

Tender Is the Stone

Agricultural Technology
and Urban Palestinian
Patrimony in Al-Naqab



By Ali Qleibo

“**S**tones tender plants” is a familiar Arabic adage that describes the agricultural practice of piling stone clumps around tree trunks, saplings, seedlings, and vines in Palestine. The mound of stones minimizes water evaporation in the hot, dry desert climate during the day and collects evening dew that irrigates the plants at night.

“Stone piles spread all over!” exclaimed the Sab’awi (i.e., one who hails from Bir al-Sabe’ Palestinian tribes) as he gesticulated with his hand and pointed his index finger. “Here, there, and everywhere!” As I followed his gesture, lo and behold, stone piles emerged into full sight. They dotted the hills and valleys and rolled into the endless horizon stretching between Subeita and Abda in the northern Naqab. Traces of this ancient agricultural tradition, an adaptation to desert conditions where water is scarce, can be spotted in Petra and, up to half a century ago, in Dura and Gaza. In brief, along the ancient spice and incense trade route bifurcating from Petra to Gaza via the northern Naqab cities, namely, Abda, Subeita, Kurnub, Al-Khalsa, Rahat, Bir al-Sabe’.

The “Incense Trade Route” is an ancient network of major land and sea trading routes, linking the Mediterranean world with eastern and southern

sources of frankincense, myrrh, spices, textiles, and other luxury goods. The Qur’an describes the Incense Trade Route as the winter and summer journey (رحلة الصيف والشتاء). The Holy Book credits Hashem ben Abed Munaf, the great-grandfather of Prophet Mohammad and the progenitor of the Hashem clan, for reconsolidating the Arab tribal alliances between Mecca and Gaza and the restitution of the ancient trade system that had collapsed during the state of chaos that prevailed when the Persian and Roman interests escalated into full conflict in the fifth century. As a wealthy Quraishi chieftain, born in Mecca and buried in Gaza, his sphere of influence and strategic nomadic Arab tribal alliances straddled across northern Hijaz, Wadi Arabah, Al-Naqab, Wadi al-Khalil, and Wadi Halhul and their tributaries.

The semiarid geographic region, a cultural eco-niche, is a mainstay of Palestinian civilization and highlights our ancestral heritage and cultural

General view of Subeita, a sprawling city along the incense and spice trade route.



Al-Naqab Desert is the backbone of Palestinian culture, and the geographic basin formed by the major valleys in Mount Hebron presents the ecological context for the onset of the process of “sedentarization” of our Natufian and Amorite ancestral tribes over time. Throughout history, our predecessors’ interaction with the environment has been a complex dynamic intellectual process, conditioned by the primordial process of “sedentarization” within the basin of the Mount Hebron valleys as they were inhabited by successive tribal demographic expansion, from whom the Sab’awi Bedouin tribes are the modern descendants.

patrimony, as testified in the extensive archaeological sites that are spread throughout Al-Naqab and Mount Hebron valleys. Rather than serving as a geographic barrier, Wadi Araba and the northern Naqab promoted a dynamic continuum with the Mount Hebron Hinterland in which Hebron and Jerusalem assumed a pivotal symbolic spiritual position as the ancestral homeland.

This lengthy process in the form of raids and counter raids (ghazzu), which entail stealing,



Nabataean Bedouin tribesmen dug and paved water conduits that led to water wells and manholes to collect every water drop. These conduits are visible along the partially restored streets of Kurnub, Subeita, and Abda.

pillaging, and usurping land and water wells and expanding into new territories (diyar) – itself a form of ecological adaptation – may well be the case with our ancestral Amorite tribes, namely, Jebusites, Qedarites, Edomites, and Nabataeans, from whom the present Sab'awi tribes descend.

“There is no prototype Bedouin.” Dr. Emanuel Marx, expert on Al-Naqab nomadic culture, smiled gently in answer to my query about the authentic characteristics of the “true” Bedouin. “The stereotypical image of the Bedouin as the lonely, rugged nomad with a camel and a tent is merely an adaptation to a particular environment.”

“We prefer the appellation of Sab'awi to Bedouin.” My host in Al-Naqab, Sheikh Khaled al-Dadda, pointed out, “Sab'awi refers to the inhabitants of the northern Naqab, most of whom practiced agriculture before we were forced to leave our lands that were to become Jewish settlements.” The tragic circumstances in which the Sab'awi tribes were displaced in the 1948, 1957, and 1967 wars rendered

them landless and deprived them of their natural resources.

Historically, the Sab'awi tribes engaged in herding, agriculture, and sometimes fishing. They also earned income by transporting goods and people across the desert. Scarcity of water and of permanent pastoral land required them to move constantly. The first recorded nomadic settlement in the Sinai dates back 4,000 to 7,000 years. Corollary to the complex cataclysmic events of desertification in Palestine during the neolithic and chalcolithic periods, demographic migrations plished marginal areas of Palestine in which Al-Naqab conditioned new modes of ecological adaptations culminating three millennia ago with the founding of the cities of the desert along the ancient spice and incense trade route by the Edomites, precursors of the Nabataeans, as a point de capiton alongside ad hoc tribal resting areas. In due course enterprising merchants forged intertribal Arab alliances

to safeguard the caravans along the route from Mecca to Gaza and built the cities of the desert whose architectural features, details, and social functions are the precursors of the urban Palestinian homestead in Jerusalem, Hebron, Dhahiriya, and Dura. They also bequeathed us the arch prevalent in Dura and Dhahiriya. Throughout, the nomadic tribes of Al-Naqab have been Arabs. Mount Hebron features common heritage that extends through time.

According to the conclusions of archaeologist Avi-Yonah and seminal work by Irfan Shahid, whereas the Edomites are considered descendants of Ishmael's son Duma, the Nabataeans are descendants of his son Nebajoh. Along with the Ammonites and Moabites, they belong to the Arabic nomadic tribes that migrated into southern Jordan. The Edomites drifted northward into Wadi Araba and wandered to southern Palestine, to Mount Hebron to build a kingdom that reached as far as Ashqelon (where Herod was eventually born). Through Edomite territory passed the spice road that in antiquity led from southern Arabia through Wadi Araba, famous for its rich copper mines. They established desert towns such as Al-Khalsa, Abda, and Subeita that were to flourish into large cities under Nabataean control, ensuring a steady flow of tribal caravans from Yemen to Palestine and thence to Egypt and Lebanon, whence Beit Jibreen and Ashqelon rose as major cities at the crossroads of several silk, spice, and postal roads.

Early Umayyad mosque.



In Subeita, the trail leads us past water fountains, winding streets, and wide boulevards flanked by houses and shops blocked by stones, as the residents closed shop and migrated in search of gainful livelihood once the trade routes shifted their course. Abandoned stables with carved troughs and mangers for drinking and eating, and the lavishly built house of the governor among rows and rows of houses bespeak the glory of the ancient city of stone, the precursors of our own architecture in Dura, Dhahiriya, Hebron, and Jerusalem.

In this sense Petra, Abda, Subeita, Kurnub, Bir al-Sabe', and Gaza are formalized interstices that wealthy enterprising tribes developed at the juncture of trade routes and offered services to relieve travelers and pilgrims. The cities were immense and included complex architectural features, such as

taverns, inns, baths, and stables in addition to living quarters for local families, impressive homesteads, and official edifices. A consistent water supply, food, entertainment, places for prayers and comfortable lodging had to be established for both man and beast of burden to help ease their stay.

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Subeita was a sprawling city along the incense and spice trade.



Striking Edomite and Nabataean temples, succeeded by imposing Byzantine churches and modest Muslim mosques abound within the cities' fortified walls and at various interstices to serve the spiritual needs of both the locals and the pious travelers. For that purpose, every drop of water had to be ingeniously collected—water wells, water conduits, terraces in the form of platforms to control water drainage following the rain storms, and stone mounds abound. Edomites, Nabataean, Byzantines, and Muslim converts in the footsteps of their chalcolithic-period predecessors worked and further developed the

land usage, traces of which are still visible. They assigned each agricultural produce; stretches of land (mares) in the flat valleys were marked to sow wheat, barley, and cereals in general, terraces close to town, and water wells for planting leeks and various seasonal vegetables, orchards of fig trees, almonds, prunes, and peaches dotted the terraced platforms while vineyards spread into the vast horizon of which nothing remains but the barren landscape strewn with stone piles.

Dug and paved water conduits leading to water wells and manholes to collect every water drop are visible

Modern-day Bedouins, the extant tribes from Bir al-Sabe', are descendants of splinter Edomite and Nabataean clans. They were once prosperous enterprising merchants, but the shift in the incense trade route in the eighth century undermined the underpinnings of their economic structure.



The entrance to the walled, fortified monastery in Abda.

along the partially restored streets of Kurnub, Subeita, and Abda. A walk in these cities is quite revealing of the glorious past of these dream cities strewn in the desert. Whereas Abda is primarily a walled holy city with Canaanite temples and idols, it

also houses magnificent Byzantine churches; a veritable monastic town that catered to the needs of pilgrims on the way to St. Catherine Monastery in Sinai, it boasts huge wine presses and caves carved on the chalky mountainside. The famed wine of Abda was sought internationally and exported via Gaza seaport. The locals lived in the caves that sprawl up the fortified hill.

“From which house do you come?” *من دار مين؟* is an antiquated question among Jerusalemites inquiring about the family name of a new acquaintance. Once answered, the interrogation proceeds, “Whose chamber?” *من بيت مين؟*, literally, Who is your father? The architecture of the house, the layout of the rooms, reflected the social structure along hamula and clan categories. The same structure is instantly perceived in the partially restored building complex known as “The Pool House” (Dar al-Birkeh) in Subeita. Inside the vestibule, an open air courtyard, with the typical water well. Adjacent to it stands a carved stone basin, the birkeh. The courtyard is flanked by doorways that lead to private chambers. The spatial layout brings back to memory the house of my great grandmother, Aisheh Saleh Nuseibeh, in the Old City. It reverberates the echo of Jerusalem's social structure and that of the hamula as the extended family.

In the lengthy process of ecological adaptation to the new environment, the perception of Bir al-Sabe' tribes did not merely reflect and react to but also incorporated the new ecological and techno-economic resources, working them into a system that was conducive to the survival of the tribal structure as an integral whole. The complex dynamic process underlies the

transformation of the environment into a resource and can be viewed as the origin of the pragmatic adaptability of the Palestinians to the diverse challenges in war and peace, under contemporary occupation and in the diaspora. Throughout history, Palestinian society has preserved its tribal structure of social solidarity within the clan. Unity within the four-generation family unit is one of its most salient political, economic, and religious structures.

The dynamic process of ecological adaptation to the environment, the cultural diversity of which the Canaanite nascent city-states were composed, and the influences of the various peoples with whom the Palestinians mixed reveal a tapestry of life that has witnessed continued adaptations that structured and conditioned the unique socioeconomic system, religion, and spiritual legacy to which the diverse Amorite tribes adapted and set the patterns for the other peoples that followed. Arabs, Greeks, Ionians, Babylonians, Egyptians, Persians, and Crusaders were followed in modernity by the Ottomans, British, and Israelis who have played an ever-increasing role in reorganizing the ecological system, expanding Palestinian resources in new directions, and reshaping Palestinian modern identity. Heirs to all these peoples and cultures, Palestinians, and Al-Sab'awi tribes as a case in point, can claim neither racial genetic purity nor ontological cultural homogeneity.

Palestinian cultural identity has been produced within the context of Palestinian geography and bears structural continuity with primordial Amorite categories of thought and myths. Throughout history, each period was merely a

fleeting moment that in its transient fragility represented a momentary socioeconomic dynamic adaptation of the culture to the available resources, thus ensuring the survival of the family within the tribe.

Jerusalemites, Hebronites, and Al-Sab'awis alike remain tribal peoples whose elementary kinship unit was dynamically structured by the early pattern of cave dwellings that formed the ancient cities and hamlets that remained inhabited well into the twentieth century. In modernity, the locus of the extended family, the subunit of the tribe (hamula) in the Palestinian village, remains invariably the hosh, the four-generation family-living courtyard.

Article photos are courtesy of the author.

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