

Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Hamdānī, *Description of the Arab Peninsula*

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The “Description of the Arab Peninsula” (*Ṣifat jazīrat al-‘arab*) by the great Yemeni scholar Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad al-Hamdānī (893–945) has accompanied me throughout most periods of my academic life. In particular, this is true for the following section:

The slopes of Mount Hinwam are inhabited by five thousand warriors from a subtribe of Ḥāshid. The cereal grown here is sorghum. These slopes are the most affluent of God’s soil with regard to bees and honey. A man often owns fifty bee-hives or more, and this honey is worth six raṭl for the Baghdad dirham and seven or eight for the dirham al-qafla. The slopes’ inhabitants are courageous and beautiful.

I have translated this passage from the Arabic edition of the *Ṣifa* as published by David Heinrich Müller in the late nineteenth century (al-Hamdānī 1884–91: 194), relying also on Ludwig Forrer’s translation into German (1942: 257) of Müller’s edition.

A few years after my first fieldwork periods in Damascus, while I completed a doctoral degree in Social and Cultural Anthropology at the University of Vienna, my first adviser Walter Dostal mentioned in early 1978 that a postdoc position might soon be opened up at the institute he directed. This would imply my commitment for a new regional specialization, i.e. in Southwest Arabian ethnography and cultural history. Requirements were a corresponding dedication to

fieldwork in the region, and to reading the relevant ethnographic and historical literature about that part of the world. “Read as much by al-Hamdānī as you can,” was the final sentence in Dostal’s instructions. My professional postdoc career thus began with the admonition by my previous adviser, future director, and subsequent predecessor that “reading matters.”

A few years earlier, I had begun to study Arabic in Syria and Austria. This included several university courses, where I first met Johann Heiss in 1976. Reading, translating, and interpreting Arabic was at the core of this lifelong association, and al-Hamdānī soon became a central part of it (Heiss 1998). In the summer of 1980, we jointly visited the central and northern Yemeni highlands. In the winter of 1980/81, I accompanied Dostal during a first joint cooperation fieldwork period in those parts of Southwest Arabia controlled by Saudi Arabia, i.e. in southern Hijaz. In the winter of 1981/82, Heiss and I jointly continued that cooperative fieldwork in southern Hijaz and northern ‘Asīr—partly during Dostal’s absence and partly together with him. Then in 1983, Heiss and I completed that sequence of ethnographic sojourns with a joint fieldwork season in Ṣa‘da province of northern Yemen.

These were the late Kreisky years in Austria’s post-1945 republican history. As a close ally of Olof Palme in Sweden and of Willy Brandt in West Germany, the head of Austria’s Social Democrats, Bruno Kreisky, won his party’s majority rule in subsequent federal elections between 1970 and 1983. One crucial aspect in Kreisky’s foreign and international policies aimed at strengthening Austria’s position of military neutrality by forging closer ties to the association of non-aligned countries of those decades. In turn, this entailed improved relations with Arab and Muslim countries, and Austria’s official recognition of the PLO. Dostal was a committed supporter of Kreisky’s international orientation, and his advice was appreciated in those governments. During the second half of the 1970s, Dostal had been part of the country’s delegation to Riyadh, led by Kreisky’s Minister for Science and Research, Hertha Firnberg. Firnberg concluded a Saudi-Austrian bilateral cultural agreement, which *inter alia* led to the joint Austrian-Saudi ethnographic cooperation project from 1979 to 1983.

In his 1979 pilot study in southern Hijaz, Dostal had been deeply impressed by the high significance of local honey production and bee-keeping. He asked me to pay special attention to this aspect of local ethnography of which he knew very little, and I did. Manual bee-keeping indeed played a substantial role within the regional rural economies anywhere on altitudes over 1,500 m above sea level in those “Arabian Highlands” between al-Ṭā’if and Sanaa. I consulted local experts and accompanied their work. I read the “Book of Plants” by al-Dīnawarī (828–896), who was surprisingly familiar with the Hijazi regions. And of course, I consulted most of al-Hamdānī’s relevant texts. At the same time, I also became interested in the text’s editorial history and its ramifications. Both aspects will be addressed in the following—the content of the chosen text section, and its more recent publication history.

The section by al-Hamdānī about the slopes of Mount Hinwam and their beehives is part of the final, major chapter in the *Ṣifa*. That final chapter was elaborated by the author as the highlight and climax of the entire text, indicated by the chapter's title "The Yemen's wonders." Everything considered by the author as being worth some wider recognition about the Yemen is briefly described in this final chapter of the book. The *Ṣifa* itself was envisioned as a major piece among all of al-Hamdānī's works. Hence the section on the slopes of Mount Hinwam and its beehives occupies a conspicuous and privileged position in al-Hamdānī's *opus magnum* and in his work at large.

In this section, the author pointed out the exceptional abundance of honey in a special mountain region of central Yemen. He even indicated some of his rare quantifications for that abundance by two criteria. In terms of bee-hive numbers per household, a man "often owns fifty bee-hives or more". In terms of market rates, a Baghdad *dirham* was worth six *raṭl* (a standard weight measurement unit of about 2.5 kilos or less), and the *dirham al-qafla* seven or eight *raṭl*. This standardized equation substantiated the author's claim that those slopes were "the most affluent of God's soil with regard to bees and honey." The rationale by which this author listed honey from the slopes of Mount Hinwam so prominently among his "wonders of the Yemen" at first sight was money as an indicator of affluence. (In another section, the author listed money as one among three sources of wealth in the Yemen of his days.) Yet simultaneously he implied that his readers from the outset would associate honey as belonging to a special class of rare and precious products.

Honey could only come from a few regions that were especially well-suited for bee-keeping, while these limited supplies always interacted with much higher and wider demands not only on markets in most regions of Southwest Arabia. Moreover, honey from Mount Hinwam (and elsewhere in Yemen) also was an important element in long-distance trade: this is indicated by the author's reference to the coined currency of the "Baghdad" *dirham* (i.e., *drachma*). These high demands were informed by the symbolic and practical values attributed by clients and producers to honey. In the tenth century, honey continued to be a main source for sweetening across all over the Middle East (Gingrich 2006). In itself, a diet was not merely a matter of culinary but also of medical concerns. Moreover, bee products themselves were considered a main remedy (or a main ingredient to that) for several important forms of illness and specific conditions of weakness, e.g. after giving birth. As a local author who would gain the popular reputation and ensuing *nom d'artiste* of being "the Yemen's tongue" (*lisān al-Yaman*), al-Hamdānī was well aware of such widely held values about honey among his readers. This indeed featured an Arab version of the emerging intercontinental relation between "sweetness and power" (Mintz 1986).

In a wider regional sense, al-Hamdānī's text section also includes some basic comparative dimensions relevant for the Yemeni and Southwest Arabian highlands. Whenever al-Hamdānī in his *Ṣifa* refers to a specific region there, he specifies who

its residents are. As in most cases, this is done by clarifying the tribal affiliations of the resident majority, in the Hinwam case a section of the Ḥāshid tribe from the author's own Hamdān federation. As usual, the author neither explicitly mentions members of minorities of either inferior positions (e.g., slaves and Jews or Christians), nor of superior status (e.g., the Prophet's descendants). The widespread existence of these minorities in al-Hamdānī's times is confirmed, however, by other local sources. The armed tribal majority households rely on agricultural production (primarily sorghum) for their basic subsistence, while the honey they produce by bee-keeping is one of those products primarily entering gift and market circulation. If this is true for the exceptional example of Mount Hinwam, then most basic aspects of this description also apply, with variations, but to a far lesser extent, to other fertile mountain regions elsewhere in Southwest Arabia as well. This is a key for understanding core elements of Upper Yemen's socio-economic history in Islamic pre-Ottoman times.

Revisiting this text section not only has consequences for thinking through its tenth-century contents of socio-economic Yemeni history. As already mentioned, the text also has its editorial and translational history in Central Europe of the late nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century. David Heinrich Müller's edition of al-Hamdānī's *Ṣifa* from 1884/91 by and large remains an enduring and highly useful testimony of Arabist philological and historical scholarship from Central Europe. Müller's edition substantially inspired the emergence of South Arabian Studies across Europe and in Vienna in particular. This also promoted the eventual methodological insight that any more detailed interpretation of al-Hamdānī's textual evidence would require improved insights into its regional contexts. In turn, Müller and his main students agreed that this would necessitate intensive research sojourns inside Southwest Arabia—for learning more about real speech practices as well as about actual conditions of life and their respective cultural background. The two decades between 1882 and 1902 thereby became a period of protracted trials and errors in the practical pursuit of these main methodological insights. By consequence, the emergence of ethnographic fieldwork in Vienna had one of its main roots in South Arabian studies at the intersections between Arabic/Semitic philology and the nascent fields of anthropology and ethnography.

Key representatives of developing the ethnographic fieldwork method in Vienna, parallel to Franz Boas (1858–1942) from Westphalia but long before Bronislaw Malinowski (1884–1942) from Krakow, were Müller's students Eduard Glaser (1855–1908; four sojourns in northern Yemen between 1882 and 1894) and subsequently, Marie and Wilhelm Hein (with a joint sojourn in Southeast Yemen in 1901/02). In fact, Wilhelm Hein (1861–1903) also was a secretary of the Anthropological Society in Vienna and the second person in the University of Vienna's history to obtain the *Venia Docendi* in "Ethnography." Marie Hein (1853–1943) co-edited some of her husband's and her own research results together with Müller (after Wilhelm's early demise), and she became one of the first female staff

members at the Natural History Museum's department for anthropology and ethnography. In turn, this department formed the nucleus of the foundation process for Vienna's Ethnology Museum.

Reading indeed does matter: Reading and editing al-Hamdānī's *Šifa*, for instance, promoted the emergence of academic and institutional ethnography in Vienna during the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century.

These reflections cannot be concluded without mentioning two substantial Swiss contributions to these engagements with South Arabian historical texts and the impact they had. One of them was due to Ludwig Forrer (1897–1995). Forrer was a skilled Swiss philologist and historian of the Middle East who was head of the Zurich Central Library when he engaged in translating the *Šifa* into German. David Heinrich Müller (1846–1912) had been one of the most prominent members of Vienna's Jewish community as a knighted member of the Imperial Academy of Sciences. When the famous edition prepared by a Jewish scholar was translated during the Nazi years, Switzerland obviously was a safer academic site than Vienna could have been. There, one of Müller's last (and disloyal) former students in office was a certain Viktor Christian, a committed member of the Nazi party and the SS who monitored everything that concerned the local pursuit of Middle Eastern and ethnographic studies between Prague and Graz. Christian did not keep Forrer from receiving the materials he needed for his translation work from other colleagues in Vienna and Graz (as acknowledged by Forrer 1942: VII), but he abstained from supporting it. Nevertheless, Forrer was able to accomplish the translation. The second relevant Swiss contribution came from Regina Bendix. I continue to appreciate her substantial cooperation in pointing out (Gingrich and Bendix 2015) how these most recent episodes of a text's editorial and publication history were embedded in a sequence of contests between enlightened search for truth and innovative insights, against strong currents of imperial, orientalist, colonial, and racist ambitions.

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