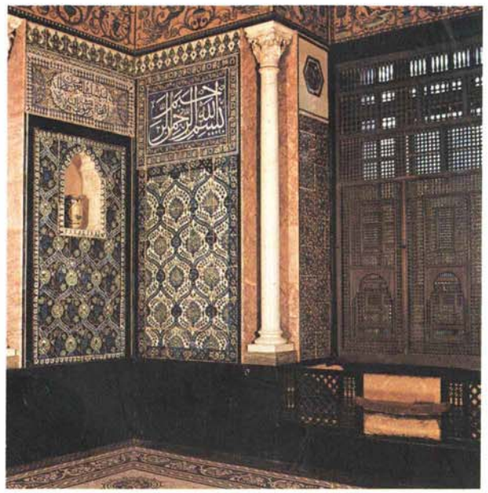

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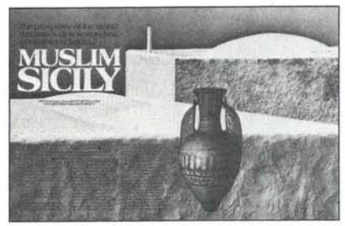




SCARFIOTTI


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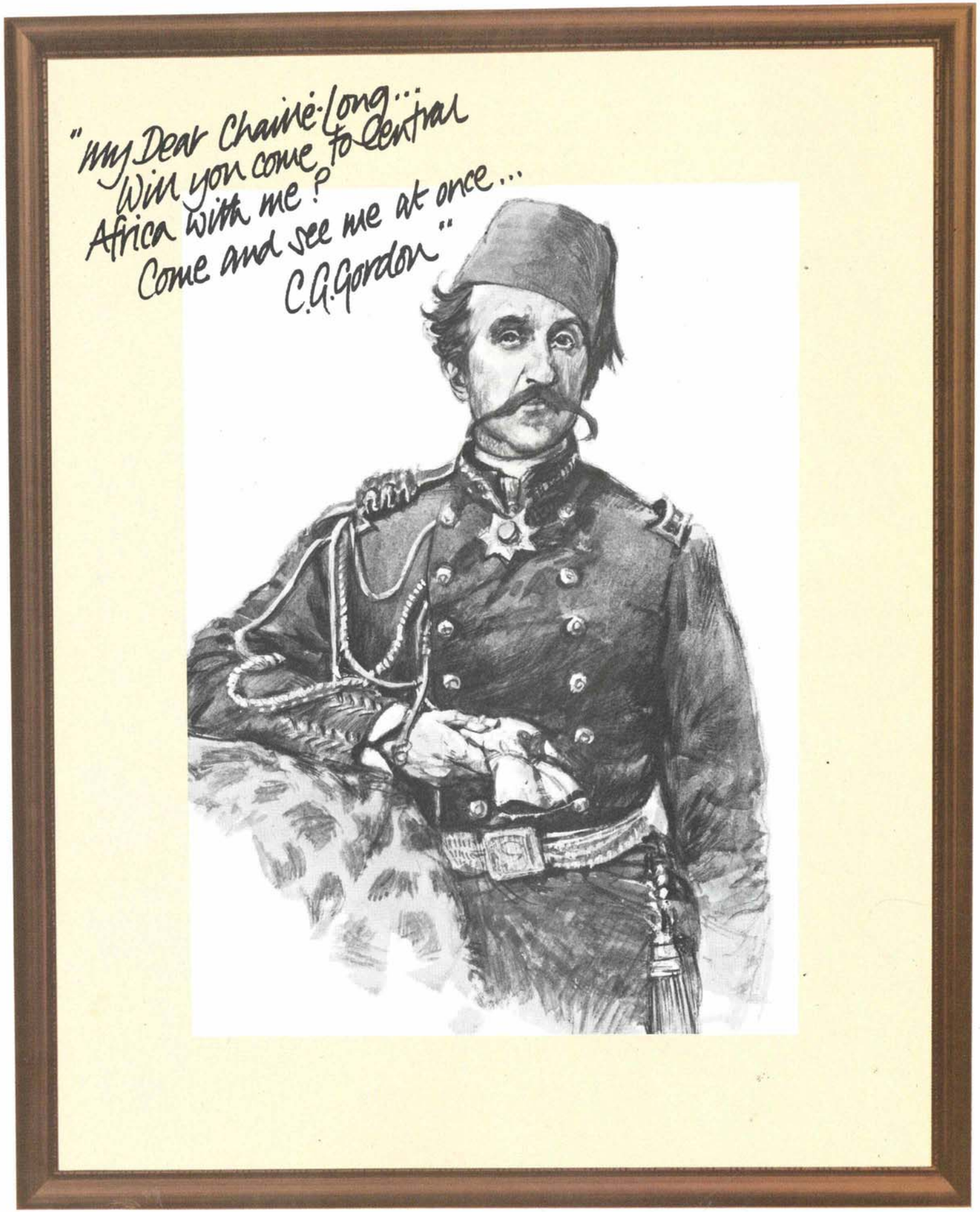
Cover: Setting out on the first of his expeditions for the Khedive of Egypt, Charles Chaillé-Long and the famous Gordon of Khartoum crossed the desert on camelback and took a river steamboat to Khartoum. Painting by Michael Turner. Rear cover: Syrian tiles and wooden screens in London's Arab Hall. Photograph by Vanessa Stamford.

◀ Different types of reef-building corals compete for sea-floor growing room and create, as they grow, one of the Arabian Gulf's most varied biotopes.




# The Expeditions of Chaillé-Long

WRITTEN BY DAVID ICENOGLE
ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL TURNER

In 1874, a former Civil War captain in America's Union Army set out to explore Lake Victoria in Central Africa. He was escorted by a fleet of 40 canoes, each manned by 30 warriors of the Baganda tribe in what is today's Uganda. He never did cross the great lake and he was not, as he believed, the first Westerner to explore Lake Victoria. But he *was* the second and his voyage was a high point in 19th-century Egypt's effort to extend its influence into Central Africa.

That campaign, launched by Ismail, Khedive of Egypt, in the early 1870's, was largely led by Ismail's extraordinary foreign legion of American Civil War officers: some 50 veterans from both the Union and Confederate armies.

Under the command of the khedive's chief of staff, Charles Pomeroy Stone, a disgraced Union general (see *Aramco World,* January-February, 1972) those veterans enlarged, trained and modernized the khedive's army, established schools to educate the soldiers and their sons, and organized the construction of fortifications and coastal defenses. They also led their troops into the Sudan – restoring to the khedive's rule ancient territories once ruled by the pharaohs – and sent expeditions into Central Africa to map those unknown lands, establish outposts and negotiate treaties.

Several of the Civil War officers, in fact, did little but explore Africa. One was a Confederate captain, Alexander McComb Mason, (see *Aramco World*, March-April, 1974) and another, possibly the most adventurous, was Charles Chaillé-Long, the man who tried to cross Lake Victoria in canoes.

Born on a Maryland plantation in 1842, Charles Chaillé-Long enlisted as a private in the Union Army at 20, fought at Gettysburg and rose to the rank of captain. After the war he worked for a New York textile firm, dabbled in literary and thespian activities and then, bored and thirsting for adventure, wrote to the Khedive of Egypt when he learned of the ruler's effort to recruit an American officer corps. To his delight he was commissioned as a lieutenant-colonel in the Egyptian Army and in 1870, after taking an oath of allegiance to the khedive, set sail for Egypt on a steamer named the *Aleppo*.

In Egypt Chaillé-Long and two other officers were met by two American generals who escorted them, aboard the Minister of War's special train, to Cairo to meet Ismail. Enroute, Chaillé-Long later wrote, they got their first taste of Egypt's heat and saw the Pyramids through the yellow haze of a khamsin, the hot, dusty wind that sweeps periodically out of the desert.

At the Abdin Palace, where the khedive held their first audience, Chaillé-Long, because he spoke fluent French, served as interpreter while Ismail explained that he had chosen Americans to help him because the United States had no colonial interest in Egypt. The khedive also outlined his plans to establish Egypt as a country independent of the rapidly disintegrating Ottoman Empire.

During his first years in the khedive's service, Colonel Chaillé-Long helped plan the construction of defensive earthworks in the desert between the Nile Delta and the Suez Canal. He also taught French at the new military school at Abbassieh and served as aide-de-camp to a general. It was a position he found "more ornamental than useful," but it also provided him with a gold-embroidered uniform that he enjoyed wearing. Something of a dandy, Chaillé-Long frequently wore ornate uniforms and once won praise from the khedive for his traveling costume: a silk top hat, a black cape with crimson lining and patent leather shoes.

In retrospect it seems odd that such a vain, almost foppish man came to follow in the footsteps of the remarkable men who had pioneered exploration of the then-unknown headwaters of the Nile: John Speke and Samuel Baker. But Chaillé-Long was also a born adventurer who hungered to become an intrepid military hero. He did not hesitate, therefore, when the khedive appointed the English soldier of fortune and religious mystic Charles Gordon to be governor of Egypt's Equatoria province in the southern Sudan; eager for action, Chaillé-Long applied for a position on Gordon's staff.

Gordon, remarking that Chaillé-Long was "a good American and a sharp fellow," decided to accept him and on February 19, 1874, dispatched a messenger with a laconic note: "My dear Chaillé-Long: Will you come with me to Central Africa? Come and see me at once. Very truly, C.G. Gordon." Although he was entertaining guests, Chaillé-Long left at once for Gordon's headquarters where he received orders as laconic as the invitation: "You will command the soldiery," said Gordon. "I don't want the bother."

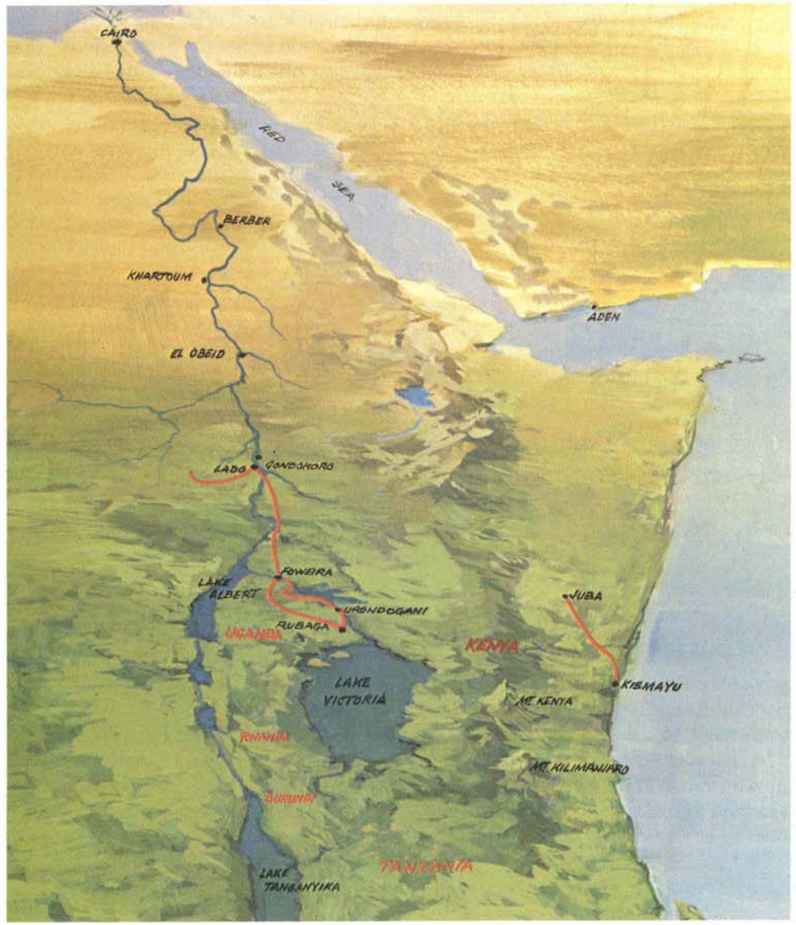
After Chaillé-Long recovered from his surprise, he asked Gordon when he was leaving. "Tomorrow night," was the reply. Chaillé-Long protested that this was impossible and, appealing directly to General Stone, managed to delay Gordon's departure for 24 hours. But

then, still in a state of shock, he set out on what was to be the greatest adventure of an adventurous life: an expedition to Uganda where he would attempt to negotiate an alliance with Mutesa, king of the Baganda tribe in a territory bordering Lake Victoria.

The expedition got underway on February 21, 1874. Leaving a rear guard to bring their stores and baggage, Gordon and Chaillé-Long left Cairo for Suez by train and at Suez took a steamer to Suakin. From there they crossed 280 miles of desert on camelback to Berber on the Nile and from Berber went by steamer to Khartoum. On the final leg they took another steamer to Gondokoro, the headquarters of the Equatoria provincial administration. Enroute they had to force their way through the Sudd, the nearly impenetrable swamp bordering the Nile in the Sudan.

In Gondokoro, the restless Gordon almost immediately decided to return to Khartoum to await the rear column, leaving Chaillé-Long, completely new to the upper Nile, in command of a base with a garrison of 1,500 men. Chaillé-Long, with equal haste, set out for Uganda on April 24, leaving Raouf Bey, the Egyptian second-in-command, in charge of Gondokoro and taking with him "a gorgeous uniform," some gifts for Mutesa and a horse named "Uganda." No horse and only two Westerners – Speke and another British explorer, James Grant – had ever made it to Bagandan territory before.

The reasons for Chaillé-Long's haste are unclear. He said later that before he left Cairo he had been given instructions by Ismail to hurry, but whatever his reason, Chaillé-Long set off at once – even though the rainy season was already beginning – and 58 days later, June 20, 1874, arrived at Rubaga, Mutesa's capital, near today's Kampala.




For Chaillé-Long this was an exciting moment. Having survived "pitiless rain, mud, misery, malaria and the dread fevers of the jungle," he now stood before Mutesa's "palace," a rustic affair surrounded by seven concentric palisades. And there was Mutesa and his court to greet him. Determined to impress the king he donned the "gorgeous uniform," mounted the horse and galloped forward in a wild charge. Mutesa, however, was unimpressed; although his attendants scattered he stood his ground, and calmly invited Chaillé-Long to an audience the next day.

The audience, Chaillé-Long wrote, was memorable and successful. He established friendly contact with Mutesa and claimed he had, with the help of an interpreter, gotten Mutesa's signature on a treaty of alliance. He also presented his gifts to the king – including a storage battery that gave the king and his courtiers shocks during a demonstration – and persuaded Mutesa to provide him with canoes to explore Lake Victoria.

Originally Chaillé-Long intended to cross the lake, not knowing that Victoria, some 200 miles long and approximately 150 miles wide, is the second largest freshwater lake in the world. Unfortunately, he didn't believe Mutesa when the king told him that it would take 30 days to cross it. He set out, with his 40-canoe escort, spotted the nearby islands of the Sese Archipelago and thought he had crossed the whole lake. It was a sad error; when he later published his conclusions he said Lake Victoria was only 10 to 12 miles wide – a statement which was ridiculed later by the Royal Geographical Society.

Chaillé-Long also decided to return to Gondokoro by following the Nile from Lake Victoria to Lake Albert, a trip neither Speke nor Samuel Baker had been able to make because hostile tribes had opposed them. That region, therefore, was still unexplored and Speke's belief that the Nile flowed from Lake Victoria to Lake Albert was unconfirmed.

Determined to close that gap in Nile exploration, Chaillé-Long ordered part of his command to march overland – with his horse – and meet him at an Egyptian outpost at Foweira. Then, on July 20, with an escort of 500 Bagandan warriors, he marched to Urondogani – the point on the Nile that Speke had reached in 1862 – and on August 7, set off down the Nile.

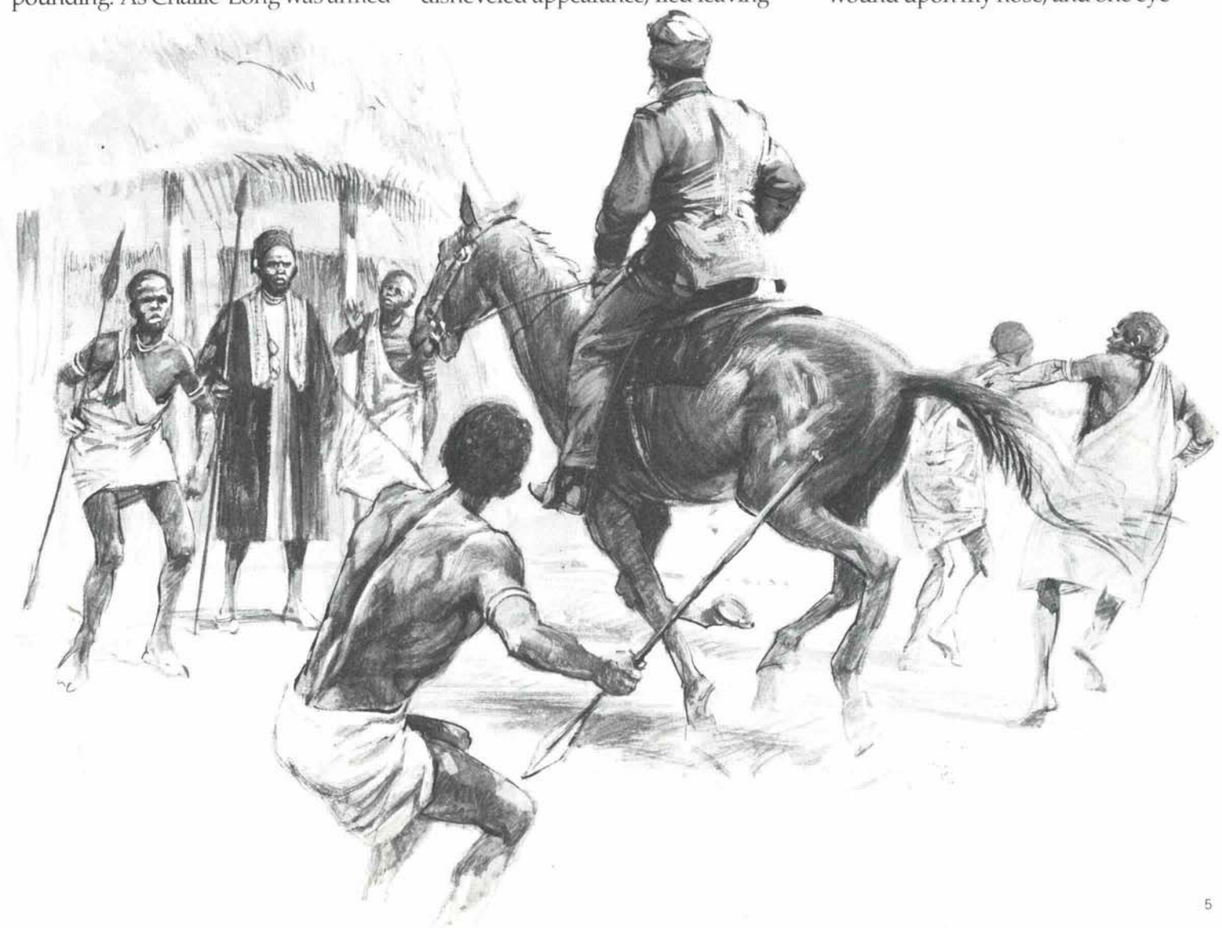
That expedition, as it turned out, was even more eventful than his march to Mutesa's capital. In his haste, the colonel and his party set out with only five pounds of flour and five pounds of beans for provisions; and as a result they nearly starved when they got lost amid the lotus and papyrus in Lake Kioga. And on August 17 they were nearly annihilated when the Bunyoro tribe attacked them.

It was, Chaillé-Long wrote later, a near thing. As they emerged from Lake Kioga, after six days, some 700 Bunyaro warriors in canoes paddled toward them, their war drums pounding. As Chaillé-Long was armed with a powerful Reilly elephant rifle, and two companions with English Snider rifles, they were able to keep the warriors at bay at first. But at the height of the battle, Chaillé-Long was accidentally shot in the face by a companion. Unnoticed in the smoke and confusion, a canoe had closed in on them and a warrior was about to spear Chaillé-Long in the back when his Sudanese cook grabbed a revolver and fired, killing the warrior. The cook's shot, however, also grazed Chaillé-Long's cheek and nose, blackened his face with powder burns and temporarily knocked him unconscious. Fortunately, at nightfall, the tribesmen withdrew.

Two days later the expedition ran out of food and Chaillé-Long decided to seek help at Kissembois, a friendly village. They arrived at the village in a deluge of rain at dawn on the 20th of August and Chaillé-Long, famished, barged into the first hut he came to. The two occupants, terrified at his disheveled appearance, fled leaving their breakfast of roasting fish behind and the ravenous Chaillé-Long grabbed it. As he later wrote, "Never before or since have I enjoyed a repast as on that morning."

That afternoon, more dead than alive, they reached an Egyptian outpost set up at Foweira and settled in to await the arrival of the overland party marching from Mutesa's capital at Rubaga. During his stay at Foweira, Chaillé-Long recovered slowly and then, some weeks later, after the overland party arrived, headed for Gondokoro.

"Through pestilential jungles and across swollen streams, with only doura [millet] for food, attacked daily with fever, we finally arrived at Gondokoro on October 18, 1874," was how Chaillé-Long described the last leg of the trip. When he arrived, he said, "My hair hung in great damp locks around my shoulders; my beard seemed to render more cadaverous my emaciated face; while the painful wound upon my nose, and one eye



closed and blackened, caused him [Gordon] to doubt my identity."

In one sense, Chaillé-Long's expedition was a failure; the treaty he had risked so much to obtain was later disavowed and his attempt to explore Lake Victoria was ridiculed. Nevertheless, Chaillé-Long, during his navigation of the Nile between Urondogani and Foweira, had explored over 100 miles of unknown Nile channel and had proven conclusively that the river that Speke had seen flowing out of Lake Victoria in 1862 was the same stream Baker had seen flowing into Lake Albert in 1864. He had also discovered Lake Kioga. And if the Geographical Society chuckled at his error concerning Lake Victoria, its president also remarked that Chaillé-Long's account of the expedition was one of "the most romantic and extraordinary stories of African travel" that he had ever heard.

It was not, however, the last such story. After recovering from a serious bout of fever in Khartoum, Chaillé-Long returned to Gondokoro and then went on to Lado, slightly downstream and on the west bank of the Nile; because of Gondokoro's unhealthy climate, Gordon had relocated his headquarters.

At Lado Gordon assigned Chaillé-Long to the command of 700 Egyptian and Sudanese soldiers and ordered him to open a route southwest from Lado towards the country of the "Makraka Niam-Niam" – now called the Azande tribe. It was not an undertaking comparable in importance with the Mutesa expedition, but it did, nevertheless, extend Egypt's presence still further. By marching 150 miles southwest, negotiating with local chiefs and building a fort, this second expedition extended Ismail's influence into the Nile-Congo watershed.

It also won him a promotion to full colonel and a medal from the khedive.

By then, unhappily, tension between Chaillé-Long and Gordon had reached the breaking point. As both were arrogant and egotistical men, relations had begun to disintegrate shortly after Gordon sent his terse invitation to Chaillé-Long to come to Central Africa. Now, on March 17, 1875, the final break occurred and Chaillé-Long returned to Cairo.

In Cairo Chaillé-Long discovered that he was a hero and that the khedive was entranced by his explorations. But he was also still weak from malaria and so, although reveling in the long awaited glory, decided to return to Maryland to visit his father. He started out, but in Paris received a curt telegram from General Stone ordering him to return for still another assignment.

This expedition, he quickly learned, was shrouded in mystery. On September 9, 1875, he was told by Ismail to go to Suez, take command of 1,300 Egyptian troops and sail south into the Red Sea for 500 miles before opening sealed orders. Until then he would have no idea of his ultimate destination.



At sea, as instructed, Chaillé-Long opened his orders. He was instructed to sail to Berbera, in today's Somalia, on the coast of the Gulf of Aden. There he was to pick up Admiral Henry F. McKillop, a British officer in Egyptian service, and place himself under the Admiral's command. From there he was to go to the mouth of the Juba river in Somaliland and march into the interior to meet Gordon.

Behind these strange maneuverings was a plan, proposed by Gordon earlier, to establish a new communications route between Cairo and the Lake Victoria region. If feasible the new route – via the Juba River on the Indian Ocean coast and inland to Victoria – would be much shorter than the 2,700-mile steamer-overland route between Cairo and Gondokoro. But it would also intrude on parts of today's Somalia and Kenya. Gordon's plan, as it turned out, was impractical. Chaillé-Long took a steam launch 150 miles up the Juba River and found that the river curved north rather than west. This meant that the proposed new route to Lake Victoria was not feasible.

In the meantime, Admiral McKillop had sent a ship to neutral Zanzibar, an ally of Great Britain, to find coal for his steamships. There he received a surprise. Instead of encountering resistance, as he had expected, his ship returned filled with coal – and carrying a memorable note from Sa'id Burghash, Sultan of Zanzibar:

"To the Commander of the Egyptians at Kismayu: I send you the coal you desire, also fruit. The latter may serve to keep you in good health, the former to take you away from my country. Go, and peace be with you."

Shortly afterwards Chaillé-Long and the Admiral received another message. It was from the khedive and it read: "Withdraw your command and return at once to Egypt."

Back in Cairo, Chaillé-Long learned that the khedive was in trouble; he was beginning to feel the financial pinch that subsequently enabled Great Britain to expand its influence in Egypt, and eventually demand Ismail's abdication. As a result, when Chaillé-Long returned from six months of leave in Europe, Great Britain and the United States, he found that the American officer corps was not being paid and was gradually being disbanded. Ismail asked Chaillé-Long to stay but he declined and in September, 1877 resigned, leaving General Stone as almost the only member of the American Military Mission in Egypt.

After resigning his commission, Chaillé-Long drifted restlessly around Europe – visiting Richard Burton in Trieste and wandering through Vienna and Paris – and then studied law at Columbia University. But in 1881 he returned to Egypt and opened a law practice in Alexandria.

He found many changes. General Stone was still there but Ismail was not; the British Foreign Office had replaced him with the Khedive Tewfik. In the Sudan a leader called the Mahdi was drawing adherents at an ominous pace and in Egypt Colonel Arabi – sometimes called Urabi Pasha – was protesting the pro-British policies of the khedives.

In May, 1882, Chaillé-Long, after a hunting trip in Luxor, returned to Cairo to find that Arabi's movement had exploded in violence and that many Westerners were fleeing Egypt – including the American consul in Alexandria. Because of Chaillé-Long's fame, the Americans remaining in Alexandria requested that he take over as acting consul there, and on June 15, he did so. Two weeks later Egypt was in turmoil, and when British warships opened fire on Alexandria's coastal defenses – built by General Stone's mission – Chaillé-Long and hundreds of Western refugees in the Consulate took refuge on four American warships waiting offshore. But he later returned, with a detachment of U.S. Marines, reopened the Consulate and stayed on as consul until August 17. By then the upheaval was over, Great Britain had occupied the country, and Ismail's plan to extend Egyptian influence into Central Africa was over.

But Chaillé-Long's career was not. In 1883 he represented western clients demanding indemnities for losses incurred during the troubles in Alexandria. And for the next 34 years he wandered the world, practicing law in Paris, serving as Consul-General in Korea, traveling to China and Ceylon and, from 1890 to 1892, living in Egypt. In his later years he also wrote extensively: more than 100 magazine and newspaper articles and six books, including *My Life In Four Continents*, his major work.

In those writings – and innumerable lectures – Chaillé-Long frantically sought the recognition and fame that he thought he had earned, but that had somehow eluded him. He did receive some honors and awards – and he was surely the most literate and glamorous figure of those colorful Civil War veterans who formed the khedive's foreign legion. He was also, as the khedive's chief explorer, the most important American in Africa and his explorations of the Nile and Lake Kioga were certainly significant. But today he is, perhaps unfairly, a neglected figure, forgotten by history and obscured by time.

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# LONDON'S ARAB HALL

**"...The Arab Hall in this fine house, without being at all like the Alhambra in detail, gives the grand impression which Eastern art awakes in many minds."**

An English vicar's wife was so enchanted by the sight before her that she wrote:

" . . . and here springs up the lovely dome as of the Alhambra, made of the dust of the earth, but quickened by the rainbow . . . The Arab hall in this fine house, without being at all like the Alhambra in detail, gives the grand impression which Eastern art awakes in many minds."

The lady – Mrs. Haweis, author of *Beautiful Houses*– went on to describe the hall: the wooden screens with their "delicate tracery," the fine glazed tiles decorating the walls of the hall and "the fountain that patters and sings in its pool of chrysolite water – the most perfect colophon to all colors and the outer heat." But she was not describing a room in Damascus, Cairo or Beirut. She was writing of a room in London, close to Hyde Park: Lord Leighton's Arab Hall, a small room that was to have immense influence on the decorative arts of England.

Eastern motifs were by no means new to England when Mrs. Haweis was praising the Arab Hallin 1882. Earlier in the century the Prince Regent, later George IV, had ordered John Nash, the architect, to give his residence on the south coast – Brighton Pavilion – "an Eastern character." This, described by Nash as "the Hindoo style of architecture," had already crept into European and English architecture – in the guise of fantasies and follies which included bits and pieces from China, India, Japan and Muslim Spain, but most of it owing little to the Orient except the name.

Brighton Pavilion was an ambitious undertaking. It cost the then-staggering sum of £148,000 and was described by Nash as having "turban domes and lofty pinnacles" that might, "from their glittering and picturesque effect; attract and fix the attention of the Spectator." The Pavilion also stimulated wide interest in Eastern architecture; with the royal seal of approval Brighton

WRITTEN BY PATRICIA BAKER PHOTOGRAPHED BY VANESSA STAMFORD

Pavilion spawned numerous imitations – in the United States as well as Great Britain.

Circus mogul P. T. Barnum, for example, saw Brighton and imitated it in "Iranistan", his house in Bridgeport, Connecticut. Other famous American homes influenced by Middle Eastern architecture were Mrs. Frances Trollope's "Bazaar "in Cincinnati, a light-hearted mixture of Egyptian architectural motifs, both Pharaonic and Islamic; and "Nutt's Folly" in Natchez, Mississippi. There were also fish-halls in Charleston, theaters and clubs in London and New York, pumphouses in Potsdam, smoking rooms in Hampshire, villas in Stuttgart, Turkish baths in Leeds and palace kiosks in Bavaria – all, in varying degrees of taste, featuring motifs and ornamentation from the Islamic world.

This interest in eastern architecture continued to grow through the 19th century as British interests in Egypt and the Sudan broadened, as British troops and travelers, enroute to India via Suez, caught glimpses of Alexandria and Port Said, and as the Great Exhibition of 1851 at the Crystal Palace offered large and accurate models of Eastern architecture, including Islamic Spain's Alhambra. By the second half of the 19th century, as a result, fashion decreed that important British homes include at least a Turkish corner within the house or studio and, frequently, an Arabian-cum-Indian style in billiard, smoking and club room decoration.

Behind this fashion was, unquestionably, the mysterious lure of the Orient. But there was also the fact that in the Great Britain of the early 1800's, there was a growing dissatisfaction with the quality of design in British architecture. As one expert put it, "We have no principles, no unity . . . (all craftsmen) runs each his independent course; each struggles fruitlessly, – each produces in art novelty without beauty, or beauty without intelligence."

In such circumstances it is scarcely surprising that after a tour of Damascus in 1873, Frederick Leighton – a painter, recognized in royal circles and in the artistic world – assigned an architect to design an Arab hall at his residence on Holland Park Road.

This decision was the culmination of a much earlier interest in Islamic art. In late 1867, for example, Leighton had written a letter to his anxious father to explain why he was spending considerable sums of money on Islamic pottery.

"I know that you, personally, care little for such things, and have small sympathy with purchases of that nature; you will, therefore, be glad to hear that though I spent a considerable

*Opposite: William de Morgan's brilliant turquoise tiles form a background for a bust of Lord Leighton.*

sum, knowing that such a chance would never again be given to me, I could, *any day*, part with the whole lot for at least double – probably treble – what I gave." He described these purchases as "old Persian faience mainly plates," a term which then included all types of Islamic pottery: the famous wares of Iran as well as those of Turkey and Syria.

During this period, Leighton, on trips to the Middle East, would scour the local suqs for textiles and pottery, returning to his accommodations happily laden with his finds. He also recruited assistants for the search, such as the Reverend William Wright of the Irish Presbyterian Church in Damascus. "Our most ardent search . . . was for Persian faience," Wright wrote later. "I had discovered the site of the ancient pottery kilns at Damascus, where the inimitable *Kashani* wares had been baked. These consisted of tiles and plates and long-necked jars with blue ground and white flowers, and during the spare hours of a few weeks Leighton was able to lay the foundations of his fine collection."

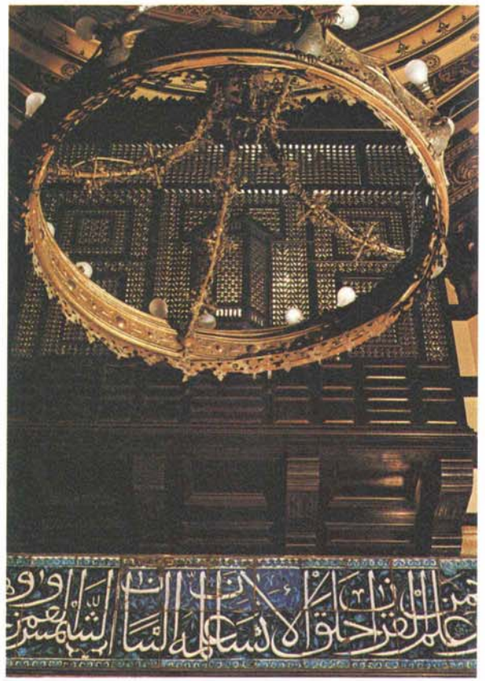
In Damascus, Leighton also found some of the *mashrabiyas* (See *Aramco World*, July – August, 1974) later displayed in the hall. and managed to involve the famous Sir Richard Burton, then acting as British Consul in Damascus, and Sir Caspar Purdon Clarke, a colleague, in his hunt for tiles. Apparently enthusiastic about the quest, Burton at one point sent a letter to Leighton promising to look out for tiles. He also warned Leighton that the value of tiles was now recognized by local traders and that supplies were drying up. Five years later, Burton did send some tiles from Pakistan, and Sir Caspar came through with others, two panels of which were used in the Arab Hall. When Leighton decided to build the hall, therefore, he already had numerous treasures scattered among the unfinished paintings in his Holland Park studio.

For the design of the hall, Leighton turned to architect George Aitchison, a friend who shared Leighton's interest in the Middle East and who, as early as 1857, was lecturing on the importance of color in architecture and extolling the Alhambra complex in Granada as one of the finest examples. It was a perfect choice; Aitchison had also designed the original Holland Park house.

For an artist as successful as Leighton – he would later receive the Royal Institute of British Architects' gold medal for his architectural paintings – the house on Holland Park Road was a very modest establishment until the artist decided that he had to "do something with these tiles" and began discussing it with Aitchison. Out of those discussions came an extension to the ground floor that Leighton, Aitchison and others transformed into London's lovely Arab Hall.

The hall, to be precise, is not "Arab" or even Middle Eastern; it resembles, rather, the 12th century Sicilo-Islamic palace of La Zisa, Palermo (See page 22). Indeed, Walter Crane – the Victorian illustrator who devised the mosaic frieze for the hall – wrote later that he had never realized how similar the plan and proportions were until he himself saw the Palermo reception room.

Essentially the Leighton House hall is some 30 feet square, placed at the end of a wide passage



leading from the entrance hall. Two shallow bays face each other across a small pool and fountain, so often found in Islamic domestic architecture. Opposite the hall passage is another alcove, or as Mrs. Haweis described it, "a fine *alhacen* of carved wood . . . with its four rare Persian enamels of women's figures. . ."

These are four fine examples of early 17th century Kubachi underglaze painted tiles with male and female figures. Also set into the wooden frontage, there are two 13th to 14th century Kashan star-shaped tiles, decorated with luster and underglaze cobalt blue, both now heavily varnished.

The man responsibile for organizing the layout of the tile panels was the potter William de Morgan, whose enthusiasm for Islamic design motifs can clearly be seen in his work. Where there were damaged or missing tiles, de Morgan designed and produced substitutes to complete the separate schemes; they are identifiable from the original only by the different glaze quality and curvature of the drawn line.

The tile work also included the staircase panel in the main entrance hall and the deep turquoise blue tiles lining the passage walls leading to the Arab Hall. In an interview given by Lord Leighton to the *Strand Magazine* in 1892, it was reported that these blue tiles were among the first de Morgan ever produced. Whether this is true or not, it is apparent that the brilliant color was suggested by the bordering of some of the Syrian tiles themselves.

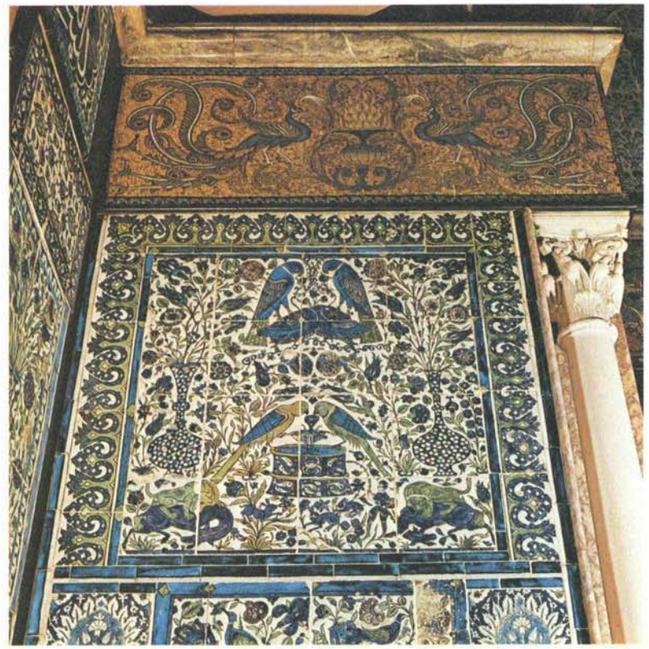
The cost of the tile work is not known, but his biographer, Mrs. Stirling, said that de Morgan lost some £500 in the Leighton House venture. On the other hand, there was the pleasure of working with some of the finest and rarest examples of late 16th and 17th century Syrian tiles.

Where the panels came from is uncertain; five major panels are definitely of Syrian origin, including a remarkable one above the wooden facade, depicting a fishing scene with fountains, cranes, crabs, fish and turtles moving among the water plants and flowers. And to the left of the hall when entering – on the left of the screened window – is another rare panel of Syrian workmanship, presumably from a private home; it shows two green parrots, traditionally held to be the birds of Paradise, perched on a fountain in which fish and crabs swim, while two birds of prey above and two lions below attack their prey against a floral background. A small figure of a huntsman attempting to ensnare rabbits completes the scene.

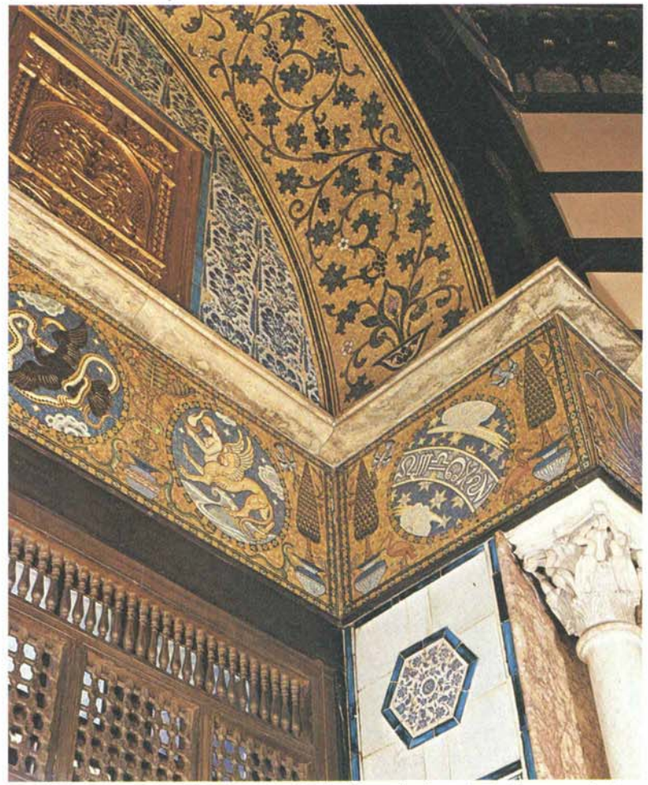
One of the most beautiful designs in these Syrian tiles can be seen on the other side of the south windowed wall. Just below the inscription there is a panel with an ogee arch form, with tulips, wild hyacinths and carnations painted on the white background of the spandrels. The graceful but formal arabesques intertwining over the blue ground within the arch curves are equal to any of the finest Turkish counterparts.

There are also some Turkish tiles in the Arab Hall and the entrance, but most date from the 17th century – not the finest period of Iznik production. The largest panel is set above the south window alcove. Otherwise they are found in polygonal arrangements on the side walls of the porches or in the centers of the staircase and hall panels.

Above the tiles, on three of the four sides, runs the mosaic frieze designed by Walter Crane on the basis of a photograph of La Zisa sent to him by Lord Leighton. Crane sent sketches of his plan for the frieze to Leighton and received an enthusiastic reply:



*Opposite: verses from Sura 55 of the Koran glow from the Syrian tile panel above the Arab hall's entrance. Above: parrots, falcons and flowers decorate this panel of tiles, also from Syria.*



*Walter Crane's mosaic frieze across the hall's north alcove is similar to one in La Ziza, a Norman royal residence in Sicily.*

Dear Crane, – many thanks. Cleave to the Sphinx and the Eagle, they are *delightful*. I don't like the Duck-women. By the bye, what do you say to making the circles in the returns *starry* heavens instead of another sun and moon? – In haste great, yours sincerely . . ."

His suggestions were accepted. The so-called "Duck-women" – the Sirens luring the Argonauts to their death – were replaced by mermaid figures and there is no repetition of the sun and moon in the alcoves. Peacocks, parrots and deer face each other amid swirling arabesque plant stems, but the heraldic confrontations are enlivened by the inclusion of mice, pelicans, squirrels and cats with twitching tails. Although the flat setting of the glass cubes impedes their reflective quality, Frederick Leighton was delighted with the result and, had money been available, would have "let loose" both Crane and Burne-Jones on a mosaic composition for the dome of the hall.

Since the money was not available he apparently settled for gilt or gold painting and today even that does not exist; the interior of the dome now is decorated with a painted design similar to 19th century embellishments of Turkish mosque domes. There is a row of screens piercing the cupola but only one, it seems, originated in Syria. Leighton had made a special trip there to buy five windows, once the plans for the Arab Hall had been agreed upon, and the Reverend Mr. Wright remembered some years later that they were obtained from a local mosque in the city. But four of the screens arrived in London irreparably damaged and a London firm reproduced them in plaster and colored glass.

The rest of the decoration in the hall was the work of Aitchison. The chandelier with bird-forms, wings outstretched, the black honeycomb molding with details picked out in gold – a favorite color device of his – above the squinches, the painted friezes in the zone of transition just below the dome-springing, were meticulously worked according to his drawings. The forms of the columns and their alabaster or gilt capitals were executed to his plan, with modeling by two of the leading sculptors of the day. And although cost precluded the use of Italian marbles for the shafts and fountain basin, Aitchison was determined to show the richness of color inherent in marble; he therefore used marble from Cornwall, Belgium and elsewhere.

The floor itself is covered with a mosaic composition with borders of tight scrolls encircling bunches of grapes, restrained in design and in color according to one of Aitchison's dictums: "In marble mosaic, black and white has always a dignified effect, if a proper proportion between them is adhered to." Aitchison also used marble for the pool and fountain, originally white but quickly replaced – when found to leak – by the present octagonal pool of Belgian black marble.

But there were some practical problemswith the pool; guests had the infuriating – and undignified – habit of falling into the shallow water when strolling about the hall during the weekly open house on Sunday afternoons, or attending the annual musical evening held in the spring.

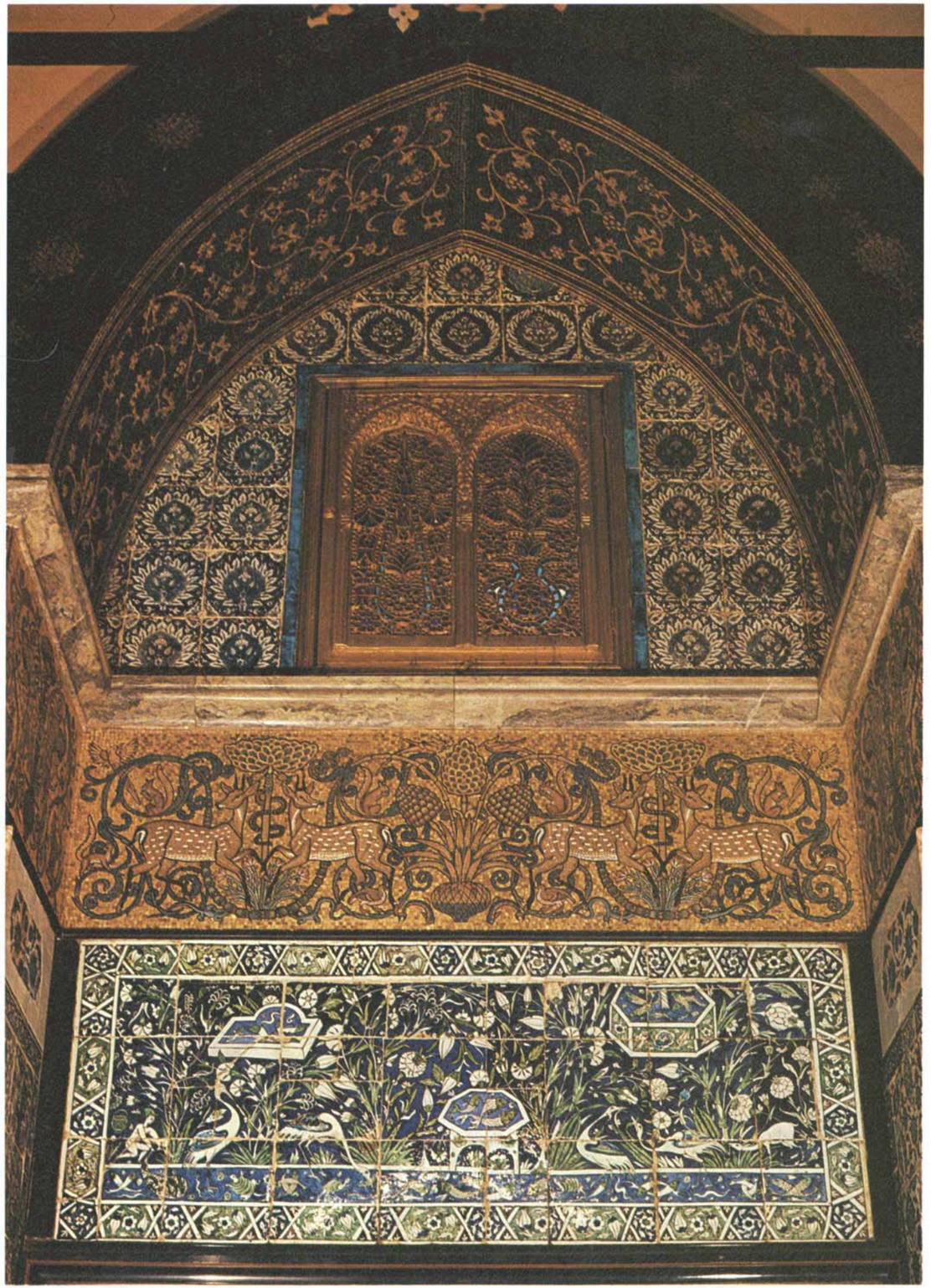
Still, the Arab Hall cast a spell on the visitor. In the journals of the day, and in the diaries and memoirs of Leighton's acquaintances, the Arab Hall was described as conjuring up "the recollection of the fairest scenes and grandest palaces described in the Arabian Nights," or as "quite the eighth wonder of the world . . . all lined with precious Persian tiles and mosaics . . . as good almost as a Ravenna church."

It is extremely difficult, obviously, to assess the exact influence of the Arab Hall on other British interiors of the 19th century. But just as Brighton Pavilion gave royal assent to Eastern decoration, the Arab Hall – in the residence of the highly respected President of the Royal Academy of Arts – gave an artistic assent. And although the fashion was in decline by 1900 – as far as architecture and interior furnishings were concerned – the Islamic themes continued to be used on pottery and glass forms, on metalwork, on textiles and in dress fashion. Perhaps more importantly, the eastern theme also stimulated a wide interest in color in, for example, wallpaper. Designers, architects and critics grew louder and louder, calling for the rejection of "smudgy terracottas, crude greens, ghastly lemons and dull greys and browns that are so liberally provided by the usual paperhanger" and for the adoption of "real sealing-wax reds, deep oranges, clear yellows and beautiful blues," as one critic put it.

George Aitchison, of course, had long been a champion of that cause, as he made clear in a lecture in 1895. He was, actually, describing his ideal of architectural decoration, but the image of London's Arab Hall was surely in his mind:

". . . the ground of the cornices will shine with eternal colors, the piers will be enriched with sparkling panels, and friezes of gold will run the length of our buildings; monuments will be of marble and enamel, and mosaics will make all admire color and movement. This will not be false and paltry luxury; it will be opulence, it will be sincerity."

*Patricia Lesley Baker is a graduate of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. A specialist in Islamic history, art and architecture, she lectures in British universities, did research for television programs on the arts of Islam and was a consultant for London's World of Islam Festival in 1976.*



# ARAMCO WORLD INDEX 1975-1978

COMPILED BY ANNABELLE CASS

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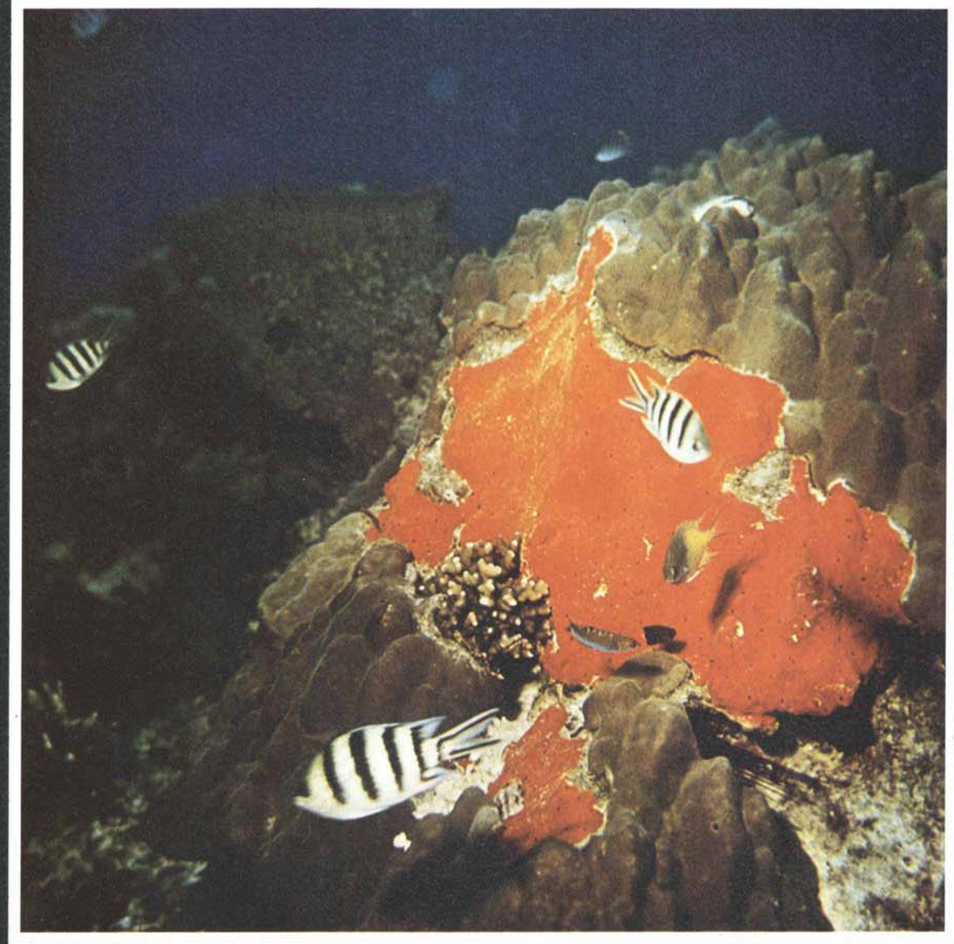


# CORAL IN THE GULF

WRITTEN BY ROBERT ARNDT
PHOTOGRAPHED BY LUDWIG SILLNER

As one does in dreams, floating effortlessly above the bright and unknown treasures of a new world, the diver hangs above a coral reef.

From the sunlit reef platform only a few feet below, down into darker and deeper zones at the foot of the reef, the strange shapes of a stone forest provide cover for small, brilliantly colored darting fish, and for larger ones that loom through the landscape like finny zeppelins. Squeaks, chirps, crackles, grunts and crunches make a continuous background of noise that reinforces the impression of a busy world hurrying about its business unconcerned – a world too interesting to leave unexplored.

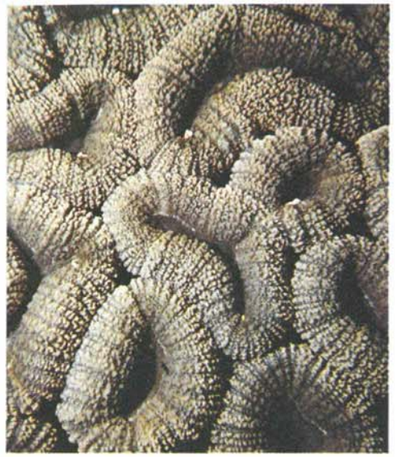
Coral reefs are the mightiest structures ever built by any life form on this planet. The largest – Australia's 1,200-mile-long Great Barrier Reef – contains more than 5,000 cubic miles of solid rock: limestone deposited a molecule at a time by small flower-like animals called polyps. They are the architects and landlords of the reef, for they created the habitat that shelters hundreds of other animal species – from shellfish that live imprisoned inside the coral's stony branches, to harpoon-throwing snails, to the pastel-colored coral-crunching parrot fish.

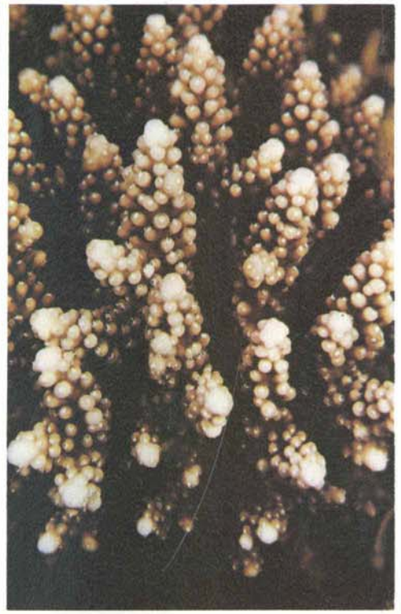
This is very much an inhabited and dynamic world, and the relationships among its creatures are complex. Indeed, the coral reef is the sea world's most complicated biotope, a word meaning a region with uniform environmental conditions for the plants and animals that live there. A coral reef is very high in the number of different species it includes. And its inhabitants exhibit a tremendous variety of diverging adaptations and fine specializations that suits each of them neatly for its particular role in the coral reef ecology.

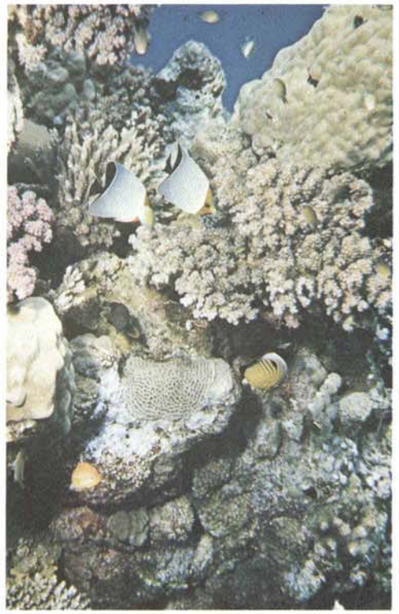
That ecology is now a little better understood than it was, thanks to Aramco scientists' studies of the untypical coral reefs of the Arabian Gulf which were included in a 285-page illustrated book called *Biotopes* of the *Western Arabian Gulf.: Marine Life* and *Environment of Saudi Arabia.* Coral reefs occur in all the world's warm oceans where conditions are right – in particular where water salinity is not too high and water temperature does not vary too widely during the year – and the reefs of the Red Sea are famous for their variety and color. Yet large and healthy coral reefs and coral islands are also common in the salty, shallow Gulf, where conditions are far from ideal for their growth.

*Turbinaria is a shade-tolerant coral species that forms large "elephant-ear" growths at the base of the reef.*

*Massive corals, below, branching corals like the* Acropora *species at right, encrusting corals and foliose species like* Turbinaria *all grow in mixed stands in the Gulf to produce a richly varied habitat. One of the most characteristic fish of the coral reefs is this small grouper,* Cephalopholis miniatus, *opposite.*







In adversity, character is revealed; that generalization is often useful in studying ecological systems. Thanks to the Gulf's adversely high salinities and adversely large swings in water temperature (see *Aramco World*, July-August, 1978), coral reefs there are less overwhelming than elsewhere in the world in the numbers of species of coral and associated creatures they support – and they are thus easier to study. Where a Pacific Ocean reef may support as many as 3,000 different species, a typical Gulf coral reef is home to between a third and half as many.

Even so, that is about twice as many different species as the Aramco study found in any other Gulf biotope. What accounts for the richness of life forms and the variety of species that make coral reefs a favorite goal of both amateur divers and scientists?

Coral polyps, according to their species, lay down their limestone deposits in different patterns; each type of coral has its own unique growth pattern that produces a characteristically shaped structure. Many of the creatures that live in, on or among the shapes exploit the structural peculiarities for shelter in their own, similarly individual, ways.

Branching corals, for example, are home to fish, shrimp and crabs that shelter in their branches. Massive brain corals are inhabited by shellfish that bore into the limestone and make their homes in the little caverns they excavate; some barnacles, and the females of a crab species, allow themselves to be overgrown, enclosed, protected and – ultimately – entombed by the living coral. Coral crabs, spiny lobsters and many fish species live in the innumerable nooks and crannies formed by the intermingling of coral species of different shapes, as do brilliant sponges, sea squirts, and some sea fans.

Other animals rely on the coral for food. Parrot fish feed directly on the living coral, biting off chunks of limestone, crunching it up with their horny beaks like children eating peanuts, digesting the living "skin" of polyps, and voiding fine white coral sand. Other species of fish poach the tiny plankton animals captured by the coral polyps' tentacles. Still other creatures inhabit the reef because the species they prey on live there: the beautiful textile cone snail prowls the coral for fish and other active animals, which it harpoons with a poisoned dart and swallows whole. Surgeon-fish, carrying scalpel-sharp bony knives on their tails, graze on the algae that grow on top of the sunlit coral.

The sunlight is important, for all reef-forming coral species are, literally, inhabited. Within the polyp's tissues are microscopic photosynthetic algae; these algae consume the carbon dioxide that the plankton-eating polyps give out, and themselves liberate oxygen that the polyps can use. It is the rapid removal of carbon dioxide by the algae, scientists have found, that makes it possible for the polyps to deposit limestone fast enough to outgrow their competitors for seafloor elbow room. Thus if there is no light for the algae, there is no reef-building by the polyps; coral reefs only exist in water shallow enough and clear enough for sunlight to penetrate it – 30 to 50 feet of depth in the Arabian Gulf.

Because different coral species – with their symbiotic algae – have different light requirements, a coral reef with many sorts of corals growing on it exhibits "depth zonation," with bright-light corals growing near the surface and corals that need less light found further down toward the base of the reef. All the various creatures associated with the coral are also "depth zoned" – they are found only where their coral is. Species of fish, crabs, snails, worms and so on are thus geographically spread out around the reef, which permits more different species to be in the same general area at the same time, and contributes to the enormous diversity of reef life.

Especially in the northern part of Saudi Arabia's Gulf coast, coral reefs are numbered in the hundreds. Most of them are platform reefs, flat-topped structures that rise from the sea floor to just below the low-tide water surface, but there are also fringing reefs, bordering parts of the shore, and a few coral islands. Few have been explored by divers, and fewer still thoroughly studied by Aramco's ecologists and marine biologists. They lie there, sunlit, teeming and productive, waiting for explorers from the small dry-land fraction of our planet.

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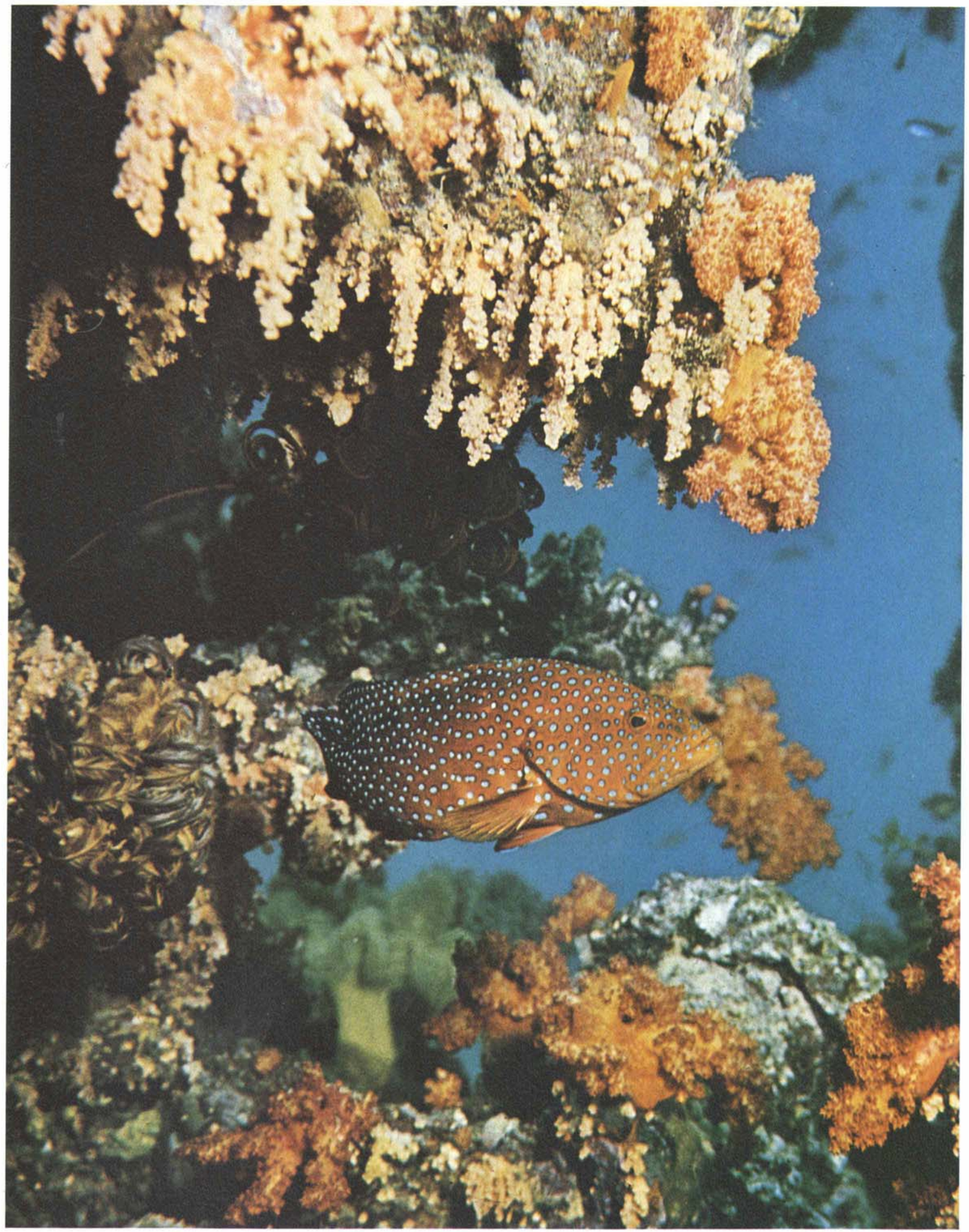
*Robert Arndt is Assistant Editor of* Aramco World.





"The prosperity of the island surpasses description. It is... a daughter of Spain..."

# MUSLIM SICILY

WRITTEN BY GIAN LUIGI SCARFIOTTI WITH PAUL LUNDE
PHOTOGRAPHED BY GIAN LUIGI SCARFIOTTI

Returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca in 1184, the famous Muslim traveler Ibn Jubair was shipwrecked in the Straits of Messina off the coast of Sicily. The inhabitants of Messina, hearing calls of distress, immediately launched their boats, hoping to profit from the situation by charging large fees for rescuing the passengers. The poorer Muslim pilgrims were unable to pay the high fees demanded, and were at a loss to know what to do.

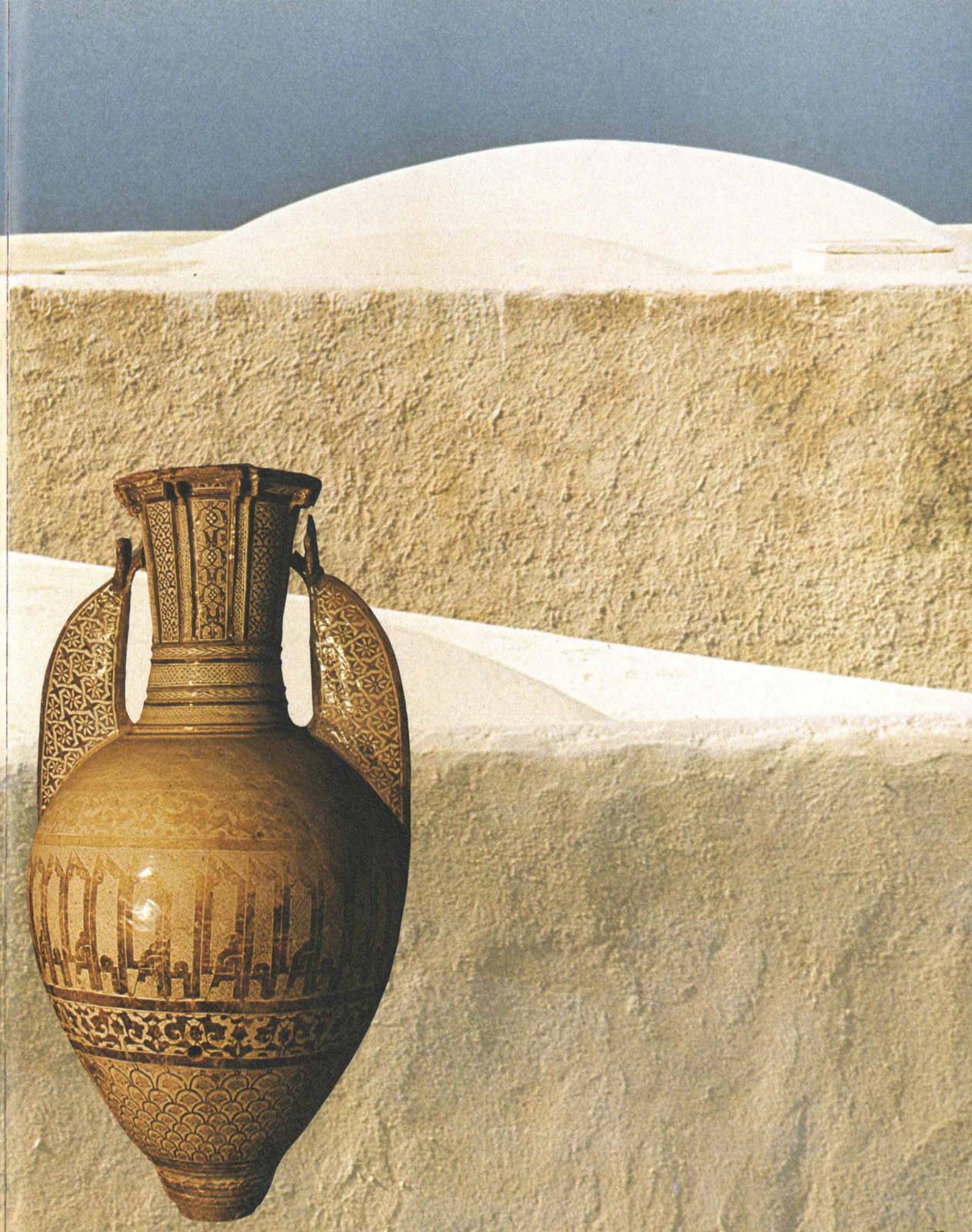
At that point, Ibn Jubair reports, an authoritative figure rode down to the shore and issued an order. And the Muslims found themselves carried to shore free.

Bewildered by this turn of events, Ibn Jubair went to thank their deliverer, and discovered that he was the ruler of Sicily himself who, although a Norman Christian, welcomed Ibn Jubair and the other Muslims and promised them protection during their sojourn in his dominion.

As the Norman Christians had ruled Sicily for 100 years, Ibn Jubair was astounded at this reception. And there were other surprises to come. He found that even the Christians spoke Arabic, that the government officials were still largely Muslim and that the heritage of some 200 previous years of Muslim rule of Sicily was still intact.

The Normans, originally, were from Scandinavia. In their search for new lands to conquer, and sun to bask in, they had wandered into southern Italy, and seen that the land was to their liking. Although their numbers were small, the Normans were formidable military men: they did not hesitate to take what they wanted, and what they wanted above all was that beautiful and productive island that had been ruled by the Muslims for some 200 years.

The Norman kingdom of Sicily is a bright spot in the turbulent history of the Middle Ages. Although Norman rule coincided with the very period that produced the Crusades – the first took place four years after the Normans conquered Sicily – they governed their ethnically, religiously and linguistically mixed population with a degree of tolerance and sympathy unequaled in the Middle Ages and rarely found today. But their achievements in statecraft, administration, learning, architecture, agriculture and science were largely an inheritance from Sicily's Islamic past. Credit must certainly go to



the imagination and energy of such men as Roger II, sponsor of Islam's great geographer al-Idrisi (see *Aramco World*, July-August 1977), but they could have accomplished little without the Muslim inhabitants.

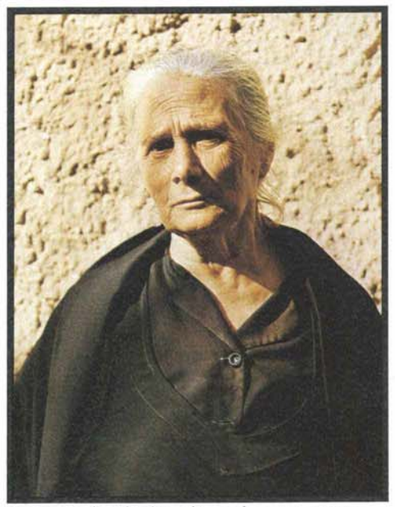
Muslim interest in Sicily goes back to the very threshold of Islamic history. The first military expedition against the island took place during the caliphate of 'Uthman, only 20 years after the death of the Prophet, Muhammad, when Mu'awiya, the governor of Syria, sent a naval expedition. This was an extension of the battles that were taking place in the east, where the most formidable enemy the Muslims faced was the Byzantine empire. Sicily was a Byzantine province and from its strategic location in the Mediterranean the Byzantines were able to control shipping and launch naval attacks against the coastal cities of the Muslim Levant and North Africa.

Through the years, many efforts were made by the Muslims to invade Sicily, but it was not until June of 827 that they finally obtained a foothold by taking Mazara on the western end of the island.

That first attack was launched from the Muslim province of Ifriqiyya – roughly corresponding to modern Tunisia – which was then governed by the Aghlabids, a dynasty going back to the days of Harun al-Rashid. Unable to tolerate Byzantine control of the seaways, and learning that Sicily was torn with internal strife, the Aghlabids decided the moment was propitious for a full-scale attack. Oddly, the man chosen to lead this expedition had never wielded a sword in his life, still less led men into battle. His name was Asad ibn al-Furat ("Lion, son of the Euphrates"), and he was a respected *qadi* and scholar from the city of Kairouan. Before embarking, Asad ibn al-Furat addressed his troops in the *ribat* – the fortified religious hospice – of the port of Sousse in what is surely one of the most remarkable exhortations ever given by a military commander:

"There is no god but God alone, Who has no peer! I swear, O soldiers, that I have not been appointed to this command by my father, or my grandfather, nor do I know of anyone to whom such a thing has happened, for I have been given this appointment because of my achievements with the pen, not the sword. I urge you all to spare no effort, no fatigue, in searching out wisdom and learning! Seek it out and store it up, add to it, and persevere through all difficulties, and you will be assured of a place both in this life, and in the life to come!"

Unlike Spain, which fell like ripe fruit, the conquest of Sicily, after Mazara fell, took 75 years. But immigration and settlement on the land began almost immediately. The island was divided into three administrative districts, the names of which survive to this day. Val di Mazara, the first to be established, comprised the western end of the island; its capital was Palermo. The central regions, including Syracuse, were called the Val di Noto, while the remaining area of the island – the last to be conquered – was called the Val Demone, and included Catania and Messina. The word "val" is derived from the Arabic word meaning "province".



*Opposite: first built in the sixth century, San Giovanni degli Eremiti in Palermo was converted to a mosque by the Arabs and became a church again in 1136.*

The history of Sicily under Muslim rule reflected the political changes that were taking place in North Africa and further east. The Aghlabids were succeeded by the Fatimids, who in turn gave way to the Kalbids. But the unique achievements of the period were not political, and are hardly mentioned in the works of the historians. Under the Muslims, Sicily once more became a granary to the world, as it had been under the Romans. While both the Byzantines and the Romans before them had been interested almost solely in the cultivation of grain, however, the Arabs introduced many new crops: cotton, hemp, date palms, sugar cane, mulberries and citrus fruits. The cultivation of these crops was made possible by new irrigation techniques

brought in by the conquerors. These innovations, especially the breaking up of the large estates and the redistribution of land, meant an end to the long years of economic and social depression. Sicily began to bloom.

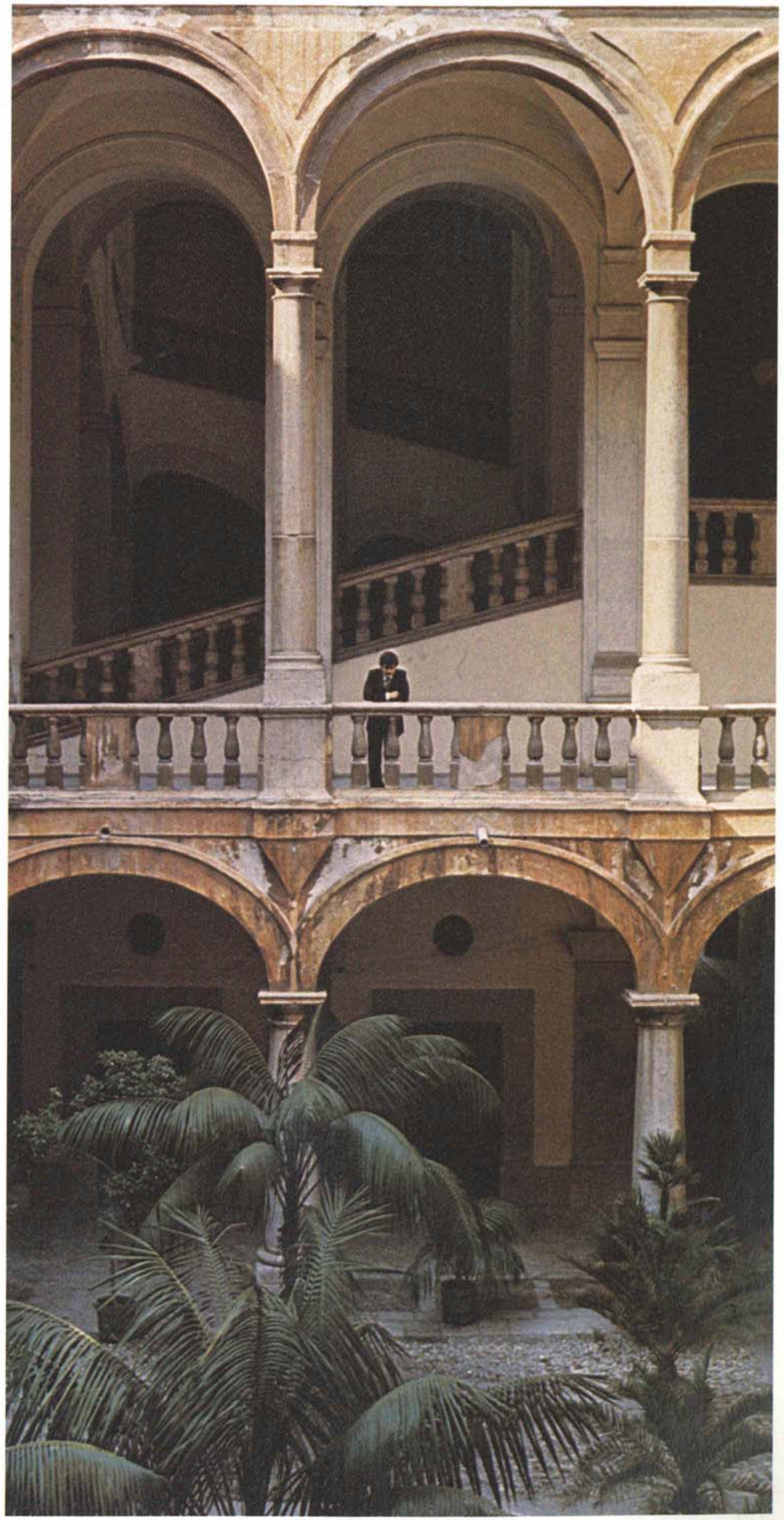
The revolution in agriculture generated a number of related industries, such as textiles, sugar manufacture, rope-making, matting, silk, and paper – the latter introduced to Europe by way of Sicily. The beautiful silks of Sicily became internationally known, and garments made of them were the prized possessions of both Muslim and Christian rulers. This industry continued to flourish under the Normans – and Sicilian silks carried an embroidered mark, the *tiraz*, that guaranteed their provenance. One example which has survived – the "Mantle of Roger II", now housed in the National Museum of Vienna – suggests the richness and quality of this work.

As they had wherever they went, the Muslims also extended and beautified such cities as Messina, Syracuse, Sciacca, Mazara, and Castrogiovanni. But the finest was Palermo, called Al-Banurmu or simply al-Madina, "the City," which Ibn Jubair described in glowing terms:

"The capital is endowed with two gifts, splendor and wealth. It contains all the real and imagined beauty that anyone could wish. Splendor and grace adorn the piazzas and the countryside; the streets and highways are wide, and the eye is dazzled by the beauty of its situation. It is a city full of marvels, with buildings similar to those of Cordoba, built of limestone. A permanent stream of water from four springs runs through the city. There are so many mosques that they are impossible to count. Most of them also serve as schools. The eye is dazzled by all this splendor."

Although dimmed by age, modern Palermo still retains traces of that splendor – not only in the few surviving monuments of the time, but in the layout of the streets. The plan of the Arab city has been meticulously reconstructed by Professor Rosario La

*Left: Arab architectural influence was still strong in 1172 when the Cathedral of Monreale was built. Right: Palermo's Palazzo Reale was rebuilt by the Arabs in the ninth century; today it houses Sicily's regional government.*



Duca. The center of the Norman city was the Palazzo Reale, still known locally as "il Cassaro", from the Arabic word *al-qasr*, meaning "fortress". Not far from the port is the area known as the Kalsa. It dates back to the year 937, when an outer line of defense was built against any attack from the sea. In Arabic it was known as al-Khalisa – hence Kalsa. It was encircled by a high wall with four gates, and formed the administrative center of Sicily. Inside the walls were a richly decorated mosque, barracks for the troops, the arsenal, and the headquarters of the government ministries.

Nowhere is the feel of Arab Sicily more alive than in the outdoor markets of Palermo. Although the number of these has been reduced by later town planning, the ones that survive – particularly those of Capo and Ballaro – are organized like the *suqs* of North Africa. (See Aramco World, September-October, 1978). If one imagines the inhabitants of modern Palermo in long flowing robes, the illusion is complete, for the features of the people, their methods of salesmanship, the sights and smells, all are evocative of the Arab world.

The markets are not the only palaces that preserve a living trace of the past. Many street names are still recognizably Arabic, and in some cases not only the original name, but the function, has been preserved. The district of the Lattarini has harbored perfumers and grocers since the ninth century. The Arabs called it *suq al-'attarin*, the market of the perfumers, and it was situated near the mosque of Ibn Siqlab, described by Ibn Hawqal in the 10th century.

The Muslims' architectural legacy is more difficult to detect; as with so many other things, Sicily's architecture is a melange of styles and periods. The Palazzo Reale, for example, rests on Phoenician foundations, on top of which the Romans built, to be followed by the Byzantines, then the Arabs, then the Normans, the Swabians, and finally the Spanish. And the Palermo Cathedral, originally a Byzantine church and then a mosque, still bears – on one of the columns at the entry to the Cathedral – a verse from the Koran. The column itself once supported the roof of a Roman temple.

There are only two wholly Arab works of architecture left in Sicily today. One is the castle known as La Favara, from its Arabic name al-Fawwara, the gushing spring. It was the residence of the Emir Ja'far (997–1019), whose name is commemorated in a street sign that leads to the Castle. It was restored by King Roger, who built a small church within its precincts.

The other surviving example of Arab architecture is the baths of Cefala Diana, 30 kilometers outside Palermo on the road to Agrigento. Although now in poor repair, these baths were still in use as recently as 50 years ago. They were built in the 11th century, and were visited by Ibn Jubair.

The Arab presence in Sicily was the stimulus for the tremendous upsurge in artistic activity which characterized Norman Sicily, especially during the reign of Roger II. But as Arab and Norman activity were so inextricably intertwined, it is clearer to call the results "Arabo-Norman," althouth in fact it did not end with the collapse of Norman Sicily.

*Decorative stonework in the Cathedral of Monreale.*

Earlier generations of scholars were inclined to consider the art and architecture of Norman Sicily as more Norman than Arab. But Professor Giuseppe Bellafiore, dean of architectural history at the University of Palermo, has written in a recent book: ". . . the purely Norman element in Arabo-Norman architecture is less than the name might suggest. The Norman rulers had the tact and the foresight to accept, and even like, what they found. Yet they retained the tenuous links which they had with the land of their origin. The strength and efficiency of the Norman administration derived from its policy of deliberate flexibility toward the existing Muslim order on the island. Thus culture in general, and artistic tradition in particular, owed little to the Norman's own land of origin."

With this in mind, it is easier to understand the legacy of the Arabs in the arts and architecture. Virtually all monuments, the cathedrals, the palaces and castles built under the Normans were Arab in the sense that the craftsmen were Arab, as were the architects. One must also remember that there was a third element in the mixture – the Byzantine, for the Byzantines too contributed to creation of the architectural style so characteristic of Sicily. The Cappella Palatina in the Palazzo Reale is a good example of how all three strands combined to create something new and exciting. The marvelous ceiling with its carved and painted decoration is the work of Arab craftsmen, while the glowing mosaics which adorn the walls of the chapel are purely Byzantine.

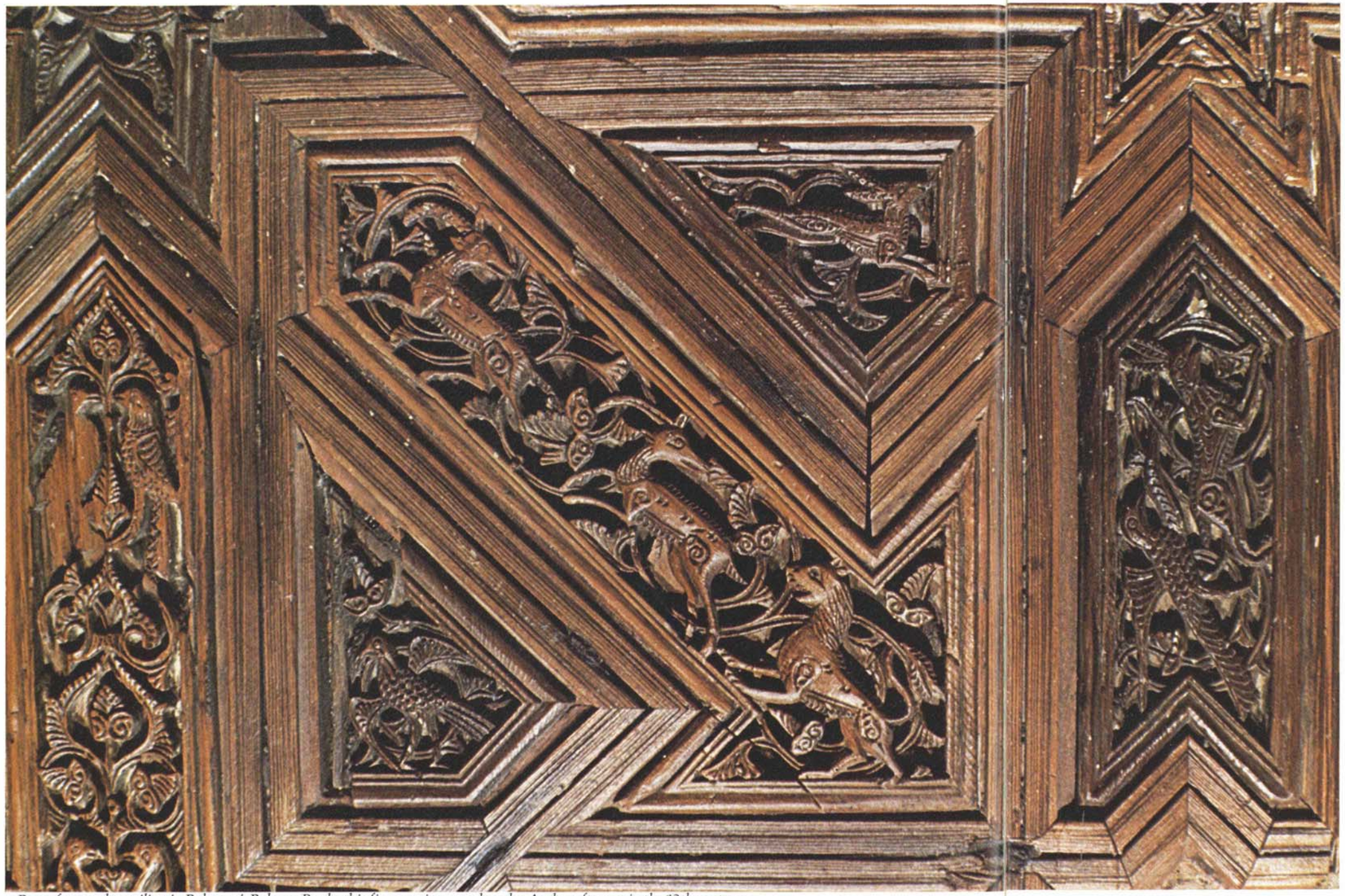
One of the most splendid residences of the Norman kings is the Zisa, whose name conceals the Arabic word al-Aziz, "the mighty". It is currently being restored. The Cuba and the Cubula are now within the city limits of Palermo, but when they were built were in the countryside, and probably served the Norman kings as hunting lodges or summer retreats. Their names are apt, for they are cube-shaped.

Throughout the Val di Mazara are visible traces of the Arab past. The plans of cities like Trapani, Marsala, and Mazara itself recall the men who built them. One district of Mazara is still

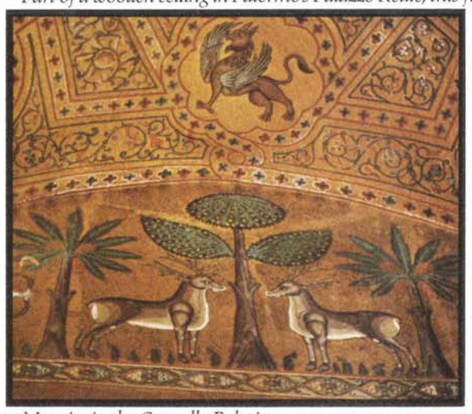


*"Saracen" figures decorate the 16th-century Porta Nuova, one of the city gates of Palermo.*

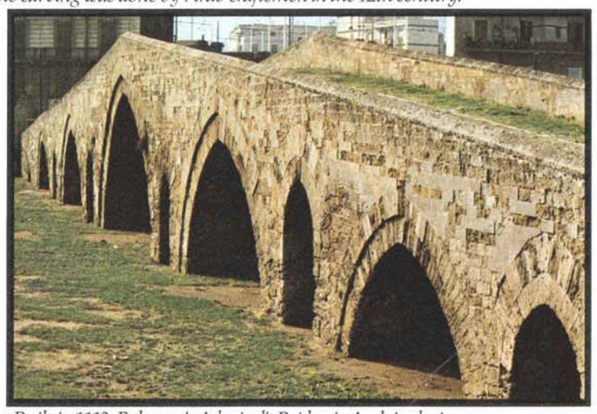
*The port town of Sciacca on Sicily's southwest coast, an agricultural and fishing center today as it was under Arab rule.*



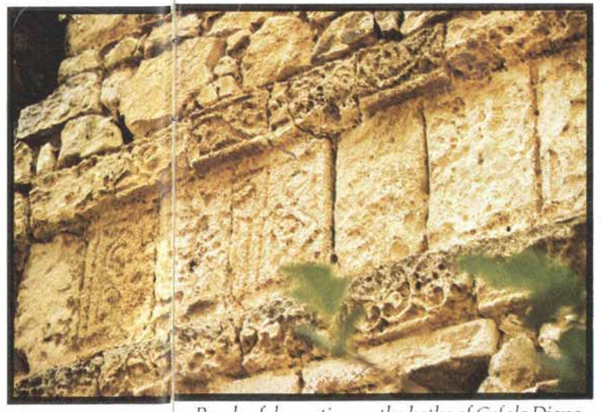
Part of a wooden ceiling in Palermo's Palazzo Reale, this fine carving was done by Arab craftsmen in the 12th century.



Mosaics in the Cappella Palatina.



Built in 1113, Palermo's Admiral's Bridge is Arab in design.



Bands of decoration on the baths of Cefala Diana.

# A Daughter of Spain: Ibn Jubair on Sicily

*In the morning of the 1st day (of Ramadan, Dec. 6 1184) we observed before us the Mountain of Fire, the famous volcano of Sicily . . . A favorable wind then . . . brought us to the mouth of the strait . . . The sea in this strait, which runs between the mainland and the island of Sicily, pours through like the 'bursting of the dam', and from the intensity of the contraction and the pressure, boils like a cauldron. . . .*

*"When it came to midnight on Sunday the 3rd of the blessed month (of Ramadan) . . . the sudden cries of the sailors gave us the grievous knowledge that the ship had been driven by the force of the wind towards one of the shore lines and had struck it. At once the captain ordered that the sails be lowered, but the sail on the [main] mast would not come down. . . When they had labored in vain, the captain cut it with a knife . . . [but] the ship stuck by its keel to the ground. . . .*

*"The sun then rose and small boats came out to us. Our cries had fallen on the city, and the King of Sicily . . . himself came out with some of his retinue to survey the affair . . . and this [Christian] King, when he perceived some needy Muslims staring from the ship, . . . ordered that they be given one hundred [pieces] of his coinage in order that they might alight."*

*MESSINA AND PALERMO*

*This city (Messina) is the [market] of the [Christian] merchants, the focus of ships from the world over, and thronging always with companies of travelers by reason of the lowness of prices . . . Its markets are animated and teeming, and it has ample commodities to ensure a luxurious life. Your days and nights in this town you will pass in full security, even though your countenance, your manners and your tongue are strange . . . You will observe ships ranged along the quay like horses lined at their pickets or in their stables . . . . The prosperity of the island surpasses description. It is enough to say that it is a daughter of Spain in the extent of its cultivation, in the luxuriance of its harvests, and in its well-being. . . .*

*"The finest town in Sicily and the seat of its sovereign is known to the Muslims as al-Madina, and to the Christians as Palermo. It has Muslim citizens who possess mosques, and their own markets, in the many suburbs. The rest of the Muslims live in the farms (of the island) and in all its villages and towns, such as Syracuse and others. . . .*

*"The Muslims of this city preserve the remaining evidence of the faith. They keep in repair the greater number of their mosques, and come to prayers at the call of the muezzin. In their own suburbs they live apart from the Christians. The markets are full of them and they are the merchants of the place. . . They have a* qadi *to whom they refer their law-suits, and a . . . mosque where, in this holy month [Ramadan], they assemble under its lamps.*

*"The Christian women of this city follow the fashion of Muslim women, are fluent of speech, wrap their cloaks about them, and are veiled. They go forth on this Feast Day dressed in robes of gold-embroidered silk, wrapped in elegant cloaks, concealed by colored veils, and shod with gilt slippers."*

*THE KING*

*"This King possesses splendid palaces and elegant gardens, particularly in the capital of his kingdom, al-Madina [Palermo]. In Messina he has a palace, white like a dove, which overlooks the shore. . . William is engrossed in the pleasures of his land, the arrangement of its laws, the laying down of procedure, the allocation of the functions of his chief officials, the enlargement of the splendor of the realm, and the display of his pomp, in a manner that resembles the Muslim kings. His kingdom is very large. He pays much attention to his (Muslim) physicians and . . . also takes great care of them. He will even, when told that a physician . . . is passing through his land, order his detainment, and then provide him with means of living so that he will forget his native land . . . . One of the most remarkable things told of him is that he reads and writes Arabic. . . ."*

Travels of Ibn Jubair. *R. J. C. Broadhurst, Jonathan Cape, London, 1952*

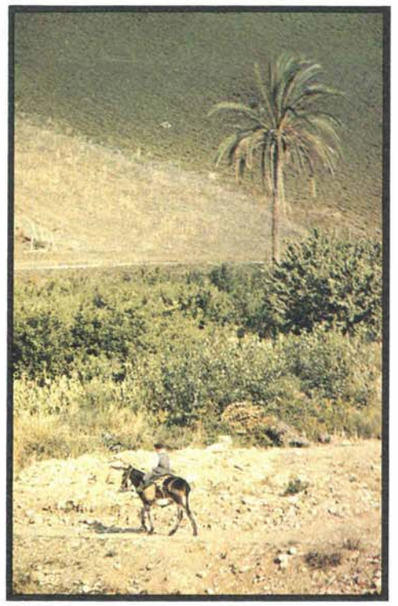
called La Kasbah, and in recent years this quarter has been occupied by Tunisian and Algerian immigrants. The wheel turns full circle.

Sicily of course abounds in Arabic place names, such as Alcantara (from the Arabic *qantara*, bridge), Gibellina, from the Arabic word *jabal*, mountain, and so forth. The dialect spoken in Sicily is full of Arabic words, as one would expect, and some of these, such as *zagara*, the orange flower, have entered standard Italian.

*Colorful battle scenes decorate Sicilian carts.*

But the Arab past of Sicily, which must now be painfully recovered from the few material remains which survive, is nowhere more evident than in the intellectual and scientific legacy which was passed from the Arabs of Sicily to Italy and then to all of Europe. Under the rule of the extraordinary Roger II, Sicily became a clearing house where eastern and western scholars met for the first time since the fall of the Roman Empire, and in an atmosphere of tolerance and beauty exchanged the ideas that were to wake Europe from the dark ages and herald the coming of the Renaissance. The Arab tradition of tolerance toward other religions, perpetuated under the Norman kings, led to free discussion and a climate of intellectual freedom that was the envy of the world. Astronomy, medicine, philosophy and mathematics were the subjects of discussion, and books on these subjects were translated into Latin and became the standard textbooks in the universities that in the 12th century were beginning to be founded throughout Europe. The University of Salerno, founded in the 13th century, became the most famous medical school in the world, and it was there that Avicenna (Ibn Sina) was translated into Latin, and the first scientific dissections were performed.

The people of Sicily have not forgotten their Islamic past. It lives on in the puppet shows, in which beautifully dressed two and three-foot puppets enact the great battles of the past, the legends that were told so long ago in the market places of Palermo and Messina. Professional story tellers – like the *rawis* who until recently throughout the Arab east told the tales of the Banu Hilal and 'Antar ibn Shaddad (see Aramco World, July-August, 1978) – still exist in Sicily, and hold their audiences enthralled as they sit before lively folk paintings depicting the heroes and heroines of their tales.



In Italy the subject of Sicily's Arab past, long neglected despite the pioneering work of the great 19th century historian Michele Amari, has suddenly flowered once more. In 1959 the University of Palermo established once again a chair in Arabic language and literature.

The brilliant past of Sicily is all too often ignored, and still inadequately assessed. But the visitor to the island is immediately touched by a breath of that far-away and exotic culture that once flourished so near the heartland of Europe. The great Sicilian Arab poet Ibn Hamdis, who in his life knew the pain of exile from his beloved island, wrote, more than seven centuries ago:

"I spoke the word Sicily and longing troubled my heart. A man exiled from a paradise can do nothing but tell of the things he has lost."

*Gian Luigi Scarfiotti studied classics in Italy and economics in Switzerland. After six years as director of a company he turned to free-lance writing and photography. Paul Lunde is a staff writer for* Aramco World *specializing in Islamic history.*