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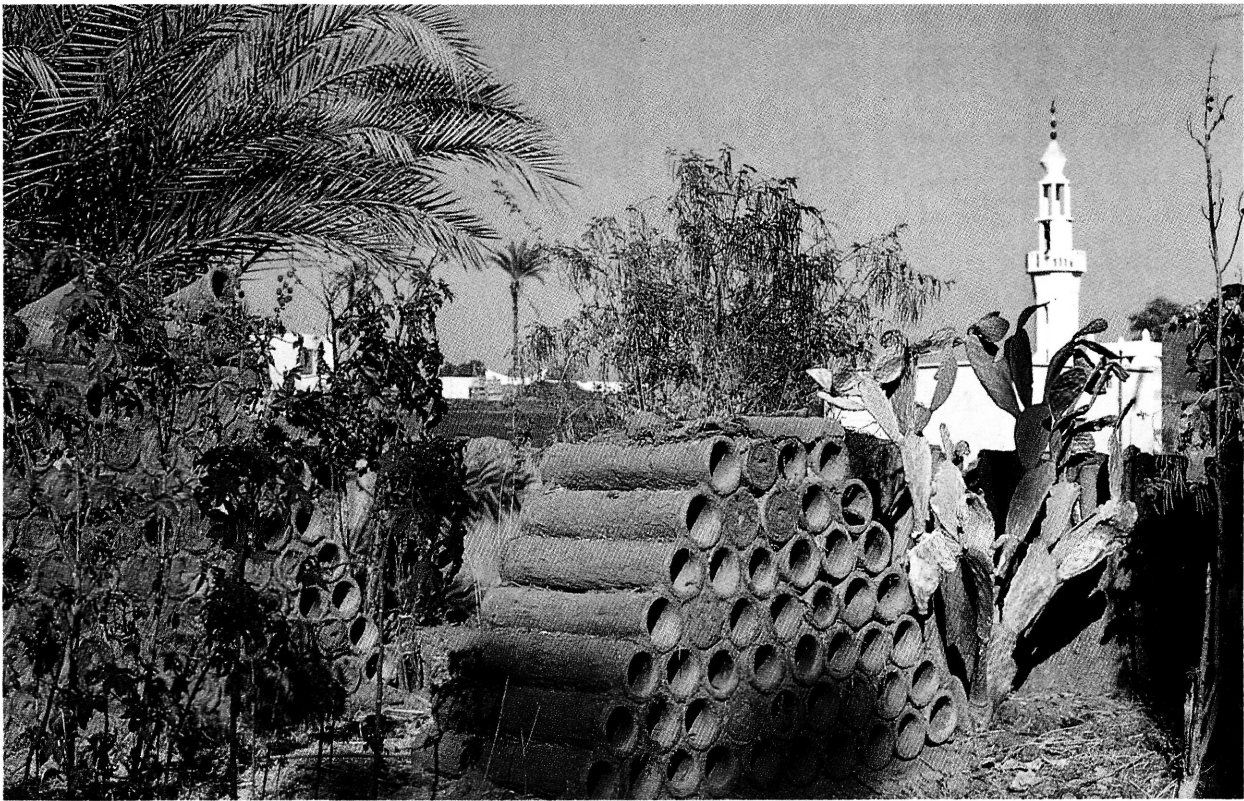
BEEKEEPING

Beekeeping *In The Islamic World*

The bee and the many virtues of its gift to mankind - honey - have served as a moral lesson to mankind down the ages. Although beekeeping was already well advanced in the lands that submitted to Islam, the Holy Quran has, however, given it a new dimension.



Written and photographed by
Dr. Eva Crane



Stack of new mud hives found in El-Minya in Upper-Egypt

The 16th Sura of the Quran is entitled 'The Bee', and versus **68** and **69** refer specifically to bees and honey:

68: And (consider how) thy Sustainer has inspired the bee. "Prepare for thyself dwellings in mountains and in trees, and in what (men) may build (for thee by way of hives);

69: And then eat of all manner of fruit, and follow humbly the paths ordained for thee by thy Sustainer". (And lo!) there issues from within these (bees) a fluid of many hues, wherein there is health for man. In all this, behold,

there is a message indeed for people who think!

Later, Ibn Magih quoted the Prophet Mohammed (peace be upon him) as saying: 'Honey is a remedy for every illness, and the Quran is a remedy for all illnesses of the mind, therefore I recommend to you both remedies, the Quran and honey.'

In Sura 16:68, 'dwellings in mountains' refers to the nests made by wild bees in rocks - common in hot, dry areas - and 'dwellings in trees' wild-bee nests in trees. These were universal sources of honey from earliest times.

The words (and in what men may build) seem to refer to beehives in Makkah or Madinah during the lifetime of the Prophet (571-632 CE), but they can be interpreted in different ways. They might mean hives built for bees, or refer to swarms of bees establishing themselves in human dwellings. They might also refer to 'wall hives' - recesses built into a house wall where people hived bees directly, or placed hives such as waterpots laid on their sides. Wall hives are still common in the Hindu Kush Himalaya mountain chain, from Afghanistan through the upper Indus basin, Kashmir,



A beekeeping site in Asir, Saudi Arabia

The basic techniques of Ancient Egyptian beekeeping were adopted throughout the entire region



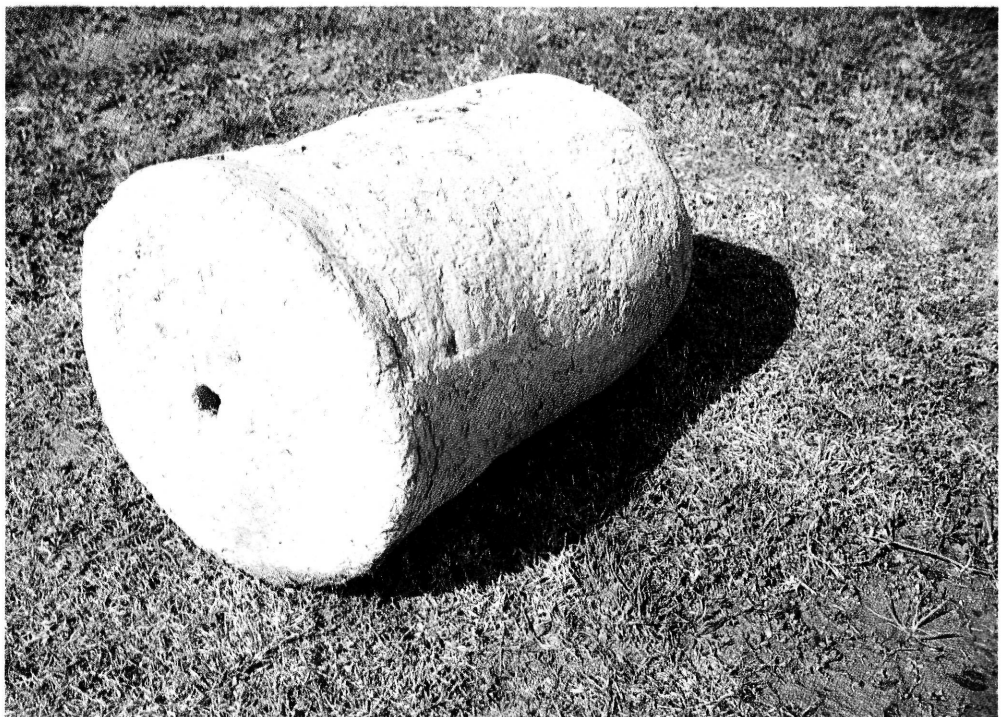
Beekeeper opening a hive from the front end of the hive which contains the bees' flight hole

Himachal Pradesh, and into Nepal east of Kathmandu. Hives are also embedded in house walls in other hot areas, and Ingram's book *Arabia and the Isles* (1942) refers to such hives in parts of the Arabian peninsula.

By the time Egypt became part of the Islamic world in the 7th century CE, beehives had been in use in the land of the Nile for over 3000 years. The basic techniques of Ancient Egyptian beekeeping were adopted throughout the entire Mediterranean region, eastward through Persia to the upper Indus basin, and throughout most of tropical Africa. The basic hive was a horizontal cylin-

der. The bees flew in and out through a hole in the front end, and the back end was detached for harvesting the honeycombs.

There are four different types of historical evidence about hive beekeeping in the lands which later became part of the Islamic world. Paintings and incised reliefs from Ancient Egypt show the harvesting of the honey from hives and the subsequent handling of the honey. A relief from the Old Kingdom sun temple of Pharaoh Ne-user-re near Djoser's pyramid, dated to about 2500 BC, is now on display in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin. A beautiful coloured wall painting from the Middle Kingdom (about



Simple mud hive still used near Srinagar in Kashmir



Excavated pottery hive from ancient Greece, fitted with a shallow ring as an extension for honey combs

1990-1570 BC) decorates the tomb of Rekhmire at Luxor, where there is a later picture on the tomb of Pa-be-sa. Each picture shows horizontal hives of baked mud, or maybe of fired clay, one of which is being opened at the back with the beekeeper taking out honeycombs; the bees have been driven away to the front of the hive by an assistant holding a smoker. Persian hives of glazed pottery, made several thousand years later, are in principle similar to these Egyptian ones.

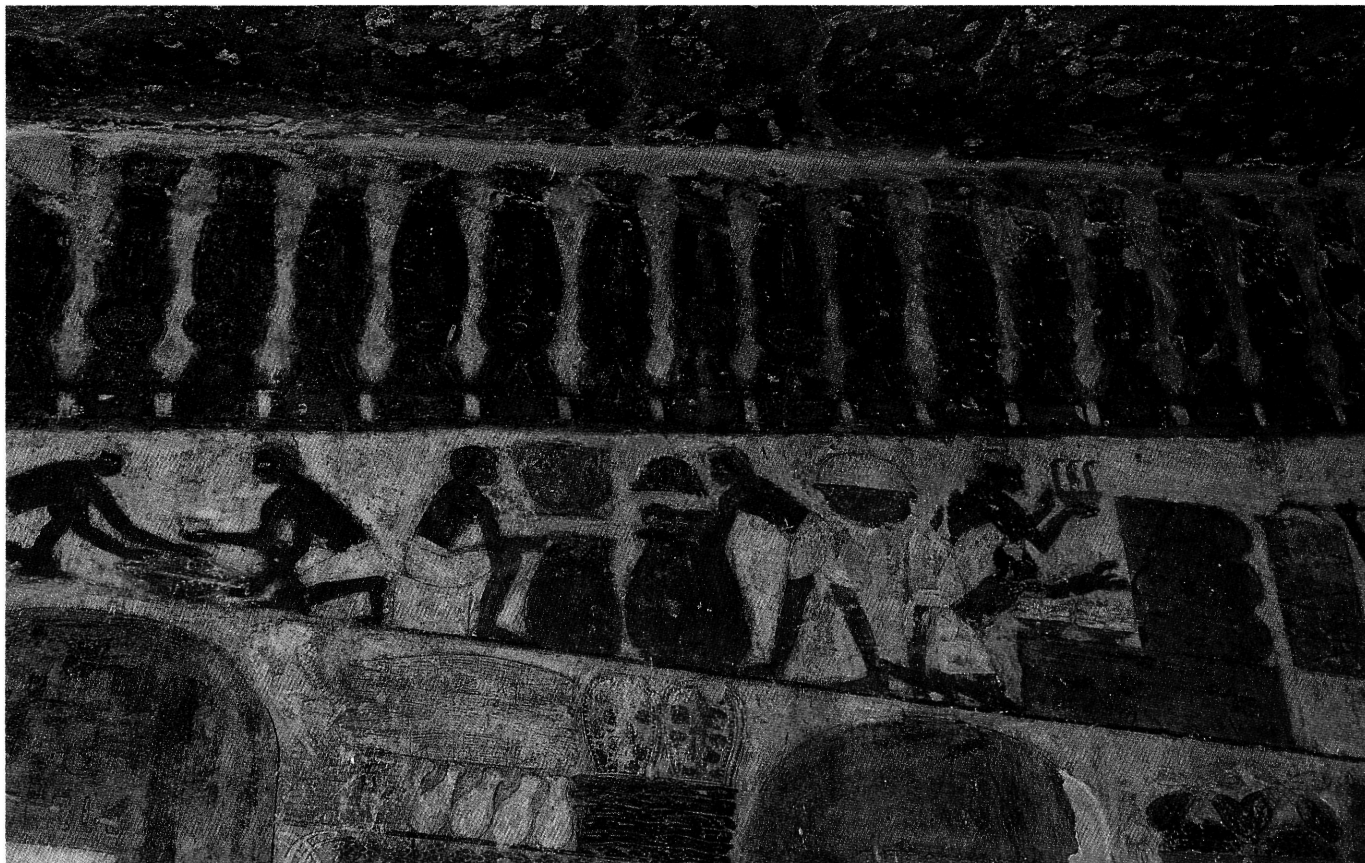
We have no way of knowing the size of these Egyptian hives, but in the 1970s a second piece of evidence came to light. Fired clay hives used in Ancient Greece were excavated, and identified as such from traces of beeswax inside. Thirty or more of these hives have so far been found, dated to periods between 400 BC and 600 CE.

Writers from Ancient Rome provide a third type of evidence. They not only described hives, but how they were used. They had learned a lot from Mago, a Phoenician of Carthage (modern-day Tunis). The size they recommended for a hive was 90 cm long and 30 cm across - the usual dimensions of many traditional hives still used in the Mediterranean region, and much the same as Persian hives.

A fourth category of evidence is available because there have been so few changes in traditional hives and beekeeping over the centuries - even millennia. Beekeeping lore was usually handed down from father to son. Provided the bees and their food-plants did not change, beekeeping methods and the type of hives used did not. There are still many remote parts of the world where one can see traditional beekeeping with the same methods, and the same hives, as were used thousands of years ago.

In March 1993 I was sent on an assignment from British Executive Service Overseas to help beekeepers in the North-West Frontier Province of Pakistan. I visited the Swat Valley, where winters are cold and beehives are kept inside the house, within the wall or beside it; a hole is made through the wall to let the bees fly in and out. The women of this region are of course in purdah but, being a woman, I was invited into houses where someone would willingly remove the back cover of the hive (only sealed in with mud) so that I could look inside.

This beekeeping method is a primitive variant of the Persian, which uses sticks inserted into the hive to support the honeycombs. Other sticks are inserted, presumably to discourage the beekeeper from removing the last few combs, so ensuring that he would leave enough honey and brood for the colony to survive and build up its population again.



A wall painting dating back to 1450 BC showing three hives on a platform

*Reinforced by
Quranic reference,
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In moister regions than Egypt where there was plenty of vegetation, hives could be woven from plant fibres such as vine stems, which are still used for the purpose in central Anatolia. Such hives are lighter, more flexible, and less breakable than those of baked mud or clay, but they need protection against rain, hence the plastering of mud or clay on the outside.

This type of hive has a woven front, and the custom grew of adding an ornamental plaque as an extra. Such plaques have a range of designs: birds, mammals, a symbol of some aspect of imperial Persia, geometrical patterns, or a Persian inscription framed in a geometrical pattern. The inscription carries either the owner's name and/or the date, an invocation of Allah, or a quotation from the Quran or other Islamic text.

It is uncertain how early these decorative plaques came into use. They may have emerged in the 18th century CE, to display the owner's wealth. This happened in Slovenia, where rectangular wooden hives were used. The front board of the hive was painted with a folk or allegorical design. The hives were stacked under a shelter against the rain, and their painted fronts formed a distinctive pattern for all to see.

One plaque of great interest to beekeepers shows a man standing at the back of a hive that is not cylindrical but conical. Traditional conical hives are still used in the mountains along the northern part of the Iran/Iraq border. They are often placed inside an enclosed bee house, with the pointed end - which contains the flight hole - pushed through the wall. A traditional hive from the Persepolis region of Persia is sim-

ilar in shape to the woven ones, but made of pottery with the integral front end painted and glazed.

Reinforced by Quranic reference (Sura 16:69), Islam had a positive influence on the use of honey. But it was a different story in hot African regions south of the Sahara, where most honey produced had been traditionally fermented. The consumption of its products had become an important part of social life, but was forbidden to Muslims. Several verses in the book of Imam Bukhari, who died some 200 years after the Prophet Mohammed, spelled out the unlawfulness of intoxicating drinks: *It is possible to drink it as long as it is not fermented. Allah's messenger said: "All drinks that intoxicate are unlawful"*.

So the making of honey beer had to cease in lands that embraced Islam.

Ornamental plaques seem to have been used as hive fronts over quite a wide area of Persia, but nowhere else. Some come from the Mashad area east of the Caspian Sea, and others were made around Tabriz in the west. I have seen maybe 20 of them in Dutch beekeeping museums, but do not know of their exact origin. The oldest, dated to 1703 or 1704, bears the Persian inscription 'Oh Lord, forgive our sins by Your grace'.

(This article is based on a talk given by the author at Sotheby's, the London auctioneers, during a private view of Islamic works of art on 26 April 1993. The objects on display included a collection of 100 ornamental glazed pottery plaques from Persia, used as the front ends of beehives. They were collected in Iran between 1968 and 1979 by Dr A. Middlehoek from the Netherlands.) ○