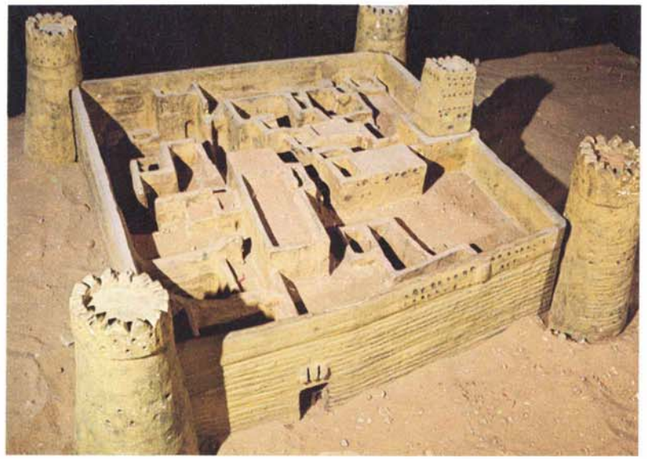

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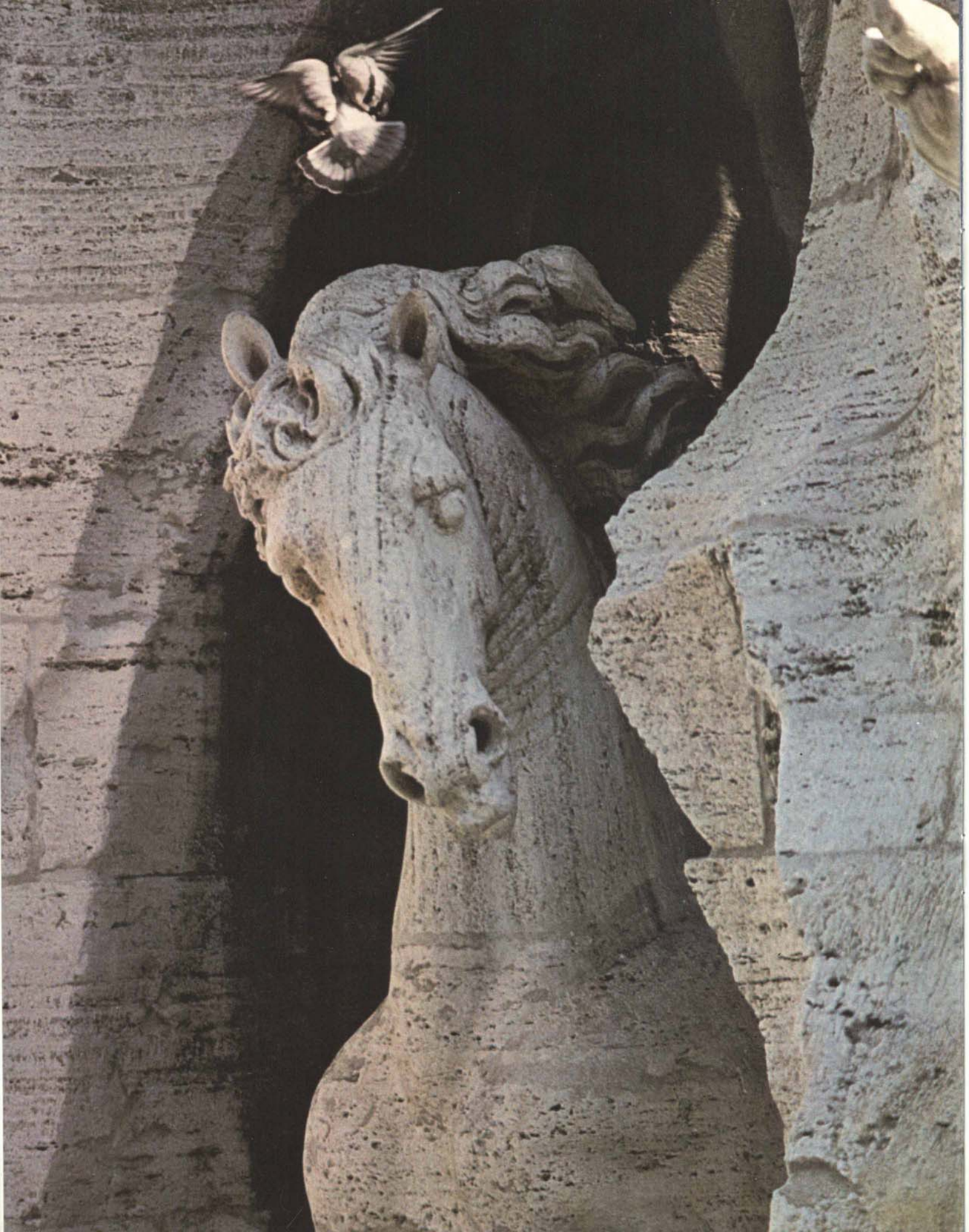
The Beauty of Bedouin Jewelry



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Cover: For an exhibit in London, a model displays different types of Bedouin jewelry from Saudi Arabia; bracelets, rings, necklaces and a *kaffat*, or forehead ornament, of turquoise set in gold bordered with baroque Gulf pearls. She also wears a *jnad* decorated with large silver bells that runs over one shoulder and down to the waist. Photograph by Ian Yeomans. Rear cover: Model of an Arab fort in Saudi Arabia's new Museum of Archeology and Ethnography. Photography by Burnett H. Moody.

◀ In Rome's Piazza Navona, Bernini sculptures surrounded a fountain and an Egyptian obelisk, one of 48 that at one time adorned the city.

Ibn Fadlan and the Midnight Sun

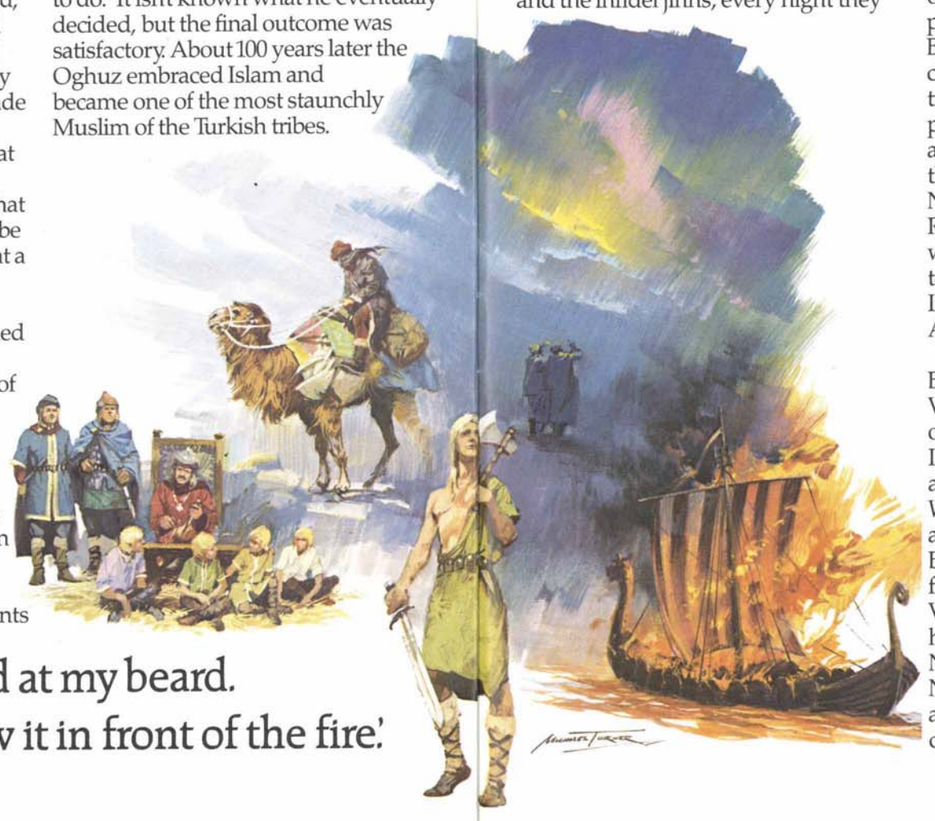
WRITTEN BY CAROLINE STONE
ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL TURNER

Early in A.D. 920, the Abbasid Caliph al-Muqtadir received a letter from the king of the Slavs, who ruled in an area of Russia north of today's Kazan. The king asked the caliph to send someone to instruct him in the True Faith, to teach him the laws of Islam, and to build him a mosque.
As the Slavic lands in those days were both distant and unknown, the caliph pondered the request for more than a year. At last, however, he decided to grant it and on June 21, the next year, the caliph's ambassador Nadhir al-Harami and his retinue set out from Baghdad.
Not much is known about the results of the mission; the ambassador's official report has not survived. But the expedition did produce one fascinating document: a detailed chronicle of the 2,500-mile trip written by the ambassador's secretary, Ibn Fadlan.
This account is one of the first since Roman times to provide a description of the harsh and arid steppes of Russia. It includes, as Ibn Fadlan himself said, "all that I witnessed in the countries of the Turks, the Khazars, the Rus, the Slavs, the Bashkirs and others, regarding their religious beliefs, their kings, and the general state of their affairs." He also described the personal experiences of the trip, particularly the extremes of weather – astonishing to a man from the hot lowlands of Baghdad.

After leaving Bukhara, now in the Soviet Union, Ibn Fadlan was hardly able to believe the cold as they headed north – some 400 miles – and spent three months in "al-Jurjaniya", near modern Kungrad just south of the Aral Sea.
"I was told that two men had set out with a dozen camels intending to load them with wood in the forest, but they forgot to take flint and steel with them. They had to spend the night without fire and by morning they and their camels were dead from the violence of the cold. I saw how much the intense cold makes itself felt in this country... the streets and markets are empty and one can walk almost anywhere without meeting a soul. On leaving the *hammam* and going back to my house, I looked at my beard. It was a single lump of ice and I had to thaw it in front of the fire. I slept... wrapped in clothes and furs, but in spite of that my cheek stuck to my pillow. In this country I saw... the earth split and great crevices form through the intensity of the cold, and I saw a huge tree split into two halves for the same reason."

At last, in February, the Amu-Darya River began to thaw and Ibn Fadlan's party made preparations to set out northeastwards. They bought shaggy Bactrian camels and huge quantities of food and, despite the warnings of the locals, who said they would never return, set out again. They soon found, Ibn Fadlan admits, that the locals had not exaggerated. When they reached the area north of the Caspian Sea they found that the cold of the journey made the previous months seem "like the days of summer." They also found that they had to dress more warmly:
"Each of us had on a tunic and over that a kaftan and over that a sheepskin robe and over that a felt cloak and over that a burnoose – after which only our two eyes showed. We also wore a pair of ordinary trousers and a pair of fur lined ones, slippers, light boots, and over those boots more boots, so that each of us on mounting his camel found he could hardly move because of all the clothes."

So they traveled until they came into the land of the Oghuz Turks, between the Caspian Sea and the Ural Mountains. The Oghuz, Ibn Fadlan said, "were nomads, possessors of tents of hair, who move from place to place. Their tents are to be seen now here, now there, as is the way of nomads, depending on their wanderings. They live in the greatest poverty..."
On the other hand, Ibn Fadlan noticed, the Oghuz owned vast herds of animals. "I saw people who owned 10,000 horses and 100,000 sheep," he wrote.
Ibn Fadlan was also distressed to learn that the Oghuz knew little of Islam and attempted to read them the Koran and explain the rudiments of the faith to them. Later, when he reached the tents of Etrek, the Oghuz general, Ibn Fadlan presented letters urging Etrek to convert to Islam; the letters were from Nadhir al-Harami, who was traveling by another route.
Etrek's response was not very satisfactory. He said to the interpreter: "I don't want to say anything until your return journey, when I will write to the caliph and tell him what I have decided to do." It isn't known what he eventually decided, but the final outcome was satisfactory. About 100 years later the Oghuz embraced Islam and became one of the most staunchly Muslim of the Turkish tribes.



'On...going back to my house, I looked at my beard.
It was a single lump of ice and I had to thaw it in front of the fire.'

Moving northwest into the area between the Ural and the Volga rivers, Ibn Fadlan came into the territory of the Pechenegs, another Turkish tribe, and eventually, on May 12, 922, after nearly 11 months of travel, reached the tents of the king of the Slavs and presented the caliph's letter. He also distributed gifts, including "scents, cloth and pearls intended for his wife..."

During the following days, the Baghdad mission discussed religion – and money. The king wanted the caliph to give him money for a fortress as well as for a mosque. Ibn Fadlan pointed out that the country was rich. The king countered that money which was given him by the caliph would be blessed and the castle built with it would be sure of victory. They agreed to disagree.

During this period, Ibn Fadlan also observed and explored the surroundings, and obviously believed in finding explanations for phenomena new to him. He was very much impressed by the Northern Lights, for example, and asked the king about them. "He maintained that his ancestors used to say: 'They are the believing jinns and the infidel jinns; every night they fight and have done so since the Creation...'"
In this land of the midnight sun, Ibn Fadlan was struck by the short Arctic nights – and the impact this had on the Muslim need to pray five times a day. "One day I went to my tent in order to talk with the king's tailor, who was originally from Baghdad. We talked for less time than it takes to read a seventh of the Koran, while we waited for the call to evening prayer. Suddenly we heard the call and went out of the tent; day was breaking. I said to the muezzin: 'What prayer did you call?' 'The dawn prayer,' he said. 'And the evening prayer?' 'We say it with the sunset one.' 'And during the night?' 'The night is as you see. It has been even shorter than tonight, for it has already begun to lengthen.'"

Ibn Fadlan goes on to give a great deal more interesting information on the country, its flora and fauna, its social customs, the food and drink and dress of the various tribes and so on. His descriptions are extremely lively and his accuracy, wherever it can be checked, amazing. Unlike later medieval travelers, whose accounts tend to run riot with implausible detail, Ibn Fadlan mentions only one marvel: the bones of a "giant" – possibly the remains of a mammoth.
But the most interesting sections of his chronicle deal with another people who traded with the Slavs: "the Rus" – probably one of the Scandinavian tribes and in any case a tribe later involved in the founding of the city-states of Novgorod and Kiev, the heartland of Old Russia. The most famous of these tribes were the Vikings, who at that time were terrorizing the coasts of England and Ireland and even raiding as far as North Africa and the Mediterranean.

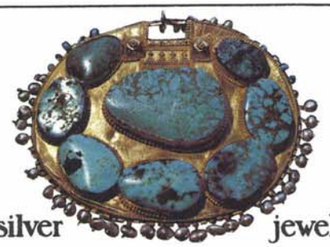
By the time of Ibn Fadlan's journey, the Vikings were also trading fur, amber and other goods over a huge area of Europe. It is reasonably sure too that they were already sailing the Atlantic to the New World by 922; just last year, an amateur archeologist, a British historian and a British numismatist identified a coin found in Maine in 1961 as an 11th-century Viking penny. By then too the Vikings had established themselves in Normandy – from where, as the Normans, they would invade England again in 1066 and, not much later, conquer Sicily (See *Aramco World*, November-December, 1978) and parts of Spain and Italy. Ibn Fadlan's description of the Rus, however, is one of the few that treats them as traders rather than bloodthirsty raiders and was written just before the time of their greatest expansion.

"I saw the Rus who had come to trade. I have never seen men with bodies as beautiful as theirs – they were like palm trees. They are fair and their skin white and red. They wear neither tunics nor kaftans, but the men have a garment which covers one side of their bodies and leaves one hand free. Each of them has an axe, a broadsword and a knife, and they are never without these things...Their swords have very broad blades, grooved, like the Frankish broadswords. From the tips of their fingers to their necks they are tattooed in green with trees, figures, and so on. 'All of the women wear on their bosom a kind of box [perhaps the enormous embossed brooches which secured their dresses and cloaks] of iron, silver, copper, gold, or wood, depending upon the wealth of their husband and their social position. In each box is a circle to which a knife is attached, which hangs at their breast."

Like other writers after him, Ibn Fadlan was fascinated by Viking funerals and describes at length a dead chieftain who was laid in his longship, his sword at his side and all his worldly goods beside him; how his dogs, cattle, horses, and slave girls were sacrificed to keep him company; and finally how the boat and its contents were set on fire. When only ashes were left, they built a barrow "like a round hill, and in the center they set up a great tablet of wood with the name of the man and that of the king of the Rus; and then they went away."

Ibn Fadlan's observant account agrees very well with other evidence about the Northmen but is much more vivid and detailed. As with the rest of his chronicle, his story recreates the barbarous splendor of life 1,000 years ago as seen through the eyes of a sophisticated diplomat from Baghdad – a man whose reactions were in many ways just like our own.

Caroline Stone contributes frequently to Aramco World.



"Why does the turquoise and silver jewelry of certain American Indians and Mexicans resemble so closely that of the Bedouins of Saudi Arabia?"

In pursuit of Bedouin jewelry – and its history – I kept discovering, or stumbling on, new facts. Even now, when documentation of Arabia's traditional jewelry seems as complete as possible, I am uneasily aware that the story must be cautiously told with a large "perhaps." Still, accumulating the pieces in my collection, and attempting to trace their history, has led me through some surprising gateways.

During a trip last summer, for example, I found a possible answer to a question I had asked many times: Why does the turquoise and silver jewelry of certain American Indians and Mexicans resemble so closely that of the Bedouins of Saudi Arabia? My conclusion is that Islam introduced the beauty of Bedouin jewelry to Spain sometime during the 800 years of Islamic rule there (See *Aramco World*, September – October 1976), and that the Spanish conquistadors then carried the artistic themes – and materials – to Mexico, Central America and the southwestern regions of the United States.

I based this conclusion on several observations: that some Mexican and Indian jewelry is identical to Bedouin jewelry, that the Indians never mined silver and that there was no native turquoise and silver jewelry until after the Spanish came.

My earlier research into the history of Bedouin jewelry had also turned up some surprising links in the complicated interchange of culture. In Saudi Arabia, for example, I examined the jewelry found by F.S. Vidal, an Aramco archeologist, in a tomb at Jawan in the Eastern Province. It was dated about A.D. 100 and, on close inspection, it was apparent that the mace-shaped bead in the necklace was identical to a bead used by the Greeks in the fourth century B.C. in the "terminal" or end position. Such a bead, faithfully reproduced, also appears in the silver Bedouin jewelry worn in Arabia, and in the terminal position – suggesting perhaps that the pattern was somehow transmitted to the Arabian Gulf.

The evidence for this is persuasive. Approximately 2,000 years ago when Southern Arabia was known as *Arabia Felix*, "Happy" or "Fortunate" Arabia, the great wealth which passed along the trade route undoubtedly included foreign jewelry, incorporating, probably, the mace-shaped bead. This bead had been designed to be placed at either end of a necklace to hold the coupling clasp – exactly as it appears in Bedouin jewelry. Traditional Arabian Bedouin necklaces, moreover, feature multi-colored and silver beads strung in irregular sizes – another echo of ancient jewelry characteristics. What supports this theory, of course, is the fact that the Arabian Peninsula, at various points in history, was relatively isolated. As a result, ancient patterns in such crafts as jewelry have been repeated – and faithfully preserved – for centuries. In a sense, therefore, Bedouin jewelry provides a fascinating window on the past.

Another astonishing aspect of the foregoing is that Bedouin jewelry is rarely old. Unlike Western jewelry, often handed down as a treasured bequest, a Bedouin woman's jewelry is generally melted down upon her death. Having been given by her family as her dowry, it would be unacceptable to a new bride and is, almost invariably, worn and damaged. As jewelry often represents a Bedouin woman's personal wealth, it is often sold, too, in times of need and then melted down by a silversmith. But since the silversmith then remakes the silver into new pieces, and since the new pieces are in the same traditional style – albeit his own interpretation – the patterns continue to reappear; in some cases they span 6,000 years.

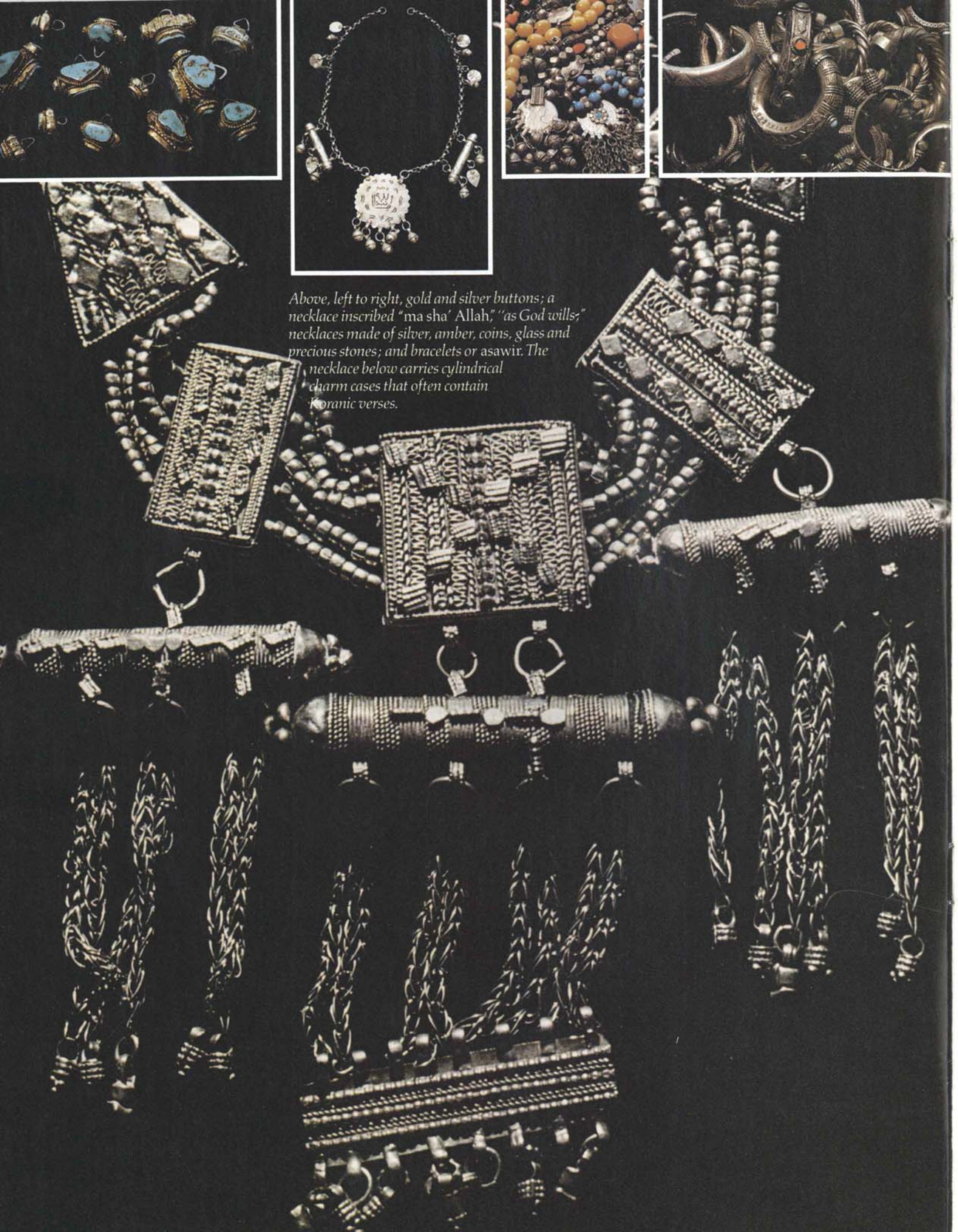
While doing research on the source of the silver used for jewelry, I also discovered that some Bedouin jewelry may – it is by no means certain – contain silver and other metals from one of the fabled King Solomon's mines.

I had begun my research in Riyadh and eventually was referred to Jiddah, where Ralph J. Roberts of the U.S. Geological Survey office supplied masses of interesting and useful papers. Among them were reports on the geology and ore deposits of a district called the Mahd al-Dhahab in northwestern Saudi Arabia, which the office had prepared for the Director General of Mineral Resources at the Ministry of Petroleum and Mineral Resources.

The Beauty of Bedouin Jewelry

WRITTEN BY HEATHER COLYER ROSS
PHOTOGRAPHS BY IAN YEOMANS, © HEATHER COLYER ROSS

At left, a silver necklace with an engraved stone. On this page, a hilyat sha'r *an ornament worn draped over the back of the head, hooked to a head-band. Insets, a silver forehead band and a choker necklace with typical multiple pendants.*



Above, left to right, gold and silver buttons; a necklace inscribed "ma sha' Allah," *"as God wills;" necklaces made of silver, amber, coins, glass and precious stones; and bracelets or* asawir. *The necklace below carries cylindrical charm cases that often contain Koranic verses.*

This report strongly suggested that the district was the site of King Solomon's legendary mines – partly because the name Mahd al-Dhahab means "Cradle of Gold" or Mother Lode, and partly because carbon dating of the tailings, the refuse from ore processing, confirm the era. As most of the metal used in jewelry prior to the 18th century came from local mining – and as the same metal is used over and over again in Bedouin jewelry – it is possible that today's ornaments contain at least a proportion of the silver and base metals which were also found in those ancient and fabled mines.

Other odd facts have surfaced during my research. Until the time of Britain's Queen Elizabeth I, for instance, men rather than women wore most of the jewels in the family. Elizabeth, however, inherited from her father, Henry the Eighth, his love of lavish body ornamentation as well as his throne and began to adorn herself with fabulous pieces of jewelry. Later she had elaborate gowns encrusted with priceless gems and the men at her court, taking the hint, began to give jewelry to their women, rather than wear it themselves.

For my book on Bedouin jewelry I also explored the rationale for wearing jewelry, and found that the answer is complex – and ancient. Since the earliest times, people have adorned their bodies in various ways: by tattooing, painting and, in some parts of the world, scarring. Body ornaments for prehistoric man also included jewelry fashioned from dead beetles, eggshells, seeds, bone, teeth, claws, tusk, wood, gem material and, later, faience and glass. Today, celebrated jewelers of the world use plastics as well as precious materials and there is a swing to primitive-looking pieces featuring shells, seeds, nuts, wood, teeth, claws and – a favorite through the ages – ivory.

One reason for body adornment in ancient times was superstition; ancient man tattooed or painted himself as a protection against misfortune and the displeasure of his gods. Later, he wore jewelry to manifest religious beliefs. And today women, primarily, wear jewelry to enhance their appearance, especially in circles where fashion, taste and beauty are important.
Even today, however, jewels have a fascination that goes beyond fashion. In the West, for example, there has been a revival of the medieval belief in the healing powers of precious metals and gems; and collectors, obviously, are fascinated in still another way.

In my case, collecting Bedouin jewelry – and researching its history – was the end result of a lifetime's appreciation of ornaments and objets d'art, the habit of collecting pretty glass, pottery and other appealing bits, preferably hand-made, and the desire for travel which led my husband and me to Saudi Arabia in 1969. Shortly after arriving in Riyadh, I began to visit the suqs and eventually discovered the "women's suq" where the traders are all women. Because of the tradition of disposing of a woman's jewelry upon her death, or selling it in times of need, much of the merchandise in the women's suq is jewelry and the traders' trays are usually brimming with second-hand ornaments, many richly embellished with turquoise and red stones. In addition there are closed showcases displaying some few old-gold ornaments which generally incorporate pearls from the Arabian Gulf.

From there I branched out into the women's suqs in the Dirah suq complex and the suq complex in Riyadh, gradually learning the customs, gradually building the relaxed rapport which is conducive to a happy transaction.
In jewelry suqs, of course, bargaining is important. Although this is a cliché by now (see *Aramco World*, September – October 1978), it is also a fact, and an important part of the ritual is a feigned indifference. This is very difficult when you see an unusual ornament or a specimen of jewelry you have been seeking for some time. But it is important; haste, it is often said in the Arab world, comes from the devil. Any obvious display of impatience, therefore, will be noted – at least as bad manners – and will almost certainly raise the price.
In time, we also found the silversmiths who work in a remote part of the Batha suq in Riyadh and much later saw some at work in the Tayif suq. The new jewelry is often of far lower silver content than the older pieces – it is made from an alloy containing large amounts of base metal – yet is more expensive than the fine old pieces sold by the Bedouin women traders. This is obviously because of the rising cost of labor and silver and the desire for new pieces. At the silversmiths, however, as at the women's suq, we often met true Bedouins – actual desert dwellers – who had come for miles to purchase, or sell, silver jewelry. As it would be cheaper to buy direct from these Bedouins, I tried often to do so. But although they were always courteous and sometimes friendly, they would not engage in a transaction – apparently because they have, and honor, an agreement to deal with the merchants.

As with the collection of antiques – unless one is a trained expert – good purchases for my Bedouin jewelry collection usually occurred only after I became more familiar with the pieces. None of the ornaments, to be sure, is hallmarked, although some occasionally exhibit the mark of the maker, so the process of acquiring fine examples of traditional pieces demands both patience and luck. Repeated visits to the suqs at one time might yield nothing, or very little, while two rare items – such as a *jnad* or *lazm* – might suddenly appear on the same day and be sold just as suddenly. In recent years, the new Western interest in hand-made ethnic items has added to the rising prices. Even worse, for collectors, the new affluence of Saudi Arabia has brought with it light-weight, machine-made gold jewelry that is quickly replacing the traditional, cumbersome silver ornaments. The modernization of Saudi Arabia, furthermore, is swiftly eradicating regional differences and styles, and frustrating efforts to document knowledge of the history of jewelry on the Peninsula.

That history is very old. Ancient pictographs on rock faces depict human figures wearing jewelry and it is recorded that the men of Arabia, until quite recently, wore bold silver jewelry. But much is still in the "perhaps" stage and will remain so until the kingdom's relatively new Department of Antiquities and Museums can focus on the details of the Peninsula's past. In the meantime, collections such as mine help to preserve actual specimens and their revealing histories.

Heather Colyer Ross, an Australian, lived nine years in Saudi Arabia where she did much of her research for her book Bedouin Jewelry in Saudi Arabia, *(Stacey International, London, 1978) and also wrote and broadcast programs for Riyadh Radio's English Service.*

Stamps and the Story of Language

WRITTEN BY ROBERT OBOJSKI

These multicolored stamps depict an array of classic scripts as written on clay tablets...

Languages form the very cornerstone of civilization, and the development of written language – from ideographs and pictographs to alphabets – is one of man's greatest and most important achievements. It is not surprising, therefore, that many stamps, which record so much of history, celebrate the development of language – particularly in the Middle East where vital advances in language were once made.

In 1972, for example, both Egypt and France issued stamps commemorating the 150th anniversary – in 1971 – of a vital archeological breakthrough regarding language: a way to translate Egyptian hieroglyphics found by the French linguist Jean-François Champollion.

Champollion, in 1821, unlocked the mystery of hieroglyphics by intensive study of the now-famous Rosetta Stone, a slab of black basalt about 3½ feet long by 2½ feet wide, found during Napoleon's Egyptian expedition by a French artillery officer. Realizing that the stone's parallel inscriptions in three scripts – hieroglyphic, hieratic and Greek – probably were the same, Champollion worked out the hieroglyphic equivalents of certain Greek letters on an obelisk and eventually translated two famous names: Ptolemy and Cleopatra. He then went on to translate names on the Rosetta Stone inscriptions, which were dedicated to one of the famous Alexandrian Ptolemies, under a date translated as March 27, 196 B.C. Thus Champollion, in effect, provided Egyptologists with a dictionary of hieroglyphics and enabled them to translate all hieroglyphic inscriptions.

To commemorate this achievement, both the Egyptian and French stamps feature a portrait of the French philologist, the Egyptian specimen including the Rosetta Stone and the French issue including the stone's key inscription.

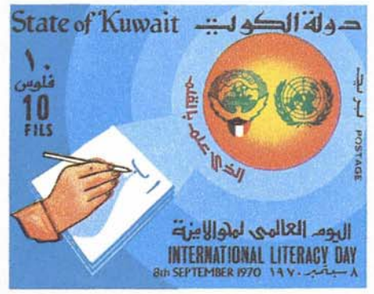
Another set of stamps – issued by Iran on Jan. 5, 1973 – illustrates the development of writing in ancient Persia with six ancient seals, the first showing an example of cuneiform writing.

Cuneiform, the writing of ancient Babylonia, Assyria, Chaldea and environs, as well as of Persia, derives its name from the Latin word *cuneus* ("wedge") and the Middle French word "forme," a reference to the wedge-shaped characters. Starting as pictographs – essentially small pictures of the objects referred to – cuneiform writing, scholars believe, was first developed about 3500 B.C. by the Sumerians, a people of Babylonia. The wedge-shaped writing was generally done on clay tablets, with the writer using a stylus to press the characters into the soft clay – which was then dried or baked. For speed, in writing with a stylus, the original pictographs gradually evolved into simplified, stereotyped groups of wedge-shaped marks. But even simplified cuneiform disappeared when the still simpler Phoenician alphabet began to spread through the ancient world.

Like hieroglyphics, cuneiform writing was completely unintelligible to historians until the 19th century. Then, through the combined efforts of a German schoolmaster, an English major and the French consul in Iraq, archeology cracked the ancient code and, within 50 years, was able to read the vast libraries of tablets dug from the rubble of Mesopotamia.

On June 5, 1973, Iran released still another set of six stamps pertaining to ancient languages of the Middle East. These multicolored stamps depict an array of classic scripts as written on clay tablets: Aryan, Kharishti, Achaemenian, Gachtak, Parthian Mianeh, and Parthian Arsacide. For the West, the one-riyal stamp showing Aryan script on a clay tablet is probably the most important in the story of languages; for Aryan, the language of an ancient people believed to have originated in southeastern Europe or southwestern Asia, is the parent tongue of the Indo-European group of languages, which includes most of those spoken in Europe.

The story of languages, of course, does not end with ancient languages. As cuneiform evolved from the pictographic to the alphabetic so other languages evolved too – as a 1938 set of six Turkish stamps suggests. This set marked the 10th anniversary of the reform of the Turkish alphabet, one of the more remarkable steps taken by Mustafa Kemal Ataturk to modernize Turkey.



Until Ataturk's time, the Turkish language had been written in the Arabic script. In 1928, however, Ataturk decreed that the Roman alphabet would be adapted to Turkish; he believed that this would make education for the ordinary citizen much easier and reduce the rate of illiteracy. As a result, Ataturk's government set up adult education centers throughout Turkey to teach the new alphabet and script and Ataturk himself, as the 1938 issue of stamps shows, taught classes publicly.

Turkey, in fact, has frequently stressed the importance of language and writing on its stamps. In 1958 the country issued a 20-kurush stamp publicizing "International Letter Writing Week," observed in October that year, and in 1959 issued a 75-kurush stamp commemorating the 75th anniversary of a famous secondary boys' school in Istanbul. Other Turkish stamps pertaining to languages and education include a 1961 set of three marking the 25th anniversary of the Faculty of Languages, History and Geography at the University of Ankara, and a 1973 semi-postal, issued to raise funds for the Istanbul Technical Institute.

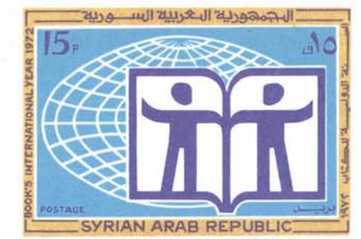
Several countries of the Middle East – Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria and Turkey – also issued stamps publicizing "International Education Year, 1970," which was sponsored by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO). Even earlier, Iran used stamps to publicize its national campaign against illiteracy. In 1963 the country issued a two-stamp set citing the work of its National Literacy Corps; the stamps showed a soldier teaching reading to a village class. In 1965 Iran also issued a set of five stamps commemorating the UNESCO-sponsored World Congress Against Illiteracy, and a two-stamp set showing a world map and school children.

Because literacy is so highly valued in the Middle East, countries there have been turning out numerous stamps on that subject since 1965, when UNESCO sponsored the World Congress Against Illiteracy in Iran. September 8 is known as "International Literacy Day;" Kuwait, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the People's Republic of Southern Yemen have issued numerous stamps commemorating the congress; and Iran, the host country, has been issuing International Literacy Day commemorative stamps on an annual basis.

By the early 1970's, the subject of languages and literacy had been broadened to include books and education. In 1972 UNESCO's International Book Year brought forth a colorful array of stamps, including some released by Iran, Syria and Turkey, Egypt, Southern Yemen, and Muscat and Oman. Iraq, the same year, issued a set of two publicizing the Third Congress of Arab Journalists held at Baghdad; they showed quill pens and a map of the Arab countries. And the next year, Egypt issued a 20-mill stamp depicting a girls' school in Cairo and commemorating the centenary of formal education programs for girls in Egypt.

Indeed, the number of stamps on this and related subjects is huge; and philatelists seriously interested in the topic of Middle East languages and education can, with little effort, put together an impressive collection at minimal cost.

Robert Obojski, who writes frequently on stamps and coins for Aramco World, *is also a contributing editor to* Acquire Magazine.



'In their Histories verily there is a lesson for men of understanding...'

A Walk Through History

WRITTEN BY BARRY REYNOLDS PHOTOGRAPHED BY BURNETT H. MOODY

Last year in Riyadh, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia quietly opened its new Museum of Archeology and Ethnography – a striking review of the kingdom's history and, perhaps more important, a tangible demonstration of the government's efforts to protect its past as it builds its future.

There is no doubt that the past is in danger. As Saudi Arabia hurtles toward the 21st century, its cranes and bulldozers have begun to erase the ancient walls, gracious buildings and picturesque quarters of other times; last year in Jiddah priceless Ottoman era homes buckled and collapsed under the assault of the wrecking cranes. And elsewhere the leveling tread of the bulldozer has begun to trample or bury even older treasures.

But there is no doubt either that Saudi Arabia, increasingly aware of its historical heritage, has stepped up efforts to record and save the artifacts and architecture of its past. Recently, for example, an 11th-hour government decree saved a handsome Riyadh landmark from demolition. Furthermore, the Ministry of Education's Department of Antiquities and Museums has announced its intention to construct a permanent $150 million National Museum in Riyadh plus 14 regional museums – some in such historic places as Mada'in Salih and Najran, others in provincial centers.
Behind that announcement – and the opening of the Museum of Archeology and Ethnography – is the department's comprehensive plan to find and document the kingdom's archeological sites and provide data for the numerous expeditions and meticulous study needed to cover a country as large as Western Europe – and in which man has lived for millennia.

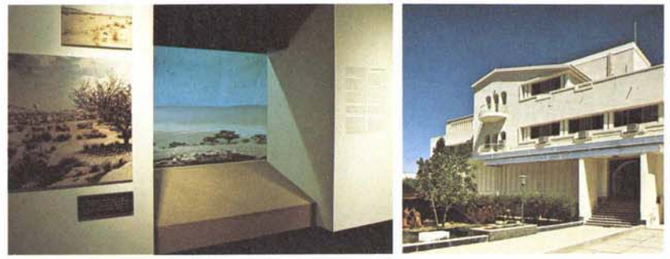
Actually, a great deal has already been accomplished. In February 1975, Dr. Abdullah Masry, the first director of the department, fielded a team of archeologists on a preliminary expedition to several sites in the Eastern Province of the kingdom, not far from the Arabian Gulf. At the same time the department launched a program – still underway today – to record and preserve the great pilgrimage road from Baghdad to Mecca; called the Darb Zubaidah, the road, and its chain of inns and wells, was built in the eighth century and was a principal Arabian highway for some 450 years. Another project begun that year was a 9,000-mile, 10-week photographic expedition which resulted in a splendid pictorial record of sites and monuments that was subsequently published in a volume called *Saudi Arabian Antiquities.*

Other scholars, meanwhile, have begun to participate in Dr. Masry's investigations. In 1976 scholars from the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago and the Institute of Archaeology of the University of London joined the investigations – as did others from Harvard University's Peabody Museum the following year. At the same time groups of outstanding archeologists, working with the department on a seasonal basis, began to publish summaries of their surveys in *Atlal,* a new journal of archeology and history issued by the department.

Many of the artifacts found by these expeditions and surveys – as well as a number of earlier, more casual finds – are now on display in the Museum of Archeology and Ethnography. Although just a beginning, therefore, the museum is already an important repository of Arabiana and, as a showcase for the kingdom's efforts, a scheduled highlight of Queen Elizabeth's royal visit to Saudi Arabia in February.
To the Queen, as to all visitors, the museum offered a brief but sumptuous audio-visual journey through millennia of buried history. It lasts only two hours, yet visitors emerge feeling that they have witnessed significant events in the development of a civilization. Working like time-lapse photography, the panels and exhibits compress the past and elicit a sense of involvement that many larger but more austere museums cannot match.
At the building's entrance, a calligraphic quotation from the Koran capsules the museum's aim and its effect: "In their Histories verily there is a lesson for men of understanding..." These lessons are at the core of the museum's profoundly simple design.

Visitors inspect "After the Revelation" gallery.

There is, for example, the lesson of Neolithic man's ingenuity when he first saw flints as extensions of his fingers and fist; the lesson of man's courage as he caught, tamed and harnessed animals to plow the soil that fed him; and the lesson of his growing consciousness of past and future as he inscribed his awe, and later his language, onto stern rock. There are too the lessons of his centuries-long progress toward civilization: his development of irrigation systems, his construction of monuments, his discovery of copper – and ways to mine it – as well as his development of the advanced modes of



At left, bronze lion head from Najran. Above, diorama of a neolithic site, and the exterior of the new museum.

transport that put the early Arabians into regular contact with other civilizations which had grown and matured along separate paths elsewhere in the Middle East.
Simultaneously, the museum's exhibits hint at the Peninsula's archeological potential and offer significant information about Arabia's little-known past. They tell, for example, of Qurayyah in the northwest, near al-'Ula; once, perhaps, the capital of the fabled Land of Midian, Qurayyah was a city dating to the 13th century B.C., and produced beautifully decorated pottery.
Other artifacts tell of the city of Taima, also part of Midian, but best known as a haven for the last Neo-Babylonian king, Nabonidus, who moved there in the seventh century B.C. One important find – the so-called Taima Stone, inscribed with a religious text in ancient Aramaic – was discovered there in 1888 and is now in the Louvre. It was found near the great well 'Ain Haddaj which has been in use since Nabonidus' time and which, until diesel pumps were installed, required up to 60 camels at a time to draw water.

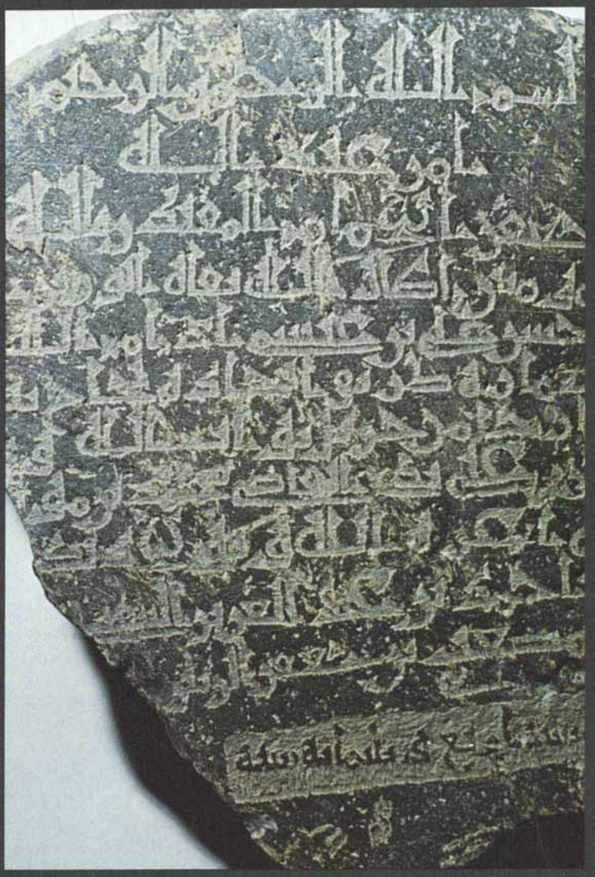
There are exhibits too from Madain Salih, a strategic stop on the vital spice and incense routes from South Arabia to the Mediterranian Sea in the first century B.C. (See *Aramco World*, September - October, 1965). Its huge rock-cut tombs, a wealth of inscriptions and its distinctive fine pottery make it clear that the area was the home of a sophisticated and wealthy civilization: the Nabatean culture that also built "rose-red" Petra further north in Jordan (See *Aramco World*, May-June 1966).
Included too are photographs – from the western half of the kingdom, south to north – of ancient graffiti, which in some areas appear on nearly every available rock surface – the work of hunters and travelers during endless centuries. The exhibits in the museum show the diversity of ages and subjects of this early art. They include inscriptions from 'Asir, in the southwest, about half of which are in similar, apparently related scripts dated about 2,700 years ago. But they also include much older pictures: wild boar, bulls and what appear to be lions – which corroborate geological evidence showing that the Arabian climate, after the last great ice age, was quite different from what it is today. Some 20,000 years ago, and again about 7,000 years ago, today's 'Rub al-Khali apparently resembled the well-watered grasslands of East Africa, with lions, baboons and ostriches – plus long-horned cattle and their herdsmen. Later, as the southwest monsoon belt retreated to its present position at the bottom of the Peninsula, today's aridity reclaimed that vast region.

Another region of Saudi Arabia covered in the museum's exhibits is the Hijaz in western Saudi Arabia. Although rightly renowned for its Islamic monuments, it is also rich in pre-Islamic sites. One is the sturdy al-Samallaqi Dam near Tayif, constructed of unmortared stones and one of the many holding and diversionary dams in the region. Another is the Ukaz Suq, 25 miles north of Tayif; for centuries the Ukaz Suq was the commercial, social, political and literary hub of the region as, in other times, the Greek agora was the hub of a town.
There are also on display traces of early life in Najd and the Qasim, the cultural core of Arabia, although, says Dr. Masry, it is precisely in this region that the records left by the antiquities are the most incomplete.
Another exhibit is devoted to al-Dir'iyah, an oasis town about 10 miles northwest of Riyadh. The ancestral home of the House of Sa'ud, and the birthplace of the Islamic reform movement of Muhammad ibn Abd al-Wahhab in the middle of the 18th century, al-Dir'iyah was destroyed in the early 19th century during an Egyptian invasion ordered by the Ottoman Turks, but the extensive ruins have been preserved as a national monument.

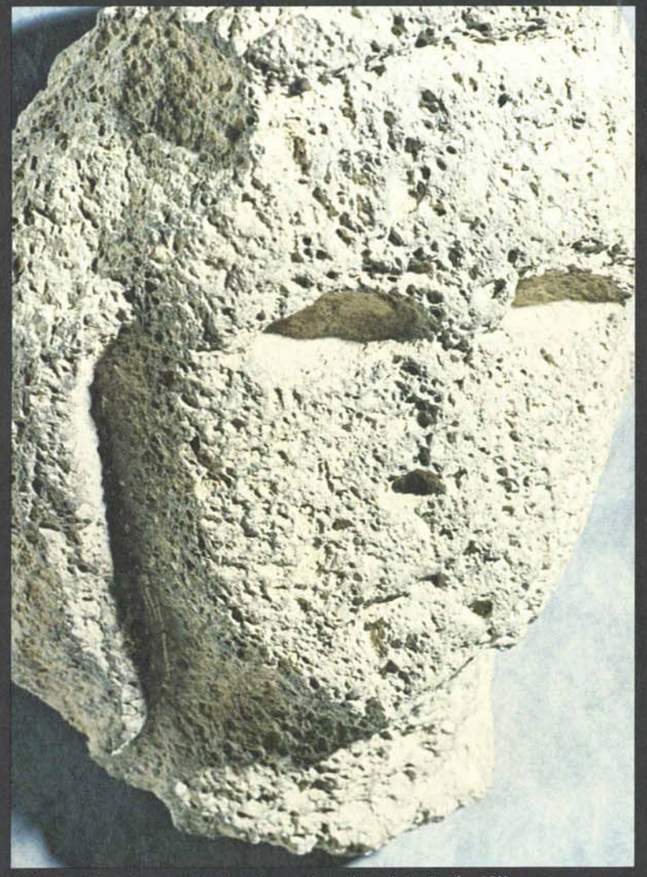
But it is in the Eastern Province, Saudi Arabia's oil-producing region on the Gulf side of the Peninsula, that evidence of earlier epochs has so far been found in the greatest abundance – some of it uncovered by a small expedition led by Dr. Masry in 1972 while a graduate student at the University of Chicago doing research for his Ph.D. thesis. This evidence corroborates earlier theories that there were contacts between eastern Arabia and southern Mesopotamia as long ago as the Ubaid era of the fifth millennium B.C. – and was of great interest to scholars of the ancient Near East, who are still hotly debating the exact extent of these contacts.

The exhibit designated as "The Age of Trade" focuses on the Eastern Province during the early third millennium B.C. – its busiest period until at least Greek times, and perhaps until modern times. By then, Tarut Island, not far from today's Dhahran, had become what must have been the capital of eastern Arabia and a center of widespread trade – judging by the fragments rescued from date gardens, and artifacts turned up by department investigations. Such fragments – carved soft stone bowls, inscribed with men, bulls, fish, snakes, birds and geometrical motifs – are identical to stone bowls with the same motifs which were found in Mesopotamia, the Indus Valley, present-day Syria, Iran and Russia, as well as in the nearby Gulf states of Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and the U.A.E. But in none of these places have so many different designs been found as in Tarut.

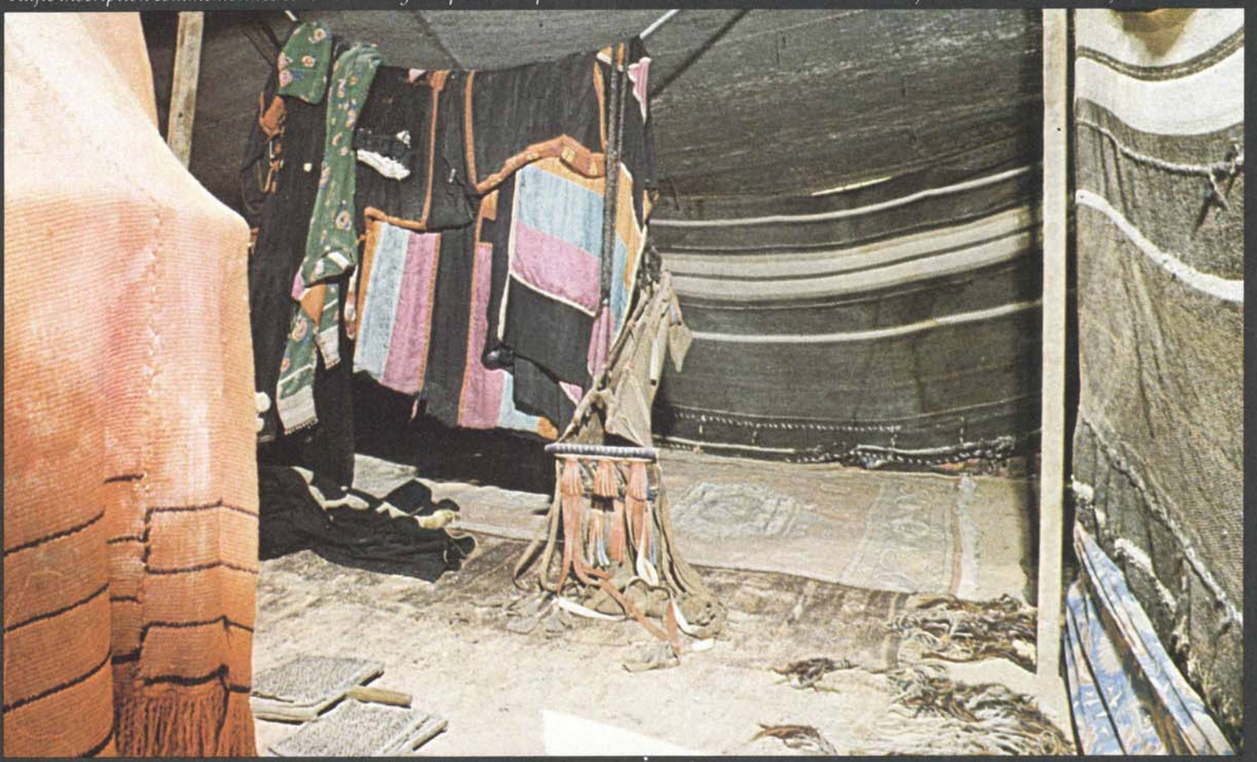
At some point, Tarut and the adjoining Arab coast became part of the ancient trading state known as Dilmun, famous in Sumerian mythology. Also called *Niduk-ki* in some cuneiform texts, Dilmun was regarded as a sort of heaven where "the lion kills not, the wolf snatches not the lamb." Identified by a Danish archeological team in the 1950's as centered on Bahrain, Dilmun also existed in reality; it functioned as middleman between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley in the thriving trade in copper, wood, ivory, precious stones and wool. Dilmun pottery also turned up in the survey of Tarut, and further investigations have turned up evidence of Dilmun traders inland. They have also showed the similarity between the older tumuli on Bahrain Island and those near Dhahran on the Saudi Arabian mainland. Many of the tomb mounds near Abqaiq are from the Age of Trade, too and the net impression is that the entire region seems to



Kufic inscription commemorates construction by Caliph al-Muqtadir.



Woman's head carved in basalt was found at al-Is, in the Hijaz.



A Bedouin tent and other artifacts are displayed in the museum's front garden.

have been one extended emporium through which passed the trade of two powerful civilizations and their tributaries.

The museum's walk through history includes another gallery which traces the development of writing from pictographic to syllabic systems and finally into a nascent alphabetic system – including the development by the South Arabians, about 1000 B.C., of their own alphabetic script. This alphabetic script provided impetus for the subsequent development of other local scripts across the Arabian Peninsula – and was a development fundamental to civilization itself.

In exhibits called "Emergence of the Arabs" and "Impact of Overland Trade Routes", the museum identifies the Arabs of the Peninsula as middlemen, and perhaps even culture brokers, within the area of the more extensively-studied Mesopotamian civilizations. And, in a display titled "Domestication of the Camel," the museum attributes the rise of the lucrative spice trade between South Arabia and Mesopotamia to domestication of the one-humped camel, the dromedary, towards the end of the 11th century B.C.

As the exhibits of camels inscribed in rock makes clear, the implications of the carvings extend much further than the edge of a stone slab. They chronicle the harnessing of a beast that influenced Middle Eastern history as much as the horse affected the American West. Because domestication of the camel made overland caravan routes possible, South Arabia flourished and way stations on the incense routes were established in eastern Arabia. And that prosperity, in turn, attracted the attention of Alexander the Great, after he returned to Babylon from his Persian conquest. Although he died before he could lead a campaign into Arabia, his successors in Mesopotamia made extensive contacts with the region, and signs of these contacts are outlined in museum exhibits.

There were, for example, Hellenistic influences on such commercial centers in Arabia as Failaka Island – a prosperous Greek trading colony off the Kuwait coast on Tarut and Bahrain, on the oasis town of Thaj, inland from the modern seaport of Jubail, and on the lost city of Gerrha – the one Arabian city known to have been powerful enough to influence nearby civilizations directly. Strabo, quoting earlier Greek writers, described the inhabitants of the city in the last two decades B.C. as "the richest of all tribes...They possess a great quantity of wrought articles in gold and silver, such as couches, basins and drinking vessels; to which we must add the costly magnificence of their houses; for the doors, walls and roofs are variegated with inlaid ivory, gold, silver and precious stones." Its location has yet to be identified.

The location of Thaj *is* known, however, and when it is excavated will be surrounded by its 12-foot-thick wall, which still stands, in places, to a height of nine feet. The deep pools at Thaj, and at neighboring al-Hinnah, are constructed of fitted stone and are still used by herdsmen. Some 2,000 years ago water from these hand-dug wells was lifted to the surface and channeled through an extensive irrigation system to prosperous fields.

Because the rise and spread of Islam is the central fact of history in Arabia, the gallery on Islam is, appropriately, at the center of the museum. It shows the development of the mosque and minaret, displays Islamic coins and exhibits fragments of the famed Darb Zubaidah pilgrimage road and, in a graphic demonstration of Islam's unifying impact, offers a simultaneous-projection slide show. Interpreting Arabia's tumultuous history in

Marble bowl from Najran is 2,000 years old.

a mélange of rapid images, it captures vividly the evolutionary confusion of the past as Sumerians, Sabaeans, Assyrians, Egyptians, Persians, Greeks and Romans rise, peak and vanish. Then, gradually, the frenetic score modulates and harmony emerges: one by one the nine panels on the projection screen coalesce as the message of Islam spreads to the farthest reaches of the world. A unique climax to the previous displays, the films crystalizes, in a few well chosen images, the chronology of the past.

Designed by Michael Rice Ltd., a firm of British consultants, who also designed museums in Qatar (See *Aramco World*, July-August 1976) and in Oman, the museum's displays offer an impressive and attractive cultural lesson for Saudi Arabs and foreign visitors alike. Despite the limits of size and the temporary nature of the museum, the designers have created a series of compressed displays that subtly illuminate the wealth of themes that played a role in the Arabian Peninsula's development, and that stitch together the threads of history, revealing patterns and parallels with the present. Today, for example, Saudi Arabia's trade is in oil and petrochemicals, not copper and spices, but the results are similar: the enrichment and refinement of a culture.

The museum, in sum offers striking lessons in curiosity, energy and ingenuity – the muscle and mettle of the mightiest civilizations.

Like the museum itself, scientific exploration of Saudi Arabia's past is a relatively new undertaking. And like the industrialization of the Kingdom (See *Aramco World*, January-February, 1977) it is a massive challenge. But Dr. Masry believes that Saudi Arabia's approach must be cautious and careful except where "rescue archeology" is called for to save sites or monuments from the great construction programs now underway throughout the kingdom.

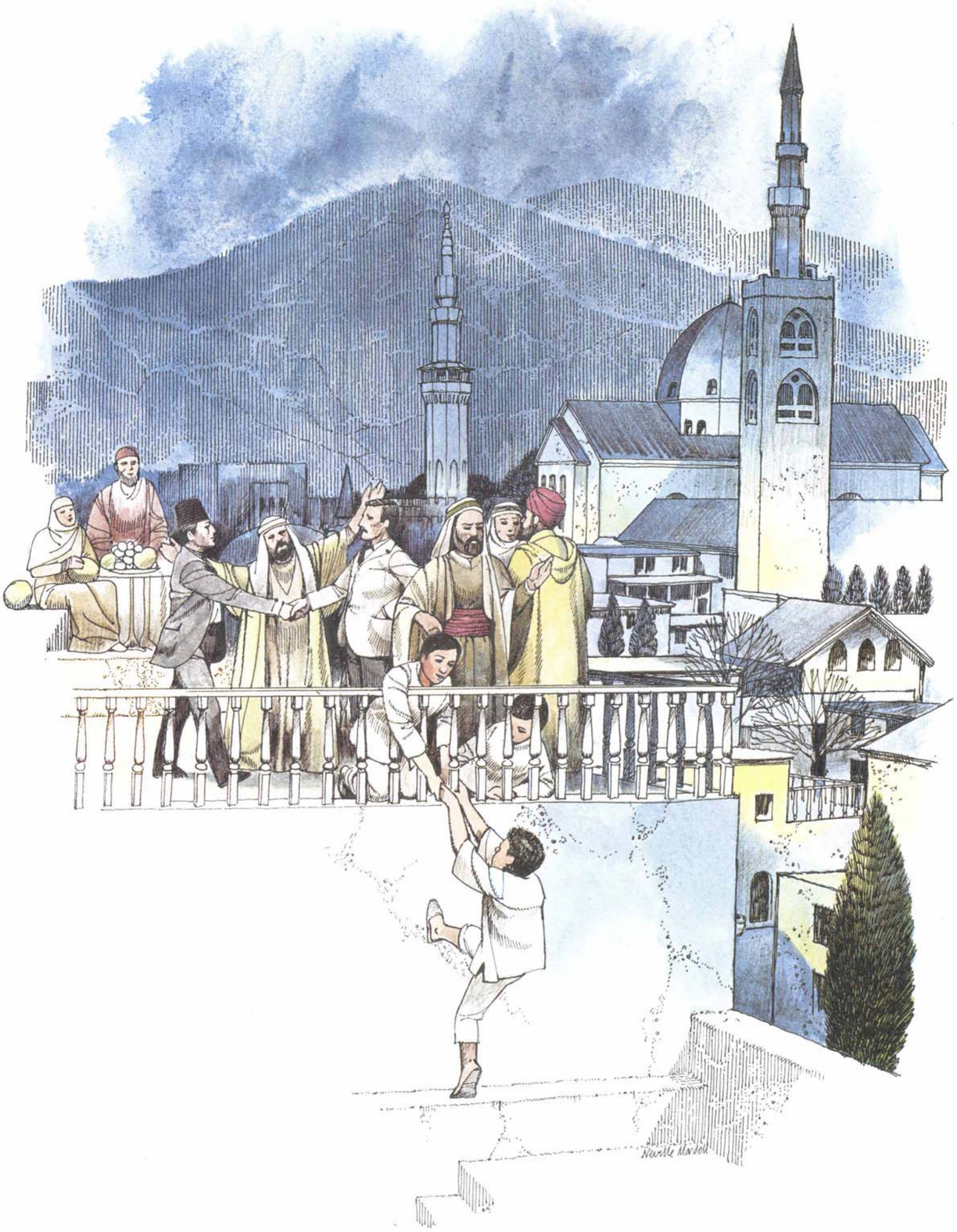
"We are discouraging large-scale excavations for the present," he says. "Massive, *ad hoc* or haphazard digging has had a disastrous effect on research in the Near East. We want academic control over our national heritage."

Masry's master plan for indentifying and mapping potentially rich sites in Arabia, therefore, is being formulated with meticulous care. "We must determine the chronology of an area – who lived where, when and how – before commencing simultaneous excavations," he explains, "so that the different areas can be fitted into a coherent historical perspective."

Unlike the repeatedly plundered archeological sites elsewhere in some parts of the Middle East, much of Saudi Arabia's past is, at present, in the safest place an archeologist can think of. "It's under the sand," Dr. Masry points out, "where it will stay until we can launch an organized, full-scale investigation."

What that investigation will disclose is, of course, unknown. The experiences of the millennia are always elusive and there are always nagging questions, loose ends and even the possibility that tomorrow's discovery may overturn today's theories. Where, for example, *is* lost Gerrha today? Submerged somewhere in the Gulf? Buried forever under centuries of shifting sand? Or, as Abdullah Masry says smilingly, "In the imaginations of those of us who dream of past glory?" No one knows. But if the care and thoroughness of Saudi Arabia's Department of Antiquities and Museums' recent investigations is any indication, they will, some day, find out.

Barry Reynolds, an instructor at the John Abbot College in Montreal and a former television scriptwriter, is now a teacher and a free-lance writer in Saudi Arabia. He has published poetry and short stories in the U.S. and Canada and his articles on Saudi Arabia have appeared in The Arab News, *and in Canadian and American newspapers and magazines.*



Growing up in Damascus:

WRITTEN BY MOUNIR R. SA'ADAH
ILLUSTRATED BY NEVILLE MARDELL

My maternal grandfather, who kept a meticulous record of his earnings and expenditures, has an entry dated June 19, 1909 for a half-*majidi* that he gave to the messenger who brought him the news of a birth: mine, the day before, in Damascus.
That birth, otherwise unremarkable, had almost taken place in April, two months earlier, when Damascus was shaken by the first of the great political and social changes that would shape or affect my life while growing up in Damascus…

In April, spring is in full swing in Syria. The extensive fruit orchards around Damascus are in bloom and the whole city traditionally goes out to the orchards to shake off the confinement of the long winter, to greet the coming spring and, as we used to say, "to smell the air."
The most attractive of these orchards on the outskirts of the city is an apple orchard, the *Mazra'a*. Legend says that because the crowds often helped themselves to blossoming branches for home decoration, the owners of the *Mazra'a* once built a wall around the whole plantation to prevent the entry of the strollers who came "to smell the air." That year, the trees bore no fruit, only blossoms and leaves. So the wall was demolished and the orchard was open to the people ever after to come and smell the air of spring.

A Personal Memoir

On April 26, 1909, my parents were among the crowd "smelling the air," when news arrived that Sultan Abdulhamid of Turkey had been deposed by the Committee of Union and Progress – the "Young Turks." The news created a panic among the crowds of strollers and they stampeded out of the orchard to reach the safety of their homes.
Why would an event so far away cause such a panic? For several decades the Ottoman Empire – of which Syria was a part – had been declining and the European powers were most anxious to add Ottoman territories to their own empires. Part of their strategy was to create dissent and discord within the Empire, and to that end they claimed the right to protect the various Arab Christian minorities that lived and had lived for centuries within these territories.

"…memories are difficult to trace; they tend to float to the surface in the wrong order. Still, there are some that a boy never forgets…".

The Russians claimed the right to protect the interests of the Greek Orthodox; the French, not to be outdone, claimed the Catholics and the Uniates; and the British us Protestants – along with the Druzes. The ambitious Germans even went so far as to proclaim themselves, on the occasion of the German Emperor's state visit to Damascus in 1898, "the sword and protector of Islam."
In fact, this "protection" was generally unnecessary. The Arab Christians in the Ottoman Empire lived in harmony with the Muslim majority, partly because they were, under Islamic law, *ahl al-dhimma* – "people of the covenant" – whose lives, liberty and property were protected. Indeed, the intervention of the great powers upset this harmony and, in the long run, endangered the minorities rather than protecting them.

As a result, some of the more enlightened Arabs, sensing the danger into which they were drifting, began to encourage the idea of an Arab nation in which the people would be citizens by virtue of nationality, rather than religion. They had hit upon an idea whose time had come – Arab nationalism.
In Istanbul, the Young Turks, who advocated a homogeneous state and saw minorities as a danger, decided to discourage the nationalist movements. The Christians in Damascus, therefore, panicked at the news about Sultan Abdulhamid; as a minority group–and

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as Arabs largely sympathetic to Arab nationalism – they felt vulnerable that lovely spring day. So, with my father carrying my brother on his shoulders and my mother dragging my sister along, my parents rushed home. In fact, nothing at all happened, but the event so shook my mother that she nearly bore me prematurely.

All that, of course, was a long time ago, but it is a family tradition and like certain incidents of childhood it lingers in memory. Such memories are difficult to trace; they tend to float to the surface in the wrong order. Still, there are some that a boy never forgets…

I remember vividly, for example, that Saturday in our family was cleaning day, and that each Saturday the washerwoman arrived early in the morning, lit the kitchen fireplace, placed a huge cauldron over the fire and filled it with water that she pumped from the well in the garden. Then she sorted out the laundry. While the water was being heated she gave the white linen materials a preliminary washing with soap and water. Then she rinsed these and put them in the boiling cauldron and poured on them two or three gallons of water from a huge jar in which we had some water softener. She let the laundry boil for some 15 minutes, gave it a soaping and a couple of rinsings and hung it in the sun. I remember what joy it was to sleep in those clean sheets and pajamas Saturday night after a hot bath. They smelled of the sun.

While the washerwoman was busy in the kitchen, the rugs were rolled and beaten to get the dust out of them, the house was swept and the windows washed. We, the children, took charge of cleaning the glass chimneys of the kerosene lamps. We filled the lamps with kerosene which we bought in six-gallon cans with an Indian head embossed on them. In those days the lands that now float on a sea of oil used to import oil from the United States.

I also remember how, on one such day, I got very tired and decided to roll myself in a rug and go to sleep. I was only about four, after all, and it seemed natural. But in midafternoon my mother missed me and the search was on. My cousins and neighbors were recruited, but could find no trace of me. Fear gripped the whole neighborhood until, rested and groggy, I crawled out of the rug.

I remember too the glorious summer nights in Damascus when the nights were clear and cool, the stars were close by and we and our neighbors would go out onto the flat roofs to sleep.

On such nights it always took us a long time to sleep, because the spectacle of the sky fascinated us. My father would point out one constellation after the other and the firmament, by the time I was five, was friendly, because I could call many of its stars by their proper names. Occasionally some clouds would sail by and we'd play the game of what each one of them looked like. Our imagination expanded as we watched their ever-changing forms and, fortunately, in those days there was no one to psychoanalyze our musings.

There were other nights, too, when we felt social and neighborly. On such occasions we would climb to the higher roof level, which was adjacent to our neighbors,' and we'd call them to come up. Before long all the neighborhood, crossing from roof to roof, would congregate and as there was always someone with a beautiful voice or an *'ud* we would often stay there until midnight, singing, gossiping, cracking roasted watermelon and pumpkin seeds, or sometimes just sitting for long periods of silence; in those days we could sit, unembarrassed, with nothing to say.

One such night I shall never forget. The roof of the Greek Orthodox Cathedral, one block from our home, caught fire. The smoke and the blaze were frightening. The firefighters arrived with their inadequate equipment and were doing their best to contain the fire, but what I remember best is the silhouette of a solitary kneeling figure with arms raised to the sky – that of my friend the Patriarch on his own rooftop, praying to God to have mercy.

Whether it was thanks to his intercession or to the firefighters' efforts I do not know, but the fire was soon contained; later I was to think that the Patriarch knew full well that it was God's will to preserve the cathedral and he was invoking that will with the certainty that it would prevail. He had put himself, his God and us believers in a box from which there was no exit but atheism. A Muslim, watching the fire from his rooftop, might have said it differently: "Allah will do what he wills, as he wills, if he wills, to whom he wills, when he wills." But the principle is the same.

When World War I broke out, we were spending the summer months in Bludan. For parched Damascus, Bludan is a summer resort sent from heaven. Out of the dry, bare rocks gush springs cold as ice, pure as the snows from which they are filtered, and life-giving to the orchards they create. The sun shines brightly while constant breezes fan the countryside. The Zabadani plain spreads itself below and on the horizon the Barada River sparkles in the sun, idling its way to create and sustain Damascus.

I remember my parents debating whether the family should not remain in Bludan until "the thing" was over. It could not last, in their view, more than a few weeks. So my father went back to work in Damascus and we stayed behind. By mid-October he changed his mind and took us home. Of course, there was no possibility of my going back to the Irish Mission Academy, which I had been attending; as the Ottoman Empire had joined Germany in the war, the Academy had been closed and taken over as enemy property.

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Instead, I was sent to the Orthodox School. It was a happy little school, and one of the teachers, Nayla, was the essence of kindness; we would have done anything for her. She and we shared a deep secret: she started us in French – then, in wartime, the language of the enemy, and forbidden by the Turks. What a tremendous incentive to learn a language! We took to it avidly. One day word came that the Turkish inspectors were on their way to the school. There was no escape: Nayla ordered us to put our French books into the Franklin stove that heated the classroom. Every single French text was burned, and we remained bookless for the rest of the year. It was our good fortune that we began our French not as a chore but as an adventure and as an act of defiance. The French language, therefore, became a symbol and when, ironically, Frenchmen replaced Turks as our rulers we managed to disassociate the culture from the colonizer, and went on defying the ruler and loving the culture.

Another day during the war, I came home from school and found three huge bonfires. I was horrified: my parents were burning books. Word had reached us, through the grapevine, that an inspector was on his way to search our house for any evidence of enemy-connected activity. Our community was a hotbed of Arab nationalism; already three prominent members of our congregation, including the minister, had been arrested and sent to exile in Tokat, and my father was next on the list. So we burned any books or papers that might be used as incriminating evidence.

At that time the slightest thing could be construed as opposition. When Turkey entered the war in October, for example, the police went to the French school to take down the French flag. A man who was watching said, "This has a long tail," a reference to the rope used to lower the flag. But in Arabic this expression can mean also, "This is not the end of the story," and that man languished in prison for the duration of the war.

Through his connection with Jemal Pasha, the Turkish commander in Syria, a cousin succeeded in procuring an exemption from military service for my father, who was unwilling to fight for the Ottoman side. The exemption was supposed to be good indefinitely, but some bureaucrat along the way had changed the term to three months. A renewal was not issued. One day, my father was asked to show his papers at a checkpoint. He readily produced the expired exemption, while his knees melted like butter. To his great relief he discovered that the chief inspector was holding the paper upside down; he was illiterate, but, impressed by the number of seals on the document, he signaled my father to move on.

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My wartime memories also include examples of kindness and brotherhood. Before the war, my father had been in the habit of going to the Victoria Hospital on Sunday afternoons to visit the sick. In his school days, his ambition had been to become a doctor, but his family could not afford it. Perhaps, with his great ambition unrealized, he compensated by giving spiritual strength to those who were being physically healed. I have no other explanation for his regular visits to the hospital and to a leper colony, situated outside the city walls, that dated back to Biblical times.

When the war came, the missionaries left and the Turkish military took the hospital over for British casualties and prisoners of war. My father, however, continued his Sunday visits and we went along. He asked for no permission, but just went there as a matter of course. We took baskets of fruit, but what touched the patients most was to see someone, with his young children, look at them not as enemies but as human beings to be loved. In recognition of these services, done purely for God's sake, my father was mentioned in dispatches, and at the end of the war he received a letter of gratitude from the commander of the British forces. This unexpected recognition gave my father much joy and pride.

Another example has to do with a family in our neighborhood which lived from hand to mouth. When there was work they lived well, when there wasn't they became suddenly destitute. Then they went to neighbors and asked if they could "borrow" bread or cheese or eggs or even oil and vegetables. We all understood and responded generously: it is the obligation of neighbors. Yet food was getting quite scarce, because of the British blockade and the influx of refugees.

One day in 1918 my father came home with two months' supply of flour. I heard him tell my mother that there was no more to be had for love or money. "We shall eat this," he added, "and then God will provide." A few days later there was a knock at our door. I went to open it and found the daughter of our neighbor, asking if she could "borrow" 12 loaves of bread. I went straight to my mother and told her, my nine-year-old voice loaded with annoyance, that the neighbors wanted to "borrow" twelve loaves. Without any hesitation my mother said, "Of course, give her what she asked for."

In October of that year, and before the flour was gone, Damascus fell to the advancing Arab and British troops, and my father was appointed director of relief work in the Damascus area. There was much to eat and to spare. God had provided.

Not far from my home was a little grocery, not more than two yards by three, run by a hajji, a Muslim who had made the Hajj, the Pilgrimage to Mecca. It was a strange thing to find a Muslim grocer in the Christian quarter, but he was there and, of course, faithfully observed the prescribed daily prayers. No matter what was happening at the moment, he would let it go and attend to his prayers when the muezzin's call was heard. One day, motivated by mischief, I stopped at his grocery when I saw him getting ready for prayer. Business at his grocery was never too heavy and customers were anxiously waited on. I told him what I needed to buy, but he would not attend to my needs. He spread his prayer rug, faced Mecca and began his prayer. Living in this world, I learned that day, one often has to choose between God and Mammon; and for the hajji the soul had priority. No matter how eloquently my minister preached, he could not have made the point more convincingly than the hajji did that afternoon.

The hajji was also involved in another lesson, although indirectly. A cousin had come on a visit from Brazil and one day, as he, my brother and I were passing the hajji's shop, we decided to help ourselves to some lovely oranges that were on display.

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My cousin from Brazil, who knew the ways of the world, worked out the strategy. We would walk up to the shop. He would come from behind and push us. We would fall upon the basket of oranges. In the confusion we would pick up a couple of oranges and hand them to him, and he'd walk away with them while the hajji was busy with us. Clumsy? Yes, but it worked.

Unfortunately, as we rejoined my cousin to enjoy the loot, my father materialized as if from nowhere and asked us how we got the oranges. We were too surprised to tell a lie, so he took the oranges away from us and told us to go home.

But that was not the end of the affair. That night at dinner he ate nothing, and after dinner, in the presence of the whole family, even my little sister aged three, he turned to us with grief showing all over his face and told us how crushed he was when he had to walk to the hajji's store and tell him that he was the father of two thieves. He had lost face, he told us, and his dignity was diminished. What had he done to deserve this from us?

We had no answer. He was a wonderful father and a generous provider. We truly lacked nothing. Of course, he probably could not – or maybe he did – appreciate the excitement that drove us to steal; it was an adventure that most children love to experience. But to have caused grief and loss of dignity for our father was too high a price to pay. Never again, we decided, would we do anything to either grieve or humiliate him.

It was about this time too, I think, that I had my first encounter with death – and learned still another lesson. I think of it as the funeral of the swallow.

I found a swallow that had crashed into a window. It was perfectly understandable – I myself had run into windows several times – but the swallow was hurt: one of its wings was broken. So I took it home and gave it all the care I could for much of the night. The next morning I fed it and made it comfortable before I went to school.

At school, I could not wait for classes to end. As soon as school was dismissed I ran home to the bird. It certainly was not better. There was a white film on its eyes and it was not struggling any longer. I picked it up and cradled it in the palm of my right hand while I stroked it with the left. It felt warm and I was happy to make it comfortable. But my happiness lasted only a minute or two. The swallow opened its eyes, looked at me intently, whispered a squeal, and then gave a shudder that I felt in every cell of my being. Then it died.

That was my first intimate experience of death, yet I was not touched by either grief or sorrow. I cannot describe my feelings of that moment, but they were nearer to awe and anguish than anything else. The bird remained cradled in my hand until it began to stiffen. Then it was no longer a part of me: it was dead and I was alive.

But I had responsibilities. I had seen funerals pass by our house and I decided to give my departed friend a decent burial. So I passed the word around to my friends at school, and after school the next day we all gathered for the funeral. There were pallbearers and official mourners and all the necessary paraphernalia. The funeral passed from our reception room, through the courtyard and into the garden. We laid the bird in a grave at the root of my little olive tree and I delivered the eulogy. Meanwhile, however, my old aunt, Sophia, under whose window much of this happened, had become curious, then, when she found out what was going on, furious. She saw the whole ceremony as an ill omen; crippled with arthritis and aging, she was naturally concerned with the subject of death. So when my father returned home she told him the whole story about her terrible nephew and his classmates.

I do not know what kind of diplomacy my father used. After he talked to my aunt he came to me, smiling gently, and persuaded me to remove the marble marker, "TO OUR DEPARTED SWALLOW." He also told me to see my aunt before I left for school the next day. I did and found that Aunt Sophia had forgiven me. Indeed, when she died, a few weeks later, she left all the gold pieces she had carefully hoarded to me, her "beloved nephew." To this day my brother wishes *he* had buried a swallow under Aunt Sophia's window.

Meanwhile, the war had begun to bring about some psychological changes in Damascus that were even greater than the political, demographic and geographic changes; it totally reshaped our attitude toward the almighty Europeans who, until then, had been privileged and nearly untouchable.

One schoolmate of my father's, for instance, had been the son of an honorary first secretary at the British consulate. The boy came to school on his horse and, on arriving, would whip out a Union Jack from his pocket, fasten it to the saddle of the horse, tie its halter around its neck and send it home riderless. No one dared touch the horse on its way home because it carried the Union Jack.

Another time, I remember, two friends, my older brother and I went to a nearby park – the Saffaniyah – to play. As the city was tense, a curfew had been imposed and the park had to be cleared an hour before sunset. But we were having such fun that when the police came near us, we switched to English – whatever English we were able to speak then – and the police stopped. "They are Englise!" they said, and waited until we decided to leave the park. As "Englise" we were above the law.

> *But my happiness lasted only a minute or two. The swallow opened its eyes, looked at me intently, whispered a squeal, and then gave a shudder that I felt in every cell of my being. Then it died.*

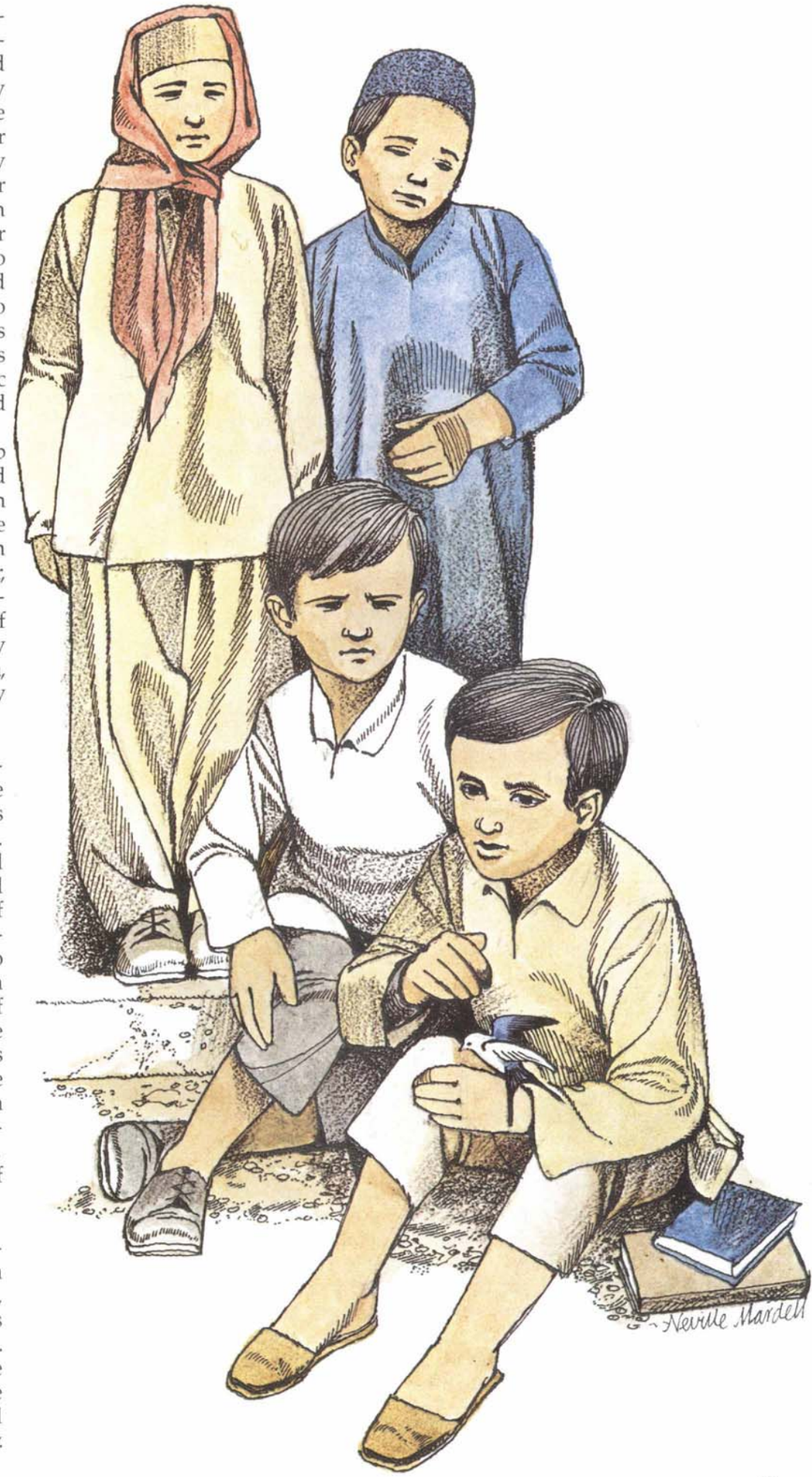
Now, however, as the Europeans fought each other we came to see them as more ordinary men – much as the Asians would see the British after the fall of Singapore. This erosion of wonder at all things European was a wholesome thing. It encouraged the growing nationalist feeling of the Arabs. It re-focused our view of ourselves. It reminded us that we Arabs had immeasurable treasures in our own culture upon which to build.

This aspect of nationalism was stimulated during the war when the Ottomans moved many suspected nationalists to Damascus, where they could be kept under surveillance. Some of these people used to meet at our home, but as politics was forbidden they discussed literary, theological or philosophical subjects. We children were always welcome, of course, or taken along when my parents went to visit others. How much we understood of these discussions, I have no way to tell. All that I remember is that I was fascinated, possibly because there is something enchanting about the Arabic language itself. One can be hypnotized by the rhythm.

Years later, when I reflected on Arab nationalism, I realized how close it had come to replacing the harsh Ottoman rule with a society that might have transcended race and territory. In Damascus, for example, in September, 1918, Ottoman authority had disappeared, bringing to an end 500 years of foreign rule. But instead of the anarchy which so often arises in such a vacuum, civil groups sprang up spontaneously and maintained order.

These groups, which established organizations in each neighborhood, were basically Muslim, but to the Christians of Damascus this was no disadvantage. As I said, we were all Arabs and we had always lived in relative harmony and had been, like Jews, seen as "people of the book," and thus entitled to protection – until the western powers began to arouse the Ottomans by insisting on "protecting" us. Besides, the spirit of Arab nationalism had already made deep inroads, and had helped to knit us together, Muslim and Christian. One night, for instance, I remember a Muslim patrol passing through our neighborhood and the leader saying *"Ya shabab,* walk quietly lest you disturb the sleep of our brothers."

For the next two years this spirit persisted. Indeed, for Syrians, it was a beautiful time. I remember, for example, the October day in 1918 when the leaders of the Arab Revolt reached Damascus. They had come through the East Gate and were proceeding west through the Souk Al Tawileh – the "Street called Straight" – toward the center of the city.



There they raised the green, white, red and black Arab flag (See *Aramco World,* March– April 1978), their swords flashing in the sun and their songs of victory sending a thrill through the welcoming city.

Nine months later, on July 2, 1919, the city was thrilled again: the Syrian Congress declared Syria a free and sovereign state. I remember this in particular because my father was a member of the congress and when he came home to tell us he was hardly able to speak for joy. And in August he came home bubbling with hope again; the congress had just met with the King-Crane Commission, sent by President Woodrow Wilson to find out what the people of Syria wanted for themselves.

For us, Wilson's 12th point was the most important; it promised the peoples living in the provinces of the Turkish Empire the right to self-determination; and now, with the King-Crane Commission actually in Damascus, we had proof that the United States meant to keep its word.

This was very exciting news. Early in the summer of 1918 we had watched from the rooftops as Allied planes dropped leaflets over Damascus with Woodrow Wilson's Fourteen Points printed in Arabic. For us, Wilson's 12th point was the most important; it promised the peoples living in the provinces of the Turkish Empire the right to self-determination; and now, with the King-Crane Commission actually in Damascus, we had proof that the United States meant to keep its word. So the Syrians on that same day reaffirmed their overwhelming preference for independence and said that if any Western guidance was needed, the Syrians would prefer it from the United States.

Thus the stage was set. The will of the people was made plain by the Syrian Congress to President Wilson and on March 11, 1920, Sharif Faisal, who had played a prominent role in the Arab Revolt against the Ottomans, was declared King of Syria.

I, as it happened, had met the Sharif earlier. In the summer of 1919, with three companions, I had been picnicking by a spring in the Bludan mountains and met Faisal on his way back from a morning of hunting. He stopped to talk to us, inspected a shotgun belonging to one of my friends and then turned to the rest of us, handed the weapon back, and said, "As for you, it is not the gun but the pen, the plow, and" – shyly looking at the only girl in the group, – "the cradle." How beautiful the word sounded when he said it: "*sareer*!" Then he sent us away in peace: "Ma' as-salamah!"

I met him one more time too – after he was declared King of Syria. He was visiting schools in the various neighborhoods of Damascus and I was selected to present him with a bouquet of flowers. To my great surprise he recognized me as one of the children he had met on the mountainside in Bludan. So I promptly forgot the words I had rehearsed as a greeting! Such are the treasures we cherish for the rest of our lives.

Our beautiful two years, of course, proved to be an illusion. France and Britain had made other plans and an independent Syria was not included. On April 18, 1920, by the Treaty of San Remo, the Council of Allied Prime Ministers granted France a mandate over Syria and in July the French sent troops from Beirut to enforce their claim. The Syrians, naturally, objected, and on July 25, as the French forces climbed the mountains that divide Lebanon and Syria, masses of Syrians swarmed out of Damascus prepared to resist this invasion. It was a popular uprising and I, all 11 years of me, took a wooden toy gun and set out for Maysalun, some 12 miles out of the city.

It was a short-lived adventure; my mother saw me sneaking out of the house and stopped me. But so was the Syrian resistance. French forces brushed the Syrians aside and took possession of Damascus.

The French, like the Ottomans before them, were often inept rulers. They attempted to divide Syria into small, semi-autonomous states drawn more or less along religious lines. And like all occupying powers they aroused fierce feelings among the subject peoples, unnecessarily.

One incident demonstrates this. A few friends and I were taking a short evening stroll when a French armored convoy approached us. When the convoy reached us, I raised my hand in a halt sign and shouted, "Taxi?" The French commander stopped the whole convoy, came down from the lead car with his pistol in his hand and gave us a tongue-lashing that could easily have won the Battle of the Marne had it been directed at the enemy instead of an 11-year-old boy. I am sure I was at fault: one does not make fun of the military. But the commander's overreaction certainly did not make friends either.

Despite the French presence, however, life in Damascus went on. With the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Irish Mission Academy was permitted to reopen and I resumed my education – this time in the company of Damascus Muslims and Jews.

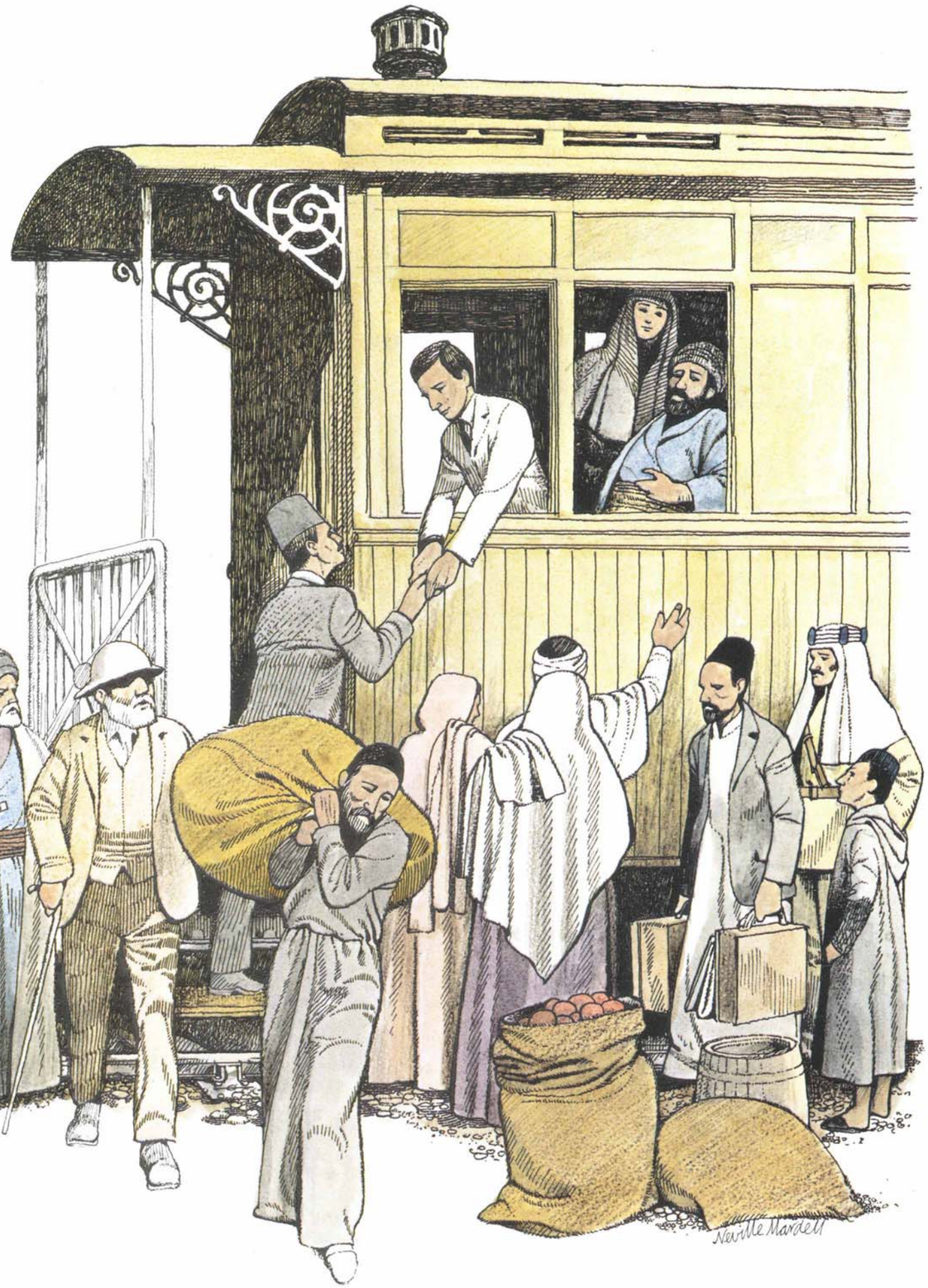
In those days we could be, and were, close friends. Despite differences we were, after all, *ahl al-kitab,* "people of the book", and Syrians. So, in the early 1920's, we studied together, played together and, on special occasions, marched together. One of these occasions was the annual observance of Martyrs' Day, when we mourned the deaths of 21 executed nationalists. Another – celebrated on July 25 each year – was the day the Syrians had swarmed out to Maysalun when the French were coming to occupy Damascus.

French mandatory officials, of course, opposed this celebration. On the anniversary day most of the people of Damascus streamed out along the banks of the Barada towards Maysalun.

The French commander stopped the whole convoy, came down from the lead car with his pistol in his hand and gave us a tongue-lashing that could easily have won the Battle of the Marne had it been directed at the enemy instead of an 11-year-old boy.

There were pageants and sword dancing and fiery speeches. The more the French tried to suppress these occasions the more popular they became, and my friends and I were always there. It brought us closer and we all still remember it when we meet.

Meanwhile, I was also getting an education. The curriculum was not complex; it



dealt only with fundamentals and was centered around the acquisition of academic skills. But in other ways we were allowed to unfold according to our individual capabilities. For me this meant I was free to read.

There were many books at home, but one I particularly remember was an expurgated edition of *The Arabian Nights* in which, every time the story reached a questionable moment, a line of poetry was inserted saying, "And what happened, happened; think well and ask no questions." Having read the *un*expurgated edition since then, I think the other version did no harm to my education! Adolescence is turbulent enough without external excitement to feed its fires.

We also did a lot of visiting with friends. They were not many, but they were for keeps, and we spent a great deal of time together. The city was big and the surrounding countryside was open, beautiful and varied. Above all, we felt secure and safe. There were hills to climb, brooks to ford, watermills to watch, and street life in which we involved ourselves. One of the things to which I always looked forward was the lighting of the street lamps.

By then, there was electricity in the city but the side streets were still lit by kerosene lamps. Each day at sunset, a man appeared carrying a pitcher, a ladder and a rag. He would lean the ladder against the wall, open the lantern, clean the chimney, fill the lamp with oil, strike a match, fit the chimney back over the flame and come down, leaving behind him a pool of light. How I loved to watch people's faces as they came closer to the lanterns and then receded into the darkness between one light and the other. There was also the night watchman who, in the winter, carried a little charcoal burner while he made his rounds. You could hear him pass as he banged his heavy cane on the cobblestones. When any one passed him he greeted them to make sure of their identity; if they were residents in the neighborhood, he let them go; if strangers, he'd give a loud blast on his whistle to alert the watchman at the next post.

The school year 1922–1923 was to be my last at the Irish Mission Academy in Damascus; thanks to an interest-free loan from the academy I was then to go to the preparatory school of the American University of Beirut. But in the fall of 1922 I fell ill with pleurisy and when I recovered, it was decided that I should not go to school for the rest of the year. I should eat well, sleep much and have a great deal of fresh air and sunshine. I do not remember what my reaction to that sabbatical year was then, but subsequently I realized that it was a blessing; as the Muslims say, "*Wa yakhlukul Allah ma la ta' lamun*". ("But God creates for you that of which you have no knowledge.")

The train arrived. He helped me get into it and stood on the platform with tears in his eyes, in the knowledge that a dream he had had a quarter of a century before was being fulfilled in his son. I was on my way.

About 200 yards from my home there was a library that belonged to the Society of St. John of Damascus. It turned out to be a treasure-house of Arabic literature, and for the next year I spent most of my time there, reading voraciously in Arabic. The Arabic language is a most powerful instrument of expression and the Arabic classics, written roughly between the 8th and the 15th centuries, represent the language at its apogee. It was an absolute joy to immerse myself in it; I felt as though I was within something divine. I am sure I read much that I did not understand and still more that had no relevance to me, but it made no difference; each night I could not wait for the day to come again, so I could go to the library and read. There was poetry, philosophy, geography, travel, folklore, theology and, above all, the Koran. The spell of the language fell upon me; I was crushed and burned and purified by it; it filled me with light and excitement. Until then, I had stood at the periphery of things Arabic, but during that fateful year I moved to the heart and soul of those things. One cannot understand the experience from the outside. One has to undergo it. Unless one knows the language, the Arab remains an enigma; when one *does* know it, the Arab does not cease to be a mystery – but he becomes an awesome mystery.

During that year I discovered also – as Arab nationalists had before me – that the central fact about the Arab community is not geography or religion, nor a body of commonly held ideas and ideals, nor a shared tradition and history. All these are derivatives. The central thing is that we know and speak Arabic, a language which, whenever it encounters any other language, tends to displace it, and not by any act of aggression but just by the love it evokes in those who behold it. The glory of it is that Arabic is capable of shaping the character in the same way that beauty, goodness, truth and love do. It falls into the category of first things which say, "Let there be," and character becomes flesh; it makes one free.

So, though much happened during that happy year, the most important was that I found the core of my own being. I knew I was ready to be launched upon another sea: the sea of history, the sea of learning, the sea of reason. I was ready for the world which, then, was the preparatory school at A.U.B. to which, at last, I set out. When my father had loaded my footlocker on a donkey to travel the five miles from Bludan to the railway station and as we stood waiting for the train, I dug my hand into my pocket where there were three *majidis* that I had won in a wager and handed them to my father. At the time I did not understand the meaning of the gesture myself, and many years later he told me that it puzzled him too. But eventually I did understand; it was a symbol that I was entering a world of other categories, other assumptions, other values. What I had not yet internalized would no longer be of any help to me in this new venture.

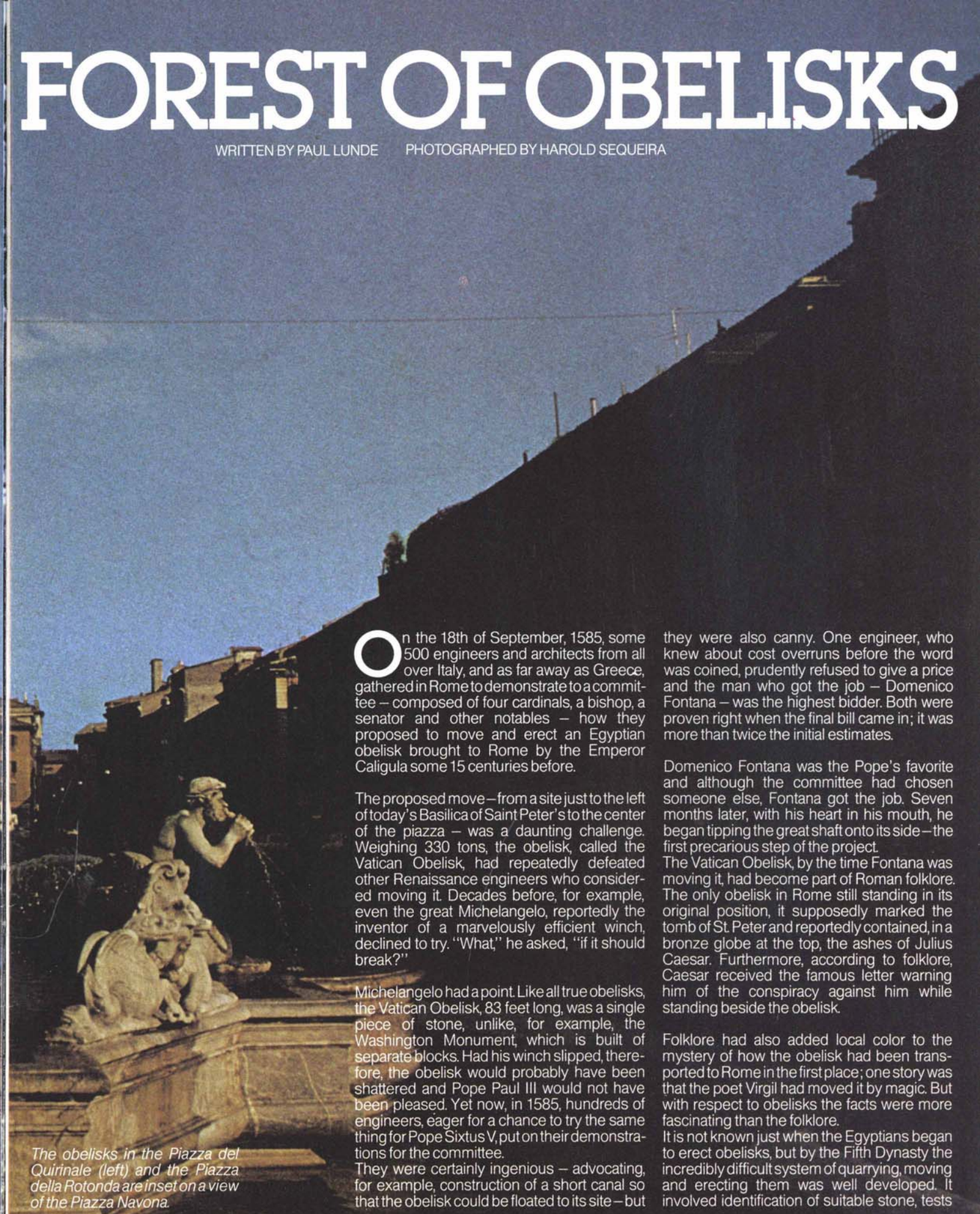
The train arrived. He helped me get into it and stood on the platform with tears in his eyes, in the knowledge that a dream he had had a quarter of a century before was being fulfilled in his son. I was on my way.

Mounir R. Sa'adah, after growing up in Damascus, went on to earn his B.A. and M.A. degrees – in political science – at the American University of Beirut. In 1945 he emigrated to the United States and now lives in Vermont, where he serves as Unitarian Universalist Minister. He has been Director of Arabic and Middle East Studies at Choate School, a consultant to Yale University and Chairman of the Vermont Arab Refugees Committee.

"Found in... gardens, under the ruins of temples, and elsewhere, they were unearthed, pieced together and put up all across Rome."

A FOREST OF OBELISKS

WRITTEN BY PAUL LUNDE PHOTOGRAPHED BY HAROLD SEQUEIRA



The obelisks in the Piazza del Quirinale (left) and the Piazza della Rotonda are inset on a view of the Piazza Navona.

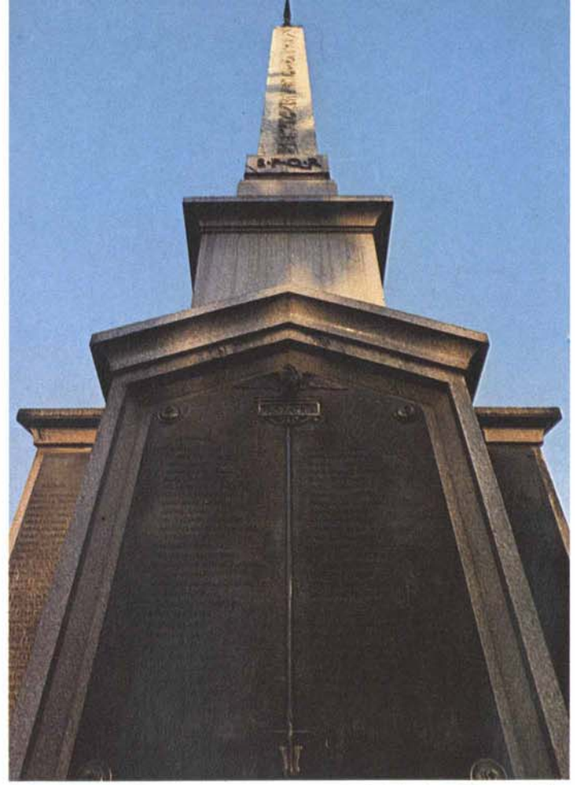
On the 18th of September, 1585, some 500 engineers and architects from all over Italy, and as far away as Greece, gathered in Rome to demonstrate to a committee – composed of four cardinals, a bishop, a senator and other notables – how they proposed to move and erect an Egyptian obelisk brought to Rome by the Emperor Caligula some 15 centuries before.

The proposed move – from a site just to the left of today's Basilica of Saint Peter's to the center of the piazza – was a daunting challenge. Weighing 330 tons, the obelisk, called the Vatican Obelisk, had repeatedly defeated other Renaissance engineers who considered moving it. Decades before, for example, even the great Michelangelo, reportedly the inventor of a marvelously efficient winch, declined to try. "What," he asked, "if it should break?"

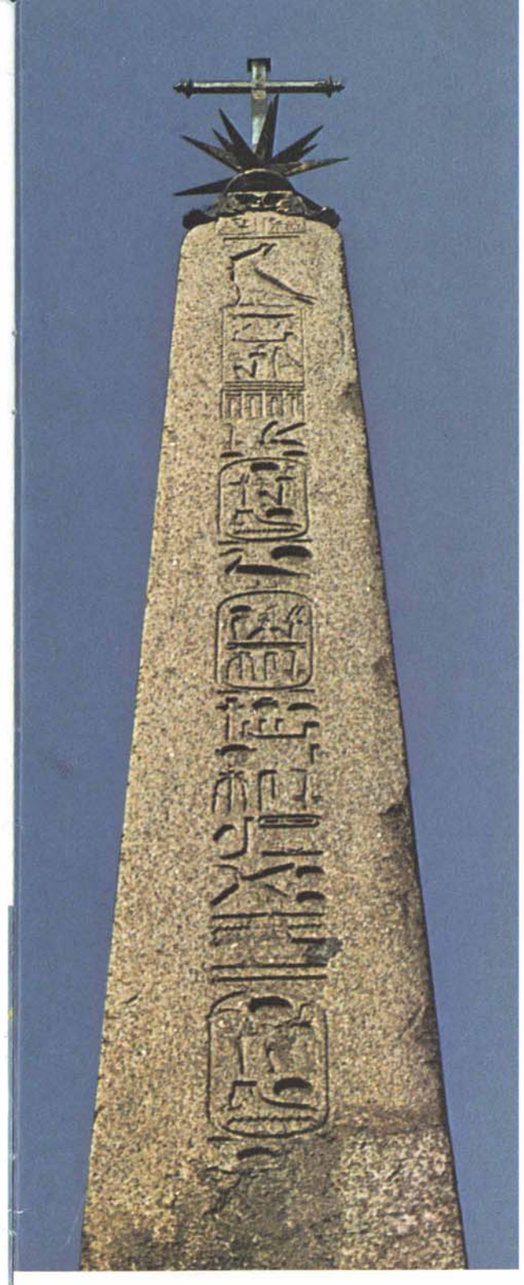
Michelangelo had a point. Like all true obelisks, the Vatican Obelisk, 83 feet long, was a single piece of stone, unlike, for example, the Washington Monument, which is built of separate blocks. Had his winch slipped, therefore, the obelisk would probably have been shattered and Pope Paul III would not have been pleased. Yet now, in 1585, hundreds of engineers, eager for a chance to try the same thing for Pope Sixtus V, put on their demonstrations for the committee.
They were certainly ingenious – advocating, for example, construction of a short canal so that the obelisk could be floated to its site – but they were also canny. One engineer, who knew about cost overruns before the word was coined, prudently refused to give a price and the man who got the job – Domenico Fontana – was the highest bidder. Both were proven right when the final bill came in; it was more than twice the initial estimates.

Domenico Fontana was the Pope's favorite and although the committee had chosen someone else, Fontana got the job. Seven months later, with his heart in his mouth, he began tipping the great shaft onto its side – the first precarious step of the project.
The Vatican Obelisk, by the time Fontana was moving it, had become part of Roman folklore. The only obelisk in Rome still standing in its original position, it supposedly marked the tomb of St. Peter and reportedly contained, in a bronze globe at the top, the ashes of Julius Caesar. Furthermore, according to folklore, Caesar received the famous letter warning him of the conspiracy against him while standing beside the obelisk.

Folklore had also added local color to the mystery of how the obelisk had been transported to Rome in the first place; one story was that the poet Virgil had moved it by magic. But with respect to obelisks the facts were more fascinating than the folklore.
It is not known just when the Egyptians began to erect obelisks, but by the Fifth Dynasty the incredibly difficult system of quarrying, moving and erecting them was well developed. It involved identification of suitable stone, tests



Left: Bernini's elephant carries an obelisk in the Piazza della Minerva that once stood in Sais, Egypt. Below; The Vatican Obelisk stands today where Domenico Fontana erected it. The obelisks in the Piazza San Giovanni in Laterana (right) and in the Piazza di Spagna were erected just 200 years apart.



of its composition—made by driving shafts into the quarry – and then the grueling work necessary to cut the obelisk out of the quarry in one piece.

Actually, according to archeologists, the ancient Egyptians may not have *cut* the obelisks. They first fractured the surface of the stone – by heating bricks and pouring cold water on them—and then pounded the obelisk out of the stone with 10-pound hammers made of a harder stone called dolomite. When free, the great shafts were then levered out – by exerting pressure on trees driven into the fissures pounded out with the hammers. The obelisks were then polished, inscribed, transported to their sites and erected.

Moving and erecting the great obelisks – as Domenico Fontana would discover – were tasks almost as overwhelming as the quarrying. The Egyptians, apparently, dragged the obelisks from the quarry to the Nile on sledges – a monumental job requiring some 6,000 men and, literally, miles of rope. Then they floated them down the Nile on barges, moved them to the sites – presumably by sledge – and erected them.

Surprisingly little is known about how Egyptian engineers erected obelisks. One theory suggests that they dug funnel-shaped holes in the sand, slid the obelisks over the lip of the funnel and down the side – until the bottom of the obelisks came to rest neatly in the neck of the funnel – and then dug away the sand, leaving the obelisks erect. Another theory is that erection involved a series of chambers that were emptied underneath the obelisk until it rested in the required position.

History is vague too on how Caligula re-erected the Vatican Obelisk in Rome. Records show that in pharaonic times it had originally stood in Alexandria, had fallen and had then been re-erected by the Romans during the reign of Augustus. In A.D. 37 it was moved by Caligula to Rome and re-erected again in the center of Caligula's private chariot course. To transport it to Italy, Caligula built a vessel of 1,555 tons; the largest ship ever built up to that time, it was later pressed into service by the Emperor Claudius to transport elephants to Britain for Claudius's invasion.

In 1586, when Domenico Fontana began to move the obelisk, Caligula's racetrack had long since disappeared, but the obelisk was still standing in the same place. Signor Fontana's task was to take it down, move it some 280 yards and stand it up again – all without breaking it.

Fontana, of course, had immense advantages over the ancient Egyptians; he had iron tools, winches and pulleys. Still, it took him six months to move the Vatican Obelisk from beside the church to the center of the piazza. And this did not include the time spent constructing the scaffolding and clearing the site, operations which took another six months of feverish work. The project also involved the demolition of houses to clear the site, the ordering of immense quantities of hemp rope and required the construction of 40 huge winches.

During the preparations, the interest of Renaissance Rome had been mounting by the day. On D-Day, therefore, officials fenced off the site—to prevent the vociferous Roman populace from interfering—surrounded it with Swiss guards and ordered complete silence.

During the same period Fontana, who knew his folklore, ordered his men to detach the bronze globe at the top—to see if it did indeed contain the ashes of Julius Caesar. It didn't, so, on April 30, Fontana finally gave the go-ahead and, to the sound of trumpets, the winches began to turn and the winch-ropes, attached to iron bands riveted to the shaft, began to tighten.

Almost immediately there was a tremendous creak, as the scaffolding groaned under the pressure and one of the iron bands snapped. Fontana sounded a bell—a signal to stop—and inspected both the obelisk and the scaffolding.


Obelisks at the Spanish Steps, in the Piazza del Popolo and in the Piazza Monte Citorio.

Then he replaced the iron band and, after 12 turns of the winches, succeeded in raising the obelisk 24 inches. Elated by this start, Fontana ordered that lunch for his workers – and for 75 horses – be provided. Eight days later the obelisk lay on its side, on a cradle. As this was the most difficult part of the job, Fontana was the hero of the hour and the populace bore him to his house, sounding trumpets and beating drums.

After that the project went swiftly. On a ramp built from the original site to the new site on the piazza – a distance of 841 feet – workers dragged the obelisk into position on rollers. Then, on September 10, with 52 turns of the winch, the obelisk was erected on its original pedestal. By sundown, it was in place and 16 days later – after the site was cleared and the cradle removed – the obelisk stood free. On the 26th of September, almost exactly a year from the time Domenico Fontana was chosen for the job, Sixtus V presided at ceremonies to mark the occasion.

But for Sixtus V, as it turned out, a single obelisk was not enough. Since Fontana had shown that a modern engineer could do what the fabled Egyptians had been able to do, with many fewer men, Sixtus decided to link the seven major basilicas of Rome by broad avenues and, if he could, erect an obelisk in front of each.

His plan, if ambitious, was by no means impossible; the Renaissance Romans had discovered, in the works of Pliny the Elder and others, that ancient Rome had once been a forest of obelisks: six large obelisks and 42 smaller ones had once adorned the city. All but the Vatican Obelisk had long since toppled and vanished, of course, but Sixtus knew that the others must be buried in the ruins of Rome; their size made them almost impossible to remove – even if broken into several pieces – and the stone of which they were made was almost indestructible.

Even before Fontana finished moving the first obelisk, therefore, Sixtus had made tentative plans to assemble the three pieces of another obelisk that had been found, 66 years before, near the Church of San Rocco. And when Fontana succeeded with the first project, Sixtus immediately assigned him to reconstruct the broken obelisk on the Piazza dell'Esquilino. Thus, one by one, Rome's obelisks were disinterred and erected.

Among them was the first obelisk ever to be brought to Rome and the third largest; it had stood in the Circus Maximus and was re-erected in 1589 in the center of the magnificent Piazza del Popolo. There were also the twin obelisks originally put up in Heliopolis by Ramses II and brought to Rome to adorn the Isis Temple, and the obelisk now in the Piazza Montecitorio; imported by Augustus, it was originally set up so its shadow would tell time like an enormous sun-dial. Found in a continuing search of Rome, in gardens, under the ruins of temples, and elsewhere, they were unearthed, pieced together and put up all across the city.

One of the most charming is the obelisk borne on the back of an elephant around the corner from the Pantheon. Erected by the Pharaoh Apries in the city Sais in Egypt, it too once adorned the Temple of Isis. Unearthed in 1665, it was turned over to the famous sculptor Bernini, who designed the elephant which bears the obelisk on its back. Dedicated in 1667, the work bears an inscription to the frivolous: "Oh you who here see transported by an elephant, the strongest of creatures, the hieroglyphs of wise Egypt, take warning: a strong mind is required to sustain solid wisdom."

Another of the more famous obelisks is that which stands at the top of the Spanish Steps. Measuring 45½ feet high, it was probably brought to Rome in the second or third century A.D. It was re-erected on April 20, 1787. Still another is the stunning combination of fountain and obelisk in the Piazza Navona, familiar to anyone who has ever visited Rome. The work of Bernini, the fountain is an allegory of the four continents in which America is depicted by an American Indian recoiling in awe before the stupendous size of the obelisk towering above him.

Each of the obelisks, of course, has a history that runs from pharaonic times through the end of the Renaissance. But some are more interesting than others. Shortly after his first triumph, for example, Fontana was assigned to excavate, move and assemble the pieces of the obelisk of Constantius, one of two that once stood in the Circus Maximus. This obelisk had just been found, by probes, some 23 feet below a garden where farmers were growing cabbages and artichokes on the ancient site of the great Circus Maximus.

The farmers, naturally, were annoyed, but Fontana dug it up anyway and in just over a month – on August 10, 1588 – erected it on the Piazza San Giovanni in Laterano. This is the largest obelisk of them all. It weighs 455 tons and is 105½ feet high. Quarried in Aswan – during the reign of Tuthmosis III – and erected by Tuthmosis IV at Karnak, this obelisk was so big that even the Emperor Augustus, who brought so many other obelisks to Rome, balked at the transportation problem. He left it to stand, as it had for a millennium, in Karnak.

The Emperor Constantine, however, was not so deterred; he wanted it for his new capital at Constantinople. The great moving project, therefore, got underway and the obelisk was on the docks of Alexandria when Constantine died and his son Constantius succeeded him. Constantius continued with the project – although deciding to bring it to Rome instead of Constantinople – and built a gigantic barge on which the obelisk was rowed across the Mediterranean and up the Tiber. Eventually it was brought to the Circus Maximus – already adorned with an obelisk erected by Augustus 367 years before – and, in A.D. 357, erected; it was the last of all the obelisks of Egypt to be brought to the Eternal City.

It was also the first to fall down – or be knocked down – and, like the others, slowly vanish once the Roman Empire had begun to disintegrate, and before the skill of Renaissance engineers like Fontana found a way to restore them to glory.

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