

# SOUTHWEST ARABIA ACROSS HISTORY: INTRODUCING INSIGHTS FROM CURRENT RESEARCH

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In its central dimensions, the present volume discusses recent research results in South Arabian studies in the humanities and social sciences. These results are informed through disciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives that fuse such diverse fields as socio-cultural anthropology, epigraphy, Semitic philology, archaeology, the history of Islam and of Arabia, contemporary history and the qualitatively oriented elements in the social sciences. By consequence, these contributions also address some very diverse historical periods across the pre-Islamic, Islamic, and modern and contemporary eras in their Southwest Arabian dimensions.

In a topical and thematic sense, these investigations into “Southwest Arabia across history” examine questions of language and linguistic continuities, economy and water management, settlements and fortifications, conflict and peace among local and tribal societies, and state governance and its limits. This collection therefore strives to make available a number of key insights into cutting edge research by focusing on a selected number of central topics across the major eras of Southwest Arabia’s past and present.

Since this volume emerged out of a conference that celebrated Walter Dostal’s life, his work and achievements, these contributions obviously do not hide that they were inspired by Dostal’s work. On the contrary, all of this volume’s contributors in one way or another were linked to that great scholar’s research activities and institutional advances. A short obituary and Walter Dostal’s list of academic print and film publications precede this introduction to provide readers with the respective background information if needed.

Yet, this is not a retrospective volume in the sense that these chapters primarily focus on past records of research. As Dostal would have wanted to see it, this is a volume dedicated to current research. These articles take one or several of Dostal’s insights as their points of departure in order to unfold their own analyses according to the standards of the present and by addressing contemporary and future research agendas.

In this manner, Roswitha Stiegner, the passionate supporter of epigraphic studies in Austria, relates Dostal’s ethnographic insights to lexicographic changes and continuities in Southwest Arabia’s linguistic repertoires through history. She thereby demonstrates the fertility in crossing disciplinary boundaries between philology, ethnography and history, and highlights this along with important aspects of the academic record in South Arabian studies as carried out in Austria since the days of David Heinrich Mueller’s prolific academic activities at this Academy, and by those of Mueller’s famous, independently-minded earstwhile disciple Eduard Glaser in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Ingrid Hehmeyer’s chapter focuses on water technology and management in South Arabia and in relation to this, on aspects of continuity and change. She discusses two cases of wadi/sayl irrigation systems, i.e. that of the pre-Islamic dam of Marib, and that of Islamic mediaeval Wadi Zabid.<sup>1</sup> In both places water management and its related rules had to be adapted to local circumstances. The Marib dam system saw a total collapse just before the Islamic period, while Wadi Zabid has seen a continuous usage until the present time and is still in use. In both cases, the principle of upstream priority is among the most important rules of distribution, even though in Wadi Zabid this principle has at times been challenged by ideas of also securing some of the water

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<sup>1</sup> A note on transliteration for Arabic and other languages of the region: For this introduction, the editors have used a simplified version of IJMES rules, except for terms with a fairly common Anglicized spelling. For the other contributions to this volume, the editors have decided to accept the transliteration rules chosen by each author for his/her own text, as specified in a respective footnote there.

shares for downstream users. Islamic and customary law are both invoked and used to legitimate the local rules, and Hehmeyer concludes her article with some hypotheses on their respective qualities and dynamics.

The following chapter by Eirik Hovden focuses on one specific form of water technology used for providing household and drinking water, that is the so-called birka or cistern. Usually a cistern is a storage tank of water on slopes and ridges, where little or no groundwater can be found. A birka, however, is not sunk into the ground. These are highly common in large parts of Yemen, especially in areas located on steep mountains. In addition, one of its other main purposes is to collect rainwater during heavy rain by leading local runoff through canals into the cistern. In what follows, this chapter investigates how public or community village cisterns are owned and managed by using various combinations of customary and Islamic law, and especially the institution of waqf. The exact ownership status of these cisterns often remain ambiguous (for example, to what extent they are waqf or not), although there is at the same time a strong fundamental notion that they do belong to the village as a unit. In that regard similar to one result of the subsequent chapter by Heiss, Hovden demonstrates another characteristic feature through the interrelation between customary and Zaydī (or other forms of Islamic) law – namely their mutual interaction and reciprocal penetration, which includes potentials not only for occasional tension, but for complementary adaptation and mutual support as well.

As Daniel Mahoney shows, many of our modern conceptions of culture heritage focus on the ways that places, objects, and practices aid in the formation, maintenance, and anchoring of political identities through acts of commemoration and remembering. In similar ways, Mahoney continues, the tenth century scholar al-Hamdani promotes and legitimizes the political, cultural, and regional identity of the inhabitants of South Arabia in the eighth volume of *al-Iklīl* through descriptions of a variety of monuments located across its landscapes. In this manner, Mahoney re-examines a famous text of medieval South Arabian scholarship that was first edited and partially translated by David. H. Mueller at this Academy (1879/80). In entries organized by location, al-Hamdani praises the exceptional workmanship of various types of structures including fortified palaces, pre-Islamic and Islamic religious buildings, and dams or other types of water management installations. Through each of these architectural types he brings out various aspects of the identity and historical experience of Southern Arabs. While the glory and prosperity of the pre-Islamic Himyarite Kingdom is often referred to, more intriguing are passages that allude to horrific events, which occurred at some of the sites as a result of invasions at various points in time in the region's history as recent as the period of al-Hamdani's childhood and adolescence. His choice to commemorate these darker aspects of their past seems to point to specific political motivations for prompting his fellow countrymen to act against their contemporary Zaydī and Fatimid invaders. In this manner, Mahoney re-emphasizes an interpretation of some of al-Hamdani's writing as contextualized in his time and his biography – in particular within his interests as a South Arabian patriot.

In his contribution about the origins of the northern Yemeni town of Sa'da, Johann Heiss continues an important aspect of his previous research. This eminent one-time student and disciple of Walter Dostal tries to show that the new town called by that name (Sa'da) grew out of the village al-Ġayl as a consequence of a tribal conflict between two factions of the (northern) Khawlān-federation and their allies. The first Zaydī imam of the Yemen and his two sons and successors on the one hand played an important part in the growth of the new town into a center for many imams in the centuries to come. On the other hand, they also became themselves part of the tribal conflicts they had aspired to solve. The old town of Sa'da gradually lost its importance and eventually disappeared altogether. Beyond its value as a contribution to the local medieval history and archaeology of a region which currently is recovering from an unfortunate civil war during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Heiss thereby also highlights important dimensions of the town's medieval Islamic history. In particular, Heiss summarizes and in fact moves beyond his earlier studies on the same topic, by highlighting interactions between fiqh in its Zaydī version and the built-in necessity in customary law for seeking at one point or another appeals for mediation by more or less neutral outsiders – who in some cases may include representatives of state order and Islamic law with an agenda of their own.

Marieke Brandt draws attention to the diversity and different nature of the plethora of tribal societies in Upper Yemen. Quite frequently, they are subsumed by experts and the media alike under the homogenizing notion of “the Yemeni tribes” – as if they were a uniform block. In her comparative analysis of leadership

concepts among the present-day confederations of Khawlān b. ‘Āmir and Hamdān (Ḥāshid und Bakīl), she demonstrates that tribal communities of Upper Yemen have developed very different modes to “inhabit” actually homologous structures. The structures of tribes and confederations and the features making up their socio-political organization therefore need to be analytically distinguished. On the basis of her meticulous analysis of different leadership concepts she demonstrates where power and influence are located among these confederations, and elucidates the various forms of cooperation and competition as well as interpenetration and repulsion among the different tribes and the Yemeni state.

In his text for the present volume Andre Gingrich, another former student and research assistant of Walter Dostal throughout the 1970s and 1980s, continues to explore the field that some of the previous authors in this book already have inspected through their discussion of certain aspects of jurisprudence and state law. He questions which conceptual or theoretical models of historical Southwest Arabian states, including Zaydī states in particular, actually have been elaborated and tried out in the humanities’ research record on this phenomenon. In his discussion of answers to this guiding question, he then singles out two major conceptual strands that have often been seen as contradictory. Gingrich proceeds to demonstrate how certain elements among each of these seemingly opposing strands could and might be combined in much more productive ways than was seen in the past. To some extent, Dostal’s research in this regard may be perceived as an early innovation towards improvements in the field of conceptualizing historical states’ roles for this region. Still, the argument continues, the so-called “segmentary model” with its stronger emphasis on local tensions as well as the “cumulative model” with its closer attention for external forces share a certain salient disregard for factors of pre-Ottoman Islamic states’ mobility and fluidity in Southwest Arabian history. The argument concludes with the suggestion that in this respect, revised versions from a third source might be helpfully combined with existing insights – i.e. from the so-called “galactic model”.

In this manner, the present volume strives to honour the memory to Walter Dostal by contributing contemporary insights for current research into questions that have always inspired that great scholar and the research traditions that informed his own biography. It therefore is no coincidence that this volume comes out in an Academy book series that is bearing the name of one of the great founding fathers of precisely that research tradition, which Dostal continued and innovated. The editors hope that the present volume, with its contributions by an international group of senior and junior scholars who in one way or another have all come to interact with Dostal’s legacy, will be received with sympathy, interest and appreciation by the relevant scholarly communities of today and tomorrow.

