

After the final destruction of Niniveh by the Medes and Babylonians in 612 B.C., the Assyrian court and such of the garrison as managed to escape, withdrew to Harran on the northwest frontier; and there, for the last time, an Assyrian king was crowned, and ruled for a few precarious months, before he too was defeated and slain. The city of Harran, which was thus briefly promoted to the status of capital, had already for many centuries occupied a position of peculiar distinction in the Assyrian world. As one of the two principal shrines of Sin, the Mesopotamian Moon-God, it had long ranked as the second city in the land, and was the seat of the Turtan or Commander-in-chief, the next most important official after the king.

For the student of history, two other aspects of Harran invest it with especial interest. First, it is repeatedly mentioned in the Old Testament, two episodes in the lives of the Hebrew Patriarchs having taken place at the famous well, which is still to be seen outside the walls of the city. Secondly, in Classical times, it became the home of a pagan people, with religious beliefs more ancient than any then existing. These were the Sabians, who, as late as Mediaeval times were to be found at Harran still perpetuating some aspects of the Mesopotamian moon-worship, including the age-old cult of Sin. Having gained the respect of the Roman Emperors, they largely escaped persecution at the hands of the Caliphs. Indeed, throughout the Arab period, their shrines, festivals and general behaviour proved an unflinching source of curiosity for travelling writers, whose accounts of them form an important link in the study of Mesopotamian culture.

The vast ruin-field, which today marks the site of ancient Harran, stands on the natural frontier between the Syrian Desert and the outer foothills of the Anatolian mountains. Its remote situation gives no clue to its geographical significance in the ancient world; yet here was the intersection of two great historic highways, one leading westwards from Niniveh to Antioch and the sea; the other coming from the Hittite homeland in the north and following the Euphrates to Babylon. The city's function as a great trading-centre in fact only terminated with the foundation of Edessa (Urfa) in Hellenistic times, and the appropriation by this new neighbour of its principal water-supply. Today, the railway marking the frontier between Turkey and Syria, passes within a few miles of Harran, which accounts for the fact that its ruins have long stood in a protected military area, inaccessible to foreign travellers and archaeologists.

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To remedy this state of affairs has been one of the first considerations of the recently founded British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara. In the summer of 1950, this body, whose purpose is to promote archaeological research by British and Dominion students and scholars, commissioned the writer to carry out a comprehensive survey of Harran and its environment. This was made possible by the courtesy of the Turkish Ministry of Defense and the assistance of the Department of Antiquities. The results are published this month in the first number of the Institute's own journal, "Anatolian Studies".

The new site-plan shows the city in the form of a great oval platform, nearly a mile wide, rising to a height of some ten metres above the surrounding plain. In fact, by the thirteenth century, when the place was finally abandoned by its inhabitants, the level of accumulated occupational debris seems to have risen until it had reached the tops of the defensive walls; so that houses on the periphery, encroaching on the battlements, had open balconies commanding a wide view of the surrounding countryside. In the centre are the ruins of an enormous Friday Mosque, and elsewhere one sees the remains of a fine basilican church and a gigantic castle. This latter building, which must rank as one of the most remarkable fortresses of Arab times, contained more than a hundred and fifty vaulted chambers, and could have accommodated a complete army. The city-walls are still standing; and the principal gates are still recognisable owing to the survival of their traditional names - (the "Aleppo Gate", the "Mosul Gate" and one on the desert side, picturesquely called the "Mirage Gate").

One purpose of the survey was to seek evidence on the site as to the whereabouts of the famous Moon-Temple of Harran, to which such frequent reference is made in the annals of Assyrian history. This building, whose name, "E-hul-hul" and some details of whose appearance are known from the texts, was restored by successive Assyrian kings, and not finally destroyed until 610 B.C. when Harran itself was sacked by the Medes. Even then its history was by no means at an end, for fifty years later the Babylonian king, Nabonidus was visited in a dream by the God, Marduk, who instructed him to rebuild it; and this he did on a magnificent scale.

One inference made by scholars from the evidence available regarding E-hul-hul, is that the temple may have been situated outside the area of the actual city. This is to some extent confirmed by the known existence in Classical times, of an important moon-shrine somewhere on the old Harran-Tadmor road. Several mounds were found to answer to this description, but clearly no satisfactory solution of the problem could be arrived at without resorting to actual excavation. A small expedition was accordingly planned by the Institute, to take place in the spring of this year, in collaboration with the

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Turkish Antiquities Department. After a preliminary sounding at a site called Yarimca, where the Assyrian remains proved to be of disappointing proportions, and deeply buried beneath Sabian debris, the attention of the expedition was directed towards a very high mound called Sultantepe, ten miles from Urfa. And there during a few short weeks of excavating, it would seem that it has now come near to realising the main object of its search.

The first soundings in Sultantepe soon located a very large building of the late Assyrian period, occupying the greater part of the summit of the mound, at a height of over forty-two metres above the plain, and having the character either of a temple or a palace. Elsewhere at the summit, the entrance to the citadel was marked by three gigantic column-bases of basalt, measuring nearly two metres square, now displaced or overturned by the erosion of the ground beneath them. In spite of the accumulation of Hellenistic and Roman remains above, the conformation of the mound made it possible to clear half-a-dozen chambers of the building, separated by walls two metres thick, and in some cases paved with baked bricks. The great quantity of pottery vessels and other small objects thus obtained, made it easy to attribute an approximate date to the building, and the early discovery in one chamber of a handful of cuneiform tablets confirmed the impression that it was Assyrian. Finally, with only ten days of the season to go, a chamber, apparently outside the area of the actual building, proved again to contain tablets, but this time in very large numbers indeed. A half-circle of large wine-jars seemed to have been arranged against the wall, and the space thus enclosed was stacked with tablets, sculptured vessels and other objects, to a height of over seventy centimetres. Only a very small section of the hoard could be cleared in the time remaining, on account of the difficulty of handling clay tablets in an unbaked state. But even so the major parts of more than a hundred and fifty documents were extracted. The hoard was then sealed and the archive, whose extent is still unknown, will remain to be finally cleared at some future date.

Back in Ankara, about sixty tablets have now been examined by experts. They prove to be a library of standard texts, similar to those accumulated by the later Assyrian kings at Niniveh. While the majority of the works are of a religious or mythological character, including hymns, prayers, incantations, etc., there are also a number of vocabularies and lists. Just come to light are portions of the Creation Legend of Tiamat; but even more important is an extract from the Epic of Gilgamesh, equivalent to the first two columns of the eighth tablet of the Niniveh series, and containing the lamentation of Gilgamesh for his dead friend Enkidu. It is expected that this tablet will make possible the restoration of the greater part of the first column, which has been represented so far only by disconnected fragments.

/From the scribal....

From the scribal notes, or colophons, present on many of the tablets, and usually giving the title of the document, the scribe's name and the date, it may become possible to explain when and why this library came to be assembled at Sultantepe and to identify the site. One eponym has already provided a date, 674 B.C., but this appears on a business document, found in another part of the site. There are indications that the library may be of somewhat later date than this. Thus the scene of these discoveries, Sultantepe, notwithstanding its distance (about fifteen miles) from Mediaeval Harran, may well mark the site of one of the temples of the Harranian moon-cult. In any case, this first glimpse of a portion only of the first fruits gathered by this expedition is a happy augury for further Anglo-Turkish collaboration.