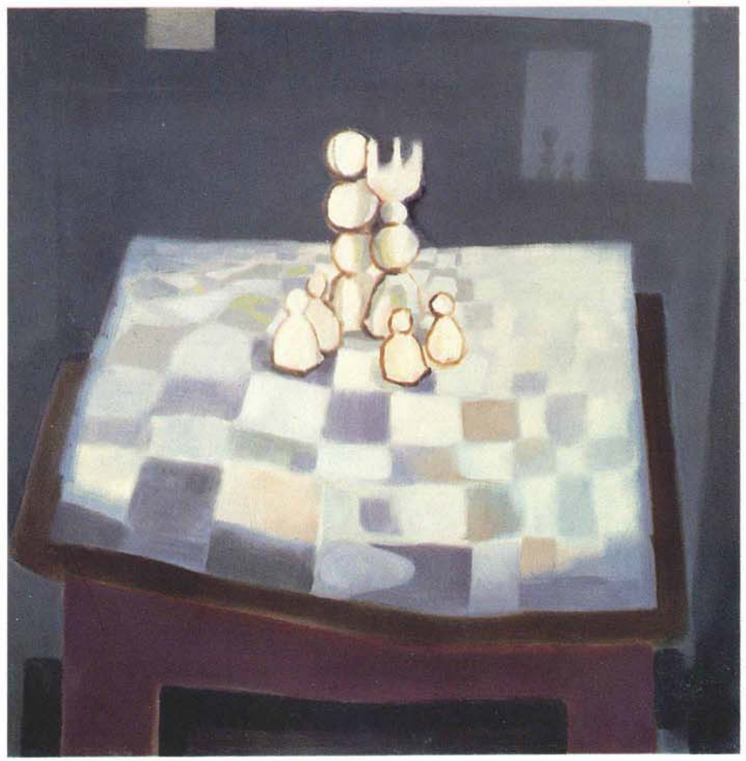

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ARAB ARTISTS *in italy*

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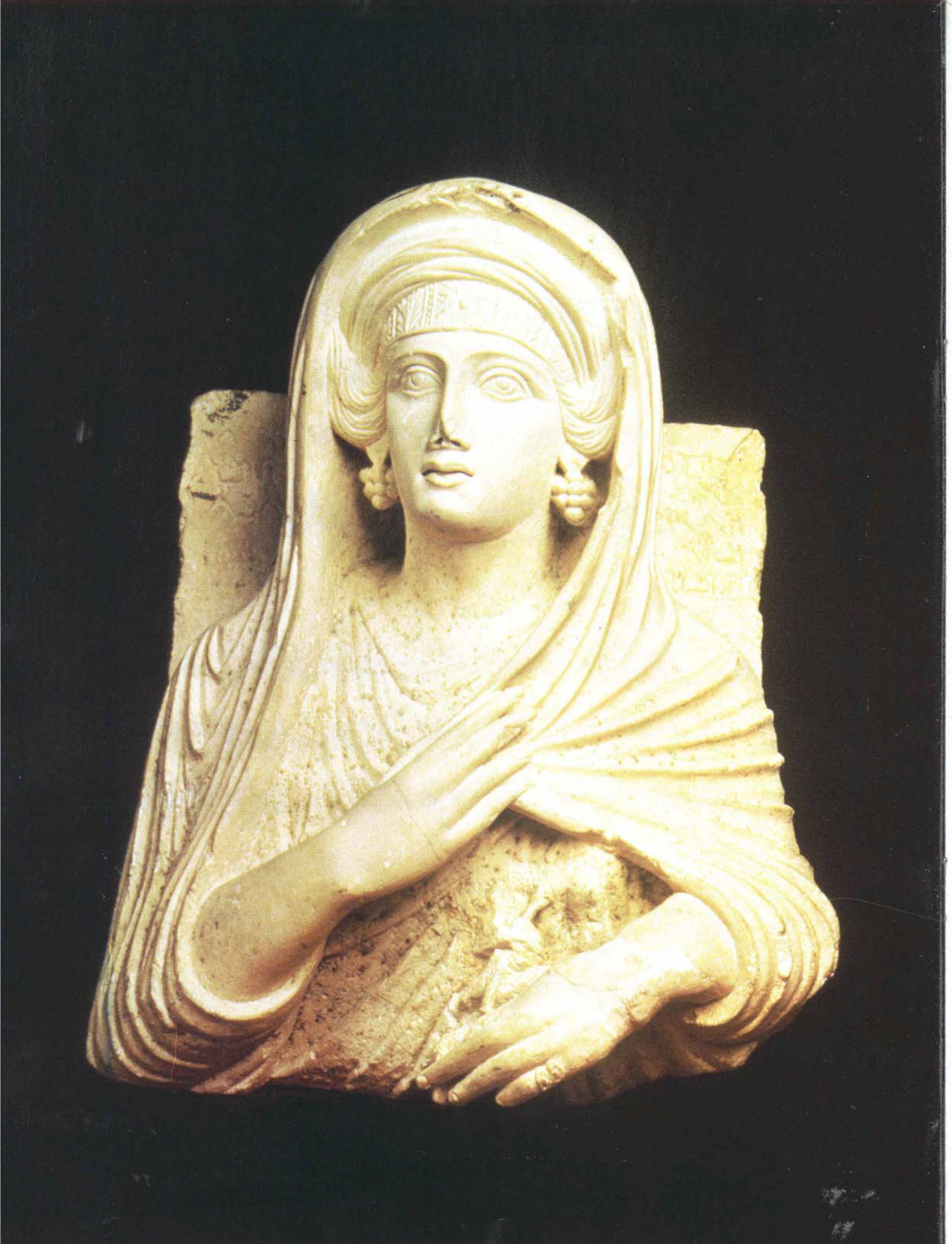
Cover: Algerian Abdel Hakim Abbaci, whose paintings were among modern Arab art recently exhibited in Rome, uses strong, bold brushwork to communicate a pent-up, almost explosive energy in contrast to his employment of cool, minimal color, to create a series of conflicting sensations. Shawki Ezzat of Egypt uses a chess-board and pieces, back cover, to echo the hierarchical Arab family unit and the rich silt-lands of his native Nile Delta, criss-crossed by irrigation channels.

◄ The early Islamic Umayyad period (661-750) spawned an outburst of exquisite mosaic work, such as this ram's head displayed at Jordan's Madaba museum.



EBLA TO DAMASCUS

WRITTEN BY JUNE TABOROFF
PHOTOGRAPHS COURTESY OF SITES

As a striking new exhibition now touring the United States shows, Syria, the mercantile and cultural hub of the ancient world, has become one of the modern Middle East's most important areas of archeological discovery.

After gaining its independence in 1946, Syria initiated a concerted program to uncover its history, the most dramatic result of which was the discovery of the site of Ebla, capital of a wealthy kingdom of the third millennium B.C, along with an entire library of cuneiform tablets – enough to quadruple the total written documentation for that period and to completely revise the early history of Syria (See *Aramco World*, March-April 1978).

To honor this era of archeological discovery, the Syrian Directorate of Antiquities mounted an exhibition of nearly 300 archeological and artistic objects representing 10,000 years of cultural development. The show, *Ebla to Damascus: Art and Archeology of Ancient Syria*, offers a unique review of 10 millennia of Syrian past as revealed by recent archeological research.

The idea of a Syrian antiquities exhibition originated five years ago. Three organizations played catalytic roles in its realization: the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES), which first fastened onto the possibilities of a comprehensive exhibition placing the new Syrian archeological material in its cultural and historic context; the embassy of the Syrian Arab Republic in Washington, D.C., which gave SITES its support and encouragement; and Aramco, which provided funds for the first phase of exhibition planning.

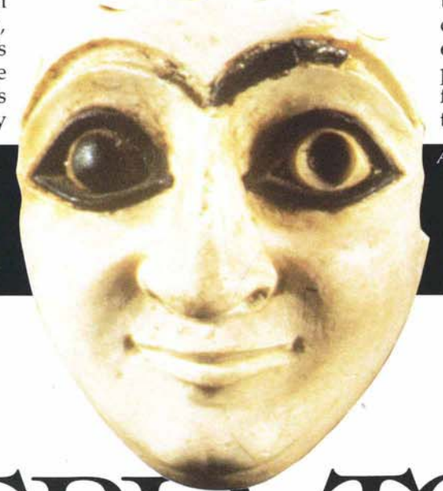
Ancient Syria witnessed the genesis of mankind's most profound and revolutionary accomplishments: agriculture, writing, and the rise of cities and civilization. *Ebla to Damascus* follows the thread of this movement, focusing attention on urban cultures from the third millennium B.C. through the first millennium A.D. Objects represent each major cultural epoch from the origins of agriculture to the rise of Islam. The primary emphasis is the determinant role played by Syrian cities – from Ebla, the powerful city-state of the 25th century B.C, to Damascus, the Syrian capital of the Islamic world.

Syria was one of the main areas where the first agricultural settlements were founded. Such Neolithic sites as Mureybit and Abu Hureyra provide evidence of farming 11,000 years ago – earlier than anywhere else in the world. Mureybit is also the site of the earliest known ancestor cult in the ancient Near East; skeletons were found buried under the floor of a building, with skulls displayed on supports made of red clay.

The agricultural life – unlike the hunting and gathering existence – with its alternating seasons of intense activity and relative leisure favored the invention and the development of crafts and technologies. Dwellings became more complex and organized, and religion was focused on fertility. This critical transition is the point of departure for the show and is documented in the exhibition's earliest objects, including stone and bone implements and figural examples of early religious beliefs.

By 4,000 B.C., most of the lowlands of the Near East were organized into small farming villages, and in Syria and southern Mesopotamia – present day Iraq – the stage was set for another great change: the emergence of civilization.

The introduction of irrigation increased crop yields, thus supporting larger populations, and southern Mesopotamia, watered by the slow-flowing lower reaches of the Euphrates river, became a center of population. By 3,500 B.C. many settlements had grown into cities with populations of as many as 10,000 people, requiring more sophisticated forms of political and social organization. Society became stratified, with administrators, rulers, and priests directing the rest of the population. Trade made available copper from Anatolia and stone and timber from the northern mountainous regions.



Left, a portrait of Agmat, Palmyra 150-200 A.D.

A marble and mother-of-pearl face, Mari 2600-2350 B.C.

A numerical system of record keeping was required to handle the administration of food distribution, storage, and production in these complex urban economies, and writing evolved from markings on *bullae*-lumps of clay used as either stoppers or seals for goods. Signs on these stoppers led to numerical notations on clay tablets which indicated quantities, pictograms were added to illustrate the type of goods stored; finally, pictograms came to represent certain symbols or sounds, and writing existed.

Italian archeologists in 1975 identified Tell Mardikh, located in Syria's northwestern plains, as the ancient city of Ebla, an independent city-state rivaling the greatest of the Sumerian cities of southern Mesopotamia. The city's wealth came from agriculture, textile production, and control of inland trade routes for timber, copper, silver and lapis lazuli.

The excavation of Ebla yielded a vast archive of clay tablets that preserved a detailed record of the life of the city, revealing a previously unknown kingdom with a civilization as complex, sophisticated and well-organized as any in south Mesopotamia, and demolishing the notion that Early Dynastic civilization existed only in that area and Egypt.

About 2,270 B.C, the Akkadians, a Semitic-speaking dynasty, took control of southern Mesopotamia and launched a series of military expeditions into Syria, destroying Ebla about 2,250 B.C. A coalition of northern and eastern enemies destroyed the Akkadians not long afterward, and the Amorite-ruled kingdoms of Syria emerged as powerful states. These Semitic-speaking peoples were probably originally semi-nomadic herdsmen who lived off the grazing lands between Syria's urban centers. Gradually, Amorites rose to positions of power throughout the region.

Three great Amorite kingdoms were dominant: Yamkhad, Shubat Enlil and Mari. Yamkhad, with its capital at modern Aleppo, succeeded Ebla as the major power in the northwest region, while at Shubat Enlil in the Habur River area, the Amorite ruler, Shamshi-Adad, unified the cities of the northeastern plains.

Despite rivalries among dynasties which led to frequent changes in leadership, Mari, too, grew in influence under its Amorite kings. Under the rule of Zimri-Lim a lavish palace was contructed, but within a century Hammurabi, the Babylonian ruler, conquered Mari and ended its role as a major power.

A half century of excavations at Mari by French archeologists has enlarged our understanding of Near Eastern history for the period 2,000-1,000 B.C. Their discovery of the Amorite palace of King Zimri-Lim, a 260-room complex, brought to light objects of fine craftsmanship and materials. The palace walls were covered with paintings of royal and religious ceremonies; statuary was an important element of the decorative program of the palace. Detailed descriptions of palace and family life were kept in the palace archives.

What is remarkable about Ebla and Mari is that the salient features of city life as we know it today – urban centers with monumental architecture, written records, and an administrative apparatus – first found their expression in these Syrian cities, a reading of history only made possible by the last two decades of archeological research.

The Middle Syrian period in Syria and Mesopotamia saw both prosperity and political upheaval. Politics and economics were dominated by the kingdom of Mitanni, with its center on the Habur plains. The Mitanni became the most powerful kingdom in northern Syria, rivaling the Hittites and the New Kingdom in Egypt for control of trade routes.

Outside the Mitanni sphere was the coastal city of Ugarit – modern Ras Shamra – a flourishing crossroads of international commerce in the eastern Mediterranean, linking sea and land trade among Egypt, Palestine, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, Cyprus, and Mycenaean Greece. French excavation at Ugarit has revealed objects in an "international style," including Mycenaean pottery and and Egyptian sword inscribed with hieroglyphics.

At the height of its prosperity, from about 1,400-1,200 B.C.,the kingdom of Ugarit was a sophisticated, cosmopolitan center with many foreign residents. Excavations at this walled city have uncovered palaces, residential quarters, temples, and vaulted tombs. Archives in several languages consist of legal contracts, administrative documents, letters, and poetry. Diplomatic texts confirm contacts with Egypt, Mesopotamia, Aegean centers and the Hittite court in Anatolia.

Above, a lion-headed eagle, Mari 2600-2350 B.C., and right, a statuette of a deity, Ugarit 1400-1300 B.C.

Above, a twisted gold bracelet found at Ebla, and left, a limestone statue of a deity from Mari.

Below, a cuneiform tablet found at Ebla, and right, a votive statue from the Ninni Zaza Temple, Mari.

About 1,500 B.C., the scribes of Ugarit adapted an early version of the alphabet, consisting of only 30 characters, instead of the 300-odd signs used in cuneiform. Each sign represented only one sound. These simplifications made writing easier, faster and more accessible to a wider group of users. No longer did an exclusive class of scribes have a monopoly on writing. The inscribed tablets found at Ugarit are a principal source of our knowledge of ancient Canaanite culture, opening the Old Testament – its history, religion, and mythology – to comparative analysis.

After invasion, famine and volcanic eruptions devastated the eastern Mediterranean about 1,200 B.C., small independent states, the Neo-Hittite and Aramaean kingdoms, came to prominence in northern Syria and southeastern Anatolia. Their centers were Damascus, Aleppo, Hama, and Carchemish. The Neo-Hittites were the survivors of the Old Hittite empire, while the Aramaeans were a new population. The Aramaeans, nomads who appeared in Syria about 1,200 B.C., gradually assumed political importance in several regions and exercised a major influence in international trade, particularly the camel caravans.

The Assyrian empire in the Near East began to push westward at this period, and by 700 B.C. most of the Aramaean and Neo-Hittite kingdoms had become provinces of Assyria.

The ebb and flow of political domination continued in the late seventh century B.C. as the Assyrian empire collapsed under the threat of the Babylonians. Subsequently, the Babylonians yielded to the Persians who, in 331 B.C., were replaced by Greeks when the region fell to Alexander the Great. Discord among Alexander's successors gave the Romans the opportunity to gain influence in the region, and in 64 B.C. Rome officially annexed Syria.

The growth of Syrian cities was spurred on by the invaders. Damascus and Aleppo were transformed into Greek and, later, Roman cities, with town planning, forums, temples, and theaters in the classical style. Trade increased, fueled by demand for luxury goods and facilitated by a new system of Roman roads, and Syria became one of the wealthiest provinces of the Roman Empire.

Most rural areas, however, remained largely unaffected by Greek and Roman rule and kept their traditional ways of life. Native Syrian and Mesopotamian gods coexisted and even merged with Greek and Roman deities; Jewish and Christian communities were also present. In turn, Greek and Roman art and religion took on characteristics of Syrian origin.

With the coming of Islam in the seventh century, Syria was once again introduced to a new religion and culture. Cities such as Dura Europas and Palmyra exemplified the interaction of Aramaean, Greco-Roman, and Arab culture. The interwining of these artistic and religious traditions and the creative outcome of their meeting is evident in bronze and marble statues, figurines, and vessels in the exhibit.

Throughout the Byzantine and early Islamic periods, Syria added its own distinctive flavor to newly adapted religious and cultural institutions. It became one of the greatest cultural centers in the Mediterranean and the capital of the Umayyad dynasty. Under Islam, Arabic became the official language and an Islamic style of art began to emerge from the synthesis of ancient traditions and classical forms.

The threads that wind through nearly 10,000 years of Syrian history are varied and telling. From the earliest periods of Syria's past, religion has been a strong inspiration in art, while for more than 5,000 years the Syrians have attached great importance to written language as an instrument of trade, a factor in political and social stability and a pillar of community wealth.

Ebla to Damascus describes, through artifacts, the beginnings of writing, trade practices, and cross-cultural ties, spanning the 10,000 years between the first instance of settled life in 9,000 B.C. to the Islamic era. It examines important discoveries from Ebla in the third millennium B.C., the civilizations of Mari and Ugarit of the second millennium B.C.; as well as the urban complexity of Hellenistic, Roman, Byzantine, and Islamic Syria. By presenting a basis for a new understanding of Middle Eastern civilization and its origins, the exhibition delineates the cultural inheritance of present-day Syria and the part it played in the development of the modern urban societies we all know today. ⊕

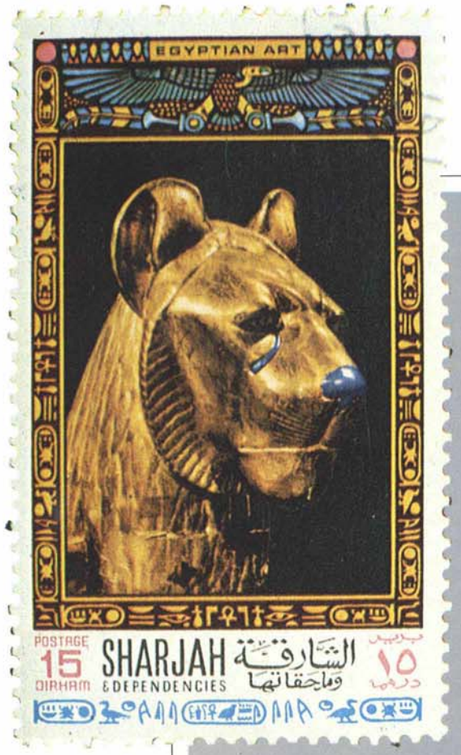
June Taboroff, who earned a Ph.D. in art and architectural history at the Institute of Fine Arts, New York University, specializes in Islamic art and architecture.

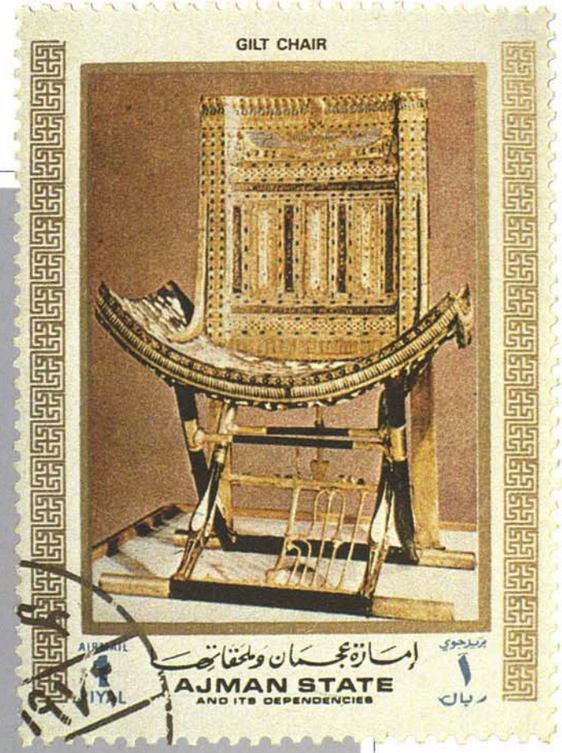
Ebla to Damascus ***will be on display at the Cincinnati Art Museum till January 18, at the Detroit Institute of Arts February 14 to May 3, and at the National Museum of Natural History in Washington, D.C. from July 10 to September 27.***

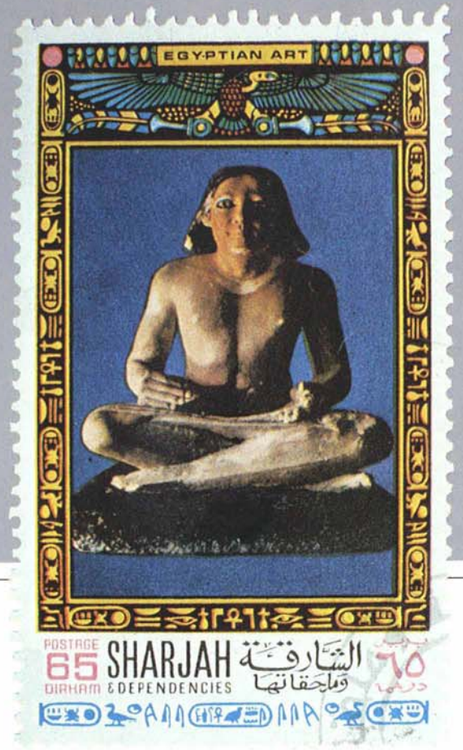
Left, a figure of the singer Ur-Nanshe found at Mari, and above, a painting of two Assyrian officials circa 750 B.C.

EGYPTIAN ART ON STAMPS

WRITTEN BY RAYMOND SCHUESSLER







When Herodotus saw the majestic remains of ancient Egyptian civilization in the fifth century B.C., he wrote, "Wonders more in number than any other land and works it has to show beyond belief."

Ever since, men have marveled at the vast learning of the ancient Egyptians and at the confidence and beauty of their artistic expression in different materials – marble, gold, silver, bronze and precious jewels.

The achievements of classical Greece in sculpture, engineering, metalwork, cabinetry and the working of precious stones can be traced back in a direct line to their beginnings in ancient Egypt. And, as we follow the time line in the other direction all these glories are also woven into our modern civilization.

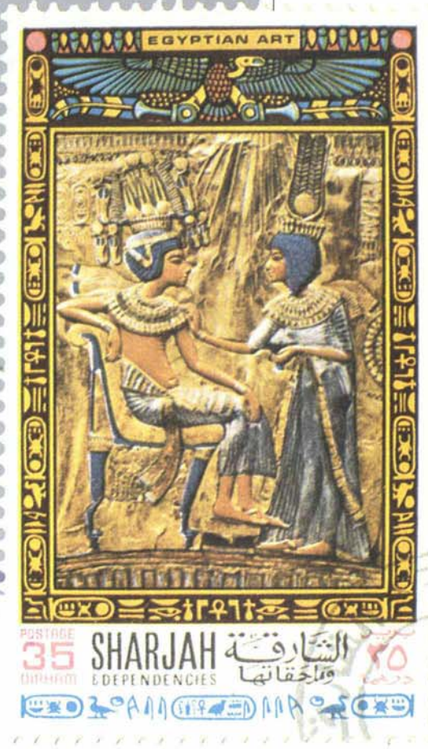
As historian Jean Capart put it, "Our final conclusion may be that Egypt reveals the knowledge of one of the sources – perhaps *the* source – from which the great river of beauty has flowed continuously through the world."

The Greeks and Romans knew well from whom they had borrowed. Egypt's civilizations, sustained for over 2,500 years, was already so old in Herodotus' time that the Greeks viewed Egypt much as we view the ruins of classical Greece today.

Many of the great treasures of ancient Egypt are commemorated on stamps issued in the Middle East. And for those who care to practice archeological excavations on stamps, the search at one remove can be almost as exciting as searching for the real thing.

Raymond Schuessler is a writer who collects Middle East stamps.

EGYPTIAN ART ON STAMPS



YEHIA SHAFIK
Spatial Composition, 1984

ARAB ARTISTS *in italy*

WRITTEN BY PATRICIA BAKER
PHOTOGRAPHED BY CIMAGLIA
AND ALESSANDRA PEDONESI

The words "Arab painting" immediately conjure up images of manuscript illustrations produced by the medieval artists of Damascus, Cairo and Baghdad. Whether the works were created to accompany scholarly scientific discourses like the *De Materia Medica* of Dioscorides and al-Jazari's *The Book of Mechanical Devices*, or to complement the lively tales of *Kalila wa Dimna* and the *Maqamat* of al-Hariri, their painters displayed a sophisticated knowledge of line and color, and conveyed the sensibility of medieval Islamic society and culture to the observer then and now.

But the recent exhibition "Tracce Arabe in Italia," held in the Palazzo Venezia in Rome presented the world of 20th-century Arab painting, represented by works of modern Arab painters living in Italy. As one would expect, the difference between today's world and that of medieval Islamic society was reflected in these paintings. But the link across the centuries was there as well – to be found in the common love of, and fascination with, vibrant color and fluid line, so apparent both in medieval Arab miniature painting and in the large, canvases of Arab artists of the 1980's.

The immediate impression on walking into the exhibition was not, however, of the Islamic heritage passed on to these painters, but of the impact on them of Western art. The work of Mohanna Durra of Jordan, for example, is clearly inspired by the same qualities of clear light and resonant color which so affected Paul Klee and August Macke during their short visit to Tunis in 1914. There, faced with the profusion of light streaming in from all sides, Klee wrote excitedly, "That is the significance of this blessed moment. Color and I are one. I am a painter."

Durra chooses, as Klee did, to express these qualities by building up areas of color on the canvas with the palette knife. In a series of dramatic color and tonal counterchanges which create startling highlights, Durra hints at a skyline or suggests a water surface in his work entitled *Imaginary Landscape* .

This use of vigorous blues, greens and mauves is also found in the paintings of Fadhil Ukrifi of Iraq, who strives to trap that cool, glassy reflective luminosity seen in the evening light and the deep waters of the eastern Mediterranean. But for a method of translating into oils this mysterious factor, Ukrifi turns to the 19th-century French artist Monet, who, in his late work produced in Venice, explored the vibration of light on water.

The heat of the Middle Eastern day and the harsh and colorful life of Berber

MUDHAFAR SHAWKT
Latest News, 1985

MOHANNA DURRA
Imaginary Landscape, 1985

MOHANNA DURRA
Geometrics in the Sand, 1985

existence are recalled in the triptych of Mezred Abderrahmane of Algeria. He prefers the intense, glowing hues of reds, oranges and yellows set against pockets of browns and black of the same textural quality for, as the expressionist painter Emil Nolde stated, each color creates a sensation. "Yellow contains happiness and also pain. There is fire-red, blood-red and rose-red. There is silver-blue, sky-blue and thunder-blue. Every color conceals within itself its soul, making me happy, repelling me, or inspiring me."

But in case the observer should be seduced into thinking that to communicate an atmosphere of pulsating heat, the artist must employ reds and oranges, Ali al-Jabiri, an Iraqi painter, proves the contrary. Standing in front of his work, the shimmering heat and the dazzling light of the Middle Eastern desert are palpable, and yet this effect is achieved through the use of one color only – a creamy white. Al-Jabiri's desert is the silent, passive landscape which appealed to many east-Mediterranean mystics, who in their striving to realise spirituality, took to living in the desert, following a life of contemplation.

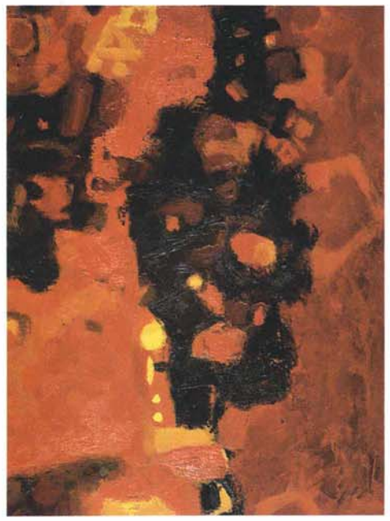
Vibrant colors are used confidently and emphatically, almost in the manner of the American artists Jim Dine and Cy Twombly, in the work of another Algerian artist, Ali Kichou. Delacroix, in his paintings of North Africa, transformed the traditional representation of light and dark, of *chiaroscuro*, into zones of luminosity by analyzing shadows and color, and applying this knowledge to the canvas. And, while Kichou's work cannot be said to be inspired by Delacroix, he has a similar understanding of color-intensifying light. But there is more than color and light in his work. Here the inclusion of "found" objects – a soft-drink can, a tape-reel, a plastic shoe sole, wire and tin foil – combined with a jumble of graffiti glyphs and pictographs worked in oils, poster and house paints, immediately communicates the noise and clutter of any village or small-town street in the Middle East. The romantic imagery of the desert and of tent life, so favored by such 19th-century European artists as James Tissot and John Frederick Lewis, finds no home here: Kichou's work is forceful and aggressive.

The painting of a third Algerian, Abdel Hakim Abbaci, is closely related to that of Kichou in the use of strong, bold brush-work which communicates a pent-up, almost explosive energy in contrast to his employment of cool, minimal color. Again, the graffiti element is powerfully evident and there is a clever manipulation of pictorial depth, creating a series of conflicting sensations and atmospheric vibrations by minimal means.

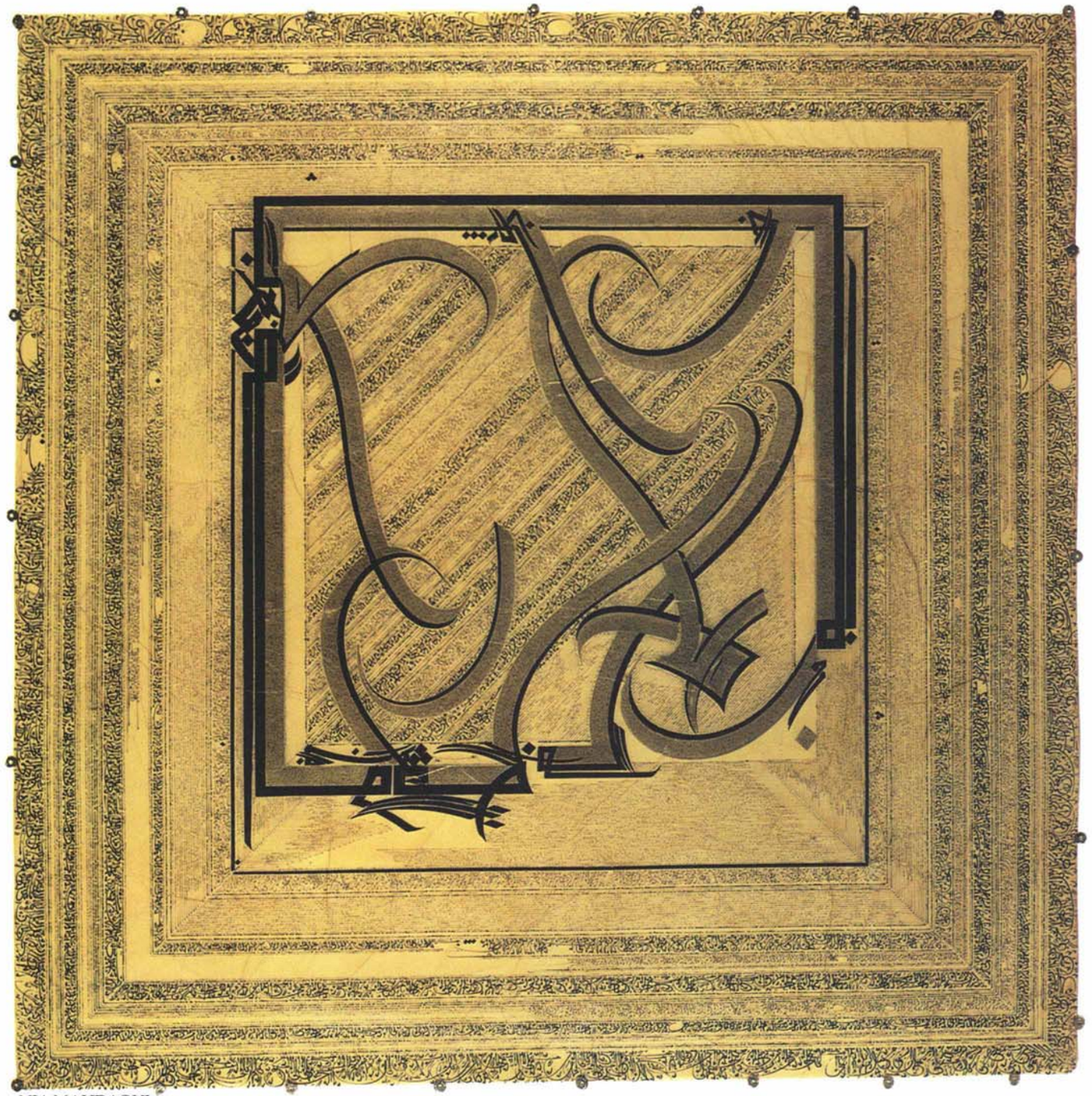
The patchwork of cultivated fields, as seen from the air, interests the Egyptian artist Shawki Ezzat, who originates from the rich silt-lands of the Nile Delta. Here, those fields, criss-crossed by irrigation channels, are transformed into the chess-board of life. The metaphor and imagery are continued with the anthropomorphic chess-pieces, which echo the family unit and its hierarchy of father, mother and children. Perhaps as a poignant reminder of the struggle for survival, the colors employed are sombre, ghostly-conveying a premonition of death.

There is a similar sensation when looking at the canvases of Hassan Badawi of Lebanon, where the composition and tonal shades serve to emphasize this distorted panorama of existence. Warm, pastel coloring is disturbingly offset by unemotional, cold shades of gray and blue. The vertical line of buildings with blind windows, containing an echo of George Grosz' work, dominates the composition, and where there are landscape elements in the form of ghostly gray, leafless trees, these too parallel the upward movement. The human element is subordinate. The human head, hand and torso are incorporated in an individual way but again the message of anonymity is present. The windows reveal nothing, the faces convey no emotion, and the hands are empty.

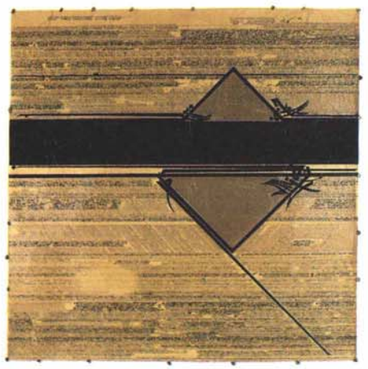
Two other painters showing at the Palazzo Venezia – Mahmoud Deadouch of Syria, and Mudhafar Shawkt of Iraq – choose to depict the human figures as anonymous, dismembered, characterless ciphers, devoid of emotion. There is yet another young artist in this exhibition also from Iraq, who employs such a device along with stereotype images of Islamica such as the crescent moon, mosque domes and minarets, and palm trees. However, Timimi Saied's talent lies in taking such well-known motifs and incorporating them in the composition to



MEZRED ABDERRAHMANE
Particulars of the Berber Woman, 1984



NJA MAHDAOUI
Untitled, 1984



NJA MAHDAOUI
Untitled, 1984

FADHILO UKRUFI ▷
Vibrations, 1984

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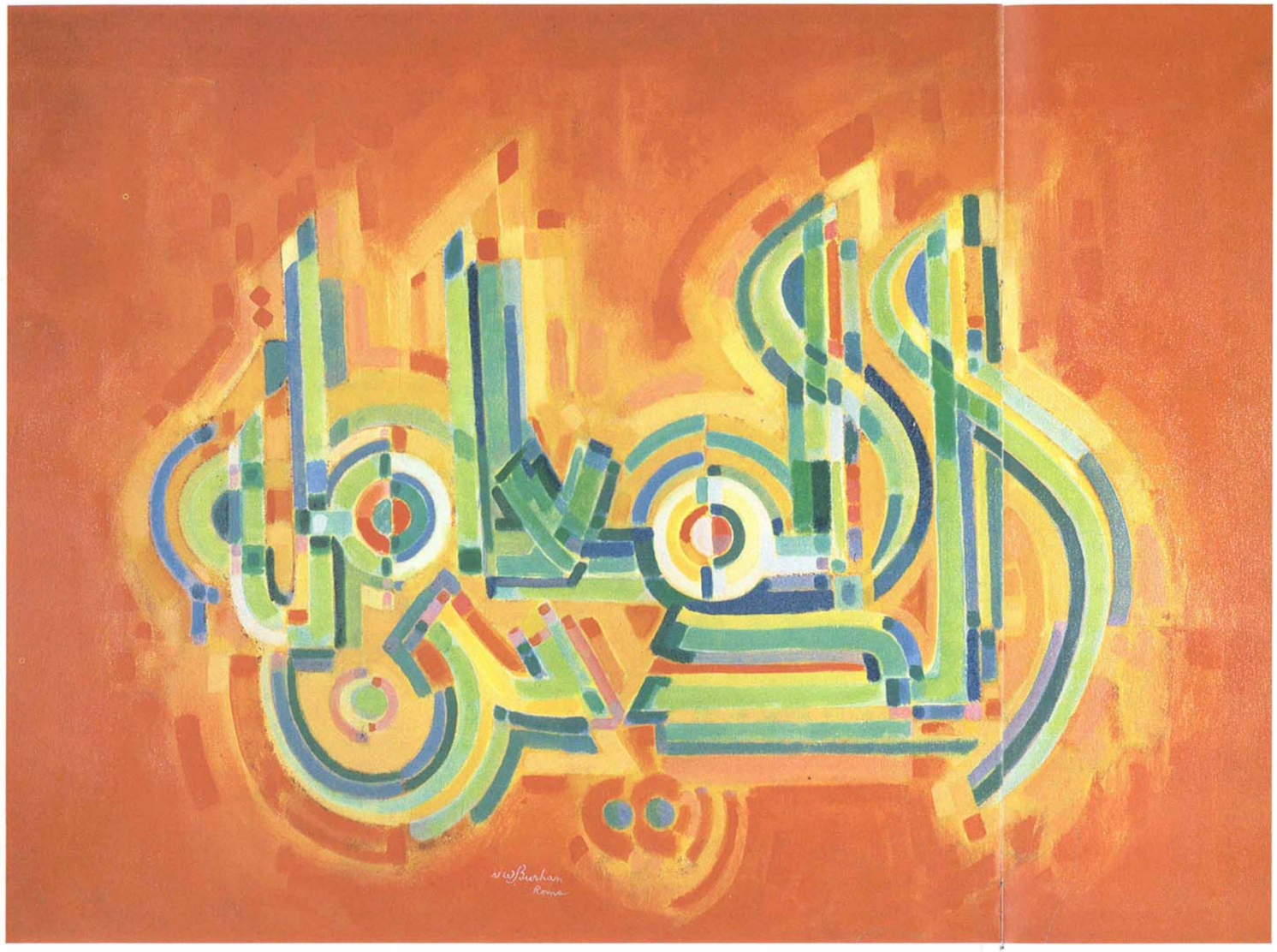


SAMI BURHAN
Scripture 2, 1985

SAMI BURHAN
Scripture 1, 1985

create highly arresting paintings which draw the visitor back again and again. His two works complement each other, but each stands in its own right. *Medio Oriente* powerfully communicates its message of incomprehension at the destruction and devastation present in so many parts of the Middle East, while Saied's other painting is concerned with those innermost crises which can threaten the very sanity of the individual. Instead of dark, melancholic tones, its background with earthly yellows, singing greens and ethereal pinks conjures up memories of home, reinforced with projected images of Arabness. Against this colorful field, the asexual figure with a super-imposed form wrestles with the crisis of identity. The figures in both works may be expressionless, but silent they are not.

Three artists from Egypt, Syria and Tunisia are linked by a common interest in the calligraphic mode of expression. Yehia Shafik, born in Cairo, shows the confident and masterly control of brush-work usually associated with Japanese calligraphers practiced in the Zen school. The elegant sweeps of the brush curve rhythmically in choreographic sequences across the canvas. But while Shafik uses a dark ground so that the brush strokes of jewel-like colors create a world of stained glass, Sami Burhan of Syria employs tones associated with heat and sand for the field. A sense of monumental mass is evoked by the use of the Kufic script which is contrasted by the intricate color shading within the letter forms.

The work of Nja Mahdaoui of Tunisia bridges the divide that can occur when employing a graphic image in an art context. It is not enough to work out the proportions of the letter forms and plot the inscription on the surface of the canvas, and expect the dynamics of the forms to take over magically. Similarly a sudden, spontaneous calligraphic stroke will often convey nothing but haste. Mahdaoui acknowledges this problem and subtly contrives to divide the surface laying the foundations of an exciting dynamism of plane and depth. She builds on this by her particular utilization of Islamic calligraphy, especially the Maghribi script, in a formal geometrical frame and in a contrasting central composition of organic growth. To intensify these elements she employs only two colors, gold and black, so complementing the two-dimensional quality of the letter forms.

It is probably these calligraphically-orientated works which the European visitor expects to see in an exhibition of modern Arab art; that and the portrayal of characteristic architectural designs or the patterned textiles of the Middle East. So the visitor experiences something like a pang of disappointment when confronted with work that so clearly uses Western art styles in order to convey its message.

After all, it was the 1912 Munich exhibition of 16th-century Persian manuscript painting which inspired Matisse to formulate his distinctive style uniting linear ornamentation and color surface constructions. And we know that Islamic painters dismissed the laws of perspective and *chiaroscuro*, so avidly studied in the West, some six centuries before European artists felt able to reject such conventions. With those facts in mind it is momentarily disquieting to see that in the 1980's Arab painters employ the grammar and vocabulary of Western art movements.

No doubt the responsibility for this state of affairs lies at the feet of Western art critics. During the mid-19th century the work of contemporary Arab, Persian and Turkish painters was continually criticized for the "unhappy" mixture of Western and Eastern artistic conventions. The recommended remedy was simple: those Eastern artists worthy of selection were dispatched to European schools where they could learn to be "real" painters, for in the academies and art schools of the northern hemisphere study of art meant the study of Western art. It is only recently that Middle Eastern artists have begun to assert their independence, working in a manner that is within and without the main-stream art scene, being a part of it and yet retaining a certain individuality.

This may not be a bad position to be in, since artistic communication, like any other kind, requires first a message and second a widely understood medium in which to express the message. At the exhibit in Rome, a number of Arab artists demonstrated their command of both content and clarity of expression.

Patricia Baker, an authority on Islamic art, lectures at universities and art schools in England and serves regularly as an international consultant in her field.

King Charles XII of Sweden, above, sent three officers to the Middle East in 1710 to draw its monuments, right.

THE SWEDISH CONNECTION

WRITTEN BY PHILIP MANSEL
ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF THE NATIONAL SWEDISH ART MUSEUMS

In the past, distant countries were sometimes more closely connected than we imagine today. Even areas as geographically remote from each other as Scandinavia and the Middle East were linked. Not only did occasional Arab travelers – such as Ibn Fadlan in the 10th century – visit Viking trading posts in Russia, but Vikings themselves traveled in the Middle East and traded there.

Much later, during the 17th and 18th centuries, Sweden again had contacts with Islamic lands. One of the most interesting results of these contacts is a collection of 40 drawings of Istanbul, Jerusalem, Palmyra and other sites by a Swedish officer named Cornelius Loos.

The story of how these drawings came into existence is rooted in the complex political situation of Sweden in the late 17th century. Beginning in 1657, Sweden had diplomatic relations with the Ottoman Empire – since both Sweden and the Ottoman Empire bordered Russia, they had political as well as commercial interests in common.

When the warrior king Charles XII came to the Swedish throne in 1697, he found himself facing the powerful Russia of Peter the Great, intent on obtaining control of the Baltic. The two nations went to war in 1700 and in 1709 Russia's victory at the battle of Poltava in the Ukraine forced the Swedish king to flee to Bender on the Dnestr river not far from Odessa – now in the Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, but then an important Turkish town.

The Ottoman Sultan, Ahmet III, welcomed his vanquished ally and treated him hospitably. So for four years – from 1709 to 1713 – Sweden was ruled from a small town in Ottoman Bessarabia, a thousand miles from Stockholm. Even in the 18th century, communications were not so bad as to make government by courier impossible.

Charles XII, however, was a very active monarch and found that time hung heavy on his hands. He later referred to "our lazy dog-days in Turkey." His thoughts, perhaps because of his interest in Biblical history – he had commissioned a new Swedish translation of the Bible – turned to the historical monuments of the Middle East. So he chose three officers and charged them to go "to Jerusalem and Egypt to examine the rarities and monuments there and make drawings of them," as the Chancellery log-book puts it.

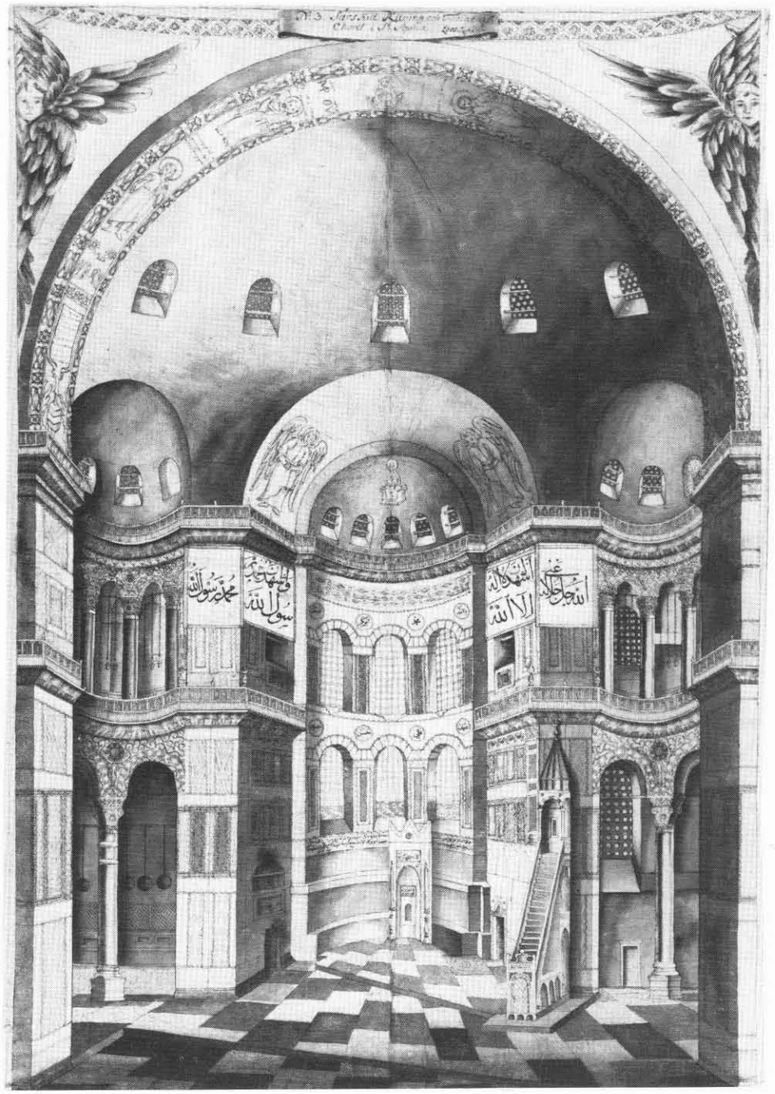
The three men he selected were Captain Cornelius Loos, Captain Conrad Sparre and Lieutenant Hans Gyllenskiep. Loos, although only 24, commanded the expedition. He was a trained military engineer and therefore knew how to make accurate plans, and had already been working with

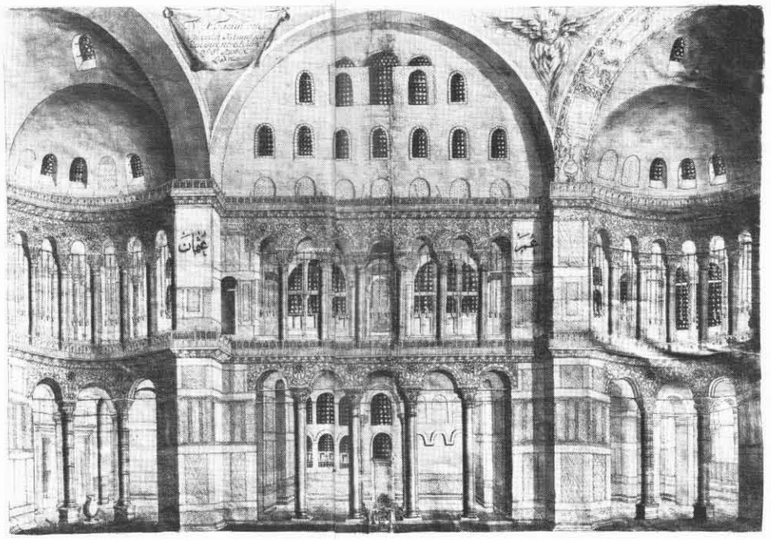
the king on a book illustrating infantry and cavalry drills.

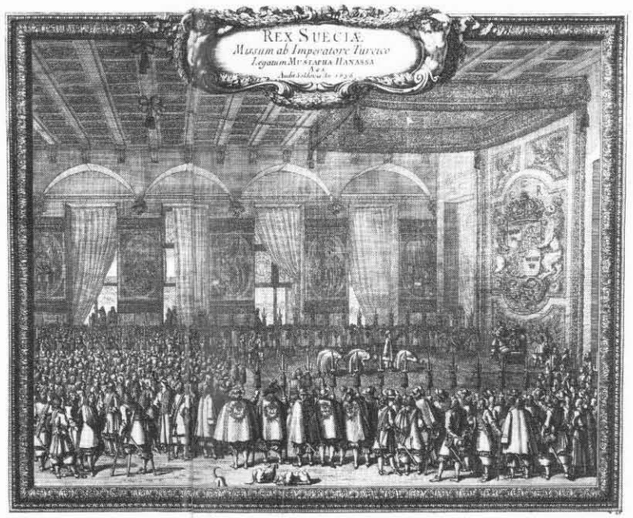
The three men left Bender in January 1710. Three weeks later they reached Istanbul, where they spent six weeks, then sailed for Alexandria on a Turkish man-of-war. They landed at Alexandria on May 21, 1710, and set off to visit the Pyramids and other sites in Egypt. They then took a ship to Acre and traveled overland to Jerusalem, Bethlehem, Jericho, the Dead Sea, Gaza, Galilee, Nazareth, Damascus, Baalbek, Tripoli and Aleppo. They were among the first Europeans to visit the magnificent ruins of Palmyra, and finally returned to Bender on June 28, 1711.

Captain Loos made sketches throughout the trip and back at Bender made finished drawings for the king. A list made in 1736 shows that he handed over more than 300 drawings, plans and views of towns and ruins throughout Egypt, Palestine and Syria. In addition, he copied a great number of inscriptions and collected over 500 antique medals, engraved gems, "heathen figures" and other curiosities. The expedition also collected botanical specimens, made paintings of male and female Turkish costume and constructed a model of the Temple of Saint Helena in Jerusalem. The king was so pleased and interested that he kept the drawings in a chest in his bedroom to study at leisure.

But two years later disaster struck. The King of Sweden and the Ottoman sultan fell out over the best strategy to use against the Russians. This disagreement led to an attack by the local Turkish garrison on the king's residence in January 1713. Charles XII was taken captive, and during the siege fire spread to his personal apartments. Three chests containing the drawings of Captain Loos were burned. The king's plan to publish them in a luxury edition had to be abandoned, and so the world lost what would have undoubtedly been one







Pen and ink drawings of the Ottoman court, right, and Istanbul's St. Sophia church, above, and Topkapı Palace, below, by Captain Cornelius Loos.

of the most elaborate and important books on the subject ever produced. Today, only 40 of the original 300 drawings survive.

Those surviving drawings nevertheless present a fascinating record of the Middle East. Their great documentary advantage over other contemporary work stems from the fact that Loos approached his task as an engineer. Unlike "Orientalist" painters, he made no attempt to create charming illusions or an exotic atmosphere. His extreme matter-of-factness gives his drawings great documentary authority. Loos' views of Aya Sofia in Istanbul were in fact used to help in its restoration in the 1950's and the drawings of Palmyra show many temples and ruins which no longer exist.

Only rarely did Loos take liberties with the truth. By questioning Loos' two companions, the king was able to discover that the expedition had never gone to the site of Troy, although Loos had produced some drawings of it, which he had based on the sketches of other travelers. When Loos apologized to the king, Charles said, "Oh, this is nothing! You travelers take many such privileges."

The Loos expedition was not the only one that Charles XII sent to the Middle East. He also dispatched Michael Eneman, the embassy chaplain in Istanbul, and Henrik Benzelius, a young student writing a thesis on Alexandria. Eneman traveled in Egypt and Syria between 1711 and 1713, collecting oriental manuscripts and seeking information about commercial prospects. His travel diary and report on the antiquities of Istanbul have been published and a picture of the Great Mosque in Makkah, which he brought back, is now in the library of the Uppsala University. Benzelius was a fine scholar of oriental languages and traveled widely in Egypt and Syria before taking up a post at Lund University.

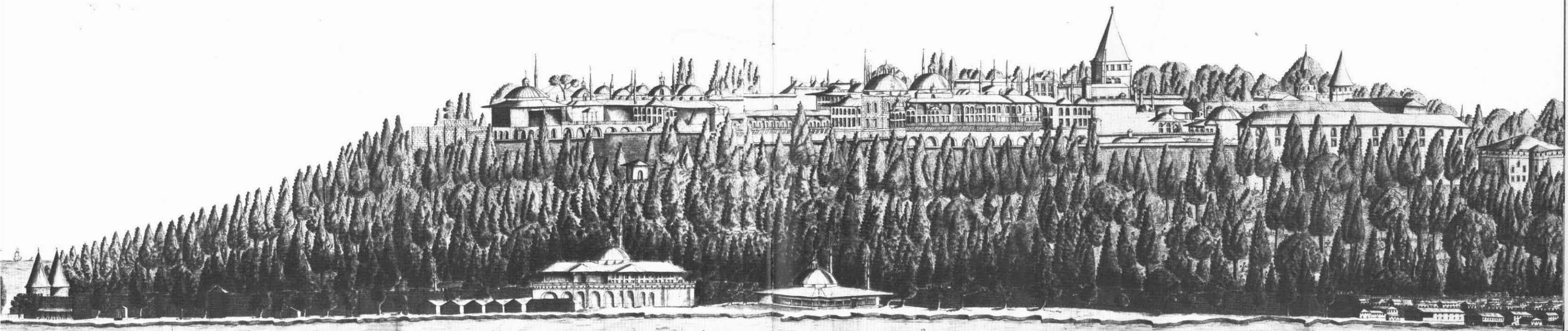
The death of Charles XII in 1718 did not mean an end to Sweden's interest in the Middle East. Indeed, the 18th century saw a constant stream of Swedish scholars and travelers between Sweden and Istanbul, where Sweden acquired its first permanent embassy abroad in 1757. In Sweden, as in other European countries in the 18th century, there was a fashion for Turkish clothes, music, divans and kiosks. This fashion reached its peak during the reign of Gustavus III, who ruled between 1771 and 1792.

Gustavus was dedicated to restoring Sweden's greatness and resisting the power of Russia – as was the Ottoman empire. He had a Turkish-style divan in his exquisite pavilion at Haga, and a Turkish kiosk and a guardhouse in the shape of a Turkish tent in its park.

From 1788 to 1790, in a last attempt to restrict the growing power of Russia, Gustavus III fought Catherine the Great in alliance with the Ottomans. Although this alliance did not halt the expansion of the Russian Empire, this last flowering of Swedish-Ottoman friendship led to the production of the magnificent three-volume *Tableau General de l'Empire Othoman* by Mouradgea d'Ohsson, published between 1787 and 1820.

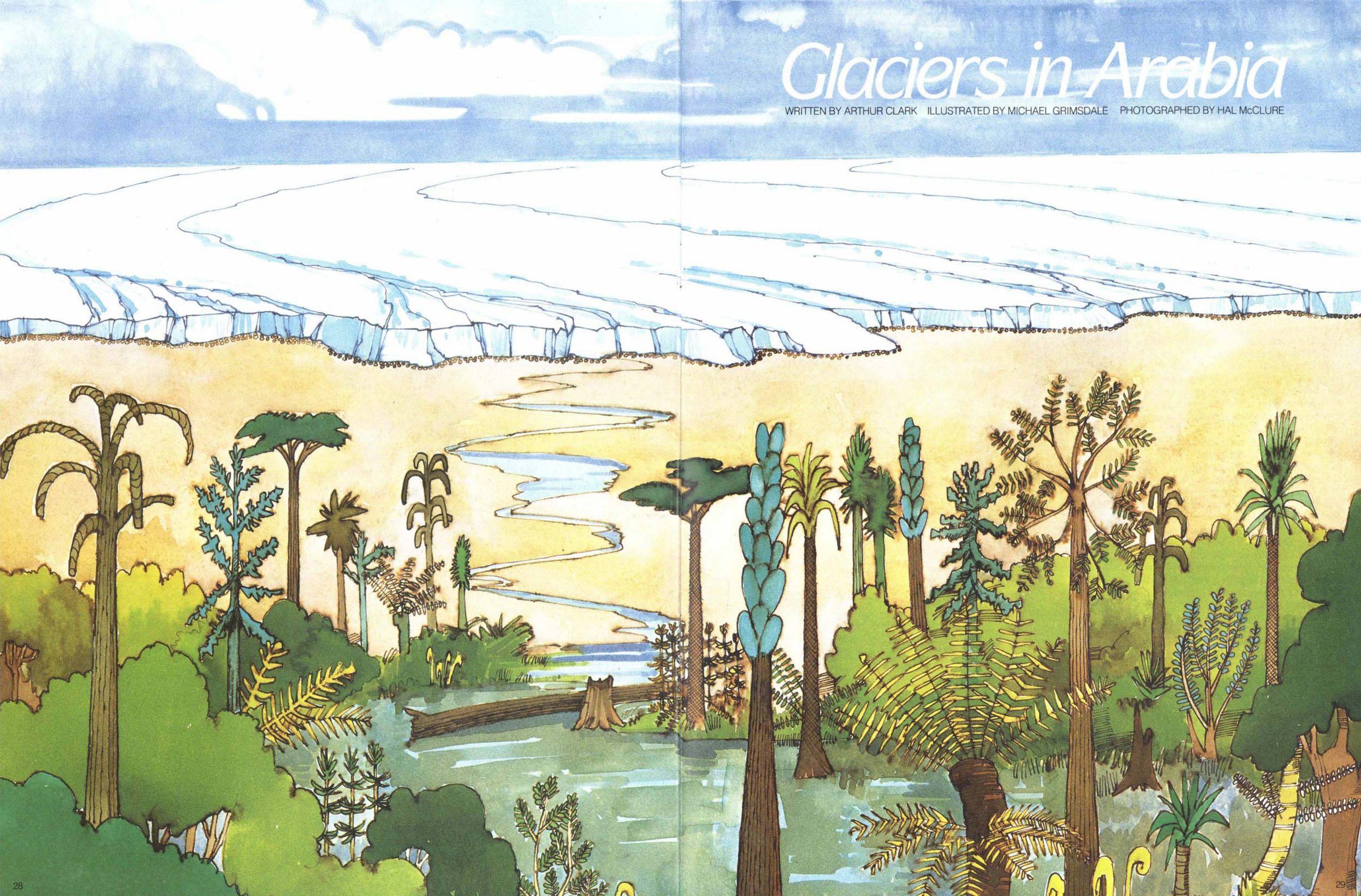
D'Ohsson, of Armenian descent, was Swedish minister in Istanbul and his detailed work provides the best description of the political and religious structure of the Ottoman Empire – and thus of half the Middle East before it had begun to be affected by modernization. Like Loos' drawings, it demonstrates that Europe and the Middle East, though remaining widely differing worlds, have always been joined by cultural, commercial and political ties.

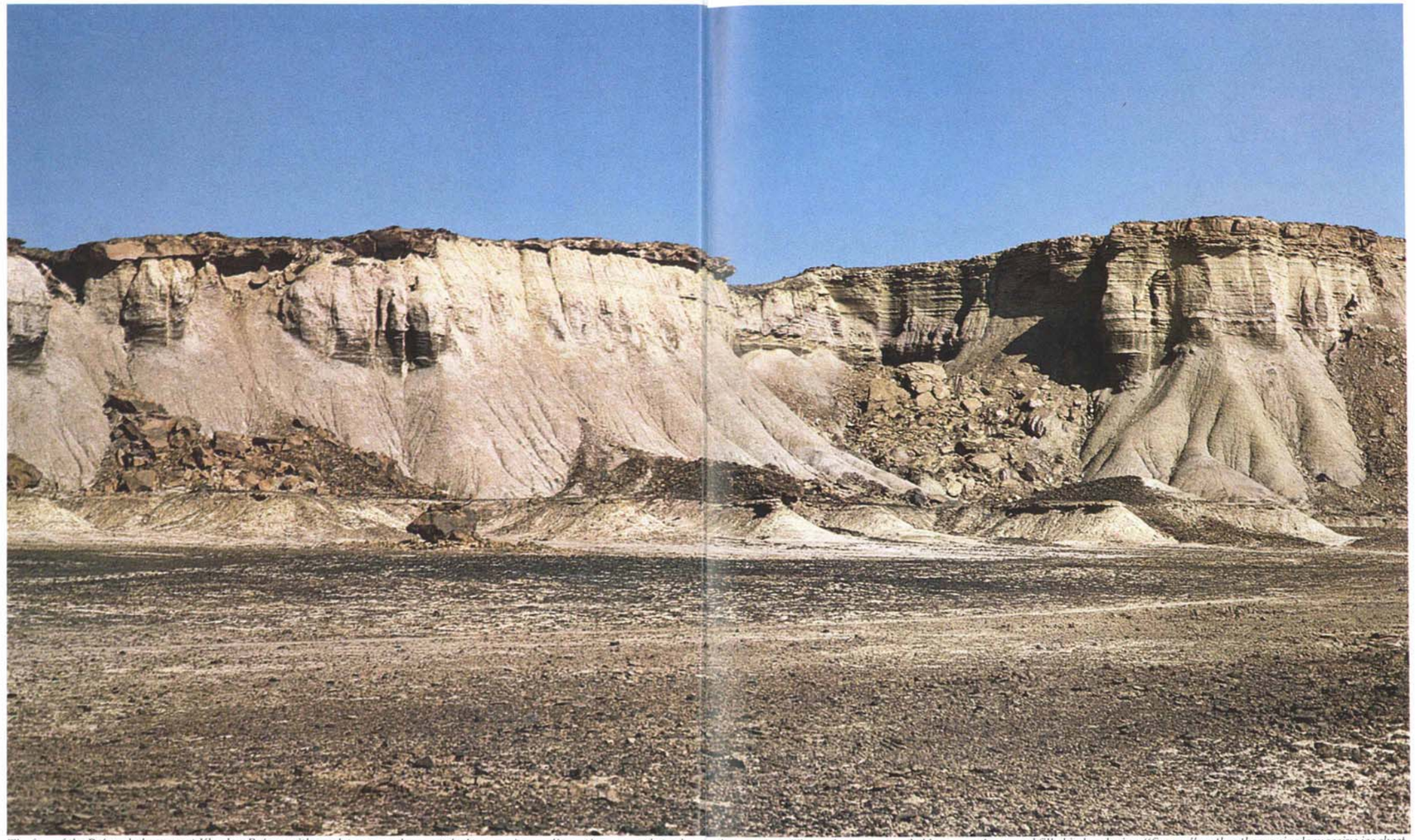
Philip Mansel is a writer specializing in the history of the monarchies of Europe and the Middle East.



Glaciers in Arabia

WRITTEN BY ARTHUR CLARK ILLUSTRATED BY MICHAEL GRIMSDALE PHOTOGRAPHED BY HAL McCLURE





The face of the Ra'an shale scarp at Khashm Ra'an, with sandstone conglomerate beds occurring as discontinuous pockets along the top edge. The pockets were probably gouged out and filled in by glacier "fingers" rather than a single massive ice sheet.

Glaciers in Arabia? Glaciers in what is now a vast and stony desert? No, it's not impossible. There *were* glaciers in Arabia – one in the vicinity of Qasim in the north-central part of the kingdom – and last year the Aramco geologist who first wrote about it came up with, well, rock-solid evidence to prove it.

According to that geologist, Hal McClure, the glacier moved across what is today's Saudi Arabia several hundred million years ago – before the world's land masses broke up into separate continents. Back then, he says, the South Pole was in Africa and the fringes of its ice cap reached into the Arabian Peninsula.

To Aramco geologists of the 1950's, this would not have been quite as startling as it seems to laymen today. While prospecting at Khasm Khatmah and Jabal Ghiran in southwestern Saudi Arabia in 1950, S.B. "Krug" Henry, one of the 1933 pioneers who launched the Aramco venture, and R.A. "Dick" Bramkamp, who became Aramco's chief geologist in 1951 (See *Aramco World*, May-June 1984), reported the discovery of granite boulders "...as large as three feet across (one meter)" that could not be traced to any nearby outcrop, and theorized that they had been "rafted" to the site by glaciers.

But it was not until 1977 that McClure, quite by accident, came across traces of the Qasim glaciation – and even then he wasn't at all sure what he had found.

However, investigation showed striking similarities between the curious Qasim rocks and those that showed glaciation in North Africa. Further, McClure's evidence pointed to glaciation in Arabia about 435 million years ago, near the end of the Ordovician period and roughly the same time that the giant ice sheets had scraped their way across Algeria and Libya. Excited about his discoveries, McClure contacted Columbia University geologist Rhodes W. Fairbridge, one of the first men to identify signs of glaciation in North Africa.

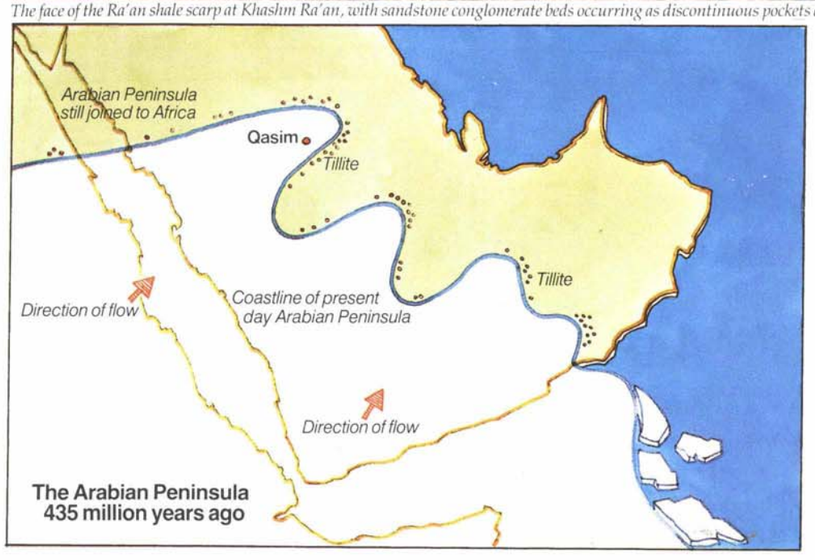
"Fairbridge was in Germany at the time," says McClure, "so Columbia forwarded my letter to him. He wrote back saying that he'd shown my photographs to other glacier specialists and they all agreed." He also gave McClure some advice: "Publish!" In 1978 McClure became the first of several geologists to produce papers reporting and describing glacier sites on the Arabian Peninsula.

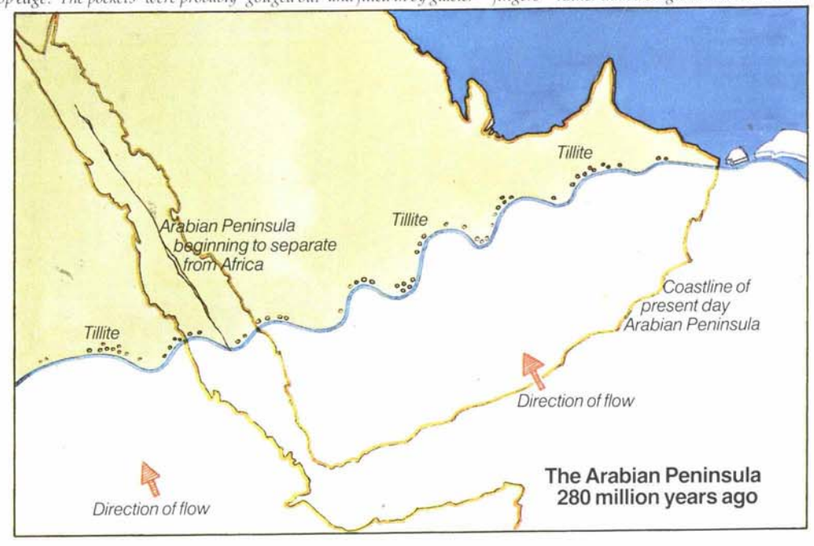
Now McClure, while leading a party of 55 geologists on a field trip through north-central Arabia which included the site of the glacier near Qasim – 320 kilometers northwest of Riyadh (200 miles) – has come across still further evidence that, he says, nails down his theory.

In the comfort of his office in Aramco's new Exploration and Petroleum Engineering Building, McClure answers a question about ice sheets by pointing to a fragment of stone on his windowsill: a shiny, pink-hued piece of granite with thin, finely cut parallel lines on its surface. These lines – "striations" – were inscribed in the stone, he says, when an ice sheet weighing thousands of tons ground over it on the long push into Arabia. They even show the direction in which the glacier was moving. In the case of the Qasim glaciation, the ice moved in a north-northeasterly direction from a "South Pole" then located in central Africa.

The stone's reflective sheen, called "glacial polish," was caused by long rubbing against the rock of fine clay particles in the ice – something like the effect of fine sandpaper on wood. Matched with other markings, the buffing on the stone is an important sign of glaciation.

Further evidence of glaciers includes stones marked with deeper gouges, "exotic" stones – rocks resting far from their places of origin – and deposits of poorly sorted rocks ranging in size from clay particles to boulders more than a meter across (39 inches). Another key sign is glacial tillite, or unsorted rock-debris deposits, and "chatter marks" on the edges of striation-marked boulders. These





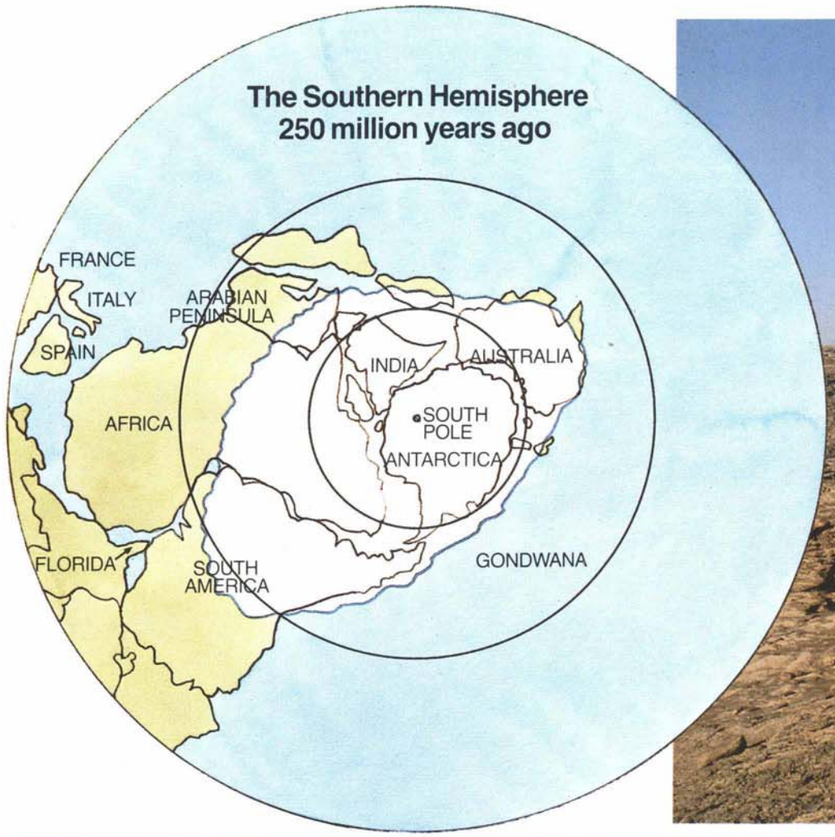
occurred when larger pieces of rock firmly frozen in the base of a moving glacier bumped over firm but brittle bedrock; instead of cutting smooth, parallel striations, they left markings "like railroad ties," McClure says.

Even more striking signs of the immense power of a glacier are "faceted" rocks: rocks with their tops neatly shaved away on the same plane by the inexorable pressure of many tons of ice studded with sharp grains of frozen clay and stone.

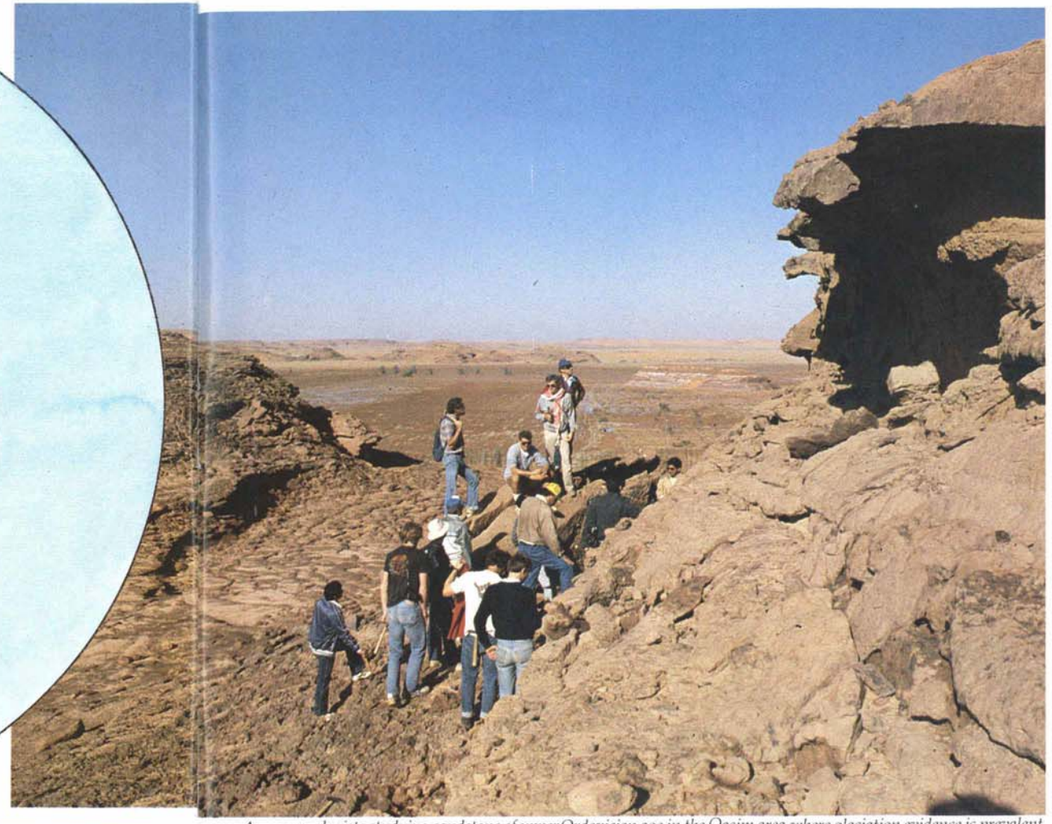
The evidence at the Qasim site, and at Khasm Khatmah and Jabal Ghiran, also suggests that glaciers entered what today is the Arabian Peninsula from different directions in *two* ice invasions, one about 435 million years ago, the other, more southerly, 280 million years ago. The continents were shifting in relation to the poles, "zigzagging here and there," says McClure, noting that nobody knows exactly what caused the continental peregrinations.

The Qasim glacier site was probably on the fringes of the polar cap, and "lobes" of ice pushed out over the barren ground like white-gloved fingers – all part of an ice field that reached across 4,000 kilometers of North Africa (2,500 miles). "Given the fact that Arabia was part of Africa until late in geological time – some 20 million years ago – it's not surprising that the giant ice sheets extended into Arabia then," McClure says.

As to the southwestern sites first investigated by Henry and Bramkamp, the evidence suggests that glaciers there also covered locations in North Yemen and Oman at the same time. McClure thinks that when ice invaded the *southern* reaches of Arabia – as opposed to the Qasim region – the South Pole was probably located off the east coast of Africa, possibly in present-day Antarctica. Arabia then would have been part of Africa, nearly touching the clustered land masses of Madagascar, India and Australia. A picture of the world at that time would show ice stretching from the pole in a wide ring which reached the



A small overhang along a glaciated boulder and striated conglomerate pavement, which are excellent evidence of glaciation.



Aramco geologists studying sandstone of upper Ordovician age in the Qasim area, where glaciation evidence is prevalent.

A sandstone boulder with two preserved sets of parallel grooves in a NNE direction, indicating the way the ice moved.

southern edge of today's peninsula.

The power of the glacier was, in any case, enormous: in southeastern Oman, ice-carved striations on uncovered bedrock measured 30 meters wide (98 feet) and single grooves run as long as 15 meters (50 feet).

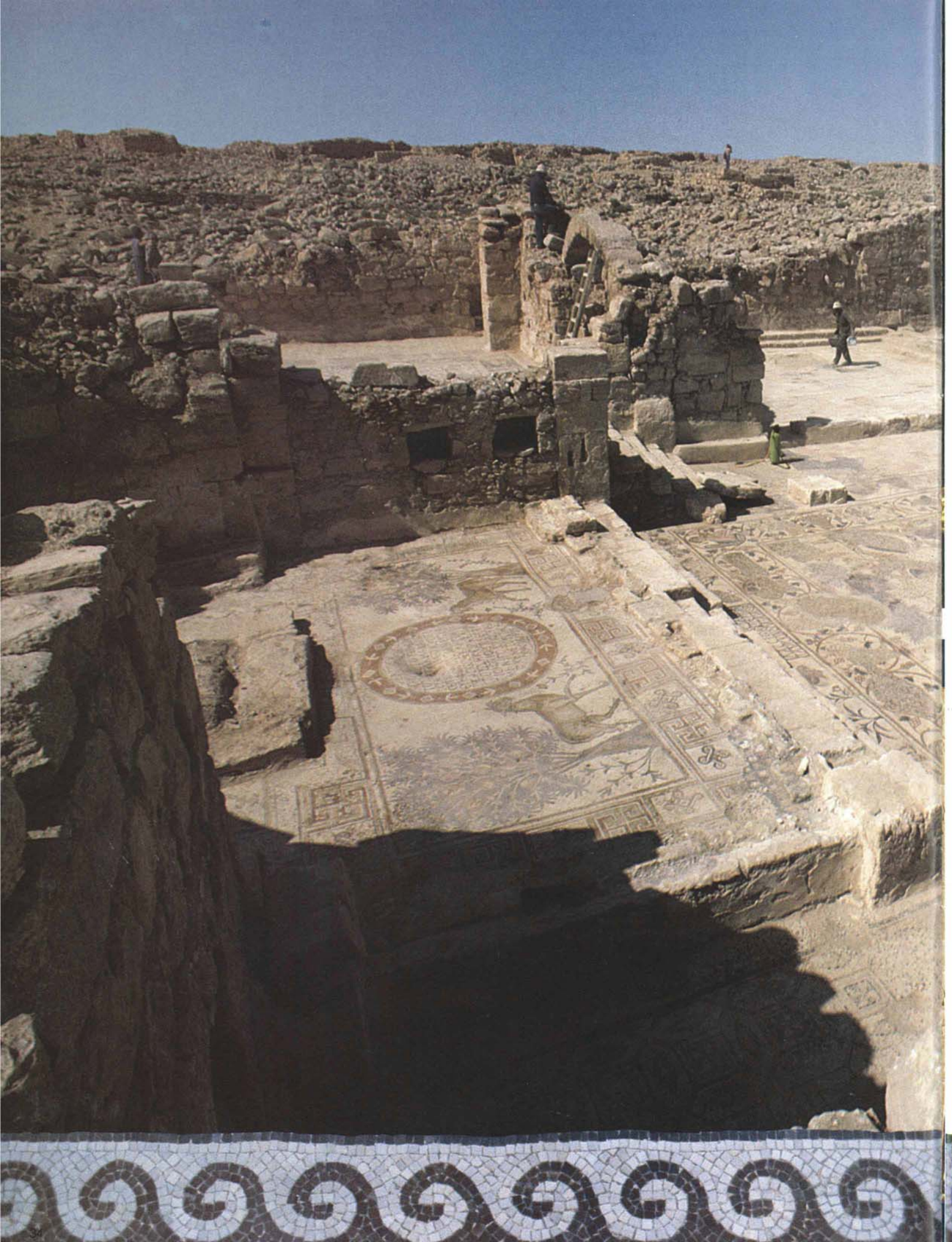
For Aramco geologists, of course, the point of such discoveries is oil, and with regard to glaciers it's the tillite that's important. Tillite, the rock debris randomly collected by ice as it moves and deposited just as randomly when it melts, can point the way to hydrocarbons. "In southern Oman," McClure says, "glacial tillites that continue from the surface into the subsurface are closely associated with hydrocarbon occurrences."

The tillite, McClure argues, couldn't have been deposited by any normal water flow. "Rivers and streams sort out rocks, rounding them and laying them down by diminishing weight and size according to the strength of the current." No, these rocks were probably "frozen in one chunk of ice and when the ice melted they just dropped as one load."

McClure, who coined the term "armored ice balls" to describe the original icy form of the stone clusters found at glacial sites, says that glacial melt has also produced unique rock formations called "dropstone laminites", which look a little like rock mattresses with large lumps in them. They occurred when large stones, released from melting blocks of ice floating on glacial lakes, fell into the soft lake bed below and depressed the sediment under them, thus permitting layers of later sediment to be "draped" over them as they were deposited. Today, erosion has sliced away sections of earth to reveal profiles of such deposits with their wrappings.

"The rocks couldn't have been brought in any other way [than by glaciers], and dropstone laminites are very good indicators of glaciation," says McClure. "There *were* glaciers in Arabia."

Arthur Clark covers Saudi Arabia for Aramco World magazine.



Excavations at Umm ar-Rasas in 1986.

MOSAIC COUNTRY

WRITTEN AND PHOTOGRAPHED
BY RAMI G. KHOURI

Several important new discoveries and a major international exhibition have catapulted Jordan's mosaics, long known and loved by specialists in the ancient arts of the Middle East, onto a broader new stage.

Though best known for its Byzantine mosaics, Jordan preserves a much more extensive tradition of ancient mosaic art spanning nearly a thousand years – from the late Hellenistic period, through the Roman and Byzantine eras to the early Islamic Umayyad period – and major new discoveries are still being made faster than the Jordanian Department of Antiquities can cope with them.

For archeologists and historians, Jordan's mosaics are an invaluable original source of information on the history, language and political geography between the first century B.C. and the eighth century A.D. For scholars of ancient art, religion and culture, they are a treasure house of form and faith in the ancient world. And for the tourist, they provide a splendid one-day outing that vividly brings to life the artistic and technical skills of successive generations of ancient craftsmen.

Dozens of fine mosaic floor "tapestry" panels and fragments are displayed at the archeological museums of Amman, Jerash and Madaba, but the highlight of the Byzantine mosaic tradition is the collection of *in situ* mosaics in Madaba and nearby St. Nebo, half an hour south of the Jordanian capital of Amman. So rich in mosaics that it is often referred to as "mosaic country," the Madaba region is the focal point of this sparkling and durable art form.

Historians have been puzzled by why such an otherwise ordinary rural farming district, not particularly renowned as an ecclesiastical center, should have had so many lavishly decorated churches. The most widely accepted explanation is that the Madaba area was sufficiently secure and wealthy – and pious – during the Byzantine period that many of its families were inspired to show gratitude by building small chapels and commissioning local artisans to decorate them with mosaics.

In a land where tradition and continuity are well documented historical facts during the past 5,000 years, this tradition of personal thanksgiving by the pious is still practiced today. Throughout Jordan, wealthy Muslim and Christian families regularly donate funds to build or renovate neighborhood mosques and churches, complementing the building program of the religious establishments themselves.

Madaba and scores of other ancient Jordanian sites existed for thousands of years as small agricultural settlements that usually developed from rest-stops along the established caravan routes that linked China, India and Southern Arabia with Syria, Egypt and the Greco-Roman world in the Mediterranean basin.

After General Pompey brought the lands of Syria and north Jordan into the realm of the Roman Empire in 64-63 B.C., the ensuing military security, political stability and robust trading activity allowed many villages and small towns, such as Amman, Jerash and Madaba, to expand into full-fledged provincial cities.

Mosaics were first used to decorate walls in Mesopotamia during the second millenium B.C., and the first floor mosaics of natural pebbles appeared in Greece around 400 B.C. The word "mosaics" derives from the Greek word for muses, Apollo's companions who served successively as deities of springs, memory and inspiration.

The earliest mosaics discovered in Jordan to date are floor fragments from the baths of the first-century B.C., late Hellenistic Herodian fortress at Makawir (ancient Mechaerus), about half an hour south of Madaba. Several third-century A.D. Roman period mosaics from Jerash are either still buried for protection, or are displayed at museums in Jerash, Amman, the United States or West Germany.

The most impressive collection of mosaics in Jordan are from the Byzantine period between the fifth and early seventh centuries A.D., and include animated floor tapestries that covered the naves and aisles of churches in Madaba, Rihab, Amman, Khirbat as-Samra, Mt. Nebo, Nebo village, Jerash and other localities. Discoveries during the past three years at Umm ar-Rasas, Qastal and Qasr al-Hallabat confirm that the Byzantine mosaic tradition continued uninterrupted into the early Islamic Ummayad and Abbasid periods. During the first two centuries of the Islamic era in the land of Jordan, floor mosaics often decorated the homes, palaces and public buildings of local Muslim dignitaries, as well as church floors in small Christian communities that existed then – as they do today – in total harmony within the larger Islamic community.

A mosaic tapestry at al-Mukhayyat composed of 24 medallions enclosing figures and animals in everyday pastoral scenes including hunting and farming.

Besides their worth as beautiful works of art that gives as much pleasure now as they did in antiquity, Jordan's mosaics also represent an unbroken expression of folk and religious art that spanned nearly a thousand years. They have been excavated, studied, preserved and displayed to the public since 1884, when scholars first started examining Jordan's mosaics in a serious manner.

It was in that year that Jordan's most important mosaic – the sixth-century A.D. mosaic map of the Holy Land, depicting Old and New Testament sites throughout the Near East – was discovered at Madaba. Though unsigned and undated by any inscriptions, its style and content indicate that it was almost certainly made in the mid sixth century, during the Classical renaissance that coincided with the reign of the Emperor Justinian (527-565 A.D.). It is the oldest and most accurate map of Palestine to be handed down to us from ancient times. As such, it has been an invaluable source of historical information and place-names, which in many cases have combined with the results of archeological excavations to determine the ancient names and locations of antiquities sites.

At the center of the map is the Holy City of Jerusalem, walled and including the Church of the Holy Sepulchre and a column that once probably carried a statue of the Emperor Hadrian. The map, which is oriented to the east, shows representations of sites in and around Palestine, the Dead Sea, the Jordan River, the Nile Delta, Sinai, and parts of the Mediterranean, Lebanon, Syria and east Jordan.

The 30 square metres (323 square feet) of the original mosaic map that still exist were made from nearly 800,000 mosaic cubes, or *tesserae* (deriving from a Greek word meaning "four-sided"). Dr. Herbert Donner of West Germany, one of the world's leading experts on the Madaba map, estimated that the original map had about 1,116 million *tesserae*, which would have required three expert mosaicists about 186 days to produce.

Like all the mosaics of Jordan, the map was made from naturally colored stone cubes, though some Byzantine mosaics also included glass, shell, marble or other materials.

Another impressive sixth-century mosaic is the large intact tapestry covering the nave of the Church of the Apostles in Madaba. This mosaic, like many others in Jordan, is firmly dated by an inscription and signed by the mosaicist – one of nine local mosaicists whose names are known from inscriptions. It was made in 578 A.D. by the master mosaicist Salamaino.

Five minutes by car west of Madaba is the brilliant mosaic tapestry covering the nave of the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius. This area, known today as al-Mukhayyat, is the site of the Byzantine town of Nebo, five of whose ancient churches have been excavated to date. The only one whose mosaics can be seen in their original place is the Church of Saints Lot and Procopius, dating from the middle of the sixth century A.D.

A mosaic map of Palestine – the oldest and most accurate of the Holy Land – showing the walled city of Jerusalem, center, and the Jordan River and Dead Sea, top.

The main body of the mosaic is composed of 24 vine medallions enclosing figures of people or animals in everyday scenes including pastoral and hunting scenes. Rectangular panels between the columns depict scenes from the Nile – another common local motif – and a representation of a church flanked by boys fishing and rowing boats.

The mosaics at Mt. Nebo – as-Siyaghah in Arabic, and Phisga in Greek – embody one of the oldest unbroken ecclesiastical traditions in the Middle East. Discovered in 1864 by the Duc de Luynes and excavated since 1932 by the Franciscan Fathers, the Mt. Nebo complex has served as a holy site of pilgrimage and a church since the fourth century A.D. The Roman era pilgrim named num Egeria,or Etheria, visited Mt. Nebo in the late fourth century A.D. and found a small church manned by Egyptian monks, probably Copts. Elements of that fourth-century church – including the upright braided mosaic cross south of the altar – are still incorporated within the apse and altar area of the present church. The church was expanded into a larger basilica in the fifth century A.D., and, after earthquake damage, was rebuilt and enlarged in 598 A.D. to produce the complex that stands today.

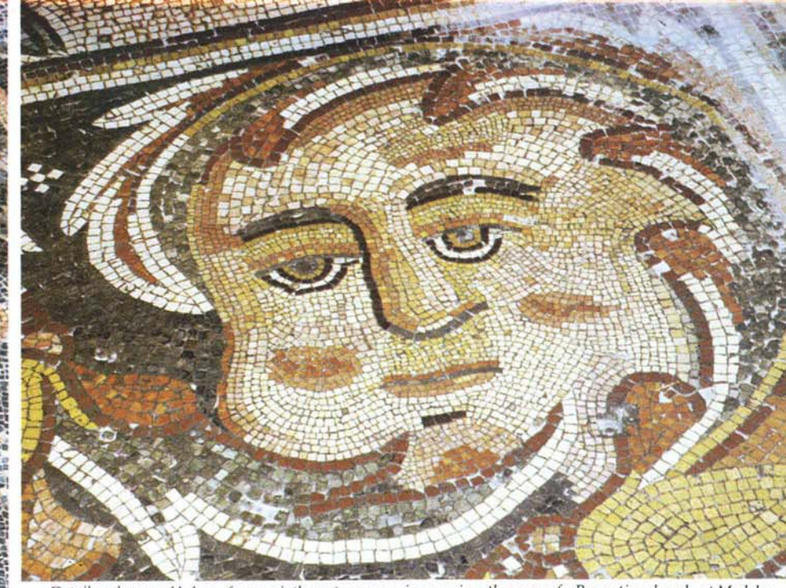
The complex has been excavated and partly restored to maintain its ancient role as a church, but also to serve simultaneously as a museum displaying some of the mosaic pieces saved from other Byzantine churches and provide an overview of the evolution of mosaics over four centuries.

One of the finest mosaic pieces preserved from the Byzantine East is the floor tapestry in a room on the north side of the church, which was the *diaconicon*, or deacon's hall, of the sixth-century church. It was discovered in 1976 by a team of excavators headed by Father Michele Piccirillo, who directs the Franciscan team studying and preserving Jordan's mosaics. The tapestry shows pastoral and hunting scenes, including two men leading an ostrich, a zebra and a spotted camel, a shepherd tending his flock of sheep, and hunters and their dogs attacking lions, leopards and wild boar. The tapestry's two inscriptions include its date of completion (August 6, 531 A.D.).

Some of Jordan's most beautiful mosaics have been excavated in four Byzantine churches and an ancient private house in the center of Madaba. These have all been re-buried until the area can be fully excavated, conserved and roofed within the coming few years, to provide an open-air museum complex displaying some of Jordan's technically and artistically most sophisticated mosaics.

Particularly noteworthy is a mosaic discovered during excavations in 1985. This was a mosaic tapestry covering a large hall measuring 10 by seven meters (33 by 23 feet) in a private home dating from the late sixth century A.D. – the first such domestic mosaic not from a religious or public building. An unusually wide frame decorated with hearts, animals and geometric de-

Umayyad mosaics, such as the leopard, above, and ostrich, below, showed remarkable concern for animal movement and expression.



Details, above and below, from a sixth-century mosaic covering the nave of a Byzantine church at Madaba.

Left, mosaics of Asqualan, top, and Gazaz, bottom, two ancient Palestinian cities. Below, mosaic at Madaba.

signs enclosed a central carpet with acanthus circles depicting typical Byzantine period hunting and pastoral scenes. Among the most impressive are a hunter killing a bear with a spear, a lamb suckling, a beautiful horse, rabbits and other animals.

The entire tapestry has been lifted and preserved, and is part of the exhibition of 45 Jordanian mosaics from Jerash, Madaba and Khirbat as-Samra that is currently traveling through Europe; it can be seen in Klagenfurt, Austria, until early March, then Munich, West Germany from July to September. In 1988, the exhibition will tour Britain and North America.

One of the finest mosaics in Madaba covers the floor of the Hyppolitic Hall, a law court or council chamber from the mid sixth century A.D. Hunting and pastoral scenes and representations of the four seasons as Tyches (goddesses of fortune) in a dark border enclose a series of mythological scenes within three central panels. One panel recounts the myth of Phaedra and Hyppolitus, in which Hyppolitus died tragically as a punishment by the goddess of love for his irreverent behaviour. Another panel shows Aphrodite on a throne next to Adonis, surrounded by a winged Cupid, Eros, cherubs and graces.

This is not only the most technically brilliant mosaic work in Jordan, but also one of the best examples of the smooth cultural transition from pagan Roman times to the Christian Byzantine period. The Tyches – holding crosses – show how Classical Greco-Roman themes and symbols were christianized during the Byzantine era. A similar transition took place in the mid seventh century A.D., when Islam became the dominant religion of the land. Recent discoveries at Umm ar-Rasas and Qasr al-Hallabat, in particular, have revealed high quality Islamic era mosaics that perpetuate the craftsmanship of the Byzantine period.

At the large walled Byzantine town site of Umm ar-Rasas, 25 kilometers (15.5 miles) southeast of Madaba, excavations in 1986 revealed two well preserved church floors from the mid sixth and eighth centuries A.D. The Church of St. Stephen, dedicated in 786 A.D. during the Abbasid era, has the latest firmly dated church mosaics in Jordan. The large nave tapestry is surrounded by a thick frame that includes representations of seven Jordanian cities, eight Palestinian cities and 10 cities from Egypt, including Jerusalem, Nablus, Gaza, Amman, Madaba, Kerak and Alexandria. The mosaic also resolved the riddle of the ancient name of Umm ar-Rasas, which it gave as Castron Mephaon (Mephaon camp) in Greek, corresponding to the Arabic Mepha'a, and the biblical town of Meph-a-ath.

In terms of historical information, this mosaic, which should be open to public display in the coming year, ranks second only to the Madaba mosaic map. It lists several city names (such as Diblaton and Limbon) which have never been encountered before in historical texts.

The long nave inscription says the church was built by "John, son of Isaac, deacon and chief of the people and camp of Mephaon," indicating that it was not unusual for a Christian cleric to head the civil administration of a town during the Abbasid period.

Above, Mosaic fragment from Qasr al-Hallabat. Right, detail of an Umayyad colored mosaic floor from Qastal.

Besides the mosaics that have been excavated at Christian churches in Jordan from the Umayyad and Abbasid periods, recent work has revealed some fine mosaic pavements at two Umayyad monuments, where the cultural continuity and technical transition from the Byzantine to the Islamic eras is clearly preserved. This is no surprise, given that the early Islamic Umayyad period (661-750 A.D.) spawned an outburst of exquisite mosaic decorative work, which can still be appreciated today at the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem, the Great Mosque (also called the Umayyad Mosque) in Damascus, and Khirbat al-Mafjar, built in 1740, near Jericho in the Jordan Valley and well known for its sculptured stone work, plastered decor and geometric mosaics.

Excavations at the Qasr al-Hallabat castle, 100 kilometers (62 miles) northeast of Amman, by Dr. Ghazi Bisheh of the Jordanian Department of Antiquities have revealed that all the rooms cleared to date were paved in colored mosaics during the Umayyad period, though only two rooms have preserved substantial fragments of the original work. Combining elaborate geometric designs with human, animal and plant motifs derived directly from the Byzantine period, the Umayyad mosaics show a high level of technical skill and, as Dr. Bisheh has pointed out, "a remarkable concern for plasticity, animated expression and movement."

Among the Hallabat representations are vine scrolls and leaves, grapes, pomegranates, oryx, running wolves, hares nibbling grapes, a menacing leopard, pairs of partridges and birds, fish, bulls, ostriches, people, running rabbits, rams, goats, lions and a fierce-looking snake. The best preserved tapestry at Hallabat is divided by a Tree of Life flanked by "good" animals on one side and "bad" animals on the other.

At Qastal, near Amman's Queen Alia International Airport, excavations by a French-Jordanian team headed by Dr. Patricia Carlier and Frederic Morin have uncovered the earliest known Umayyad mosaics in Jordan, dating from the caliphate of Abd al-Malik ibn Marwan (605-705 A.D.). They cover much of the floor of a substantial and finely decorated building that probably served as the palace of a local governor. The Qastal mosaics, a few panels of which can be seen at the Madaba archeological museum, include geometrical patterns, trees, leaves, fruits and rosettes, using small cubes of 12 different colors.

Several mosaic cubes were golden leafed glass cubes, indicating the lavish decoration that the patron of the palace commissioned during what was a period of wealth and stability in Jordan. Except for the open courtyard, entrance and staircases, the floors of the entire palace were covered in mosaics.

Evidence of iconoclastic destruction of human and animal images in the late eighth century mosaic has also revived the debate about the iconoclastic movements that shunned human and animal representations. Much of the defacing of mosaics in the regions had been traditionally attributed to the decree of the Umayyad Caliph Yazid II, around 722 A.D., but new evidence from Umm ar-Rasas suggests that much of the iconoclastic fervor of the eighth century should be attributed to currents within the Byzantine church itself.

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