

Preface

This volume contains seventy-one folktales collected from storytellers in the Wadi Ara (Wādi ‘Āra) area and the Northern Triangle (i.e., the area around Kufr Qara‘, ‘Ar‘ara, Bāqa-Jatt and Umm il-Fahm) and selected from a total of some two hundred stories recorded in 1990 and 1991.

The material was collected for two purposes. Firstly, in order to preserve the folktale tradition, which is being lost from day to day. The growing influence of radio, television, video, etc. and changes in cultural norms among Arab citizens of the State of Israel are just two of the factors that have caused the characteristic Arab cultural figure of the traditional storyteller to depart the stage.

In this culture, listening to folktales was once an enjoyable way to pass the time. As its popularity dwindles, so, too, do the tales themselves, and this is why we have taken it upon ourselves to collect this material, organize it and preserve it to the best of our abilities.

Our second objective is to offer this important material to readers interested in its cultural and anthropological content, and to students for whom it will provide a source of enrichment for their acquisition of colloquial Arabic and a broader social and cultural context for their improved understanding of the language.

The book was originally written in Arabic, from which it was translated for the benefit of readers who do not have a full command of the language. We have tried to keep the English translation as accurate and as close to the original Arabic as possible. Here and there, however, we have allowed ourselves to depart from a too-literal rendition of the original in order to preserve the literary qualities of the narrative. Recording the stories in Arabic has obliged the compilers of this book to formulate their own rules. In doing so we have adhered as closely as possible to the accepted forms and conventions of

writing literary Arabic, and when these have not permitted us full written expression of the colloquial language we have tried to stick to a regular set of rules (see remarks below). At this point we should like to express our thanks to Professor M. Piamenta, whose books and articles on colloquial Arabic served as our guide in this regard, and whose advice was of great help to us.

To make things easier for the reader, we have provided audio recordings of the stories read out in the appropriate dialect.

The history of the area

Wadi Ara (the ‘Iron Valley) extends for some twenty kilometers between the Manasseh Hills (Blād ir-Rūḥa) in the south and the Samarian Hills (Jbāl is-Sāmra) to the north. The King’s Highway (Ṭarīq is-Sulṭān), which linked Egypt to Mesopotamia, passes through this geological depression.

The name ‘Iron, which is mentioned in an Egyptian document from the time of Pharaoh Thutmose III (15th century BCE), may be the source of the name ‘Āra.

The Wadi Ara region and the hills on each side of it were once covered in woodland. Tribes from the Arabian Peninsula who settled at the northern entrance to the valley in the Megiddo (Lajūn) area and at its western entrance in the area of ‘Ārūna (‘Āra) helped to conserve and protect the trade routes between Egypt and Syria.

Historic sites providing evidence of extensive ancient settlement are located at each of the two entrances to the valley: Tel Megiddo in the north and Tel Esur (Assawir) near Ein Iron.

During the Roman and Byzantine periods numerous settlements were to be found in the valley, and some, such as Mu‘āwiya, ‘Āra and ‘Ar‘ara still exist

today. The larger villages were built near springs and other water sources, while smaller hamlets were situated on hilltops, for safety and protection.

In 1099 the Crusaders conquered the region and established a number of fortresses there, the most important of which was that of 'Ar'ara. The local Arabs stayed on their land and paid taxes to the Crusader ruler. The Mamluk sultan Baybars conquered the region in 1265 and divided the land among emirs from his army, who settled the area and managed their property and possessions with the help of local agents.

During the period of Ottoman rule, on the eve of Arab settlement, most of the area was uninhabited, and thus most of the names of the local communities found there today are Arabic.

The Arab tribes that settled in the area swiftly took possession of most of the lands, including those distant from the main settlements.

As the years passed the number of inhabitants increased, and today the local population is around 95,000, all Sunni Muslims. The oldest community in the area is Umm il-Fahm, which occupies the highest point (450 meters above sea level), and from which settlement extended outwards towards more distant villages lower down.

These settlers arrived from the area of Beit Jubrin (the Jabārīn clan), from Jordan and Syria (the Maḥāmīd and Maḥājne clans) and from Beersheba and Hebron (the Aḡbāriyye clan, also known as the Iḡbāriyye or Ġbāriyye). Members of the Maṣārwe clan, originally from Egypt, can also be found in the area. Christians are likewise known to have settled there, e.g., the Samra and the Ḥaddādīn families; the Ḥaddādīn were blacksmiths and metalworkers, as their name implies. The last Christians left the area in 1936.

These clans are linked not by blood, but by the area they live in. Most arrived

in search of a place to settle and make a living, or to escape personal feuds in their villages of origin. Most of this settlement (59%) took place during the Ottoman period, with smaller additions later during the time of the British Mandate (36%) and after 1948 (5%).

Although this process of coalescence is especially characteristic of Umm il-Fahm, the other villages in the area have undergone a similar transformation from nomadic tribe to rural settlement. The process was accelerated by a desire for security and the fear of attack by marauding Bedouin tribes. The Transjordanian Şaqr (şaqer) tribe had a unifying influence in this regard, despite the protection money (khāwa) they were paid regularly.

The clan or extended family system still persists today in the local villages, and until 1948 there were no exogamous marriages: people married only within their own clan. Each clan lived within its own area, and this is still the case today, apart from a few small locations where the population is mixed.

In 1948 the northern part of the valley was captured by Jewish Hagana and Palmach forces, and, under the Rhodes Agreements, the entire area came under the jurisdiction of the Israeli government. Most of the Wadi Ara land was expropriated, and the local Arab residents were now obliged to seek a living outside their villages, an innovation that has transformed their way of life socially and culturally.