

THE DISTRIBUTION OF THE DATE PALM

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WRITERS on the resources of the Moslem world commonly give little definite information about one of the most picturesque as well as valuable of its resources—the date palm. With sufficient effort, however, it is possible to bring together many more data on the subject than one might at first suppose. In the more highly organized countries of its occurrence, where the palm is subject to taxation, it is enumerated in the periodical census. Elsewhere, the estimates of travelers must be depended on. A summary of all the available sources of information indicates that there are in the entire world something like 90,000,000 date palms, of which more than half are in the countries bordering on the Persian Gulf. Iraq is far in the lead.

IRAQ AND PERSIA

According to Mr. Dowson¹ there are about 30,000,000 palms in Iraq, of which one-half are on the Shatt-al-Arab, 5,000,000 on the banks of the Hillah canal, a million around Baghdad, and the remainder on the Euphrates and in separate oases.

The most important plantations in Persia are those on or near the Persian Gulf, but there is also a large production in some of the highland regions as far north as Tabas. On the Persian side of the Shatt-al-Arab, opposite the Basra region, V. H. W. Dowson calculates the number of date palms to be something like 3,750,000. From Dr. Fairchild's report, there must be not less than 5,000,000 in the Minab region near Bandar Abbas; and there are said to be at least 250,000 in Tangistan. I have been unable to find even guesses as to the number of palms in other parts of Persia, but if the grand total is put at 10,000,000 it will perhaps serve the present purpose.

INDIA AND BALUCHISTAN

E. O'Brien², formerly deputy commissioner of Multan, says that the date palm grows in literally hundreds of thousands in the Multan, Muzaffargarh, Dera Ghazi Khan, Dera Ismail Khan districts, and perhaps in Bannu; also in Jhang, Bahawalpur, and Sind. Milne³ cites the following figures for the number of female palms in three of these

¹ V. H. W. Dowson: *Dates and Date Cultivation in the Iraq*, 3 vols., Cambridge, 1921-23.

² Quoted by E. Bonavia: *The Date Palm in India*, Calcutta, 1885.

³ D. Milne: *Date Cultivation in the Panjab*, Lahore, 1911.

districts: Multan, 315,055; Muzaffargarh, 838,999; Dera Ghazi Khan, 126,384; total, 1,280,438.

If the figures given by Mr. Milne be arbitrarily doubled to cover all the rest of northwestern India, one would arrive at a total of about 2,500,000 female palms. Mr. Milne states that in the districts he has visited about 50 per cent of all palms are males, so to get the total number of palms of both sexes, one would have to increase the above estimate to about 5,000,000.

The principal centers of cultivation of the palm in Baluchistan are the Panch Ghur valley, where there are said to be about half a million palms, and Kach in Makran.⁴ Presumably the total number in the country cannot be less than one or two million.

ARABIA AND SYRIA AND PALESTINE

Hasa proper was credited with 2,000,000 palms in the Turkish census of 1877, while Dr. Fairchild estimates the number at Qatif as 1,250,000, making the total for this district 3,250,000.

In the Bahrain Islands Dr. Fairchild estimated the number of palms at 500,000, a figure that may be too high.

Oman is credited with 4,000,000 palms,⁵ the larger part of which are found in the coastal belt known as the Batinah, stretching some 150 miles north of Muscat. Samail valley has half a million palms, and the next most important plantings are at Ibri.

Hadhramaut grows some palms, both on the seashore and on the desert side, but I have found no reports as to their number. At a guess there can hardly be less than 200,000.

Aden grows a few palms along the coast but none in the interior. It is an important point of transshipment for dates from Persian Gulf ports en route to Red Sea ports.

It may be conveniently remarked here that a few dates are grown on the African coast, in Somaliland, Eritrea, and neighboring countries. The production is commercially unimportant, however.

Yemen is mostly too high for the palm, but there are flourishing cultures in the little-known valleys of the interior, such as Jauf and Najran. In the absence of all information, I will put down 100,000 as representing a minimum for these regions.

Asir boasts a few palm groves here and there, but production is probably not sufficient for local needs, save at Bisha. Date production in Asir may be considered negligible, in a world-wide survey.

Hejaz, the sacred territory, is, according to Arab tradition, the true home of date growing, and the culture receives much attention here. The important centers are Al-Ala, Medina, Taima, and Khaibar.

⁴ D. G. Fairchild: *Persian Gulf Dates*, *Bur. of Plant Industry Bull.* 54, Washington, 1903.

⁵ *Daily Consular and Trade Repts.*, June 30, 1914, p. 1984.

There are no palms at Mecca. Medina possesses 300,000 palms, according to a report sent me by Gellatly, Hankey, & Co., an exporting firm at Jidda. I doubt if all Hejaz possesses more than 500,000.

Jabal Shammar has not been surveyed by agriculturists, but some information on this, as well as other parts of Arabia, is available in the British Admiralty "Handbook of Arabia" (1920). In the mountains there is only one settled area of any size, namely Aqda, reputed to possess 75,000 palms. Jauf may have 50,000; the Sakaka groves are said to be somewhat more extensive. Making allowance for Hail and smaller oases, the total cannot be much above 250,000.

Qasim deserves special consideration because, according to the opinion of many Arabs, the cultivation of the palm has reached a higher point there than anywhere else. The plantations of Buraida, Anaiza, and Qusaiba altogether contain perhaps no more than 100,000 palms.

Nejd imports most of its dates from Hasa. In central Nejd (the Aridh) the chief centers of date growing are Riyadh and Daraiya. Such photographs as I have seen do not indicate that there are many thousand palms there. Farther south, however, in Wadi Dawasir there is a great horticultural district lately visited by H. St. J. B. Philby, who gives taxation details indicating that the total annual production of dates there is some 5,000,000 pounds.⁶ This might represent anywhere from 50,000 to 100,000 palms. Arabic legends of the extensive date groves of Wadi Jabrin, "a palm tract comparable in size, though not in density or fertility, to the Hasa itself" have been set right by R. E. Cheesman (1925).⁷ His report in the *Geographical Journal* gives no details of the number of palms, but his photographs and references indicate that there cannot be many thousand. Altogether, I doubt if Nejd should be credited with more than 250,000 palms.

On the whole, then, the interior of Arabia plays little part in the world commerce of dates—a fact well known to geographers but not in accord with popular tradition. It is not even self-supporting. The figures given above are largely guesswork, but at least they are closer guesses than anything hitherto published. Arabia altogether can scarcely possess much more than 9,000,000 palms, of which three-fourths are on the shore of the Persian Gulf, in Oman and Hasa.

There are still a few palms in the hot valley of the lower Jordan, where in classical times the tree flourished; and there is a small production at Gaza. North of this palms are found at isolated points, particularly in the plain of Philistia and near Beirut and Tripoli, but at no point in sufficient numbers to have commercial importance.

⁶ H. St. J. B. Philby: *The Heart of Arabia*, 2 vols., London, 1922; reference in Vol. 2, p. 206.

⁷ R. E. Cheesman: *The Deserts of Jafura and Jabrin*, *Geogr. Journ.*, Vol. 65, 1925, pp. 112-141.

EGYPT, LIBYA, AND CYRENAICA

Egypt, according to the census of 1907, had slightly more than 10,000,000 palms to which must be added 46,426 in Arish (the peninsula of Sinai), 3947 in Suez, and some half million in the western oases. The total for Egypt at present is therefore approximately 11,000,000.

For the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, the Central Economic Board has furnished (1924) detailed figures showing a total of 1,261,629 palms, nearly all in the provinces of Dongola, Halfa, and Berber.

According to the calculations of E. de Cillis⁸ the Italian colony must have nearly 9,000,000 palms, or as many as Tunisia and Algeria put together. Most of these, however, are in the interior oases of the Sahara, little subject to Italian control, and the figures may be high. The only exact enumeration is for Tripoli and three neighboring oases (Tagiura, Gurgi, and Gargarese) in which the Italian census of 1917-1918 discovered 285,000 palms. In Tripolitania the Italians calculate that there are 7,800,000 palms, of which about 3,500,000 are in the region comprised in the former Turkish vilayet of Tripoli, which includes Ghadames, Ghat, and the Fezzan. At Ghadames there are said to be 25,000, while the neighboring oasis of Derj is credited with 800,000, Ghat with only 5,000. I have seen no detailed figures for the Fezzan, but the Italians evidently calculate them at more than a million.

In Cyrenaica there are supposed to be about 1,200,000 palms, of which only 20,000 are on the coast, the beautiful oasis of Derna having no more than 8000. Figures for the interior are given by the British Admiralty "Handbook of Libya" (1920) as follows: Aujila, 40,000; Jalo, 100,000; Wadi, 40,000; Leskerre, 20,000; Sella, 100,000. It is evident, then, that more than 750,000 are attributed to the Kufara group of oases—a moderate estimate if the areas assigned to these oases are to be relied on. G. Rohlfs' estimates of palms have almost everywhere been found to be too high, but his estimate of nearly 2000 square miles of land characterized by palms may not be so wide of the mark. Rosita Forbes and Hassanein Bey have given no particulars on this point, but their photographs show that in many districts the palms are widely scattered.

FRENCH AFRICA

Tunisia possesses 2,138,075 palms according to the statistical report of the Regency (1920). The groups of Saharan oases known as the Jerid and the Nefzawa account between them for more than half of these. Other important regions center on Gabes (400,000), Gafsa (50,000), and the island of Jerba (400,000).

⁸ Emanuele de Cillis: Saggio de "Fenicigrafia libica": Studi sopra alcune razze di palma da datteri coltivate in Tripolitania, *Minist. delle Colonie Boll. di Informazioni*, Rome, Vol. 11, 1923, pp. 733-819.

Algeria has 7,211,000 palms according to figures furnished by the office of the governor-general (1924). Of these 6,620,459 are in the Territoire du Sud. There are well on to 2,500,000 in the Wad Righ and an equal number in the Tuat oases. In the region Figuig-Colomb-Bechar there are about one million.

Morocco has slightly over one million palms according to figures furnished by the Directorate of Agriculture at Rabat (1924). The Tafilelt oases are credited with a trifle more than half of the total.

While the colonies united under the name of *Afrique Occidentale Française* are at the southern limit of commercial cultivation of the palm, they stretch so far across Africa that they contain, altogether, enough palms to deserve mention. The office of the governor-general has furnished me with such data as are available. Beginning in the west, there are small and scattered plantations in and just north of Senegal, but the only ones of any size are in Mauritania, where the district of Adrar contains 110,000 and Tagant 73,299. Traveling eastward, one encounters a few palms in almost every oasis and also scattered plantings along the Niger; but the next area of any importance devoted to the industry is not reached until one arrives at Tibesti, at the extreme limit of French territory. Here the plantations are numerous, that of Bardai being the most important. Borku and Unianga also grow quantities of good dates. I have seen no estimate of the total number of palms in French West Africa, but if it be credited with 500,000, the estimate will be conservative.

There are small plantings in French Equatorial Africa, as for example in Kanem and Wadai, but I believe they are not of sufficient size to merit consideration here.

Many seedlings are grown as ornamentals on the northern shores of the Mediterranean, and at Elche, Spain, there are 115,000 grown for their fruit. In Australia, in South Africa (Damaraland and Namaqualand), and in South America (Brazil, Argentina, Peru) there are scattered seedlings, and the prospects of establishing the industry commercially are good. In Mexico (Baja California and Sonora) there are at least 100,000 palms, and in Southern California and Arizona perhaps 150,000.

Conjectural as are many of the data presented in this review, they are fortunately most trustworthy for the regions with the largest date industries, so that the correctness of the total is less affected. If the total number of palms in the world be calculated at 90,000,000, I believe future investigation will prove this figure to be within 5 per cent of accuracy.