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The Bahrein Islands, in the Persian Gulf

Author(s): J. Theodore Bent

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PROCEEDINGS
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The Bahrein Islands, in the Persian Gulf.

By J. THEODORE BENT.

(Read at the Evening Meeting, November 25th, 1889.)

Map, p. 56.

THE group of islands known as the Bahrein (Arabic dual form of Bahr, i. e. two seas) lies in a bay of the same name about 20 miles off the coast of El Hasa, in Arabia, in the Persian Gulf. Bahrein, the largest, is 27 miles long by 10 wide. It is almost a dead level of sandy desert, relieved by palm-groves, where there is a good supply of water and occasional patches of cultivation. In the centre of the island are found rocky hills, 400 feet high, of limestone formation; they are called Jebel Dukhan, or "the mountain of mist," doubtless from the fact that they are frequently enveloped in sea mist, the cause of the extreme unhealthiness of these islands during the summer heats. The rest of the island is of coral formation. Around Jebel Dukhan is a depression skirted by low cliffs. The second island in point of size is Moharek, north of Bahrein, and separated from it by a strait one mile broad; it is of horseshoe form, seldom more than half a mile broad, and is about five miles in length. The rest of the group are mere rocks: Sitrah, four miles long, with a village on it of the same name; Nebbi-Saleh; Sayeh, and Khaseifah, and to the east of Moharek, Arad, three-quarters of a mile in length, with its date-grove, and a large double fort thereon of Portuguese construction, either an island or a peninsula at low tide. Arad is the only island which retains its ancient name; the others, according to Strabo, Pliny, and Ptolemy, having been called Tyros or Tylos, and Tharros.

The sea all round the Bahrein is remarkably shallow. Two coral reefs run out from Bahrein and Moharek respectively, which shut in the harbour, and through which large vessels cannot pass; but the harbour is sufficiently deep for good-sized *baghalows* until quite close to the shore, which no boats can approach, and landing has to be effected on the backs of the celebrated white donkeys of Bahrein, a breed noted all over the East for strength and swiftness; their tails, manes, and flanks are usually

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decorated with henna, and as the rider is provided with no reins or stirrups, the transit to the shore is effected not without considerable inconvenience to the inexperienced.

The shallowness of the sea between Bahrein and the mainland has contributed considerably to the geographical and mercantile importance of the Bahrein. Ptolemy in his map places Gerrha, the mart of ancient Indian trade, and the starting-point for caravans on the great road across Arabia, just opposite where El Katif is now.

Classical authors, as we shall see later, with good reason assign the original home of the mercantile Phœnicians to these islands. The Portuguese recognised the importance of Bahrein, and took it in 1521, and built one of their principal forts in the Persian Gulf thereon. The great Portuguese explorer, Albuquerque, wrote on October 20th, 1514, to the King of Portugal,* stating its favourable position, and asserting that with Hormuz and Bahrein in Portuguese hands, the Persian Gulf would be entirely in their power. Major Durant, in a consular report, states it as his opinion that, "under a settled government, Bahrein could be the trading place of the Persian Gulf for Persia and Arabia, and an excellent harbour near the warehouses could be formed." No big vessels can approach the opposite coast of Arabia, hence, in olden days, when the caravan trade passed this way, all goods must have been transhipped to smaller boats at Bahrein.

The Bahrein Islands have been celebrated for their pearl fisheries ever since the days of the Periplus of Nearchus in the time of Alexander the Great. The chief commercial town, Manameh, on Bahrein, is inhabited by pearl merchants and divers. The merchants dwell in towers of certain architectural merit, a style of architecture borrowed from the neighbouring coast of El Hasa, strictly Saracenic. We inhabited one of these towers during our stay—a square room 16 feet, with 26 unglazed windows and a door, so there was plenty of circulation of air. The divers, chiefly negro slaves from Africa, dwell in bamboo huts along the coast. These divers resent all attempts at improvements in the way of diving apparatus, &c.; the loop and stone, the horn protection for the nose, and oil for the orifice of the ear, being all the paraphernalia required.

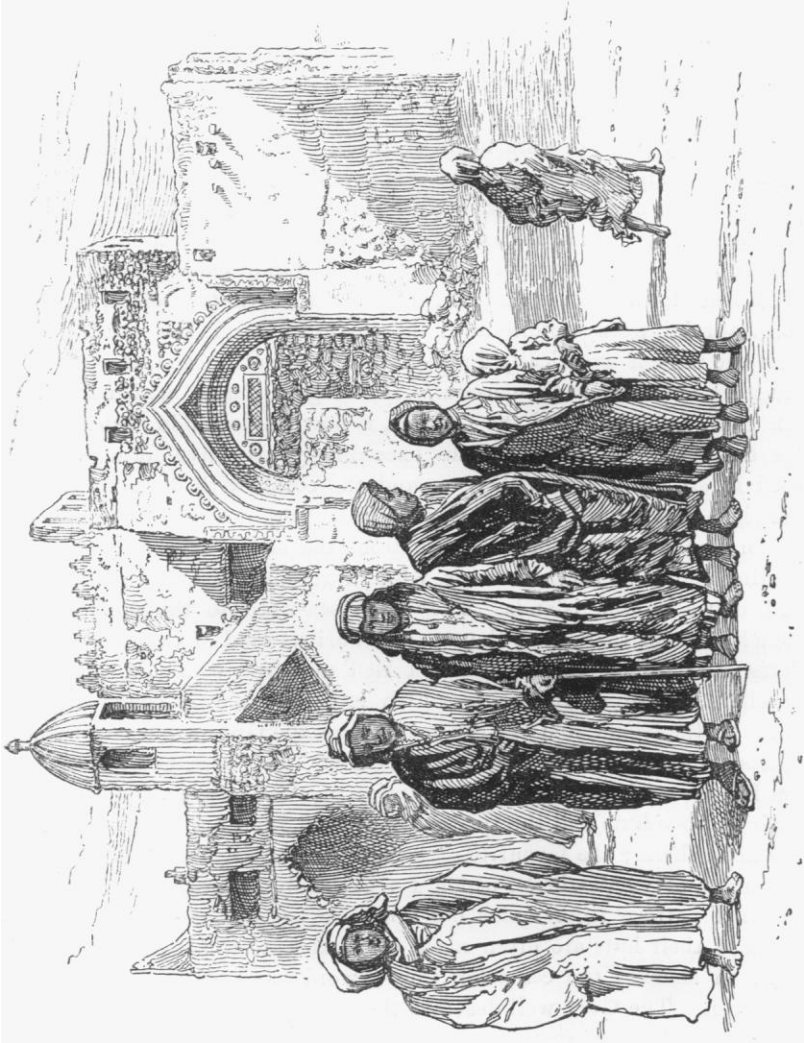
Albuquerque, in his commentaries,† thus speaks of Bahrein pearl-fishing in 1510:—"Bahrein is noted for its large breeding of horses, its barley crops, and the variety of its fruits; and all around it are the fishing grounds of seed pearls, and of pearls which are sent to these realms of Portugal, for they are better and more lasting than any that are found in any other of these parts." This is also the verdict of the modern pearl merchants, who value Bahrein pearls as more lasting and harder above those even of Ceylon. Evidently Albuquerque got an order from his sovereign for pearls, for he writes,‡ in 1515, that he is getting the

* 'Cartas de Alfonso de Albuquerque,' p. 264. † Published by the Hakluyt Society.

‡ 'Cartas de Alfonso de Albuquerque,' p. 328.

pearls which the king had ordered for "the pontifical of our lady," and in their dealings the pearl merchants of Bahrein still make use of the old Portuguese weights and names.

At present the pearl fisheries employ about 400 boats, of from eight



MOSQUE AT MANAMEH.

to twenty men in each. Each boat pays a tax, which goes to the sheikh, and the season for fishing is from April to October.

Manameh, the commercial capital of Bahrein, is a long, narrow town extending for nearly two miles along the shore; it has a few barn-like mosques with low minarets. For the inhabitants along the coast are

chiefly Arabs, of the fanatical sect of Wahabi, who object to any mosque, decoration, or ritual; whereas the inhabitants of the inland villages are mostly of the Shiite, or Persian sect, pointing to the supremacy of Persia in the islands in former years. Manameh has about 8000 inhabitants, and an active, though exceedingly dirty bazaar.

The sea between Manameh and Moharek is alive with strange craft: the *baghalow* of the Persian Gulf, with long prow decorated with shells, and huge grip, which makes it a boat easily turned in a squall; the companion is usually elegantly carved, and in the shallow waters it is propelled by poles, or oars made of poles, with pieces of board tied on with twine and used as paddles. Many of them have curious-shaped stone anchors, and water-casks of uniform and, doubtless, old-world shape. The sheikh has some fine war-vessels, called *Batils*, which did good execution about fifty years ago, when the Sultan of Oman and the rulers of El Hasa tried to seize Bahrein, and a naval battle took place, in which the Bahreini were victorious in the shallow sea off the coast. Now that the Gulf is practically English and piracy at an end, these vessels are more ornamental than useful. His large *baghalow*, which mounted ten guns, and was called the *Duniyah*, is now employed in trade. Then there are the bamboo skiffs, an exceedingly primitive form of canoe used in all the fishing villages round the coast, with decks flush with the sides, and requiring great skill in managng.

In the sea, sometimes a mile from the shore, men may be seen wading and collecting sea-weeds, which form a staple diet for both men and cattle on the islands. They give sea-weed to the donkeys and camels, and for their cows they make a curious kind of cake with green dates, date-stones, and fish-bones boiled together, which is said to be excellent for producing milk. Fish is a very staple commodity all through the island, and one can realise how the Greeks placed on these coasts their fish-eaters and tortoise-eaters. The bazaars of Manameh are full of stockfish for the consumption of the natives. The floors of their bamboo huts and the tiny courtyards in front are all strewn with the helix shells; the favourite game of men and boys is spinning tops made out of whelk-shells, which I really believe must have been the original pattern from which our domestic toy was made. The door-posts of their huts are often made of whales' teeth; a great traffic is done in sharks; the cases for their swords and daggers are all of shagreen. The Gulf well deserves the name given to it by Ptolemy of the *Ichthyophagorum sinus*.

At low tide you can cross over from Manameh to Moharek on donkey-back. In the centre of the strait is an old dismantled Portuguese fort, used only by the sheikh as a stable for his fine breed of Arab horses. The town of Moharek is about the same size as Manameh; it is the seat of government, the aristocratic capital, whereas Manameh is given over to the pearl merchants. Moharek is the home of the sheikh

and his relatives of the royal house of El Kalifah. The El Kalifah originally held the kingdom of El Hasa too, on the mainland opposite, but they were driven out by the Turks about fifty years ago, and now the Bahrein Islands is all that is left to them of their former extensive territories.

The El Kalifah are the chiefs of the Uttubi tribe of Arabs. Sheikh Esau, the present head of the family and sovereign lord of Bahrein, owes the possession of his throne entirely to English protection. In 1867 the Shah of Persia aimed at acquiring Bahrein, though his only claim to it was based on the fact that Bahrein had been an appanage of the Persian crown under the Suffavean kings. He instituted a revolt on the island, adopted a claimant to the sheikhdom, and got him to hoist the Persian flag. Our ships blockaded Bahrein, intercepted letters, and obliged the rebel sheikh to quit. Then it was that we took the islands under our protection. In 1875 the Turks caused trouble, and the occupation of Bahrein formed part of their great scheme of conquest in Arabia. Our ship the *Osprey* appeared on the scene, drove back the Turks, and transported to India several sheikhs who were hostile to the English rule, and placed Sheikh Esau under British protection on the throne, under which he happily rules to this day.

One of Sheikh Esau's palaces is at Moharek, and here he holds his court in the winter-time. When we visited him, the courtyard of his palace, which recalls the Alhambra somewhat in its architectural features, was crowded with Arab chiefs in all manner of quaint costumes, the royal family being always distinguished from the others by their red handkerchiefs bound round by akkals or rings of camel's hair bound with gold. My wife got a photograph of a group of them resting on their guns, and with their kanjars or sickle-shaped daggers by their sides. We took Prince Mohamed, the heir apparent, and the stout Seid ben Omar, the prime minister of Bahrein, or, as he is called, the bazaar master, i. e. minister of commerce. But Sheikh Esau refused to place his august person within reach of our camera. Sheikh Esau gave us cups of bitter coffee, followed by cups of sweet cinnamon tea, a disagreeable custom at first to those accustomed to take their coffee and sugar together. The coffee-pots of Bahrein are quite a speciality, also coming from El Hasa, which appears to be the centre of art in this part of Arabia. With their long beak-like spouts and concentric circles with patterns on, these coffee-pots are a distinct feature. In the bazaars of Manameh and Moharek coffee-vendors sit at every corner with some huge pots of a similar shape simmering on the embers; in the lid are introduced stones to make a noise and attract the attention of the passers by. Coffee-shops take the place of spirit and wine shops on the island, which in this strict Wahabi country would not be for a moment tolerated.

Besides the coffee-pots, other objects of El Hasa workmanship may

be seen in Bahrein. Every household of respectability has its wooden bowl with which to offer visitors a drink of water; these are beautifully inlaid with silver in very elaborate patterns. Also the guns used by Bahreini sportsmen are similarly inlaid, and the camel-saddles of



SHEIKH SEID BEN OMAR IN SHEIKH ESAU'S PALACE.

the sheikhs are most beautifully decorated on the pommels in the same style.

The old weapons of the Beduin Arabs are still in use in Bahrein—the long lance which is put up before the tent of the chief when he goes about, the shield of camel's skin decorated with gold paint and brass

knobs, the coat of mail, and other objects of warfare belonging to an age long gone by.

Walking through the bazaars one is much struck by the quaint huge iron locks, some of them with keys nearly two feet long, and ingeniously opened by pressure of a spring. In the commoner houses the locks and keys are all of wood. In the bazaars, too, you may find that queer el Hasa money called Towilah, or "long bits"—short bars of copper doubled back and compressed together, with a few characters indicating the Prince who struck them. Cooking is done on tiny little braziers for charcoal, holding merely sometimes a spoonful of live coal; these little things look remarkably like the fire altars of old Zoroastrian days.

The town of Moharek gets its water supply from a curious source, springing up from under the sea. At high tide there is about a fathom of salt water over the spring, and water is brought up either by divers who go down with skins, or by pushing a hollow bamboo down into it. At low tide there is very little water over it, and women with large amphoræ and goat-skins, which look very real and life-like though headless, wade out and fetch what water they require. This source is called Bir Mahab, and there are several of a similar nature on the coast around, the Kaseifah spring and others.

The legend is that in the time of Merwan, a chief Ibn Hakim, from Katif, wished to marry the lovely daughter of a Bahrein chief. His suit was not acceptable, so he made war on the islands, and captured all the wells which supplied the towns on the bigger island; but the guardian deity of the Bahreini caused this spring to break out in the sea just before Moharek, and the invader was thus in time repulsed. It is a curious fact that Arados, the Phœnician town on the Mediterranean, was supplied by a similar submarine source. The force of the stream as it comes out of the earth is so considerable that it pushes back the salt water and does not get impregnated.

In their ordinary life the Bahrein people still retain the primitiveness of the Beduin. At the two inland villages of Rufaà—"mountainous Rufaà" or Rufaà Jebeli, so-called because it is situated on the edge of the low cliff before alluded to which skirts the central depression, and Rufaà Shergeh—we stayed at the house of Sheikh Khallet, a strict Wahabi, who does not allow smoking or alcoholic drinks in his house. The Rufaà are much older than Moharek or Manameh, fortified villages with castellated walls of mud bricks; here many of the El Kalifah family reside in comfortable houses. Sheikh Sabas, who has been in India, has decorated his room with trophies from Bombay, but Sheikh Khallet's room has no furniture whatsoever save the matting with which his floor is strewn. The courtyards of these houses are architecturally interesting: the Saracenic arch, the rosettes of openwork stucco, the squares of the same material with intricate

patterns—great boons in a hot land to let in the air without the sun. There is also another contrivance for obtaining air; in building the house a niche three feet wide is left in the outer wall, closed in on the inner except for about a foot. It is funny to see the heads of muffled women peering out of these air-shafts into which they have climbed to get an undisturbed view. Here some of the women wear the Arabian *buttra* or mask, which whilst it hides their features gives their eyes full play. They are very curious. Some of the women one meets on Bahrein are highly picturesque when you see them without the dark-blue covering; they wear red petticoats and orange-coloured drawers down to their heels, aprons of gold coins, and gold bracelets and turquoise-rings. Carrying on their heads baskets of huge citrons they look very well, but if they see the dangerous animal man coming they dart behind a palm-tree till he has passed. Some are very superstitious, and we felt great contempt for the good ladies of Ali who refused to pollute themselves by washing infidel clothes, and obliged us to employ a washerman instead. Occasionally we got a good peep at the women as they were working in the fields or cutting with sickle-like saws the scrub that grows in the desert for their cattle.

Sheik Mohamed's palace at Rufaà Gebeli is interesting; he is nephew of Sheik Esau, and heir-apparent to the sheikdom.

From the Rufaà we visited the fishing village of Asker, where we reclined during the heat of the day to rest in one of the bamboo huts paved with helix shells and which we found delightfully cool, and then remounting our camels proceeded to examine Jebel Dukhan, an escarped mass of limestone rocks with rugged outline and deep caves: from the summit Bahrein looks like a sheet of oatcake floating on the waves. On the surrounding desert a small gazelle is abundant. One day we came across a cavalcade of Bahreini sportsmen, who looked exceedingly picturesque in their flowing robes and akkals, and riding gaily caparisoned horses, with crimson trappings and gold tassels. Each had on his arm a hooded falcon and by his side a Persian greyhound. When the gazelle is sighted the falcon is let loose, it skims rapidly along the ground, attacks the head of the animal and so confuses it, that it falls an easy prey to the hounds in pursuit. Albuquerque in his Commentaries says, "There are many who hunt with falcons about the size of our goshawks, and take by their aid certain creatures smaller than gazelles, training very swift hounds to assist the falcons in catching the prey."

There are about fifty villages scattered over the islands, recognisable from a distance by their patch of cultivation and groups of date-palms. Except at Manameh and Moharek they have little or nothing to do with the pearl fisheries, but are an exceedingly industrious race of peasants who cultivate the soil by means of irrigation from the numerous wells with which this island is blessed. These wells are worked like Indian wells, by donkeys and bullocks and a running slope, so that the buckets

or skins for water descend as the animals ascend and *vice versa*. There are generally three to six small wheels attached to the beam, over which the ropes of as many large leathern buckets pass. When these buckets rise full they tilt themselves over, and the contents are taken by little channels to a reservoir which feeds the dikes and are transferred to the palms by buckets raised by the leverage of a date-trunk lightly swung by ropes to a frame, and balanced at one end by a basket of earth into which it is inserted, and is so light to lift that women are generally employed in watering the trees.

After leaving Manameh and passing Sheikh Esau's summer palace, just a large fortified enclosure, in which his followers pitch their tents, with one room over the entrance for his majesty, the belt of palms is reached which extends for several miles, and is from two to three miles in width. This district produces some of the best palms in the Persian Gulf. We witnessed the artificial fructification of the date-palms when we were there. The long male spathes are cut off, dried for twenty hours, and sold in the markets; two or more flower-twigs are inserted into the female flower, and the fructification thus effected.

Green dates (*salang*) are given to the donkeys for fodder, and to this the Bahreini attribute their exceptionally good breed. They make *sheerah* for their own consumption out of dates dried for three days; then date-juice is poured over them and sesame seeds, walnuts, or ginger powder mixed with them. For exportation the dates are dried and the date-juice allowed to run off in the *madabash*, and then they are packed in date-leaf baskets. To manure their date-groves they use the fins of a species of ray-fish called *awal*, which, by the way, was an ancient name of the Island of Bahrein.

This area of fertility is very rich and beautiful; it extends all along the north coast of the island, and the fishing village of Nayim, with its bamboo huts nestling beneath the palm-trees, is highly picturesque; and all this fertility is due to the number of fresh-water springs which burst up here from underground, similar, no doubt, to those before alluded to which spring up in the sea. The Arabs will tell you that these springs come straight from the Euphrates by an underground channel by which the great river flows beneath the Persian Gulf, reminding one, and doubtless being the same legend alluded to by Pliny when he says, "Flumen per quod Euphratem emergere putant." There are many of them—the Garsari well, Uhm-i-Shaun, Abu Zeidan, and the Adari, which last supplies many miles of date-groves through a canal of ancient workmanship. The Adari well is one of the great sights of Bahrein, being a deep basin of water 22 yards by 40 long, beautifully clear, and full of prismatic colours. It is said to come up with such force from underground that a diver is driven back, and all around it are ruins of ancient date, proving that it was prized by former inhabitants as a bath. The water is slightly brackish, as is that of all these sources, so that

those who can afford it send for water to a well between Rufaà Gebeli and Rufaà Shergeh—one of the sights of the island—called Hanaini, which is exceedingly good, and camels laden with skins may be seen coming into Manameh every morning with this treasure.

The other well, Abu Zeidan, is situated in the midst of the ruins of the old Arab town known now as Beled el Kadim, or “old town.” This is built round, and is reserved for the private use of Sheikh Esau and his family. Adjoining it he has a tiny mosque, where he says his prayers and drinks his coffee during the hot summer weather.

This ancient capital, dating from a period prior to the Portuguese occupation, still presents some interesting ruins. The old mosque (Madresseh-i-abu Zeidan), with its two slender and elegant minarets, so different from the horrible Wahabi constructions of to-day, forms a conspicuous landmark for ships approaching the low-lying coasts of these islands. Around the body of the mosque runs a fine inscription in Cufic letters, and from the fact that the name of Ali is joined with that of the Prophet in the profession of faith, we may argue that this mosque was built during some Persian occupation, and was a Shiite mosque. The architecture, too, is distinctly Persian, recalling in its details the ruins of Rhey or Sultanieh in the north of Persia, and has nothing Arabian about it.

Ruins of houses and buildings surround this mosque, and here in the open space in the centre of the palm-groves the Bahreini assemble every Thursday for a market; in fact the place is more generally known now as Suk-el-Khamis, or Thursday’s market. We attended one of these gatherings, and were much struck with the picturesqueness of the scene, to which the mosque minarets and waving palm-trees lent an agreeable background.

About a mile from Beled el Kadim is the garden of Sheikh Esau, where amidst a perfect jungle of hibiscus, acacia, pomegranates, and other trees he passes much of his time in summer. Again another mile closer to the sea is the fine ruined fortress of the Portuguese, Gibliah, as the natives call it now, just as they do one of the two fortresses at Muscat. It covers nearly two acres of ground, and is built out of the remains of the old Persian town, for many Cufic inscriptions are let into the wall, and the deep well in the centre is lined with them. It is a regular bastioned fortification of the sixteenth century, with moat, embrasures in the parapets, and casemented embrasures in the re-entering angles of the bastions, and is one of the finest specimens of Portuguese architecture in the Gulf, attesting to the importance with which they looked upon this island.

The Portuguese rule in Bahrein and in the Persian Gulf generally forms a very interesting episode, unfortunately but little known, in the history of commercial enterprise. The Portuguese were the first Europeans to enter the Persian Gulf and give an account of themselves

since the days of Alexander the Great and Nearchus. It was, in fact, for many years a Mahomedan lake, closed to the infidel. The great explorer Albuquerque was the man who again opened out this district to Europeans. Early in the sixteenth century (1504), Albuquerque urged the occupation of the Gulf. In 1506 three fleets went to the East under the command of Tristan d'Acunha, with Albuquerque as second in command. Tristan soon took his departure further afield, and left Albuquerque in command. This admiral first attacked and took Hormuz, then governed by a king of Persian origin. Here and at Muscat he thoroughly established the Portuguese power, thereby commanding the entrance into the Gulf. From Barros' account it would appear that the King of Bahrein was a tributary of the King of Hormuz, paying annually 40,000 pardaos, and from Albuquerque's letters we read that the occupation of Bahrein formed part of his scheme. In fact, Albuquerque's scheme at that time would appear to have been exceedingly vast and rather chimerical, namely, to divert the Nile from its course and let it flow into the Red Sea, ruin Egypt, and bring the India trade viâ the Persian Gulf to Europe. Of this scheme we have only the outline, but beyond establishing fortresses in the Gulf it fell through, for Albuquerque died, and with him his gigantic projects.

The exact date of the occupation of Bahrein by the Portuguese I have as yet been unable to discover; but in 1521 we read of an Arab insurrection in Bahrein against the Persians and Portuguese, in which the Portuguese factor, Ruy Bale, was tortured and crucified.

Sheikh Hussein bin Said, of the Arabian tribe of Ben Zabia, was the instigator of this revolt. In the following year the Portuguese governor, Dom Luis de Menezes, came to terms with him, and appointed him Portuguese representative in the island.

A few years later, one Ras Bardadim, Guazil or Governor of Bahrein, made himself objectionable, and against him Simeon d'Acunha was sent. He and many of his men died in the expedition of fever, but the Portuguese power was again restored.

The Turks were the next enemies that the Portuguese had to deal with, and their defeat by the Portuguese off Muscat, in 1554, is considered by Turkish historians to have dealt a more effectual blow at their power than the better known battle off Corone, when Andrea D'Oria defeated Barbarossa and obliged Solyman to relinquish his attempt on Vienna.

Towards the close of the sixteenth century the Portuguese came under the rule of Spain, and from that date their power in the Persian Gulf began to wane. Their soldiers were drafted off to the wars in Flanders instead of going to the East to protect the colonies: and the final blow came in 1622, when Shah Abbas of Persia, assisted by an English fleet, took Hormuz, and then Bahrein. Twenty years later a company of Portuguese merchants, eager for the pearls of these islands,

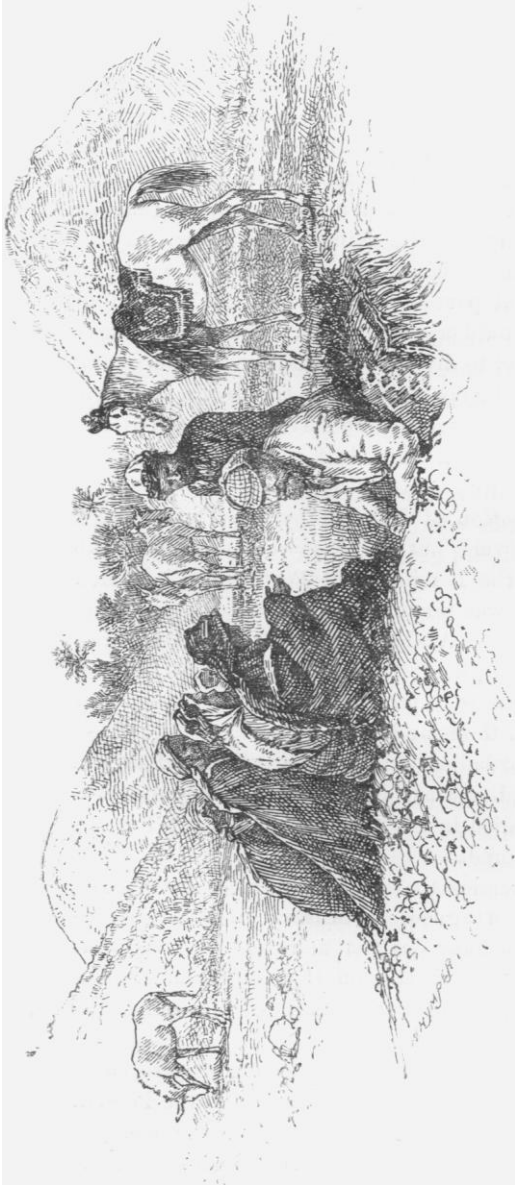
organised an expedition from Goa to recover the Bahrein, but the ships were taken and plundered by the Arabs before ever they entered the Gulf.

Thus fell the great Portuguese power in the Gulf, the sole traces of

which now are the numerous fortresses, such as the one on Bahrein. Amongst the débris in the fort we picked up numerous fragments of fine nankin and celadon china, attesting the ubiquity and commerce of the former owners, and attesting, too, the luxury of the men who ruled here—a luxury as fatal almost as the Flanders wars to the well-being of the Portuguese in the East.

From 1622 up to this century the contest in Bahrein has been one between the Arabians and Persians, and as the Persian power has been on the wane the Arabian star has been in the ascendant. In 1711 Sultan bin Seif wrested Bahrein from Persia. In 1784 the tribe of the Uttubi from El Hasa got it, and have held it ever since, despite the attempts of Seyid Said, of Oman, the Turks, and the Persians, and if Sheikh Esau and his successors are willing to submit to the British Protectorate, the El Kalifah family will probably continue to reign as long as the English are the virtual owners of the Gulf.

Leaving the palm-groves and the Portuguese fortress behind us, we re-entered the desert to the south-west. Here we came upon what is



THE MOUNDS AT ALI.

really the greatest curiosity of Bahrein, to investigate which was our real object in visiting the island, namely, the vast sea of sepulchral mounds, which extends as if from a culminating point at a village called Ali, just on the borders of the date-groves; at this point the mounds reach an elevation of over 40 feet, and as they extend further southwards they diminish in size, until miles away in the direction of Ruffa we found mounds elevated only a few feet above the level of the desert, and some mere circular heaps of stones. This is a vast necropolis of some unknown race, to discover which was our object in excavating. There are many thousands of these tumuli extending over an area of desert for many miles. There are isolated groups of mounds in other parts of the islands, and a few solitary ones are to be found on the adjacent islets, on Moharek, Arad, and Sitrah.

Our attention was first given to the larger mounds, situated at the northern corner of the group near Ali, from which village we were able to obtain workmen of an indifferent kind. We pitched our tents under the immediate shadow of one of them in the desert, and commenced operations under considerable disadvantages with regard to both workmen and tools.

Complete uncertainty exists as to the origin of these mounds and the people who constructed them. But from classical references and the results of our own work, there can now be no doubt that they were of Phœnician origin. Herodotus (ii. 89) gives us as a tradition current in his time that the forefathers of the Phœnician race came from these parts. The Phœnicians themselves believed in it: "It is their own account of themselves," says Herodotus; and Strabo (xvi. iii. 4) brings further testimony to bear on the subject, stating that two of the now called Bahrein Islands were called Tyros and Arados. Pliny follows in Strabo's steps, but calls the island Tylos instead of Tyros, which may be only an error of spelling.

Ptolemy in his map places Gerra, the mart of ancient Indian trade and the starting-point for caravans on the great road across Arabia, on the coast just opposite, near where the town of El Katif now is, and accepts Strabo's and Pliny's names for the Bahrein Islands, calling them Tharros, Tylos or Tyros, and Arados. The fact is that all our information on the islands prior to the Portuguese occupation comes from the Periplus of Nearchus. Eratosthenes, a naval officer of Alexander's, states that the gulf was 10,000 stadia long from Cape Armozum, i. e. Ormuz, to Teredon (= Koweit) and the mouth of the Euphrates. Androsthenes of Thasos, who was of the company of Nearchus, made an independent geographical survey of the gulf on the Arabian side, and his statements are that on an island called Icaros, now Peludji, just off Koweit, he saw a temple of Apollo. Southwards, at a distance of 2400 stadia, or 43 nautical leagues, he came on Gerra, and close to it the islands of Tyros and Arados, "which have temples like those of the Phœnicians," who

were, the inhabitants told him, colonists from these parts. From Nearchus too we learn that the Phœnicians had a town called Sidon or Sidodona in the gulf, which he visited, and on an island called Tyrine was shown the tomb of Erythras, which he describes as "an elevated hillock covered with palms," just like our mounds, and Erythras was the king who gave his name to the gulf. Justin accepts the migration of the Phœnicians from the Persian Gulf as certain; and M. Renan says, "The primitive abode of the Phœnicians must be placed on the Lower Euphrates, in the centre of the great commercial and maritime establishments of the Persian Gulf" (*Hist. des langues sémitiques*, vol. ii. p. 183). As for the temples, there are no traces left, and this is also the case in Syrian Phœnicia; doubtless they were all built of wood, which will account for their disappearance. When we ourselves, during the course of our excavations, brought to light objects of distinct Phœnician provenance, there would appear to be no room for doubt that the mounds which lay before us were a vast necropolis of this mercantile race, and that either of two suppositions must be correct, firstly, that the Phœnicians originally hailed from here before they migrated to the Mediterranean, that this was the land of Punt from which the Puni got their name, a land of palms like the Syrian coast from which the race got their distorted Greek appellation of Φοῖνικες; or, secondly, that these islands were looked upon by them as a sacred spot for the burial of their dead, like the Hindoo looks upon the Ganges, or the Persian regards the shrines of Kerbela and Meshed. I am much more inclined to the former supposition, judging from the mercantile importance of the Bahrein Islands and the excellent school it must have been for a race which was to penetrate to all the then known corners of the globe, to brave the dangers of the open Atlantic, and to reach the shores of Britain in their trading ventures; and if nomenclature goes for anything, the name of Tyros and the still existing name of Arad ought to confirm us in our belief and make certainty more certain.

We commenced operations on one of the largest of the mounds; its dimensions were as follows: 35 feet in height, 76 feet in diameter, and 152 paces in circumference. We chose this in preference to the higher mounds, the tops of which were flattened somewhat and suggested the idea that they had fallen in. Ours, on the contrary, was quite rounded on the summit and gave every hope that in digging through it we should find whatever was inside in *statu quo*. At a distance of several feet from most of the mounds are traces of an outer encircling wall, similar to walls found around certain tombs in Lydia, and this encircling wall was more marked around some of the smaller and presumably more recent tombs at the outer edge of the necropolis; in some cases several mounds would appear to have been clustered together and to have had an encircling wall common to them all.

We dug from the top of our mound for 15 feet with great difficulty,

through a sort of conglomerate earth, nearly as hard as cement, before we reached anything definite. Then suddenly this close earth stopped, and we came across a layer of large loose stones, entirely free from soil, which layer covered the immediate top of the tombs for two feet. Beneath these stones, and immediately on the top of the flat slabs forming the roof of the tomb had been placed palm branches, which in the lapse of ages had become white and crumbly, and had assumed the flaky appearance of asbestos. This proved that the palm flourished on Bahrein at the date of these tombs, and that the inhabitants were accustomed to make use of it for constructive purposes.

Six very large slabs of rough unhewn limestone, which had obviously come from Jebel Dukhan, lay on the top of the tomb, forming a roof. One of these was six feet in length and two feet two inches in depth.

The tomb itself was composed of two chambers, one immediately over the other, and approached by a long passage, like the dromos of rock-cut Greek tombs, which was full of earth and small stones. This passage was 23 feet in length, extending from the outer rim of the circle to the mouth of the tomb. Around the outer circle of the mound ran a wall of huge stones, evidently to support the weight of earth necessary to conceal the tomb, and large unhewn stones closed the entrance to the two chambers to the tomb at the head of the passage.

We first entered the upper chamber, the floor of which was covered with débris. It was 30 feet long, and at the four corners were four recesses two feet ten inches in depth, and the uniform height of this chamber was four feet six inches. The whole surface of the débris was covered with the tiny bones of the jerboa, that rat-like animal which is found in abundance on the shores of the Persian Gulf. We then proceeded to remove the débris and sift it for what we could find therein.

The chief objects of interest consisted in innumerable fragments of ivory, fragments of circular boxes, pendants with holes for suspension, evidently used as ornaments by this primitive race, the torso of a small statue in ivory, the hoof of a bull fixed on to an ivory pedestal, evidently belonging to a small statue of a bull, the foot of another little statue, and various fragments of ivory utensils. Many of these fragments had patterns inscribed on them—rough patterns of scales, rosettes, encircling chains, and the two parallel lines common to so many ivory fragments found at Kameiros, and now in the British Museum. In fact, the decorations on most of them bear a close and unmistakable resemblance to ivories found in Phœnician tombs on the shores of the Mediterranean, and to the ivories in the British Museum from Nimrud in Assyria, universally accepted as having been executed by Phœnician artists, those cunning workers in ivory and wood, whom Solomon employed in the building of his temple, and before the development of Egyptian and Greek art the travelling artists of the world. The ivory fragments we found are now in the hands of Mr. A. S. Murray, of the British Museum,

who writes to me as follows:—"I have not the least doubt, judging from the incised patterns, from bull's foot, part of a figure, &c., that the ivories are of Phœnician workmanship."

The pottery found in this débris offered no very distinctive features, except being coarse and unglazed, but the numerous fragments of ostrich shells, coloured and scratched with rough patterns in bands, also pointed to a Phœnician origin, or at least to a race of wide mercantile connection, and in those days the Phœnicians were the only people likely to combine in their commerce ostrich shells and ivory. We also found small shapeless pieces of oxidised metal, brass or copper.

No human bones appeared in the upper chamber, but those of a large animal, presumably a horse, but the chamber immediately beneath was much more carefully constructed; it was exactly the same length, but was higher, being six feet seven inches, and the passage was wider. It was entirely coated with cement, in which all round the walls at intervals of two feet were holes sloping inwards, in which in the second tomb we opened we found traces of wood, showing that poles had been inserted for hanging drapery upon. The ground of this lower chamber was entirely covered with a thin brown earth of a fibrous nature, somewhat in appearance resembling snuff; it was a foot in depth, and evidently the remains of the drapery which had been hung around the walls. Prior to the use of coffins the Phœnicians draped their dead,* and amongst this substance we found traces of human bones.

Thus we were able to arrive at the system of sepulture employed by this unknown race. Evidently their custom was to place in the upper chamber broken utensils and the corpse of an animal belonging to the deceased, and to reserve the lower chamber for the corpse enshrouded in drapery. For the use of this double chamber our parallels are curiously enough all Phœnician. Perrot, in his 'Art in Phœnicia,' gives us examples of two-storied tombs in the cemetery of Amrit, in Phœnicia, where also the bodies were imbedded in plaster to prevent decay prior to the introduction of the sarcophagus, reminding us of the closely cemented lower chamber in our mounds. A mound containing a tomb with one chamber over the other was last year observed in Sardinia, and is given by Della Marmora (part ii. pl. x. p. 73) as of Phœnician origin. Here, however, the top of the tomb is conical, not flat, as in our mounds, which would point to a later development of the double chamber which eventually blossomed forth into the lofty mausolea of the later Phœnician epoch and the grandiose tombs of Hellenic structure.

Also at Carthage, this very year, excavations have brought to light certain tombs of the early Phœnician settlers which also have the double chamber. In answer to Perrot's assertion that all early Phœnician tombs were *hypogea*, we may say that, as the Bahrein Islands offered no facility

* Perrot, 'Hist. of Art in Phœnicia.'

for this method of sepulture, the closely covered-in mound would be the most natural substitute.

Before leaving the tombs we opened a second and smaller one of coarser construction, which confirmed in every way the conclusions we had arrived at in opening the larger tomb. Near the village of Ali, one of the largest mounds has been pulled to pieces for the stones. By creeping into the cavities opened I was able to ascertain that the chambers in this mound were similar to those in the mound we had opened, only they were double on both stories, and the upper storey was also coated with cement; two chambers ran parallel to each other, and were joined at the two extremities.

Major Durand also opened one of the mounds, but unfortunately the roof of the tomb had fallen in, which prevented him from obtaining any satisfactory results; but from the general appearance, it would seem to have been constructed on exactly the same lines as our larger one. Hence, we had the evidence of four tombs to go upon, and felt that these must be pretty fair specimens of what the many thousands were which extended around us.

In conclusion, I may add that our researches in every way confirmed the statements of Herodotus, Strabo, and Pliny, that the original home of the Puni was the group of the Bahrein, and on quitting these islands we felt what a wonderful commercial pedigree these low-lying, unhealthy specks of earth had had. From Phœnicians we pass on to Portuguese, and from Portuguese to Englishmen, who now, as virtual lords of the Persian Gulf, are beginning to recognise their importance. If the Euphrates Valley Railway had ever been opened, if the terminus of this railway had been at Koweit, as it was proposed by the party of survey under the command of General Chesney, the Bahrein group would at once have sprung into importance, as offering a safe harbour in the immediate vicinity to this terminus. Bahrein is the Cyprus of the Persian Gulf, in fact. This day is, however, postponed indefinitely until such times as England, Turkey, and Russia shall see fit to settle their differences; and with a better understanding between these powers, and the development of railways in the East, the Persian Gulf will yet once more become a high road of commerce, and the Bahrein Islands will once more come into notice.

After the paper, which was illustrated by lantern-slides from photographs

Admiral LINDESAY BRINE said he visited the Bahrein Islands some years ago, and could confirm the description given in Mr. Bent's paper. The photographs which had been exhibited were, however, rather misleading in one respect. The Arabs were not such fearful people to look at as they appeared on the screen, some of them being very handsome men indeed. With regard to the supply of fresh water, it was quite true that there were several fresh-water springs under the sea in the harbour of Bahrein, in places where, in days gone by, the dhows would anchor. In order to obtain the water, a man would go down with a skin or jar and place it where the spring rose from the sea-bed, fill it, and bring it up. That was the way

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in which the dhows generally obtained their supply of fresh water. He knew of no such springs in any other country, except in the harbour of Syracuse, where the fresh water rose up from the sea at a place where it was about 20 feet in depth.

Mr. CECIL H. SMITH (of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, British Museum) said that he would only speak of the archaeological interest connected with the questions arising out of Mr. Bent's paper. As far as the evidence went at present, he thought the Museum authorities were prepared to admit that the Bahrein Islands probably represented a primitive site of the Phœnician race. The mode of sepulture seemed certainly connected with that people. An enormous necropolis of large mounds like that at Bahrein was practically unique: it was true that a similar necropolis existed in Lydia, the burial-place of the early kings, but this was of considerably later date, and might have been remotely suggested by a Phœnician origin: on the other hand, the tomb chamber within the Lydian mounds was of different construction. The special feature of the burial system at Bahrein was the double construction, with one chamber over another, and this system seemed to be specially characteristic of the Phœnicians. Within the last two years the French excavations at Carthage had laid bare what was believed to be the necropolis of the earliest Phœnician settlers on that site, and the form of tomb was that of the double chamber. As to the great antiquity of the Bahrein mounds, a point of evidence worth noting was the fact that at present no inscriptions had been discovered there. Five mounds had now been opened: one by Captain Durand, another by officers of the *Sphinx*, and three by Mr. Bent, but no trace of inscriptions had yet been found. Another peculiarity was, that in almost all the necropoles connected with the Phœnicians, it was usual to find objects of glass, but in the mounds recently opened glass had not as yet been found. And yet we know that in later times at any rate Phœnician glass found its way in that direction. Three years ago, when he was in the Persian Gulf, he was given for the British Museum a bangle, which seemed undoubtedly of Phœnician glass: this had been found by the donor near the village of Pasni, on the coast of Baluchistan. At present the evidence was somewhat scanty, and rather negative than positive; but the character of the finds pointed to a primitive, unwarlike, trading race such as we know the Phœnicians in the Persian Gulf, previous to their migration, must have been. Mr. Bent's excavations would reopen the controversy which had raged among Egyptologists as to the identification of the land of *Punt*. This was frequently mentioned in the early Egyptian texts as some mysterious land to the north-east of Egypt, from which they got, amongst other products, that of incense. If the land of Punt or Puane could be connected with the primitive home of the Phœnicians, it would argue in favour of the etymological identity of the two forms. The Greek "Phoinix" (= Phœnician) has also the meanings which point to South Arabia. The difficulty in this identification had always lain in the fact that in the Egyptian texts referring to the inhabitants of the land of Punt mention is made of giraffes and negroes; this had led Mariette to believe that Punt could not be Arabia, but was rather Somaliland, the *regio cinnamomifera* of the ancients. The most recent authority, however, Schweinfurth, had produced botanical and other proof that the land of Puane or Punt must have included the whole of Southern Arabia as well as the opposite adjoining coast of the Red Sea. Now in the early texts, Puane is often associated with To Nefer, the "divine land," or more usually in the plural the "holy islands." If, therefore, Punt referred to Southern Arabia, it might be that To Nefer referred to islands like those of the Bahrein group, rendered holy in remote times as the burial-place of the people. In conclusion, he was glad of the opportunity of expressing the obligation which the British Museum and the public generally owed to Mr. and Mrs. Bent: for four years in succession they had now conducted researches,

at no small risk and discomfort to themselves, the results of which had been on each occasion most generously given to the British Museum.

The PRESIDENT said that Mr. Theodore Bent's paper proved that it was not necessary for a traveller who desired to give the Society valuable information to go in all cases very far from the ordinary routes of commerce. The members welcomed with delight the intelligence sent to them by those distinguished men who, taking their lives in their hands, crossed great continents and sent back information with regard to regions which were like new worlds; but they had also a warm welcome for others who gave them information without such sacrifices as Mr. Stanley had made. Mr. Bent seemed to have a peculiar liking for the exploration of islands. In the year 1885 he published an excellent work upon the Cyclades. Towards the end of last year he contributed to the 'Nineteenth Century' a very remarkable paper upon the island of Santorin in its connection with the New Testament. Quite recently he had written on the Princes' Islands, in the Sea of Marmora; and to-night he had given them a very instructive paper on the Bahrein group. Perhaps the most valuable portion of his paper was that in which he described his excavations in the mounds which he believed to be of Phœnician origin. Hitherto one of the things which it had been most difficult to believe in Herodotus had been his reiterated statement that the Phœnicians thought they originally came from the Erythræan Sea. It seemed in the present case, as in many others, that with increase of knowledge further confirmation was given to the general truth of the statements of the Father of History. In addition to the archæological information which he had given, Mr. Theodore Bent had communicated to them a great many very interesting observations with regard to the present state of the Bahrein Islands, and he (the President) was sure that he was the faithful interpreter of the meeting when he returned to Mr. Bent the thanks of the Society for his very instructive and agreeable paper.

*Progress of the Russian Expedition to Central Asia under
Colonel Pievtsoff.**

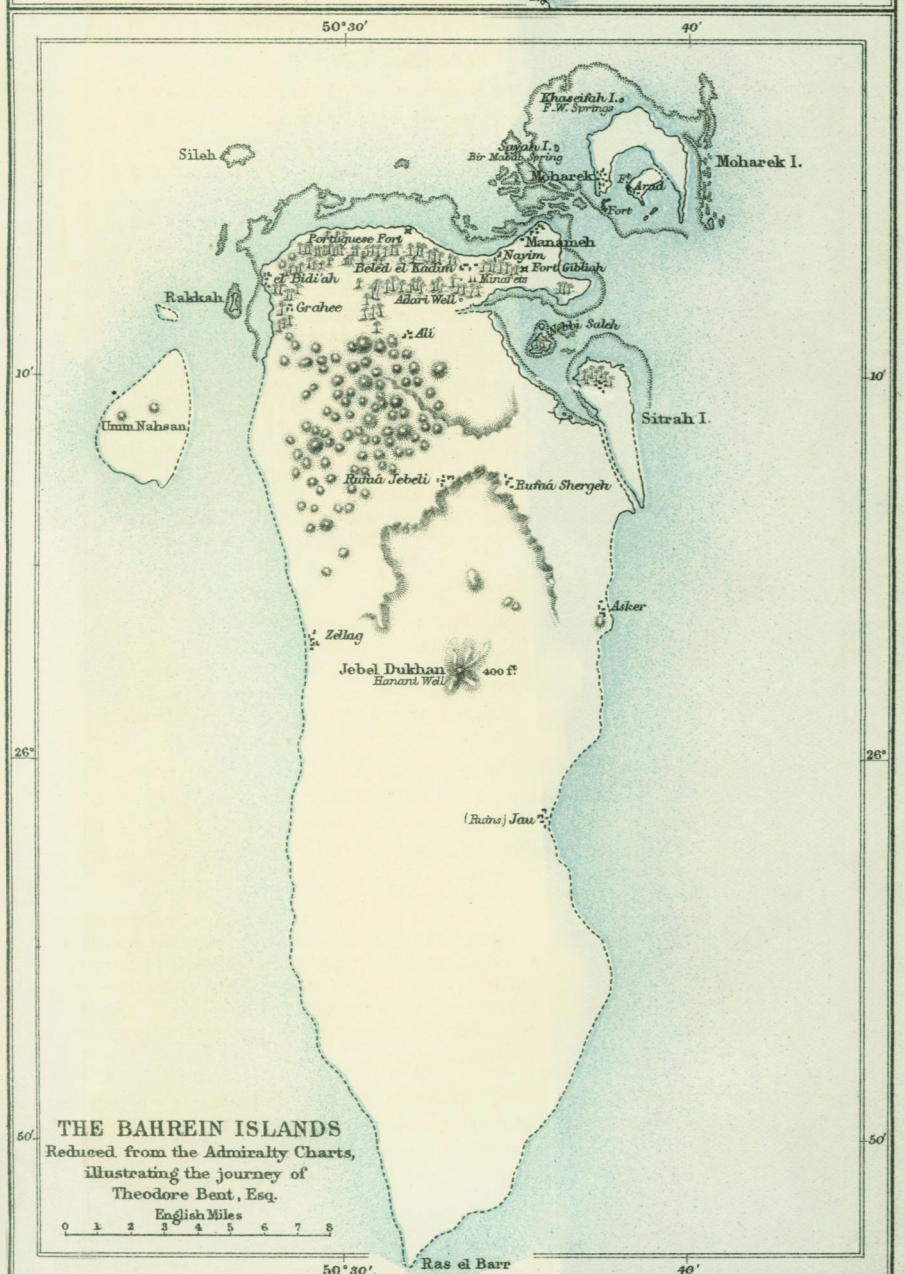
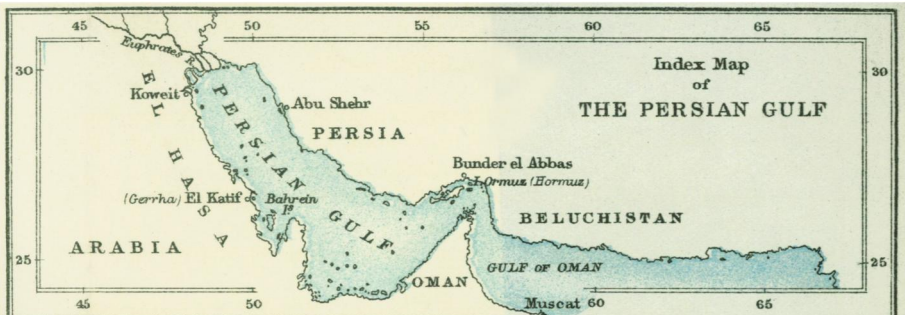
THE following is an extract from the first letter of Lieut. Roborovsky, describing the progress of the expedition into Central Asia, which was led at starting by General Prejevalsky and continued after the death of the leader by Colonel Pievtsoff. Lieut. Roborovsky had been a companion of Prejevalsky on his former expeditions. This letter was despatched on the 4th August, 1889, from a place to the south of the Yarkand Oasis.†

Our caravan left Prjevalsk on the 13th May for the village of Slivkina, where we were to join it. In the evening, Kozloff and I, in company with General Savrimovitch and Lieutenant-Colonel Korolkoff, who were then on service, went for the last time to the lake to say farewell and greet at the tomb of our beloved and never-to-be-forgotten chief, Nicholas Mikhailovitch Prejevalsky. We stayed there some hour and a half, and returned home much moved.

The 14th, in the morning, we paid some farewell visits, and towards 3 p.m. set

* Translated from the 'Russian Invalide,' Oct. 11/23rd, 1889.

† For map vide Prejevalsky in 'Proceedings R.G.S.,' 1887, p. 268, and Carey, *ibid.*, p. 790.



H. Sharbau, R.G.S. F.S. Waller