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7/11/66DERIVATION AND ORTHOGRAPHY OF
AL-RUB' AL-KHĀLĪ

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It is no exaggeration, perhaps, to assert that man's knowledge of the geography of the North or the South Poles exceeds, in bulk and accuracy, his knowledge of the Geography of the Arabian Peninsula, or at least some parts of it. This is particularly true of that vast desert expanse in the south-east of the Peninsula to which the early Arabs refer by several names: al Dahnā', al-Nafūd, al-Aḥqāf, al-Rumūl or al-Rimāl, and Ramlat Yibrin. Recently it has become known by a name unknown to Arab geographers ancient and modern alike. This name is al-Rub' al-Khālī (the empty quarter). Where has this name come from, and how should the orthography of its first part be—Rub' (quarter, signifying one over four) or Rab' (quarter, signifying locality or region)?

The first attempt at determining the correct orthography of the term was made, in 1937, by Philip K. Hitti of Princeton University, who, in his monumental *History of the Arabs*,* favoured Rab'. In reviewing the book for *The Muslim World*,† I commended the author on what I considered then to be a real contribution. I was wholly unaware that both of us were, in this particular instance, mistaken. In fairness to Professor Hitti, it must be noted that his choice of Rab' instead of Rub' was more of a reaction against the latter with its arithmetical connotation than of any concrete evidence in favour of the former.

In 1951, the Princeton University Press published Harry W. Hazard's *Atlas of Islamic History*. In all its maps except that on page 3, captioned "The Islamic World from Morocco to Iran," the Arabic name of the Empty Quarter appeared as al-Rab' al-Khālī. On the map on page 3, the name appeared as al-Rub' al-Khālī. In the index, it appeared under both. Then early this year (1956), an Arabic edition of the same atlas was prepared under the auspices of the Franklin Publications, Inc., with the title *Atlas al-Ta'rikh al-Islāmi*. On receiving the atlas, I noticed the Arabic of the Empty Quarter unvowelled on all the maps, beginning with that of the first Moslem century and ending with the fourteenth. In the index the name appeared vowelled with a *ḍammah* on the *rā'* (i.e. Rub').

My first reaction on seeing this was that the name should not have appeared on any of the maps except on those of the fourteenth Moslem century (latter part of the nineteenth Christian century) and after, because the term was in all likelihood of recent origin.

I took the opportunity of the presence of the representative of the Franklin Publications, Inc. in Beirut to mention the matter to him, but he was emphatic in saying that the matter was looked into by the scholars responsible for the translation. Unable, however, to dispel my own

* Macmillan, London, 1937, pp. 7, 15.

† Vol. XXVII, No. 4 (October, 1937), pp. 389-99.



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doubts, I decided to look into the matter myself: both into the origin of the term and into its correct orthography.

On checking the works of Arab geographers, both ancient and modern, no light could be shed on either problem. Early Arab geographers do not use the term, and modern Arab writers use it unvowelled and have nothing to say about its origin. Foreign writers who have used the term seem to be aware of its modern origin, but give no explanation either for its derivation or for its correct orthography, although they invariably favour the *dammah* over the *rā'*. Only two writers have something which may explain the riddle. These are H. R. P. Dickson and Charles M. Doughty.

In his *The Arab of the Desert*,* Dickson relates a chat which he had with a certain Rashid Bin Fahad of the Al 'Arja of the 'Ajman, who told him among other things that—

The word Rub' al Khali . . . was a *hadhar* or townsman's expression, and Badawin did not know the name, and he himself had only once or twice heard it.

In his *Travels in Arabia Deserta*,† Doughty cites a tit-bit which might solve the problem. He wrote:

They love not the (intruded) Turks. — Zeyd taught me thus (from his book), the divine partition of the inheritance of the world; — “Two quarters divided God to the children of Adam, the third part He gave to Ajûj and Majûj (Gog and Magog), a manikin people parted from us by a wall; which they shall overskip in the latter days: and then they will overrun the world. Of their kindred be the (gross) Turks and the (misbelieving) Persians: but you, the Engleys, are of the good kind with us. The fourth part of the world is called *Rob'a el-Khāly*, the empty quarter:” by this commonly they imagine the great middle-east of the Arabian Peninsula; which they believe to be void of the breath of life! I never found any Arabian who had aught to tell, even by hearsay, of that dreadful country. Haply it is *nefûd*, with quicksands; which might be entered into and even passed with milch dromedaries in the spring weeks. Now my health failed me; and otherwise I had sought to unriddle that enigma.

What is the origin of this legend? It is not possible to determine its source with any degree of certainty. It is, however, possible to see in it an echo of the belief, shared by practically all early Arab geographers, that the earth is divided into two halves, northern and southern, and that each half is in turn divided into two quarters, eastern and western. According to these geographers, one half of the earth lies concealed under the water, and the other half is exposed above it. Half of the exposed half is empty, from the equator southward.‡ According to al-Qazwîni,§

* Second edition, London, 1951, pp. 286-87.

† Cambridge, 1888, Vol. II, p. 524; New and Definitive Edition in Two Volumes, London, 1936, Vol. II, p. 558.

‡ See *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Ṣafa*, ed. Khayr-al-Dīn al Zirkili, Vol. I (Cairo, 1928), p. 114; see also Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, Vol I (Beirut, 1955), p. 19.

§ *'Ajā'ib al-Makhlūqāt wa-Gharā'ib al-Mawjūdāt*, ed. F. Wüstenfeld (Göttingen, 1849), p. 147.

that quarter is supposed to be void of settlements or life. Concerning it, he says:

Similarly, the southern half is made of two quarters: the eastern which includes Abyssinia, the land of the Zēnj, and Nubia, and the western on which no one has set foot at all. It is adjacent to the Sudan which is next to the (land of the) Berbers, such as Kuku and the like. It is said that Ptolemy, the Greek King, despatched a mission to this quarter in order to have it explored. The mission, however, sought out the learned men of the nations adjacent to it, and returned (without setting foot on it) and reported that it was desolate and lifeless. It was therefore called the ruined quarter (*al-rub' al-kharāb*) or the scorched quarter (*al-rub' al-muḥtariq*).

From the above the following conclusions may be safely drawn:

1. The use of the term, al-Rub' al-Khālī, as a proper name for the vast expanse in the south-east of the Arabian Peninsula is of recent origin. It was unknown prior to the latter part of the nineteenth Christian century and the early part of the fourteenth century after the Hegira. Consequently the term should not appear on any map of the area before that date.
2. The term itself is still unknown to the tribes which inhabit the outskirts of the Dahnā'.
3. The term as used to-day stems from the usage of Doughty on the authority of his informant, Zeyd.
4. The origin of the term might be traced to the legend of the ruined quarter (*al-rub' al-kharāb*) or the scorched quarter (*al-rub' al-muḥtariq*), mentioned by the majority of the early Arab geographers.
5. The correct orthography of the first part of the name is with a *ḍammah* on the *rā'*, giving us al-Rub' al-Khālī.

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