

Chapter 1

THINKING man has always been interested in his past. Archeology, the study of ancient things, has long since helped us to understand more fully our classical background. Within the last century, however, there have appeared those older, and in some ways more brilliant, cultures which preceded Greece and Rome. To some, Egypt represents the center of these earlier cultures, for excavations there have been rewarded by such wonderful discoveries that the very word “archeology” immediately calls to mind the impressive monuments of that land. The famous finds in Tutenkhamon’s tomb fired popular imagination to such an extent that for a time our ladies wore Egyptian jewelry and dresses decorated with patterns and scenes copied from the walls of ancient tombs. But even after scarabs and gaudy prints had returned to their former oblivion, something still remained. No one could forget entirely the thousands of pictures which had appeared in books, periodicals, and newspapers. Archeology had won a place in the interest of the masses; and, fortunately for the science, that interest has not abated with the passing years.

But while Tutenkhamon deserves much credit for his help in awakening the world to the importance of our science, yet he has helped to accentuate a tendency that

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is in itself wrong. The relative importance of archeological results has come to be identified more and more with the intrinsic worth or the artistic value of the objects found. No scholar needs to be told that this is a mistake. The plan of a building, the special pattern or decoration of a lowly clay vessel, a few lines of inscription hardly visible on a rock or a tablet, frequently add much more to scientific knowledge than a hoard of gold or silver objects. As a result of this incorrect evaluation of archeological results some of the most important discoveries made in Egypt have passed unnoticed by the outside world.

Other lands have suffered even more, and this is especially true of that ancient cradle of civilization which is in the basin of the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. If there is a more fertile spot for archeological investigations, it has not yet come to my attention. The “happy hunting ground” for those excavators who desire to see their labors continued even after death is certain to be located there. And yet Mesopotamian archeology does not “make the front page” nearly so often as it deserves. True, the extraordinary finds in the tombs of Ur of the Chaldees have attracted considerable attention. The imposing helmet of solid gold, the splendid filigree work on golden daggers, the unique hair ornaments of Sumerian ladies, and many other objects—all of which testify to a very high degree of civilization dating back as far as 3000 B.C.—have been featured in newspapers and periodicals. More recently, the huge Assyrian “bull” which I was fortunate enough to bring to the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago from the palace of Sargon in

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Khorsabad (see illustration opposite title-page) has also received its due share of attention. But here, again, the emphasis was misplaced. The more comments I heard, the more I was convinced that there is widespread ignorance as to the real worth of the results obtainable from Mesopotamian excavations.



A QUEEN OF "UR OF THE CHALDEES" AND HER GOLDEN ORNAMENTS

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For this there are three main causes. First, the science of Assyriology is still comparatively young. It takes a long time for new discoveries to escape from the incomprehensible scientific books and articles which first discussed them and to find their place in those general works on history, the arts, and sciences which are easily accessible to all. Moreover, engrossed as they have been in the tasks before them, Assyriologists have either neglected or been unable to present to the world at large in an effective way the importance of the results they have achieved. The last, but by no means least, important reason for this apparent lack of information about our science must be sought in special conditions within the land itself.

With the passing of years the first of these handicaps, the youth of the science, will automatically disappear. Nothing can remain young forever. As time goes on, there will be found a larger number of reliable exponents who can explain lucidly and simply the significance of their efforts. But the last handicap, the one arising from local conditions, is destined to remain forever.

In Egypt stone is plentiful, and the great pharaohs utilized it for temple and pyramid, imperishable testimonies to their names. Even had Egypt's history not been practically continuous, still no one could have failed to notice these reminders of the existence of a great civilization.

In Mesopotamia, on the other hand, stone hardly exists. Some sort of gypsum is found in the north, and this exclusively was used by the Assyrian kings in the decoration of their palaces. But this stone is of such poor quality as to be virtually soluble in water; any inscription or

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statue left exposed to the elements will promptly disintegrate. In the southern part of the land even gypsum is lacking, and for this reason the ancient Babylonians treasured what pieces of stone they could import from distant lands and used those pieces exclusively for the images of their gods and their most important records. For building materials they had to make the most of what was at hand, river clay, and the Bible preserves for us a tradition which is based on demonstrable facts:

And it came to pass, as they journeyed from the east, that they found a plain in the land of Shinar; and they dwelt there. And they said one to another, Go to, let us make brick, and burn them thoroughly. And they had brick for stone, and slime had they for mortar [Gen. 11:2-3].

THE WEATHERED STATUE OF AN ASSYRIAN DEITY



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MODERN BRICKMAKERS IN THE NEAR EAST

This is correct except that the Babylonians did not always burn their bricks; when they did, they succeeded so well that they obtained a product greatly superior to anything manufactured in that area today. I shall never forget a little episode to which I was witness while visiting the excavations at Ur. One day a guest, a British architect, found in the refuse dump a baked brick dating about 2200 B.C. He wanted to keep it; and, since the inscription stamped upon it was so common as to be of no scientific interest, it was given to him. But the brick was large, about twelve inches square and three inches thick—quite a burden to carry as far as England. Our guest decided

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it would be wiser to cut off the inscription and take away only that. He borrowed an ax and worked with it over half an hour under the broiling sun, but the brick refused to be cut. He had to give up but, despite his disappointment, could not refrain from expressing his admiration for the wonderful work of the ancient brickmakers.

The early contractor had to meet one difficulty. Fuel was as expensive in the Orient in those times as it is today, and the immense temples and palaces that ancient architects were constantly planning required such an extraordinarily large number of bricks that the cost of baking them would have been prohibitive. So the old Babylonians resorted to the very simple expedient of drying their bricks in the sun and using them unbaked. The

RESTORING A WALL WITH MUD BRICKS



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ANCIENT WALL CONSTRUCTION AND DRAINAGE CHANNELS

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walls exposed to the elements were protected by plaster of mud and straw, or sometimes with baked bricks set in bitumen. Courtyards were also paved with baked bricks, but the interior of the walls was a solid mass of sun-dried bricks. Building costs were thus cut considerably, and the construction remained solid so long as the roof stood and the facing continued in good condition. But, let the edifice be neglected for a number of years, and it would crumble into dust.

When the central government became too weak or too poor to take proper care of the network of canals that irrigated the land, large tracts of fertile territory were converted into a desert almost overnight, and whole cities had to be abandoned. The roofs of the buildings caved

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in, and the core of the huge walls, no longer protected, was exposed to the rain. Water slowly worked in; the bricks began to swell up, and the walls to crack and fall. After a few rainy seasons, the upper part of the walls completely disintegrated and left merely a little mound of dirt to mark the site of a once splendid palace. All furniture and perishable objects that had not been taken away when the buildings were abandoned remained buried in the wet debris; with the passing of years they too disappeared and are now gone forever. We should have no idea of the magnificence of the ancient furnishings but for the fact that occasionally we find thrones, chairs, and tables sculptured on the reliefs which adorned the palaces.

A CRUMBLING MUD-BRICK WALL IN A MODERN NEAR EASTERN CITY

