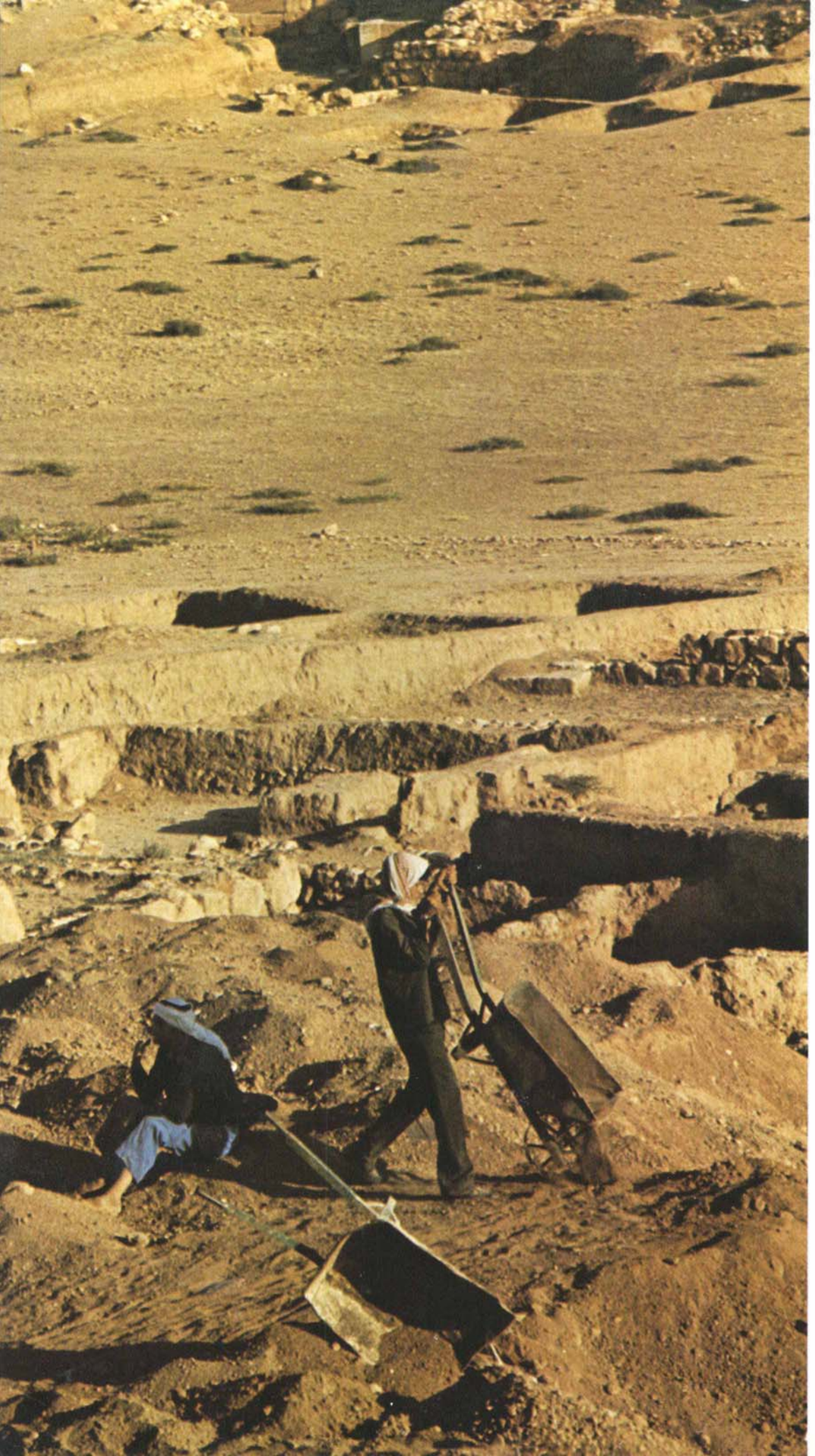

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EBLA: CITY OF THE WHITE STONES

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Cover: A detail from one of the 16,500 or so cuneiform tablets found in the royal palace of Ebla, which, archeologists say, will completely change the known history of the ancient Middle East. Rear cover: Part of the 1977 excavation of Ebla, with the previously uncovered city gate in the background. Photos by Tor Eigeland.

◀ A Saudi Arab color guard stands beside the flag of the Kingdom, which bears the Muslim confession of faith above a sword

"Who is the fairest...?"

Coins from the collection of the British Museum

Two names have come down to us from the ancient world which are familiar in every household: Alexander and Cleopatra. Say "Alexander," and your listener will unhesitatingly add, "the Great;" it is almost inconceivable that you could mean *another* Alexander – though any index of the ancient world lists at least a dozen other men with that name. So too with Cleopatra. Whom else could you mean but the Queen of Egypt, consort of Julius Caesar, Augustus and Mark Antony, Shakespeare's "lass unparalleled" and the "serpent of Old Nile?"

In fact, there were other notable Cleopatras in the ancient world – probably as many as there were Alexanders. And one of them was a queen more lovely and more scheming than the famous Cleopatra, and even more ruthless in her ambition to hold fast to her royal position. She was the wife of three kings and the mother of two more; she ordered the assassination of one of her husbands and one of her sons; and she died of drinking the poison she had prepared for another son! Virtually unknown except to historians and to collectors of Greek coins, she is Cleopatra Thea, a queen of the Seleucid realm in the second century B.C.

She and her famous namesake Cleopatra VII – Mark Antony's Cleopatra – each ruled one of the empires into which Alexander the Great's worldwide domain had been divided by his generals after his death in 323 B.C. And despite the nearly 100 years that separated them in time, and the rivalry and war between their two empires, they had the same blood in their veins: that of Alexander's great general Ptolemy, who became king of Egypt, and whose dynasty ended with the famous Cleopatra's suicide in 30 B.C., when Egypt became a Roman province.

How did an Egyptian princess become queen of a rival empire in Syria? It was the result of a well-established political ploy: the gift of a princess as a bride to settle a feud or cement a friendship.

In this case the princess was Cleopatra Thea and her marriage – to the Seleucid king, Alexander – was to strengthen an alliance between her father, Ptolemy VI, and Alexander. But although celebrated in great splendor at Alexander's court at Ptolemais – modern Akka – the alliance eventually crumbled and Alexander fled from Ptolemais to refuge in Antioch, whereupon Ptolemy VI – not wanting to govern Syria openly – offered Cleopatra Thea to Demetrius, son of a previous Seleucid king whom Ptolemy had helped overthrow and kill. As the apocryphal Book of Maccabees tells the story:

The Other Cleopatra

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY GEORGE TAYLOR

> "Whereupon he sent ambassadors unto Demetrius, saying, come, let us make a league betwixt us, and I will give thee my daughter whom Alexander hath, and thou shalt reign in thy father's kingdom. Wherefore he took his daughter from him, and gave her to Demetrius, and forsook Alexander, so that their hatred was openly known."

This Demetrius was, be it noted, a boy of less than 14 at the time – not a lot older than Cleopatra Thea's own young son – and, six years later, he was taken prisoner while fighting a military campaign on the empire's eastern borders. This was the signal for another usurper to murder Cleopatra Thea's son and claim the Seleucid kingdom. To oppose him, since there was now in Syria no legitimate successor in the Seleucid line, Demetrius' younger brother was brought home from Turkey to become Cleopatra Thea's third husband and king.

This third marriage lasted nine years, during which Cleopatra Thea bore five sons. But then the third husband was killed and the dreadful struggle for power was resumed – this time with Cleopatra herself in the forefront. As her second husband had been released from imprisonment, she ordered him killed, went on to murder her son by Demetrius – who had unwisely claimed the kingdom without deferring to his mother's authority – and began to rule the Seleucid kingdom herself. When the people objected – they never forgot that she was from the house of Ptolemy, and not Seleucus – Cleopatra associated herself in joint rule with her second son by Demetrius, Antiochus, who became the eighth Seleucid king of that name.

It was then that Cleopatra overreached. For when this previously weak young man – nicknamed "Grypos" or Hook-nose – began to assert himself, Cleopatra Thea again decided on murder. When Grypos, after wrestling in the gymnasium, came into the palace hot and tired Cleopatra Thea offered him a cup of wine – which she had thoughtfully poisoned. This time, however, Cleopatra was outwitted and she had to drink the wine herself – thus bringing to an end her 30 years at the epicenter of savage Seleucidan intrigue.

In her taste for power, and the means she used to keep it, Cleopatra Thea far surpassed her more famous namesake. Did she surpass her in beauty, too? It is almost certain that she did. The legendary beauty of the Cleopatra who seduced Mark Antony seems to have been just that – a legend. Scholars suggest this because her likeness – shown on numerous ancient coins, the majority from the mint of Alexandria – bears little resemblance to the incomparable beauty celebrated by poets and writers. Indeed, the face depicted on the coins is stern, heavy and forbidding – yet unquestionably authentic, because the portrait is confirmed by those on the coins issued by Cleopatra's other mints at Berytus, Damascus, Ascalon and Antioch. So uniformly unflattering are the portraits that it has even been argued that Cleopatra suffered from an unsightly neck goiter, a disease then endemic in the area. Yet no die engraver would have risked the Queen's displeasure by producing an unflattering portrait and no queen would have permitted her own coinage to bear a caricature of herself throughout her empire and abroad.

By contrast, Cleopatra Thea, who also struck coins, emerges as a handsome woman. And although those coins are rare, her features, even late in life, were unquestionably more attractive than those of Antony's Cleopatra.

What is it, then, which has given fame to one Cleopatra and obscurity to the other? Clearly the associations with imperial Rome have helped; writers from her own day to the modern period have seized on her exploits with Julius Caesar, Mark Antony and Augustus to give Cleopatra VII a notoriety denied to Cleopatra Thea, whose affairs involved merely the lesser-known kings of a steadily shrinking empire. And though Cleopatra Thea was apparently the more handsome woman, Cleopatra VII must have had some quality that transcended beauty and made her extraordinary, and that won her tributes like Shakespeare's:

> Age cannot wither her, nor custom
> Stale her infinite variety.

For one Cleopatra, then, an endless stream of analysis in books, articles, plays and films. For the other, for Cleopatra Thea, seven lines in Lemprière's *Classical Dictionary.*

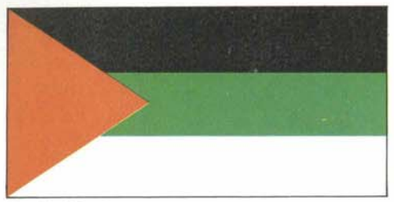
George Taylor was a professor of English at the American University of Beirut and now lectures at Brighton Technical College. He is the author of The Roman Temples of Lebanon, *and a contributor to numismatic journals.*

Symbols of hope, ideals and history....

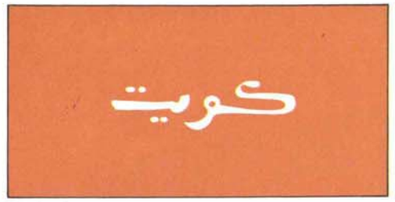
Flags of the Arab World

WRITTEN BY EDMUND MIDURA

One of the most interesting – and certainly the most colorful – collections of historical emblems anywhere is crackling in the wind in front of the United Nations headquarters in New York: the flags of the U.N. member nations. And in them, invisibly, but inspiringly, lies a rich record of the hopes, aspirations, ideals and varied histories of peoples all over the globe – most notably those of peoples of the Arab world. In few areas of the world are national flags so expressive of these forces as among the Arab countries. For in Arab flags there is the story of Islam, of foreign incursions and domination, of struggles for independence, of the Arabs' aspirations to supranational unity and of their enduring love for historic lands.



Flag of Arab Revolt



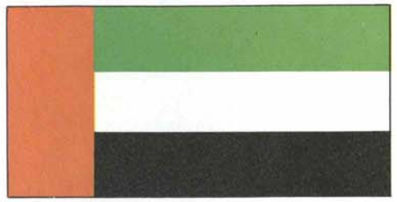
Early Kuwait

Libya, 1950

Flags and their precursors go far back into antiquity. Vexilloids – three-dimensional symbols mounted on poles or other supports – appeared in ancient Assyria and Egypt, which used the falcon as its symbol, Greece – where Athens chose the owl – and Rome, which flaunted its famous eagle, but also used bales of hay.

As the centuries passed, streamers of cloth began to be attached to these poles, probably to serve as decorations or to attract attention. But then, around 100 B.C., the Romans began to replace their three-dimensional symbols with small square pieces of purple or red cloth hung from a horizontal bar fixed to a spear shaft; they called it a *vexillum* – the Latin root for "vexillology," the study of flags. The first real development of cloth flags, however, took place in China, where, carried on bars and poles, they came to symbolize religious and philosophical concepts. From China, the idea of the flag moved to and through India to the Arab lands, where, with the advent of Islam in the early seventh century, it took root and flourished.

Islam gave the development of flags a great impetus. Perhaps because Islamic strictures against human representation encouraged the development of abstract decorative patterns, it was in the Middle East that the concept of associating specific colors with individuals and dynasties developed. Muhammad, for example, adopted two flags, one white, the other black, and the caliphs who succeeded him adopted colors for various reasons associated with him. The Ummayads chose white because, tradition says, Muhammad wore a white turban; the Abbasids chose black because that was the color of the Prophet's own banner; and the Fatimids took green because it was the Prophet's favorite color. Later, other rulers chose red to fly over their Arabian Gulf territories.



United Arab Emirates

These four colors – white, black, green and red – are still the dominant colors of the flags of the Arab world; they have come to be known as the "pan-Arab colors," although additional symbolic meanings have been given them by modern Arab states. Blue, brown and yellow are rare in Arab flags, and orange is nonexistent.

As Islam spread through central and western Asia, through north Africa and into Europe, the Arabs carried their flags with them for the world to see – and to imitate. The Crusaders, for example, were fascinated with the brilliant banners of their opponents and, on returning to Europe, brought back not only the knowledge of the beauty and utility of Middle Eastern flags, but the flags themselves. As one consequence, individuals, cities, states and all manner of other entities began to design and display their own flags – the direct ancestors of today's countless banners.

Among Arab flags four main traditions can be discerned, two of them early and two more recent; some, of course, fall outside these groupings, but even they share common elements.

The two early groupings include flags based on the red flags of the Arabian Gulf and on the star and crescent. The more recent groupings are based on the World War I "Flag of Arab Revolt" – raised by Sharif Husain of Mecca – and the Arab Liberation Flag first raised during Egypt's revolution of 1952.

Until the 19th century the flags of the amirates along the Arabian Gulf were all solid red, a fact that made it difficult to distinguish who was flying them. As sailors from these territories ranged far and wide, planting their identical flags as far away as Zanzibar and the East Indies, this tendency toward identical flags caused obvious problems. Eventually, therefore, most of the amirates modified their flags so that one standard could be told from another. Kuwait added its name in Arabic script to its red flag; Ajman and Dubai put a white vertical bar on the hoist; Abu Dhabi added a white canton; Ras al Khaimah and Sharjah put a white border around their red; and Umm al-Qaiwain made the hoist a white vertical bar and placed a white star and crescent on the red field. Only Fujeira and the Sultanate of Muscat and Oman retained all-red flags.

Bahrain and Qatar made the hoists of their flags white vertical bars and separated them from the red fields with sawtooth edges. The serrations are not symbolic, merely decorative, and have sometimes not been used at all. Qatar's flag is unique, too, in that the official color has been changed from red to maroon.

The recent adoption of new flags in Kuwait and the United Arab Emirates – the 1971 union of the Trucial States – has moved their banners into the grouping of the "Flag of Arab Revolt." Oman, too, has adopted a new flag – retaining the earlier red but incorporating enough national individuality to move it outside this grouping. Thus, only the flags of Bahrain, Qatar and the individual Emirates remain in the grouping based on red.

Mauritania

The star and crescent flags reflected two historical forces: Islam and Ottoman dominion. Even though the star and crescent symbols go further back in history they have become so inextricably a part of Islam that several modern nations whose territory was never under Ottoman rule bear the star and crescent on their flags as symbols of their Islamic heritage. These include Pakistan, Mauritania, Malaysia and some of its constituent states, Brunei, the Maldive Islands and the Comoro Islands.

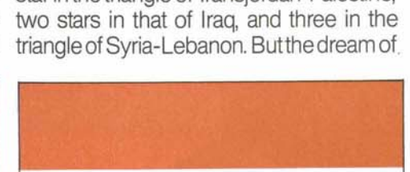
The crescent has historically been associated with the city that is now Istanbul, even back to the time of Philip of Macedon; the star, at various times and places, has been considered symbolic of the Virgin Mary and al-Tariq, the morning star mentioned in the Koran.

The Ottoman flag waved over Egypt until the British protectorate was established from 1914 to 1922; at that point a khedival flag of three star-and-crescents was substituted. The Egyptian kingdom that followed adopted a green flag with three white stars and a crescent – the stars symbolizing the three "Peoples of the Book" who composed Egypt's population, while the green stood for the nationalist movement, the Hajj and the fertility of the Nile. Then, in 1958, that flag was replaced by that of the United Arab Republic – a banner in the tradition of the Arab Liberation Flag.

Libya, too, when it achieved independence in 1950, chose a star and crescent flag. To the black flag of Cyrenaica, with a white star and crescent, the Libyans added an upper red stripe for the Fezzan and a lower green stripe for Tripolitania. But when Sanusui rule ended in 1969, this flag too was abandoned for the Arab Liberation Flag.

The Federation of South Arabia, born out of the British Aden Protectorate in 1967, also used a white star and crescent imposed on black, green and light blue horizontal stripes separated by narrow yellow stripes. But the Federation was soon replaced by the People's Democratic Republic of Southern Yemen and a flag in the Arab Liberation Flag group.

In the Arab world today, the star and crescent appears only on the flags of Tunisia, Algeria, Umm al-Qaiwain, Mauritania and the Arab League.



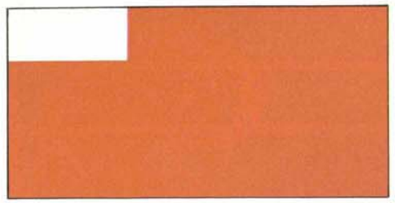
Ajman and Dubai

The traditional red flags of the Arabian Gulf, and the star and crescent flags, reflect the history and religion of the Arab world. The two 20th-century groups of flags represent far more the rapid changes modern times have brought: freedom from foreign domination and the formation of modern republics.

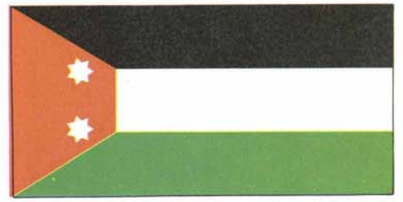
During World War I, Sharif Husain of Mecca led the successful Arab revolt against the Ottomans in the Hijaz under a banner that has come to be known as the "Flag of Arab Revolt." It bore a red triangle at the hoist imposed on horizontal stripes of black over green over white. The colors in the stripes were drawn from the three caliphates; the red symbolized the revolt against the Turks.

Husain hoped that variations of that flag would someday fly over independent Arab states east of the Mediterranean – with one star in the triangle of Transjordan-Palestine, two stars in that of Iraq, and three in the triangle of Syria-Lebanon. But the dream of

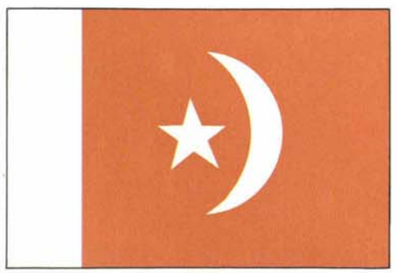
United Arab Republic, 1958



Abu Dhabi

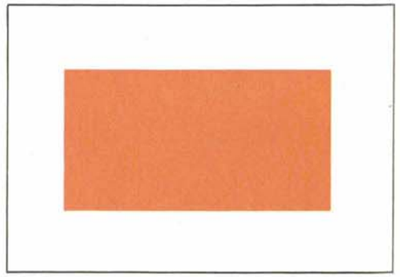


Iraq, 1921

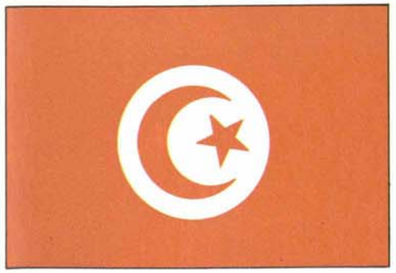


Umm Al Qaiwain

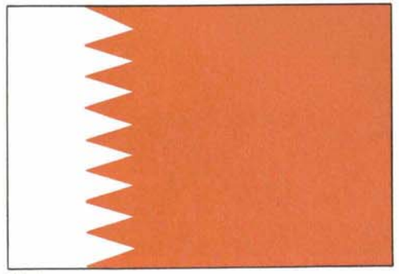
Syria, 1963



Ras Al Khaima and Sharjah



Tunisia



Bahrain

Iraq


Qatar


Federation of South Arabia


Jordan

independence was frustrated by the League of Nations, which established British and French mandates in all these territories after the war.

Husain's son, Faisal, did fly the flag over a briefly independent Syria in 1920, but then the French took over and Faisal became king in Iraq, where, in 1921, he adopted a version of Husain's flag. It had a red trapezoid along the hoist on which were two white, seven-pointed stars; the order of the stripes was changed to black over white over green. The points of the stars symbolized the seven fundamental verses that constitute the first *surah* of the Koran.

This Iraqi flag endured until the country became a republic in 1958, when it was replaced by a flag with vertical bars of green, white and black. On the white bar was a red eight-pointed star on which there was a yellow sun outlined in white, intended to symbolize the cooperation between Arabs and Kurds in Iraq. Another revolution in 1963 discarded this flag and adopted a new banner that fits into the Arab Liberation Flag grouping.

In Transjordan another of Husain's sons, Abdullah, became amir and adopted a similar variation on the "Flag of Arab Revolt" – keeping the red triangle at the hoist, putting a white seven-pointed star on it, and changing the order of the stripes to black over white over green, the same as on the Iraqi flag of the time. That flag still flies today over the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

Except for Jordan's version, the "Flag of Arab Revolt" nearly disappeared, but it has been revived somewhat in recent years by new developments. The Palestinians have adopted the Jordanian version, but without the star in the triangle, as the banner of their homeland. In 1961, at the end of the British protectorate, Kuwait adopted a new flag along the lines of Husain's. It has a black trapezoid along the hoist imposed on horizontal stripes of green over white over red. Black signifies the defeat of enemies, red the blood of sacrifice, white, Arab achievements and green, fertility.

Also in this category now is the recently-adopted flag of the United Arab Emirates, with a vertical red bar at the hoist next to horizontal stripes of green over white over black.

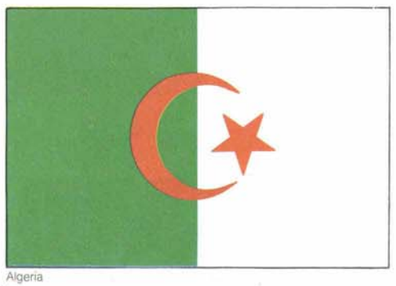

Kuwait

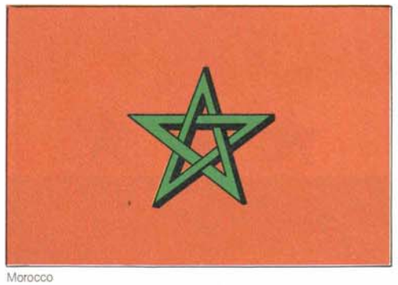
Despite these new additions to the "Arab Revolt" grouping, it is still true that no other category of Arab flags is so widespread as that of the Arab Liberation Flag, versions of which now fly over seven nations.

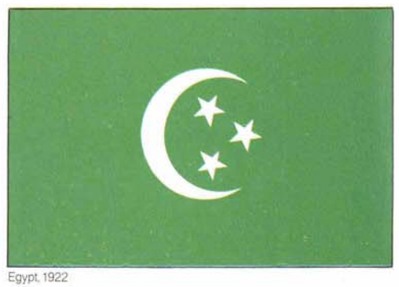
After the republic was established in Egypt, the green star and crescent flag was not discarded. It continued to fly until 1958, but alongside a new banner, the Arab Liberation Flag. This flag was a horizontal tricolor of red over white over black. In the center of the white stripe was imposed in gold the eagle of Saladin, and on the eagle's chest was a shield bearing the Egyptian crescent and three stars. The colors – three of the pan-Arab colors – gained new symbolic meanings that are generally subscribed to by all the nations that now fly versions of this flag. Black stands for the dark days of foreign oppression, and white for the bright future that will replace them through – red – the blood of sacrifice. The use of the eagle of Saladin drew a direct parallel between the present and the days of the Crusades, representing Arab unity in the face of threats from abroad.

Syria, during the French mandate, had adopted a variation of Husain's flag in the form of a horizontal tricolor of green over white over black with three red stars on the white stripe. In 1958 Egypt and Syria joined in the United Arab Republic, and the flag for both countries became the red-white-black tricolor with two green stars on the white stripe substituted for the eagle. The stars symbolized the two nations and restored the fourth, missing, pan-Arab color, green. In 1963, Syria and Iraq both adopted the red-white-black tricolor with three green stars on the white stripe as an expression of Arab solidarity. Egypt retained the two-star flag until 1972, when Egypt, Syria and Libya formed the Federation of Arab Republics and each adopted a slightly different new version of the tricolor, now with the hawk of Quraish – representing the tribe of Muhammad – in gold on the white stripe.

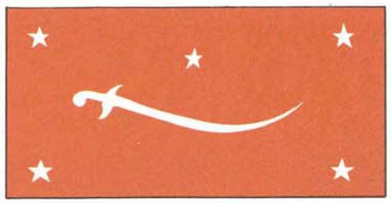
The Yemen Arab Republic adopted its version of the Arab Liberation Flag after the


Algeria


Morocco

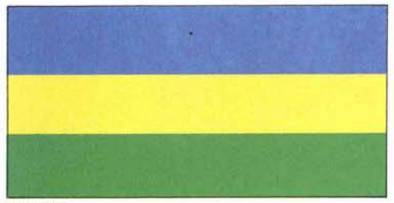

Egypt, 1922


Iraq, 1958


Yemen, 1927


Oman

revolt against the imamate in 1962, putting one green star, symbolizing unity and independence, in the center of the red-white-black banner. Prior to that, Yemen had used a red flag inscribed with white characters, replacing it in 1927 with a red banner on which there were a sword and five stars, all in white. The stars were for the regions of Yemen, the five Pillars of Islam and the five periods of daily prayer.


Sudan, 1956

When the Sudan became independent in 1956 it adopted a flag quite unlike others in the Arab world, a horizontal tricolor of blue over yellow over green. Blue symbolized the Nile, yellow the sands that bordered it, and green the fertility of lands irrigated by the river. But a change in government in 1969 resulted in a competition to design a new flag that would better express the spirit of Arab unity. A Khartoum Art Institute graduate submitted the winning design, imposing a green triangle at the hoist over the red-white-black tricolor. The previous Arab Liberation Flag symbolism was retained, but added to it was the commemoration of the Sudan's own large black population in the black stripe, and the green triangle's symbolism of fertility and Islam. That flag was adopted in 1970.

In 1967 the People's Democratic Republic of Southern Yemen – which displaced the Federation of South Arabia and which is now known as the Democratic People's Republic of Yemen – adopted a flag on which a light blue triangle with a red star on it is imposed on the red-white-black tricolor. The blue represents the people under the leadership of the National Liberation Front, itself symbolized by the red star. This is the only current Arab flag that has any blue in it, but it too is part of the grouping of "liberation flags."

The four remaining Arab national flags are outside all of these four historic groupings. They are those of Saudi Arabia, Morocco, Oman and Lebanon.

Saudi Arabia's national flag is the only one in the world today on which an inscription is the principal charge. It is a green flag which bears the *Shahada* or Muslim confession of faith: "There is no god but God; Muhammad is the Messenger of God." Beneath is a sword, also in white. The founder of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, King 'Abd al-' Aziz was an advocate of a reformist movement in Islam, and this banner was traditional with that movement. Early versions had two crossed swords below the inscription. Such religious inscriptions have been a part of many early Arab flags, appearing, for example, on the flag of the Yemen until 1927 and on those borne by the lieutenants of the Mahdi during his successful war against the British in the Sudan in 1885.

Morocco for centuries flew a plain red flag, but three years after it became a French protectorate in 1912 a green pentagram, representing the Seal of Sulayman, was added to distinguish Morocco's flag from other all-red banners. It remains the flag of the Moroccans today.

Oman's and Lebanon's are the only two Arab nations' flags that bear unique national symbols of their own. Oman had retained the solid rectangle of red until 1970, when the incoming sultan decreed a new flag. A vertical red bar at the hoist extends a narrow red stripe to the fly between thick stripes of white and green. In the canton, in white, is the national badge of two crossed swords behind a *khanjar,* the traditional curved dagger of Oman. The red is drawn from the old Omani flag and symbolizes the battles fought to expel foreign invaders, the white stands for peace and prosperity, and the green for the fertility of the land.

During the French mandate Lebanon flew a French tricolor with a cedar of Lebanon charged on the white center bar. But in 1943, with independence imminent, a new flag was adopted. It retained the cedar – long a symbol of holiness, peace and eternity – on a broad centre stripe between two narrower red stripes. The red stands for sacrifice and the white for peace.

Thus, throughout the Arab world, history has left its mark – in color, pattern and emblem – for all to read on flags flying proudly in the winds of change.

A vexillologist by avocation, Edmund Midura has spent 20 years teaching and practising journalism. He is presently with the Philadelphia Inquirer.


Yemen


Saudi Arabia


Lebanon

EBLA

CITY OF THE WHITE STONES

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED BY TOR EIGELAND

"The greatest archeological discovery of the generation—perhaps of the century."

Until 1975 the golden age of Middle East archeology seemed to be over. Between 1821 and 1928, Jean-François Champollion had unlocked the mystery of the Rosetta Stone; Howard Carter had found and opened King Tut's tomb; Paul-Emile Botta, Austin Layard, and Charles Leonard Woolley had electrified the West by unearthing the magnificent ruins of Sumer, Akkad, Nineveh, Nimrud, Ur and Babylon – and men like Major Rawlinson, George Grotefend and George Smith had cracked the ancient codes of the cuneiform tablets found amid the ancient rubble.

Other archeologists, to be sure, had been subsequently digging away in the almost innumerable tells and ruins of the Middle East. Kathleen Kenyon, for example, had made important finds at Jericho and Jerusalem while Geoffrey Bibby's excavations on Bahrain had linked the Arabian Gulf with the Euphrates. And in Saudi Arabia Dr. Abdullah Masry – now director of the Kingdom's Department of Antiquities – uncovered evidence showing that the 'Ubaid culture of Mesopotamia had ties with the cultures of what is now the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia. But none of those discoveries, important as they are, quite compared with the announcement, in 1975, that a team of Italian archeologists had found Ebla, a name that may mean "city of the white stones."

Unlike the series of exciting, mid-19th century discoveries in Mesopotamia – where the first thrust of the spade seemed to disclose some precious artifact – the discovery of Ebla demanded 12 years of determined digging at Tell Mardikh, an archeological site 40 miles south of Aleppo in Syria. And in the first five years – 1963 to 1968 – the University of Rome archeologists found no indication of the identity of the site.

Tell Mardikh, obviously, had once been an extensive urban center, as both the size of the tell and the number of shards indicated. And, equally obviously, it had an extremely long history; pottery fragments from 3000 B.C. to the Hellenistic period – 325-50 B.C. – were found on and about the site. But until 1968 Giovanni Pettinato and Paolo Matthiae, the archeologists in charge of the dig, did not know what the site was, or even if, as they suspected, it filled a gap in the history of northern Syria.

Then, in 1968, they found a basalt votive statue with a 26-line Akkadian inscription. Because the name "Ebla" was mentioned twice in the inscription, Professor Pettinato postulated that Tell Mardikh was identical to the ancient Ebla – a place mentioned obscurely in Akkadian and Assyrian records. Like many of the great archeological theories, it was a daring assumption – but then, in 1975, his hypothesis was triumphantly vindicated: the team announced the discovery of more than 15,000 clay tablets in the Royal Palace of Ebla – and subsequently raised the total to more than 16,500.

From those tablets the archeologists concluded that Ebla was a flourishing kingdom in the third millennium B.C. that was apparently a commercial and political rival to the powerful states of Mesopotamia. Ebla also seems to have traded with civilizations in Anatolia, Palestina and western Iran, made treaties with its neighbors, and conquered the powerful city-state of Mari in Mesopotamia.

Even more surprisingly – in the light of previous theories on ancient history – the Eblan tablets were written in a North-West Semitic language, that is, a language related to Hebrew and Phoenician and one much older than any previously known Semitic language. The texts date from 2400 B.C.

To transcribe, translate and publish those texts will, of course, take many years. But it is already clear that the early history of the Semitic-speaking peoples of the Middle East will have to be carefully re-evaluated. For the discovery at Ebla, as Tor Eigeland wrote after a recent interview, "was nothing less than an original cultural center of the ancient world, a lost empire complete with documentation."

–The Editors

The outside world has come to ancient Tell Mardikh, something that has not happened for a long, long time. Not for some 3,000 years.

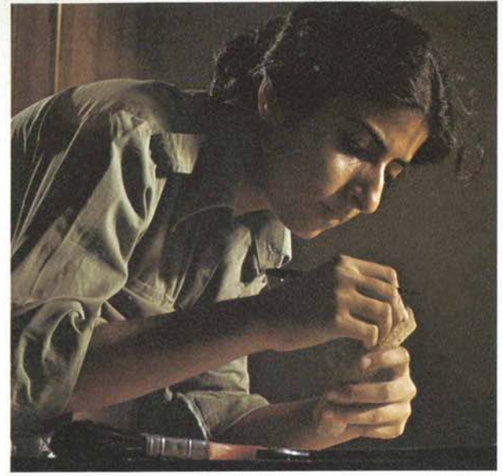
The first invasion took place in 1963 when a team of Italian archeologists came to excavate the huge mound called Tell Mardikh and see if they could shed some light on the relatively unknown history of northern Syria in ancient times.

The second invasion began when the archeologists announced the discovery of some 15,000 cuneiform tablets, in a previously unknown language, that confirmed the existence of a state called Ebla. Archeologists and journalists, sensing the importance of the find, began to pour into Syria clamoring for interviews with one of the men in charge of the dig, and I, last fall, was one of them.

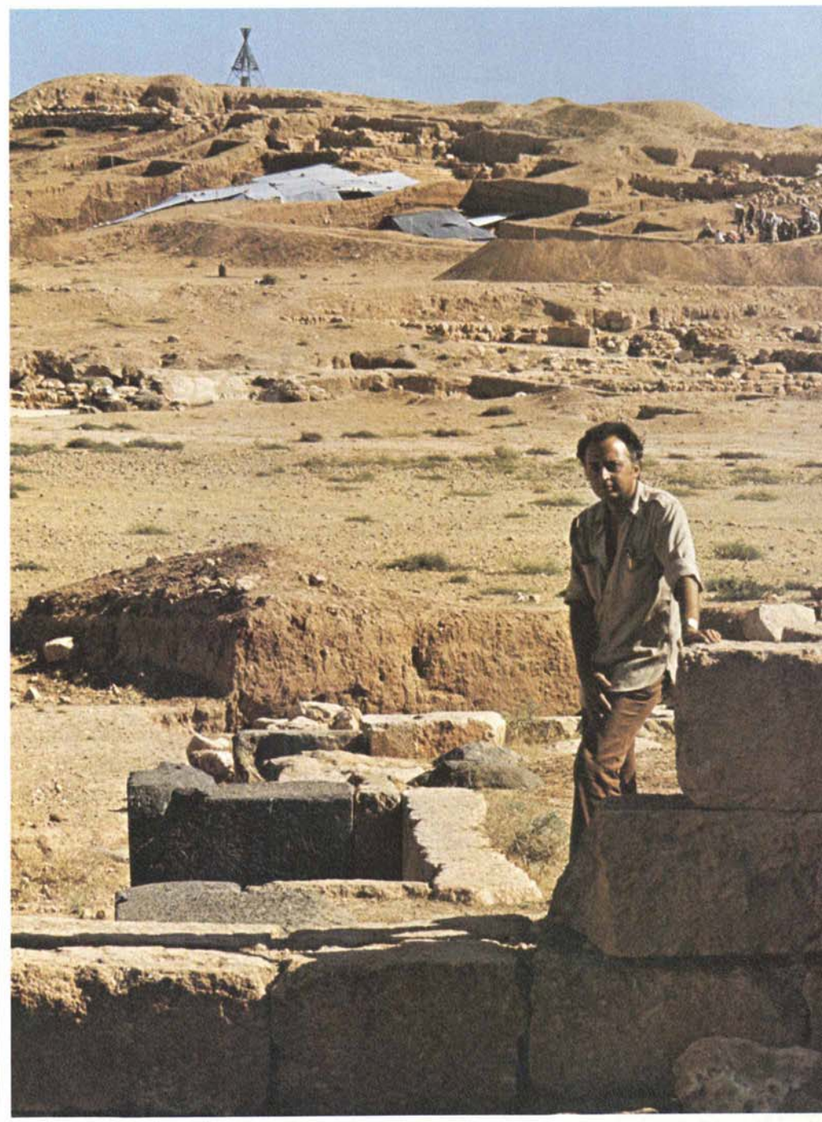
My interview was with Professor Paolo Matthiae of the University of Rome, a handsome, sun-burned, intense young man, who gave generously of his time and knowledge and made it plain at the outset that the discoveries at Ebla were not made by chance. "The sensation of this discovery must not make one forget that it did *not* happen by chance, but after 14 years of scientific hard work. Sometimes one forgets this in the light of a sensational discovery."

Seated at a plain wooden table loaded down with papers and notes, surrounded by walls full of charts, maps and shelves of bits and pieces of broken pottery, Professor Paolo Matthiae also made it clear that his team's work since 1964 was based on a firm belief that there was something important hidden beneath Tell Mardikh. "From the first moment," he said, "we were sure of the great importance of the city – really, right from the beginning – because the site was very large – 140 acres, with a diameter of 3,575 feet.

"From the beginning in 1964 till 1973, we worked on the later great phase of the flourishing of the city between 2000 and 1600 B.C. This is the age of the great Amorite dynasty, the age of Hammurabi of Babylon. From 1973 until now, and surely for the next several years, we will work on the early great phase of the city: the third millennium, between roughly 2400 and 2250 B.C. The topography of the city is very clear,



Archeology student Jeanette Shalabi, left, makes precise, exact-size drawings of objects excavated at Ebla. Below, Professor Matthiae, a leader of the archeological team, poses in front of Tell Mardikh. In the foreground opposite page, a city gate partially excavated in 1977, with a present-day Syrian village in the background.



as you can see, with some great ramparts or fortifications at the exterior line, a very large lower city and a small citadel almost exactly in the center. This is the site for the public buildings, royal palaces and administrative buildings. The lower city had the entrance, with four great gates at four corners of the perimeter."

Professor Matthiae, speaking in careful, precise English, went on to say that his team had had to persevere for years without solid evidence. "We knew nearly nothing, but we became sure of the truly great importance in 1968 when we came to identify definitely the Tell Mardikh with Ebla. Before, it was thought that Ebla was somewhere in southern Turkey or elsewhere in northern Syria. In 1968 we found an inscribed statue, with a dedicatory inscription in Akkadian by Ibbit-Lim, son of the king of Ebla. Previously we knew only something very general about Ebla from royal inscriptions of the third millennium B.C. from Mesopotamia. Two kings of Mesopotamia said that they had conquered Ebla about 2300 or 2250 B.C."

Even so, he said, it was not until 1974 that they were certain that they had made a spectacular find. "From 1974 on, it was possible to be sure that we had a really sensational discovery, because before our excavation it was unimaginable to have archives from the third millennium in Syria. Only Mesopotamia was a great center of civilization and all scholars thought that in Syria, writing was not known until the beginning of the second millennium. Nobody thought there was an important city with a great urban life here. But by 1974 it became clear that we had not only archives, but also a great palace and not only written documents but a whole great civilization within this royal palace. We had found tablets with cuneiform inscriptions before, but in 1975 we found a room – the room of the archives – *full* of tablets."

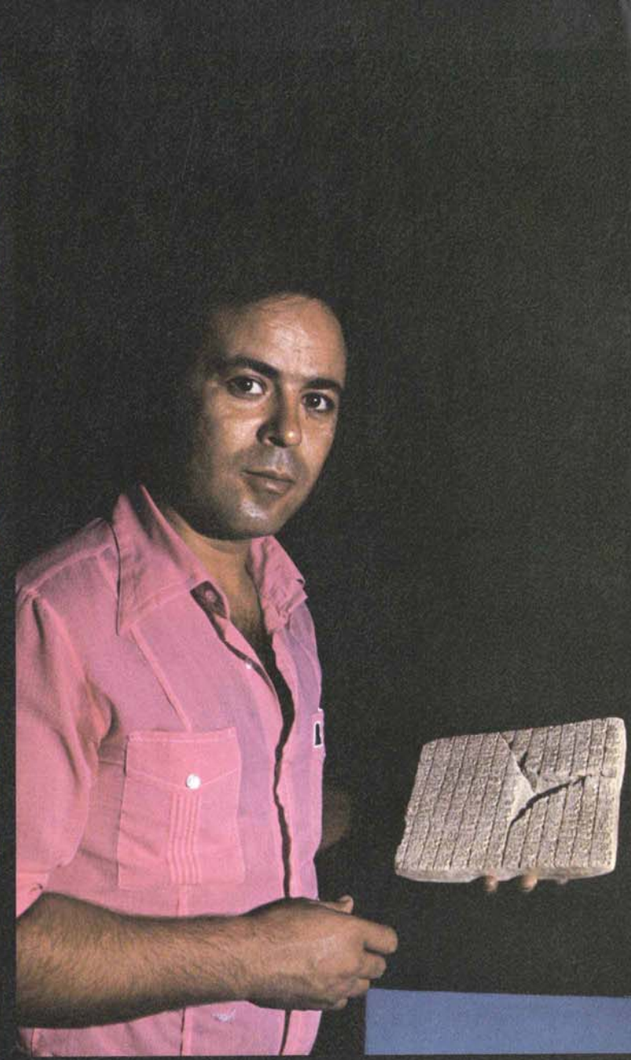
That, he added, was not an exaggeration. The room they had found contained Ebla's state archives: nearly 15,000 tablets, a total that was subsequently raised to more than 16,500. "Not all intact, of course, but a great many were. All the tablets were kept on wooden shelves very similar to our bookshelves. Ebla was destroyed by a great fire, probably set by Naram Sin of Akkadia, and during this fire the shelves were destroyed and collapsed, leaving the clay tablets along the walls in the room."

And the tablets themselves contained surprises, Professor Matthiae went on: a hitherto unknown language. "The script of these tablets was the classical cuneiform writing of Mesopotamia. Surely this kind of script was borrowed from Mesopotamia, perhaps from the beginning of the third millennium. But the *language* was a local language. According to Professor Pettinato, our epigrapher, this is an ancient north-west Semitic dialect defined as Paleo-Canaanite, to indicate that it is completely different from Amorite which, until then, was believed to be the oldest of west Semitic languages. The name also implies that it has similarities to Phoenician and Hebrew. So we have a language unknown until now. Of course, with many analogies to known Semitic languages, and also with analogies to the Akkadian language, the great Semitic language of Mesopotamia."

Professor Matthiae stressed the importance of that fact. "This establishes Eblaite as a language, neither Phoenician nor Hebrew, which has now been documented as more than 1,000 years older than either – which makes it contemporary with the old Akkadian at the time of Sargon."

Translation of just a fraction of the wealth of material available has already thrown light on a number of things, he said. "We have found documents belonging to the administration for finance and trade indicating that textiles were an important state-controlled export industry. Many documents registered the taxes and tributes given to the city. Others, but only a few tablets so far, concerned political affairs such as international treaties, the most important of which was the one between Ebla and Assyria.

"One of the most interesting historical texts was a letter sent by an Eblaite general to the King of Ebla regarding the success of a military campaign against a great city of the third millennium, the city of Mari. Mari was an independent state between Syria and northern Mesopotamia and now we know it was conquered twice



At left, a detail of the rear-side carving of another limestone basin. Archeologists believe that the kilted, bearded dignitaries, facing each other and clasping hands, may be solemnizing a pact. The basin is tentatively dated to 1800 B.C. Above, Antoine Suleiman, curator of the Aleppo Archeological Museum, holds one of the tablets from Ebla's archives. The museum is the repository for artifacts found at Ebla.

Archeologists and laborers work in the main excavation area of Tell Mardikh, above. Roofs at left shelter the dig's "offices," where finds are first cleaned, sketched and sorted. Nazem Jabri of the Aleppo Archeological Museum, opposite page, displays a carved limestone double water basin found in a temple building and probably used in religious rites.

by Ebla – about 2500 B.C. and again around 2250 B.C.

"Also very important are some tablets that we name 'lexicotexts' with lists of words in Sumerian, the language of Mesopotamia, and bilingual vocabularies in Sumerian and Eblaite – at times listing Sumerian pronunciations. It seems we have nearly 1,000 entries of words in Sumerian and Eblaite languages. They are really the most ancient vocabularies in the world. The Akkadians made some vocabularies, but several hundred years later, nearly at the time of Hammurabi of Babylon, close to 1800 B.C. when the Sumerian language was almost forgotten and no longer spoken. The Sumerian language by the age of Hammurabi had become only a ritual language for ceremonies of the temple – like Latin now."

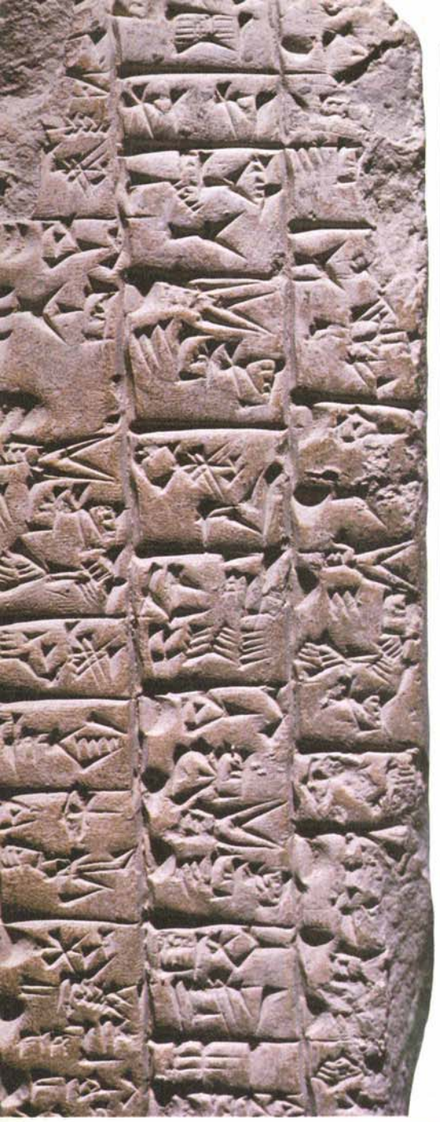
Because of the victories mentioned in the text, he continued, it is clear that Ebla was an important power during those centuries. "Ebla was the center of a great political power and it surely dominated, directly, northern Syria, parts of Mesopotamia and part of lower Anatolia. We know too that the network of trade was very large, from eastern Mesopotamia to the Mediterranean coast and from Anatolia to Palestine."

As he talked, Professor Matthiae unearthed an article he had written detailing some of the other finds. They included, the article read, "friezes . . . with a series of standing figures, mythical and legendary. First there were group scenes of lions in an erect position, tearing goats apart. There were also remains of nude heroes piercing rampant lions with swords and of bull-men frontally engaged in battles with lions and bulls. In the second group there were soldiers girt with tight, short skirts and wearing heavy helmets on their heads, all stabbing one another with short swords. There were also other figures of wonderful delicacy and sober plasticity – notably the bust of a girl. This is a typically Syrian inspiration."

From that and other evidence, it is logical to assume that the position of women in Ebla was different from that in Mesopotamia, he said. "From such hints," Professor Matthiae said, "it is possible to consider that the woman's position was higher than in Mesopotamia and surely all the social life in Ebla was more open than in Mesopotamia. The palace, for instance,

is a completely open building, not like the closed fortresses of Mesopotamia. And, unlike Mesopotamia, names of women of the royal household are mentioned."

On the other hand, he went on, there were probably many such differences in the various civilizations of Mesopotamia. "In modern times we are accustomed to consider the ancient Near East all a unitary world, from the beginning until the age of the Persian kings. This is a very mistaken consideration, of course, because in nearly 3,000 years, tremendously important developments took place. Also, the Sumerian man of the third millennium was surely very different from an Assyrian of the same millennium, not unlike the difference between a modern-day Roman and,



say, a German. There were many important differences, but from our distant perspective we tend to consider all these worlds in a unitary way, which is a big mistake.

"Another thing," – Professor Matthiae shows a slight irritation here – "is that the international press has sometimes followed the lines of non-existing relations between Ebla and the Bible, thus forgetting the real importance of the discovery... But, as some important newspapers underlined clearly, the real importance is *historical*."

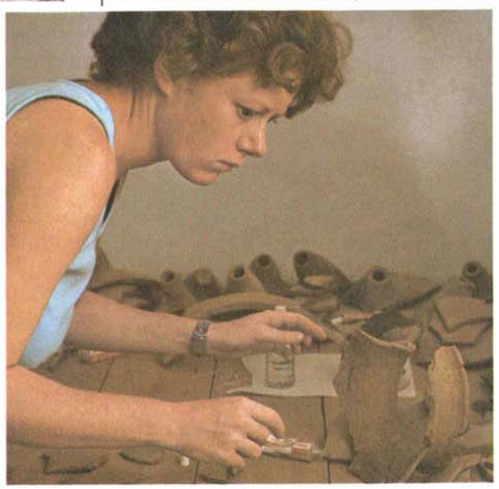
Warming to his subject, Professor Matthiae said that the tendency of many Westerners to see ancient times in the Middle East just as "Biblical times" can distort their historical importance. "If we consider the history of the ancient Near East in a non-religious perspective, we see that this was the seat of many really revolutionary developments in the history of mankind, for instance the neolithic revolution. This is the beginning of the social and economic organization of the life of the later ages. Above all, we see the same kind of life we are living now...This eastern urban life was the origin of our own western urban civilization. Now the Bible, of course, is an important account of these lands, but this is but one aspect of a more general conception of history, economy and social life of the ancient Near East."

Ebla's historical significance, he went on, is immense. "For the first time, we know a properly Syrian culture existed in the third millennium. And it was a great, highly sophisticated urban civilization. Furthermore, we have another important source of written documentation from Syria and the horizon of this new source is not only northern Syria; it includes all of the Near East in the third millennium. And the third millennium is the real beginning of the urban civilization for the whole world, as I have said.

"Also in a more detailed perspective we must change our view of this period. About 2300 B.C. Akkad was a world power, the *only* world power known in the Near East. Now we know that there were *two* world powers – Ebla in northern Syria and Akkad in southern Mesopotamia. We now know too that this was a period of struggle and tension between the two great powers, that about 2250 B.C. Ebla was destroyed by a great king of Akkad – Naram Sin. This great king says, in an inscription, that he destroyed Ebla and another city of northern Syria. Arman, which was perhaps the ancient name for Aleppo. It is typical that Naram Sin says that no one before him succeeded in destroying Ebla and Arman and that never since the creation of mankind had anyone conquered these cities. This is a very boastful speech, but surely he alluded to the great political power of Ebla.

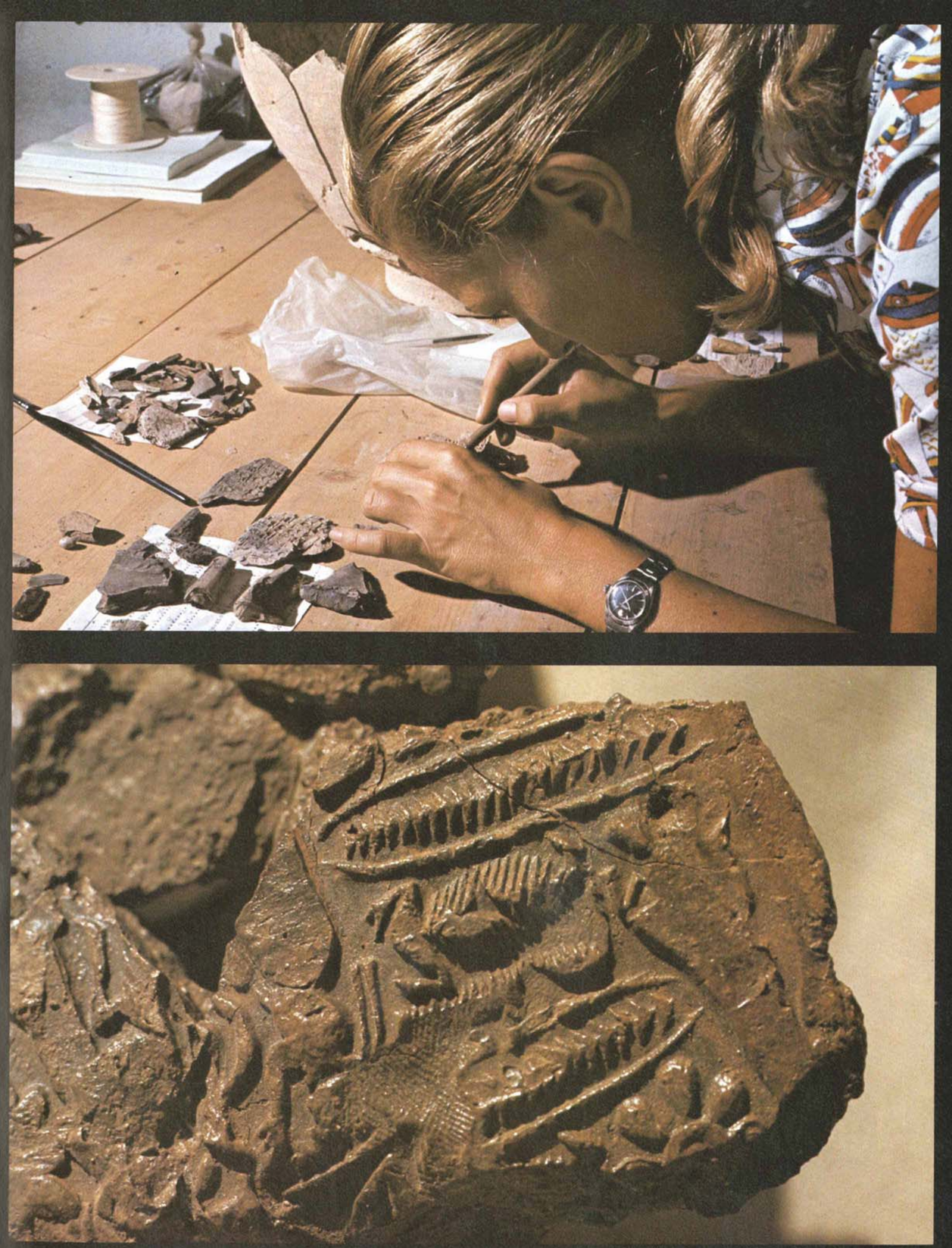
"We now definitely have a beginning of a general innovation for our studies for all the ancient Near East because apart from the commercial and financial texts we have these lexicotexts, historical texts and literary texts; we now have the beginning of a real great revolution in our work and studies."

As Professor Matthiae brought his interview to a close he added still another important point – that the discovery is only at its beginning. The digging inside the great palace has just started and only a fraction of the over 16,500 tablets has been studied. Translation, indeed, is so vast a job that an international committee of 10 scholars in 10 different countries has been named to help get the job done. And the expectations are so high that Dr. Atif Bahnassi, the Syrian Director General of Antiquities, plans to publish the results of the explorations in a journal to be called EBLAICA. For archeology, it seems, another golden age is already underway.



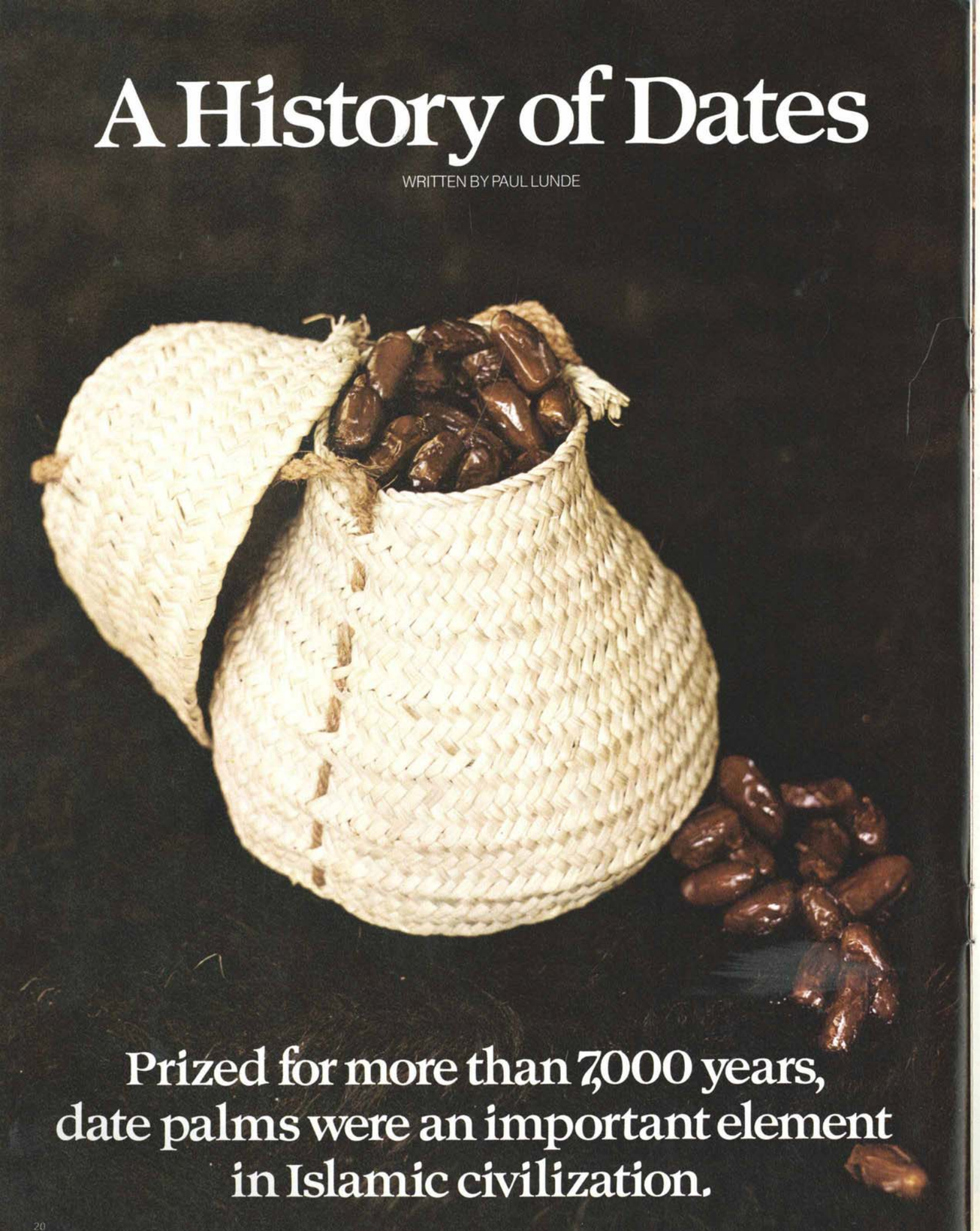
Above, a detail from a still untranslated cuneiform tablet found at Ebla. At right, Frances Pinnock works on an archeological jigsaw, piecing together pottery fragments. Archeologist Gabriella Matthiae uses a fine tool to clean fragments of cuneiform tablets, opposite page. Impressions of cylinder seals, like the one shown opposite, are often useful in dating discoveries and establishing cultural connections between ancient civilizations.

Tor Eigeland, a freelance photo-journalist based in Spain, has written and photographed two entire issues of Aramco World:



A History of Dates

WRITTEN BY PAUL LUNDE



Prized for more than 7,000 years, date palms were an important element in Islamic civilization.

In the centre of the royal emblem of Saudi Arabia, there is a palm tree above crossed swords. To the West, the palm is as much a symbol of Islam as the crescent and star, and this is not unreasonable: just as the olive was a basic element in Mediterranean civilizations, so was the date an economic elément in those of Islam.

The date is not, of course, the only palm. This very simple and primitive tree family is divided into more than 100 genera, variously adapted, of which many others are useful to man, in particular the coconut palm, the sago palm, the "dragon's blood palm" and the African palm – which produces the oil for a famous soap of the same name. For most of those trees, however, Arabia is too dry. It is the date palm which is *the* palm tree throughout the peninsula, and even further. Spreading out from the Middle East, date palms were carried far and wide by Muslim traders and travelers, until today they grow in every Islamic country whose climate is dry enough.

Dates, however, go much further back in time. Remains of dates have been found on a number of neolithic sites, particularly in Syria and Egypt. This means that they were being eaten by man as much as 7,000 to 8,000 years ago, although we have no proof that they were cultivated that early. In the third millennium B.C., however, cultivated dates are spoken of with veneration in the Gilgamesh Epic, the extraordinary tale of a quest which ranges from Lebanon to Bahrain: "And did you not love Ishullanu, the gardener of your father's palm grove? He brought you baskets filled with dates without end; every day he loaded your table."

Date palms also appear engraved on seals of that period, sometimes flanked by animals, sometimes by gods and men, and in Assyria, as later in Greece, it was undoubtedly a sacred tree.

The date may have been less revered in Egypt. It is not represented by a basic hieroglyphic symbol and there are fewer pictures of it than one might expect. Furthermore, the Greek historian Herodotus, who wrote a lively and informative account of the country and customs of Egypt in the middle of the fifth century B.C., says nothing of the cultivation of date palms, although he gives many details on other crops. We do know, however, that date palms existed very early, partly from archaeological evidence and partly from column capitals clearly carved to represent date palms – for example the granite pillars, dating

from about 2,500 B.C., of the funerary temple of King Sahurë at Abusir, now in the Cairo Museum.

Besides its beauty, the date palm's vital importance to the premodern economy of Arabia – and indeed to early life on the peninsula – makes it unsurprising that it should be frequently mentioned in the Koran. There is a particularly beautiful reference in the *surah* entitled *Mary*. After the annunciation, we are told: "Thereupon she conceived, and retired to a far off place. And when she felt the pangs of childbirth she lay down by the trunk of a palm tree, crying: 'O, would that I had died and passed into oblivion.'

"But a voice from above cried out to her: 'Do not despair. Your Lord has provided a brook which runs at your feet, and if you shake the trunk of this palm tree it will drop fresh ripe dates into your lap. Therefore rejoice. Eat and drink. And should you meet any mortal say to him: "I have vowed a fast to the Merciful One and will not speak to any man today."'"

The Prophet's Mosque, built at Medina around A.D. 630, was made almost entirely of palms: the columns and beams of the trunks, and the thatching and prayer mats of the leaves. According to one tradition, it was at Medina that the land was first cultivated by the descendants of Noah after the Flood, and it was there that the date was first planted.

Whether that first planting was in Medina or elsewhere, the date palm soon spread to the coasts of Africa, to Spain – where it is still grown in the east, a reminder of the period of Arab domination – and to western Asia. In northern India, however, it is said to have been introduced by the soldiers of Alexander the Great, who spat the stones from their date ration around the camp so that, in the course of time, palm groves grew up. This century the date was introduced into southern California, where is it still cultivated on a limited but productive scale.

But dates are not all that the date palm has produced. From Egypt, Rome took the graceful tree as a decorative motif, especially in mosaics. The Roman examples were rather rough, but soon the design passed to Byzantium, where we find it again and again, in the marvellous mosaics of Ravenna and later, Byzantine Rome. This is hardly surprising, for the palm came to be closely associated with Christianity – hence Palm Sunday and the palm as an attribute of martyrdom. But as an element of design it reaches its finest flowering in the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and in the Great Mosque at Damascus, whose splendor can be seen to the present day.

The date palm's strange waxy flowers, stylized into an almost abstract pattern, were also incorporated into architectural design and during the 18th century, when European fashion turned to the Orient, palm flowers became a very popular motif; some are even embroidered in silk on the hem of a splendid dress now in the Metropolitan Museum in New York.

In the Arab world, the date is not simply valued as a dried fruit. Pressed into cakes, it is still used as feed for camels and horses and even dogs in the oases of the Sahara when little else is available.

Date stones can be ground and mixed with other flour to eke it out, and the result is a delicious nutty-tasting bread still available in Hofuf. Alternatively, the provident Bedouin, especially in Najd, saved the stones from his dates to soak and feed to his animals when grazing was scarce. Palm hearts are a well known delicacy and the young leaves can be cooked and eaten as a vegetable.

In Arabia, the dates by themselves were once an important sweetening element and are still often eaten with coffee to contrast with its bitterness; syrup pressed from dates is also eaten. There are also sweets based on dates, particularly the dates stuffed with marzipan or walnuts popular in the eastern Mediterranean countries.

For the nomad, the date meant survival. It is a good food, of very high nutritive value and – as Westerners know well – keeps almost forever when dried. The date has a further property: a sugar content so high – up to 80 percent – that it inhibits most germs and so provides a healthy food, unlike much fresh fruit which, in the tropics, is apt to spread disease. The sap of a related species of palm, *Phoenix sylvestris,* can also be drunk fresh. It is sweet and refreshing, not unlike sugarcane juice. Fermented, it becomes intoxicating and hence forbidden to Muslims, the Prophet setting the limit of three days' fermentation before the drink is considered to be unlawful. Interestingly, three days is also about the

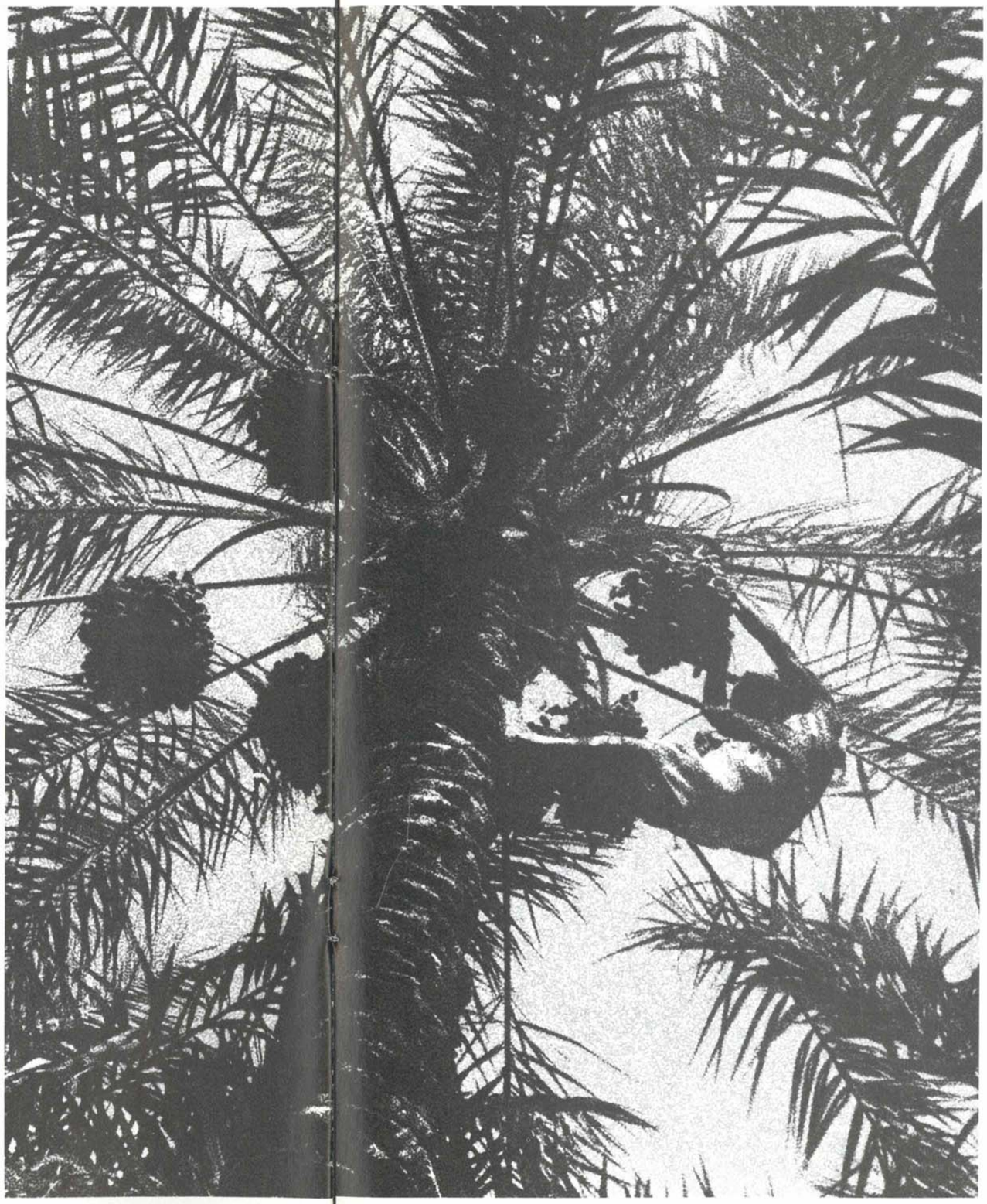
time required for the fermenting palm juice to become toxic and dangerous to the health, especially to vision.

The date palm also provides wood for building. Although not very hard, it does well enough in a dry climate: pieces of carved palm wood from old houses can still be found in the markets of al-Khobar, Riyadh, Jiddah and other cities in Saudi Arabia. The wood was also used for some parts of dhows, the hard and valuable teak from India being reserved for the parts exposed to rougher weather. Palm fronds, on the other hand, are useful for thatching roofs and making baskets, mats and numerous other household articles. One of the most attractive of these is the container made of the midribs of the leaves, which can be found packed full of fresh dates at any Middle Eastern market in late summer. Each area has slightly different baskets – those in Dammam, for example, are often colored red. Any parts of the date palm not used in other ways are, naturally, used as fuel. Slow-burning palm-wood chips were thought especially suitable for making coffee.

Insects are the primary pollinator of the date palm in much of its range. But since Arabia does not have a wide variety of insect species, this natural pollination does not ensure the best possible crop: hand pollination is necessary. This process can still be seen in Arabia in the spring. When the fruit begins to form, the spathes are commonly tied up in paper bags to protect them from the insects and birds – for example the famous green ring-necked parakeets, who for many years have pillaged the dates of Dhahran and who can destroy the crop of a whole tree – about 50 pounds – in a few days.

Many other species of birds, bulbuls especially, like to nest in date palms and often use palm fibres as nesting material. And the palms of the oases, in their carefully spaced ranks, also provide the sole shelter for all kinds of ground crops that grow in their blue-green shade – as alfalfa and vegetables do in al-Hasa.

If, in the East, the date palm was enormously useful, in the West it was glamorous. Even its botanical name, *Phoenix dactylifera,* refers to myth. The phoenix, of course, is the legendary bird, inhabitant of Arabia, of which only one was said to exist. When after 500 years it felt itself about to die, it sought out Shakespeare's "sole Arabian tree," generally thought to be the palm, built itself a pyre of dragon's blood, frankincense and myrrh – all Arabian products – laid a single egg and then set fire to its nest. From the ashes arose the new phoenix. This legend excited the imaginations of East and West, and both European and Arab naturalists and encyclopedia writers speculated at length upon the nature of this mysterious bird. There were even reports of its being sighted.



Less romantically, the generic name *Phoenix* was probably given to mark the date seed's ability to lie dormant for years – even decades – before germinating when conditions are favorable. *Dactylifera* means "datemaker"; our word "date" comes from the Greek *daktylos* meaning date – or finger.

Since the date palm is clearly so basic to Arab life, it is hardly surprising that there should be numerous words to describe its varieties and the stages of its development. Different varieties of dates are distinguished and appreciated by connoisseurs much as we make distinctions between Cox Orange Pippins, Golden Delicious, and Granny Smiths. In North Africa – where dates were introduced by the Arabs – a story is told about one particularly prized variety known as "The Date of Light."

It is said that an old lady named Tuaja went on a visit to Medina and there in the courtyard of the house of Aishah, the Prophet's wife – where, according to tradition, a date palm grew – she picked up some date stones. She was very moved by finding the descendants of the fruit eaten by the Prophet himself and so she threaded the date stones into a string of prayer beads. In the course of time she returned to her home town and, filled with piety after her pilgrimage, longed to study the Koran and the Traditions. The learned men of the city, however, laughed at her, saying she was a poor, ignorant old woman and not worthy of their teaching. She resigned herself to their unkindness and not only performed the prescribed prayers with great regularity, but spent all her spare time sitting with her back to the mosque wall praying, with her date stone beads in her hand. The years passed and she died. As she was carried to the burial ground, her chaplet broke and her date stones were scattered. They were valueless and no one troubled to pick them up, but the following year a number of date sprouts were seen, and within seven years the palms were bearing the most delicious dates ever eaten in North Africa. Some said they were called "The Date of Light" because the trees themselves shone, others because it was known they had first come from al-Madinah' al-Munawwarah, "The Radiant City."

Paul Lunde is a graduate of the London School of Oriental and African Studies and a staff writer for Aramco World Magazine.

A DAM AT MARIB

WRITTEN BY RHEA TALLEY STEWART PHOTOGRAPHED BY THOMAS SENNETT

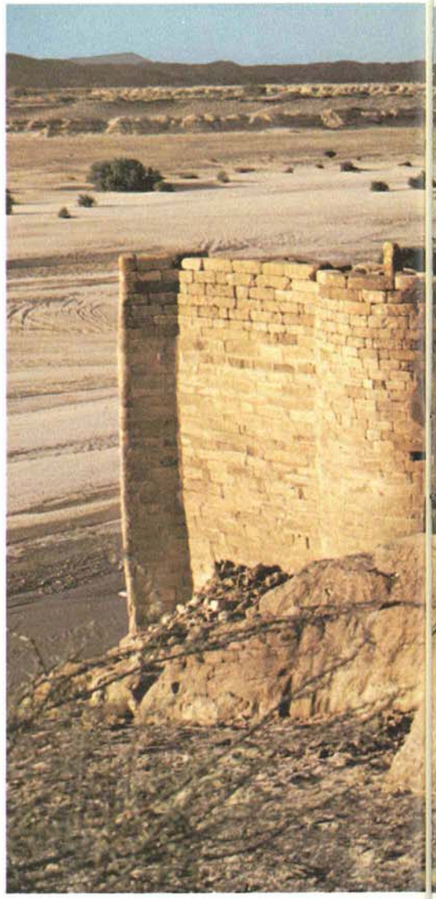
After 13 centuries the great dam collapsed at Marib –as did the civilization it helped support.

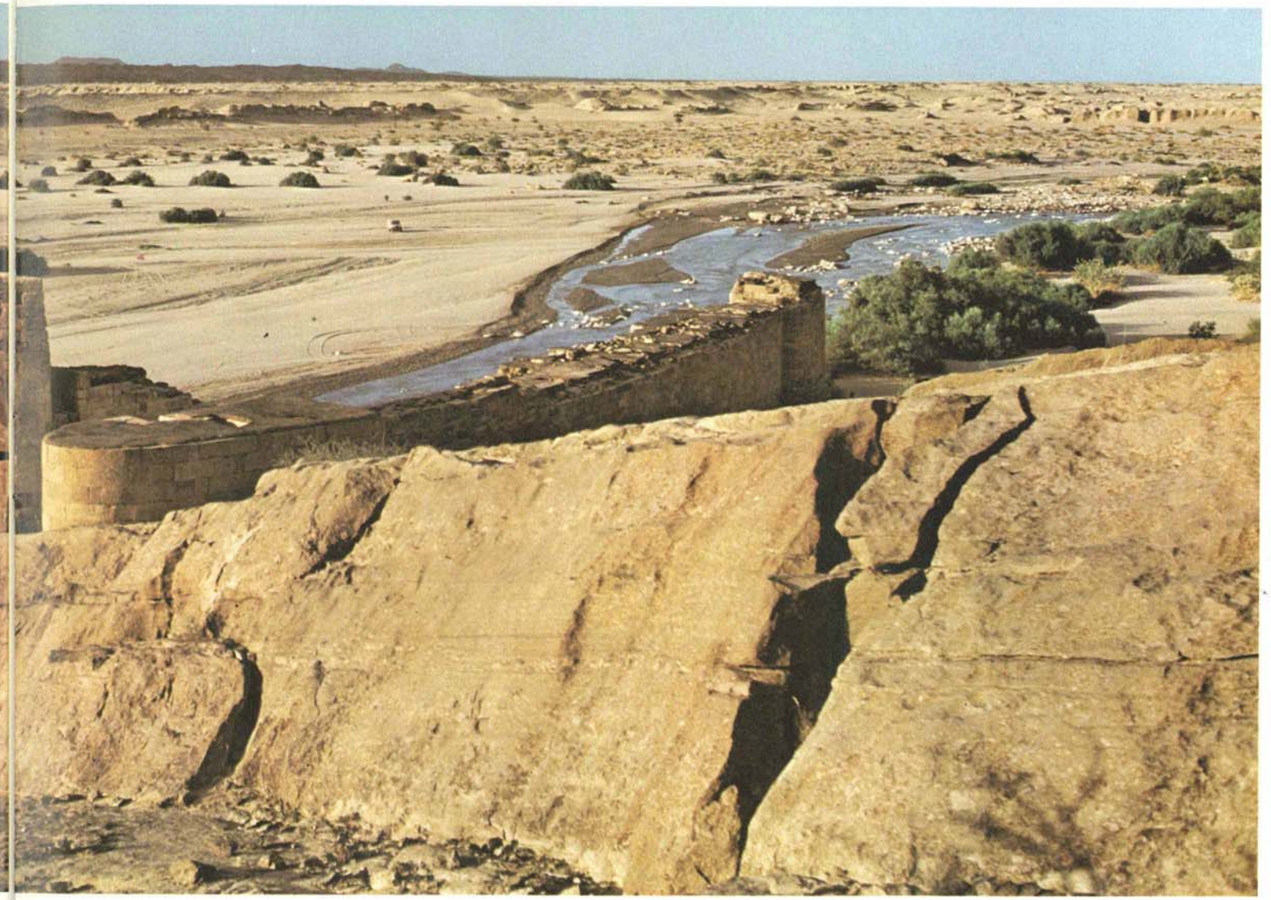
In the sixth century, two events took place on the Arabian peninsula. One brought down an ancient commercial empire. The other led, years later, to a spiritual empire that would eventually reach and re-shape much of the known world.

The most important of those events was the birth of the prophet Muhammad in Mecca. By the time he died in 632, the message of Islam that had been revealed to him had united all Arabia

under one rule for the first time and less than 100 years later the new Empire of Islam reached from the borders of France all the way to China.

The other event was far more prosaic: the collapse of a dam in Yemen in the Peninsula's south-west corner. Why it collapsed has been debated by scholars for years, some saying it was caused by exceptional rains, others believing it was caused by an earthquake. But whatever the cause, the collapse of the dam marked the end of an ancient civilization of South Arabia – a civilization centered on the fortified city called Marib and on its dam.





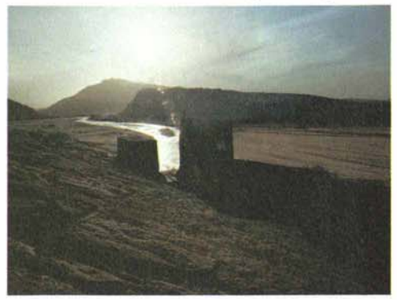
In earlier centuries this civilization – called Saba in Arabic and Sheba in the west – was exceptionally wealthy. According to the Koran Saba's queen, known in the west as the Queen of Sheba, ruled from "a magnificent throne." According to the Bible she also visited King Solomon in Jerusalem about 900 B.C. arriving, says the First Book of Kings, "with a very great train with camels that bare spices, and very much gold, and precious stones..."

Saba's riches came from its role as a trans-shipment point for Eastern luxury goods being traded to the West and from the collection and sale of two rare and expensive aromatic resins – frankincense and myrrh – for which the ancient world had a nearly insatiable appetite. They were used by the ancient Egyptians in embalming, were burned as offerings to the pagan gods of East and West, were valued as medicines from first-century Rome to 11th-century Persia, and perfumed the state occasions of royal and imperial courts throughout the known world well into the early Middle Ages. Yet they grew, almost exclusively, in Southern Arabia – whose inhabitants told fabulous tales about the dangers and difficulties of collecting them in order to deter competitors – and were a vital factor in the prosperity that earned the area the name *Arabia Felix* – Happy Arabia.

The trees that produced frankincense and myrrh probably grew wild. Scholars simply aren't certain. But they must have been jealously tended, nevertheless, as were the other agricultural crops that provided the broad base of the Sabaean economy – as well as the dam that made agriculture possible.

Sabaean agriculture, in fact, was based on more than just the dam. In addition, those ancient hydrologists had developed a water management system that included numerous wells and an extensive irrigation network. But the centerpiece of the system was the Marib Dam – Sudd Marib – an engineering marvel of the age.

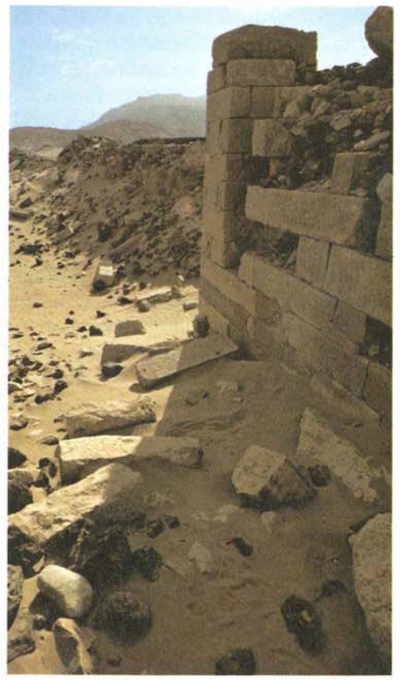
Faced with meticulously cut stone blocks, the dam spanned an 1,800-foot gap cut through the Balaq Hills by the Wadi Adhanah, and rose 15 feet above the watercourse, according to modern estimates. Awed ancient writers gave greater dimensions – 100 feet high and over 5,000 feet long – but they apparently confused the dam proper with its extensive associated irrigation system.



This branched out from two massive stone and mortar abutments at the dam's north and south ends – they still stand today – that were connected to the sides of the Balaq Canyon by 25-foot thick walls. From the abutments, water was distributed to the extensive cultivated areas along the downstream banks of the wadi by a system of branching canals – the main one on the northern end more than a mile long – equipped with gates and sluices.

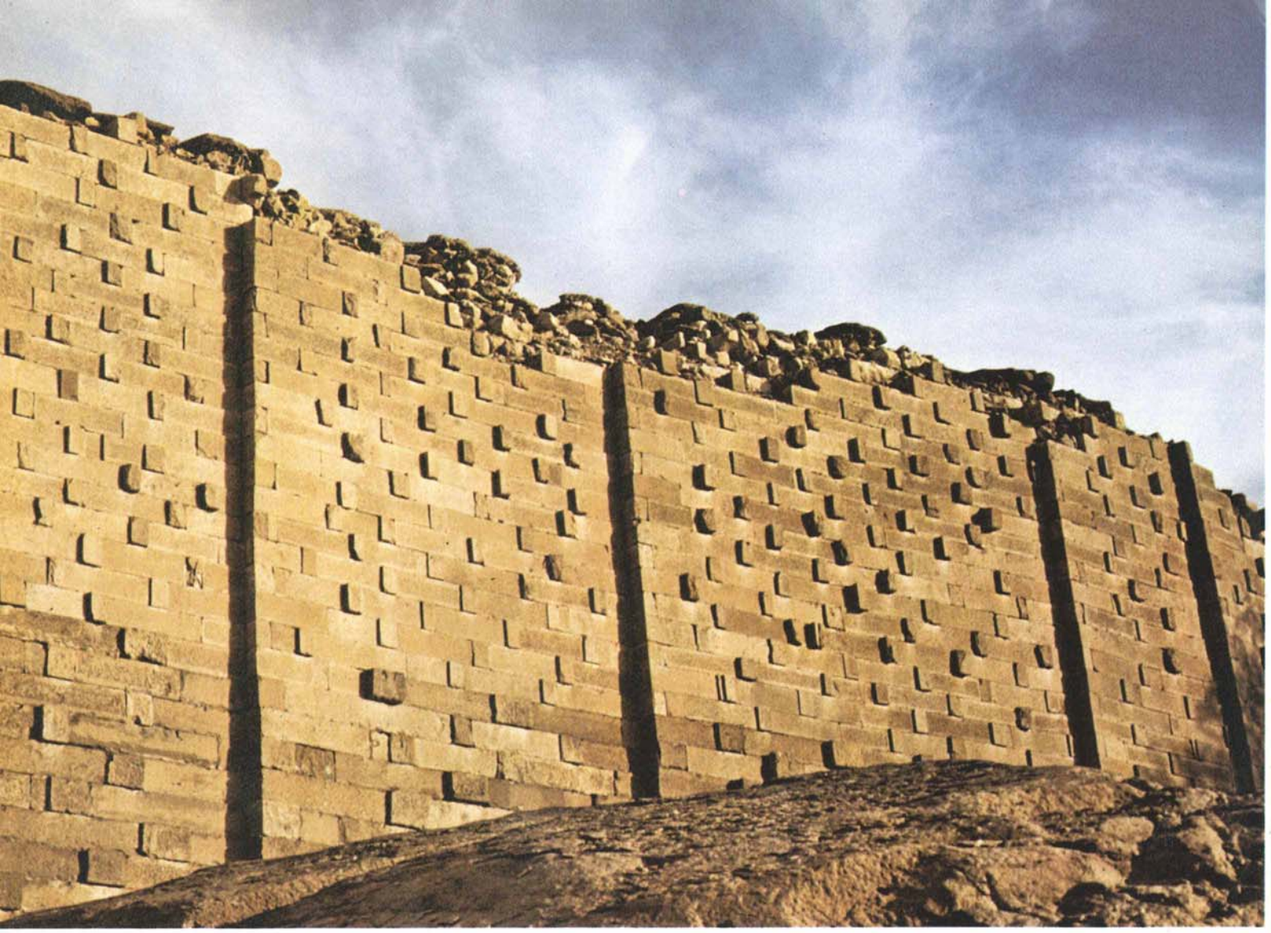
According to inscriptions, the dam was built in the seventh century B.C. by a ruler named Sumhu' Alay Yanuf and his son Yatha'-Amar Bayyin, but it was maintained, for centuries after, by successive generations of skilled Sabaeans and, later, by the kings of Himyar, a civilization that succeeded the Sabaeans as a potent force in South Arabia.

Their people, apparently, were a handsome race of medium height, with fair skin and short, straight noses, They lived in many-storied houses, viewing the passing caravans through window-panes of alabaster sliced so thin, according to one account, that those within a house could distinguish the shapes of birds flying overhead.



If agriculture was the base of Sabaean prosperity, however, international trade was the chief source of its wealth. By providing trans-shipment of silks from China, produce from East Africa and treasures from India – cinnamon and pepper, gold and precious stones – the Sabaeans, and other South Arabian peoples, dominated trade between the civilizations of the East and those of the Mediterranean. Clearly, much of this trade was in luxury goods, but ordinary goods were traded too. In A.D. 60, a traveller listed these products as available in the market place of Saba's chief port: purple cloth, clothing – plain, embroidered or interwoven with gold – saffron, sweet rush, muslin, cloaks, blankets, sashes, fragrant ointments, wine and wheat.

To all this were added aromatics, products so valuable that all Rome was scandalized when Nero burned the whole annual frankincense production of Arabia to mark the funeral of his wife Poppaea. As the Roman historian, Pliny,



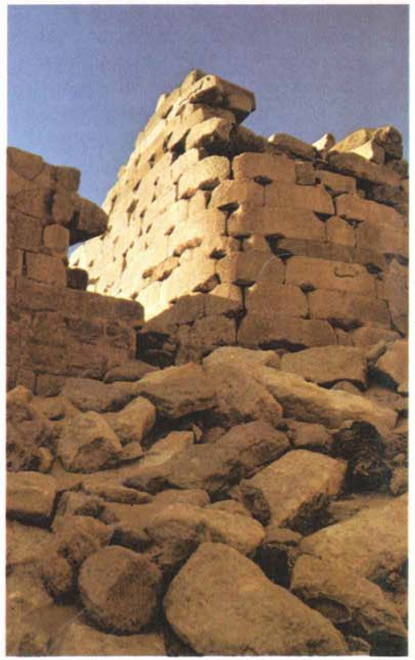
put it, "It is the luxury that is displayed by man, even in the paraphernalia of death, that has rendered Arabia 'The Happy.'"

The Himyarites, of course, still possessed the fertile agricultural areas and the frankincense and myrrh trees that produced the most valuable cash crops of South Arabia. But soon even they lost their marketability, thanks – ironically – to the spread of Christianity, which, for a time, discouraged the use of frankincense along with other pagan patterns of worship. Trade, therefore, fell off and with it the region's ancient and famous prosperity.

Himyarite knowledge of hydraulic engineering apparently also declined. Sabaeans, in their great days, had dealt with the problem of controlling and conserving water by sophisticated methods and for a period the Himyarites kept this knowledge alive. But now these techniques were forgotten, and maintenance of the dam became increasingly difficult. The dam broke and was repaired in A.D. 450 and again in 542, but in the latter part of the sixth century – A.D. 570 according to early Muslim historians – the dam broke for the third and last time, the skill, and perhaps the will, to repair it having vanished.

Subsequently, as a result, many farmers of Marib began to migrate – some in whole tribes north to Syria, as their descendants relate to this day – while others joined the victorious armies of Islam and scattered to the four corners of the earth. The Koran itself refers to the collapse of the Marib Dam as a punishment on the Sabaeans for their ungratefulness to God.

Without the dam to distribute rainfall through Marib, the water tended to run off into the deserts nearby and disappear. Trees, vegetables and grains grew no more and, inevitably, the sands moved in. Today, Marib grows no more than a little wheat and, during the rainy season, some sorghum, sesame and a kind of alfalfa fed to animals. The people



whose ancestors once fed a large part of the Middle East now import much of their food, and the town of Marib is largely in ruins.

The story, however, may yet have a happy ending – thanks to an Arab leader who proudly traces his ancestry back to the Marib area: Shaikh Zaid Bin Sultan Al Nuhayam, President of the United Arab Emirates. Determined to revive the ancient fertility of the area, Shaikh Zaid, with the financial backing of the U.A.E., has launched a major restoration project to find water and expand croplands.

The project, in fact, is already well underway. A Swiss study team, for example, has been taking soil samples and studying aerial photographs in preparation for an extensive well drilling program scheduled to begin in 1978 and Robert Law, a golden-bearded Scotsman who is the team's head, is already sure the program will be a success. "Water is sometimes as close as a few meters underground in a gorge in the dry season, but in most of the area I think it is between 50 and 130 feet down." This is the depth of the hand-dug Himyarite wells, dating to the sixth century A.D., from which most of Marib's present-day residents still draw their water by hand.

Law's soil samples went back to England for analysis last year, and his team is now studying the aerial photographs, painstakingly marked out to show land ownership. Determination of boundaries has its difficulties, however, since they are measured in traditional units that vary widely from one area to another. They tentatively plan nonetheless, to drill about one well for every 10 farms – and then to ask the beneficiaries to pay a modest amount for it to make the project self-supporting. "We know that it is going to meet universal resistance," says Law. "People feel that water is like air or sunlight: it belongs to everyone, so why should they have to pay for it?"

Farmers in the Marib area still have the ancient skill of making a small amount of water irrigate an astonishingly large area of land, channeling it through a radiating pattern of shallow ditches. Furthermore, Marib's soil almost certainly has an ample natural supply of nitrogen, and plants growing in it develop formidable stems and root systems. The cosmos of western gardens, for example, is a rather flaccid flower. In Yemen, given half a chance, it rises up on half-inch stems – perhaps a good omen for new productivity in Marib.

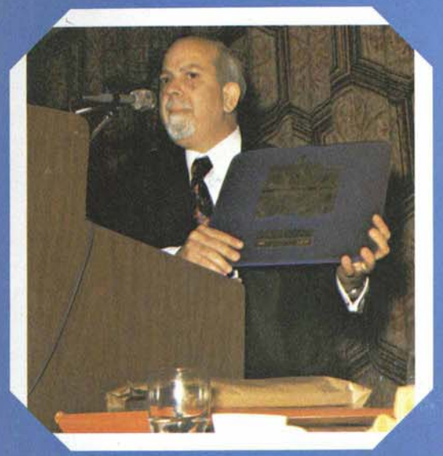
The famous Marib dam, however, will not be rebuilt. Because of its history, its value as an archeological site and historical monument far outweighs its agricultural potential. Even so, some of the prosperity that it provided so long ago may soon return, with the new water, to the land once called Saba.

Rhea Talley Stewart, author of Fire in Afghanistan, *is a member of the Asia Society's Afghanistan Council. A journalist all her life, she is now writing a thriller.*

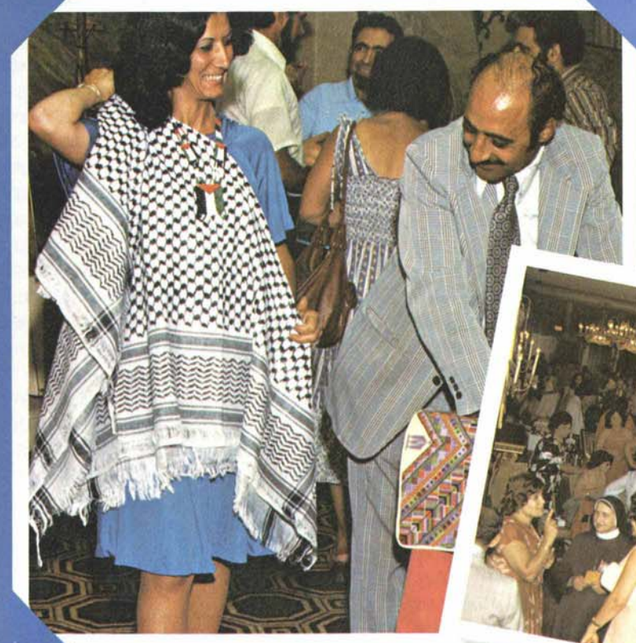
"My dear cousins and brothers..."

Reunion on the Potomac

WRITTEN BY BRAINERD S. BATES



Scenes from the Ramallah family scrapbook show special guests, such as Senator McGovern, right, and the special atmosphere of community that reigned. Exhibits of Palestinian crafts, and of works by Palestinian artists, drew interested crowds.



PHOTOGRAPHED BY SCURLOCK STUDIO

Family reunions, typically, comprise at most a few dozen relatives, and the kinfolk, divided into easily discernible generations, normally hail from places within reasonable distances from the reunion. But in Washington D.C. last summer there occurred a family gathering so big that it virtually filled the Shoreham-Americana, one of the city's more commodious hotels. Those attending, furthermore, came from throughout the United States.

In some ways, it *was* typical. Exuberant guests embraced and kissed with enthusiasm. Old friends shared old memories, and the tears flowed like wine. Yet this family, although nearly everyone was related by blood or marriage to everyone else, had something exceptional in common. Each member had his or her roots in a piece of hallowed real estate 7,800 miles off in another part of the world: a small, mountainous town called Ramallah, on the now famous West Bank of the Jordan River. And each was a member of the American Ramallah Federation which for 19 years has been sponsoring annual conventions for this unusual group of United States immigrants.

Like most immigrants, the Ramallans, after settling in the States, prospered, raised children and worked hard at becoming "good Americans." But they also – perhaps more than some immigrants – reserved a special place in their memories for their origins: the mountain town in the Middle East where, years before, their ancestors had planted deep and durable family roots.

As a result Ramallans, over many decades, encouraged a special cohesion. Wherever a significant number of Arabs with Ramallah connections settled, they soon formed a Ramallah club, many with youth auxiliaries. By last year there were 19 of these clubs, with a membership totalling 20,000 Palestinian-Americans and with chapters in such disparate locations as Detroit, Washington, Birmingham, Houston, Knoxville, San Francisco, Jacksonville, San José, and Lexington, Kentucky.

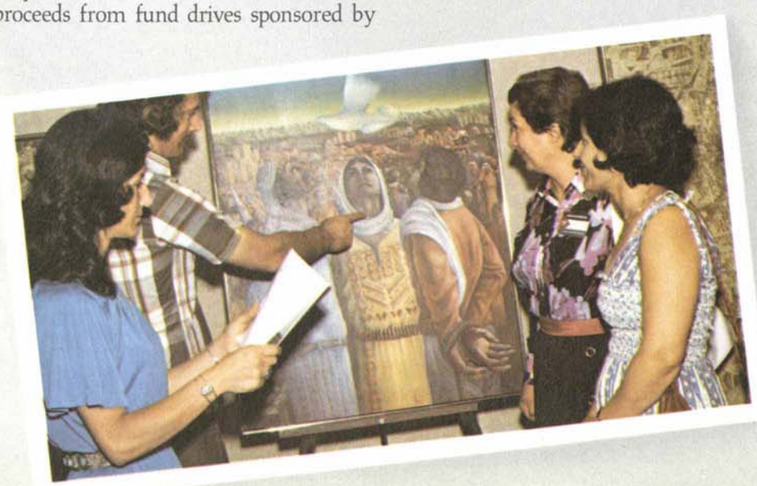
As with all such organizations, one big reason for forming such a club was purely social: the need to share the language, food and music that is so vital to Arabs, wherever they are. But there were other, more serious purposes too. One was the provision of help, primarily in the fields of education and health, to fellow Palestinians still living on home soil.

Ramallah itself, about nine miles north of Jerusalem, sits on seven hills which, some 3,000 feet up, boast a summertime coolness that has attracted vacationers from all over the Middle East for generations. Beyond that, this town of about 50,000 permanent residents has always been known as a center of learning. With three colleges and six high schools in their midst, the citizens of Ramallah have long been known for the high levels of schooling they attain and for the unusually high proportion of well-educated professionals among them.

There were, nevertheless, areas in which the American Ramallans could help, and they have done so enthusiastically. Eighteen years ago they founded a hospital in Ramallah and, by sustained support, helped it grow into one of the most modern and best equipped institutions on the West Bank. They also contributed to construction of a fine community library and to the provision of books. And, enlisting the aid of the Red Cross and Red Crescent societies (see *Aramco World*, March/April 1977) they have distributed in Ramallah the proceeds from fund drives sponsored by the U.S. Ramallah clubs for the welfare of Palestinian refugees, the formation of Boy Scout troops and other causes.

The third purpose of the Ramallah clubs is the preservation of a culture. For the older generation – particularly those who were born in the little city above Jerusalem and immigrated during the last 40 years – there will never be a question of who they are and what their heritage is. But among the widely scattered overseas Ramallans there is concern that their offspring, growing up with at least one foot planted firmly in the West, might forget their roots in the East. Many Ramallans, therefore, have established neighborhood schools to teach Arabic and, indirectly, foster remembrance and knowledge of Ramallah and Ramallan ways.

Although most of the Ramallans did not come to the United States until 30 years ago, the first trickle of Ramallah citizens to head for American shores began in 1901. Twelve years before that the American Religious Society of Friends – the Quakers – had established schools for boys and girls in Ramallah and, in telling tales of life in America, whetted the appetites of many youngsters. Some Ramallans, consequently, began to see in America opportunities for advancement and began to emigrate. Like many American immigrants, they didn't really plan to stay; they planned to make their nestegg – sending remittances home on a regular basis to wives and families left behind – and



eventually return to Ramallah themselves to realize old dreams of a home of their own or a shop that would give them future independence.

According to chronicles of the early immigrations, many new entrants into the United States, usually short on general education, became peddlers, selling linens and other dry goods obtained from abroad. Later, though, they moved into more stable businesses – a small grocery store or a restaurant specializing in the kind of ethnic fare they knew best. They also began to buy their own homes and then, established, sent for their families – until, it is said, there were more Ramallans in the United States than in Ramallah itself.

There were, certainly, a lot of them at the Washington convention, many sharing the same family names – Ayoub, George, Saah, Misleh, Ibrahim and Radifi for example – and many, in appearance, reflecting the single bloodline from which they sprang: that of one Rashid al-Haddadeen. A blacksmith believed to be the father and founder of the town, Rashid al-Haddadeen was apparently attracted to the craggy, hilly site because it was well wooded and could supply him with plenty of fuel for his forges. In any case he settled there 500 years ago and had five sons – Sabra, Ibrahim, Shugayr, Jiryes and Hassan – who in turn sired a total of 18 male heirs and got the house of al-Haddadeen off to a fruitful start.

Because their roots do go so deep, Ramallan researchers have worked hard at keeping track of the now far-flung Ramallah blood-lines. But with the help of all the sons and daughters of Ramallah – reinforced by regular local chapter meetings and annual conventions – they have succeeded admirably. Asked where they came from, two youthful conventioneers, obviously generations removed from their Middle Eastern roots, did not say they came from Detroit or Jacksonville or San Francisco; instead they looked at the questioner in puzzlement and said without hesitation, "Why, Ramallah, of course…Why do you ask?"

The Ramallah bash in Washington had many of the outward appearances of any convention held anywhere: the usual excited melees on both sides of the registration desk, the distribution of name tags and the scouting of hotel premises. Those attending also collected tickets for sporting events and tours of Washington's sights, and signed up for such events as a ladies' fashion luncheon and a young people's career symposium – which brought to the podium speakers representing the worlds of medicine, law, engineering, business and the theater. But there were unique elements too; elements that were wholly and unmistakably Arab.

All day Thursday, for example, cars from the District of Columbia, Maryland and Virginia pulled up, one after the other, to the Shoreham to discharge cargoes of huge pots and kettles brimming with Arab food. For at the annual Ramallah convention, the Ramallah families themselves provide and serve the complete opening-night meal – a feast that only travelers who have observed the creation of a meal in the Levant can appreciate. It entailed, said Samira Ayoub, wife of Washington Ramallah Club President Sliman Ayoub, a full week's preparation by herself and other Ramallan ladies from the Washington area. On the other hand, it was worth every minute of the effort. The menu – roast leg of lamb, rice and stuffed grape leaves, with great mounds of delicious round, flat Arab bread – could not have been more Middle Eastern, or more delicious.

Unlike the usual national convention, where most of the participants fall within a fairly narrow age-range, the Ramallah convention also included participants at both ends of the age scale; Arabs just don't leave babies or grandparents at home. Into the main lobby at the Shoreham, therefore, came scores of tiny Palestinian-Americans, some carried in their mothers' arms, some pushed in carriages, some sucking bottles or pacifiers, and all included in every event, even those that ran late into the evening. For the slightly older set there was a well-run all-day babysitting service – to free mothers and fathers for the daytime business meetings and symposia – and professionals brought in by convention planners gave a variety of magic shows and enthralling exhibits to keep them occupied and happy.

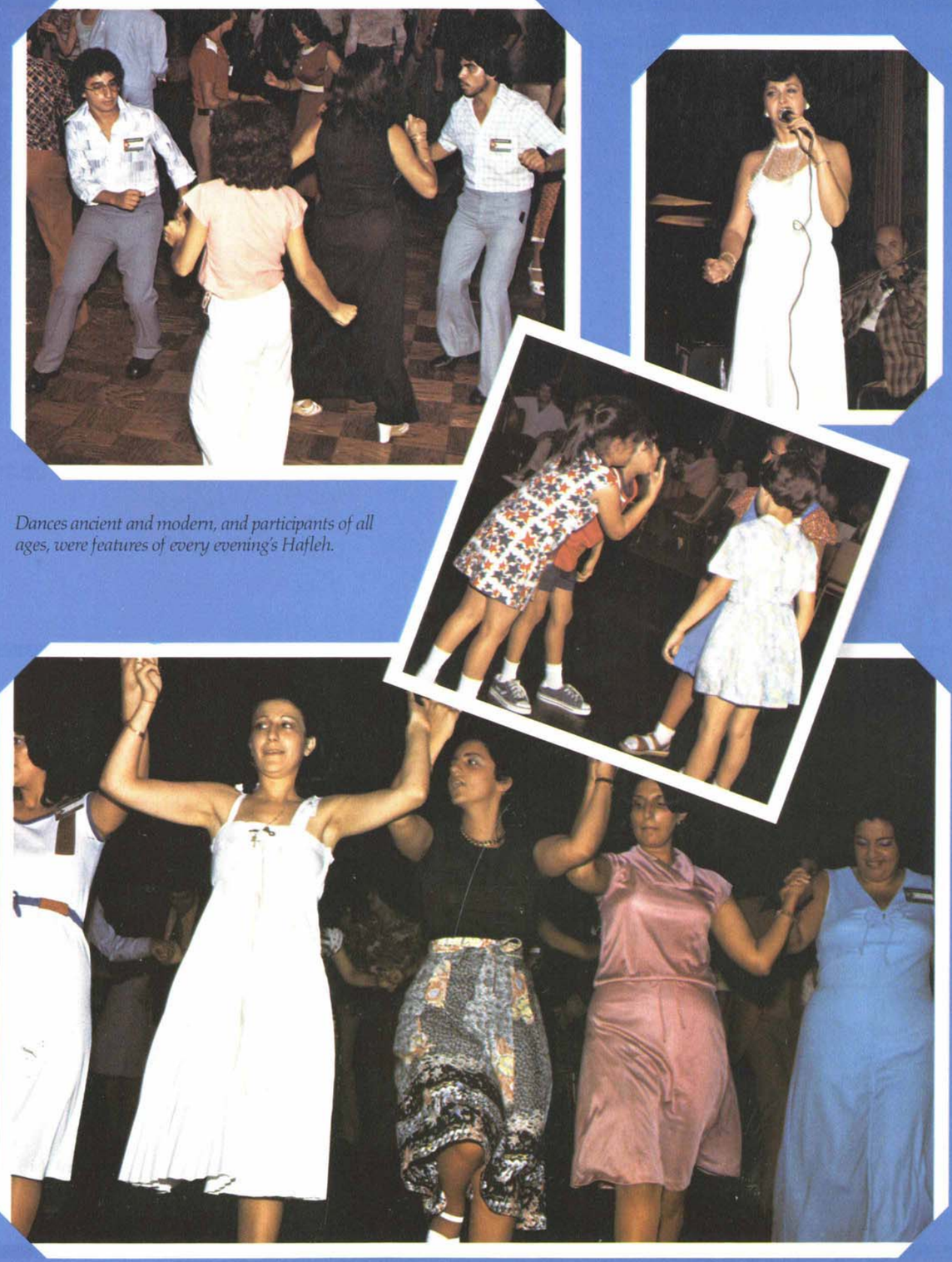
The activities seemed endless: an exhibit of paintings by Palestinian artists, after a successful nationwide tour; Arabic-language films, with English subtitles; and late each evening a *hafleh* – roughly, "party". Featuring authentic folk dancing, those gatherings brought everyone with a willing body and spirit onto the floor to dance in the old way to the accompaniment of *oud* and *tabla*.

There were, of course, business meetings too, and, on Sunday evening, a formal banquet at which the guest of honor and principal speaker was U.S. Senator George McGovern, Democratic candidate for President in 1972. Seated with him at the flower-decked head table were such notables as His Excellency Najati Kabani, the ambassador of Lebanon and dean of the Arab diplomatic corps in Washington; Salah Abdulla, Jordan's ambassador to the United States; Zuhdi Tarazi, representative of the P.L.O. to the United Nations; Dr. Muhammad Abdul-Rauf, director of Washington's Islamic Center on Massachusetts Avenue; and several members of the Palestine National Council. Even there, the family feeling prevailed: incoming Federation President Mukhles ("Mike") Saah, of Falls Church, Virginia, addressed the tables full of listeners in front of him as "my dear cousins and brothers" – and it was hardly hyperbole.

Delegates to the convention had already voted on Chicago as the site of the next gathering, and even before the conventioneers in Washington had had a chance to say their final farewells, the Chicago delegates were already beginning, in their minds at least, the year-long preparations for the Ramallah get-together on the shores of Lake Michigan the following summer.

That planning for the 20th Convention of the American Ramallah Federation will be shaped by a plethora of guidelines and precedents. There is one exigency, however, that has not been allowed for in the organization's constitution or bylaws. It seems that at each yearly convention there is a small but interested faction of delegates who keep hoping that a certain highly eligible young lawyer, always active and helpful behind the scenes, will somehow discover an attractive Ramallan girl who will bring about a change in his bachelor status. It didn't happen in Washington, alas, but *inshallah* – if God wills – there's always a chance that things will go differently in Chicago. Then the organization known as the American Ramallah Federation will have achieved yet another unspoken goal: keeping it all in the family.

Brainerd S. Bates was one of Aramco World Magazine's *first editors, and later served for many years as Aramco's chief writer on petroleum in Dhahran. During that time he contributed regularly to the magazine, writing on oil and a wide range of subjects besides – from horse racing to desert camping to the Orient Express. After his retirement in 1975, he returned to freelance writing, and was working on a full issue of* Aramco World *when, at the end of 1977, he collapsed and died. He will, of course, have a successor, but will never be replaced. –The Editors*



Dances ancient and modern, and participants of all ages, were features of every evening's Hafleh.