

## **THE ORAL TRADITION AND ARAB NARRATIVE HISTORY: AN EXERCISE IN CRITICAL THINKING**

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The analysis and evaluation of historical sources is a difficult skill for students to master. There are two reasons for this. First, students usually need some prior background knowledge of the topic that the sources address; and second, students need the ability to think critically to ask appropriate questions of the sources. Knowledge of an historical topic depends upon background reading and information gathering skills. Critical thinking as it relates to the analysis of historical documents depends upon four specific skills: 1) the ability to identify ambiguous or equivocal claims or arguments; 2) the ability to distinguish relevant from irrelevant information; 3) the ability to evaluate the reliability, or accuracy, of an argument; and 4) the ability to synthesize information from a variety of sources to draw an informed conclusion.

This article suggests a way that teachers can use three narrative accounts of one event in Arab history to give students practice in the analysis and evaluation of sources. These accounts are particularly useful for evaluation and analysis because they present conflicting versions and interpretations. The exercise presented here is based on accounts of the capture of Riyadh by Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in 1902. It is the seminal event in the modern history of Saudi Arabia and is to the Saudis what the Battles of Lexington and Concord are to citizens of the United States.

This article is divided into three parts. First, historical background is presented about both Abdul Aziz and the Arab oral tradition of narrative history. Second, the three accounts of the capture of Riyadh are presented. Third, teaching procedures and notes, based upon the results of field testing, are suggested.

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

In 1891 the small Saudi state in central Arabia was destroyed by an army representing the Sultan of the Ottoman Empire. This army was led by Arabs who were members of the Rashid tribe. For generations, the Rashid tribe had competed

with the Al Saud tribe for control of central Arabia. The Saud family, which had ruled the region since the mid-eighteenth century, fled into exile in Kuwait. After ten years, Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud, a prince of the Saud tribe, made plans to capture the former Saud capital, Riyadh. It was to be the first, and most important, step in re-establishing the Saud family in Arabia.

Riyadh was the seat of government for the Ottoman puppet governor, Ibn Ajlan. As a Rashid, he was Abdul Aziz's sworn enemy on both political and personal grounds. In January 1902 Abdul Aziz and a small band of supporters entered the city by night. At day break, he ambushed the governor, took control of the city, and declared the establishment of a Saudi state. Ibn Ajlan's supporters near Riyadh submitted to Abdul Aziz's authority and he soon established control over most of the area which today makes up the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. In 1932 Riyadh was established as the capital of the new kingdom, which Abdul Aziz and later his sons have ruled ever since.

Accounts of Abdul Aziz's capture of Riyadh quickly became an important chapter in oral narratives of Arab history. This is not unusual because for generations much of Arab history was preserved in oral form. For example, the sayings and actions of Mohammed were transmitted orally for almost 300 years before they were written down. Four different versions of his sayings and actions, known as Hadith, have survived. Over the years, disagreements have arisen within the Islamic world as to which versions are valid. Biographers of the Prophet also based their works upon oral accounts. The great Arab poet, Al Busiri (1212-1295 A.D.), gathered information about the life of Mohammed that had been in oral form when he wrote his *Ode of the Mantle*. Oral histories and written narratives were often set in rhyme so they could be remembered and repeated over the years. The oral tradition of narrative history became important for both teaching and entertaining Arabs who gathered in mighty sultans' courts or around small desert campfires.

Abdul Aziz, who was a noted storyteller, loved to talk about how he and his men captured Riyadh. During his long life (1880-1953) he had many opportunities to do so. Because he made no written record of his adventure, historians must reconstruct the tale from the account as recorded by foreigners who had an opportunity to hear him tell the story. The exciting tale exists today in many different versions. All of them are attributed directly to Abdul Aziz; however, there are no full transcripts of Abdul Aziz's many accounts in the foreigners' books. Likewise, no Arab historian conducted a formal oral history interview with Abdul Aziz.

The story of the capture of Riyadh, as well as other tales of early Saudi history, are available in a number of sources. The accounts used in this article come from three books that are available at most libraries: David Holden and Richard Jones, *The House of Saud: the Rise and Rule of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World* (New York: Rinehart and Winston, 1981); Robert Lacey, *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Avon Books, 1981); and David Howarth, *The Desert King: the Life of Ibn Saud* (London: Quartet Books, 1980). Other versions can be found in the following: H. C. Armstrong, *Lord of Arabia: Ibn Saud, An Intimate Study of a King* (Beirut: Khayats, 1966); D. van der Meulen, *Faces in Shem* (London: John Murry, 1961); and Sir Reader Bullard, *The Camels Must Go: an Autobiography* (London: Faber, 1951). For general information on Arabia and biographical details on the life of Abdul Aziz, the many books and memoirs of Harry St. John Philby, a British diplomat who became Abdul Aziz's advisor and friend, are particularly useful.

#### ACCOUNT I: THE CAPTURE OF RIYADH

Toward the end of Ramadan, Abdul Aziz and his men set off toward Riyadh. [When] in sight of Riyadh itself, . . . so most versions of the story tell us, a rearguard of ten men was detached with instructions to secure the baggage train, and, if nothing was heard from Abdul Aziz and the rest of the party by the following noon, to return at once to Kuwait and announce their capture. The remaining thirty went on to take cover in the thick palm groves that then lay near the city walls.

Exactly who was with him in this final assault party is unclear. The legends that now surround their deeds are none too precise on matters of fact. A few of them, it is said with good authority, were actually slaves, for slaves in old Arabia were often raised to positions of trust. Certainly, there were at least two prominent members of the House of Saud besides Abdul Aziz himself--his first cousins Abdullah bin Jiluwi and Abdul Aziz bin Musaid. Beyond these we meet the Arab love of story-telling in which prosaic details of substance usually run a poor second to heroic style. Some accounts have it that fifteen men accompanied Abdul Aziz on the first vital foray into the town. Others say nine, still others say only six, at least one, which quotes Abdul Aziz himself, has twenty-three.

A small and daring group crept through the palm groves in inky darkness--for the end of Ramadan is signaled by the appearance of the thinnest of thin new moons. They approached the city wall--and found themselves in luck. The Rashid Governor, Ibn Ajlan by name, had grown complacent and allowed part of the wall

to fall away. It was a simple matter to lever an old palm trunk into position against it, run up to the top and jump down on the other side.

The town was in darkness, the populace asleep. Abdul Aziz and his men made their way towards the Mismak where, as they had learned in advance, Ibn Ajlan always slept for safety's sake. Across the street from the fortress gate was the private house where he kept his family, and next to that was another house where old servants of the Al Saud were living. A soft knock at the door brought a girl to enquire who was there. 'It is Abdul Aziz, son of Abdul Rahman,' was the whispered answer. 'Let him in!' Astonished and delighted, the family ushered the men inside and showed them the way across the roof to the Governor's house next door. There the sleeping women and servants were quickly overpowered, and Abdul Aziz and his men settled down at a lattice window, with coffee and quiet murmuring of verses from the Koran, to keep watch over the Mismak gate until dawn.

The muezzin in the nearby mosque signalled daybreak with the first call to prayer. As the sun rose, there were sounds from within the fortress to indicate that the Rashid garrison was stirring. With their prayers complete, Abdul Aziz and his men crept downstairs to await their moment to rush the Mismak gate. It came just half an hour after sunrise. The little wicket of the fort was opened from inside and Ibn Ajlan himself emerged, stooping low, with several men behind him.

With a shout of 'Al Saud!' and 'God is Great!' Abdul Aziz charged from the doorway of the house. Firing his rifle on the run he missed his shot at Ibn Ajlan and saw the Governor turn to duck back through the wicket. Behind him his cousin, Abdullah bin Jiluwi, hurled his spear in the same direction but that, too, missed and stuck quivering in the main door to one side of the opening.

In another moment Ibn Ajlan might have been safe, for although Abdul Aziz's momentum had carried him clear across the street, he was momentarily felled by a blow from the rifle butt of one of the Rashid guards. But Ibn Jiluwi's charge was equally fast and he was just in time to grab the disappearing Ibn Ajlan's legs and haul him unceremoniously back into the street. Then, as the Governor turned with his sword upraised to strike at Ibn Jiluwi, a bullet caught him in the chest. Courtesy attributes this deadly shot to Abdul Aziz, who is said to have drawn his pistol as he leaped up from the ground to defend his cousin. But as the doorway must by that time have been a seething mass of struggling bodies, with swords, daggers and rifle butts flailing everywhere, a certain skepticism seems justified about who fired the fatal shots.

The fight was brief. With their Governor dead the guards were demoralized, and within an hour of sun-up on that January morning the young Abdul Aziz bin Saud appeared on the Mismak battlements bearing Ibn Ajlan's severed head and

threw it to the gathering crowd in the street below. At twenty-one he was the master of his father's lost mansions.<sup>1</sup>

## ACCOUNT II: THE CAPTURE OF RIYADH

At sunset, around six in the evening on 15 January 1902, the forty men moved forward. They carried just their weapons--daggers, swords, a few rifles. On the north-east fringe of Riyadh, Abdul Aziz picked out a small scouting party of half a dozen, leaving the remainder of his striking force beneath the trees.

Abdul Aziz moved forward with his handful of scouts into the darkness. Using an old palm trunk as a ladder they were soon inside the dark and sleeping streets, and no watchman saw them.

Abdul Aziz's objective was the Mismak fort, the stronghold of the Rasheed garrison in the middle of town. Abdul Aziz was heading for [a house] directly opposite the fort's main gates, for he had been told it was the residence of the Rasheed governor, Ajlan.

Near by was the home of a farmer known to be loyal to the Al Sa'ud, and it was on his door that Abdul Aziz knocked first, sometime around midnight. A woman answered, but she would not open up.

'I am from the governor,' said Abdul Aziz, and spun a story about buying livestock on the governor's behalf.

The woman was not convinced. It was no hour for a stranger to come knocking on the door of a house where women were present.

So Abdul Aziz blustered with his borrowed authority. If she did not let him in, he said, the governor would get to hear of it and her master would suffer.

The woman went away, and after a while a man opened the door gingerly. Abdul Aziz and his companions were ready. They rushed inside. The man was indeed an old friend of the Al Sa'ud.

Now Abdul Aziz heard how the land lay. The Rasheed governor, Ajlan, had a house just two doors away facing the main gates of the fortress. But only his wife slept there. Ajlan himself usually spent the night inside the fortress walls for safety's sake, only emerging about half an hour after sunrise, when he would cross the square to take breakfast with his wife. He was always attended by several guards,

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<sup>1</sup>David Holden and Richard Johns, *The House of Saud: the Rise and Rule of the Most Powerful Dynasty in the Arab World* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1981), 4-7. Reprinted by permission of Henry Holt and Company, Inc.

and there was a strong garrison of Rasheed soldiers inside the castle, with sentries on the gates. But there were no sentries on Ajlan's house.

Abdul Aziz and his companions crept up on to the flat roof and over into the house immediately next door. They found a man and his wife sleeping there, gagged them with their blankets, tied them up and moved on. Ajlan's house was a story taller than its neighbors, and the intruders had to climb on each other's shoulders to reach the roof. Inside they found two figures in the main bedroom. Abdul Aziz and Abdullah bin Jiluwi stole across the bedroom, weapons at the ready.

This was another of the climaxes to which Abdul Aziz built up with zest in later years, miming his stealthy progress across the room with a cartridge in his rifle, while his cousin crept beside him, shielding a lighted candle with one hand.

But it was a false climax, for though one of the sleepers was indeed Ajlan's wife, the other figure was her sister. Abdul Aziz and bin Jaluwi tied and gagged the two women, and then broke an opening through the mud wall into the house from which they had come. They needed a route by which the back-up force could get inside the governor's house without attracting attention, and one of the scouts was sent back to the palm grove to bring the reinforcements along.

Soon all forty men were gathered together looking out through the wood lattice windows across the square at the fortress. There were several long hours to wait until dawn.

They killed the time in the best desert tradition, sipping coffee, reciting the Koran and dozing. Before sunrise they washed and lined up to say the morning prayers.

When Ajlan, Governor of Riyadh, eventually emerged for his breakfast and morning exercise, the main gate was opened for him, and then closed again behind him. He strode across the square in the sunshine.

Accounts differ as to what precise plans Abdul Aziz had laid in advance against this moment. There is a tale that he had dressed the smallest of his party in the clothes of a serving-woman who usually opened the door to the governor, intending to trick Ajlan inside and then murder him. Another narrator insists that Abdul Aziz stationed men in the upper room to give covering fire while he duelled with Ajlan in front of the house, while a third version suggests no set plan at all, asserting that Abdul Aziz, tense and over-anxious, panicked and rushed out at Ajlan before the moment was ripe.

But one of the Sa'udis who actually took part in the skirmish later described Abdul Aziz as being totally composed in the moments before the confrontation. 'How cool and calm he was! He had discarded his aghal (his double headcord) and tied his Kaffiyah (his cloth headdress) over his head and around his neck, and had

followed it by carefully tying the long sleeves of his dishdasha (his full-length shirt or smock) round the back of his neck.'

Abdul Aziz rushed out into the open toward Ajlan and the fortress with an enormous shout, and he took the governor completely by surprise. Ajlan had only a few guards with him. But he was still close to the fortress gate, and as Abdul Aziz's men streamed out into the square the Rasheed guards turned to take refuge through the postern opening. One by one they dived through the hatchway.

Abdul Aziz grappled with Ajlan. The governor was retreating, so that Abdul Aziz had to bring him down from behind with a flying tackle, and the adversaries slugged it out, face to face. Abdul Aziz parried the blows of Ajlan's sword with his rifle butt. Hafiz Wahba asserts that the governor turned and might have got clean away, had he not been winged by a shot from Abdul Aziz's rifle--in the arm, says Wahba, in the leg, says one of Abdul Aziz's sons.

All agree that Abdullah bin Jaluwi's role was critical, for he killed one of the Rasheed guards who was about to strike down Abdul Aziz. Then bin Jaluwi turned to Ajlan, narrowly missing him with a ferocious javelin thrust, and he buried his weapon so deep in the woodwork beside the postern door that it could not subsequently be removed without breaking off the spearhead and leaving it embedded there.

By this time a tug-of-war was going on through the narrow opening. The Rasheed garrison had Ajlan's head and shoulders inside the fort, while the Sa'udis on the outside were tugging desperately upon his flailing legs. Suddenly Ajlan managed to direct a heavy kick into Abdul Aziz's groin, and the Sa'ud leader went down, badly winded. He released his grip on Ajlan's feet, and the governor dragged himself inside. If Abdullah bin Jaluwi had not flung himself heedlessly through the opening at this moment after Ajlan all might have been lost.

Did bin Jaluwi now catch Ajlan again by the leg just inside the gate and kill him, thus bringing about the surrender of the garrison? Did he cut him down or shoot him running up the steps of the mosque, or inside the mosque doorway after Ajlan had taken refuge there and had been dragged outside again?

Or was it, perhaps, Abdul Aziz himself who managed, somehow, to draw his dagger and kill the Governor as the British minister, Reader Bullard, believed after hearing the tale from the great man's own lips in 1937?

Abdul Aziz himself usually gave the credit to his cousin, but it hardly mattered, for the result was the same. The Rasheed garrison laid down their arms. Riyadh belonged to Abdul Aziz, and at noon that day several thousand citizens

gathered to swear their bay'ah of allegiance to the young hero. The Al Sa'ud were masters in their own home again--and they have remained the masters ever since.<sup>2</sup>

### ACCOUNT III: THE CAPTURE OF RIYADH

While the end of Ramadan was still being celebrated by more peaceful people, [Abdul Aziz and his men] approached the town by night and couched the camels in a distant part of the oasis. Ibn Saud left a few of the men with camels, and led the rest of them on foot through the groves and gardens, silently in the darkness. When they came within sight of the walls he halted, and chose six men to come with him; and he told the others to wait till midday, and then, if they had heard no news of him, to escape and ride to Kuwait, because by them he would either be victorious or dead.

Ibn Rashid had neglected the walls of Riyadh, and Ibn Saud and his companions scrambled over them, using a palm trunk as a scaling-ladder, and entered the sleeping town without alarm. Ibn Saud led his men into the alleys. They were hushed and empty. In the centre of the town the Rashids had built a fortress, and opposite the fortress gate, across the square, they had fortified a house where the governor, whose name was Ajlan, kept his women. Both of these strongholds were locked and barred, but next to the women's house there was another, which belonged to a seller of cattle called Juwaisir. Ibn Saud knocked on his door, and after a while a girl's voice answered: "Who are you?"

"I am sent by the Amir Ajlan," he said through the closed door. "He wants to buy two cows. I have to see your father."

The girl said: "You should be ashamed. Does anyone knock on a woman's door at this time of night. Go away!"

"Be quiet," Ibn Saud said. "In the morning I shall tell the Amir and he will rip your father open."

Juwaisir hastily opened the door; and Ibn Saud seized him and scared him into silence. He told his men to shut the daughters in a cellar. In a moment of confusion Juwaisir escaped and ran away.

By then, the raiders had made a simple plan: to go up to the flat roof of Juwaisir's house and jump to the roof of Ajlan's and force an entrance there. But the gap was too wide. Instead, they humped to another house, where they found a

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<sup>2</sup>Robert Lacy, *The Kingdom: Arabia and the House of Sa'ud* (New York: Avon Books, 1981), 48-52. From "The Great Adventure" in *THE KINGDOM*, copyright 1981 by Robert Lacey. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc.



man in bed with his wife, and tied them both up in their bedclothes, and gagged the wife, and threatened them both with death if they made a sound. Then they waited to see if Juwaisir had given the alarm. But when the town remained silent, Ibn Saud sent two of his men to bring in the rest who were hiding in the palm grove.

Ajlan's house was a story higher than the others. They climbed on each other's shoulders, and forced the roof door open and crept through the house seizing the slaves of the household one by one, until they came to the bedroom which seemed to be Ajlan's. Ibn Saud went in with his rifle; another man followed with a candle. There were two mounds in the bed, and he peered at them--but neither was Ajlan, one was his wife and the other was her sister. He unloaded his gun and prodded them, and they jumped up screaming. "Enough," he said, "I am Abdul Aziz."

Ajlan's wife asked in terror, "What do you want?"

"I want your husband." Ibn Saud asked her when Ajlan would leave the fortress.

"He will not come out until after sunrise," she said.

The raiders locked her up with her sister and the slaves, and broke a hole in the soft mud wall and brought the rest of the party in from the house next door; and then they settled down to rest, and ate some dates and drank the governor's coffee, and slept and prayed.

During that vigil, their only thought was to lure the governor into the house and kill him there, and with that in their minds they asked the women which of them usually opened the door to him in the morning; and they chose one of the men who was small enough and dressed him in the woman's clothes and left him to let Ajlan in when he knocked.

The others went up to a room above, where there was an opening from which the gate of the fortress could be seen across the square. It was a heavy studded wooden door with a very small postern in it, only two feet high, so designed that a man could only go through it head first, exposing his neck to the sword of the keeper inside.

After the call to prayer from the mosques of the town, when the raiders hidden within the house performed their own devotions, and as the morning light refilled the square, the gate was opened. The sight of the open gate was too much for Ibn Saud. He jumped to his feet and ran downstairs, determined to rush it, shouting to some of his musketeers to cover him from the window. But while he was going down, Ajlan himself emerged with a dozen men, and the gate was closed behind him.

The fight was merciless. Ibn Saud flung open the door of the women's house and charged cross the square. Ajlan and his followers turned at the sound, and seeing him the followers ran for the fortress gate and bolted through the postern one by one. When Ibn Saud reached it, Ajlan was left alone. He had drawn his sword; Ibn Saud had nothing but a rifle. Ajlan made at him, sword raised to strike. Ibn Saud covered his face with his arm and fired his rifle point-black, single handed, and heard the sword clatter on the ground and knew he had wounded Ajlan. Ajlan plunged at the postern, Ibn Saud caught his legs, and his own men pulled his arms and Ajlan gave Ibn Saud such a kick in the stomach that he started to faint and let him go. For half a second then the history of Arabia hung on the postern gate. Before the defenders could slam it shut, a cousin of Ibn Saud named Abdullah ibn Jiluwi thrust himself into the hole and wriggled through. In the narrow gateway within, the defenders were too confused to decapitate him as he came, and he laid about them with his sword. Others followed and threw the main gate open, and the rest of the horde of Ibn Saud swarmed in and started a bloodthirsty fight, outnumbered two to one, through the courtyards and towers of the fortress. They slaughtered half the defenders. Some fell or were thrown from the battlements. Ibn Jiluwi cut Ajlan down and killed him. Thirty or forty surrendered and were locked in their own dungeons; and before the morning ended, Ibn Saud sent his men through the town to proclaim that God's will had been done, and the House of Saud was master again in Riyadh.<sup>3</sup>

### SUGGESTED TEACHING PROCEDURES

There are two methods that may be used to teach critical thinking skills through the analysis and evaluation of these historical sources. Both have merit. The first is to distribute a list of questions about the sources to students before they read. Students will be primed to look for specific information and can organize it for analysis and evaluation. When students are faced with a series of sources, the ability to manage data, in turn, will help them identify ambiguous claims and distinguish relevant from irrelevant details. The second method is to have students read the accounts before the teacher distributes a list of questions. The advantage of this option is that students will read for major concepts, rather than for specific details. Moreover, students will develop the ability to determine the reliability, or plausibility, of a particular source without any preconceptions the specific questions might foster. This, in turn, helps students formulate their own questions as they

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<sup>3</sup>David Howarth, *The Desert King: The Life of Ibn Saud* (London: Quartet Books, 1980), 17-21. Reprinted by permission of Quartet Books Limited.

read. Perhaps students who are in the early stages of developing critical thinking skills should start with some questions about the sources already in hand. More advanced students may be better able to "start cold" and develop their own questioning strategy.

To help students get started, teachers should discuss the Arab oral tradition of narrative history and explain that as historical tales and narratives are repeated over the years details are often changed. Some aspects of the original event are forgotten and others are added. One job of modern historians is to select the facts from these narratives that they consider important enough to include in their version of "history." Teachers should also explain that there is no standard translation from Arabic into English. In these accounts Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud is called Abdul Aziz, Ibn Saud, Ibn Sa'ud, and bin Saud; similarly, the family of Ibn Ajlan can be spelled either Rashid, Rasheed, or Al-Rashid. Teachers may also wish to help students define new vocabulary words (for example, Ramadan, Amir, and postern/wicket gate). Finally, they may wish to use a map to orient students to the region.

Distribute copies of the three versions of "The Capture of Riyadh" and, if warranted by the needs of the class, distribute the "Questions for Critical Thinking." The questions, which teachers may wish to adapt to meet their own needs, focus on four critical thinking skills: identifying ambiguous or equivocal claims or arguments; distinguishing relevant and irrelevant information; evaluating the reliability or accuracy of an argument; and synthesizing information to draw an informed conclusion. [Some sample answers, derived from field testing, are included.]

**Questions for Critical Thinking:  
The Capture of Riyadh**

**A. Identifying Ambiguous or Equivocal Claims or Arguments**

1. How many men were in the advance party that entered the city with Abdul Aziz?

**Account I:** 15, 9, 6, 23. **Account II:** 6. **Account III:** 6.

2. Abdul Aziz gained entrance to a house across the street from the fort. How did he convince the people to let him in?

**Account I:** The house belonged to a supporter of the Al Saud tribe. When Abdul Aziz identified himself he was welcomed.

**Account II:** Abdul Aziz said the governor had ordered him to buy livestock. The owner, a supporter of the Al Saud tribe, let them in.

**Account III:** Abdul Aziz said he had come from the governor to buy cows. The owner was not a supporter of the Al Saud tribe and had to be frightened into keeping quiet.

3. Describe how Abdul Aziz and his men went from the first house into the house of the governor's wife.

**Account I:** They crossed from roof to roof, the governor's house being directly next door.

**Account II:** They crossed from roof to roof at one point standing on each other's shoulders.

**Account III:** Because the gap between the houses was too wide, they had to go across the roof tops via third house.

4. What were the circumstances of Governor Ibn Ajlan's death?

**Account I:** Ibn Jiluwi prevented him from re-entering the fort. While Ibn Ajlan and Ibn Jiluwi fought, Abdul Aziz shot the governor.

**Account II:** Abdul Aziz and Ibn Ajlan fought. Abdul Aziz shot the governor.

**Account III:** Abdul Aziz shot Ibn Ajlan, but only wounded him. The governor was killed inside the fort by Ibn Jiluwi.

5. List other details which differ in the three accounts.

Account III says that Ibn Ajlan's wife had once supported the Al Saud. Accounts differ concerning who was tied up.

Account II mentions five possible ways Ibn Ajlan may have been killed. The accounts differ as to exactly how and where he was killed.

Accounts II and III tell of cutting a hole in the wall between two houses. Account I mentions Abdul Aziz throwing Ibn Ajlan's severed head to the crowd.

6. What is the most significant discrepancy in the accounts?

Student answers will vary.

7. How does the fact that the accounts differ in several details affect their value as sources for understanding history.

Student answers will vary.

**B. Distinguishing Relevant from Irrelevant Information.**

Discuss the following:

1. Which of the details in the narrative accounts had a direct bearing on the capture of Riyadh? Which details are less important?
  - a. How did the number of men who were with Abdul Aziz affect the outcome of the battle?
  - b. How did Abdul Aziz's strategy (or lack of strategy) affect the outcome of the battle?
  - c. Why might the details that pertain to Moslem customs be important in the narrative?
  - d. Why might Arabs or Westerners who listened to Abdul Aziz want to learn exactly what happened during the battle?
  - e. Which details in the narrative accounts would an Arab student or a Western student find relevant today?
2. Based upon the relevant information, which account seems to be most accurate?
3. Which account seems to be least accurate?

**C. Evaluating the Reliability, or Accuracy, of an Argument.**

Discuss the following perspectives on the oral tradition of narrative history in the Arab World.

1. In *The Magaddimah*, the fourteenth-century Arab historian, Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406), gave reasons for possible errors in an oral account of history:
  - a. The teller could be partisan and might favor a particular creed or opinion.
  - b. The teller could fail to correctly interpret the causes of an event.
  - c. The teller could fail to place the event in the correct historical context.
  - d. The teller could prejudice the story to flatter a ruler.
  - e. Some oral historians tend to exaggerate to enhance the effect that their story might have on an audience.

2. In *The Kingdom* (1981), the modern Western historian, Robert Lacey gave the following reasons for the different versions of "The Capture of Riyadh:"
  - a. Abdul Aziz was a master storyteller who was more interested in entertaining his audience than in giving exact historical data.
  - b. Abdul Aziz made changes in the story because they made it more exciting, not only for the audience, but for himself as well!

Based on their reading and on the perspectives of an ancient Arab historian and a modern Western historian, ask students:

1. Which account now seems most reliable? Have opinions changed because of Ibn Khaldun's warnings or Lacey's information?
2. Should Abdul Aziz be considered a reliable source of information for either Arab or Western students who are interested in the capture of Riyadh?

#### D. Synthesizing Information to Draw an Informed Conclusion.

After the three narrative accounts of the capture of Riyadh have been read and the details analyzed and evaluated, students should try to recreate the event in their own mind. At this point, they should review the accounts and attempt to determine the participants' emotional state as well as the overall mood that surrounded the event itself. It is in this context that some of the details, which at first may have seemed to be irrelevant, are actually important in gaining a complete understanding of the significance of the event.

The accounts are, above all, heroic tales of bravery and valor. They do, however, contain some comic elements: disguising one of the men in women's clothing; Ibn Ajlan kicking Abdul Aziz in the groin; and Ibn Ajlan wiggling through the postern gate, his men pulling his shoulders while Abdul Aziz pulled at his legs. Moreover, some details, which may have not directly affected the outcome of the battle, provide students with important insights into Arab social history. For example, as they recreate the narrative, students should consider the details that concern the Islamic religion, including Ramadan, morning prayer, and invoking God's name in battle; dress; desert architecture; town planning and descriptions of the surrounding oasis; and the status of Arab women circa 1900. The details of the actual battle, taken in conjunction with these aspects of Arab life, will help students reach the highest levels of critical thinking, not only about the event that established the modern Saudi state, but about the people who were directly involved as well.

*Conclusion*

In learning about the Arab world, narrative accounts are particularly important because they are often the only sources of information we have concerning specific events. Based upon memory and the oral tradition, they give Arab history a personal dimension that can be obtained in no other way. Although the written narratives are secondary sources that come to us through Western authors, they provide the participants' perspectives and contain the freshness of direct conversation. They also preserve the experiences of people who had neither the time nor skill to write memoirs. Students must compare these sources with each other and with other forms of historical evidence. For example, the authors can report that one detail of the capture of Riyadh can be validated by physical evidence. A spear point is, in fact, deeply buried in the gate of the Mismak fort!

*Note on Field Testing*

This lesson was presented to high school sophomores in world history courses. Briefly, the students found the conflicting details in the accounts confusing and frustrating. The authors and the teachers who field tested this material believe that this was a result of the students' inexperience with critical thinking exercises. Questions in Section C, "Evaluating the Reliability, or Accuracy, of an Argument," proved to be the most difficult, but teachers reported that questions in this section generated the most interesting discussion among the students.

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