

A HOLIDAY IN THE JEBEL DRUSE

BY NEILSON C. DEBEVOISE

Oriental Institute, University of Chicago

SOUTH of Damascus there lies a region which was once the center of extensive volcanic action. In the course of centuries the oldest lava flows have completely decayed and thus between the limits of more recent eruptions there are patches of exceedingly fertile land. There are few springs, but the character of the rich soil is such that one good rain a year is sufficient to produce an abundant crop of wheat. Under the *Pax Romana* this region supported a large population which built extensive cities out of the local black basalt. Adorned with all the theaters, baths, and basilicas of the post-Christian epoch, military posts on the edge of the desert protected the countryside from nomad raids, and the caravans which took its wheat northward returned with goods from the Syrian ports.

Fifty years ago many of these cities remained largely as they were when the breakdown of the Roman military power exposed them to the attacks of the Beduins and caused their general abandonment. The region was then, as it is now, the home of a religious group known as the Druse who since their inception in the eleventh century have been prohibited by their belief from intermarrying with other sects and have thus for a thousand years preserved their racial purity. The people are tall and sturdy, and the old men, especially, are very distinguished looking. Since the revolt of 1925, in the course of which the Druse warriors had ample opportunity to display the military prowess and bravery for which they are famous, they have been inclined to be suspicious of foreigners. However, toward America, as the poll conducted by the King-Crane Commission clearly showed, they entertain the most friendly feelings. The impartial attitude of the American University in Beirut, and particularly of the medical staff, has furthered friendly relations, and Druse sheiks constantly bring their wives and daughters for treatment at the American institution.

In the fall of 1932, while spending some time in Beirut before

the commencement of the excavating season. I had the privilege of joining several of the medical staff of the American University who had been invited to attend the great Druse festival at Soueida in the Hauran and to be guests of the Emir. The party which included Dr. and Mrs. Edgar Turner, Dr. Douglas Cruikshank, and several others was under the special guidance of Shaik Khalil Almadeen of the Bakleen Druses who was also a member of the University staff. Although Bakleen is one of the Lebanon Druse villages, Shaik Almadeen was well acquainted in the Jebel whence he ran much wheat through the Turkish lines during the war to the Syrian villages.

We expected to leave after the close of university work, about one-thirty in the afternoon, but as usual with a large group we were late in starting and it was nearly two by the time our cars rolled out of the big wrought-iron gates of the campus. Crossing the nearly level coastal plain took but a short time, and soon the cars were winding up the steep slopes of the Lebanons. A sharp rain which set in made the hairpin turns and heavy gradients of the road, which was dangerous enough at best, more unpleasant than usual, and it was with a sigh of relief that we began to slip down into the smiling valley between the Lebanon and the Anti-Lebanon ranges, a valley known to the Greeks as Hollow Syria. The road ran almost straight across the level surface of the plain up the lower lying slopes of the Anti-Lebanons. A steep descent through many trees, beside a rippling stream led us into the verdure of the outskirts of Damascus. Damascus, often called the port of the desert, was alive with all the activities of a busy commercial city, and here we saw more native and fewer European costumes.

After tea at the Ommyad Hotel, our cars turned south by the end of the Street called Straight and as we glanced behind us the lights of the city began to pick themselves out of the dusk of the evening. Although it was too dark to see what sort of country we were passing through, I knew we had entered the Hauran, for the road became a narrow and rough strip of dust which wound tortuously between rows of black boulders. About nine o'clock the lights of Der'ra appeared ahead and we made our way to the best and only hotel in the city. The long drive in the coolness of the evening had given us all hearty appetites and we were soon eating a good dinner in the local Movie Palace. Here we found ourselves sur-

rounded by glaring posters depicting such thrillers as the *Third Episode of the White Peril* and Bert Buckum in *Six Gun Sammy*. The waiter came and went through a rough wooden door which for some unfortunate reason was located directly in the middle of the screen. Behind our backs on the pillars other posters showed two taxi cabs of ancient vintage meeting in a terrific collision with parts flying in all directions. This eating place beside being a movie had the added distinction of serving as the buffet for the Der'ra station, for this city is on the main line of the Hejaz railroad whose ultimate destination is Mecca and Medina. Here also a branch line ran to Haifa. The town was of great tactical importance to the French, and the fatigue caps of the legionaires were everywhere. Supper at length over, we walked several hundred feet to our resting place which sought added dignity under the name of Hotel. The lady in charge was greatly concerned to know who was to occupy each room, so as she put it, to be able to decide whether or not to change the sheets. The first classical antiquities which we saw were the blankets which had not been washed since the Roman occupation. While these preparations were made, for it turned out that most of us had clean sheets, we wandered about the streets, some purchasing sprays and cans of Flit. I chose a pair of high leather boots such as they wear in the Hauran with heavy iron cleats on the bottom.

About ten, after copious applications of Flit, we turned in to bed and I, for one, slept soundly. The difficulties which caused the remainder of the party to pass a restless night have never, for some unknown reason, been attracted to me. After a good breakfast at the buffet, our cars set out again about eight o'clock for the Bosra eski Sham. In the old town of Der'ra itself there was a sort of underground city, possibly of Nabatean origin but since our time was limited we decided to employ it in more interesting ruins. The country through which we traveled was a vast open valley between the mountains along the Jordan River and the Jebel Druse. It was volcanic in origin as spots of basalt scattered here and there showed but nothing like the huge areas of surface rock through which we passed the night before.

On the top of nearly every hill squared blocks gave evidence of a ruin of some variety, and even the shepherds huts were reminders of ancient structures which had been despoiled. Many fine buildings

and even some entire towns pictured and described by the Princeton Expedition in the beginning of this century have completely disappeared since that time. An hour and a quarter's ride brought us to the large arch spanning the Roman road which forms the main street of Bosra eski Sham. Bosra, once the capital of the Roman province of Arabia, is still a wonderfully interesting ruin. There are early basilicas, triumphal arches, city walls and towers, an early mosque, and a fine theater preserved almost intact by the fact that a twelfth century castle was built on top of it. The city is full of inscriptions most of which have been published by Littman, Butler, and Bell.

The building material is dull black basalt which is not attractive and does not lend itself to the art of the stone cutter readily. Most of the blocks were scarcely larger than fifteen or twenty inches long in contrast to the huge stones of Baalbec which attain a length of more than sixty feet. The larger part of the constructions date from the fourth to fifth centuries and are heavy and uninspired, gross in detail and somewhat crude in workmanship. Bosra is a frontier town both from a political and an artistic standpoint, a fact which should lend added interest for the student of history and art. A part of the roof of the basilica which still remains in position is interesting as one of the few remaining examples of ancient roofs. A series of stones were set into the wall, each one projecting farther out than the lower one just as though a false arch were to be built. The span was thus sufficiently reduced so that a single slab a foot or eighteen inches wide could be laid across the opening. The roof was entirely made up of such slabs laid side by side.

A wedding was in progress near one of the ruined churches and we stopped a moment to watch the proceedings. Up on the roof twenty or more young Druse warriors were dancing, swaying from side to side, and stamping rhythmically as they sang, as Druses often do, of battle. Some double reed pipes gave rhythm and impetus to the dance. Below in the courtyard were the women clothed in gay colors and dancing to the beat of a small hand drum as they waved brightly colored handkerchiefs in each hand. In the corner of the yard were two enormous copper caldrons, with steaming preparations for the coming feast. The bride was still in her own home where she would remain until evening and these festivities were taking place at the home of the groom.



THE YOUNG WARRIORS DANCED AT THE WEDDING FEAST.
THE DRUSE WOMEN WATCHED THE GAMES
FROM THE SIDELINES.

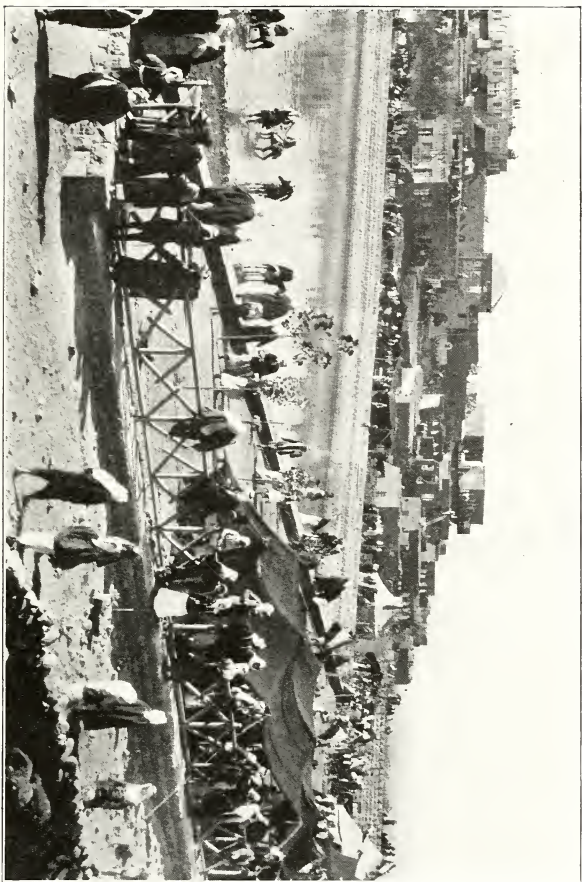
Leaving Bosra behind in the plain, we climbed rapidly toward the southern end of the Jebel Druse, mounting steadily in the direction of a high box-like hill on the horizon. As we drew near its base, a sign in French and Arabic informed us that it was the village of Salkhad, our destination. Originally a volcanic cone, its entire top had been surrounded by a high almost vertical wall about which rose the remains of an ancient castle. Because of its commanding position the French have utilized it as a fortress and it is now surrounded by barbed wire and three heavy guns command the countryside roundabout. The occupation of this site dates back to timeless antiquity; fragments of carving gave evidence of the presence of the Roman legions. Salkhad is the last outpost of civilization on the edge of the blue beyond which lies the almost unexplored desert. Into this mysterious void the ancient Roman road disappears with fascinating abruptness.

From Salkhad to Soueida, the principal city of the region, and its present administrative capital, our road wound among small black volcanic cones, through somber lava flows, and over patches of reddish ash or decayed volcanic products. Much of the land would have made a perfect setting for the "Inferno" and the blazing October sun did its best to complete the illusion. Wherever there was a little water the Druse had planted grapes or a few trees and much plowed land gave evidence of grain then long harvested and stored away underground. Halfway to Soueida was a flight of marble stairs leading to a small platform and a pillar. It bore an inscription in memory of the first French detachment sent out by an over-confident and not too wise commander in Damascus. Not a man returned to tell the fate of the column and it took six months of hard fighting to relieve Soueida.

Soueida from a distance looked much like the other Druse villages of the district, a collection of black basalt houses many of which were in such condition that it was difficult to differentiate between ruin and modern habitation. But Soueida near at hand was teeming with life and color. Its normal population of five or six thousand was swelled by festival visitors to twenty-five or thirty thousand and the influx produced much the same effect as it does in the small American college town. Crowds of small boys ran hither and thither between groups of sedate elders and the loaded camels and donkeys. Every shop was crowded with purchasers buying additional finery.

We ran our cars directly to the great square in the center of the town around which were grouped the tents of the leading sheiks. Emir Hamza Beg el Atrash, whose guests we were to be, was a young chap of twenty-three, of medium height, pleasing appearance and much dignity. He was clean shaven except for a small moustache and was dressed in an embroidered cream colored jacket and a white undergarment. The *agal* and *chifa* which he wore were similar to those of his compatriots but his shoes were European. The tent was simple but the chairs good and there were some excellent Persian rugs on the floor. The Emir welcomed us most cordially in Arabic but he omitted all of the lengthy and flowery speech which is customary on such occasions, for as he explained, he realized we did not care for it. This was true courtesy; the flowery speeches were soon to weary us in other tents. We sat around for some time during which little was said beyond polite remarks about each other's health and after coffee had been served in small Turkish cups we left under the guidance of an affable and immense colonel of the Druse Gendarmery. He must have weighed at least two hundred and fifty pounds. A long black moustache, carefully trimmed, gave his normally jolly face a somewhat fierce expression. To me he was the embodiment of a Turkish official of the old regime. As a result of the letter of introduction which we handed to him, he devoted two entire days to our entertainment.

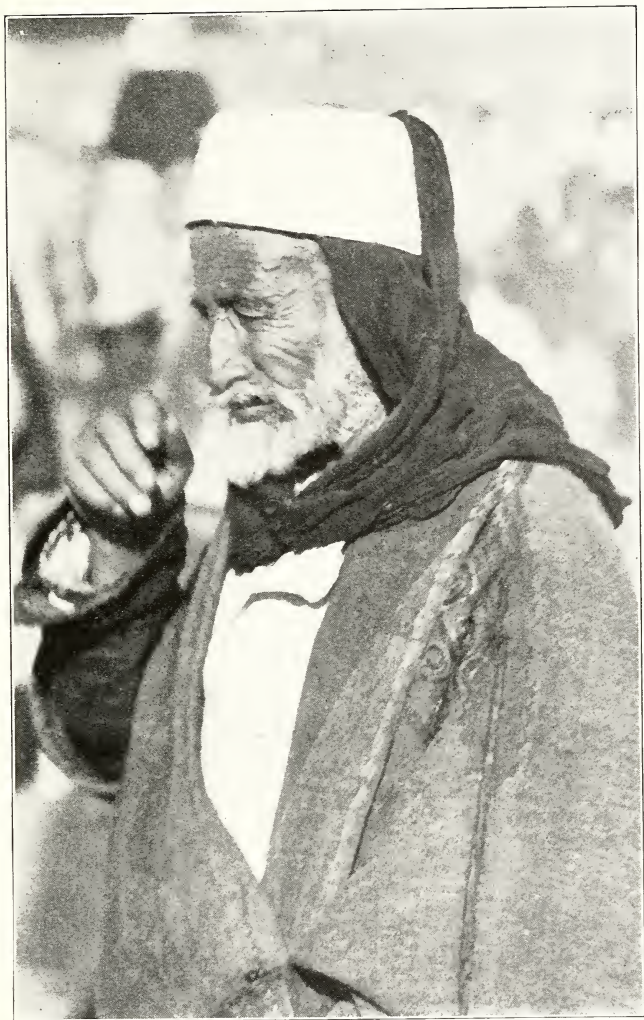
We visited a number of other sheiks along the row of tents to the accompaniment of more coffee and then went with the affable colonel to the local hotel where we had a very good dinner in European style with an excellent local red wine. After dinner we wandered through the crowded streets back to the tent of the Emir who was preparing to leave. At nine that evening we climbed wearily into our cars and set off behind his old Dodge. His castle was about twelve kilometers out of Soueida, a great black basalt building decorated with bits of Roman sculpture from a ruin not far away. The castle had been bombed from the air during the revolt and one wing destroyed and the remainder badly shaken so that even the huge keystone over the main gate threatened to fall. The Emir is a comparatively poor man in a land where wealth is reckoned in gasoline cans of gold Turkish liras. His money as well as the lives of many of his immediate family were given in support of the revolt and he has only now begun to recoup his fortunes. Recently he has redeco-



THE ANIMALS ARE DRIVEN INTO THE WATER STORAGE TANKS

rated and refurnished a part of the house in modern Syrian style and it was there that we found our quarters. The furniture was simple but the beds were comfortable and everything was clean. The Emir himself assisted some of his men to prepare our beds. Dr. Cruickshank and I went downstairs to a room decorated in a similar manner where we spent a comfortable night after I had recovered from the caffeine consumed in the afternoon. The coffee was so strong that one's head swam and heart pounded and the accompanying sensation of exhilaration lasted far into the night. We rose early and attempted to clean up and shave in the few drops of water available. The small village in which the castle was located had no water supply at all and that which was brought daily from a spring not far away had not yet arrived. There are few springs or wells in this entire region, and water is collected during the rainy season in huge reservoirs into which herds of camels, horses, and cattle are driven to water and from which the people dip their daily needs. It was then the end of the dry season and the water was very shallow and of a billious green color. The flavor I can only imagine for I did not try it. The French have introduced a new piped water supply into Soueida which is said to be excellent.

We had a tasty breakfast at the castle served by the Emir himself to do us honor. The table was soon piled high with fried eggs, lebney, goat's-milk cheese, and there was unlimited tea. After we had made photographs of the Emir and the castle we crowded into the cars again and bumped back to the metropolis to begin again our round of calls. Many of the men whom we met have long been famous and their names and faces appear on the pages of the accounts of the region by Miss Bell and Seabrook. Because of his position as a proponent of the revolt, the Emir was not looked upon with favor by the French; no Legion d'Honneur cross glittered on his robes as it did on those of some among the Druse. The spirit was gone from a holiday fostered by the French and the atmosphere was tense with hatred, hatred of the French and of those Druse who were suspected of having aided them or who had accepted favors from them. Among the latter was one who was said to be the best of the famous Druse horsemen. He was a huge heavy-set man dressed entirely in white and wearing a curved scimitar with a beautiful silver bound handle. Although over sixty years of age, he was



THE DRUSE ELDERS ARE PATRIARCHAL IN APPEARANCE.

still very active and we saw him perform later in the day during the games with lance and scimitar.

From tent to tent we went, sipping coffee, eating candy, some stale, but some, especially the Damascus candied fruit, excellent, munching grapes, pistachios and peanuts, until I felt like a monkey and my head was in a whirl. For French visitors there were bottles of every variety which we declined with thanks. The Druse men are fine, tall, distinguished fellows with that great natural dignity which dwellers in the desert lands possess. Never have I met with such genuine hospitality as we did in the Mountain. As Shaik Khalil said, as long as we were in the Jebel Druse we were their guests and were permitted to buy nothing.

The initiated Druse are usually most patriarchal in appearance and they wear as a distinguishing mark a white *chefia* wound around their tarbooshes. This is the only group permitted to read the holy books and to partake fully in the religion; they must foreswear liquor, tobacco, and leave their beards uncut. There are few young men initiated nowadays, for the spirit of unrest has penetrated to these far parts and many of the new generation have fallen into the ways of the Ferengi. But they are still full of enthusiasm and the ground around the tents shook with their rhythmical stomp and reiterated war songs. The dancers were divided into two groups, one of which sang a line which was then repeated by the other side of the circle. The same words may be shouted ten or twenty times until a new line is introduced and the process begun all over again.

About the middle of the morning, a desultory rifle fire commenced some distance to the west of us and crowds of beskirted Druse began to run in that direction. Presently through clouds of dust came an officer of the *gendarmerie*, a fine young Druse, who suggested that we would be safer and have a better view from the top of his house nearby. From the flat roof we looked across a small wady toward some black tents beyond which was a small group of men engaged in a battle royal with fists, stones, clubs, and anything else available. The *gendarmes* were pressing their horses into the *mêlée*, swinging the butts of their rifles and firing into the air. The struggle must have lasted fifteen minutes or more until enough police arrived to break up the fight and scatter the combatants. The trouble began when one tribe attempted to place their banner before the others in the assembly which had just taken place.

The festival itself was not of great interest for the spirit of the Druse was not in a holiday celebration held under the eyes of the French. Their official tent stood on the east side of the square in the morning and on the west in the afternoon to avoid the sun which was still hot in this region even so late in summer. The parade of Druse flags, a review by the French military officials, and many photographs, were followed by physical exercises by Druse school children ending with the waving of small French flags! The Druse *gendarmarie* and police gave excellent exhibitions of stunt riding but the feature for which we were waiting, the riding by Druse warriors and games which had always followed, had been shunted off to the end of the program if indeed they were ever given. At four it became imperative that we start for home, and after numerous farewells we climbed into the cars once more. The road was dotted with solitary plodding figures or weary horsemen whose animals reflected the dejected state of their riders. As we discovered later, the best road was one through Ezra'a but it was not the shortest, as our maps indicated, nor did it show upon the road signs. We therefore went through Sha'aba where we arrived at dusk. It is a most interesting ruin and one which I should like time to examine at my leisure. There were two Roman roads at right angles to each other, both in almost perfect state of preservation, temples, baths, and mosaics, scattered throughout the city, as well as two triumphal arches, one at each entrance to the city.

Night had fallen before we entered Damascus but we stopped there only for some tea and reached Beirut about midnight, weary from too little sleep and drugged with too much black coffee.