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THE ASHIRÉT HIGHLANDS OF HAKKIARI (MESOPOTAMIA)

By EDGAR T. A. WIGRAM

At a meeting of the Society on March 15, 1916, with Sir Frederic Fryer in the chair, Mr. Edgar T. A. Wigram read a paper, illustrated by lantern views, on this subject. In introducing him, the Chairman said that Mr. Wigram's brother, a missionary of the Church of England, had been resident in those regions for some ten years past. It was in the course of a visit to him that Mr. Wigram obtained the knowledge of the country which he was about to use for their benefit. He believed that the photographs for the illustrations they were about to see were mostly taken by the lecturer.

Mr. Wigram's address was as follows :

We may form some rough mental conception of the general lie of the land in southern Asiatic Turkey by picturing it as a classical theatre, with its auditorium facing south-west. It is formed of a low, flat arena (or orchestra, as the Greeks would term it), half enclosed to the northward and eastward by a semicircular arc of lofty mountainous plateaux. The arena is Turkish Arabia—Mesopotamia and the Syrian desert—a dead, level plain, almost entirely alluvial, and nowhere rising more than a few hundred feet above the level of the sea. The plateaux which enclose it comprise Anatolia and Armenia to the northward, and Iran, or Persia, to the eastward—a continuous sweep of rugged tableland averaging some 5,000 feet above sea-level, and seamed with a network of mountain ranges which attain to a height of 10,000 feet or more.

The step from the plain to the plateau is very abrupt and definitive; and this abruptness is emphasized by a bold range of mountains which is drawn, like a huge saw-toothed parapet, right along the whole rim of the plateau. At its western extremity this range is known as the Taurus, and that name is now often used loosely to include all the central chain as well. But to the Greeks and Romans this central range was Niphates; and perhaps we may still call it so, for a modern generic name seems lacking. The peaks are now only known collectively as the mountains of Kurdistan.

It is in this central portion that the range attains its greatest elevation, and just west of the Turco-Persian frontier the chief peaks are some 14,000 feet high. Here, too, it begins to curve definitely southward; and, as it does so, it throws off a sort of spur in a northerly direction, linking up with Aghri Dagh (Mount Ararat), some 150 miles away.

Separated from each other by these three divergent ridges are three tracts of comparatively level country embayed in the re-entering angles; and in the centre of each of these tracts there lies a considerable city—Van, in Armenia, to the northward; Urmi, in Persia, to the eastward; and Mosul, in Mesopotamia, towards the south. These three cities are about equi-distant from each other, and may be regarded as forming the points of an equilateral triangle whose sides are 120 miles long; and the rugged mountain mass that fills the interior of this triangle is known as the district of Hakkari—one of the wildest and least accessible regions even in Kurdistan.

The regular road from Aleppo to Mosul runs just along the foot of the mountains skirting the northern edge of the great Mesopotamian plain. This is the line that has been chosen by the engineers of the Bagdad Railway. And it does but follow the time-honoured track that has been adopted by nearly every traveller and conqueror since the days of Abraham and Chedorlaomer; for the bee-line from Babylonia to Syria traverses a waterless desert, and was impassable even in those days, when the rainfall was probably heavier than now.

The distance from Aleppo to Mosul is a little more than 300 miles, and when the railway is finished the journey will take about ten hours. But till then, under the old conditions, it entails about a fortnight's travelling, and this is usually accomplished in an araba—a sort of ramshackle four-wheeled buggy, fitted with a tilt, and drawn by three or four scraggy ponies—which the voyager (like an ancient Scythian) has to use as a "movable home." The araba progresses at a foot's pace, and an average stage for a day would be about twenty-five miles. The halting-places have to be determined by the known position of certain starveling streams, or pans of moderately drinkable water; and food, and even fodder for the horses, is generally only obtainable at intervals of three or four days.

Roads may fairly be called non-existent. Some few of the more important towns which lie near the foot of the mountains—such as Urfa, Mardin, and Diarbekr—do indeed pose as the starting-points of one or more metalled roadways, which sally forth heroically from the city gates, and disappear abruptly and ignominiously after a career of four or five miles. But on the plain are mere foot-tracks, often so faintly marked that it is difficult to trace them even by daylight, and singularly easy to lose them after dark. On one such occasion

our drivers, having strayed a few paces aside, set to work to hunt for the path by the light of a small wax taper. "How many miles to Babylon?" says the old rhyme, and goes on to ask: "Can I get there by candlelight?" It would seem that this was really a very important point to ascertain.

Mosul, the chief city of Upper Mesopotamia, is reputed to contain 80,000 inhabitants. It is the seat of a Vali, and the headquarters of a military division; but it is a squalid and meanly built place, and altogether unfortified. The streets are mostly so narrow that a cat can jump across them from roof to roof; and, after the least rain, so muddy that the householder usually bridges them with a plank whenever he wishes to visit his opposite neighbour. Their windings, too, form a maze of such ingenious complexity that few of the townfolk know their way except in their own particular quarter.

The place is an oven in summer, and the half-dozen or so of Europeans who live there all escape for their lives to the mountains at that season if they can. But in winter the climate is pleasanter, except during the rainy season in January or February, which has been so hampering our troops lately in their operations below Bagdad.

Mosul lies on the right bank of the Tigris, and opposite to it, on the left bank, just beyond the old bed of the river, and consequently about a mile back from its present channel, rise the mounds that mark the site of Nineveh. There is nothing of Nineveh now left above ground except these great mounds, which look for all the world like derelict railway embankments. They mark the line of the old walls, and enclose an area about three times as large as modern Mosul. All the more important marbles and bronzes have probably been long since removed and housed in the British Museum, but one specially choice plum is still reserved for future excavators—the mound of Nebi Yunus, which covers the principal palace of Assurbanipal. This hillock is crowned by a mosque, which is reputed to contain the tomb of the Prophet Jonah; and a mosque of such peculiar sanctity must not be disturbed on any account. For Jonah is still a great personage in this locality; the fast which is said to have been instituted in consequence of his preaching being still observed annually, with the utmost strictness, by all local Christians and Moslems and Yezidis, as well as by Jews.

Almost the only memorials of the old Assyrian conquerors which are now to be seen in the lands where they reigned in their glory are the great bas-reliefs which they delighted to have carved at conspicuous points in the living rock; apparently to serve as trophies marking the limits of their conquests, much as an English "Tommy" loves to carve the badge of his regiment on some conspicuous precipice in Tibet or Afghanistan.

Several such may be seen at about a day's journey north of Mosul,

at the point where the Bavian River issues from its mountain glen. This spot was apparently one of the quarries where the stone was cut for building the palaces of Nineveh, and whence the huge blocks were floated down to their destination on rafts of inflated skins. The sculptures are of the date of Sennacherib; and the quarries were perhaps abandoned in consequence of the outbreak of the civil war which followed his assassination. The principal relief records his destruction of Babylon, which had rebelled against him early in his reign, and which he took and razed to the ground.

Across the plains to Mosul one can travel in some sort of carriage, but the pathways over the mountains take nothing that runs upon wheels. Three thousand years ago, as he himself has recorded, "I, Tiglath-Pileser, was obliged to go on foot." And those who imagine that, because the Russians have captured Bitlis, the road now lies open for them into Mesopotamia, must have a very inadequate conception of the character of these local roads. It is true that an army may manage them; Xenophon's army actually did—but they abandoned all their transport to do so. And the road is now not a whit better than it was in Xenophon's day. The only baggage that can be taken is such as can be carried on pack mules; and even a small party is likely to get well strung out on the narrow pathways, and to require pretty frequent halts to pull itself together again.

Our road lies at first on the plain, close to the foot of the mountains, over stony ground, meagrely cultivated, with a few small, dirty villages here and there. Many of these villages are now deserted and ruined, having been gradually badgered out of existence between Turkish tax-gatherers and Arab reiders; and the most regular landmarks are the derelict, walled cemeteries, which are rendered conspicuous by their sacred trees. The cult of the sacred tree is, of course, one of the oldest of all religions. It is a familiar subject in the ancient Assyrian bas-reliefs, and often alluded to in the Bible as the worship of the groves. In this country, where trees are scarce, nearly every prominent tree seems to be canonized. It is too much to say, perhaps, that they are still actually worshipped, but they are at least very greatly honoured. Few natives will pass such a tree without leaving a rag in the branches to keep the Genius in mind of him, and none would dare to steal even a fallen branch to light his fire withal.

One of the most noteworthy monuments in this stage of the journey is the old hermit monastery of Rabban Hormizd, situated in a pocket of the mountains overlooking the plain of Mosul, and consisting of hundreds of cave-cells ranged in tiers along the face of the cliff. It was founded in the eighth century, and has never been entirely abandoned. Its church, in local phraseology, is a "Church of Name," celebrated for its miraculous power of curing insanity. The lunatic

(often quite willing) is solemnly conducted to the church, and chained up in it for twenty-four hours with a ponderous iron chain and collar. After that experience he is usually sane enough to profess himself cured.

Close to Rabban Hormizd is Alkosh, reputed to be the burial-place of Nahum; and, despite the fact that the commentators place Nahum's Alkosh in Galilee, I feel there is much reason to accept this local claim. One can hardly read Nahum's prophecy without feeling that he must have been an eyewitness of the last siege of Nineveh—probably one of the refugees who looked down from the mountains on the armies of Cyaxares and Nabopolasser, and saw "the bloody city" at last delivered to the flames.

But undoubtedly the weirdest corner in all this part of the country is Sheikh Adi, the central shrine of the Yezidis, or "devil-worshippers," which is hidden away in a secluded valley just within the fringe of the mountains about a day's journey north of Mosul. This strangest sect is supposed to number about 200,000 adherents; widely scattered in many detached communities, but most numerous in the province of Mosul. The poor wretches are a quiet and harmless folk enough, but are regarded by all their Moslem and Christian neighbours as the vilest of outcasts and pariahs. They seem to inspire the same mixture of scorn and fear as witches used once to inspire in England. Anyone with adequate backing is ready to bully them by daylight, but nobody feels quite willing to pass their doors alone after dark.

"Devil-worshippers" they are truly, but their religion is a queer medley, compounded, apparently, out of about half a dozen others. It must be admitted, however, that, such as it is, they adhere to it most steadfastly; and, in spite of incessant persecutions, apostasy is almost unknown.

The Yezidis believe in a Supreme Being, but in One who holds Himself entirely aloof from all created things. The creation of the world, and its governance for a period of 10,000 years, were committed by Him to the first of the seven great Spirits which emanated from Him—the Spirit euphemistically known as Melek Taus (King Peacock), who is identical with Satan. Melek Taus is an evil and fallen Spirit; but at least he is Prince of this world, and, as such, must be duly propitiated. Moreover, it is inconceivable that he shall not some day be rehabilitated, and then he will remember those who paid him reverence in his disgrace. Melek Isa (Jesus) is the second of the great Spirits, and He, too, will reign for 10,000 years, when Melek Taus's reign is done. But meanwhile worship of Him is not so imperatively necessary; and, in any case, those who neglect Him may hope He will pardon the offence.

This central article of their creed is an inheritance, no doubt, from the old Persian worship of Ahriman, the Evil Principle. Other

tenets date back to primeval Nature worship, or have been borrowed from Judaism, Christianity, and Mahommedanism. The Yezidis are very reticent about their faith, and no outsider has ever witnessed their ritual; but it seems clear that Sheikh Adi is to them what the Temple of Zion was to the Jews, and that all their worship is centred in the sacrifices performed here at their annual festival.

Sheikh Adi is a sort of Satanic monastery, consisting only of the temple and its precincts. There is no village near it; and nothing can be more eerie than to arrive at that solitary ruined shrine in its lonely glen at nightfall, and find it all silent and deserted, but brilliantly illuminated with scores of tiny lamps. The Yezidis entertained us hospitably, and allowed us to visit the temple, and even to inspect the shrine within it, which contains the image of Melek 'Taus in the form of a conventionalized bird. The bronze peacock in the British Museum was perhaps at one time used as such a "Sanjak," but they keep seven Sanjaks altogether, and these are often looted and replaced.

There are two main roads leading into the mountains from Mosul: one just west of Alkosh, and one at Akra, further east. Akra is a typical Kurdish mountain township, perched halfway up the slope of the hillside, and looking southward over the Mesopotamian plain. Mosul, some fifty miles away, is clearly visible, half veiled by the smoke of its lime-kilns; and the windings of the Tigris may be traced for many miles beyond. East and west, as far as the eye can see, the heights rise up from the level in a series of bold headlands that look as if they had been dressed to toe a line: and the steepness of the slopes is apparent in the planning of the city, where each front door seems entered from the roof of the house below.

The Kurds enjoy an evil reputation, and in most respects thoroughly deserve it; but at least we have no right to regard them as intruders who ought to be expelled. They have been established in the land as long as any of their neighbours; and as the Kings of Assyria made a practice of flaying their chiefs alive whenever they were able to catch them, we may infer they were considered a nuisance even in those earliest days. Xenophon expressly states that the Kurduchi were an independent people, and were not to be considered as subjects of the Great King; and he adds an illuminating note that there were no Armenian villages within a day's march of the Kurduchian frontier, because the Kurduchi were so incurably addicted to plundering them—a remark which seems to have a very modern ring.

The Kurds are still semi-independent, and it is certainly not from the Turks that they have acquired their unruly habits. They are not even akin to the Turks; for while the Turks are Turanian, and the Arabs and Armenians Semitic, the Kurds speak a dialect of Persian, and are thus presumably an Aryan race. I fear they are nearer akin to ourselves than they are to any of their neighbours; albeit, it is not

a relationship that we need be ambitious to claim. They are a pastoral race; but, unhappily, rather of the type of those Eliotts and Johnstones and Armstrongs who used to practise "the faithful herdman's art" upon our own border. And perhaps their inveterate enmity towards the Armenians and Syrians may be regarded as a part of the agelong feud between the feeder of flocks and the tiller of the ground which seems to have originated in the quarrel between Cain and Abel. In summer they are nomadic, dwelling in tents of black goat's hair, and tending their flocks and herds upon the high mountain pastures; but in winter they gravitate to their villages in the valleys or on the plains. They are a picturesque gang of ruffians, and one could hardly help feeling some sentimental regret at their disappearance; but I fear one is tempted to apply to them the words which Scott puts into Albany's mouth to justify the mutual slaughter of the Clan Quhele and the Clan Chattan. There can be no peace in the country until they are thoroughly tamed.

The range upon which Akra lies is one of a sheaf of parallel ridges which form a sort of outwork to the Hakkari Oberland. Beyond them lies a long, straight, widish valley, running due east and west for a distance of about 100 miles, and forming a kind of moat between the outwork and the citadel. This valley looks quite continuous, but as a matter of fact it is not one valley at all. It is shared out between two rivers which break into it out of the northern gorges, pick up tributaries out of the central section, and emerge from it at opposite ends. A somewhat similar valley, the Valley of Mergawar and Tergawar, skirts the eastern front of Hakkari upon the Urmi side. This latter valley possesses some importance as affording the most eligible route by which the Bagdad army could be transferred to Erzerum; but this district has long since been occupied by the Russians, and is no more available for the Turks.

These valleys, with the ridges which form them, are the boundaries of the Ashiret country; and the phrase, "the Ashiret country," may be paraphrased "the country of the clans." The Ashiret tribes live to-day under much the same sort of conditions as the old Scotch clans in the Highlands "beyond the line" before "the Forty-five." They are nominally Ottoman subjects, but their real allegiance is rendered to their own hereditary tribal chieftains. They pay tribute (when it can be got out of them), but not taxes, like the Rayats on the plains.

The Ottoman Government lately had been trying to strengthen its authority, but the effort must now have been abandoned, and never looked like having much success. In districts where the chiefs were powerful they often maintained order almost as efficiently as the Hukmet. But, unfortunately, this was not the case in the valleys on the Ashiret borderland. These are inhabited mostly by

petty chiefs and broken clans; and they are fitted with a handy bolt-hole into Persia for the convenience of folk who have made their own land too hot to hold them. It is said that a Vali of Van, upon taking stock of his Government, found that there were 700 men under sentence of death in it who were all still at large; and in the Amadia Valley nearly every prominent chief seems to be an outlaw for some proved act of violence—a circumstance which does not affect his standing in the least. My brother asked one such Agha, after an amicable conversation, whether it was really true that he had committed the fifteen murders with which he was commonly credited. "Well, Effendim," he replied innocently, "they were all of them enemies of mine, except two."

It is the Zab River that occupies the eastern end of the Amadia Valley, and the crossing of it was the occasion of our receiving a pretty clear intimation of the extent to which the Sultan's writ might be expected to run in an Ashiret chief's country. From Mosul to this point we had, of course, been escorted by a couple of zaptiehs, to insure the safety of our persons, according to the custom of the land. But this insurance policy did not include any risks on the farther side of the Zab River, and the zaptiehs washed their hands of us as soon as we reached the waterside. If the Sheikh of Barzan sanctioned our visit, we needed no further protection; but if he chose to resent it, what good would two zaptiehs be? Moreover, as my brother's escort said bluntly on another occasion: "Of course we can go with you, Effendim; but how are we going to get back?"

It is rather an adventure for a native to travel in the Ashiret country. Supposing that he is at all worth robbing, he needs to sound his course with great care. As it was in Israel in the days of Deborah, so is it now in certain districts of Hakkiari—"the high-ways are unoccupied, and the travellers walk in byways," and even "the noise of the archers in the places of drawing water" (if for "archers" we read "riflemen") is not quite an idle fear.

Of course, if the traveller is known to be blessed with powerful friends in high places, or relatives who have a reputation for conducting a blood feud energetically, his chances of getting through scathless are very greatly improved. But the murder of some stray villager is likely to pass quite unnoticed; and if they have robbed a man of a piastre the thieves think it rather a good haul. But the robbers keep one rule: "Thou shalt not attack a European." There are always inquiries about a European, and a most unsmotherable row. So the Frank's party travels scot-free; and as he proceeds on his journey he finds that every person who wants to go on tramp in the district has taken the opportunity of tacking himself on to his convoy in order to "walk under his shadow" and share in his immunities. He picks up two or three at one village, and drops two

or three at another, and always has some small following till he reaches his journey's end. How many depends upon circumstances. Where the local chief keeps good order, like the Sheikh of Barzan, his countenance is not so essential; but in the neighbourhood of such folk as the Mira of Berwar or the Agha of Chal his services are in great demand.

Where travelling is so precarious, it is natural that there should not be much accommodation for travellers, and in a mountain village there is very seldom a khan. The traveller billets himself, as of course, upon the headman of the village, usually making him some small present in departing in return for his hospitality—a gift if his host is of some social standing, or money if he is obviously poor. The guest is almost always welcome. His visit is held to confer a certain “kudos” upon his entertainer; as the local phrase runs, it “increases his name.” Indeed, if the chief be a personage of any note, it is a marked slight to enter his village without accepting his hospitality. Thus the prophet in the Biblical narrative, who was sent to Bethel to denounce the king's idolatrous practices, was particularly charged not to accept hospitality; and the local prophet felt that his own prestige must suffer so much under such a pointed censure that he rode out after him, and persuaded him to disobey. A Tkuma Malik once met my brother as he was returning howewards down the valley. “It is my hope, Rabbi, that you will be my guest to-night. You see, you stopped with So-and-so (a rival chief) on your way up, and if you don't honour me this time I fear I shall be obliged to shoot you.” There was no ill-feeling in the matter, but he felt that his honour was at stake.

One must add, to the credit of the tribesmen, that the poorest traveller may claim hospitality even at the house of an Agha. He will get at least a meal and shelter, and his person and property will be safe as long as he stays. Violation of hospitality is a very rare event, and is always strongly reprobated, though it has been held fair to rob your guest later, after he has been allowed sufficient law.

The village houses are built of rough stone walling, and floored with mud beaten hard. The roofs are always flat, and are formed with rafters of unsquared poplar-stems, upon which is spread, first a layer of brushwood, and then a thick covering of well-punned mud. Such roofs are quite water-tight so long as they are properly attended to; but they have to be kept well rolled and trodden, so as to work out the cracks which are constantly appearing in them after a spell of dry weather. The rooms are low and very dark, for there are often no windows whatever, and the daylight is only admitted through the smoke-hole and the door. The doors are made very low, probably to prevent the cattle entering; for in many cases, particularly in Kurdish villages, the living-rooms and byres are all under the same roof, and intercommunicating. The belated wayfarers at Bethlehem,

who were obliged to spend the night in the stable because there was no room for them in the guest-chamber, were perhaps experiencing no very unusual hardship—certainly none that is at all unusual in Hakkari at the present time.

If there is an upper story, it is generally what is known as a "belai"—open towards the north, and serving as a living-room during the heats of the summer, and as a store for fodder during the winter months.

The typical fireplace, or "tanura," is a beehive-shaped hole dug in the middle of the floor. The smoke escapes from it as best it can, partly through a hole in the roof over it, partly at the ends of the rafters, and partly under the lintel of the door. The house boasts practically no furniture except the sleeping-rugs and cooking-pots; and householder, guests, and retainers as a rule all share the same room.

Naturally the inhabitants do not live in such rooms more than necessary. They sleep there at night; they live there in the depths of winter, when often for days or weeks together the villages are buried under snow. But by day, in the spring and autumn, they generally carry on their ordinary household jobs on their roofs or in front of their doorways; and in summer, when the nights are sultry, they usually sleep on the roofs as well.

The village roofs, by the way, seem to be regarded as common territory, and all inhabitants enjoy a right of way across them, except where the alleys between them happen to be too wide to jump. Such an easement, indeed, is inevitable where the village lies on a hillside, as it is only over the roofs of the lower houses that one can reach the doors of the upper rows.

The people, whether Kurds or Syrians, are partly agricultural and partly pastoral; but flocks and herds being portable property, and (in border phrase) easily "lifted," there is a natural tendency for agriculture to get left more and more to the Syrians, and for the sheep and cows to gravitate into the possession of the Kurds. Syrian and Kurdish villages are intermixed everywhere in Hakkari, just as Kurdish and Armenian are intermixed farther north. The two peoples hardly ever share a village, though occasionally a few stray families have somehow got themselves stranded in an opposition camp. They differ in race and in creed, and they speak different languages; but their dress and their physiognomy are both very much the same. The Kurd carries a larger armoury, and bears himself with a certain ruffianly swagger; but, except in these two particulars, it is difficult to tell them apart.

Neither Syrian nor Kurdish women wear the veil, though, of course, the Kurds are Moslems, and though Christian women in Armenia are also accustomed to go veiled. Their rough open-air

life, and the field labour to which they are habituated, has apparently led them to discard this hampering conventionality.

Amadia, the chief town in the Sapna district, stands right in the centre of its valley, occupying the flat summit of an isolated hill, whose cresting of vertical precipice gives it exactly the appearance of being surrounded by a titanic wall. On the northern side of the valley rises the main mass of the Hakkiari Mountains, and before describing these particularly I would say a word about their general form.

The Niphates range, as I said earlier, forms the southern edge of the Armenian plateau; and as the three great rivers of Mesopotamia all have their sources on that plateau, it follows that they all have to cut their way through these mountains in order to descend to the plain. The result is a series of magnificent gorges—magnificent even in the case of the Tigris and Euphrates, which pierce the range further westward, but most magnificent of all in the case of the Zab, which cuts its way through the highest and wildest part of the range in the very centre of Hakkiari.

We say, "As old as the hills," but there are certain physical features of the globe which are in most cases older than the hills, and these are the rivers. This fact is probably responsible for the formation of the Hakkiari gorges. The rivers were already flowing southward from the plateau to the plain before the mountains were thought of; and as the limestone ridge slowly heaved itself up inch by inch for century after century, the stream, neither checked nor diverted, kept grooving the barrier away.

According to Syrian tradition, the Zab is the "River of Eden." They identify it with the Pison, and regard the Garden of Eden as having been situated on the Armenian plateau about the regions now occupied by the vilayets of Van, Erzerum, and Bitlis. According to this reckoning, the three other rivers of the Garden would be the Euphrates, the Tigris, and the Araxes, which all have their sources in this region within a short distance of the Zab. Milton seems to accept this theory when he pictures Satan as alighting on Mount Niphates, and it is a theory which has at least the merit of giving a satisfactory answer to the vexed question why it is that no Eden now exists. All the original face of the ground now lies buried hundreds of feet deep beneath the ashes and lava flow from five huge quiescent volcanoes, and when these were in full activity they must have been very fitting representatives of Cherubim with flaming swords.

The other land which claims to be the site of Eden is, of course, Babylonia. But we may at least say this in favour of the Armenian theory—that Babylonia, though historically the most ancient, is, geologically speaking, one of the newest of countries. It is almost

entirely alluvial, and at the time when man may be supposed to have first made his appearance in the world it probably did not exist.

The Zab gorge, for all its narrowness and difficulty, is one of the main avenues of traffic in these regions, and it has even been seriously contended that if a railway is ever constructed to link Mesopotamia and Armenia, this is the line along which it will have to come. At present, the path is one long arduous scramble along the steep banks of the river. Sometimes it is built out upon a rough causeway close along the edge of the torrent; sometimes notched in under an overhanging precipice; or even bracketed out across the face of some great vertical slab, on stout wooden bearers wedged into the crevices of the rock. Often the path has to leave the waterside and clamber up by steep zigzags across the saddle of some projecting bluff, and at certain points where the gorge is notoriously cumbered with fallen boulders it is usually judged expedient to desert it altogether, and take a divergent course along some of the lateral valleys, including one or two passes above the line of perpetual snow. The river is only fordable at one or two points in these gorges, and even at these points only for a few weeks every year. The only means of crossing it at other times are provided by two or three very narrow and flimsy bridges precariously bracketed out from the banks on rough wooden cantilevers. Only one passenger can cross these at a time, and he will not be able to do so unless he possesses a pretty good head.

The gorges are rendered quite impassable by the depth of the snows in winter-time, and the imminent danger from avalanches continues to prohibit travel until the spring is well advanced. The fall of these avalanches often blocks the course of the river for several hours together, and on such occasions the natives have a fine opportunity of gleaning the fish that have been left stranded in the dry bed below. In due time the dam bursts, or the river bores a passage beneath it, and then the adventurous fishers have to shin up the rocks for their lives.

The road leading into these regions from Amadia is the merest boulder-shoot; the pathway wriggling up a steep gully in the hillside behind the town through a cascade of huge fallen fragments, many of which are as big as a house. It is considered a bad bit of road even when judged by local standards, but it is literally the only road at this particular point. Farther in things are somewhat better; but as often as not the traveller finds himself committed to the dry bed of a rock-encumbered torrent; or to a six-inch path across a bare sloping scree, as steep as the roof of a house, and finishing off at the eaves with a fifty-foot drop into the boiling river below.

I know nothing of the road from Nisibin to Bitlis. It was a district so notoriously infested with Kurdish cut-throats that even my brother and his colleagues (who were not usually deterred by trifles)

had never ventured to travel that way. But, unless it is altogether different from all other roads in the neighbourhood, the Russians at Bitlis will not find it easy to get in touch with a British army on the Tigris above Mosul.

I have spoken of Syrians and Christians as being intermingled with the Kurdish tribes of Hakkari, and it is amid the fastnesses of the Zab gorges that these Syrian Christians for the most part have their home. Tyari (the central portion of the main Zab Valley) and the lateral valleys of Tkuma, Baz, Jilu, and Tal, are almost exclusively populated by these Christian tribesmen, and they have many isolated villages in other districts as well. It cannot be honestly said that they are, when independent, much tamer or more law-abiding than their Kurdish neighbours. Their Maliks are perpetually at feud with one another over grazing rights, and so forth, and, of course, still more constantly at feud with the neighbouring Kurdish Aghas, with whom they can pick religious quarrels even when they have no valid grievance of any other kind.

These Christian tribesmen are Ashirets, like their neighbours. They owe allegiance primarily to their hereditary Prince-Bishop, Mar Shimun, the "Catholicos of the East." They are now but a small community, being supposed to number in all about 80,000 persons; but, small as they are, they are one of the most interesting survivals in the Ottoman Empire, and their strange position as a semi-independent Christian tribe living in the midst of Mahomedans, and ruled by a chief whose authority over them is exercised both temporally and spiritually, they seem like a standing testimony to the truth of the old medieval legend of Prester John.

Of their origin as a nation it is difficult to speak positively. They themselves assert that they are descended from the ancient Assyrians, and it cannot be denied that, if we are to attach any weight to physiognomy, we shall find a good deal of evidence that tends in favour of such a claim. Of course, it is only a comparatively small proportion of the tribe who have markedly Assyrian features. Their race, as it exists at present, must have been much adulterated with other stocks. But in some cases the Assyrian type asserts itself so arrestingly that we feel it impossible to question their Assyrian descent. Certainly, if we are to admit it, it would be a striking fulfilment of prophecy: "Nineveh is laid waste; who shall bemoan her? Her people is scattered upon the mountains, and no man gathereth them."

In addition to the Assyrians' features, the tribesmen have inherited no small share of their martial instinct, and their prowess as fighters is fully admitted by the Kurds. The Armenians and the Syrians of the plain have had most of their fighting spirit crushed out of them, but no Kurd cares to face a Tyari man on anything like level terms. So long as the arms were equal, the Christians, though heavily out-

numbered, were able to give about as good as they got in the way of manslaughter and sheep-stealing; and as the amount of powder burnt was altogether disproportionate to the size of the casualty lists, there seemed no particular reason for any outsider to interfere. But of late years the arms were not equal. The Christians were supposed to be disarmed, and had often to make shift with flintlocks. The Kurds obtained Government recognition as "Hamidie Irregular Regiments," and, as such, were equipped with Mausers; and on these terms the game was too onesided. On the outbreak of the present war the Christians were assailed by a general coalition of all the Kurdish tribes, assisted by regular troops with mountain batteries of artillery; and though they put up a good fight as long as their ammunition lasted, they had at last to abandon their villages and retreat over the snowy passes into Persia. They reached Urmi almost naked, and in a state of utter destitution; and the men, women, and children who perished from the hardships of that march were far more than fell in the fighting. Such help as is possible is now being given them by Russians, by the British Consul, and by the American missionaries; and we hope that by these means the survivors may have been tided over the winter, and may be able to establish themselves in the wasted Urmi villages in spring.

Their Christianity is of very ancient origin, for they represent about the last remnant of the Christians who inhabited the ancient Parthian and Sassanid Persian Empire. Christianity, we must remember, spread eastward to Ctesiphon at least as rapidly as it spread westward to Rome and Carthage, and up to the end of the fourteenth century there were probably more Christians in Asia than there were in Europe. These Eastern Christians, however, were always kept very much out of touch with their Western co-religionists, first by the constant wars between the Roman and Persian Empires, and then by the Moslem conquests, which cut them off from all intercommunication. They formed a separate independent national Church, recognizing as their Patriarch the Bishop of their capital city Ctesiphon; and their very existence seems to have been so completely forgotten by the whole of Western Christendom that, whenever a mediæval traveller did stumble across them, he always regarded them as a new discovery. They were a numerous and powerful body, nevertheless. The "Arabian Nights" indicate that they formed an important section of the community in the days of Harun al Rashid. They spread throughout Persia, and into China and India; and the Christians of St. Thomas, in Malabar, a branch now much larger than the stem, still acknowledge Mar Shimun, the chief of the Assyrian Christians, as the legitimate successor of the Patriarch of Baghdad.

The decay of Christianity in these regions seems to have been the

result mainly of the devastation and depopulation caused by successive waves of conquest, particularly by the conquests of Timur the Tartar. The Patriarch fled first to Mosul; and in later years sought a yet securer refuge at the village of Qudshanis, in the heart of Hakkari, where the last remnant of his people were still maintaining themselves.

Benjamin, the present Mar Shimun, is still a comparatively young man, though it is now some ten years since he became Catholicos. The dignity is hereditary in his family, as such dignities generally are in this country among Moslems and Yezidis, as well as among Christians, and as the High-Priesthood was hereditary in the House of Aaron among the Jews. The office descends from uncle to nephew; for by old tradition the Bishops of this Church must be celibate, though the priests are always married men.

Mar Shimun is, of course, regarded by the Kurds in the light of an hereditary enemy; but they think of him, nevertheless, as a chief of equal standing with themselves, and as possessing the same sort of semi-sanctity as their own Sheikhs. By our own theological purists both he and his people are rather held suspect as Nestorians; but, without entering upon that thorny subject, I will only say that those who have lived most among them are convinced that there is no heresy in them at present, and that the chief obstacle to reunion is their somewhat natural reluctance to admit that there ever has been.

I ought, perhaps, to add a warning that the East Syrians, whom I have just been describing, are quite distinct from the West Syrians, whose Patriarch resides at Mardin. The latter represent the old Christian Patriarchate of Antioch, the Christians of the Asiatic provinces of the old Roman Empire; and though both Churches are now Melets of the Ottoman Empire, they have always kept entirely distinct.

One of the most typical of the lateral valleys is that of the Oramar River, a considerable tributary of the Zab, which unites with it just below Amadia. It is a valley which is very seldom visited, being about the only district in the neighbourhood which is left absolutely blank on the large scale maps; and we were assured that we should be the first Europeans to visit it, and that even we could not do so. "Horses couldn't go, and mules couldn't go, and Englishmen couldn't walk." The valley was chiefly inhabited by Kurds, who acknowledged the authority of the Sheikh of Barzan, and one of his caterans accompanied us to see that we came to no harm. There were also a few Christian villages, which, politically, were pretty well off, because the Sheikh is tolerant, but which in their remote valley had been left without priest or service for about twenty years.

Oramar itself lies at the head of the valley, a little below the snow-line, and looks very much like a swallow's nest plastered against the face of a wall. This appearance is owing to the terraced fields, which spread out fan-wise beneath it—a good example of the terrace cultivation which is commonly practised in these mountain glens.

Upon these bare rock slopes sufficient soil for cultivation can only be kept together by the building of retaining walls; and there are even exceptional instances where, after the walls are built, the soil has to be carried up to them in baskets on men's backs. Water has also to be provided artificially by ducts from the mountain streams carried along the face of the slope, and even after all this labour it often happens that the only crop which can be grown is millet, though good ground bears wheat, and sometimes even rice and vines. The men of the mountains lead a pretty hard life, but for all that they would not change with the despised plain-dweller. As the local proverb says: "It is better to eat millet bread and carry a gun than be an unarmed rayat under the Ottoman."

The very existence of these terrace fields, by the way, proves that Oramar was once a Christian village, and that (as is still constantly happening in similar cases) the Christians have been squeezed out by Kurdish intruders. Kurds never trouble to make good fields. They are not, and never will be, cultivators. And the Turks are likely to find this out, to their cost, now that they have expelled all the Syrians and Armenians. Asia Minor is far more likely to suffer from famine itself than to be able to spare any corn for Germany.

Only one Christian family is now left in Oramar, and the reason why it is allowed to remain is very typical of local habits of thought. The head of this family is the Christian priest of the ancient hermit church of Mar Mamu, which is planted a little above the village; and, like many another ancient Christian shrine in the district, Mar Mamu is considered sacred even by the Kurds. No doubt it was a hallowed spot long before the days of Christianity, and its old traditional sanctity has survived all changes of creed.

Mar Mamu was a very early Christian martyr, who underwent his persecutions at the hand of Alexander the Great. This tyrant cast him into a burning fiery furnace, where he was heard singing the Psalter for three months consecutively, till his persecutor released him in despair. Thereafter he retired to Oramar, and (like another St. Patrick) swept away with him into his hermitage all the snakes that infested the upper valley, which he bottled up in a cave under the floor. The snakes are all still there. The present incumbent has seen them—"in a vision." And it is obviously unwise to meddle with their keeper, lest they should escape to vex the land once more.

Many of the mountain shrines are accorded similar veneration, such as Mar Abd-Ishu, in Tal, and Mar B'Ishu, in Gawar, the latter being one of several where the ancient animal sacrifices still form part of the customary rites; but perhaps Mar Zeia, in Jilu, is most "lord of name" of them all. Jilu is about the most remote and inhospitable of all these savage valleys; and Jilu men (having a specially hard life of it in their own homes) have developed, to an even greater extent than their neighbours, the national habit of "going to

countries" in order to better themselves. They drift away absolutely penniless, and utterly ignorant of any foreign language; yet not only do they contrive to penetrate even as far as America, but often drift back to their homes again with quite a good stock of hard cash. This is seldom quite honestly come by, for the charitable folk whose purse-strings have been loosened by their (perfectly true) tales of the miseries and oppressions of their hapless Christian brethren have generally failed to realize that their petitioners (as representatives of these oppressed Christians) have every intention of keeping all alms for themselves. But the rascals have at least so much conscience as prompts them always to make a thank-offering on their return at the Church of Mar Zeia, and that shrine is now choked with a most amazing collection, which it has probably taken centuries to get together, and which ranges back from festoons of modern American clocks to ancient jars of Chinese porcelain which may be well worth their weight in gold. The guardian relic which preserves all these treasures from plunder is a kerchief, believed by all Kurds to be the veritable "napkin of Mohammed," given to the Church by the Prophet himself as a token of his protection.

Intermixed with the Kurds and Syrians, who form the main population of Hakkari, there are, besides Yezidis and Armenians, a certain small number of Jews. And these quite decline to lend themselves to any Anglo-Israelitish theory, for they claim that they are the only original "Lost Ten Tribes," and that they have never been lost. They and their fathers, they say, have been settled in Mosul and its neighbourhood ever since the day when Sargon carried them away captive from Samaria. Their position is far from enviable, for the Yezidis alone are regarded with greater contumely; and though many of them are wealthy, thanks to their national talent for money-lending, yet (like Jews of medieval Europe) they dare not let their wealth be known. The Jew who will cash your cheque promptly (when he learns that you are an Englishman) is to all outward seeming the poorest wretch in the town. Many Kurdish Aghas keep tame Jews, practically as bond-slaves, to manage their finances for them. The Agha of Chal, in particular, keeps quite a herd, and once even offered to sell us one for £5.

The Agha of Chal is commonly reputed to be the greatest thief and murderer in the district, except the Mira of Berwar; but this fact has proved no impediment to his being appointed Mudir, to administer justice in the land, as representative of the Ottoman Government, and this he is still doing—according to his lights. If scandals of this sort were rare, it might be permissible to ignore them; but, unfortunately, they are the merest commonplaces of Turkish provincial administration, and furnish the most unanswerable argument against the continuance of Turkish rule. As a man, the Turk has many

virtues, but as a governor he is execrable; for he has allowed all the machinery of government to fall into the hands of professional job-mongers, and the most flagrant corruption flourishes absolutely unchecked. The substitution of Young Turks for Old has produced no improvement in this particular, and, indeed, the new hands (being novices) seem to plunder with rather less grace.

The Turks have been confronted with a most difficult task, analogous in some degree to the task which confronts us in India. Numerically an insignificant minority in the lands which they nominally govern, they are set to control a medley of mutually antagonistic tribes. Energy alone could win respect for their rule, but they have long since lost their energy. Like other feeble opportunist Governments, they are now seeking only acquiescence, and their method of doing so is to allow as much licence as possible to all the more turbulent elements (from whom any trouble may be apprehended) to behave exactly as they please. The result is, naturally, chaos. Though seldom designedly cruel, they have succeeded, by sheer laziness, in evolving a condition of anarchy more disastrous and oppressive to their subjects than any open tyranny could be.

The Kurds, whom they have sought to conciliate, are more profoundly disaffected to their government than the Armenians and Syrians whom they have allowed them to massacre and expel. Before the outbreak of war, there was scarcely a single Kurdish chief who was not in treasonable correspondence with Russia. The Russians had even supplied them with arms, and though, on the commencement of hostilities, the arms were used against the donors, this *volte-face* was not the result of any profound policy, nor even of the fanaticism engendered by the proclamation of the Jihad. The Kurds had merely realized that by joining the Turks at first they would get *carte blanche* to plunder the Armenians; and now that the plunder is exhausted, and only hard knocks are going, they are not at all likely to give much more effective aid.

It is to be hoped that, when the war is over, this country may be blessed with an active and resolute "Warden of the Marches," like Belted Will Howard, of Naworth, who will put down all disorders impartially with a strong hand.

Colonel Sir HENRY TROTTER said that between thirty and forty years ago he visited the regions described by the lecturer—namely, during the Turko-Russian War of 1877-8. He was with the Turkish Army, which included a force of several thousand Kurds as auxiliaries, and very troublesome auxiliaries they were. Any wounded Russians who fell into their hands were done for, and many Armenian villagers who happened to come in their way were slaughtered. They became so troublesome that at last they had to be sent away, and a very good

riddance it was, as they were of little use in the fighting line. At the same time there were many of them who were good fellows in their way. It struck him, as it had struck the lecturer, that the tribal clan system was similar to the old clan system in Scotland. In the Turkish Royal Family the Sultanate does not pass from father to son; the succession passes to the eldest male member of the family; but in Kurdistan the succession is from father to eldest son, and the Chief is looked upon exactly as the old Scotch clans used to look upon their Chiefs. The wonder to him was that Mr. Wigram found any Nestorians left. About 1850 Beder Khan Pasha, Emir of Bohtan, which lay west of Hakkari, the famous father of seventy stalwart sons, in association with the Chief of Rowanduz, massacred almost the entire body of the mountain Nestorians. They were so successful in their hunt for them that the Patriarch had to take refuge in Mosul, where he was entertained and protected by our Consul. He believed that he and those who were with him succeeded in getting back to their country, but how it could still be largely populated by Nestorian Christians is a problem. There have been other massacres since, culminating in the recent outrages, and it seemed there could now be very few Christians left in the country which had been described to them. When he was at Van he met the Patriarch of the Nestorians. They exchanged gifts, and had some interesting conversation together. He could hardly say which was most to be admired in the lecture—the photographs, or the very graphic descriptions by which they were accompanied.

The LECTURER said that according to careful estimates he had heard, the refugees from Hakkari still numbered about 40,000 men, and as there would still be some left in the remote villages, he thought that his estimate of 80,000 Christian tribesmen was probably not very far out of the reckoning. Answering a question, he said the language spoken in Hakkari by the Christians was pure Syriac, while the Kurds spoke Kurdish, which was a dialect of Persian. The Christians were proud of their language being very much the same as Aramaic, the old Syriac of Christ's time, which was still read in their churches, and was still understood more or less by them. The Old Syriac bore about the same relation to the New as the language of Chaucer did to the English of the present day.

Colonel A. C. YATE drew attention to the fact that the Society had within the last two months had two very able and instructive lectures upon Mesopotamia, in both of which a claim to the site of the Garden of Eden was put forward. The first was from Mr. Perceval Landon and dealt with the lower regions of the Tigris and Euphrates, the claim of which to be the birthplace of man was so much better known than that of the Highlands of Central Kurdistan with which Mr. Wigram had just dealt. The fabled scene of Man's sinless exist-

ence—short, as might be anticipated—must, however, yield the *pas* for the moment to the one vital point connected with the war with which Mr. Wigram had dealt—viz., how long the Russian Army, reported some days ago to have reached and occupied the Bitlis Pass, would take to reach and seize some point on the Bagdad Railway. Practically four Russian forces were operating from the Caucasus—viz., towards Trebizond, Nisibis, Khanikin, and Ispahan. These Russian movements had an important relation to the relief of General Townshend's long-beleaguered force, a force for which all felt keen anxiety. He had had the pleasure of escorting to the meeting one of the most patriotic of Russians, who, however, was no longer in the room. As they drove to Albemarle Street, she, Madame Novikoff, in reference to the capture of Erzerum, reminded him that the town had previously been twice in the hands of Russia, once in 1829, when General Paskiewitch took it, and again in the Russo-Turkish War of 1876-8, during which Sir Henry Trotter had himself been present in that neighbourhood.

Colonel Sir HENRY TROTTER said he was there on that occasion. The town was occupied by the Russians during the armistice, but was restored to Turkey under the Berlin Treaty.

He desired in conclusion to express his appreciation of a lecture which had been delivered with a lucidity that engaged attention, and which had made them feel in some measure acquainted with a neighbourhood which to most people was a *terra incognita*.

The CHAIRMAN said the lecture had greatly increased their knowledge of the Mesopotamian Highlands, and of the characteristics of the tribes by which they were inhabited. He thought, taking everything into consideration, it was very remarkable that there were any people, other than the Kurdish clans, left in those regions. Not only did the country seem to be most inhospitable and most inaccessible, but also there seemed to be standing feuds between the tribes, which left very few inhabitants. He did not think it was a country he would be very anxious to visit, though to younger men its exploration must be very interesting. Mr. Wigram had made the very best use of his opportunities for studying the country and people. It was to him surprising that the lecturer's brother had been able to live in these wild Highlands for so long a time as ten years. From the views they had seen it appeared to be almost impossible for the Russians to be able to reach Bagdad, or to give us material assistance in Mesopotamia, seeing how deplorably bad the communications were. Still, the Russians had done very marvellous feats in this war, and it was at least possible that they might be able to surmount the tremendous difficulties of the mountainous route to the southern plains. He proposed a vote of thanks to Mr. Wigram for his most interesting and instructive lecture.