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AUGUST, 1910

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# The Open Court

A MONTHLY MAGAZINE

Devoted to the Science of Religion, the Religion of Science, and the  
Extension of the Religious Parliament Idea

Editor: DR. PAUL CARUS.

Associates: { E. C. HEGELER.  
                  { MARY CARUS.



THE HOLES IN THE SOUTHERN SKY.

Which Mr. Theodore Cooper identifies with the "chambers of the south"  
mentioned in Job ix. See pages 500-504.

**The Open Court Publishing Company**  
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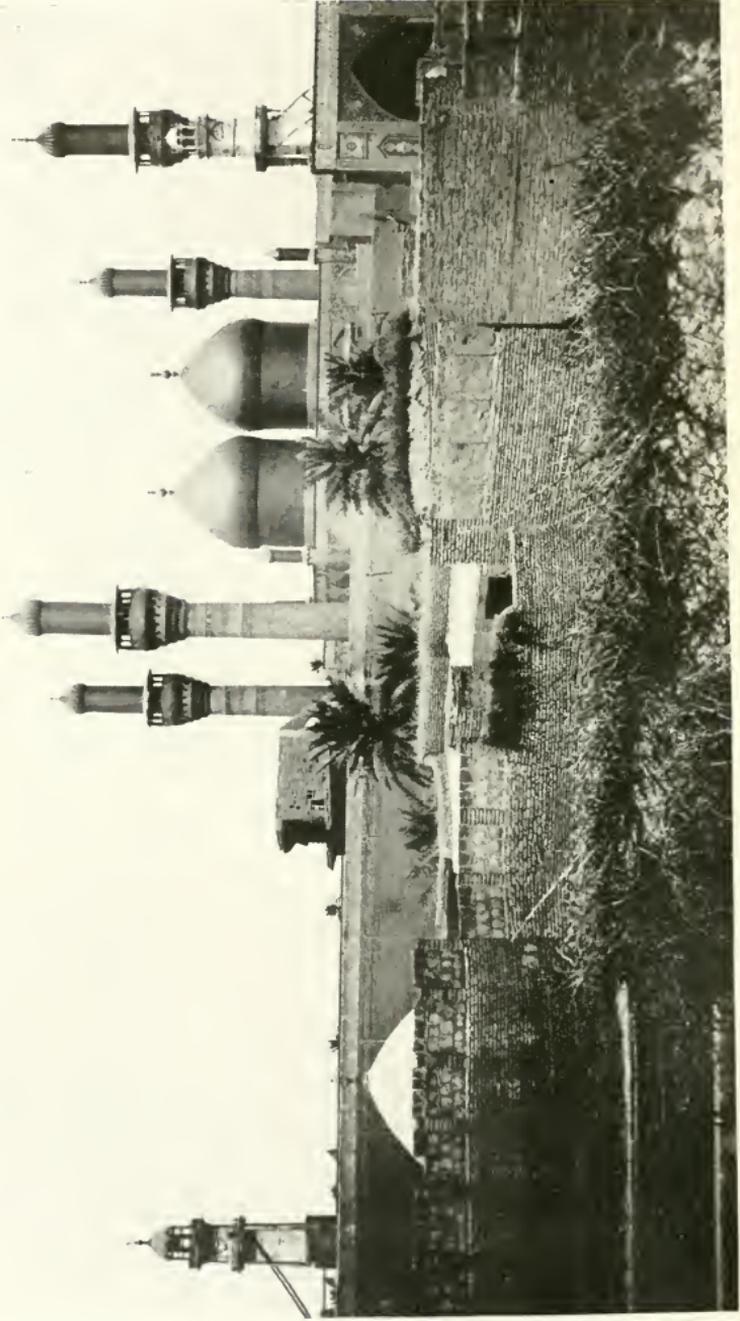
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THE SHRINES OF HUSSEIN AND ABBAS AT KERBELA.

*Frontispiece to The Open Court.*

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## THE SACRED CITIES OF EASTERN ARABIA.

BY EDGAR J. BANKS.

IT is popularly supposed that in the Mohammedan world Mecca is the one and only sacred city, yet the Moslems themselves count ten sacred places to which they make their pilgrimages. Mecca they place foremost among them, for there the Prophet was born, and there all Moslems, regardless of sect, flock to worship about the sacred Kaaba. It is the one best known to Christians, because the few adventurers who have risked their lives to enter it, have given thrilling accounts of their experiences. On the eastern side of the desert, in the vicinity of the once glorious Bagdad, are three cities, Kazamieh, Kerbela and Nejef, which to the Shiah branch of Moslems—the Persians, Indians and several of the desert Arab tribes—are scarcely less sacred. In the winter of 1904-5, disguised as a Turk, and under the guidance of a faithful Moslem servant, I performed the pilgrimage, at least to the exterior of these three shrines.

From whatever direction one approaches Bagdad, the eye is first attracted to the six lofty golden minarets of Kazamieh. The city, lying to the right of the Tigris four miles north of Bagdad, derived its name from Kazim, a nephew of Ali and an early Moslem saint; now his tomb has become a magnificent mosque in which the eastern Moslems love to worship and store their wealth. For several years an antiquated horse-railway has connected the city with Bagdad, yet in spite of this representative of the West, the Christian who enters Kazamieh, is met with angry glances and insults. To pass the gate-way of the shrine, or to glance in at the open court, is to endanger life. A few years ago, while stealing a forbidden glance from the street, a British consul was fired upon, and later, as I was passing the open gate-way, an ancient Persian woman

rushed at me so furiously that to avoid trouble I beat a hasty retreat.

The shrines of all the sacred cities closely resemble each other in construction. High walls, entirely lined within and partly without with beautifully enameled Persian tiles, enclose a large rectangular court. Gate-ways on three sides of the enclosure lead into the court, while upon the fourth side is the mosque or shrine, decorated with all the barbaric splendor which the money wrung from the visiting pilgrims can purchase. Before the mosque at Kazamieh is a colonnade of teak wood inlaid with mother of pearl. Six minarets, all capped with gold, stand at the corners and at the centers of the longer sides of the court, and a large golden dome rises



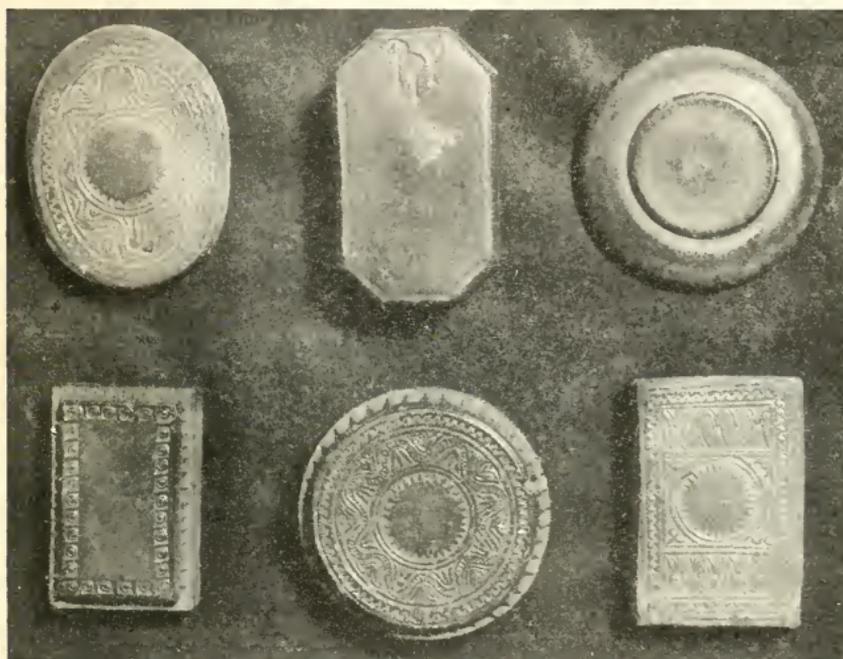
DERVISHES WHO WANDER FROM ONE SACRED CITY TO ANOTHER.

above them. Only the Kaaba at Mecca has a greater number of minarets.

In the mosque, directly beneath the dome, are the tombs of the saints enclosed in a huge lattice-frame; the walls about it are gorgeously decorated with tiling, precious stones and metals. This description applies in a general way also to the shrines of Kerbela and Nejef, each of which is provided with but two minarets.

The number of pilgrims visiting the sacred cities of Irak have increased so rapidly in recent years that a daily stage employing about twenty carriages, each accomodating eight passengers, runs from Bagdad to them. Kerbela lying about forty miles from Bagdad, in the desert to the west of the Euphrates, has a population approxi-

mating fifty thousand, and it is said that the city is increasing at the rate of a thousand houses a year. It has far outgrown the ancient walls which are now but little more than an enclosure for the shrines. The city is famous in Moslem history, for there Hussein, the son of Ali, was killed in the year 680 A. D.—an event which gave rise to the grewsome festival of the month of Moharrem, when all devout Shiahs beat and cut themselves in grief assumed for the occasion. To enter Kerbela is no longer difficult for the Christian,



CLAY BLOCKS USED IN PRAYER.

That the heads of the moslems may rest upon them instead of upon the ordinary dirt, during their prostrations. The clay is from the soil of the sacred city of Kerbela, and in it is supposed to be the blood of the martyred saints Hassan and Hussein.

and Jews have long lived there. From the roof of the inn in which I was lodged, I could look down upon the sacred shrines, yet it was unsafe to attempt to approach the entrance.

The graves of Hussein and of his younger brother Abbas have been the life of Kerbela. Thither the Shiah pilgrims flock by thousands, carrying with them their dead to bury in the sacred soil. Some come upon horse-back, with their dead wrapped in bundles

of reeds or in rugs which they sell to meet the expense of the journey, or jammed into saddle bags; others arrive by stage, carrying as baggage a mysterious basket in which are the bones of a body exhumed to be transplanted in the sacred soil; still others cross the desert on foot, carrying upon their shoulders the few remaining bones which have not dropped out of their wrappings on the way to lighten the burden. To the pious Shiah the chief aim in life is to be buried in one of the sacred cities, and while dying, the promise which he extracts from his relatives, is that his body shall be taken there, that he may rise with the saints on the resurrection day. The promise is generally fulfilled, though perhaps years later.

The soil of Kerbela is more sacred than of any other city, for it drank the blood of the martyred saints; now the priests mould little pieces of the clay-like soil, stamp them with a design or with verses from the Koran, and sell them to the pilgrims. Thus the pilgrims may carry away with them a bit of Kerbela, which they place upon the ground before them whenever they prostrate themselves in prayer, and thus in their distant homes they may always pray on sacred soil.

Though Hussein is a saint of the greatest importance, Abbas is feared more than he is revered, and the people of the town relate strange tales of his actions. Frequently, so they say, he rises from his grave and walks about the streets of the city to punish the unjust. He never slumbers, and as each pilgrim enters the mosque, he reads his most secret thoughts. Once when a proud soldier approached his grave with drawn sword, Saint Abbas was angered, and with invisible hand, he seized the sword, and severed the soldier's head from the body; then in the twinkling of an eye he fixed the head in space in the vault of the dome above; there within plain sight of all the people, both it and the sword are suspended together, without support, as a warning to all who enter. Once when a Greek Christian attempted to enter the mosque, the saint in his grave perceived that an infidel was approaching, and the Greek fell dead upon the threshold. Similar stories without number are circulated by the priests for the purpose of magnifying the power and the popularity of the saint.

From Kerbela, a stage drawn by four mules abreast carries the pilgrims southward over the stony plains for sixty miles to the desert city of Nejef. Long before the journey of ten hours is over there appear upon the horizon the two golden minarets and the tall dome of the tomb of Ali, the first Moslem martyr, glittering in the sunlight, then the duller roofs of the houses and the towers

of the old city walls, and finally a myriad of gilded domed tombs which have been crowded into the desert outside the city, form a picture worthy of the days of the Arabian Nights. Nejef, with a population of about twenty thousand, is a city of fanatics, and the headquarters of various sects of dervishes, and though a Turkish garrison is now stationed there, the government has little control over its over-religious subjects. During my visit to the city, I was lodged in the Turkish guardhouse, in a little chamber over the city gate, nor was I permitted to venture into the streets unless accompanied by several armed soldiers.

The city is still surrounded by its ancient crumbling walls, and the streets are unusually narrow and filthy. The interior of the shrine, as far as I know, has never yet been seen by a Christian.



TOMBS IN THE DESERT.

Nejef in the distance to the right. In the center and to the left are tombs outside the city.

In architecture, the shrine resembles those of the other sacred cities, and as at Kerbela a square clock-tower with a chime of bells to strike the hours, stands midway between the minarets and the tomb. The striking of the bells, though once forbidden by the Moslems because employed by the Christians, to call them to worship, sounds out of place in the mosque yard, especially when it deadens the voice of the muezzin in the minaret gallery singing the call to prayer.

No shrine is more richly decorated than this supposed tomb of Ali. It is said that the gold covering its minarets and dome has the value of two and a quarter millions of dollars. Slabs of gold are laid into the floor about the three graves; a silver fence surrounds

them, and the walls about are inlaid with precious stones. In the central and largest of the three graves within the enclosure formed by the silver fence, and directly beneath the center of the dome, lies Ali, who, so the Shiah say, should have been the first successor of Mohammed. In the other two tombs Adam and Noah are said to be buried.

Nejef is particularly a city of the dead, for every nook and corner has been used for burial purposes over and over again until the government has forbidden more bodies to be buried within the walls. However, the faith in the sanctity of the soil of Nejef is stronger than the firmans of the Sultan, and the hundreds of bodies which arrive at the city daily, are smuggled through the breaches in the city wall, or are admitted by bribery through the gates, to find a resting place near the shrine. The result is that the cellars and court yards of the houses are filled with the dead; the streets are undermined; holes are dug into the walls, and the decomposing bodies are stored away in dark rooms and upon the house tops to await the great day and the resurrection of Ali. Beneath the mosque is a deep pit into which the bones of those who have been buried in the vicinity for twenty years or more, are thrown. For each person living in the city, there are probably a thousand dead, and the living are waiting to die that they may be buried in the sacred soil.

Everything is expensive in Nejef. Bread is sold at double the Bagdad price. House rent is made dear by the many wealthy Indians who have come there to die on sacred soil, but to die is the most expensive thing of all. For permission to lie beneath the sand far out of the city on the distant horizon, just within sight of the golden tips of the minarets, where the jackals and hyenas are sure to devour the body before the first morning, the cost is never less than a Turkish lira (\$4.40); the price of a grave nearer the sacred center depends upon the circumstances of the friends of the dead, and their ability to bargain. A wealthy Persian recently paid \$44,000 for the privilege of being buried for twenty years in the basement of a mosque beneath the tomb of Ali; at the end of that period his body was to be disinterred and thrown into the pit beneath the shrine.

The annual revenue of this small desert city, derived from the sale of graves alone, is said to amount to more than two million dollars a year. In spite of the enormous income, the priests who are always in attendance at the mosques to serve or to fleece the bearers of the dead, receive no salary, yet they grow wealthy and

self-important upon the gifts which they extort from the pious faithful. When the treasury of the Turkish empire is empty, to replenish it, the sultan might but make an expedition to these sacred desert cities, for in their coffers are stored riches which have been accumulating for ages,—diamonds, rubies, emeralds, pearls without number, gold coins of every age and country, silks and carpets of rarest design and workmanship. Nothing is too valuable for the Shiah Moslem to present to the shrine of Ali, for thus he purchases an eternal home in Paradise, and smoothes the rough, thorny way over which he must travel to reach the crystal palace and the dark-eyed hours of musk awaiting him there.