GOLD MINING IN ARABIA AND THE RISE OF THE ISLAMIC STATE

BY

GENE W. HECK

(Riyadh, Saudi Arabia)

Abstract

The financial and economic strengths of the early Islamic state have been a source of ongoing speculation, causing some scholars to even question medieval Makkah’s economic reason to exist. This article explores the role of precious metals—gold and silver—in lending vitality to the economy of Western Arabia in the formative years of the Dār al-Islām. Combining primary source evidence with artifacts and qualitative and quantitative analysis of mining residuals, including carbon 14 dating, it produces evidence suggesting that such metals played a far more significant role in contemporary commerce and industry than has been heretofore generally acknowledged.

The Historical Perspective

The economic dynamic that impelled the early Islamic state remains a source of current intellectual controversy. Even now, after decades of focused Western research, works continue to appear that add challenging new dimensions to scholarly debate over the incipient vitality that characterized the commerce of the fledgling Muslim empire. Most recently, Shaykh Ḥamad al-Jāsir has appended illuminating new insights into the production of precious metals in medieval Arabia in his annotated edition of al-Hamdānī’s seminal work: Kitāb al-Jawharatayn al-Waqiqatayn al-Māṣifatayn: al-Ṣafrāʾ wa al-Baydāʾ. A 1991 article by Ḥuṣayn Ṣābir, technical advisor to the French Geological Mission to Saudi Arabia, likewise adds valuable input based on in situ knowledge and recent archaeological discoveries that support the evidence provided by the medieval Islamic sources.1)

Today Arabia, which legend holds was home to the famed mines of biblical King Solomon, is experiencing a significant rebirth of this historic industrial heritage, as precious metals mining, a source of significant wealth at the time of the rise of Islam, is once again gaining attention. Currently there are 782


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major known gold occurrences in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—in sites that usually also contain associated admixtures of silver, copper, lead, zinc, and iron ores. Of these sites, 31 are estimated to contain more than 1,000 kilograms of gold, and 99 contain gold reserves in the 100 to 999 kilogram range. Many of these deposits are extremely rich in gold content—averaging twenty to thirty-five grams per metric ton, contrasted with an average worldwide yield of about 7 grams.2)

The Saudi Directorate General for Mineral Resources, in fact, has identified more than 800 potentially commercially viable hard mineral sites in modern Saudi Arabia. At many of the sites identified, there is clear geological evidence confirming previous mining activities. Indeed, more than 1,000 locations in Western Arabia show signs of historic mining. Carbon 14 datings from wood residuals at the smelters that supported these mining operations indicate that many of these activities dated to the classic period of Islam.3) Currency minting operations also may have taken place using the ore yields of these sites. Suggestive of this possibility, an Umayyad coin dating to the year 105/724, includes the phrase: “the mine of the Commander of the Faithful in the Hijāz.” There are likewise numerous contemporary copper coins (fulās) bearing the same inscription.4)

Currently, several of these sites are under active development. Operations at Mahd al-Dhahab commenced in 1990. The production of this mine, believed to contain 1.1 million tons of ore, is projected to reach 2.5 metric tons of gold per year. The Şukhaybarat mine, situated 187 miles east of al-Madīnah on the historic Arabian commercial route to Iraq, also started up in September, 1991. Its ore reserves are assessed at 8.4 million tons. Though its annual production was originally estimated at 3,300 pounds of gold, more than thirteen tons of gold already had been produced by the close of 1996—valued at nearly $155 million at then current global market prices. Mining activities at this location are expected to extend over a 13 year period, and two other medieval mines, al-‘Amār and al-Hajar, are scheduled to re-commence production by the year 2000.5)
MAP A
Active Mining Sites of Medieval Arabia
Leasing licenses similarly have recently been granted to commence operations at a site known as “al-Maṣāniʿ,” meaning “the factories”—so-called for its proliferation of medieval smelting operations—located in Wadi Sa‘dah, 75 miles northwest of Najrān (at 18 degrees, 8 minutes N latitude, 43 degrees, 51 minutes E longitude) on the key inland medieval commercial route connecting Makkah with Yemen. It is estimated to contain some 8.5 million tons of gold, silver, zinc, and copper ore, requiring 17 years of production employing current technologies. Development licences likewise are pending at Hamdah, Jabal Sayyid, and Bulgah; and another historic mine in this region—called al-Ma‘malah, also meaning “factory”—is also currently under active exploration. It is located in Wadi Turabah, on al-Ta‘if-al-Aqiq road (at 21 degrees, 4 minutes N latitude; 41 degrees 20 minutes E longitude), and is believed to contain 960,000 metric tons of ore. In all, the Kingdom is estimated to possess more than 20 million tons of commercially exploitable gold ore.

That Saudi Arabia should now emerge as a major hard minerals producer, however, should come as no surprise to serious students of the region’s history. The ancient and medieval sources abound with references to such mining activities. The classical Greek, Roman, and Persian sources, among them Agatharchides, Pliny, Strabo, Polybius, and Diodorus Siculus, all attest to the abundance of gold and silver on the Arabian Peninsula in their eras. The latter states that Arabian gold was so pure that no smelting was necessary. Biblical Midian, a region historically legendary for its gold, was situated in the region surrounding

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G.C. Miles 1948, pp. 106-109. An inscribed stone found in the residual medieval gold tailings at Mahd al-Dhahab by geologist K.S. Twichell in the 1940s reads:

“In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate, ‘Abd Allāh Ja‘far, the Imām al-Muṣṭaqdir bi-Allāh, Commander of the faithful, may God preserve him, ordered the minister al-Ḥasan ‘Ali b. ‘Isa, may God perpetuate his great work, to build a wide highway for the pilgrims of God’s house, with the hope of earning a rich reward from God. This work was administered by the judge Muhammad b. Mūsā, may God exalt him, and carried out by Abū Ahmad b. ‘Abd al-A‘zīz and Musta‘b b. Ja‘far al-Zubayrī in the year 304 (916).”


ing modern Tabük. The 4th/10th century Yemeni geographer, al-Hamdânî, indicates that the Sásânids mined silver in the Najd and the Yemen, and even opened up an overland route through central Arabia to transport silver from the region back to Persia.\footnote{13}{Al-Hamdânî 1987, pp. 13, 87 ff.}

Indeed, among the Arabo-Islamic sources, there are quite incredible claims of widespread precious metals availability, suggesting that they permeated medieval Hijâzí lifestyles. Ibn Ḥanbal, in discussing the entrepreneurial prowess of famed Companion of Prophet Muḥammad, ‘Abd al- Раḥmân b. ‘Awf, for example, asserts that it was impossible for him to lift a stone in the Hijâz without finding gold and silver. Others, among them al-Tabari and al-Muqaddasi, indicate that precious metals were a major source of wealth and commerce for Makkani businessmen.\footnote{14}{Ibn al-Athîr 1985, vol. 2, pp. 145-146.} Ibn Isâq openly asserts that silver was the prime economic impetus of the al-Quraysh: “\textit{wa hayya ‘uzm tijâratihim;}” whereas others such as Ibn al-Athîr suggest that gold and silver were foremost components of Arabian northbound trade.\footnote{15}{Sârat Ibn Isâq 1976, no. 500; Ibn al-Athîr 1985, vol. 2, pp. 145-146.} In alluding to the proliferation of precious metals in the Hijâz, the \textit{Qur’ân} laments the attractiveness of gold and silver for the masses—and explicitly warns that those who hoard these metals, rather than putting them to productive use, will suffer God’s everlasting wrath.\footnote{16}{Qur’ân, Sârahs III:12, 85; IX:34.}

Similar claims extend to documentary contentions attesting to the buoyancy of contemporary commerce. Seventy Makkani prisoners captured by Companions of the Prophet at the “Battle of Badr” reportedly ransomed themselves by paying 4,000 silver dirhams each, for a total of 280,000 dirhams. The Makkans financed their campaign against the Muslims at the “Battle of Uhud” at a cost of 50,000 gold dinârs. Al-Wâqidi describes a Hijâzí commercial caravan bound for Syria wherein members of the banû Makhzûm tribe were carrying 4,000 mithqâls of gold; members of the banû ‘Abd Manâf 15,000 mithqâls of gold; and two individuals, al-Hârîth b. Ṭâmîr b. Nawfal and ‘Umayyah b. Khalaf, were each carrying 1,000 mithqâls of gold.\footnote{17}{Al-Wâqidi 1965, vol. 1, pp. 27 ff.; F. ‘Ali Ridâ 1979, pp. 160-62.} In another instance, Abû Baqâ’ Ḥibatallâh relates the amazement of a medieval customs official upon discovering:\footnote{18}{Abû Baqâ’ Hibatallâh, \textit{Al-Manâqib al-Mazyadiyah}, British Museum, ms. add. 23, fol. 23; ibidem. 1984, vol. 1, p. 67.}

\begin{quote}
A Quraysh caravan coming to Syria to trade without gold? That is not possible!
\end{quote}

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\footnote{13}{Al-Hamdânî 1987, pp. 13, 87 ff.}
\footnote{16}{Qur’ân, Sârahs III:12, 85; IX:34.}
\footnote{18}{Abû Baqâ’ Hibatallâh, \textit{Al-Manâqib al-Mazyadiyah}, British Museum, ms. add. 23, fol. 23; ibidem. 1984, vol. 1, p. 67.}
He also notes that the Ghassânids transacted commerce with Hijâzí merchants using gold as the currency basis for their transactions. 19) Al-Wâqîdî and Zubayr ibn Bakkâr, in turn, assert that Caliph Umar I, prior to his caliphal appointment, had engaged in gold transactions between the Hijâz and Syria. 20) Al-Wâqîdî, Ibn Sa’d, Ibn Hishâm, and al-Balâdhurî refer to a raid conducted by Prophet Muḥammad at al-Qaradah in the Najd in Jumâdâ II, 3/December, 624. This attack occurred on a Makkah commercial caravan led by Umayyad chieftain Abû Sufyân travelling to Iraq on the famed Darb Zubaydah pilgrimage route, wherein Muslim troops captured over 300 mithqâls of gold and silver. This sum, though again quite large, may not be surprising. As the sources indicate that Abû Sufyân customarily carried substantial quantities of precious metal bullion with him on his trading expeditions to Syria and Iraq. 21)

Three years after al-Qaradah incident, in 6/627, Prophet Muḥammad’s forces at al-‘Iṣ once again intercepted a Syrian-bound caravan laden with silver. 22) Al-Wâqîdî and Ibn Sa’d likewise describe the seizure by the Muslim forces of 4,000 ounces of silver in booty upon their victory over dissident tribes, among them the banû Hawâzîn and banû Thaqîf, at Ḥunayn in 8/630; whereas al-Wâqîdî, al-Balâdhurî, and Ibn Hanbal relate information on numerous silver-denominated loans contracted by Prophet Muḥammad at various times from prominent Makkah citizens. 23)

Indications of such buoyant economic activity, if accurately captured in the sources, cannot have failed to occasion a significant requirement for capital liq-

uidity and, in turn, for precious metals to mint currency. Indeed, when the Islamic caliphate began to issue massive quantities of its own high quality currency, commencing with the reign of Umayyad Caliph ʿAbd al-Malik b. Marwän (d. 86/705), the mines of Arabia were exploited to meet the mounting demand for gold bullion. The demand was readily met, as such precious metals the medieval Muslims had in abundance. It was the proliferation of gold, silver, and copper in the region, in fact, that later produced the high quality tri-metallic coinage that would power the Islamic empire’s monumental 2nd/8th-3rd/9th century global trade offensive. As properties such as the prodigious banū Sulaym mine, among others, continued in operation well into the 3rd/9th century.24)

This availability of precious metals was a critical economic consideration. For because of the relative paucity of agrarian and industrial resources in the Makkan region, its imports greatly exceeded exports at the time of the rise of Islam. This imbalance created the need for voluminous supplies of bullion, at first to trade in bulk, and later to mint currency in the form of gold dinārs, silver dirhams, and copper fulūs, to compensate for the commodity trade deficit.25)

At the time of the rise of Islam, bulk countertrade using gold and silver bullion (bi-l-tibr), denominated in weights equivalent to the Byzantine gold and Sāsānīd silver currencies circulating in the Hijāzī marketplaces, was the prevailing commercial practice. Ibn Saʿd indicates that on one occasion, Prophet Muḥammad dispatched Shuʿaib b. Wahb al-Asadī on a mission to al-Ḥarīth b. Abī Shammar bearing one hundred mīthqāls of gold. Another trade transaction involving Muḥammad resulted in the delivery of twelve “ūqiyah” (ounces) and one “nashsh” of silver, equal in currency value to 500 dirhams. Indicative of the volume of such activities, economic demand soon precipitated the need for a massive bullion weight, known as the “qinṭār,” which equaled 4,000 dinārs, to transact contemporary commerce.26)

One need only survey at random some of the prices cited by chroniclers to ascertain the currency demand that, according to the medieval Arabic sources, characterized Islam’s commercial “Golden Age.” Al-Īṣṭahārī relates that horses customarily sold for 100 dinārs. Quality clothing was equally precious. While he was governor of al-Madinah, ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz is said to have owned a silk gown valued at 100 dinārs and other vestments valued at 1,000 dinārs. ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās reportedly purchased a “thawb” priced at 1,000 dirhams

and vestments also valued at the same amount. One prominent Hijazi, ‘Abd al-Mu'talib b. Hashim, grandfather of Prophet Muhammad, was reportedly buried in clothing embroidered with 1,000 mithqals of gold. He also gave his wife a dowry of one hundred ratls of gold. The estate of Abd al-Rahman b. ‘Aww, invested primarily in gold ingots, was valued at more that 400,000 dinars; whereas that of Prophet Muhammad’s chancery clerk, Zayyid b. Thabit, contained an equally prodigious amount of gold bullion.27)

There are likewise reports in the medieval sources of slaves selling for 10,000 dirhams, 40,000 dirhams, 5,000 dinars, and even as much as 100,000 dirhams. Mu‘awiyah b. Abu Sufyan is said to have purchased a house in al-Madinah from Huwaytib b. ‘Abd al-Ghazzâ for 40,000 dinars. There are reports of other houses in the region selling for 100,000 and 200,000 dirhams respectively.28)

The brisk commerce and velocity of capital at work in the markets of the nascent Dâr al-Islâm also is suggested by the size and impressive aggregate commodity values of caravans engaged in Makkan trade. Al-Waqidi and al-Tabari mention one commercial caravan containing more than 2,500 camels. Another managed by ‘Abd Allâh b. Judfân consisted of more than 2,000 camels; yet another was composed of 1,500 camels, carrying the value of 50,000 gold dinars in merchandise. Indeed, one wealthy trader, Abû Uhayyah Sa’id b. al-‘Abbás, in the year 6/627, had over 30,000 gold dinars invested in a single Umayyad caravan led by Abû Sufyân.29)

This proliferation of precious metals also led to burgeoning jewelry-making and decorative embellishment industries throughout the region. Al-Samhûdi indicates that there were more than three hundred jewelry smiths in the Mediterranean suburb of al-Zuhrah alone. Indeed, they and the goldsmiths of Fadak and Khaybar were regionally renowned for the quality of their craftsmanship. Al-Azraqî and al-Fâsî relate that in pre-Islamic times, Quraysh tribal chieftains would take great pride in embellishing the Ka‘bah with elaborate gold and silver overlay—a practice that has been perpetuated until the modern era. Doors


and window frames were a particular focus of gold leaf decoration. While it is difficult to estimate the quantity of bullion involved in this activity in historic times, some indication may be suggested by the fact that the total weight of gold in the present day twin entrance doors to the Ka‘bah exceeds 286 kilograms.\(^{30}\)

Accordingly, while many of the assertions advanced by the Islamic sources may be apochryphal and shrouded in the mists of Arab lore, it is the underlying body of residual physical evidence attesting to the abundant availability of precious metals on the medieval Arabian Peninsula that is the focus of the present inquiry—examining a body of compelling evidence that supports longstanding claims of a 1st/7th century Hijazi regional economic buoyancy that has heretofore been largely unsubstantiated.

The Economic and Geographic Perspective

The primary medieval Arabic sources indicate that the treasury of the nascent Islamic state benefited greatly from mining revenues starting from its inception. Al-Bakri and al-Samhudi assert that Prophet Muhammed issued a formal document that granted as qaṭā‘i‘ (property concessions) the Qabaliyah mines, including “ma‘dīn al-Nuṣub,” located in Jabal Quds, near al-Madīnah, to Bilāl bin al-Ḥārith al-Muzanī. Other sources relate that several other prominent mine owners customarily gave portions of the proceeds from their gold production as charitable contributions (sadaqāt) to the nascent Islamic state. Such production was subject to an official 2.5% zakāt levy, except for several mines in the northwest Hijaz which, al-Baladhuri states, were subject to a 20% khums levy. Ibn Sa‘d confirms that the Qabaliyah, Juhaithan, and banū Sulaym mines all yielded great revenues for the Islamic fiscus. Indeed, the sources directly link Prophet Muhammad’s tribe, the Quraysh, to at least four of them—ma‘dīn banū Sulaym, ma‘dīn al-Nuṣrah, ma‘dīn Bahra‘, and a mine called “ma‘dīn al-Bīrām,” located near al-Ta‘if.\(^{31}\)

Many other mine sites are also noted in the sources. Ibn Khurraḍhbih and Qudamah b. Ja‘far, for instance, describe a mine on a commercial route that


coursed “from al-Yamāmah to al-Kharj, then to Nabʿah, then to al-Majāzah, then to the mine” (al-mafidin). Al-Bakrī, and al-Masʿudi refer to another mine called “Bahrán,” owned by al-Hājjāj b. ʿIlāţ al-Bahizī al-Sulami, located in al-Furuʿ on the route from Makkah to al-Madinah. Al-Balādhurī and al-Wāqīḍī suggest that this was but one of several mines that al-Hājjāj owned in this vicinity. Al-Wāqīḍī, al-Samhūdī, Ibn Saʿd, and al-Ḥarbī, in turn, describe sites on a main medieval commercial and pilgrimage route (Darb Zubaydah) running northeastward from Makkah toward Iraq known as the “Sulaym mines,” and belonging to the Sulaym tribe (“maʿādin al-dhahab alat̲ bi-arḍ banī Sulaym”). Actually, as Al-Wāqīḍī and other sources make clear, this operation also was not a single mine, but rather a series of mines dispersed through the region. There is residual evidence, in fact, of at least ten separate medieval mining sites in this immediate vicinity. Al-Ḥarbī testifies to their productivity:

Al-maʿādin kāna bihi dhahab kathr yustakhraj fī qadim al-dahr wa yufr fī al-muḥābnah.

Thus, while some could argue that the various references to mines in the lands of the banū Sulaym suggest a single site, there is powerful countervailing evidence that a significant number of proximate mines actually were in production. One of the banū Sulaym mines appears to have been located near the modern site of Qurān. Al-Isfahānī states that below Ublā and Qurān are two mountains, and that the banū Sulaym mine was located there on al-Kūfah-Makkah road. Al-Ḥarbī and ‘Arrām al-Sulamī note that there was an alternate route that passed this mine, coursing from al-Suwārqiyyah southeastward to Ṣufaynah, then connecting with the main Darb Zubaydah north of Ḥaddah. Al-Samhūdī similarly describes the banū Sulaym mine as in the valley of Qurān, beside Ublā, on the Najd road, about 100 miles from al-Madinah. He notes that it is near al-Suwārqiyyah, “which belonged to the banū Sulaym.”

Al-Ísfahání, on the other hand, states that north of Qurān was “Sharūrā, wherein lie the mountains of banū Sulaym.” While al-Samhudi does not differentiate between the sites, al-Hamdānī indicates that this mine was distinct from “ma’din bani Sulaym,” and was known as “ma’din bani Fārān.” The sources also refer to two mountain peaks known as al-As̱h’āth and ‘Unayzāt between the Sulaym mine and al-Suwārqiyyah; and to a well in Ublā’ between the mine and al-Suwārqiyyah, located less than 10 miles northwest of Qurān. Al-Bakrī claims that this site was in operation in the reign of Caliph ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb (r. 13-23/634-44).37) (See “Site I,” Maps B and C. The site described appears to be at approximately 23 degrees, 24 minutes N latitude, 40 degrees, 28 minutes E longitude.)

Thus, while various sources indicate that there was a “ma’din bani Sulaym” in operation at the time of the rise of Islam at a site called Qurān near al-Suwārqiyyah, their descriptions are not entirely consistent with the location where others believe the famed “banū Sulaym” mine actually was, and where it is commonly believed to have been today. The conflicting contentions can be readily reconciled, however, through other references in the sources indicating (i) that the mining activities of the banū Sulaym were carried out on a variety of properties, and not at just one site; and (ii) that the “banū Fārān” actually were an offshoot of the Sulaym tribe whose lineage traced through one Fārān b. Bāliy, as al-Bakrī asserts:38)


The linkage of the banū Sulaym to the Qurān mine site thus can be tenuously established, albeit indirectly through the banū Fārān branch of the Sulaym family.

Some 30 miles to the northeast of the Qurān site, however, lies what today is called the “Mahd al-Dhahab” (Cradle of Gold), a mine that definitely was a property of the banū Sulaym. Operated in classic Islamic times by the aforesaid

37) Ibid.

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MAP B
Active Mining Sites of Medieval Arabia

SITE I: Ma'din bani Farân at Qurân, 23 degrees, 24 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 28 minutes E longitude

SITE II: Ma'din Mahd al-Dhabab, 23 degrees, 55 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 50 minutes E longitude

SITE III: Ma'din bani al-Sharid at Bi'r 'Umaq, 23 degrees, 58 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 59 minutes E longitude

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MAP C
Active Mining Sites of Medieval Arabia

SITE I: Ma’din bani Farân at Qurân, 23 degrees, 24 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 28 minutes E longitude
SITE II: Ma’din Mahd al-Dhahab, 23 degrees, 55 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 50 minutes E longitude
SITE III: Ma’din bani al-Sharîd at Bi’r ’Umaq, 23 degrees, 58 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 59 minutes E longitude
SITE IV: Ma’din al-Nuqrah (al-Naqirah), 25 degrees, 32 minutes N latitude; 41 degrees, 24 minutes E longitude
al-Ḥajjāj b. ʿIlāt al-Bahizi al-Sulami, who had married into the Qurashi tribe, it is located approximately 170 miles northeast of Makkah and 155 miles southeast of al-Madina, directly on the Darb Zubaydah road. Describing this route, al-Hamdānī and al-Ḥarbi assert that from al-Misläh to Ufayʿiyah is 8 miles; and from it to the lava field (harrah) of the banū Sulaym (“which consists of 23.5 sections”) is 26.5 miles, and from it to al-ʿUmaq is 22 miles. Al-Ḥarbi states that the mine itself was “26.5 miles from Ufayʿiyah... in the mountains to the right of the ascending road.” He also indicates that a large round well built by Queen Zubaydah was proximate to the mining site. Ibn Saʿd and Ibn al-Athir provide evidence that the mine was in use in the reign of Caliph Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq (r. 11/632-13/634). It was still in operation in 128/746, when the Umayyads appointed Kuthayr b. ʿAbd Allāh as its overseer, and did not close down until well in the 3rd/9th century.39) (see “Site II,” Maps B and C, at 23 degrees, 55 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 50 minutes E longitude.)

Twenty two miles to the northeast of Mahd al-Dhahab, at al-Bīr fiʿUmaq, according to al-Samhādī, was another mine known as “maʿādin banū al-Sharīd.” This mine, also actively worked in the classic Islamic period, was the property of yet another offshoot of the banū Sulaym, through a linkage of ʿAmrū b. al-Ḥarīth b. al-Sharīd, and ʿUqayl b. Ḥudayl banū al-Sharīd, via banū ʿAmrū b. Yaʿqūb b. Ṣuḥayl b. ʿUṣayyah b. Khufāf b. Amrī al-Qays b. Buhthah b. Sulaym.40) (See “Site III,” Maps B and C, at 23 degrees, 58 minutes N latitude; 40 degrees, 59 minutes E longitude.)

Some 137 miles further to the northeast of Mahd al-Dhahab, moreover, lay yet another mine, known as “maʿādin Nuqrah” (al-Naqirah), west of the Darb Zubaydah at the juncture where that route sub-divided, with branches diverging to Makkah and al-Madina. Al-Ḥarbi and Ibn Khurdadhbih indicate that the northern sector of this mine, located 26 miles northeast of al-Mugithah, was also known as “maʿādin al-Qurashi.” Al-Bakri states that it was located before Ḥarqarā and that it was operated by the banū ʿAbs.41) (See “Site IV,” Map C, at 25 degrees, 32 minutes N latitude; 41 degrees, 24 minutes E longitude.)

Because these sites were on the traditional Hijāzī-Iraqī pilgrimage route, they enjoyed a direct commercial tie to Makkah. References to still other medieval

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mines with links to the Makkan commonwealth also abound in the Islamic sources. Al-Hamdâni describes a mine called “ma’din Mahajat al-Ìrâq” (“mine of the Iraqi pilgrimage route”) that lay between Ufay’iyah and al-’Umaq, in the vicinity of Mahd al-Dhabah (though this site may well be another banû Sulaym mining subsidiary, as he also suggests). He likewise speaks of two mountains near Makkah, al-’Ayrah and al-’Ayr, that contained operating mines. Zubayr b. Bakkar and al-Azraqi indicate that al-’Ayrah is the mountain to the right of the approach to the pilgrimage site of al-Minâ, whereas al-’Ayr is the peak directly across from it.42)

Al-Bakri cites another mine known as “ma’din al-Nuṣub,” one of the Qabaliyah chain of mines, proximate to al-Madinah.43) Other sources indicate that the “Qabaliyah” mines were located between al-Madinah and Yanbu’, and that still others could be found in al-Juhaynah region.44) Al-Yaqūbî asserts that there were also gold mines at al-’Uwaynid on the coastal route from Aylah to Makkah.45) Al-Hamdâni also cites major medieval mining operations at al-’Aqiq, between Sa’dah and Najrân; at Dankân, at the top of Wadi Dhabbân between the villages of al-Qaḥmah and Halin al-Suflâ, on the San’a -Makkah inland commercial route; as well as at Bishah. Al-Isfahânî, in turn, indicates that the prime occupation of the inhabitants of Wâdî al-Qirâ was exploiting the prodigious gold, silver, and copper mines located in that region.46)

Other medieval mines were located in Central Arabia, outside of the Makkans’ direct sphere of influence. They included “Hillayit” (al-Najâdî), which al-Bakri and al-Samhûdî both call the most productive mine on earth;47) “al-Ahsan,” a gold and silver mine situated between al-Qasîm and al-Yamâmah, operated by the banû Kilâb;48) and “Abraq Khutrab,” a silver mine near al-Dariyyah pastoral reserve, east of Wâdî Jarîr and south of Wâdî al-Rumâh.49) The sources

45) Al-Ya’qûbî 1892, p. 341.
similarly attest to the prodigious output of al-Hufayr, al-Ḍubayb, Shamām, and Thaniyat ibn ʻIṣām mines in al-Yamāmah.50)

In addition to gold, silver, and copper, it appears that iron ore was also produced at several of these sites. Indeed, there are indications that at least eleven separate iron mines were in operation on the Arabian Peninsula at this time.51) In all, there are references to over two hundred gold, silver, copper, and iron mines in medieval Arabia cited in the sources consulted by this inquiry. Other gemstones and minerals were present in significant commercial quantities as well. The sources indicate, for instance, that emeralds, amethysts, quartz crystals, turquoise, borax, lead, the stone used in whetstones for sharpening swords and knives, and table salt also were mined in medieval Arabia and exported to surrounding regions.52)

Fortunately for research, unlike other vestiges of desert civilization, mining leaves a lasting imprint. Consequently, evidence of medieval mining operations—in the forms of trenches, pits, deep, tortuous tunnels, and ore residuals—today exists at more than a thousand separate sites in the lava escarpments that dominate the western half of Saudi Arabia. Often, pairs of tunnels, dug adjacent and parallel, extend inward into the escarpments to depths approaching seventy meters, and to as much as eighty five meters in the case of Mahd al-Dhahab.53)

The remnants of mining villages, stone quarries, and smelters—as well as lanterns, stone hammers, picks, shovels, millstones, grindstones, pestles, and other primitive mining instruments—also can often be found proximate to these sites. Some of these residuals are quite revealing. Tailings and slag at Mahd al-Dhahab, for example, suggest that as much as a million tons of ore may have been mined there in the early Middle Ages. Remains of wells dug adjacent to these locations to provide pure water for washing ore, as well as to meet the consumption needs of miners, likewise are in evidence. Al-Samḥūdī and others explicitly refer to wells located at the sites mined by the banū Șulaym and elsewhere. In several instances, their ruins still are evident.54)

51) Al-Azraqī 1858, pp. 158-160; al- стоимāni 1968, pp. 30, 126; Plans currently are underway to commercially develop substantial iron ore deposits found at Wādī al-Šawāwīn, as well as bauxite deposits at al-Zabīrah.
The Chronological Perspective

Indeed, such ruins can be of significant value in determining the actual dates of mining operations. As the difficulty of dating past mining activities is often complicated by the nature of the industry itself. For in antiquity, as now, mining towns tended to be functional rather than cultural centers. Thus, the presence of such artifacts as exquisite pottery and other sophisticated accoutrement usually is quite rare, with only more utilitarian utensils present. Nonetheless, past smelter sites often do contain “tailings” as well as slag piles, analysis of which can be successfully employed in radiometric dating of historic workings and the evaluation of past mine production.

Among other data, such tailings—generally consisting of non-smelted waste materials with imbedded ore fragments—can provide detailed information on the composition of the ore and the nature of the mineralization. The slag, in turn, represents a geochemical amalgam consisting of compounds from ore, flux, furnace, and trace elements of the metal extracted. The chemical composition of the slag, therefore, can be of particular value to the metals geochemist, who can “fingerprint” an extracted sample through trace elements found in the original ore. It may also contain charcoal, which is the fuel medieval miners usually used in kilns for smelting the extracted ore. Such charcoal is commonly found as sealed fragments in residual fused glass and hence serves as a useful chronological dating material in Carbon-14 (C-14) dating methods.55)

Properly employed, radiometric dating thus can be a key physiochemical method for assaying mining residuum—dating its organic and biological components by measuring its C-14 radioactivity. This process is based upon the deterioration of natural carbon over time, and is predicated on the axiom that when a carbon-containing organism dies, or is otherwise destabilized by removal from its equilibrium cycle, its C-14 contents decay with a 5,570 year half-life. A precise measurement of the remaining C-14 content therefore allows the analyst to calculate the time lapse since the organism died.

A potential exogenous factor complicating the radiocarbon dating process, however, can involve the specificity of the sample itself. For among the reasons that chemically-derived age determination could yield dates later than the actual activity would be if samples were to be taken only from the top of the slag heap—which would represent the culmination of the mining activity. Another would be “bioplastic varnishing,” subsequent accruals of bacteria and other mold-like organisms, which could also affect the specificity of the sample. Such spurious factors, in fact, combined with the age of the charcoal feedstock itself

when consigned to smelting, may explain why certain C-14 dating results could indicate late ‘Abbāsid 10th-13th century mining activities, whereas medieval documentary sources might suggest a 7th-10th century actual operations date. The key to effectively using radiocarbon dating, therefore, is first to understand its limitations.

Working within these caveats, it is insightful to note that radiocarbon datings of residual charcoal in slags from Mahd al-Dhahab suggest that in situ gold and silver mining and smelting activities were carried out approximately 3,000 years ago—in an era exactly corresponding to the reigns of biblical Kings David and Solomon (circa 1000 B.C. to 922 B.C.)—and again from A.D. 430 to A.D. 830. Such findings comport perfectly, of course, with al-Harbi’s aforesaid claims that such mining activities took place in ancient times (“al-ma‘dīn kānā bihi dhahab kāthīr yustakhraj fi qadīm al-dahr”) and again in Islamic times, only to be halted in the 3rd/9th century because they were no longer cost-effective (“wa aladhī hamalahan ‘alā tarkīhi anna al-ma‘ūnah akthār mimā yakhraj minhī”). Testing at a placer gold deposit at Jabal Makhiyat (20 degrees, 12 minutes latitude, 43 degrees, 28 minutes longitude) suggests mining activities both in King Solomon’s era and again circa A.D. 626—precisely in the lifetime of Prophet Muḥammad. Testing at the al-Nuqrah gold and copper mine, in turn, indicates that mining activities took place in the A.D. 675-835 period.56)

Similar radiocarbon testing indicates that silver mining activities took place at al-Samrā‘ mine (at coordinates: 24 degrees, 22 minutes latitude; 44 degrees, 21 minutes longitude) in al-Dawādim silver district in the A.D. 668-819 period; and at Jabal al-Shizm copper mine (at coordinates: 26 degrees, 27 minutes latitude; 37 degrees, 32 minutes longitude) in the A.D. 450-950 period. C-14 testing at al-Ma‘ṣūnī‘ copper mine (at coordinates: 18 degrees, 08 minutes latitude, 43 degrees, 51 minutes longitude) has produced similar time frames for medieval mining operations.57)

Arabic inscriptions dating to the classic Islamic period at many of these sites can aid in the mining dating process. Kufic inscriptions found among tailings at Mahd al-Dhahab, for example, suggest that they may extend back to the A.D. 750-1150 ‘Abbāsid era and similar writings exist at (cited in geographic order from west to east across the western half of the Arabian Peninsula):


‘Aynūnā’, Ghurābah, Hīllayit (al-Najādí), al-Muwazzar, al-Ḥamdah, al-Mašānī’, al-‘Aqīq, and at numerous other excavated sites. At al-Ṣuwarqiyah, as well as at Thanayt ibn ‘Īsām al-Bāhili gold mine, thirty kilometers west of al-Qawayyiyah in the western Najd, such writings consist of personal names and prayers of repentance seeking Divine pardon and redemption as well as supplications invoking the blessings of Prophet Muḥammad. It is critical to note that inscriptions found at certain of the sites, including al-Qabāliyah, appear in unpointed Arabic script, suggesting that they may date to no later than the close of the first Islamic century.  

Glass, vessels, pottery, and shards present at the mining sites can also contribute to a more accurate dating process. Remnants of glass and glazed pottery at a variety of locations, among them (again cited in order from west to east): Ghurābah, Musayna’ah, al-‘Ablā’ (al-‘Ablah), Mahd al-Dhahab, al-Nuqrah, Samirā’ (Samirah), al-Shumūtā’, al-Hujayrah, al-Samrā’ (al-Samrah), and al-‘Aqīq mines have been dated to the A.D. 9th and 10th (A.H. 3rd and 4th) centuries. Numerous glass fragments found in al-Dawādīmi silver district likewise have been determined by the Corning Museum of Glass to date to the A.D. 800 to A.D. 1300 period. Since such fragile fragments have survived, it may be assumed that they represent the culmination of mining operations at the particular location, because subsequent production activity likely would have obscured their existence. Dated medieval Islamic currency has also been found at several of the medieval sites. Two ‘Abbāsid silver dirhams struck in the years 143/760 (at al-Kūfah) and 158/778 (at Baghdad), for instance, have been found at Samirā’, a medieval gold mine located northeast of Hīllayit on the Darb Zubaydah.

There are also remnants of mining villages at many of the sites that suggest medieval occupation. Among them, the mining site at al-‘Ablā’ contains foundations of approximately 300 structures that possibly could have housed as many as 1,000 manual laborers; whereas the site at al-‘Aqīq contains at least 100 similar structures. At Mahd al-Dhahab, numerous stone dwelling ruins resembling barrack-like structures also suggest that a large work force was employed at the mine; and similar dwellings exist at Umm al-Qurayyāt, Ghurābah,
al-Birām, Muṣayna‘ah, Umm al-Damār, Turabah, Māwān, al-Nuqrah (North and South), al-Ṣafra‘, al-Kawm (East and West), al-Shumṭā, al-Kawkabah (Ashqar al-Barāqī), al-Hujayrah, al-Sāmrā‘, al-‘Isān, Umm al-Liddām, al-Ḥufayr, al-‘Awaṣajah (modern Abā al-Ruḥayj), and Umm al-Dabā‘.  

Medieval Islamic sources also often may be employed to sustain the evidence suggested by physical artifacts. In addition to al-Ḥarīb’s aforesaid conformity with C-14 dating results at Mahd al-Dhahab, for instance, both Ibn Sa‘d and Ibn al-Athir provide corroboration that the Treasury of Prophet Muhammad’s successor, Caliph Abū Bakr, received substantial revenues from mining operations. Ibn Sa‘d states:

Much money was brought to it from mafidin al-Qabāliyah and mafidin Juhaynah, and mafidin bani Sulaym was opened in the caliphate of Abū Bakr, and he received the “ṣadaqah” from it and deposited it in the Treasury, and Abū Bakr distributed it to the masses . . .

Al-Baladhurī, Mālik b. Anas, al-Bakri, al-Samhūdi, al-Tibrāni, and others, in turn, indicate that Prophet Muhammad granted al-Qabāliyah mines and adjacent areas as concessions to Bilāl bin al-Ḥarith al-Muzānī on the condition that the lands be agriculturally improved; whereas al-Ḥājjāj bin ‘Ilāt al-Bahizī, Abū Ḥuṣayn al-Sulami, and others are reported by the medieval Islamic sources to have presented gold donations from their mines to Prophet Muhammad. Ibn Hajar relates that when members of the bani Līḥb brought gold ore to him from mā‘din ‘Aqīq Ghāmid, near Turabah, Prophet Muhammad ruled: “Whoever finds something, it is for him; and the twenty percent tax (‘khums’) is to be levied on precious metals.” Al-Hamdānī similarly attributes to Prophet Muhammad the assertion regarding mafidin ‘Aqīq ‘Uqayl, in modern Wādī al-Dawāsir: “the land of the ‘Uqayl has been showered with gold”—suggesting that this mine too was productive in his era.

The medieval Islamic sources present evidence that mining activities took place on the Arabian Peninsula in pre-Islamic times as well. Al-Hamdānī indicates, for example, that amongst the gold mines of the Najd was “ma‘din Thantiyar ibn ‘Isām al-Bāhili,” chamberlain of Ghassānid King Nu‘mān bin al-Mundhir (r. circa 580-602 A.D.); and asserts that thousands of Persians also

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worked at the Shamām silver mine in al-Yamāmah—a practice that likely came to a halt with the Islamic conquest of the Sāsānīd empire in 16/637. He likewise indicates that “ma’din al-Radrād,” which he states was better than the Shamām mine, was also operated by “Persians of the mine.”

Naṣr al-Iṣkandari, later cited by Yaʿqūt and al-Ḥāzīmī, asserts that “Mīndah” was a pre-Islamic Ḥijāzī mine which had a huge pit in which water gathered. The Mīndah mine also is frequently mentioned in early Arab lyrics. Pre-Islamic poetry similarly reverberates with references to specific gold and silver fineware, rings, bracelets, other jewelry, and gold and silver embossed weaponry. Coincident with the rise of Islam, the Qurʾān too speaks of them as esteemed precious metals. Sūrat Āli-ʿImrān, for instance, asserts:

Fair in the eyes of men is the love of things they covet; women and sons; heaped up hoards of gold and silver . . .

Sūrat al-Kahf promises the Righteous:

For them will be Gardens of Eternity; beneath them, rivers will flow; they will be adorned therein with bracelets of gold . . .

a commitment that finds its affirmation in Sūrat al-Ḥajj:

Allāh will admit those who believe and work righteous deeds to gardens beneath which rivers flow; they shall be adorned therein with bracelets of gold and pearls . . .

to which Sūrat al-Insān adds:

And among them will be passed round vessels of silver and goblets of crystal—crystal clear, made of silver . . .

The composite of documentary and scientific evidence thus suggests that modern conventional portrayals that separate historic Arabian mining operations into two distinct chronologic periods of activity—late Bronze Age and medieval ʿAbbāsīd—may well be imprecise. For many references are unquestionably pre-ʿAbbāsīd and may be traced back to the era of Prophet Muḥammad and before. In addition, as noted, practically every gold, silver, and copper deposit on the Arabian Peninsula shows some evidence of previous mining activity. Roman pottery shards, for example, have been found at an ancient mining site called Wādī ʿArjah in northwest al-Ḥijāz. Several medieval mine site names—such as al-Maṣānī, al-Maʿmalah, Umm al-Marū, Umm al-Damār, and al-ʿAmār likewise


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clearly suggest the existence of previous mining. Thus, it is not altogether illogical to conclude that just as modern geologists and prospectors now typically seek out historic mines as a means of finding new deposits, so did the miners of previous times, in so doing, obscuring the handiwork of their predecessors.65)

It is not improbable either that what we now identify as ‘medieval’ Islamic mining actually is a sporadic continuation of early exploitation—particularly for large deposits such as al-Nuqrah—and that such mining probably took place from its inception perhaps in the third or second millennium B.C. until midway into the ‘Abbāsid era. Thus, the geographic documentary sources and in situ physical evidence converge in a compelling way to suggest that significant precious metals extraction and smelting operations did take place at mining sites in Western Arabia at various times before, during, and after the proclamation of Prophet Muhammad’s mission—while peaking in the commercial surge that attended the first two Islamic centuries.

Not coincidentally, many of these mines lay on or near the historic incense, spice, and pilgrim routes of the Arabian Peninsula. Mahd al-Dhahab, for instance, is situated two kilometers north of the well-travelled Darb Zubaydah pilgrimage route that linked Makkah with al-Kūfah in Iraq, as well as with other key cities of Western Asia. In addition to Mahd al-Dhahab, the Nuqrah, Hillayit, Samīrah, and Umm al-Damār sites were likewise located along this route. Similarly, such noted medieval mines as al-‘Aqīq and al-‘Ablá were located on the Yemen-Makkah-Syrian spice route. Not only were these routes major arteries for commerce, therefore, they also afforded access to the currency base that made such commerce possible.66)

The Operational Perspective

It appears that early medieval Arabian mining was financed with private capital. Al-Baladhuri quotes future caliph ‘Umar b. ‘Abd al-‘Azīz’s grudging assessment of a mining property that he had recently acquired: “look at what was extracted from it and what I spent on it.” Ibn Hajar, in turn, quotes members of the banū Lihb as asserting: “We brought the Prophet of God ore from al-‘Aqīq, and he wrote us a letter stating: ‘whoever finds something, it is his.”’ Whereas al-Bakrī speaks of a dispute at Mahd al-Dhahab between original Sulami investors and mine workers in the caliphal reign of ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb.67)

Nonetheless, despite operational difficulties, and however primitive the extraction techniques, it appears that even by modern standards, mining in ancient and medieval Arabia was “big business” for the age. The evidence suggests, for instance, that an estimated 1,500,000 ounces of gold were produced from the more than one million tons of ore mined at Mahd al-Dhahab in historic times. Based on residual tailings, evidence likewise indicates that more than 1,000,000 ounces of gold were produced at al-Ḥamdah in the early medieval era. These are economically significant findings. For they are production volumes of sufficient magnitude to have generated substantial local purchasing power throughout the medieval west Arabian Peninsula and east Mediterranean basin, stimulating regional economies to an appreciable degree.68)

The Arabic sources reveal that medieval mining operations were often labor-intensive, at times employing as many as 1,000-2,000 workers. Existing ruins, as noted, indicate that these miners were usually housed in stone structures, often arranged in orderly barrack-like fashion. Slaves, prisoners, and servants likely comprised the bulk of the mining labor force. But there are reports of others—Jews, Persians, and even Arabs—who actively engaged in mining activities on the Arabian Peninsula. Al-Ḥamdānī, for instance, states that there were 200 Jews at ma’din ‘Aqiq ‘Uqayl in Wādi al-Dawāsir. He also indicates that there were thousands of Zoroastrians employed at ma’din Shamām, and that they had even set up two places of worship (baytā nār) there.69)

Mining operations were supported by impressive public and private support infrastructure. As subsequent analysis will reveal, some mines were even deemed to be true towns (having a minbar). Many were at least full fledged mining villages with fortifications, and in some instances, had palaces. Certainly, commercial support infrastructure was present. Al-Ḥarbi writes that Mahd al-Dhahab contained quite substantial physical facilities to logistically support ongoing site operations—describing a palace and a mosque at the mine, as well as a circular well built by Queen Zubaydah, numerous other wells, old and new, and a square reservoir in the vicinity:70)

Ma’din banū Sulaym. . . . is for the banū Sulaym bin Mašūr bin ‘Irīmāh; and in it is a mosque and a palace; and from the mine to ‘Ufay’iyah is sixteen and one half miles; and in it is a circular well of Zubaydah; and many wells, old and modern, having names. Two and one half miles from the well are building ruins said to be “Rayyān,”

where (Hârûn) al-Rashîd stayed; and there were palaces
in it for his commanders and staff, and shop ruins,
and wells, and a square reservoir and a distillery,
at a mile from Rayyân.”

Indeed, there are reports that Hârûn al-Rashîd, each time accompanied by more
than one hundred Islamic jurisprudents (fuqahâ’), made at least seven official
visits to the Islamic holy cities of Makkah and al-Madinah, and had palaces
built at many of the official major rest stops that were co-located with mines
along the Darb Zubaydah pilgrimage route to facilitate his mission.

Other sites were substantially built up as well. Speaking of “ma‘din Mawân,”
al-Harbi cites a palace, mosque, reservoir, and three wells within its confines—
and similar references proliferate throughout the medieval Arab geographies.
Al-Hamdînî asserts that “ma‘din Thaniyât ibn ‘Isâm” contained a fortress, and
al-Harbi states that it too was considered to be a true town (having a minbar).
Yâqût writes that “ma‘din ‘Aqîq ‘Uqayl” had a governate; whereas al-Hâzîmî
states that “ma‘din Khazabah” also had a governor: “wa bihâ amîran wa min-
baran.” Al-Iṣfâhânî reveals that there was a market at “ma‘din al-Qashrâ”
and that there were merchants at “ma‘din al-‘Isn” as well as at “ma‘din al-
Awsajah.” He describes “ma‘din al-‘Ahsân” as a village with a citadel and a
mine; and “ma‘din ‘Arâqîb” as a mine and a huge village. He likewise claims
that “ma‘din Hillayît” was both “a mine and a village.” Yaqût, citing the
authority of Abû Miswar, describes a market at “ma‘din al-Nuqrâh.” Al-Harbi
asserts that “ma‘din al-Nuqrâh” had a mosque and a palace, two reservoirs, and
wells. Thus, both the physical and spiritual needs of the mining community
were met with on-site services.71)

As for the mining itself, medieval Arabian gold was found in various forms.
Al-Hamdînî states that gold nuggets as large as six ounces were not uncom-
mon, and that pure grains of gold were often interlaced with the earthen ore
brought up from the mining pits. Al-Harbi, in describing operations at the banû
Sulaym facilities, speaks of “the earth being mixed with gold.” Upon removing
stones from the ore mix, this “gold dust” (placer gold) was extracted by wash-
ing it in wooden troughs especially designed to separate out dirt and other resid-
uals. After this process, the resulting particulate mix could be refined further by
first manually sifting it in a dish; then immersing it in quicksilver to consume
residual pollutants; and finally boiling off the quicksilver, leaving the purified
gold intact.72)


But often, the desired gold and silver existed in the form of microscopic particles compounded with other minerals such as copper, zinc, iron, and lead sulfides (gossans), which required more complex refining techniques. Al-Hamdānī describes the requisite refining process in detail—indicating that medieval mining engineers operating on the Arabian Peninsula smelted the ore through a combustion process employing kilns (tanānīr) made of stone-reinforced baked clay. It is apparent from the remnants of those kilns that have been preserved that they were almond-shaped and approximately sixty centimeters both in height and base—and were vented to accommodate one or two sets of leather bellows. Separating the gold from the other minerals contained in the raw ore was accomplished by placing within the kilns measured portions of both charcoal and raw ore—pre-pulverized by hammers, millstones, and pestles—as well as clay and mineral salts that accelerated the refining operation. Charcoal, usually produced from mimosa, acacia, or juniper wood, was the primary feedstock used in the smelting process.73)

The composite was then ignited, and the covered kilns fanned with the bellows for approximately one hour. Because silver, mineral sulfides, and other salts within the ore dissolved at temperatures well below the 1,063 degree centigrade melting point of gold, they would separate outward from the central mass, leaving the purified gold to settle into small pots placed in the base of the kiln. Once the smelting operation was complete, the pots would be removed with tongs and allowed to cool, after which, the pure ore was removed.74)

While the refining of silver was similar to that of gold, the method of smelting copper ore was technically somewhat different. It involved first pulverizing the mined ore into fragments through impact-crushing and grinding, followed by smelting to separate the copper from the ore. The latter process was carried out in a clay kiln, which was charged with a mixture of crushed ore, flux (usually sea shells, calcite, hematite, and quartz), and charcoal. As heat built up in the kiln, the firing was intensified by a blow pipe worked by bellows. The molten copper then sank to the bottom and the residual copper gangue at the surface flowed out through a hole punched near the base of the kiln into a small bowl.
placed further down. The kiln was then broken and the copper and slag extracted.75)

Conclusions

From the wealth of evidence presented in the medieval primary sources, it is clear that the role of precious minerals in stimulating the economy of the medieval Ḥijāz has been greatly underestimated in many modern analyses. Indeed, the synthesis of the documentary data with recent archaeological discoveries strongly indicates that ore production from the gold, silver, and copper mines of the Arabian Peninsula contributed greatly to the commercial expansion that characterized Islam’s dynamic first two centuries. So much so, in fact, that in response to Patricia Crone’s cogent inquiry regarding early medieval Makkah’s economic reason to exist; to wit:76)

The Meccans cannot be said to have exported silver and gold at all . . . Meccan trade thus cannot be identified as a trade in gold, it may be asserted that, without question, it was gold and silver used as currency and the dynamic commerce that these twin precious metals underwrote.

The archaeological evidence depicting the economic impact of precious metals on the economy of medieval Arabia thus is persuasive—so persuasive, in fact, that it may now invoke the need to reexamine other conventional interpretations of early Near Eastern history based on the emerging data that ongoing exploration of the Arabian Peninsula has to offer. For the range of tools at the disposal of modern historians of the Peninsula has expanded greatly in the past decade, making possible greater economic understanding based on dramatic new evidence that the artifacts of the region are beginning to provide.77)

Source Analysis

Unlike many works of Islamic history, in setting its scenarios, the present analysis relies heavily upon medieval Arabic geographies which generally tend to be more empirical than other more traditional Islamic sources. Such sources not only include the well known, predominantly 3rd/9th and 4th/10th century geographers contained in the Bibliotheca Geographorum Arabicorum—Ibn Khurradadhbih, Ibn Rustah, al-Mas′ūdi, al-Muqaddasi, Qudāmah Ibn Ja′far,

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75) H. Sābir 1991a, p. 16.
76) P. Crone 1987, pp. 87-95 passim, pp. 87 and 95 quoted.
77) Including satellite remote sensing infra-red photography techniques that have recently led to the rediscovery of ancient trading cities on the Peninsula.
al-Ya‘qūbī et al.—but also both earlier and later geographers/historians such as al-Baladhuri, Yaqūt, al-Fayruzābādī, and the native Ḥāḍāz ‘Arrām al-Sulami. It has also extensively explored the findings of geographers devoted primarily to capturing the topographical essence of the medieval Arabian Peninsula; in addition to still others, such as al-Hamdānī and Nāṣr al-Iskandari, who are focused more narrowly on describing contemporary mining operations.

In the former category are the works of such chroniclers as the 3rd/9th century al-Ḥarī’s Kitāb al-Manāsik wa Amākin Ṭuruq al-Ḥajj wa Maʿālim al-Jazīrah;* the 3rd/9th century al-Ḥṣafānī’s Bilād al-‘Arab; the 4th/10th century al-Hamdānī’s Ṣiḥāṭ Jazīrat al-‘Arab; the 5th/11th century al-Bakrī’s Muʾjam mā Ustaʿjam min Asmāʾ al-Bilād wa al-Mawādī; the 6th/10th century al-Ḥāzimī’s Kitāb al-Amākin and the 10th/16th century al-Ṣamhādī’s Wafāʾ al-Wafāʾ bi-Akhbār Dār al-Muṣtafā. Al-Hamdānī likewise wrote a major treatise devoted exclusively to regional mining called Kitāb al-Jawharatayn al-‘Atīqatayn al-Maʾṣīfatayn: al-Ṭafrāʾ wa al-Baydāʾ, edited and published by Shaykh Ḥamad al-Jāsir in 1987; whereas much of Nāṣr al-Iskandari’s commentary on mining appears in al-Jāsir’s 1995 edition of al-Ḥāzimī’s Kitāb al-Amākin. The lexicons of al-Zabīdī, Tāj al-Fiʿūs, and Ibn ʿAbīn, Lisān al-ʿArab, and al-Fayruzābādī’s Al-Muḍānim al-Muṭabah fi Maʿālim Ṭabhah likewise have been useful in defining explicit mine sites.

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