CHAPTER 3

British Colonial Knowledge and the Hajj in the Age of Empire

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Introduction

Europeans produced and accumulated a vast body of information on the peoples, societies and polities they encountered, and, in many cases, came to rule over during the age of empire. This material was recorded in numerous formats, including maps, account-books, official reports, censuses, gazetteers, published books and pamphlets, and by a wide variety of authors, including consuls, colonial officials, travellers, doctors, and missionaries. Islam was an important subject of enquiry for Europeans engaged in this information gathering. Given the size and number of Muslim polities, and the geographical spread and demographic strength of Muslims from West Africa to Southeast Asia, this was unsurprising. Many of Islam’s religious practices attracted European attention for a number of purposes—scholarly, ethnographic, economic—and often intersected with colonial administration, such as the municipal regulation of what were termed ‘Muslim festivals’, such as ‘Īd al-Fiṭr.

But the scale and scope of the Hajj set it apart from Islam’s other religious practices as a subject and object of enquiry for Europeans. The Hajj is the largest annual gathering of people on the planet for a religious purpose. Every year during the imperial era, hundreds of thousands of men and women, many of whom were colonial subjects, made the momentous decision to leave their homes across Africa and Asia to set out on the often long journey to the Ḥijāz, and the Holy City of Mecca, to perform the Hajj, the fifth pillar of Islam. This chapter focuses on the efforts to obtain, collate, and interpret information on the Hajj by officials working for the British Empire. Beginning in the 1870s,

when Britain's engagement with the Hajj hugely expanded due to the opening of the Suez Canal and the threat of epidemic diseases linked to pilgrims' movements, the chapter ends on the eve of the Second World War, which marks a caesura in the pilgrimage's history, on the cusp of a world in which post-colonial nation states, oil production, and air travel dramatically transformed the Hajj experience.  

This chapter focuses on the British Consulate in Jeddah, the nearest port to Mecca where the majority of colonial pilgrim-subjects arrived and departed from. Jeddah contained the consulates of several European powers in this period, such as France, Russia and the Netherlands, as well as other powers with Muslim subjects, such as Persia. The principal forms of information produced by Britain on the pilgrimage from the late 1860s were the annual reports on the Hajj, which form this chapter's principal source-base. The chapter will chart how British knowledge production changed over time, being affected by wider concerns that ranged from the threat of epidemic disease and political changes in the Hijāz, such as the shifts from Ottoman to Hashemite then Saudi control. These moments of flux often dictated the content of information gathered on the pilgrimage and the way in which this material was interpreted and presented in official reports.

Through a critical analysis of these archival sources, the chapter will argue that the Muslim employees of the Jeddah Consulate played a vital role in the production of British knowledge related to the Hajj. Many Hajj reports were authored by Muslim Vice-Consuls. Although numerous Hajj reports carried the imprimatur of the British Consul, substantial parts of the information contained within these documents had been sourced from the Muslim Vice-Consul and his interlocutors, who included pilgrims and the inhabitants of Jeddah, Mecca and Medina. The chapter will demonstrate how information was received, interpreted and presented by the British consulate in Jeddah in its reports to officials in London and elsewhere in Britain's Muslim empire, especially in India, which accounted for the largest number of Britain's pilgrim-subjects. As Eric Tagliacozzo has stated, British official documents “give a real sense collectively of how the British Empire conceptualised the Hajj through

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