

Arabia before Islam

ONE THING in Arabia is much the same today as it was 1400 years ago: the desert. Look at Sources 1 and 2.



SOURCE 1 A modern photograph of the Arabian desert near Mecca

SOURCE 2 Two poets of sixth-century Arabia describe the hard conditions in the desert

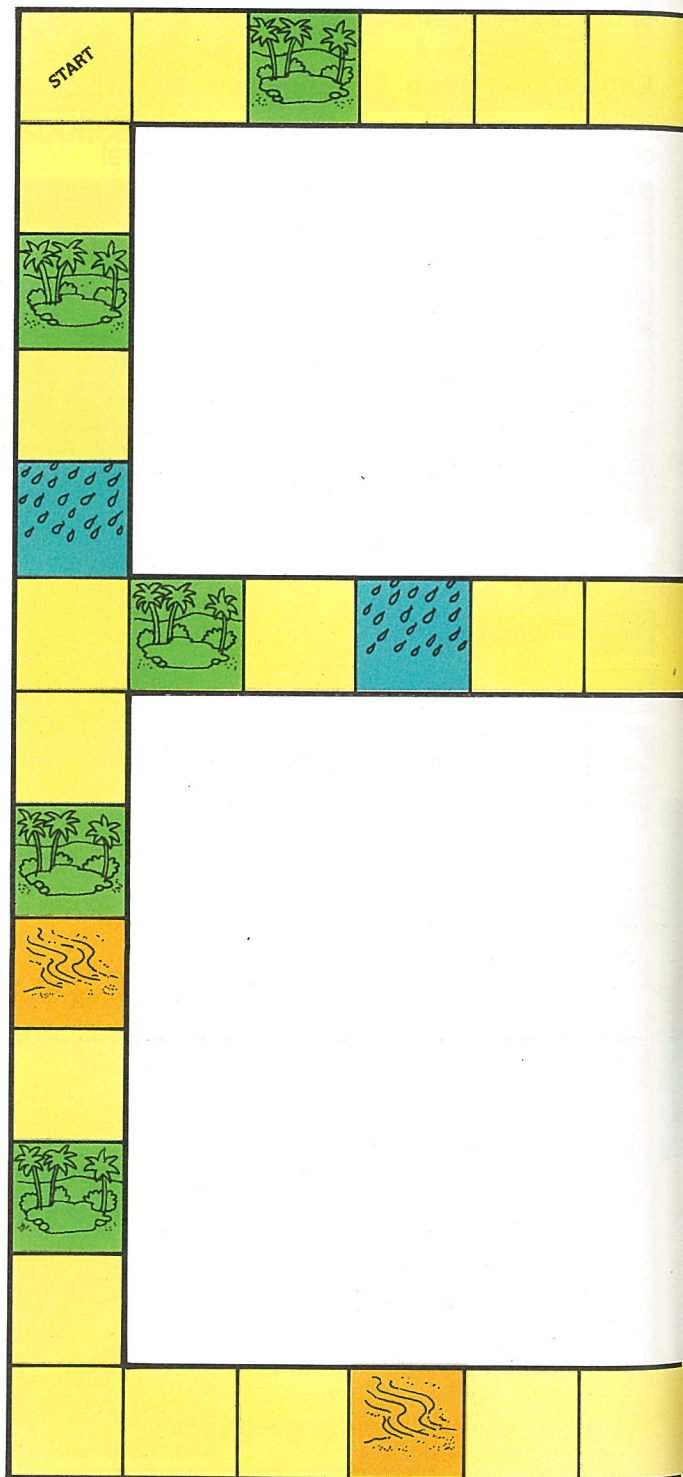
- a) *The thorns prick the camel's hooves.
The summer winds swell and swirl about me
in scorching blasts*
- b) *And many's the morning I've shielded myself
from the wind and cold,
when its reins lay in the fingers of the bitter
north*

In Arabia today there are no permanent rivers or lakes. Desert areas can go without rain for years and then suddenly have torrential rainstorms.

SOURCE 3 From the holy book of Islam, the Quran (Sura 16.9)

- It is God who sends down water from the sky,
which provides you with your drink and brings
forth the pasture on which your cattle feed. With
it He brings up corn, olives, dates and grapes and
fruits of every kind.*

1. In what ways do Sources 1 and 2 agree about the Arabian desert?
2. What can you learn about the desert from Sources 2 and 3 that you can't from Source 1?
3. What would be the difficulties of living in the desert?



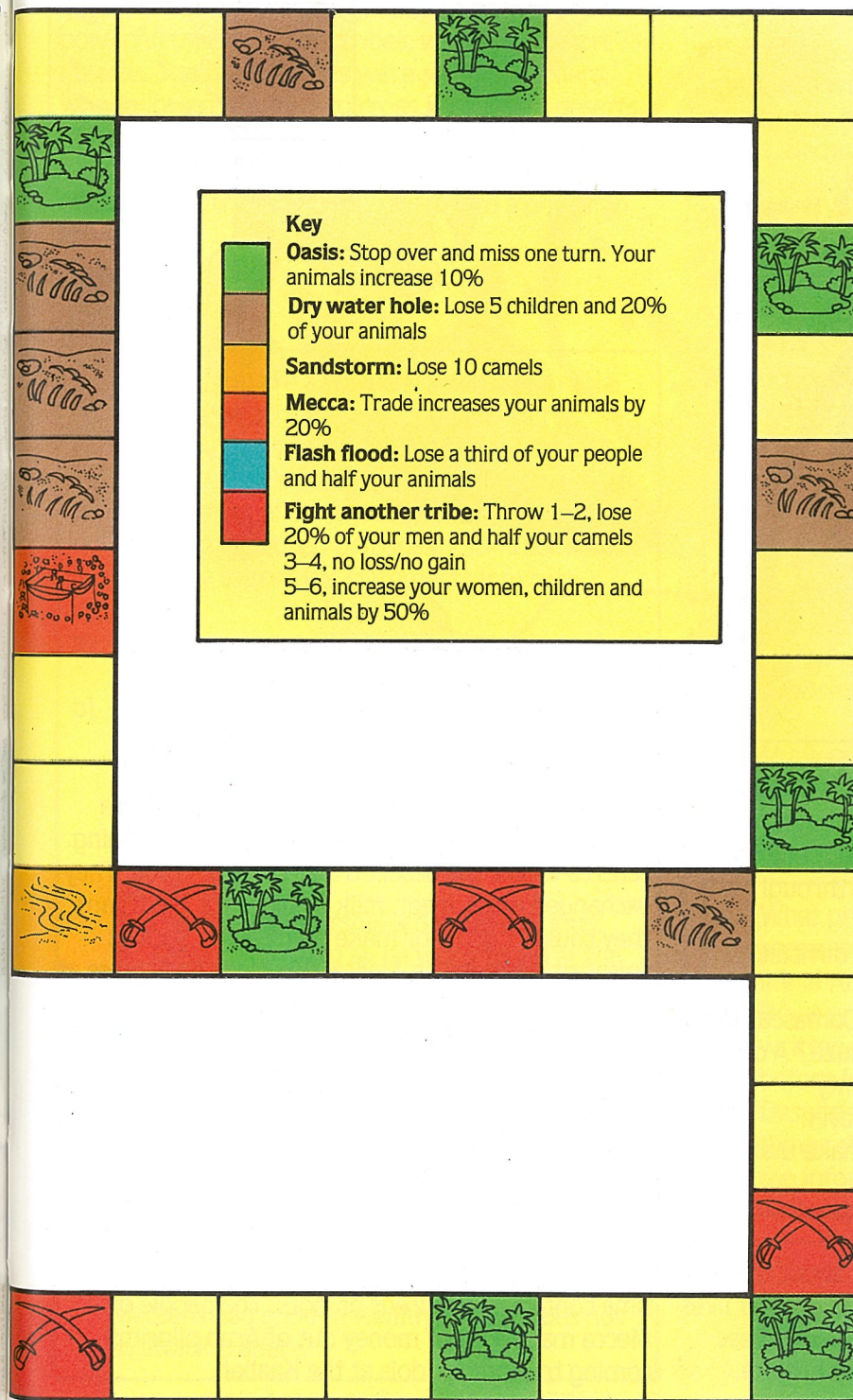
Survival

Could you survive in the desert? Play the Survival Game and find out.

Get into groups of four players. You'll need dice and a record sheet, which your teacher will give you.

Key

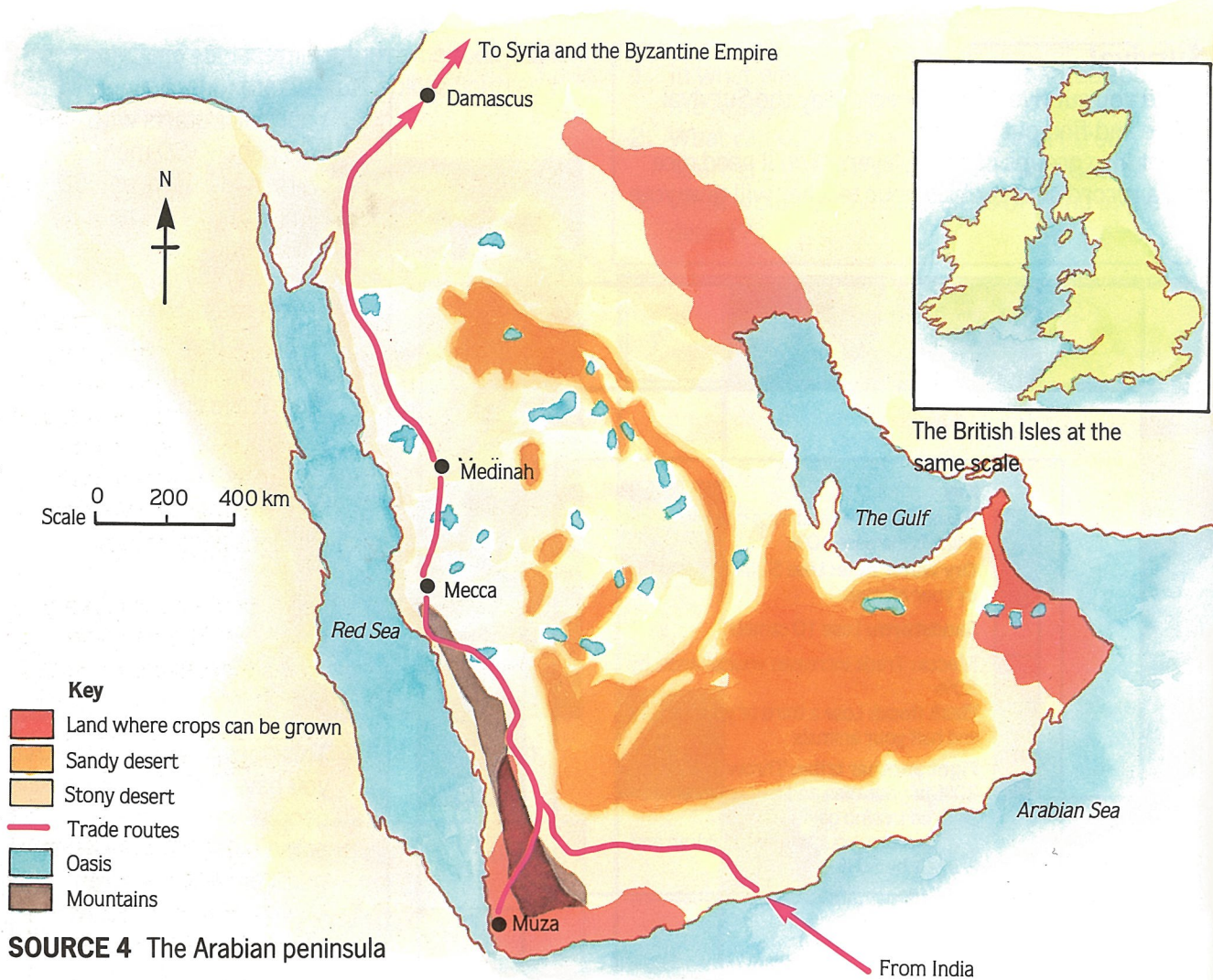
- Oasis:** Stop over and miss one turn. Your animals increase 10%
- Dry water hole:** Lose 5 children and 20% of your animals
- Sandstorm:** Lose 10 camels
- Mecca:** Trade increases your animals by 20%
- Flash flood:** Lose a third of your people and half your animals
- Fight another tribe:** Throw 1-2, lose 20% of your men and half your camels
3-4, no loss/no gain
5-6, increase your women, children and animals by 50%



Rules

1. Your TRIBE starts with 100 people (30 men, 30 women, 40 children), 50 camels and 100 stock (sheep and goats).
2. Men can only fight if they have a camel to ride. If you have fewer camels than men the extra men must leave the tribe.
3. You must have at least 1 stock animal for every 2 adults and every 4 children. If your number of stock animals drops below this, then you lose the number of adults shown on the dice every time you make a throw (1 child = half an adult). This goes on either until you have lost enough people, or until you get some more stock, and the numbers balance again.
4. Move around the board by throwing the dice. Do what the board tells you.
5. See if you can survive twenty throws

1. Who survived best? Why was it difficult to survive?
2. Would you expect Arabia to have a small or large population for its size? Give reasons.
3. Where would you expect to find the most people: in an oasis, in a trading city, or in the desert?
4. What would decide how rich someone living in a country like this would be?
5. Why do you think Arabs felt they were living at the mercy of nature?



SOURCE 4 The Arabian peninsula

Use the key to the map in Source 4 to answer these questions:

1. Is Arabia a good place for growing food?
2. Where does the main trade route through Arabia go to?
3. Would travel in Arabia be easy or difficult? Explain your answer.
4. How many kilometres is it from Damascus in Syria to the Arabian seaport of Muza? A camel train travels at an average of twenty kilometres a day depending on travel conditions: how quickly could it make that journey?

In the Survival Game you found out about the lives of the desert people. Three aspects of their lives are particularly important in explaining why these people were soon going to build a great Empire.

The cities

By the early 600s, the main cities of Arabia were Medinah and Mecca. These were important trading centres where the desert tribes came to trade. They exchanged wool, meat, milk or hides for the things they couldn't grow or make themselves, such as spices or weapons. In Mecca, this trade took place at a religious SHRINE called the Kaabah.

Religion

Arabia was already influenced by a number of religions. Trade had brought many Jews and Christians to Arabia. Some ARABS had converted to these religions. But most followed other gods. They could all be worshipped at the Kaabah, which at that time contained hundreds of IDOLS. The people of Mecca made a lot of money out of Arab pilgrims coming to worship idols at the Kaabah.

The tribes

Everyone belonged to a clan – a kind of extended family. A number of clans together made up a tribe. Loyalty to your tribe was fierce and disputes between tribes were often settled by fighting.

Some tribes, such as the Quraysh, which you will come across later, were city-dwellers and MERCHANTS. They were beginning to be more powerful than the other tribes, who were desert NOMADS. The desert tribes were skilful travellers, who followed the stars to cross featureless deserts, moving from oasis to oasis.

Could someone make use of the skills and loyalty of the desert tribes and turn them into a powerful army?

1. Imagine you are a traveller in ancient Arabia. Write three sentences of good advice for someone thinking of making the same journey.
2. Here is a list of statements which sum up the situation described on pages 156–159. As a class, try to sort the statements into two groups:
 - a) things which would make Arabia backward and less united
 - b) things which suggest that changes might take place in Arabia: people becoming richer or the country becoming more united.

- The nomads' main loyalty was to their tribe. These tribes were constantly fighting one another.
- The nomads worshipped different gods.
- These gods could all be worshipped at the Kaabah.
- There was no system of law and order to settle disputes between the tribes, or to punish tribes that attacked traders.
- Only a small population could live in the harsh desert area.
- The nomads' lifestyle meant they weren't interested in building up great wealth.
- The Meccans were gradually becoming rich from the profits of trade and PILGRIMAGE.
- Meccans had enough wealth to pay tribes not to attack traders.

How do we know?

What are the problems of finding out what Arabia was like 1400 years ago, just before the Islamic religion began?

- Because the desert tribes were nomadic, they didn't build permanent homes, or have many belongings.
- Most Arabs could not read or write 1400 years ago. There was no need to. However, each tribe recorded its history and achievements in long poems. Because poetry is easy to memorise these poems could be passed on word for word from generation to generation. Collections of the best poems were later gathered together and written down. Source 2 on the previous page shows poems of this period.
- The harshness of the environment meant very few outsiders ever visited Arabia. The few who did have left very incomplete impressions of what Arabia was like (see Source 5).

SOURCE 5 Written by a Greek sailor in the first century

The country inland is peopled by rascally men who live in villages and nomadic camps, by whom those sailing off course are plundered and those surviving shipwrecks are taken for slaves. Muza (a seaport) is crowded with Arab shipowners and seafaring men, and busy with the affairs of commerce.

1. What problems are there for ARCHAEOLOGISTS trying to find out about life in Arabia before Islam?
2. What problems face historians using written evidence to find out about Arabia before Islam?
3. Despite the problems, we can learn some things about Arabia before Islam. Use the information on pages 156–159 to write a paragraph about it.