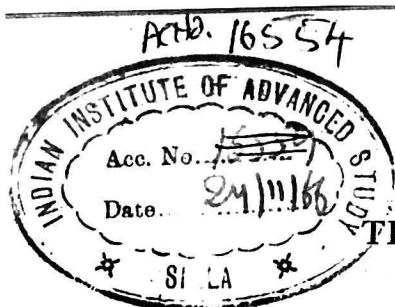




THE KHABUR VALLEY

By J. ROWLANDS

OF every thousand Europeans who know the Levantine Littoral hardly one knows the area or the history of the Khabur. This river, rising at Ras-el-'Ain ("The Head of Springs") on the Turkish frontier, flows down to the Euphrates south of Deir-ez-Zor through Syrian territory, and supports the life of a dozen nomadic tribes and a hundred thousand settled villagers.

Kurd, Arab, Armenian, Circassian, and Nestorian live in close proximity in villages perched on the hillocks or grouped round the wells, while the steppe-land undulates gently to the horizon. Near the river's source, at Tell Halaf, was a civilization hidden till modern archaeologists unearthed its traces. This civilization on the Khabur has been named "the Mitanni," and it is of this civilization in Upper Mesopotamia that the Khabur has been most informative. It yet bears traces of earlier irrigation barrages and a prosperity which appeared to be lost for ever till it was rescued from the neglect of the Turkish overlords. Later the Hittites passed and in turn gave way to the Assyrians, a half-Semitic people. Greek, Persian, Mede, Roman, and Turk have all established outposts or patrolled the banks of the Khabur; while looking down from their rocky "Jebel Sinjar," the primitive and pre-Islamic pagan Yezidis have placated the devil with mysterious rites and earn to this day the name of devil worshippers. Throughout these ages, contemptuous of the civilizations which have passed, the nomads continue their way of life substantially unchanged since the time of Abraham.

To-day the desert, for such is the name of the steppe-country, is its own road, scarred by the passage of wagons into tracks between the villages; but each pimply hillock shows that time has claimed civilization after civilization, burying past villages in dust.

The Khabur flows on, malarial and somewhat sulphurous with the overflow from the sulphur springs near Ras-el-'Ain.

To-day the railway on which the Kaiser lavished so much talent, time, and engineering skill passes beneath the Turkish escarpment and does, in fact, constitute of itself the Turkish frontier, together with a barbed wire enclosure of twenty yards at every station. But the railway has had comparatively little effect on the average citizen of the north-east. Some trade inevitably passes along it, but with such a large open frontier smuggling is an economic proposition. Passengers can go to Aleppo in a night rather than take two days by car, but the Kurdish chiefs must needs beware that they step not over the frontier, even travelling to represent their constituencies in Damascus, lest they be arrested and shot belatedly for acts of rebellion committed as long as twenty-five years ago. They have already been tried and condemned *in absentia*. Unpopular though the French have been, and unluckily so considering their improvements to the country, the Arab of the interior recalls with greater hatred the suzerainty and the despotism of the Turkish Caliphs, their Kaimakams,

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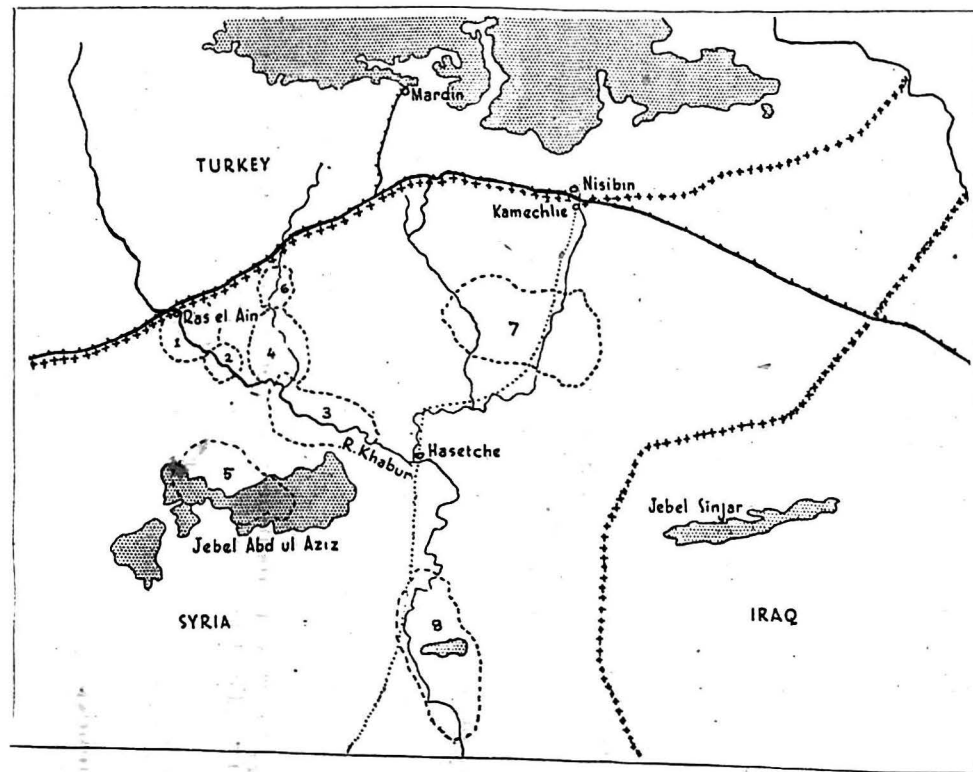


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and their Mudyars. The frontier situation, therefore, remains continually delicate. Banditti abound, raiding into Syria and retiring to Turkish sanctuary, and however cordial London-Ankara relations have been, the kidnapping of Britons, which occasionally occurred during the war, did nothing to relieve the tension that existed between the great provincial headquarters of Mardin, high on its hill overlooking Syria, and Hesetche on the Middle Khabur, or Nisibin and Kamechlie with their forts ostentatiously facing each other across a hundred yards of no-man's-land. Nor have local relations always been cordial between the frontier villages of Turkey by the railway and their Syrian counterparts a few yards away. When the Syrian headman receives the would-be Hajjis and issues them with Syrian identity cards (thus profiting both his faith and his pocket), the Turkish neighbours, who deprecate Islamic manners, are naturally offended, and when the respective military commanders on each side insist rigorously on numberless local protests at undiplomatic imprisonments of suspicious aliens, tension is inevitable. Modern blockhouses, tactically sighted along the Turkish side of the railway, and frontier guards, who from their demeanour could not be the cream of any army, do little to reassure the remnants of massacred peoples as to Turkish intentions towards their adopted Syria.

The present tribes of the North Khabur are mostly Kurdish-Arab in origin—Milli, Adwan, Harbe; but as one goes south the Arab elements appear more numerous—Sherabin, Jubur, Baggara (on the Jebel Abdul Aziz), Ageidat, and fractions of the great Shammar tribe, now independent in face of the greater Shammars of Transjordan. A singular tribe is the Circassian "Chechens," now few in numbers, who some eighty years ago migrated from the Caucasus. These Circassians have preserved their original costume to a considerable degree—the open smock, belt, boots, and Kalpek hat. A dagger is a sign of rank, and their dancing resembles strongly the stamping and kicking of the Cossacks. Malaria has reduced their numbers, but their villages appear, superficially and intimately, to set a standard of cleanliness far higher than that of their neighbours. The Chechens, incidentally, were recruited largely for the French Gardes-Mobiles and other organizations; their being amenable to discipline was one of the greatest recommendations, and this is surely not unrelated to the fact that they are perhaps the strictest of the Moslems on the river.

Of the Christians, who form a minority in the region, the most numerous are the Nestorian tribe of Assyro-Chaldeans. By tradition converted by St. Thomas Didymus, the Assyrians for centuries took refuge amongst the hardly penetrable Hakkiri Mountains of Turkey. There, in independence, they maintained their tribal integrity against Turks and Kurdish neighbours, a sturdy highland people in quilted patchwork coats and conical caps, the like of which have been found carved on stones dating from the Empires of Sargon and Sennacherib. In the Hakkiri these Nestorians were in the last century befriended by the Church of England, who, seeing the low level to which their priesthood had fallen, sent a purely educational mission to instruct "the Protestants of the East" in their own faith. The mission which was



- + + + + + Political frontiers.
 — + — + — Railways.
 Rough tracks.
 - - - - - Approximate tribal areas: 1. Milli-Adwan tribes. 2. Chechens.
 3. Assyro-Chaldeans. 4. Sherabin. 5. Baggara. 6. Harbe.
 7. Shammar Zor. 8. Ageidat-Jubur tribes.

established founded a connection with Britain that has not yet been severed. Readers of this Journal will recall that when the Turks declared war in 1915 the Assyrians rose against them, and, when the might of Turkey was directed against them, were forced to leave their high mountains and seek refuge in the plains of Mesopotamia. This was a tragic exodus of a whole people, in which perhaps a hundred thousand died from exhaustion, starvation, the bullets of the harrying Kurds or Turks, and the diseases of the plains. Finally they were received and rationed by General Maude's army. Thus began the refugee complex still to be noticed, as among the Armenians of the later massacre. The League of Nations settled the Assyrians in Iraq, where large numbers of them served in the British forces, Iraq levies, and the oil companies. However, a difficult mountain people, Christian at that, was disliked by its Arab neighbours, and when the mandate of Iraq was prematurely surrendered in 1933 the Iraqi Army, thirsting for battle honours, committed a massacre of the almost defenceless Assyrians. A large number, led by Maliks Yaku and Loco of the Tiyari and Tkuma tribes, had entered French Syria to escape the growing persecutions of Islam. The French imprudently returned them to Iraq without disarming them, where the Iraqi Army met them and fought an indecisive action. The Assyrians, however, dispersed to their villages, only to find that Iraqi units had committed unprovoked atrocities on those they had left behind. To-day about 9,000 Assyro-Chaldeans are on the Khabur, resettled by the League of Nations, but the majority of their race remains in Iraq. The older leaders look back regretfully to the old mountaineering life in Turkey and dream, it seems in vain, of returning to it. The younger generation, however, has been brought up as Mesopotamian plainsmen, and of these many have entered commerce on the Littoral or in America. Their spiritual leader, Mar Shimun, resides in Cyprus under British protection. These Khabur Assyrians, talking Aramaic, the language of Christ, live close to the river in brick houses resembling beehives. They display in many respects a refugee complex, but, given the chance by their suspicious neighbours, they should be useful citizens, for they are considerably better educated and have a higher morality than their non-Christian fellow-subjects.

A day's journey by car down the Khabur from the Turkish frontier to the Euphrates, spanned by a handsome suspension bridge at Deir-ez-Zor, is an adventure. In summer the steppes may be afire, ruining the grazing for the flocks; in winter, when the rainfall is heavy, the route's defiles become a wellnigh impassable morass of mud. The Bedouin and their camel caravans will always give the stranded traveller welcome and may slay a sheep in his honour; the villagers will turn and stare into the Mukhtar's guest-room, as the stranger sits on a mat or divan of varying cleanliness, and sips Turkish coffee and exchanges greetings in the courteous formulæ of the East. The Mukhtar, for the honour of his guests, receives a tithe from every villager, and in a land of no hotels his house is the caravanserai and public-house of his village. The road, with bridges over the few deep wadis, and only intermittently metalled, runs through the ageless procession of Eastern life. It passes the tells, or hills,

many of which are crowned with a graveyard or a village, for the latter is usually built high up to avoid malaria.

Leaving the Turkish mountains out of sight and going south through the cultivation of the lower steppes, one sees the river winding to the east, meandering between and past the hill-masses of the Jebel Sinjar and Abdul Aziz. This latter contains almost the only timber to be found in a country which, it is said, was once a forest from Aleppo to Baghdad. Before reaching Hasetche, the centre of the Jezirah Provincial Government, there rises conspicuously to the east the Mountain of Thunder; its name is an eloquent survival of a tradition, for it is an extinct volcano; its boulder-strewn base hides a few nomad camps, with their fierce watchdogs, and tattooed women garbed in an almost uniform blue-black dress. From the crest the men can be seen grazing their sheep or camels on the steppes and children rounding up the goats amongst the volcanic rocks.

Hasetche, with about 20,000 inhabitants, possesses two Bishops—those of the Syrian Catholic and Syrian Orthodox faiths. An Armenian Catholic Bishop has his seat in the frontier town of Kamechlie, but it is little more than an administrative centre at the confluence of a tributary of the Khabur. It has no bank, being less of a commercial centre than the refugee town Kamechlie, which is on the railway. The fort is of modest dimensions compared to the ones needed for the military problems of frontier patrol to the north.

Civilization has made great strides in the towns and in some of the houses of the richer villagers; the luxury of the East is, however, rarely evident, for consumer goods have been a rarity. Because timber is imported from great distances furniture is sparse and rare; it is said that every tree needs a guard to prevent the Bedouin making a tent-pole of it. The tents and hospitality are the outstanding features of nomadic life. The ceremonious courtesies and even more punctilious blood-feuds, for causes long since forgotten, mark the nomad as a proud follower of a code of honour hard to understand until one has read Lawrence or Doughty.

Water fetched in skins from great distances is precious. In consequence their personal cleanliness is not of the greatest, and their guest may be required to accept the poor hospitality of a louse-infested mat and unhygienic dysenteric cookery. Coffee is served in tiny bowls the size of the hollow of an egg-cup, and the sheikh (or his head domestic, usually of obvious negroid extraction and of probable slave stock) will pour a few scalding drops from the pot on the dung-fuel fire. The guest will sip thirstily and belch, receive another cup, and perhaps a third (four errs on the side of greed). Such coffee is bitter and unsweetened but has a curiously refreshing effect. In the towns where water is no problem the guest is served invariably with the sweet thick black Turkish coffee.

No account of the Khabur could be complete without a reference to its economic wealth. It is a granary for the Littoral, and upon its rainfall depends indirectly the flour eaten by the townsmen of the Lebanon and Aleppo. Wheat and barley, usually black, are the staple crops, which are cut primitively by sickle and threshed by animal labour on the communal threshing-floors of every village. The cultivation is equally primitive:

two oxen dragging light ploughs over the fields, barely scratching the surface, and rotation of crops is practically unknown. However, under the Government monopoly of cereal purchases during the recent war, combine-harvesters could be seen plying the fields next to the hand reapers, followed by gleaners. The twentieth century seemed to abut on to a scene unchanged since Old Testament times. Winnowing, of course, is dependent on the breeze.

Under an irrigation scheme opened north of Hasetche a canal irrigating 7,000 hectares will replace dependence on rainfall and waterwheel. These waterwheels, great picturesque wooden structures, are driven by the current and lift buckets at the end of every spoke, tipping them into a crude watercourse trough that carries the liquid to the fields. They are, however, the work of skilled craftsmen, who, as a class, are dying out in the face of the engineers of the new world. North of Hasetche the Khabur runs between arable land of varying width from 500 to 1,000 metres; the land so cultivated requires at least 325 mm. of rain annually, but the provision of the canal means that three crops can be grown where one was raised before.

In spite of the wealth of the area, however, no bank exists on the river, though there is one in Kamechlie. The peasant hoards such wealth as his landlord leaves him.

In the area temperature varies from 15° to 53° C., which means that it possesses the extremes of Mesopotamian climate, and in summer the khamsin and dust storms are extremely detrimental to agriculture. Erosion inevitably contributes to the wastage, and as the land is bare of windbreaks in the shape of timber the wind and dust lay a damaging spell on the agriculture of the area. Away from the river strip the wilderness is gradually being reclaimed as more and more tribes establish settlements and as more immigrants arrive to seek a living on the slopes of the plateaux.

Cotton, tobacco, and sugar beet would all prosper on the largely colloidal soil of the valley, but have yet to be introduced. Paddy has been grown by aid of irrigation pumps on the upper river and fetches a good price, competing against Egyptian imports. It is a sign of importance and wealth for a host to be able to provide his guests with rice, and the sheikh who can do so preens himself on his rising prestige. Locusts, who make periodical descents on the plains from Persia, have been known to strip the rare gardens overnight, and the wild fires on the arid grass wildernesses have the sole virtue of destroying their eggs.

Such then is the Khabur, a land of promise under whatever régime it may find itself. It was once the scene of a mighty civilization (nearby Nisibin once had eighteen colleges in the University of the Nestorian Church), and now the twentieth century is making inroads on its time-old economy and society. Sheikhs are beginning to send their heirs away to be educated, but it will be a long time before the contrast of standards ceases. For generations to come the independent nomad will have none of the luxuries of the townsman. He has seen the civilizations come and go and remains indifferent to their glamour, to their benefits as well as to their disadvantages.

