Surveys in Mesopotamia during the War: Discussion

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So far archæologists have concentrated their efforts on a few cities like Babylon and Nineveh. Though the whole of Samarra may be comparatively modern, it certainly rivals both these cities in size.

Before the paper the PRESIDENT said : I have very much pleasure in introducing to you Colonel Beazeley of the Survey of India, who has been doing some excellent work in Mesopotamia, especially survey about Samarra.

Colonel Beazeley then read the paper printed above, and a discussion followed.

After the paper the PRESIDENT said : I was hoping at the end of the paper that we were just coming to an interesting point. Colonel Beazeley at the commencement had told us how he had been shot down in an aeroplane and taken prisoner, and I was looking out all the way through the paper to hear what became of him after that. He put off telling us to another day, but I hope that on that other day we shall have a good account of it. We are grateful to him for having given us this paper, for it has opened up to us a new vista. He has spoken of the immense value and use of air photography, and we hope at some later afternoon meeting to have a special paper showing the value of air photography for reconnaissance during the war. In this case it is a matter of archæology, and we can see quite distinctly how these very ancient cities were planned on the American type. I am sorry to see that they were planned in this way, as those of us who have been to America are not very much struck by the beauty of that rectangular type. I could wish that the ancients had not been so up-to-date. But anyhow, every one of us must have been struck by the magnitude both of the city and of the great irrigation works. I cannot imagine a city of four millions then, and shall be very interested to hear how that estimate was arrived at. Asiatics are prone to exaggeration, and four millions does seem to represent a very large city. At the present time in Asia there is no city of anything like that size—neither Peking nor Canton nor Calcutta approach it. The irrigation works were incontestably on a magnificent scale, and I was particularly interested in what Colonel Beazeley said about these underground channels, the karez, as they seem to be spread over the greater part of Asia. They are very common on the Afghan frontier in Seistan, but I also came across them in Chinese Turkestan near Turfan. It is extraordinary how these Asiatics lead water underground by a series of wells dug down and connected up by channels underground. That is how it is done in Central Asia. We can, I think, realize the extreme difficulty under which our survey officers carried out their duties, the rough instruments they had to use, the bad climatic conditions under which they had to work, the appalling mud and the terrific heat.

Commander D. G. HOGARTH: If I am called upon it is not as an authority on Mesopotamia, because I have never seen that region. I share the President's doubts about the population which is ascribed to these cities, remains of which have been photographed from the air ; but may I say in my case how enormously valuable to archæology such surveys will be in future. Of course they have this disadvantage—that all remains of all ages will leave a common superficial outline, and an enormous area of ruins may be seen without its being the least possible from the air to tell whether they belong to one or to successive periods. I am speaking entirely without book on the matter, but I should have thought that this long range of towns on the left bank of the Tigris

not so very far north of Baghdad, belong to a much later age than the birth of Christ—that the great mass of it is, in fact, early Arab. We know that the Caliphs of Baghdad were in the habit of building, each of them, a fresh city to live in, and of moving up the river for reasons similar to those which actuate rulers in the East still. It was this constant building of new palaces that ruined even the Khedives in Egypt. We probably have here a succession of towns, and not one immense city inhabited at one time. To come back to the question of population: if all the area was inhabited at one time you might, indeed, have a city of four million people: but I would rather believe that only part of it was inhabited at any one time. I had that impression when I first saw this air photograph in the Journal and I wondered on what particular archaeological authority an early date is ascribed to it. We know of certain migrations from Baghdad due to conditions ruling, at various times, in the town. When it became too pronouncedly in favour of the direct descendants of the Prophet as against those of his uncle, the Abbasid Caliphs were in the habit of ceasing to live in Baghdad and “strafing” their capital from a safe distance. I cannot help thinking this range of towns is much more of the date of Baghdad itself. Remember how enormously estimates of ancient populations have shrunk, as a result of actual archaeological investigations; and it would be very interesting to know whether in this case there is any sign of one circuit of town wall. Babylon, for example, probably never contained a much larger population than Stambul at the present moment.

The PRESIDENT: Perhaps Colonel Beazeley could tell us what has become of those finds of the Germans?

Commander HOGARTH: They are still at Basra. The things which the British Museum itself excavated in 1917–18, are in the British Museum, but sixty cases, the result of the German excavation at Samarra, which were got down to Basra, had an absolute embargo placed on their export, and from that date to this they have never been allowed to leave. It is the greatest possible pity.

Major KENNETH MASON: I can tell you what was in most of those boxes. It nearly all, if not quite, belonged to the Caliphate period and mostly consisted of plaster work. Miss Bell had a look at some of it in Baghdad before it was sent down to Basra. I think this bears out Commander Hogarth's opinion that the city, so far as is known at present, belongs to the time of the Abbasid period.

Note added after the paper.—When we occupied Samarra in 1917, we did not secure all the material dug up by the Germans. General Cobbe mounted a guard as soon as he knew there was anything of archaeological interest; but before we arrived the Turks, presumably at the orders of the Germans, had thrown much of the excavated material into a serdab and set the place on fire.

Sir MARTIN CONWAY: Colonel Beazeley spoke of a building seen in the Samarra photograph as originally a sun temple; but it is a famous mosque built in the ninth century. The corkscrew tower that is its conspicuous feature is rather an important historical monument. Historically the type descends from that of the ancient Ziggurat of Chaldæa, the ordinary stage-towered Babylonian temple, which was, as a rule, quadrangular in plan. From that, no doubt, developed the Persian fire-tower, examples of which are known. This minaret of the mosque at Samarra and another in the same district are no doubt a development of the Persian fire-tower. The interesting point about this particular minaret of the mosque of Samarra is that according to Makrisy the minaret of the mosque of Ibn Talun in Cairo was imitated from the

Samarra minaret, so that it forms a link between the architecture of Egypt and the most ancient Babylonian architecture. I quite agree with Commander Hogarth that the common custom in the whole of this region throughout antiquity and the middle ages was for a monarch to build himself a new town not very far away from the town of his predecessor. When you find town-ruins stretching along 25 miles of river, you must not conclude that they are the remains of one great town simultaneously occupied by a vast population, but a succession of towns, not necessarily separated by long intervals of time between one and another, but not simultaneously occupied. As to those boxes of remains from Samarra, they were, in the first instance, ordered to Alexandria, there to await the days of safe passage across the Mediterranean. I really do not know why the order was revoked, and they have stopped at Basra ever since. The contents, no doubt, were largely stucco work. When the Germans excavated Samarra before the war, they revealed the lower parts of many house-walls. The ordinary internal house decoration was a very beautiful stucco work, sometimes exceedingly elaborate, sometimes bold and simple, but of the ninth century. It is perhaps worthy of mention that not merely in Mesopotamia, but in Egypt, Palestine, Italy, in the Alps at Dissentis, in France at St. Germain des Près, and in Germany, in the ninth century there was very fine stucco work done. One of the finest examples of it was at Cividale, a city the fate of which I have not heard, but it was badly damaged in the war. The little ninth-century chapel which was there, beautifully decorated with some of the very finest stucco in the world, may have been damaged or destroyed. At all events, from Samarra on the Tigris to St. Germain des Près the ninth-century stucco was made, and the remains in the Baghdad boxes were to a great extent of such work.

Sir THOMAS HOLDICH: I should not like Colonel Beazeley to go without congratulating him and his colleagues on the success of their work. Surveying in front of a very active enemy is always ticklish work, and I think they have succeeded marvellously well. I have not a word of criticism to offer on the methods they employed, which are certainly somewhat dissimilar to methods I remember in times past. But whatever they were, they have shown a great deal of ingenuity, and I think, from what I have heard from Colonel Pirrie and others, that the success of the surveys in Mesopotamia is fully equal to the success of the surveys on the Western front. On the whole I think our survey officers have acquitted themselves exceedingly well. There is just one point about the references which Colonel Beazeley has made to the irrigation works in Mesopotamia I should like him to clear up. I have been impressed, as no doubt you all have, at the extraordinary extent of the ancient irrigation works in Mesopotamia, and Colonel Beazeley has suggested that the results of this irrigation supported a population of something like eighty million people, while he placed the population of Samarra at something like four millions. It would be interesting to hear on what basis that computation has been made. Though the population might be as large, it does not follow at all that the population of Samarra would spread over so wide a surface as that of London does. We know something of crowding in the East End of London, but it is nothing whatever to the crowding that you may find in a good many Eastern bazaars, particularly in India. As regards the irrigation itself, it would be very interesting to know, particularly in view of the future, whether the success of the ancient scheme of irrigation in Mesopotamia can be repeated in these days; about that there seems to be some doubt. I know the views of Sir William Willcocks; but since we have heard him explain his schemes there have been practical

experiments made in Mesopotamia which may be exceedingly useful. An officer recently returned from Mesopotamia told me that the result of the irrigation which they had carried out for the purpose of raising vegetables, and even cereals, in order to supply the troops, was that there was an extraordinary outcrop of salt, similar to that which occurred in the Punjab when they first introduced irrigation there. What the chemical composition of this salt is I do not know, but it seems doubtful whether they can deal with this difficulty. We know that the water which is so freely and generally to be found spreading over Southern Mesopotamia at certain times of the year is of no use whatever for irrigation. The only water that is of use is that which is brought down by the Tigris from the hills, and which contains sediment necessary for the crops. I should like to hear what Colonel Beazeley has noticed on that subject. There is another matter. Of course the question of what is to become of Mesopotamia is a political problem with which we have nothing to do. But I should like to know what the nature of the frontier of Mesopotamia really is, a question which can only be answered by our surveyors. The Arab tribes, who are scattered all over the plains, are distinct from the people of the hills; but whether the line of demarcation between them is as distinct as we believe it to be, is a problem which requires examination. When I was at work myself in Mesopotamia it seemed to me that the line was really very distinct—quite as distinct as it is in India; but of all the future problems which confront us in regard to Mesopotamia, that of the responsibility of keeping another frontier in order is perhaps the chief. I have nothing further to add, except to congratulate Colonel Beazeley and his colleagues, who have done such splendid work, and especially on coming home with their skins whole.

Colonel BEAZELEY: I must thank Sir Thomas Holdich for his very kind and flattering remarks about our survey work in Mesopotamia. One or two points have been raised about the date of the city. I am afraid the evidence is on the whole against my estimate. The only thing I had to go on really were the objects that had been found while digging the trenches—tear bottles, a certain number of coins and ornaments; and officers whom I asked about these things told me they probably belonged to an earlier period. The tear bottles themselves were all thought to belong to a somewhat earlier period than the Mohammedan days. I must leave the final question of its epoch to experts. The question of the population of the town was simply worked out roughly by myself and other officers, assuming that the whole area was populated at the same time. We made a rough census of the number of the houses that probably existed in the city taken as a whole, and calculated out the average number of inhabitants, and it worked out to very nearly four millions. The question of what I call a temple and others have called a mosque was brought forward because I should like to have it settled. An Arab in the city to whom I often used to talk about the old ruins told me in his opinion the temple was not primarily a mosque. If it had been a mosque they would have kept it up: they would not have destroyed it, as they pulled up all the fine interior marble colonnade, and put them in the courtyard surrounding the tomb under the golden dome. The other question which Sir Thomas Holdich raised was whether Mesopotamia will ever become a fertile country again. The only information I have about that is from irrigation officers, who were of the opinion that it would take at least four years after the irrigation system had been restored to get the ground into working order. The ground at present, as Sir Thomas Holdich has said, is covered with a great deal of salt at places and in other parts it is sour.

Commander HOGARTH: Will it get clear in four years?

Colonel BEAZELEY: The canal officer said they could do it in about four years.

Commander HOGARTH: Where are they going to drain the salt away to—back into the channel of the river?

Colonel BEAZELEY: I do not know. Canal officers in India know how to do it; I could not tell you myself.

Commander HOGARTH: I understand the great difficulty in Egypt is to keep the salt from getting back again into the irrigation water.

The PRESIDENT: We must all share with Sir Thomas Holdich in congratulating Colonel Beazeley on the fine work which he, together with other survey officers, have done in Mesopotamia, and accord him a very hearty vote of thanks for his paper.

Note added by Colonel Beazeley after the Discussion.

The opinions of Sir Martin Conway and Commander Hogarth on the comparatively recent date of Samarra command respect, and I have only one remark to add, that the Abbasid Caliphate was in its decline when its adherents were driven out from Baghdad and sought refuge at Samarra, and it hardly seems possible they can be entirely responsible for the whole of the vast city. Commander Hogarth's last question about the salt in the soil requires an answer. It greatly depends whether the salt merely results from the evaporation of water that has been lying on the ground, or whether it percolates up from below. In the former case it is quite easy to get rid of the salt, but I believe the latter evil is difficult to eradicate.

THE NEW BOUNDARIES OF BULGARIA

Map following p. 160.

WHEN the Treaty of Versailles was signed on June 28 and published in London six days afterwards, we felt some anxiety lest it might not be possible to follow in the *Journal* the rapid reconstruction of the boundaries of Europe thus begun by the delimitation of Germany. But things have not moved so quickly since; the boundary commissions that were formed months ago to demarcate the German boundaries are still awaiting, at the beginning of January, the ratification of the treaty that will allow them to take the field; the organization under Allied control of the various plebiscites is delayed for the same reason. The treaty with Austria signed on September 10 has only just been published, though by the courtesy of the Geographical Section, General Staff, and of the Foreign Office, we were able to give a full description of the boundary in the November *Journal*. To the same courtesy we are indebted for the means to publish an account of the new boundaries of Bulgaria, delimited in the Treaty of Neuilly-sur-Seine signed on November 27, and shown on a 1/M map attached to the treaty, copies of which have been received recently in London.