

Imaginary Places

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IMAGINARY PLACES VI

Bedou

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Bedou

Bedou presents a number of difficulties for the geographer, but foremost is the problem of location. It has no boundary except that which is traced by its inhabitants in their incessant wandering. If there is a pattern in their travels it is undetectable by outsiders. Moreover, the **sands upon which they move** are as mobile as time itself.

The heat of the sun is so extreme that evolutionary processes have ensured the protection of the natives by rendering them nearly invisible to the eye. We see their tents, their manufactured goods, and even their dromedaries. Occasionally, we may even see a flutter of cloth that must surely contain a human form, but never a face or hand that would confirm the fact. When by chance they appear in the busy streets of cities, they are taken for shadows. **If they have names** they are kept from the ears of outsiders, though a name is the Bedou's most prized possession, and there is no honor of consequence greater

than his own (see H. G. Wells, *Outline of History*, page 5, revised edition, 1949).

These phantoms are viewed by many people as being a little uncivilized, almost savages, but more likely they are philosophers and poets, and more likely they know better than to associate themselves with those who call themselves civilized. So what if their poetry concerns itself almost exclusively with love and war, and so what if their philosophy is simple and full of cartoonish romanticisms. And, when they attend the **marketplaces**, if there seems to be something uncanny in their business transactions we cannot in fairness say that we have not seen such practices within our own social concourse.

The women are the true puzzle, however. Only rarely do they come forward in public, and even when they do appear they remain always behind **veils that carry the weight of law**. Anthropologists say women hold the true

BEDOU

power of the Bedou. Other reporters suggest women are no more than objects, prospering or not according to the whims of men and boys. Still, there is the matter of the gold; every woman, young or old, seems to have a

good quantity of the precious metal adorning her neck, breast, or waist, while the only gold seen on a Bedou man is that which he has just acquired in a business transaction or liberated by force of arms.



The Confusion of Time

The sand under their feet counts approximately two trillion six hundred twenty-eight million minutes of history, though in no particular order, and for all of it they have changed little.

Of the Bedou it is the Hunsit who provide the model for all the rest. No one sits a camel with more style, wields a sword with more dash, or recites the words of the Prophet with greater feeling. It is no wonder that the great caliphates of this region have for centuries paid handsomely for their services as royal escorts, palace guards, and official decorations.

Yusef of Mazrah, who might have spent a lifetime herding sheep from place to place, instead retired with a royal pension at the rank of sergeant after thirty years of service as point man and kettle drummer in the 16th Royal Camel Corps. As he had enlisted at the age of fifteen, he was still relatively young and had little desire to return to the bosom of his family. Reports say that he now lives in Rome, Italy, where he plays drums with a jazz ensemble that includes a Turk, two Englishmen, and a Spaniard.



Oasis

They came to the oasis on a schedule. Here names were exchanged, but in whispers. The shape of their conversation was determined by custom. Good manners were paramount. And, so long as they remained at this place, men who were enemies behaved toward one another as brothers. Away from this place, meeting under the sun and in the open, they might well have slit one another's throat without a second thought.

The oasis is no more, of course; it was bulldozed in 1985 to make way for a mini mall. The Bedou come now only in response to television ads for white sales and close-outs. Good manners seem less important, and throat slitting is no longer confined to the outskirts—proving, perhaps, that progress does not always move in a straight line.



Market at Basha

In the open spaces on the outskirts of cities and towns are the marketplaces, nebulosities that change in shape and size with the comings and goings of the sellers and buyers. Many of the marketplaces have been in existence since the dawn of civilization; the sand underfoot is mixed with the gold and blood that has been the excess of a million or more transactions.

Abu Setrak arrives in the morning. He shares strong coffee with his colleagues and familiars before commencing any business; politics, religion, and camel prices will be thoroughly thrashed before the sun rises ten degrees above the eastern horizon, and they will be interrupted only by the call to prayer. He has brought several fine camels to sell. With luck he will make enough for a down payment on a thirty-foot Winnebago he saw advertised in the *Sunshine SmartShopper*.



Veils

Law forbids unmarried girls to unveil before any man, and married women may unveil only before their husbands, relatives, and persons considered by their husbands to be trustworthy. This allows men to brag about their women to strangers without fear of contradiction. The advantages that accrue to women are few.

A famous story tells of a man who married a woman whose face he had not been permitted to see until after they were wed. As it turned out she was very, very ugly. When she asked her husband who among family and friends would have the privilege of *Namaharem* (seeing her unveiled), the husband replied "Anyone but me, woman."

There is the equally famous story of Queen Nyssia, the wife of King Candaules. She was said to be the most beautiful creature ever to inhabit the earth. But because the rules concerning veils are even more severe for queens and such, the King was unable to enjoy the envy of others. It drove him mad, and from that point a very tragic tale unfolds, the advantage going to Queen Nyssia. The full details of this story can be found in a certain book by Theophile Gautier, though it may be difficult to find a copy that has not been badly abused.

Attempts by women to overthrow law and custom have generally failed, though there remains hope that in this modern era television might accomplish what courage and good sense could not. There are some early indications of this in the viewing habits of the Bedou. *Charlie's Angels* is in rerun, and *Baywatch* currently tops the charts as the most watched program since the first portable television set found its way into the desert on the back of a donkey twenty-five years ago.