The Bedouin of the Sinaitic Peninsula

W. E. Jennings-Bramley

To cite this article: W. E. Jennings-Bramley (1909) The Bedouin of the Sinaitic Peninsula, Palestine Exploration Quarterly, 41:4, 253-258, DOI: 10.1179/peq.1909.41.4.253

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/peq.1909.41.4.253

Published online: 20 Nov 2013.

Article views: 13

View related articles
THE BEDOUIN OF THE SINAITIC PENINSULA.

By W. E. Jennings-Bramley.

(Continued from Q.S., 1908, p. 116.)

XXII. Life.

For covering in the night the women weave a sort of rug of wool and goats’ hair mixed, a strip of each in turn. These are generally left the natural colour of the hair and wool, although sometimes a little red is worked in, as a pattern. It is while out with their flocks that the women spin the wool and goats’ hair of which these long strips are woven. These strips sewn together are used both for making tents and these rugs.

Goats’ hair is called sháh.
Sheep’s wool “ souf.
Camels’ wool “ wubber.

All three are used for the manufacture of tents and coverings.

Unlike other Mohammedans, they are very fond of dogs, which are allowed to go in and out of the tents and are treated kindly. They use them as watch dogs and for hunting the ibex. A dog also always accompanies the women when watering their goats, for protection. I have also seen some cats. On the whole I think the Bedouin are fond of animals. They catch gazelles and red-legged partridges, but only to sell them in the towns. I have known a Bedouin bring up two young eagles he had taken from the nest and let them go when they were old enough to care for themselves, but I have never seen any birds in cages. They have many names both for dogs and camels. The latter are generally named after some well-known camel from which they are said to descend. Thus one I had was called “Araiman,” from “Arimat,” a well-known strain. Another Nigâr, that being the name of a famous camel from which mine was descended. For more personal reasons I have known a
camel named Abu'l ella, or "Father of a rise," because its owner had a rise on the day he bought it. Among names for dogs I can remember Zabīf, Farka, and Lissa.

I have given a detailed description of a Bedouin tent elsewhere. The women keep to their side of it, the children go in and out. Some men, if very near relations, are privileged to go into the women's side of the tent. In my own case, when visiting a Bedouin I knew, he would, on my entering, shout out a salutation so that it could be heard on the women's side; then his wife would simply answer back or come, veiled of course, and stand looking over the partition talking to us. The older women are not so particular about being veiled, and among the younger women there is a great difference on this point. If they know a man very intimately they will sometimes speak to him unveiled, I have lived three or four days with a Gabnisi Arab and seen and spoken to his wife with the same liberty with which I might have spoken to an Englishwoman. This matter rests in the husband's hands, he decides whom she shall see and by whom she shall be seen. If a traveller meets a woman on the wayside and has something to say to her or any question to ask, she will sit down with her back turned to him and her burqa drawn over her face, but will speak quite freely to him. A near relation, such as an uncle or brother-in-law, they always kiss on meeting.

Among men the most ordinary salutation on meeting is "Marhabba," to which the answer is "Salamaat"; to which "Allah ya salamek" is said, and "Allah ya salem hatrack" or "Ya bareck feel" are returned. A salutation, especially of the Bedouin, is "Gawâk," which is said while pointing at the person saluted with the camel stick. When leaving, nothing need be said, but if any expression is used it is either "Maa Salaama" or "Allah ya gibon bi salaama" or "Hulluf Allah alack."

The nearest approach to general social intercourse between men and women takes place during the Rūbia', to which I have already alluded. At this season of the year—the only one when many collect together in one place—the Dahieh is danced or rather sung in the evenings. The chorus, which is composed of as many men of the tribe as choose to join in, stands in a long row. It is their business to beat time, and as they stand they step simultaneously

---

1 Quarterly Statement, 1907, p. 32.
forward, bending as they clap their hands rhythmically. A deep guttural sound marks the first cadence. When they have thus given the time and rhythm, one of their number begins a chant in honour of heroes of the past, or improvises verses in which he celebrates the deeds of valour of some one present perhaps. At the end of each verse the chorus repeat a kind of refrain. Every allusion is greeted by the women gathered together by themselves in a tent close by, with the shrill tremulous “zaghareet,” which with them is equally a sign of mourning or rejoicing. Suddenly a girl (the Hashi) appears on the scene. She is closely veiled and stands perhaps thirty yards away in front of the men. She pauses an instant, sword in hand, just time enough to feel the rhythm of the song, and then advances quickly, holding the sword lengthways in both her hands. Her body sways in time to the rhythm of words and beat of hands. The men are gradually approaching her and when they reach her the chant becomes louder and her movements more decided. She now retreats slowly, repelling them with her sword, sometimes bending to the right, sometimes to the left, but always following the rhythm in every movement. When thus she has been driven back to the limits of the ground, there is a short lull, while the men walk back to their original starting point, and the whole thing begins again. The Hashi will sometimes dance longer than her audience desire, or her performance may not satisfy them; in either case, one of the men kneeling down, goes through the motion of shooting at her, pointing at her with the forefinger of the left hand and snapping the thumb and third finger of the right while the forefinger of the right hand pulls the thumb of the left as an imaginary trigger. The Hashi then retires and another takes her place. Sometimes a different dance is chosen, it is called the Harbi. The Hashi in this takes very short quick steps, the time is much faster, and she runs round and round very much in the same manner as a mechanical toy. These songs and dances will sometimes last the whole night through. The Bedouin will sleep merely an hour before they go off into the hills with their flocks at daybreak; once there they sleep through the heat of the day, and come back ready for another night of singing and dancing.

The Hashi can never be a married woman. I have heard that in the Ababda she is not veiled and that instead of a sword she holds out her own long hair to its full length, but I only know this from hearsay, as I have never seen it.
The following is a song sung during the Dahieh:

Abu Ghabbush's funeral feast is set
Ye who are praying (at it) prepare to set forth
The starting-day is fixed
But Ghabbush will not meet us.
Cursed be the fateful night
Which casts down those of high degree
It has taken from us Abu Ghabbush
And left his sleeping place empty.

These dances and amusements are only indulged in at the time of the Rûbia', or on such special occasions as a circumcision or marriage. At other times the natives are scattered here and there, and such things are impossible. Some are tending their flocks, others travelling to the towns nearest to them—but often many days' journey off—in search of corn, flour, coffee, as well as stuffs, and the guns and swords they require. Gunpowder, too, they fetch, for they have never yet attempted making it themselves. All their trading is done by exchange. A Bedouin I knew, having paid for a gun with a young camel, a goat, and one real (£), soon after repented of his bargain and wanted to return the gun; but, as the other man had already eaten the goat, restitution on his side was difficult.

They are of necessity frugal: their ordinary diet consisting of unleavened bread and water with an occasional onion, and such milk as can be spared from the calves and kids. But when the chance presents itself, such as a feast in honour of a stranger, or any little festivity of their own, it is quite remarkable what quantities of meat and fat they will consume. Their cooking is at all times very elementary. Of dishes, properly so called, they know nothing. All meat, be it camel, goat, hare, gazelle, or ibex, is cooked in the same way, and that I have elsewhere described.

They have no honey and keep no bees, but are very fond of sweets, which they buy in the towns. They get a kind of treacle called Assal, made from sugar-cane and ordinary Helawa, a mixture of honey and oil. Coffee they consume in large quantities, considering what it costs them. Tea they have heard of. Neither wine nor spirits of any kind have penetrated, even for medicinal purposes, into the desert. Beyond the usual Mohammedan restriction regarding pork, they have none, and do not object even
to vulture—taken medicinally; but of this I will speak when dealing with their remedies. I have never heard of their attributing any moral influence to certain foods. In fact, their minds are far more occupied with physical than moral questions of improvement. Their laws are handed down from father to son and are enforced by general opinion. Such are the following, which no Bedouin would dream of transgressing:

Any water you may discover, either in your own or in the territory of another tribe, is named after you.

Dates and figs planted by you in another tribe's territory are yours. In most cases, however, the land is bought before the planting is done. In the case of buying a single date tree, a stem from the top of the tree to be bought is cut off, and a circle measured round the trunk—the length of the date stem taken as a measure of half the diameter plus the thickness of the trunk—so much ground goes with the tree. Should the purchaser wish to sell the tree again he must first of all offer it to the original owner, and for the same price as he gave for it. As money seldom passes and all is done by exchange, supposing a man exchanged two trees for a horse, he would have to find a horse of the same age and value as the horse he had received in the first instance, should he want his trees back.

Trees are often exchanged. They also mortgage them.

They are too far from civilization—too constantly on the move also—to be amenable to the laws that govern Egypt. No government, at the time of writing, has ever attempted to enforce conscription, nor does it seem likely that any will, for many years to come. The Bedouin demand nothing of the government, neither defence nor order, help, assistance, nor any of the hundred and one necessities which a civilized people claim in return for the burden of taxation. The Bedouin neither asks for nor receives any of these: it is but fair he should be, as he is, exempt from taxation. As to the children, there are no schools for them to go to, and it would require a very efficient school-board to force them into schools, if there were any. I have never met any Bedouin who could read or write, nor one to whom the ability would have seemed desirable. If there was anything more to be learnt about camels than they know, they would willingly learn, but it would be very difficult to persuade a Bedouin that such increase of knowledge were possible. They have neither ambition to widen their horizon, nor much
curiosity concerning the world beyond it. However much they may dislike another Bedouin, he must be, de facto, a superior being to any town-bred man, and, though raiding and killing each other may become a painful necessity, in all ordinary daily transactions they are extraordinarily kind among themselves. For instance, they will freely lend what little money they have to each other without interest. It is only the town people who claim interest, and high interest too. The Bedouin in all their dealings with the civilized or semi-civilized world are very careful, buying only the things of which they know the value, and having a very shrewd idea that they would certainly be cheated otherwise. I have seen one look at a sovereign doubtfully and carefully before accepting it. They are, in fact, constantly on their guard against townsfolk and their ways.

Every sort and kind of money finds its way into Arabia, and they have to accept it or give it at the value put on it by the men with whom they deal. When they speak of a real, they mean a real medjidi, the value of which is 20 piastres, that is the coin best known to them, and one which may be said to have a fixed value.

(To be continued.)

GLEANINGS FROM THE MINUTE-BOOKS OF THE JERUSALEM LITERARY SOCIETY.

By R. A. S. MACALISTER, M.A., F.S.A.

(Continued from Q.S., January, p. 49.)

VIII.

At the meeting of 28th December, 1849, Mr. FINN read a Paper on Deir el-Kal'ah, in the Lebanon.

In October, 1848, I rode from Brumana... to see the Roman remains of a Maronite convent, popularly named the Convent of the Castle. Riding about the exterior of the group of joint building and ruins, we found shafts of columns still erect, especially two of granite, and of enormous diameter. In the eastern side of the convent, and commandingle a glorious prospect of Lebanon scenery,