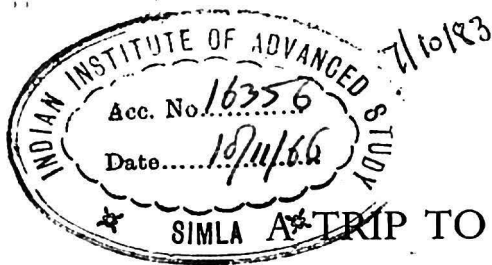


PRESENTED TO THE INDIAN INSTITUTE OF ADVANCED STUDY, SILLA

BY





TMP

PH
950
CRO

SIMLA A*TRIP TO MADAIN SALIH

By PETER CROWE

READERS of Doughty will remember his description of the Nabatean tombs at Madain Salih, ancient Hidjr, in Northern Arabia. Like Petra, Madain Salih lay on the old caravan route from south-west Arabia along the Red Sea and into Syria, and the tombs there were cut into the rock during the first century A.D. by men of the same race who built Petra. So much is known, but little else; no one knows how the people who were buried there lived, or even where, whether they originally came to Madain Salih from further south, or what became of them when the prosperous trade in gold and frankincense turned to other routes and the settlement fell on evil days. Few people have visited the tombs since Doughty's time and only one fully-equipped archaeological expedition* to the area has given much attention to them. This is not altogether surprising when you realize that even now there is no paved road within fifty miles of the site and that from whatever direction you approach it you must cross wide stretches of rock, sand and lava.

Madain Salih is identified by Moslems with the story of the prophet Salih in the Quran. As with Noah in the Bible, this concerns a prophet whose teaching was rejected by the people to whom he was sent, with the result that their city was destroyed by a natural calamity.

Over the centuries the commentators have elaborated the tale in all sorts of ways, particularly as regards the reference in the Quran (in connection with the story of the prophet) to a she-camel which the disbelieving people hamstrung. According to the legend; when the people of Thamud refused to listen to the prophet's words, they proposed that at a certain festival they should pray to their gods and he to his, and see which would answer. When the day came the Thamudites first prayed to their idols, with no result. Then their prince, Jonda, challenged Salih to conjure forth a she-camel, big with young, from the rocks nearby and swore that if the prophet brought this miracle to pass they would believe him.

Salih asked it of God. The rocks shuddered as though in labour and a she-camel came forth, big with young. Seeing the miracle, Jonda believed, and some few with him; but the rest of the Thamudites still repudiated the prophet and glorified their own idols.

Meanwhile the miraculous she-camel drank up all the water from the village well, but at the same time she produced inexhaustible supplies of milk. Some commentators say that she went through the village streets crying, "If any wants milk, let him come forth!" This caused both wonder and dismay, for although the people appreciated the milk they feared for their supply of water. Finally, although Salih begged them to spare the

* Undertaken in 1907 by Pères Jaussen and Savignac, who published the results of their work in 1909 under the title of *Voyage Archéologique en Arabie*.



she-camel if they hoped to avert the wrath of God, the Thamudites lamed the miraculous animal by cutting her tendons, and then killed her. Her young foal, however, came forth from the womb unharmed and vanished into a great rock which still stands as a landmark on the western side of the valley, its summit close to a thousand feet.

Then Salih warned the people to stay inside their houses for three days. And on the third day "a terrible noise from heaven assailed them; and in the morning they were found in their dwellings prostrate on their breasts and dead."

Whether the Thamud were contemporary with, and related to, or subject to, the Nabateans is not clear. Pliny and Ptolemy mention their settlements, including one that is apparently Madain Salih, as oasis towns on the route from Southern Arabia. Later this route was gradually abandoned, being replaced by sea travel and by a trade route up the Persian Gulf and then overland, through Palmyra. The settlement at Madain Salih probably came to an end at about the same time as the Nabateans at Petra were finally overthrown by the Romans (A.D. 106). From the inscriptions copied by Doughty it is clear that all the monuments there date from the first century A.D., that all are Nabatean, and that all except one are tombs.

But in the time of Mohammed, five hundred years later, no one could read these inscriptions. The history of the people was forgotten. Passing by these rock-hewn façades, scattered throughout the valley, and seeing no other houses (for no one yet knows where the people lived), the Beduin concluded that these buildings must have been the dwellings of an ancient pagan race. Those who were brave enough to venture inside discovered human bones, which even in Doughty's time they claimed to be those of giants, although he found them quite ordinary.

So, presumably, arose the legend of the people of Thamud, struck dead in their houses overnight. Tradition may also have associated their downfall with one of the volcanic outbreaks which long ago led to the formation of the Harrat, as they are called, the enormous fields of black lava which cover several areas in north Arabia and which are desolate enough to make anyone brood on past cataclysms. And so the city of Thamud became one of the cursed cities, like Midian, and Sodom and Gomorrah, its fate an awful warning of what might befall those who rejected the prophets of God.

Madain Salih was our objective in an expedition from Jeddah last February. The leading spirits in this were the manager of the Dutch Bank, an experienced desert camper who had been planning such a trip for several years, and the American Ambassador, who took the lead in co-ordinating plans and discussing them with officials in the Saudi Government. Even they, however, had to go mostly on guesswork and hearsay, for although excellent aerial photographs of the area were available it was impossible to tell from these whether some parts could or could not be crossed by Land Rover. As for the rest of us, we were enthusiastic camp-followers whose main qualification was possession of—or access to—a desert vehicle of some kind.

The Saudi Arabian Government was interested in our plans and extremely helpful. They provided us with two trucks, and their drivers, to

carry the heavy provisions and extra supplies of petrol; they provided a tent, a guide (although the guide, as guides often do, proved to be more of a liability than an asset), and an official from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to accompany us. This was the more difficult for them because the expedition was timed to coincide with the Id el-Fitr, the three-day holiday which comes at the close of Ramadan. This is a joyous holiday; the strain of a month's fasting is over, and everyone relaxes, puts on new clothes, and spends the time visiting friends and family. Shops close, banks close, government offices close. It is not a time when drivers, guides, or officials would choose to be bothered with a group of foreigners wanting to drive over five hundred miles into the wilderness to look at tombs.

Three alternative routes were possible from beyond Medina to El Ula, and thence to Madain Salih, both of which are located on the old Hejaz Railway. One, undoubtedly the most direct, was to follow the railroad track all the way from Medina, but this would mean two hundred miles of very rough going, even if it were possible. The second was to take the new, well-paved Medina-Tebuk road, which more or less parallels the Hejaz Railway sixty or seventy miles to the east, and try to cut across this gap at some promising point as near Madain Salih as possible, without—as far as we knew—even a camel track; this would mean the shortest distance across bad country, but might be a dead end. The third was to turn off this same Medina-Tebuk road earlier, following a known track across to the railroad, and then north to Madain Salih. We intended to try the second alternative. But at the last moment the experts, after an intense study of the aerial photographs, decided that we had very little chance of making a crossing there, and we compromised—wisely, as it turned out—on the third alternative, which eventually took us over a hundred and thirty-six miles of unpaved track.

We left Jedda just before eight o'clock on Wednesday, February 12: nine Land Rovers or power-wagons, and twenty-eight people, the two trucks and their drivers having gone ahead at daybreak some hours earlier. We were Saudi, American, Swiss, Dutch, German, Italian and British. And in spite of all the planning which had gone before, we were embarking on something of a gamble. As the cars swung out into the Medina road one by one, heavily loaded, many of us must have wondered whether we would in fact reach Madain Salih and whether those same nine vehicles would all return under their own power six days later.

To complicate matters an American correspondent from Beirut and his son were planning to fly to Jedda, and from Jedda to Madain Salih, meeting us there on the following afternoon. Was there an airport at Madain Salih? Well, perhaps not exactly, but there was a place where airplanes had landed.

The first hundred miles, to Rabegh, was straight going on the Medina road, through semi-desert country. This is the regular pilgrim route, and every twenty miles or so along the way are pilgrim rest houses, their columns gaily decorated with sketches of palm trees, flowers, or automobiles, in bright colour. Coffee-pots and brass trays hang in neat rows, and benches, or charpoys, are laid out ready for the traveller. Beyond Rabegh the land becomes more desolate, a sandy waste with drifts of sand

blown against the roots of every smallest thorn bush; an occasional glimpse of the sea on the left and a range of jagged peaks on the right, their foothills covered in sand.

About a hundred and eighty miles from Jedda the road swings inland and joins a road coming up from the port of Yenbo. We stopped for petrol and rejoined our trucks at Badr, the scene of Mohammed's first victory, and then followed the wadi north-eastwards towards Medina. It is beautiful country, with blue and purple mountains rising beyond the nearer, red-brown hills, and mud villages, their groves of date palms fenced with palm fronds, scattered at frequent intervals along the road. Extensive irrigation walls show where they have tried to catch the floods that follow heavy rain.

Some eighty miles later the convoy stopped suddenly over the crest of a ridge and there before us, only a few miles away, lay Medina, the forbidden city, second only to Mecca in holiness. Much of the city was hidden by low hills, but we could clearly see the brilliant green dome of the Prophet's tomb, its minaret, and other tall, twin minarets to the north of the city, the whole shimmering in a heat haze like the mirage of some fairy town.

All roads, of course, lead the faithful into Medina. The non-Muslim who wishes to get to the other side of the city has to find his way around it as best he can without entering the sacred precincts. One by one our eleven vehicles bumped off the road and plunged into desert, clouds of sand billowing around them, to follow a wide detour along what might or might not have been a track. To my surprise we came almost immediately upon the Hejaz Railway, the old railway of the Turks, the railway made famous by Lawrence of Arabia; single track, narrow gauge, it stretched romantically if somewhat crookedly from its old terminus at Medina away into a gap in the hills. We were to see a great deal more of this track in the next few days, but it remained exciting, and strangely improbable.

A contract to rebuild the Hejaz Railway has recently been signed, specifying that the work is to be completed in thirty months. Perhaps a few years hence pilgrims and even tourists will be able to make the journey from Damascus to the outskirts of Medina by train.

It was now that the disadvantages of having a guide became apparent. By ourselves we would have skirted the mountain north of Medina, keeping as close to the city as possible, and come out on the further side. But whether he had misunderstood where we wanted to go, or was looking for a road that did not exist, or whether he was overwhelmed by the responsibility of keeping us at a safe distance from the holy city, the guide led us on a wild chase, north, east and south, north, east and south again. Different parts of the convoy lost contact with each other. We bumped in and out of the same village three times in a crazy, follow-my-leader game. One truck was stuck in sand and had to be pulled out.

It was after twenty-seven miles, two hours later, and buried in dust that we regained the road and saw the twin minarets and green dome of Medina behind us. We were almost converted to Islam on the spot.

By this time it was already five o'clock, and we had to stop within a few miles of Medina to set up camp while it was still light. To us in the Hejaz the sun always sets at six o'clock, summer and winter, or rather it is always

six o'clock when the sun sets, a fact which requires explanation. Like the ancient Romans, the Arabs reckon the day ends and a new day begins at sunset, which is therefore equivalent to our midnight. Sunset, Arab time, is always twelve o'clock; one hour after sunset is one o'clock, and so on. Westerners, finding it difficult to adjust to this timing, use what is called "sun-time", which differs exactly six hours from Arab time, so that, for instance, four o'clock Arab is ten o'clock sun-time, and vice versa. Greenwich has nothing to do with this.

We fell easily into a routine of camping. Everyone seemed to find their own place without being told—unloading the trucks, putting up beds, building the fire, getting supplies unloaded and the evening meal started. The trucks and cars were parked as a windbreak, and within this shelter we had two small tents and one large harem tent, with extra camp beds set up by the men wherever they wanted, so that a variety of snores arose through the night from all points of the compass. The Arab drivers would quickly have their own fire going under a thorn bush nearby, and we shared food. Firewood was scarce, but there is always something to be found, and one of the Land Rovers would usually drag in a dead thorn tree from nearby. Nights were cold; as low as 40°, and seeming colder to blood thinned by the Jedda climate.

In the mornings it was even more surprising how smoothly and without apparent organization we started moving. One public-spirited early riser would have the fire going and coffee hot before others straggled sleepily from bed. Thereafter people seemed to wander aimlessly on errands of their own. Yet within an hour of sunrise we had breakfasted and eleven vehicles were loaded and on the road.

The next day took us through astonishing country. First red sands; then the Harrat of Khaibar, one of the great volcanic areas where porous black stone is flung across the sand like huge pebbles on a seashore, mounds of black rock look as though they had been dumped by giant bulldozers, and the whole world seems dead. Here more than anywhere else one has the feeling that when God finished creating the earth He cast all his leftover materials upon the Arabian peninsula. Or did He indeed sweep away the idolators in a sea of lava? One began to wonder.

In all this darkness appeared what looked like a lake covered in snow, but which was in fact a great waste of salt—white, and bitter to the taste.

Beyond this is Khaibar, the town to which Mohammed exiled the Jews of Medina after they had leagued with his enemy Abu Sofian. They were later driven out of Khaibar as well, and it is believed to have been subsequently settled by African slaves belonging to a Nejd tribe, the members of which still come every year to collect their share of the date harvest. The majority of the people are certainly dark, many with African features. Apparently the Arabs themselves could not or would not live at Khaibar because of its malarial fevers. It still has a bad reputation for malaria, not difficult to understand when you see the stagnant ponds along the outskirts of the town.

This was the first day of the Id holiday, when people could eat and drink and smoke as they liked for the first time in a month, and Khaibar was gay, with an air of prosperity. Everyone seemed to be out in the

street, all in new clothes, the children in bright pink and blue and orange.

After Khaibar we were still on the main road, and we were told to turn left twenty miles further north on a dirt track leading cross-country to El Ula. The turning was marked, we discovered much later, by two cairns beside the road and an almost invisible number 34, with an arrow, painted in the road. But there were cairns everywhere, no one noticed the faded number, and in spite of our increasing doubts the guide in the leading truck pressed on, so that we had gone a good forty miles before he would admit that we might have overshot the turning. After consultation and map-reading, we turned back. Then we were lucky enough to come upon the encampment of the local Emir some distance off the road, and after a little negotiation we were provided with a guide who actually came from El Ula.

The track, once we found it, was clear. It was through rock and stone and gravel, across a huge wadi, and then through a twisted pass and out across a series of further wadis. The country was not desert; there were thorn trees and bushes, even some wild flowers, and in many places rain had evidently swept down the wadis. There was more green than there would be later in the year and the flocks of camels, sheep and goats were probably doing well. But it was rocky and arid, and the earth was dust. A hard country, with no oases, only occasional wells.

We averaged fifteen miles an hour, our passengers hanging on as though riding horseback. At this speed we could seldom afford to stop, and were frustrated according to our different interests. The photographers sat with itching fingers, jumping out to take a hasty photograph when they could; the bird-watchers saw the white flash of a tail disappearing, and could not know whether it was a Desert or Isabelline Wheatear; the hunters looked for rabbit and gazelle, and took a quick shot when they could, to the disapproval of others.

After fifty miles of this we camped, and went on next morning across a valley of grey-green gravel, dotted with thorn bushes that were sometimes greenish-yellow, sometimes dead and white as ghosts, while in the distance this gave way to pink—pink, not red—sand which covered the foothills of purple mountains. We shortly came out again on the Hejaz Railway, at a blockhouse dated 1328 in the Mohammedan calendar (1908 or 1909). Here we had more time to examine it, picking up rusty nuts and bolts with as much excitement as though we had discovered ancient Troy or Ur of the Chaldees. The sleepers are all metal, either from shortage of wood or danger of termites, except at the points, where they are wooden, and are very well preserved; the rails are cast-iron. Later we came across other blockhouses, all of the same pattern, near some of which flat-cars still lie overturned. At El Ula station at least five cars are standing on the tracks, and at Madain Salih an ancient locomotive still rusts in the engine shed, waiting for repairs which were never completed.

We turned north along the track, and after another thirty or thirty-five miles encountered a bed of silt or sand, several miles wide, where it seemed incredible that we did not break down. Each vehicle had to travel as fast as possible and find its own way, unable to see ahead, or for that matter in any other direction, because of the great waves of sand that smothered

them. This hazard surmounted, we reached El Ula, ancient Dedan, about one o'clock and found it to be a long oasis, very fertile, with water apparently available everywhere at a depth of only a few metres, and with gardens and orange groves as well as vast groves of date palms. It was undoubtedly a very ancient settlement on the road from the south.

The people were extremely friendly and, seeing our licence plates, cheered us on our way with shouts of "Jedda! Jedda!", and as soon as we stopped at the petrol station many of them came up to shake hands.

Beyond El Ula the track north runs up a narrow wadi between high cliffs, and the landscape is spectacular. We were completely unprepared for this. The sandstone cliffs have been carved by wind and sand into shapes that are grotesque and yet lifelike—into chimneys, cathedrals, camels and human figures; into monstrous mushrooms and popovers. Some are single pinnacles, some long and fantastic ranges of carved rock, with sand drifts lapping at the base. The heavier sand only blows up to a certain height, which accounts for the towering domes on slender bases, while the upper parts have been carved by lighter sand and wind to look like candle wax dripping down, or lava which has hardened as it flowed. The same effect is seen at Petra, and as at Petra one soon becomes hopelessly confused between what appears man-made and is natural rock, and what looks natural but has been carved by man. It is not hard to believe in the she-camel that Saleh conjured from the rock.

Nineteen miles of this brought us to Madain Salih, a broad valley still in the same fantastic landscape. We had not far to look for the tombs. They lie on every hand, facing in every direction, their façades cut into the sandstone. There is no narrow approach such as the Siq at Petra, and the tombs themselves are scattered over an area of several miles. There are two or three main groups, where tombs are carved on every side of some outstanding rock formation, but there are also isolated cliffs with a single monument. Even a small outcrop of rock, with no façade, may prove to contain a grave. Doughty, I think, estimated that there were more than eighty tombs, and it is unlikely that he saw them all; he could not wander freely among them and, as he says, "I never went thither alone, but I adventured my life."

The monuments are not of the same quality as the best at Petra. They are all very much alike, simply carved, with the characteristic step pattern above, an inscription, and then a pediment, with pilasters usually flanking the entrance. They have a provincial look about them, as though they had been done by people who had heard of, and perhaps seen, Greek and Roman architecture but who—even more than their colleagues at Petra—had not the skill to reproduce it exactly, or the originality to strike out for themselves. Being cut into the face of the rock, however, they have been sheltered from the driving sand and are in good condition, their carving still clear.

There are some ornaments; rosettes, a pair of what seem to be griffons facing each other, urns at either corner of the pediments. Most of the pediments are surmounted by a bird, with the head missing—not weathered, but defaced. In the only case where a head remains it appears to be human, and the bird may have been a sphinx, but in other places one can

clearly trace the outline of the bird's head turned sideways. On at least three of the tombs a human head is carved inside the pediment, one a woman and two men, with what might be a coil of hair, or more likely a serpent, coming out from their ears on either side. One face is grimacing, its tongue stuck out, in appearance rather like the Egyptian god Bes.

The interiors are bare, squarish rooms, with graves and embrasures of various sizes and shape, from six-foot pits to narrow, vertical niches in the upper walls which could not have been graves and might have been for offerings. Human bones still lie scattered in several, and someone digging a few inches in the dust found bits of close-woven material, brown-streaked, that had presumably formed part of grave cloths. In Doughty's time these cloths were common and he described them as "brown-stained and smelling of the drugs of the embalmers".

We camped that night beside one of the cliffs where tombs were most numerous. Enterprising climbers found what must have been a Turkish emplacement, and returned from the hill above us with rifle and revolver cartridge cases, the former Turkish and the latter British, stamped "B B 1917" (together with a spent rifle bullet), which had evidently been fired during an engagement in the first World War. More surprising still, our camp fire that night burned—fitfully—with Turkish coal found in the bunkers of the railway station.

Next morning we saw Mount Ethlib, a rock formation even more curious than the others. Here are few, if any, tombs. Here instead, at the entrance to a narrow passage, is what Doughty called the Diwan, a large, open chamber facing roughly north, where the sun would never reach it. In contrast to the bare tombs, this chamber has pilasters carved inside at either corner. The rocks beyond the Diwan are closely carved on both sides with tablets and niches, much weathered, which were perhaps intended as memorials to those who were buried in other parts of the valley. At least two flights of steps have been cut in the central cliffs of Mount Ethlib, and near the top of one of these is what appears to be a sacrificial altar. The whole of the mountain may well have been an area consecrated to the dead, where ceremonies and sacrifices were held, and the "Diwan" may have been a temple or ceremonial hall.

On the north side of the passage leading through Ethlib a conduit for water, shorter but very similar to that at Petra, is cut into the sandstone. This apparently ends in a small cistern above the Diwan, and was probably used to provide water for the temple—if temple it was.

No one knows. A dune of sand drifted near the entrance to Ethlib cries out to be excavated by a trained archæologist, and even the amateur can scarcely resist the temptation to dig.

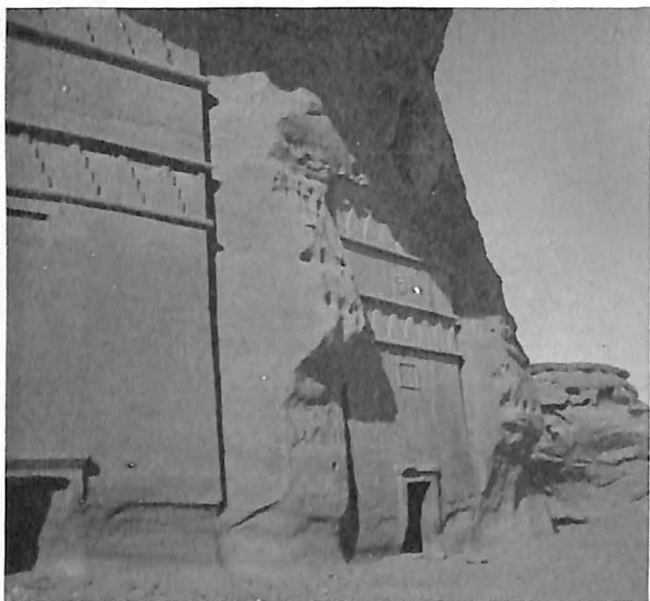
We should have spent hours, if not days, in this one part of the valley alone. But we had all to be back in Jedda by February 17, and to make sure of doing so we must leave Madain Salih soon after midday. Meanwhile that morning we were surprised by the arrival of the plane carrying the correspondent from Beirut, expected two days earlier, which by this time we had quite given up. This circled over our heads, lower and lower, its pilot apparently studying the gravel strip which provided the only possible landing space nearby, almost touching down and soaring up again,



ON THE ROAD FROM EL ULA

TOMBS AT MADAIN SALIH





TOMBS IN CENTRAL ROCK,
MADAIN SALIH.



while we were torn between hope that he would make it and hope that he would not take the risk. At last he came down for an almost perfect landing.

We had then to make hurried plans, to split the party into those who would remain another night there and return next day by plane, and those who must start back immediately by road. The trucks and Land Rovers and power-wagons were on their way before one o'clock, after less than twenty-four hours at Madain Salih.

Thereafter we retraced our steps: El Ula, the railroad, the wild and colourful country between that and the Medina-Tebuk road; Khaibar, Medina, Badr, and so down to the coastal plain. There it seemed suddenly humid and hot, and with the coolness and exhilaration of the mountains behind us we realized how tired and how very, very dirty and sand-encrusted we all were. But we were well content and, miraculously, we and our vehicles were all intact.

We had travelled some 1,130 miles in six days, perhaps 300 of that without roads. It is still at best a rough trip to Madain Salih, and if possible not one to be done in a hurry, but it presents no serious difficulty if well organized. It is to be hoped that the archaeologists will follow in our steps before long, while the area still remains comparatively untouched. There should be much to be discovered there. And as for beauty of wild landscape, there must be few parts of the world which can compare with this unknown or forgotten corner of Saudi Arabia.

Postscript by Mr. Parker T. Hart, American Ambassador to Saudi Arabia, on the party which was left behind at El Ula when the main convoy set off on its return journey to Jedda on Saturday, February 15:

Those who remained behind did so partly to keep company with the American correspondent and ensure him needed transport and provisions, and partly to obtain another twenty-four hours of sight-seeing. An Arab official escort with two vehicles, all furnished by the Amir of al-'Ula, Ahmed al-Sudayri, made possible considerable exploration and all Arabs were most accommodating and helpful.

We were shown the ruins of Qal'at Hodayda, just north of al-'Ula, where a tell of shards marks in Arab tradition the city destroyed by the curse of Salih. The famous well near by, from which the she-camel had drunk, is now silted up and dry. Many tombs were visited on the west side of the valley. Inscriptions in Thamudic over their architraves were photographed.

We slept at the same camp site in the open or in tombs, as preferences dictated, and the temperature again fell to 40°F. When take-off time came the next afternoon the two trucks were directed back and forth across the hardpan to be used as runway, compacting the heavy incrustations of salt which had formed over the sump and which would have greatly retarded the run for a critical distance before the Dakota could be airborne. To ensure a safe take-off we had to refuse some last-minute appeals for a lift to Jedda—hard to say to people who had been such splendid hosts. The pilot gave the plane maximum throttle before releasing his brakes and our take-off was barely possible, a tribute to the versatility of the plane as well

as to the pilot's nerve and skill. We circled several times for picture taking and the view was magnificent.

For about forty miles the valley stretched north-south like a sea of yellow sand from which rose innumerable great islands of tawny pink sandstone, often sheer-walled and several hundred feet in height, sculptured by wind and sand into columns, pinnacles, spires, saw-teeth, natural bridges, profiles and every oddment of erosion conceivable to man's imagination. At the base of many, the tomb entrances were clearly visible. The width of the great valley varies from perhaps ten to twenty-five miles, larger than the Grand Canyon and far more impressive than Bryce or Cedar Breaks, sandstone classics of the American Southwest. Its sweeping perspectives and wild beauty were enhanced by its complete isolation and our certain knowledge that only a small number of non-Arabs had beheld this scene before.

We followed the trail south by which our party had come but despite careful observation with field glasses we missed them, as we directly overflew their encampment north of Medina just before dusk. The party saw us clearly, however, and attempted to signal a greeting. We had left Madain Salih twenty-four hours after them, and we reached Jedda nearly twenty-four hours before them.

