



Arabian Oasis City: The Transformation of 'Unayzah (Modern Middle East (Paperback))

Soraya Altorki, Donald P. Cole

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Vast social change has occurred in the Middle East since the oil boom of the mid-1970s. As the first anthropological study of an urban community in Saudi Arabia since that oil boom, Arabian Oasis City is also the first to document those changes.

Based on extensive interviews and participant observation with both men and women, the authors record and analyze the transformation that has occurred in this ancient oasis city throughout the twentieth century: the creation of the present Saudi Arabian state and of a new national economy based on the export of oil and the economic boom brought about by the dramatic increases in the price of oil following the October 1973 Arab-Israeli War. In addition, the authors reveal the changes brought about by the fall in the price of oil beginning in 1982 and analyze the problems confronting 'Unayzah in its aftermath.

By demonstrating that the area was not exclusively dominated by tribalism and Bedouin nomads, this empirical case study destroys stereotypical views about Saudi Arabia. Indeed, it proves the existence—prior to the coming of the modern Saudi Arabian state—of surplus agricultural and craft production and the full development of local, regional, and long-distance trade networks. It shows that women, although veiled, played active roles in work outside the household. The social impact of change over the years is, however, profound—especially the gradual replacement of the extended family by the nuclear family, changing patterns of husband-wife relationships, the impact of self-earned income on the status of women, and the emergence of a new middle class of employees and entrepreneurs. Because of the high degree of gender segregation in this area of research, Altorki and Cole give us a fortunate collaboration between a Saudi Arabian female scholar and an American male scholar experienced in research in the Middle East.

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