island beckoned with swaying palms and white-sand beaches; up close, the bodies of dead slaves clogged the harbors, creating an indescribable stench.

My research had begun with a simple phrase. But that simple phrase had been a key that opened many doors, revealing intriguing, complex stories within stories hitherto unknown to me and, I suspected, most Westerners. They were stories, I thought as I delved yet deeper into East African history, that needed to be told.

Author's Note

ALL OF THE DIALOGUE IN THIS BOOK COMES FROM PUBLISHED sources. In the Oman section, I quote from the translations of two traditional Arabic histories: *Annals of Oman to 1728*, which is a partial translation, by E. C. Ross, of Oman's first history book, *Kashf al-Ghummeḥ*, by Sirhan ibn Sa'ad ibn Sirhan; and *Imams and Seyyids of Oman* by Salil ibn Razik (or, more accurately, Humayd ibn Muhammad ibn Ruzayq), translated by George Percy Badger. Both books are a mix of legend and fact; Salil ibn Razik was also the panegyrist, or orator, for Seyyid Said, with prejudices that reflect that connection.

In the Zanzibar and Germany sections, I rely on quotes from Seyyida Salme's *Memoirs of an Arabian Princess* and *Letters Home*, as translated by E. van Donzel in *An Arabian Princess Between Two Worlds*. I decided to use van Donzel's translation of the memoirs rather than earlier editions because it contains passages that Salme later edited out and because his is the only published English translation of her letters. In the East Africa section, I use dialogues quoted in the books of such Western explorers and missionaries as Richard Burton, David Livingstone, and Henry Morton Stanley, and of the Swahili slave trader Tippu Tip.

Since there is no standard transliteration of Arabic into English, I have generally opted to use the simplest spellings available, and/or those most familiar to Westerners, for greater ease of reading. Exceptions include authors' names, which I spelled according to the author's preferences. I have also opted not to correct spelling and grammatical errors in most quotations, or use "[sic]," as I feel that the authors' uninterrupted original language adds to the texture and a sense of time and place to the narrative.

At the suggestion of Abdul Sheriff, author of *Slaves, Spices, and Ivory in Zanzibar*, I have used the terms "Indian Ocean slave trade" or "East African slave trade" rather than the often seen "Arab slave trade" or "Islamic slave trade." As Professor Sheriff quite correctly and logically pointed out to me, the phrase "Atlantic slave trade," not "European slave trade" or "Christian slave trade," is common usage, and it is both curious and inaccurate to describe the slave trade of East Africa in ethnic or religious terms; many races and religions were involved.

PART ONE



Oman



THE TIME IS 1806.¹ THE PLACE IS A SULTAN'S CASTLE JUST OUTSIDE Barka, Oman, a port on the Arabian peninsula. Inside the castle sit two handsome teenage brothers: the gentle and bookish Salim and the decisive and ambitious Said. Beside them is their adviser Muhammad bin Nasir. Standing sentinel at the door is a tall Nubian slave.

Bedr, the boys' first cousin, enters the room and takes a seat between the brothers. Said admires the scabbard hanging by Bedr's side—a magnificent affair set with semiprecious stones. Yet even more magnificent is the point of the dagger within, Bedr says, and he takes it out for his cousins to admire. Silently, Said reaches for the weapon and then, swiveling suddenly, plunges it into his cousin's breast. The Nubian slave shuts the door.

Screaming with pain, Bedr staggers to his feet and throws himself out a window, to land upon a dung heap. Stumbling to the castle stable, he mounts a saddled horse—one is always at the ready, as is the Arab custom. He gallops toward the desert, where four hundred of his Wahhabi* supporters are quartered. Watching from an upstairs window, Said's aunt Bibi Mouza cries out for Said to go after him, and he does, accompanied by his brother, his adviser, other noblemen, and the Nubian slave. Galloping through a copse of date trees, they come upon the wounded man and knock him off his horse. Pouring blood, Bedr doggedly continues on foot toward the Wahhabi camp, now within sight. Said hesitates a moment, then stabs him dead.

Said and Salim are the sons of Seyyid Said bin Sultan Ahmed Al Busaid, who ruled Oman from 1793 to 1804. Bedr was plotting the brothers' own murders and would have succeeded were it not for the boys' perceptive and formidable aunt. Upon discovering Bedr's intention, Bibi Mouza persuaded Said of the necessity of killing his cousin.

Six weeks after Bedr's murder, Said and Salim are declared the joint rulers of Oman. It will be Said alone, however, who will wield the power. He is fifteen years old—and, legend has it, will be haunted by his vicious act for the rest of his life, so much so that he will rarely sentence a subject to death.

The story of Seyyid Said bin Sultan Al Busaid and his children begins, as all stories begin, in history. But in the case of the Al Busaids, and of the Omanis in general, that history is many centuries old. Though today all but vanished from the world stage, Oman is one of the oldest and most unusual countries in the world.

A small nation, Oman lies at the southeastern edge of the Arabian peninsula, east of today's Saudi Arabia, south of the United Arab Emirates, and northeast of Yemen. A dramatic land of desert, mountain, and sea, Oman is centered on a stark, rugged chain of mountains—the Hajars—and is isolated from its neighbors by the vast, barren reaches of the Rub' al-Khali, the Empty Quarter, the great desert that also blankets much of Saudi Arabia. Geography and destiny: limited contact with other Arabs meant that from the beginning, the Omanis

developed their own unique history and culture, including a singular brand of Islam called Ibadhism, and were more focused on the sea and foreign parts than they were on Arabia.

About two thirds of Oman is bounded by the sea. To its south and east are the Arabian Sea and the Indian Ocean, while to its north is the Gulf of Oman, which leads into the Persian Gulf—better known among Arabs as the Arabian Gulf. Directly north of Oman lies Iran, less than thirty-five miles away at the Strait of Hormuz, the narrowest point. As strategically important during Seyyid Said’s time as it is today, the strait has witnessed the passage of everything from great argosies headed to ancient Mesopotamia to mammoth oil tankers headed to modern nation-states. As an old Arab proverb goes, “If the whole world were a ring, Hormuz would be the gem in it.”

The sea has been central to Oman since the dawn of time. Centuries before the birth of Christ, the ancient Omanis were building boats sewn together with twisted coconut fibers and sailing for thousands of miles with the help of the powerful monsoon winds that blow between India and East Africa. Oman’s strategic position at the entrance to the Persian Gulf, midway between India and Africa, also made it a coveted prize for foreign invaders ranging from the Persians to the Portuguese.

“Oman” today refers to the Sultanate of Oman, a modern nation with clearly defined borders, but during Seyyid Said’s time, the term was used more loosely, to refer to a broad swath of territory centered on the country’s northwestern mountains. The origins of the word *Oman*—or more correctly, *’Uman*—may derive from an Arabic term meaning “to stay in place.”

The forbidding Hajar Mountains, which run in a north-south arc along Oman’s east coast, are the country’s most striking geological feature. Arid and nearly devoid of vegetation, they rise naked and dark from the earth, the result of a violent upheaval from the ocean bed some one hundred million years ago. Twisted into strange contortions in parts, the large limestone range changes color with the day—from burnt red to gray, pale green to tan, deep purple to black. In Seyyid Said’s time, the Hajars were still well populated with gazelle, wildcat, lynx, and leopard, but already their numbers were dwindling.

In the heart of the Hajars soars the ten-thousand-foot-high Jabal Akhdar, or “Green Mountain,” which is green only in relation to the desert. The crucible of Omani culture, the Jabal Akhdar is intertwined with deep valleys and high plateaus that have held small farming communities since as early as the fourth millennium B.C. Later settlements established around the mountain’s base grew into some of Oman’s most important towns and cities.

Wedged between the northern part of the Hajars and the sea is the fertile Batinah plain stretching for about 150 miles in length and 5 to 30 miles in width. For centuries, thousands of towering dark green date palms have flourished here, beneath watchful eyes peering out from mud-brick towers and forts. Dates have long been the mainstay of Oman’s food supply and economy, used to feed everyone from humans to camels and to purchase everything from spices to slaves. Even today, Oman is one of the world’s largest producers of dates, harvesting about 265,000 tons a year.

On the edge of the Hajars south of the Batinah lies Muscat, or “place of anchorage,” Oman’s capital since the 1780s and one of its few large natural harbors. Muscat is “one of the most picturesque places in the world,”² wrote one nineteenth-century visitor. “From

distance, immense granite masses of rock, with jagged outline of cliff and crag, are seen rising in gloomy abruptness from the sea.... Plastered houses glitter against the somber background like a seagull's wing against an angry sky." A flourishing international port since well before the advent of Islam, Muscat—seductive, reclusive—was, until 1929, accessible only by boat and mountain footpaths.

Lacing the Hajars and the Batinah are the dry riverbeds known as *wadis*. The *wadis* run with water only in the late summer or early fall, when the surrounding mountain slopes gleam with wildflowers and a velvety sheen, and are peppered with oases.

Historically, the *wadis* have been Oman's lifelines, serving as the main transportation and communication routes between the country's interior and its coast, which are otherwise cut off from each other by the mountains. The most important *wadi* is the Sumail Gap, which separates the Western and Eastern Hajars, and is actually a series of several intertwining *wadis*. Guarded by watchtowers—raised fingers along the way—the Sumail Gap is bordered by a mountaintop shaped like a ship. Local legend has it that a group of foreign sailors once tried to depart Oman before paying a young girl for their provisions. She complained to her sheikh, who pulled the ship back against the wind, up the mountain, as a punishment and warning for all to see.

At the northernmost end of the Hajars, jutting out into the Strait of Hormuz, is the Musandam peninsula, where Seyyid Said's father was slain by the so-called pirates who once flourished on this coast. Now separated from Oman proper by the United Arab Emirates, the dark, hulking peninsula rises nearly a mile above the sea and is cut by deep, narrow, fjord-like inlets, similar to those found in Norway. Musandam's easternmost point is known as the Cape of the Graves of the Indians, named for the many Indian merchant vessels that were once shipwrecked on its shores. Treacherous winds and currents meant that those who attempted to sail directly through the Strait of Hormuz—or miscalculated their route, the weather, or the sea—often met their deaths on Musandam, Arabic for "anvil."

To the west and south of the Hajars begins the country's second most striking geologic feature—its deserts, which cover about two thirds of today's Oman. Only a small portion of this territory is desert in the classic sense of golden sands and rolling dunes; most is simply barren inhospitable land, with habitats ranging from arid plains to boulder fields to salt flats.

The most famous of Arabia's deserts, the Rub' al-Khali, begins in Oman's far west. The world's largest sand desert, covering 225,000 square miles—most of today's Saudi Arabia—the Empty Quarter receives almost no rainfall and holds few settlements. Along its edges live dozens of Bedouin tribes, known among the Arabs as the Bedu.

Throughout most of human history, Arabia's deserts went largely ignored by everyone but the Bedu. With the arrival of oil companies on the peninsula in the mid-1900s, the deserts suddenly took on a far greater importance, but only modest oil reserves have been found in Oman.

Finally, to Oman's far southwest is Dhofar, a large, distinctive region that has at times functioned as a separate state. The Dhofari people differ from the Omani people both physically and linguistically, and their land differs as well. Its rolling hills and plateau, surrounded by mountains, receive the rains of the summer monsoons and for months every year, Dhofar's slopes are thick with mists. Along its coastal beaches, coconuts, bananas, and

papayas grow. Dhofar fell under loose Omani rule about a thousand years ago, but when Seyyid Said rose to power, it was governed by a renegade merchant prince infamous for piracy and smuggling.

Seyyid Said lived most of his formative years and first decades in power on the Omani coast, where he absorbed what was by then a prosperous, cosmopolitan maritime atmosphere. But always at his back were the mountains and the deserts, harboring forces that threatened to bring down his rule, his family, and his empire.

During Seyyid Said's time, and still in many ways today, Oman was a land of fierce, independent tribes. Numbering in the hundreds and varying widely in size, degree of influence, and cohesiveness, most of the tribes were organized around a common ancestor and had a great deal of autonomy, often going their separate ways when they disagreed with the country's ruler. Each tribe was led by a sheikh, who represented it during negotiations and conflicts with outsiders. The sheikh was usually a member of an elite family, but the office was not hereditary. He was chosen by a consensus of his peers.

The tribes of Oman were of two types: the Hadr, or settled, and the Bedu. The Hadr were the country's farmers, craftsmen, teachers, religious leaders, and merchants, living in villages, towns, and cities under the rule of Sharia, or Islamic law. The Bedu were the country's camel breeders, herdsman, and semi-nomads, living at the edges of the settlements and deserts under the rule of tribal law.

As with most tribal peoples, the Omanis were never an easy people to rule. Wrote one early chronicler: "Now the people of Oman³ are endowed with certain qualities, which it is my hope they may never lose. They are people of soaring ambition, and of haughty spirit; they brook not the control of any Sultan, and are quick to resent affront; they yield only to irresistible force, and without ever abandoning their purpose."

In the second half of the first millennium B.C., the wealthy Greek and Roman empires began trading with Dhofar, Oman's often-independent southwestern region. Dhofar is one of the only areas in the world where the frankincense tree grows. Then in great demand throughout the lands of the Mediterranean, Dhofar's frankincense was collected by slaves and loaded onto ships that headed north to the Mediterranean through the Red Sea.

The Greeks and Romans used frankincense—believed by the ancient Egyptians to be the sweat of the gods fallen to earth—for religious and medicinal purposes, burning it on altars, using it in embalming and to ward off evil, and flaunting it as a sign of power and wealth. In the first century A.D., the Roman historian Pliny remarked that Emperor Nero had burnt more frankincense at his wife's funeral than all of Arabia produced in a year. Pliny also noted that the people of southern Arabia—meaning Yemen and Dhofar—were the wealthiest in the world. And wealthy they would remain until the fourth century A.D., when the spread of Christianity, which did not use incense at first, brought about the collapse of the frankincense trade.

Not all of the early frankincense traders transported their cargo on sailing ships; some traveled overland, via camel caravan routes established in Arabia as early as 2000 B.C. These caravans traveled from one oasis to the next, allowing for man and camel to replenish themselves before moving on to the next stop—often weeks away. One of the most famous

these stops was the legendary lost city of Ubar, believed to have been located in southern Oman. Mentioned in the Quran, Ubar dazzled visitors with its precious metals, jewels, and monuments. The city flourished for thousands of years, until God destroyed it for its greed and wanton ways—or so the pious believe. Excavations near Shisr in southern Oman have revealed a walled settlement, surrounded by smaller settlements, which was suddenly destroyed when its underground water caverns collapsed, plunging the town into an enormous sinkhole.

During the sixth century B.C., northern Oman was seized by the Persians, then ruled by the Achaemenid king Cyrus the Great, who established an empire that at one point reached as far east as India and as far west as the Aegean Sea. The Persians would occupy Oman, except for relatively brief intervals, for the next 1,200 years. Their presence was greatly resented by the Omanis, but they gave the country an important gift whose value cannot be overestimated: an ingenious irrigation system made up of underground water channels. Known as *qanat* in Persian and as *falaj* (sing.) and *aflaj* (pl.) in Arabic, the channels were dug twenty yards or more beneath the ground's surface and drained the water from the mountainsides into the arid regions, transforming desert into habitable land. By the time the Persians left Oman, the country boasted about ten thousand *aflaj*, many of which are still in operation today.

* * *

Little is known about the people who lived in Oman when the Persians arrived, but they left behind dozens of fine beehive-shaped burial structures dating back to the third millennium B.C. and may have spoken various dialects of a common language now known as Arabic. The first Omani settlers whose name is recognized today may have belonged to the Yaaruba tribe, or the Azd people, who are said to have begun appearing in the country in the eighth century B.C., trekking north from Yemen's Hadramawt Valley. But the great migration of the Azd⁴ occurred later, perhaps during the late second or early third century A.D., and perhaps due to an earlier collapse⁵ of the mighty Marib dam—a seismic event in Arab history.

First constructed around 1700 B.C., and rebuilt about eleven centuries later by the Sabaeans, an ancient people mentioned in the Bible, the Marib dam was located northeast of Sanaa, the capital of today's Yemen. At times measuring about 2,000 feet long by as much as 50 feet high, the dam was built of huge stone blocks held together with metal clamps and contained a two-mile-long lake. Sluices drained the dam's water into a large tank below, where it was used to cultivate the countryside and to provide Marib city with water. During its heyday, Marib city was the largest and wealthiest metropolis in Arabia, home to powerful merchants engaged in the India-Egypt trade.

Signs of the dam's deteriorating condition were obvious for many years but went ignored by local leaders, who were too busy fighting each other to pay much attention to domestic affairs. According to legend, a rat undermined the weakened structure, and it collapsed, causing mile upon mile of death and destruction. Survivors fled to other parts of Arabia, including Oman, and neither the dam nor the city was ever rebuilt. Today, the dam's ruins, still in excellent condition, are Arabia's foremost archaeological attraction.

According to Oman's earliest history book, the *Kashf al-Ghumme*, or "Dispeller of Grief

the first Azd to arrive in Oman was one Malik bin Fahm.⁶ But Malik fled his homeland not because of the bursting of the Marib dam or other disaster, but because of a barking dog—so wrote the book's author, in a national narrative that includes both legend and lore. The dog belonged to Malik's neighbor, who was under Malik's protection, and was killed by Malik's nephew. Malik's brother defended his son's actions and Malik, a man of great honor, exclaimed that he could no longer live in a country "where a person under his protection suffered such treatment."

Malik then gathered his tribe together and led them across the desert. Many months later they arrived in Qalhat, a port on the southern Omani coast. En route, Malik was warned of the Persians living in northern Oman and, leaving most of his tribe in Qalhat, he headed farther north in hopes of negotiating peace. But the Persians refused his proposition, saying "we do not wish this Arab to settle amongst us, that our land should become straitened unto us; we have no need of his neighbourship." To which Malik replied, "I must positively settle in the district of Oman; if you accord me willingly a share of the water, produce, and pasture, I shall settle in the country and praise you. If, however, you refuse, I shall remain in spite of you. If you attack me, I shall resist you, and if I prevail against you, I shall slay you, and carry off your offspring, and shall not allow one of you to remain in Oman."

Still, the Persians refused to welcome the Azd. With an army numbering thirty or forty thousand, and a contingent of war elephants,⁷ they saw no reason to negotiate with the newcomers. Malik declared war and gathered together his men, numbering only about six thousand. The two forces faced off near the town of Nizwa. Malik mounted a piebald charger and he and his officers headed into battle, clad in body armor and iron helmets worn beneath red robes and yellow turbans.

The Persians advanced, their war elephants in front. The Arabs attacked the animals with swords and spears, piercing their hides until the elephants turned in flight, trampling Persians underneath. The two armies fell upon each other, to "fight with fury, and nothing could be heard but the clashing of their weapons." The battle raged for two days, but on the third day Malik slew the Persian commander in one-on-one combat, and the Persians withdrew from Oman.

Malik then established the first Arab kingdom of Oman, with Qalhat—later destroyed by the Portuguese—as its capital. He attracted many other Azd tribes to the region until "there became numerous therein, and their power and fame increased." No other Arab leader dared oppose him and he reigned for seventy years, until his accidental death at the age of 120, in the hand of his favorite son.

As the story goes, Malik required his sons to take turns keeping guard over his house at night. His favorite son was Salimah, to whom he taught archery "until he excelled in the art." Salimah's brothers envied their sibling and conspired against him, telling their father that Salimah habitually deserted his post at night in order to sleep. Malik dismissed the accusation at first, saying that he knew his son too well to believe such a thing. But then—oh, fickleness of a human heart!—doubts grew in his mind. He decided to test his son. One night while Salimah was on duty, Malik donned a disguise and left his house. At that fateful moment, Salimah nodded off for a brief nap. He awoke to the neighing of his mare and assumed that an enemy was approaching. Knowing that horses point their ears in the direction of sound, he aimed a

arrow between his mare's ears. Malik heard the whoosh of the arrow as it was released and called out, "Do not shoot, my son, I am your father." But it was too late. The arrow entered his heart.

As Malik died, he uttered a verse that has become proverbial among all Arabs, and is a little too reflective of their history:

I taught him every day the bowman's art.

And when his arm grew strong he pierced my heart.

* Followers of the fundamentalist faith regard the word *Wahhabi* as pejorative; they prefer to be called *Muwahhid* (Unitarians) or just *Muslims* (as opposed to all the other nonbelieving Muslims). And some modern scholars and Islamic reformers prefer the term *Salafi* instead. I have chosen to use *Wahhabi*, however, because it was commonly used in Oman in the 1800s and because it is more familiar to Westerners.

DURING THE FIRST THIRTY-ODD YEARS OF HIS FIVE DECADES IN power, from 1806 to 1856, Seyyid Said lived mostly in Muscat, in a whitewashed palace facing the sea. At the time, Muscat was a walled city about a mile in circumference, packed onto a small plain surrounded by sheer, serrated peaks. The city's neat, elegant, light-colored walls contrasted sharply with the darkness of the mountain range.

Hemmed in on all sides, Muscat was a crowded city, with an estimated population of ten to twelve thousand. Built around a web of narrow, crooked alleyways and streets, it contained dozens of tall stone houses, several hundred smaller stone-and-mud houses, and more than a thousand huts built of date tree branches and leaves plastered with mud. Outside the city walls huddled hundreds more huts, housing another three to four thousand people who slept on simple mats, ate out of earthen pots, and burned camel dung for fuel. During the country's infrequent rains, large parts of the city and its suburbs floated away—discarded lives.

But rich or poor, residing in stone houses or mud huts, most citizens of Muscat considered the town's crowded conditions to be a small price to pay for living in what was one of the safest and most tolerant cities in the Middle East. Seyyid Said, like most Omani rulers before him, welcomed all peoples to his capital, and all were free to build houses of worship and live and pray as they pleased. The city was filled with foreigners of every description: Hindus from Gujuzat, Parsis from Bombay, Sindhis and Baluchis from the Makran coast, Persians from Bushehr, Arabs from Syria and Bahrain, Armenians and Kurds from Mesopotamia, and Jews from Baghdad. When Rabbi Jacob Samuel visited Oman in 1835, he found 350 Jewish families living on the fertile Batinah plain.

Muscat's extraordinary harbor—"the most wonderful that nature¹ and art could ever devise"—was a deep semicircle surrounded by rock. On a typical day, it would be filled with a half-dozen merchant ships, thirty or forty small craft loading or unloading those ships, perhaps twenty-five small vessels en route to India under the protection of a frigate, and dozens of fishing boats. Many of the fishermen cast their nets directly offshore, where the water was sometimes red with crab, and others stayed right in the harbor, where herring and pilchard were "thick as gnats² on a summer's evening." Hawks, gulls, and sea swallows circled overhead.

When the sea was calm³ and smooth enough, it reflected Muscat's dark hills and two whitened forts near its harbor entrance; when the water swelled, the picture rolled toward land. At noon, as the day's heat became unbearable, Muscat fell completely silent. A lone slight canoe with a lone fisherman might pass by, followed by a *balaga*, a large vessel with an elevated stern, manned by a crew of many races, some singing and banging on drums as they worked. As the *balaga* passed the harbor, guns fired, breaking the sun-baked silence. The sounds reverberated in the surrounding hills, rat-tat-tatting in quick succession, and secondary echoes sounded from more distant mountains. Finally, complete silence reigned once more.

Seyyid Said's palace, built of coral stone and lime, stood just off the beach near the center

of town. Inside, airy apartments opened onto a central courtyard. Outside, a wide veranda overlooked the sea, and it was here that Seyyid Said held court every morning and afternoon, receiving everyone from international emissaries to ordinary townspeople and Bedouins. Anybody could come before him with a concern or complaint—and many did. Like many Arab rulers of his time, Seyyid Said committed his share of atrocities when dealing with his enemies but was a just and liberal ruler at home, beloved by his people, especially as he grew older.

An often grave man of average size, Seyyid Said had an open and pleasant face, light brown skin, and dark and expressive eyes framed with heavy eyelids and long lashes. When he was a young man, his beard was full and black and his mustache clipped short. Gentlemanly and communicative, polite and generous, and receptive to new ideas and influences, he understood Arabic, Hindustani, and Persian, and later in life, Swahili and probably English.

Seyyid Said dressed simply and elegantly, in a white cotton, ankle-length *dishdasha* with a *furakha*, or short tassel, scented with perfume—an Omani trademark—dangled at the right side of his robe's neckline, while on his head perched a fine blue-checked turban framed by red, green, and yellow threads. At his waist was a cloth belt, into which he tucked a curved dagger, or *khanjar*, which was carried by all Omani men at all times. Sometimes, too, Seyyid Said wore a ruby ring, but otherwise, unlike most Eastern sovereigns of his day, he wore no jewels or ornaments of any kind. During cooler months, he donned a dark-colored, embroidered cloak, or *bisht*, over his *dishdasha*.

Westerners who met Seyyid Said were usually very impressed by him, especially as the years went by and he accrued more gravitas and power. One 1819 visitor opined that the ruler had “the most agreeable and polite⁴ manner of any Arabian or Persian I have ever met” while a 1835 visitor noted the sultan’s “mild yet striking countenance”⁵ and said that “he is the most respected prince in the East.” A sea captain who met Said in Muscat shortly before his death remarked that he had “so much firmness, honesty⁶ of purpose, kind feeling, and decision of character ... that your esteem is won at once. One of the noblest looking men I have seen in the East.” The explorer Richard Burton called the ruler “as shrewd, liberal and enlightened⁷ a prince as Arabia has ever produced.”

Seyyid Said often held court with only a handful of ministers or family members present. He rose to meet his visitors, and treated both high- and lowborn with equal respect, as did most Omanis. The egalitarian manner of the Ibadhis, practitioners of the Muslim faith unique to Oman, was a quality remarked upon again and again by Western visitors.

Seyyid Said’s simple ways did not extend to hospitality, however—he greeted guests with elaborate spreads of fruits, sweetmeats, and drinks, served in cut crystal and laid out on elegant European tablecloths. Tea, sweet and black, was usually served, followed by coffee, bitter and very strong, with a touch of cardamom. Accompanying the coffee were dates, served fresh or dried and sometimes sprinkled with cumin. The Omanis produced more than twenty varieties of dates and used them in everything, from salads to meat dishes to desserts.

Next door to Seyyid Said’s palace was the customhouse, where merchants and sea captains brought their cargoes to be recorded and taxed. Seyyid Said used the customhouse revenues to pay all personal and governmental expenses. The Omani citizens paid no country or city taxes.

Crowding the customhouse during daylight hours were hundreds of men of a dozen races. Muscat's thriving trade was even more of an international draw than was its tolerance. Arab, Hindu, Turk, Jew, Persian, and Baluchis—all were there, packed into a small outdoor square with one side open to the sea. Muscat's most important merchants began assembling at the customhouse in the early morning, just after prayers, some taking seats on benches, some on rusty cannons, and some on coils of rope. Stroking their beards, counting their prayer beads, they appeared to be engaged in idle gossip, but were in fact negotiating deals, some involving substantial sums. Among other things, ships coming into port carried pearls from Bahrain; coffee from Yemen; copper from Basra; gold, ivory, ostrich feathers, and slaves from Zanzibar; and muslin, spices, timber, rice, and porcelain from India and China.

Next door to the customhouse was a partially covered bazaar selling everything from silks and linens to glass beads and bracelets to sugar and dried shark fins. Top-quality produce for sale included grapes, mangoes, peaches, plantains, pomegranates, figs, melons, lime, eggplants, potatoes, and onions.

In the bazaar's open sheds worked Muscat's artisans—blacksmiths, coppersmiths, ropemakers, carpenters, and weavers. The blacksmiths sat with their anvils and hammers between two holes in the ground—one for fire, the other for water—and weavers worked their looms while sitting in holes in the ground. Barbers wandered about carrying stools, cups, mirrors, and razors, to give their customers shaves and manicures, or crack the joints of their arms, fingers, and legs. Blind beggars were everywhere.

Most Omani Arab men dressed as simply as Seyyid Said, in white *dishdashas* with scented tassels, open sandals, blue-checked cotton turbans, and *khanjars*. Virtually all men had beards; some wore turquoise rings, and others stained their feet and palms red with henna. Some also applied a narrow stripe of silvery white antimony to the outer edges of their eyes, to increase their sparkle and, it was believed, to improve sight. One admiring European wrote: “The people of Muscat seemed⁸ to me to be the cleanest, neatest, best dressed, and most gentlemanly of all the Arabs that I had ever yet seen.”

The exceptions were the very poor, of whom there were many. They went about half-naked, with “a leathern girdle which keeps⁹ their rags together; this ligature is so tight that it forms a cicatrix on the skin of the loins and serves to hold paper, an inkstand, a knife; and, in short, whatever they possess; for an Arab, like another Diogenes, usually carries all his worldly goods upon his person.”

Poorer women went out unveiled, but the rare elite woman on the streets flowed along in voluminous black, her body, face, and hands completely covered. Underneath, however, she wore a bright exotic ensemble consisting of a loosely fitted tunic that fell just below her knees, baggy trousers gathered at her ankles, and a sweeping embroidered headscarf, the *lihaf*, that reached to her calves. Ornate silver and gold stitching embroidered her tunic and trousers, silver bangles clinked on her wrists, and toe rings and platform sandals, called *qurhat*, adorned her feet.

Here and there roamed the Bedu, in town for the day only, to shop for supplies. Regarded by the Muscati people as more foreign than the actual foreigners—“a wild race not to be trusted,” some said—the Bedu tended to be smaller and more wiry than the town Arabs, with quick, energetic features and long unkempt hair that hung to their shoulders. They wore

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