

KNOWLEDGE ROUTES: SCHOLARLY MOBILITY AND INTELLECTUAL CONNECTIVITY IN ARABIA, 1700–1930

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Abstract

The article attempts to understand the dynamics of academic mobility and intellectual exchange during the period of 1700-1930 in Arabia. It challenges the accounts of how pre-oil Arabia is an intellectually isolated place, indicating that the Arabian Peninsula was a component of broader knowledge ecologies, interconnected by educational travel, pilgrimage, the exchange of manuscripts, and by links between teachers and students. The article is developed based on the Arabic biographical work and travel literature, and current studies on the history of Islamic intellectuals, to present the idea of knowledge paths, whereby the current trends of movement promoted the generation of intellectual power and transmission of education. The study tries to avoid the trap of splitting knowledge, teaching, and learning into institutional and/or local settings by anticipating the movement of scholars, texts, and pedagogical practices among the Hijaz, Najd, Yemen, Iraq, Egypt, Syria, and the Indian Ocean world. It demonstrates with some of the most crucial historical cases and mobility-based method of analysis that intellectual authority was not obtained only by means of local education but by means of interaction with wider circles of scholars. The article adds to a body of work on the intellectual history of Islam through an introduction to the spatial and infrastructural thinking of knowledge routes for the study of scholarly mobility. It states that the same routes of motion linked the educational communities of each region and allowed the dissemination of knowledge long before the modern educational systems were invented. Thus, Arabia is not only not an intellectual periphery, but rather a connective zone in the wider Islamic scholarly geographies.

Keywords: Scholarly Mobility; Arabia; Islamic Intellectual History; Knowledge Circulation; Pilgrimage; Manuscript Culture; Intellectual Networks; Hijaz; Najd.

1. INTRODUCTION

Until now, the history of knowledge in Arabia has tended to be eclipsed by narratives focusing on political fragmentation, environmental constraints, and the late development of formal institutions. The previous learning types have therefore been characterised as local, informal, and simple-minded.

New research has thrown doubts on these assumptions. Mobility, circulation, and connectivity are now key factors in understanding the production of knowledge as highlighted by historians of Islamic intellectual life (El-Rouayheb, 2019; Reichmuth, 2009; Voll, 1975). Students went on pilgrimages to study, manuscript copying took place, and networks connected faraway places. Ways of intellectual authority were gained not just by knowing texts, but also by engaging in these broader scholarly geographies.

Within this context, Arabia was unique. Mecca and Medina were present, creating constant interaction between the local population and other visitors to the city, coming from all over the Muslim world. Pilgrimage entailed scholars, students, and religious experts being in constant touch, and this enabled the sharing of learning other than ritual practice. Pilgrims were made to attend classes, get books, ask for authorisations to transmit knowledge, and develop relationships with

scholars encountered. The scholars of the Arabic world went out to places like Cairo, Damascus, and Basra. Along with the migration of people went the migration of texts, of educational traditions, and of the very authority of scholarship.

These processes are explored in this paper by referring to *knowledge routes*, which here are understood as contoured paths of scholars, students, manuscripts, educational practices, and forms of authority from space to space. The study is guided by the following three questions: How did scholarly mobility help in the production and dissemination of knowledge in Arabia between 1700 and 1930? How did pilgrimage, study abroad, and manuscript transmission contribute to entanglements with broader Islamic intellectual geographies? And what does the notion of knowledge routes contribute to the current debates?

The main thesis is that intellectual life in Arabia was maintained by means of long-term networks of mobility between local communities and more extensive Islamic scholarly networks, which need to be investigated not only in terms of institutions and ideas, but also in terms of the mobility pathways that facilitated these movements.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND HISTORIOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Scholarly mobility has become an increasingly important field of study in the field of Islamic intellectual history. Until recently, studies on the history of science have concentrated more on institutions, doctrines, or key individuals; more recently, movement, circulation, and connectivity are now appreciated as vital components of the intellectual life of science.

However, as El-Rouayheb (2019) has shown, far from being a period of decline, intellectual life in the early modern Islamic world was dynamic, with educational exchanges, scholarly correspondence, and transregional connections ensuring continuity of intellectual traditions over enormous territories. The article by Voll (1975) about Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi and intellectual communities in Medina in the eighteenth century shows that the function of Medina was not merely a local center but an intellectual crossroads that bridged the world of Arabia, South Asia, and North Africa. Another example of the interconnections between Yemen, the Hijaz, India, and Cairo in a broader scholarly world, found in the work of Reichmuth (2009), which reinstates the life and networks of Murtada al-Zabidi, is the application of correspondence, the exchange of manuscripts, and traveling as an educational experience.

A dimension of the Indian Ocean has been added. Engseng Ho (2006) illustrates how the Hadrami scholars and religious traditions have continued to move across the sea or land due to the movement between southern Arabia, East Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia. Tagliacozzo and Toorawa (2015) also indicate that pilgrimage is not only a religious obligation, but a social and intellectual process, which makes the possibility of spreading manuscripts and academic exchange.

Yet, Arabia is still represented in the literature as a location, but not as an object of analysis per se. Present-day scholarship stresses the importance of Mecca and Medina; less attention is given to the omnipresent threads that interlace the diverse educational communities of the region and connect them with the larger worlds of thinking.

This article aims to fill this void by examining specifically the issue of scholarly mobility within and through Arabia, exploring the paths that enabled repeated exchange in education and intellectual connection between Arabia and Islamic scholarly geographies more broadly.

3. SOURCES AND METHODOLOGY

This research uses a qualitative historical approach with a theoretical framework of intellectual history, mobility studies, and geography of knowledge, through three main categories of sources.

Biographical literature in Arabic (tarājim, ṭabaqāt works) gives information about scholars' educational courses, teachers, travels, and affiliations. Of particular interest are Ibn Bishr's *'Unwān al-Majd fī Tārīkh Najd* and Ibn Hamid's *al-Suḥub al-Wābila 'alā Ḍarā'ih al-Ḥanābila*. Although not produced as documents of mobility, these works often tell of migrations of education, academic experiences, and intellectual travel.

Pilgrimage and travel writings shed light on the contexts in which scholars interacted. Historical sources, such as those of Ibn Jubayr, Ibn Battuta, and later, from the Hijaz, highlight the variety of peoples who converged on Mecca and Medina, which accounts for the educational exchanges that took place in these holy cities.

Remnants of intellectual exchanges between regions are found in manuscript and transmission studies, such as ownership statements, marginal annotations, reading certificates, and ijāzah records. Although a full manuscript transmission chain is not attempted in the course of this study, research on manuscript culture has determined that manuscripts were commonly moved around with scholars, pilgrims, and students.

The article does not seek to be comprehensive, prosopographically, in its coverage of all scholars who had Arabia as their sphere of interest. Rather, it highlights specific historical instances to show how and when scholars' mobility and intellectual connections have occurred.

The years 1700-1930 were selected for including the late Ottoman period, important changes in Arabian politics, and increased Indian Ocean connectivity, and for maintaining the centrality of pilgrimage, educational travel, manuscript culture, and teacher–student transmission. The analysis is carried out in three phases: identification of intellectual macro-nodes (Mecca, Medina, Najd, Yemen, Cairo, Damascus, and Basra); analysis of the case studies of the different mobility forms; and understanding of these patterns using the concept of knowledge routes.

4. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Knowledge Routes as Intellectual Infrastructure

The main analytical contribution of the article is the notion of knowledge routes.

There are related but different frameworks found in existing scholarship. Circulation is the way ideas and texts flow among communities. Network theory is about relationships between scholars, institutions, and traditions. Mobility studies consider mobility as an integral part of social life. Knowledge routes are extensions of these approaches, with an added, explicit spatial view.

Knowledge routes are the recurring spaces along which forms of knowledge, scholars, students, manuscripts, educational practices, and authorisation travelled between regions, pilgrimage routes, educational journeys, maritime routes, manuscript transmission routes, and chains of scholarly authorisation.

The framework sees mobility as a form of “intellectual infrastructure”. As roads, ports, and communication networks are all considered infrastructure, so are the mechanisms that make the movement of knowledge possible. Pre-oil Arabia had a complex network of pilgrimage routes, educational travel traditions, manuscript circulation systems, teacher–student relationships, etc., all of which served this purpose.

This focus is on the circuits that link institutions rather than institutions themselves; the question is not just about the location of knowledge but about its mobility and the mobility's role in building intellectual authority.

The concept is different in a specific sense from other approaches: circulation is about movement; networks are about relationships; mobility studies are about the processes of movement; knowledge routes are about pathways that are repeated and that make all three possible.

The framework is especially appropriate to Arabia, the importance of which was not just because of its large religious centres, but because it was a region of connecting space between several different scholarly geographies. Scholars from all over the Islamic world were gathered together repeatedly through the medium of pilgrimage, trade, educational travel, and the circulation of manuscripts.

The next sections focus on historical instances of the functioning of these knowledge routes and their role in the creation of intellectual authority in Arabia from 1700 to 1930.

5. HISTORICAL EVIDENCE

Scholarly Mobility and Intellectual Connectivity

Table 1: Conceptual Examples Discussed in Previous Scholarship

Scholar / Network	Dates	Mobility Pattern	Relevance to Article	Supporting Source
Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi	d. 1750	Sindh → Medina	Medina as an eighteenth-century scholarly crossroads	Voll (1975)
Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab	1703–1792	Najd → Medina; Basra reports debated	Mobility as a contested marker of scholarly formation	Voll (1975); Commins (2006); DeLong-Bas (2004)
Murtada al-Zabidi	1732–1791	India/Yemen links → Zabid → Cairo	Transregional scholarly authority through correspondence, teaching, and texts	Reichmuth (2009)
Hadrami scholarly families	18th–20th c.	Hadramawt → Hijaz / India / East Africa / Southeast Asia	Indian Ocean religious and genealogical mobility	Ho (2006)
Pilgrimage-linked scholars and students	18th–20th c.	South Asia / Southeast Asia / East Africa → Mecca and Medina	Hajj is intellectual as well as ritual mobility	Tagliacozzo & Toorawa (2015)
Farangi Mahall scholarly networks	18th–19th c.	North India ↔ Hijaz and broader Islamic scholarly circuits	South Asian scholarly culture is connected to wider Islamic learning	Robinson (2001)
Ahmad Khatib al-Minangkabawi	1860–1915	Minangkabau → Mecca	Southeast Asian scholarly presence in Mecca; teacher of major Indonesian reformist figures	Von der Mehden (1993); biographical literature
Rahmatullah Kairanawi / al-Sawlatiyah	1818–1891 / founded 1870s	India → Mecca	Institutionalization of the Indian Muslim scholarly presence in Mecca	Alavi (2011); studies of al-Sawlatiyah

Snouck Hurgronje's Meccan observations	1884–1885	Jeddah / Mecca observation of pilgrims and learning communities	External documentation of Mecca's cosmopolitan scholarly environment	Snouck Hurgronje (1888–1889 / English trans.)
Ahmad Zayni Dahlan	1816–1886	Mecca as a teaching hub	Meccan scholarly authority and transregional students	Studies of late Ottoman Mecca: biographical literature

Table 1 provides illustrative examples of conceptualisations of scholarly mobility that have been used in previous scholarship. It is not a complete prosopographical database and does not pretend to quantify all scholarly activity relating to Arabia in the period from 1700 to 1930. Instead, it pinpoints documented patterns that favour the article's analytical approach to knowledge routes.

The cases in Table 1 have been selected from the published scholarship and not from a newly compiled prosopographical data set. They are not being used to determine the extent of the full range of Arabian intellectual networks, but analytically to show patterns of scholarly mobility that recur.

Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi and Medina as a Transregional Intellectual Center

Perhaps the best example of the mobility of scholars and the resulting exchange of ideas in Arabia is that of Muhammad Hayya al-Sindi (d. 1750).

Al-Sindi was a scholar of Hadith, originally from Sindh, and settled in Medina, where he became influential. His impact goes beyond his work. His pedagogical circles consisted of students of other areas of the Islamic world (Voll 1975), and his networks extended well beyond the Hijaz.

This was not only of institutional importance to Madina. The city was a centre where scholars, visiting by pilgrimage and educational travel, were able to meet teachers, to have access to manuscripts and intellectual traditions of other parts of the world.

As the case study reveals, during the time frame covered by this research, academic power was frequently built in the form of involvement in transregional networks, not only in local educational settings.

Educational Travel and the Case of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab

The educational career of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab should be approached with caution, as there are aspects of his travels that are yet to be discussed in recent scholarship.

Several sources of history and other works of later historians all agree that he studied in Najd and Medina; some of the historical traditions regard Basra, however (Commins, 2006; DeLong-Bas, 2004). But the actual dates and purpose of the trips are topics for scholarly debate.

So the present article does not make claims about disputed itineraries. Rather, it gives a general overview of the importance of educational travel in the context of Arabian scholarly culture.

Of interest is the fact that both proponents and detractors often approached scholarly legitimacy via mobility, training with reputable teachers, and interaction with broader intellectual communities. The journey itself is a frequent sign of the educational authority.

The mobility was thus not merely instrumental in the learning of knowledge, but also became a kind of cultural symbol of scholarly formation.

Ahmad Zayni Dahlan and the Global Reach of Meccan Scholarship

Mecca remained a significant intellectual center in the Muslim world in the nineteenth century, one of the most cosmopolitan.

The case of Ahmad Zayni Dahlan (1816–1886), the Shafi'i Mufti of Makkah, is a case in point.

Dahlan's students came from South Asia, Southeast Asia, and East Africa, as well as many parts of the Ottoman world. He influenced through his educational relationships and not through political institutions. Many students who studied in Mecca would return to their respective regions with legal traditions, scholarly connections, and educational practices they had acquired while studying in Mecca.

This pattern is a representation of how intellectual authority might be passed along via mobility. The city of Mecca served as all of the following:

- A sacred destination.
- A center of learning.
- A node within wider scholarly networks.

But in addition to his scholarship, the importance of Dahlan lies in the transregional educational community, which could be linked to his teaching activities.

The Indian Ocean Knowledge Corridor

This is because the Arabian Peninsula was linked not only with the overland routes, but also with the maritime networks.

As shown by Ho (2006), Hadrami scholars had long-standing ties that united southern Arabia with East Africa, India, and Southeast Asia. Such links enabled the transmission of religious power, teaching practices, manuscripts, and family ties throughout the Indian Ocean.

In the same vein, research on pilgrimage focuses on the learning value of mobility by sea. Pilgrims from Gujarat, Java, Aceh, Zanzibar, and elsewhere often spent time in the Hijaz studying before going back home (Tagliacozzo & Toorawa, 2015).

These movements show that pilgrimage was sometimes a means for the exchange of ideas. The educational and religious mobility were closely tied.

The Hijaz was not at the edge of the Islamic intellectual world, but rather at the center of a larger network that connected many Islamic intellectual traditions in the Indian Ocean world.

6. PRIMARY-SOURCE PERSPECTIVES

One of the most prevalent objections to mobility studies is their use of the present in manipulating the past and the neglect of the past in their treatment. The present article does not attempt to reconstruct complete travel itineraries from archival materials, but some of the primary sources can provide insights into the environments in which scholarly mobility took place.

Ibn Jubayr's renowned description of Mecca puts a particular emphasis on the amazing range of people that flock to the holy city:

“The gathering of peoples in Mecca is beyond description”

Although composed in an earlier time than that under discussion, the comment is pertinent to a feature that has been significant to the intellectual value of Mecca. The visitors' presence from a variety of areas made the presence conducive to educational exchange.

Likewise, when describing Medina, Ibn Battuta emphasizes the significance of the city in the context of larger networks of movement:

“I reached al-Madinah, the Illuminated City.”

The importance of these statements lies not so much in their direct evidence of eighteenth- or nineteenth-century scholarly networks, but in the patterns of connectivity that they illustrate in terms of the holy cities.

Biographical traditions recorded by Ibn Bishr and Ibn Hamid are more relevant to the present. These are several examples of scholars being repeatedly represented in the works, either through their teachers, through their path in learning, or through their academic relationships. Learning is seldom talked of as a purely local activity. Rather, academics seem to be linked to mobility, transfer, and school affiliation.

This point can be used to support one of the central theses of the article: the fact that intellectual life in Arabia was based on a bigger web of relations and was facilitated by the possibility of recurring and repetitive patterns of scholarly mobility.

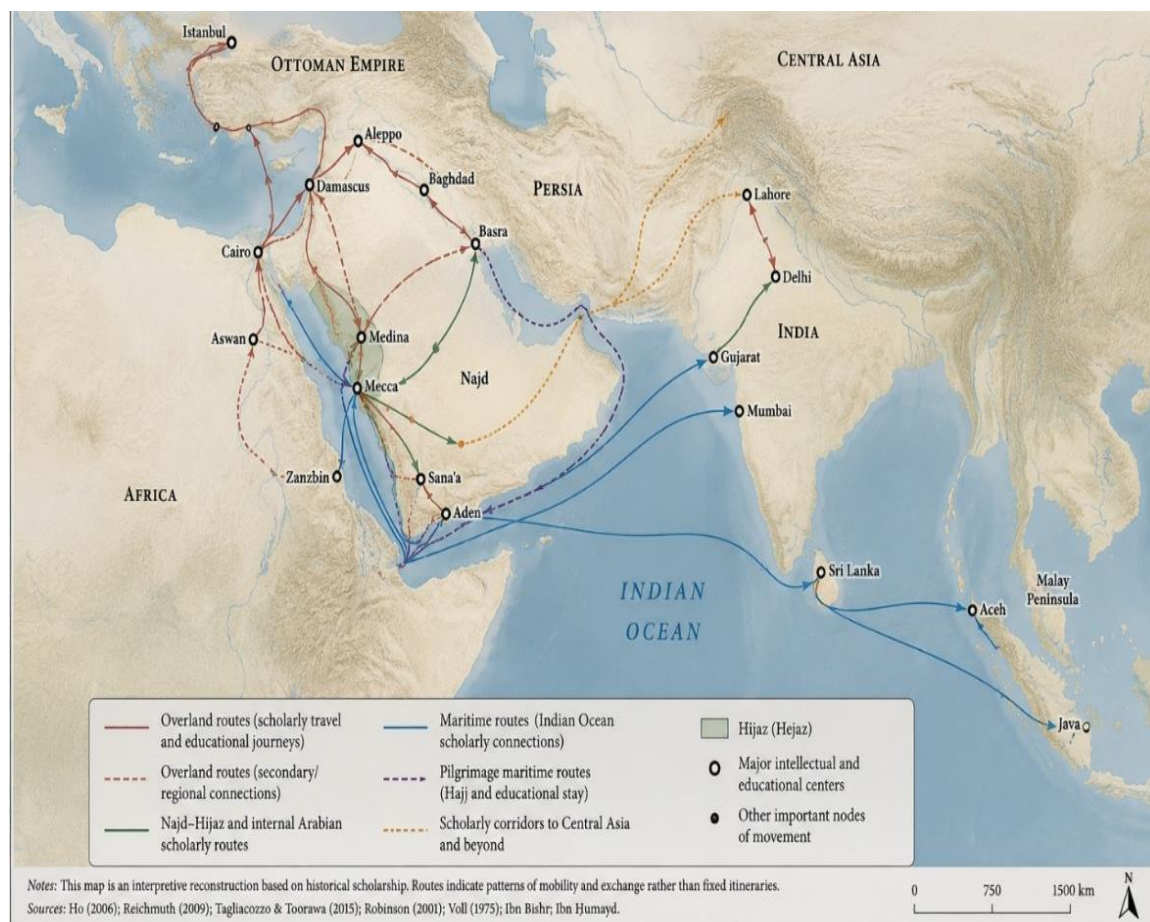


Figure 1: Interpretive reconstruction intended to visualize recurring patterns of scholarly mobility and intellectual exchange discussed in the literature. The figure is illustrative and not a precise historical map

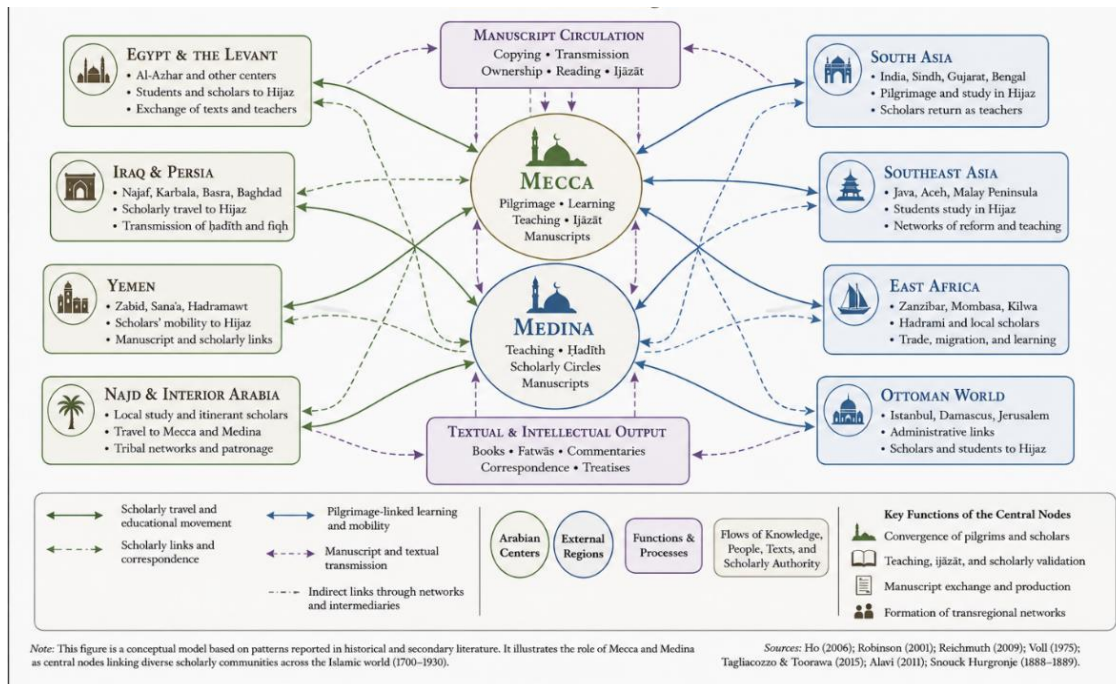


Figure 2: Conceptual diagram included to facilitate understanding of the article's analytical framework. It represents reported patterns of scholarly connectivity rather than a quantitative network analysis

Manuscript Evidence and Future Directions

The latter was frequently accompanied by educational mobility and, consequently, textual mobility as attested by the manuscript catalogues and the transmission studies. The scholarly mobility of the documents of ownership, reading, transmission, and ijazah certificates, which are held in all the collections of the Middle East, indicates that the manuscripts were not only centres of knowledge deposition, but also travelling intellectual objects on a larger scale of exchange.

Although the present paper does not trace a full transmission chain, it might be useful to utilize manuscript catalogues from Mecca, Medina, Cairo, Sana'a, and other centres in the future to map out textual circulation in conjunction with scholars' movement, thereby providing a much stronger empirical foundation for the study of intellectual mobility.

7. DISCUSSION

The evidence examined here indicates that the mobility of scholars was one of the main ways in which intellectual life was organized throughout Arabia from 1700 to 1930. Instead of being isolated centres, educational communities were enmeshed in larger networks of scholar-student, manuscript, and teaching networks, both regionally and across the regions.

The case studies reveal three common themes.

In the first place, there was a high correlation between intellectual authority and movement. The mobility often emerges as the way to acquire, validate, and transfer learning in the educational networks reconstructed by Reichmuth (2009), the scholarly circles of Medina (Voll, 1975), and the Indian Ocean connections explored by Ho (2006).

Second, pilgrimage and education were closely related. Hajj created opportunities for scholars to meet and interact with each other among Muslims from different parts of the world, leading to learning

experiences that went beyond their ritual duties. The holy cities served as both a religious destination and a centre of intellectual meeting point.

Third, the movement of manuscripts and people went hand in hand. The transfer of education was not just reliant on the circulation of scholars, but also on the circulation of texts: manuscripts, commentaries, and instructional materials linked distant communities and facilitated the spread of intellectual traditions through time.

As a whole, the results verify that understanding knowledge production in Arabia is not strictly based on institutional history. Dynamic networks of movement connected local educational worlds with broader Islamic worlds of intellectual life.

Knowledge Routes and Intellectual Infrastructure

These processes can be identified by the concept of *knowledge routes*. While previous scholarship has focused on either the movement itself and/or the relationship that can be created through movement, this study contends that the recurring pathways that enable movement should be addressed as well.

These mechanisms were present in pre-oil Arabia and were:

- Pilgrimage corridors.
- Educational travel traditions.
- Teacher–student relationships.
- Manuscript transmission systems.
- Ijazah networks.
- Maritime routes connecting Arabia with the Indian Ocean world.

These elements combined to create the paths by which power, knowledge, and cultural and intellectual traditions traveled regionally.

The analytical potential of knowledge routes is to reveal that the geography of knowledge and the intellectual authority were not just established in education but also in wider networks of movement and exchange.

Mobility, Power, and Constraint

Mobility allowed an intellectual exchange, but it was not free, nor was it easy for everyone.

Travel needed to have financial means, stamina, and relatively safe routes. The weather, epidemics, political unrest, and tribal warfare all influenced migration patterns in Arabia and elsewhere.

The Ottoman rule impacted the setup of pilgrimage and also impacted access to key educational centers in the Hijaz. In the nineteenth century, the growing power of Europe at sea was reflected in new shipping networks, quarantine laws, and imperial supervision that increasingly influenced mobility throughout the Indian Ocean.

There were also differences in the approach to interaction between scholars as a result of the differences in doctrines. Theological dissent and competition over control did not exist in educational circles, and intellectual exchange frequently occurred in an environment of theological dissent and rivalry.

Nevertheless, with such restrictions in consideration, we can escape too romanticised versions of scholarly mobility.

Knowledge routes were not disinterested places of trading. They were historical structures that were affected by politics, economic abilities, nature, and religion.

This fact corroborates the critique of this article. Rather than free movement, there was a series of negotiations of opportunities and constraints in the development of intellectual connectivity.

Arabia as a Connective Intellectual Zone

A more general question that this research leads to is the role of Arabia in the history of Islamic thought.

The broader implications of the given work are related to the importance of Arabia in the history of Islamic thought.

Most of the earlier histories spoke of Arabia as a province of the intellectual protectorate of larger centres, Cairo, Damascus, or Istanbul. It is evident that such cities had a strong impact, although the evidence discussed in this paper suggests otherwise.

It was where the intellectuals met in a big way, and individuals from every corner of the world would gather at the Hijaz during pilgrimage and through education.

Najd was engaged in broader scholarly circles, via educational travel and intellectual contact beyond the core of Arabia.

Yemen had long connections with the Indian Ocean world and with the wider Middle East in the realms of scholarship, commerce, and religion.

The areas as a whole constituted a landscape of knowledge production and transfer.

Thus, Arabia was not a mere place in the Islamic imagination. It was also very active in the creation of that geography.

8. CONCLUSION

In this article, the term knowledge route has been used to examine the mobility of scholars and the intellectual connectivity between Arabia from the period 1700-1930.

It has cast light on the intellectual life in Arabia, which was nurtured by recurring patterns of movement of scholars, students, manuscripts, and educational communities, based on Arabic biographical literature, travel narratives, manuscript studies, and modern scholarship on Islamic intellectual history.

The results contradict the notion of pre-oil Arabia being educationally marginal or intellectually isolated. Rather, the peninsula becomes a dynamic region of connections in the midst of larger Islamic knowledge ecologies.

The case studies discussed here highlight that scholarly authority could often be created by engaging in networked mobilities. The infrastructure of knowledge transfer via different regions was provided via educational travel, pilgrimage, manuscript circulation, and teacher-student relations.

The main strength of the article is the concept of the knowledge routes developed. The framework provides another approach to the spatial basis of intellectual life, and is concerned with repetitive paths and not only institutions. It highlights the significance of movement as a knowledge production, dissemination, and legitimization process.

Future studies are advised not only to focus on the conceptual reconstruction but also to map it empirically. The use of prosopographical databases, manuscript transmission chains, digital network

analysis, and GIS-based reconstruction of scholarly travel are some of the avenues through which further research can be done. These approaches would allow historians to test, elaborate, and build on the framework presented here.

To sum up, the history of learning in Arabia can hardly be discussed within the framework of texts, institutions, or individuals. It is also vital to comprehend the routes that connect them. Knowledge was in motion, and in the process, it created permanent intellectual worlds that interlinked Arabia to the larger Islamic world.

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