

# History

Given that the Peninsula is a compact region shared by countries of small population, you'd think it would have a common history. It doesn't – or only in the most general terms. What follows is therefore only a broad summary where sometimes a passing reference is made to an important historical event. See the History section of each country for the details.

*Arabia & the Arabs: From the Bronze Age to the Coming of Islam*, by Robert G Hoyland, is one of the few histories of the Peninsula to describe the pre-Islamic period in detail.

Travel to the museums of Pakistan and the Mediterranean and you'll be sure to find the small round seals that were the hallmark of Dilmun traders – their personal signatures – and evidence of the extent of their trading influence.

## TROPICAL ROOTS (66,000,000–10,000 BC)

Stand in the middle of Wadi Fanja on the outskirts of Muscat and you may just uncover more than the toads and grasshoppers of today's arid vista. This was where archaeologists discovered a herbivorous dinosaur, not unlike *Zalmoxes* or *Rhabdodon* dinosaurs from France and Romania. What is interesting about this discovery is that it shows that the climate of eastern Arabia, some 66 million years ago, was far more verdant than it is today, with savannah-like grasslands and abundant rainfall. Crocodiles also inhabited places like Wadi Fanja, suggesting that permanent rivers helped to cut the deeply incised mountain ranges of today's Peninsula.

*Homo erectus* was attracted to the rich hunting and gathering grounds of southern Arabia more than a million years ago, though quite where it came from no one knows for sure. *Homo sapiens* arrived on the scene 100,000 years ago and began more organised settlement. Visitors to museums across the region, particularly the National Museum (p113) in Bahrain and Bait al-Baranda (p189) in Muscat, will see plenty of evidence of their distant descendants, including charcoal burners and spear heads, dating from 10,000 BC.

## BORN TO TRADE (10,000 BC–AD 500)

Visit any souq across the Peninsula, or attend any meeting between doctor and patient, teacher and pupil, and you will realise instantly that rules and regulations are fluid, negotiable entities to be haggled over, argued about and artfully manipulated. Perhaps this is because trade runs through the blood of Peninsula peoples, shaping modern daily interactions as it has shaped each country's ancient heritage. Not surprisingly, then, trade informed the very earliest aspects of the region's history.

Copper was where it all began. It was mined in Majan (the ancient name of Oman) and traded through the mighty Dilmun Empire. It's easy to simplify the lives of the ancients, but the early seafaring traders of Dilmun were no barbarians: they spent their mineral wealth on fine glass; ate too many dates and suffered bad teeth; took the time to thread beads of carnelian to hang round their beloveds' necks; enjoyed complex legends; and expressed

## TIMELINE

c 66,000,000 BC

The Peninsula is covered in savannah-like grasslands, rainfall is abundant and permanent rivers are home to crocodiles and herbivorous dinosaurs.

c 100,000 BC

*Homo sapiens* live a hunter-gatherer life across the Peninsula, burning fires and rearing their own livestock.

6000–3200 BC

Loose groups of Stone Age and Bronze Age individuals occupy the Peninsula, setting up intricate trade routes between Arabia and Mesopotamia (Iraq) and the Indus Valley.

their interest in life through their administrations of death – much like their contemporaries in Egypt.

The Peninsula's early wealth wasn't founded on ore alone, however. It was due in large part to a tree, and a particularly ugly one at that. Frankincense, the aromatic resin of the *Boswellia sacra* tree, was the chief export and economic mainstay of the region. Grown in southern Arabia and carried by caravan across the great deserts of the interior along time-worn trading routes, it helped fund the mighty Nabataean civilisation that controlled much of northwestern Arabia from 200 to 100 BC.

Visit Madain Saleh (see p326) in Saudi Arabia today – where the Nabataeans carved spectacular tombs into the desert cliffs, similar to those of their capital Petra (Jordan) – and it's easy to understand that frankincense was no ordinary trade: it touched the soul. Indeed, for over 5000 years frankincense (which to this day is used in religious ritual and all special ceremonies of an Arabian home) made southern Arabia not just one of the richest regions of the ancient world, but also a land presumed to be touched by magic.

## THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF ISLAM (AD 570–1498)

Given that today one out of every four people are Muslim, there can be no greater moment of historical importance on the Arabian Peninsula than the birth of the Prophet Mohammed in the year AD 570.

As one of the world's most influential spiritual leaders, it is easy to focus on Mohammed's teachings and forget his historical context, but in many ways the limited descriptions of his childhood give a good indication of life in the desert at that time. As his father died before he was born, Mohammed became the poor ward of his grandfather. Although his family were settled Arabs, he was given to a Bedouin foster mother, as was the custom at the time, to be raised in the desert. Perhaps it was this experience that gave him a sense of moderation and the preciousness of resources. In the desert, too, there were no intermediaries, no priests and no prescribed places of worship – nothing separating the people from the things that they believed in.

Mohammed went on caravans and became a trusted trader before returning to Mecca, which at that time was a large and prosperous city that profited from being the centre of pilgrimage. Mecca was the home of the Kaaba (see p68), a sanctuary founded by Abraham but occupied by the images and idols of many other tribes and nations.

The worship of the one-true god and the condemnation of idols was at the heart of Mohammed's teaching and inevitably the Meccans took fright, forcing Mohammed to flee to Medina in 622. Mohammed's mighty legacy, however, transcended his personal history and the new religion of Islam quickly spread across the Peninsula and to the world beyond. Ironically, as

Frankincense permeates the great oral histories of the region. The Queen of Sheba is fabled to have laid it at the feet of King Solomon and the three wise men took the precious resin to Jerusalem.

According to Pliny, only 3000 families had the inherited right of harvesting frankincense – but with exclusions: men were forbidden to cut trees after contact with a woman or after attending a funeral.

### c 3000 BC

Dilmun, the first great civilisation in the Peninsula, is founded on the sweet waters of ancient springs off the coast of Bahrain; it extends from Failaka Island (near present-day Kuwait) towards the hills of Oman.

### 3000–2000 BC

In Oman, tombs at Bat and Gaylah are erected along mountain ridges by the Hafil and the Umm an Nar cultures – people belonging to the low-lying territories of the modern UAE (United Arab Emirates).

### 323 BC

Alexander the Great, attracted to Arabia's wealth, is on the point of mounting an expedition to the region when he dies in 323 BC. His admiral, Nearchus, establishes an important trading colony on Failaka Island.