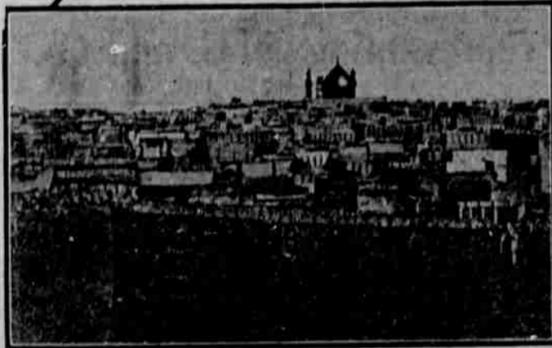


# Holy City of the Shias



The Wall and Roofs of Nedjef.

(Prepared by the National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C.)

**N**EDJEF, a desert city west of the Euphrates in Iraq, is a sort of secondary Mecca in the Mohammedan world. It is the annual pilgrimage place for the Shias, the "dissenters" of Islam, just as Mecca is a goal of pilgrims among the orthodox Mohammedans.

It is five days by mule or camel caravan from Bagdad to Nedjef, and in the eventful centuries since the Shias founded Nedjef—on the spot where a nephew of the Prophet Mohammed was slain—it is estimated that over 25,000,000 Moslems have made the pilgrimage to this mysterious desert city of golden domes, fabulous treasures, and weird rites.

Thousands of devotees from the Shia horde of India, Persia and Turkestan flock through Bagdad each year, bringing with them their mummified dead—salted and dried—for burial in the holy ground about the mystic city. My camel caravan and winding mule train the patient pilgrims make the long march; many from distant Turkestan are a whole year making the round trip. To help handle the throng that pours through Bagdad each spring and autumn, enterprising Bagdad Jews have established an "arabanaah," or stage line, from Bagdad to Kerbela, the half-way town on the desert route to Nedjef. From Kerbela on the way leads through the dreary and monotonous desert—a rolling sea of gray sand, the margin of the great waste that sweeps Arabia from Kerbela and Nedjef to Mecca, Aden, and the Red sea.

As one approaches Nedjef he sees first the great gold dome of its mosque, burning in the sun rays; then, the high, frowning walls that surround the sacred city. It is a gorgeous spectacle, mirage-like vision, as of a mighty city floating in the air. The high, sharp walls shut it off abruptly from the desert, and it seems a mighty thing apart from the surrounding sea of sand.

Nedjef is a freak city. Not a green thing—a plant, shrub, or tree—lives within its dry, hot limits. It is built on a high plain of soft sandstone. The narrow, crooked streets, in many places mere passages three or four feet wide, wind about like jungle paths. In the Arab quarter the mud-plastered houses are all two stories high and, odd as it sounds, have no windows facing the street. Only a wooden door, massive and bolt-studded, but so low that one must stoop to enter, opens to the street.

#### Ceilars Are Refuges From the Heat.

One of the strange features of this strange city is its cellars. In summer the fierce heat drives the panting people deep down into the earth, like rats in a hole. Beneath every house is a cellar, burrowed minelike to amazing depths; one, it is said, reaches an astonishingly low level, being more than 100 feet below the street. Down into these damp, dark holes the Shias flee when the scorching desert air sizzles above and imported German thermometers stand at 130 degrees Fahrenheit. Some of the cellars (serlaba) are arranged in a tier of cells or rooms, one below the other; the upper room is used in the first hot months, the family going lower down as the heat increases.

So many of these vast underground retreats have been dug that the excavated material, carried from the city on donkeys' backs and dumped on the desert outside, forms a great hill over 100 feet high, from the top of which a fine view of the city may be had. It is said that many of these serlaba are connected by means of underground corridors, and that criminals, who swarm in Nedjef, easily elude capture by passing through these tunnels from house to house, finally emerging at a point in the city remote from their place of disappearance.

In the heart of Nedjef, its great dome visible for miles on the surrounding desert, stands the magnificent mosque of Abbas, the shrine that draws the teeming throng from all the Middle East.

Turning from the native quarter the visitor comes to the long straight bazaar leading to the mosque. He is struck with the difference in the looks of the Nedjef people and the crowds at Kerbela. Many uncouth, swaggering desert men are among them, their long hair, faded dress, and camel sticks, or oversupply of guns and sidearms, marking them as from the wild places. There is a spirit of crude, barbaric primitiveness in the crowd that surges past. The little touches

of outside influence one sees at Bagdad, like an occasional European hat or an imported overcoat, are all lacking at Nedjef. Here is old Arabia in original bindings.

#### Beauties of the Mosque.

The mosque is come upon suddenly, for the crowded bazaar street ends in an open plaza before this dazzling structure.

In amazement one gazes on its wonderful facade; golden tiles and fancy silver work rise above and about the great portal, and across the wide entrance is hung a giant chain of brass, worn smooth and shiny from contact with the millions of turbans, tarbooshes, and keffeyehs which have brushed under it in centuries gone by. This chain is so hung that all who enter the mosque must bow.

Through this open gate can be seen the base of the great mosque itself. The great gold tiles which cover the dome also run to the very base of the mosque. And on the inside of the walls about the court are more gold tiles. Above the outer portal, too, on the outside, are sprawling Arabic characters 20 inches high, seemingly cut from sheets of gold. What must this barbaric splendor have cost!

The cost of the wonderful temple itself is but a bagatelle compared with the value of the treasure in its vault. For ages, be it known, Indian princes, shahs, and nobles of the Shia faith have made precious gifts to this temple at Nedjef, pouring into it a priceless stream of jewels, gold, and plate. The looting of the Nedjef mosque has been a favorite dream of soldiers in the Middle East. The true enormity of the treasure at Nedjef was only brought to light less than a generation ago when the shah of Persia made the hajj and the pent-up wealth was revealed to his royal gaze by its zealous official keeper, the "Kilitdar."

But no Christian has ever seen the inner glories of the great mosque of Abbas at Nedjef. The contrast between two faiths is striking; a Moslem walking into a Christian church is made welcome; a Christian who walked into the Moslem mosque at Nedjef would be slain as a defiler; yet both claim the same God!

More human bodies are buried in the plain outside the walls of Nedjef, it is said, than in any other one spot on earth. Myriads of fancy tombs, terminating at the top in little blue-tiled domes, rise from the plain. And all the millions of pilgrims who have come in ages past with corpses for burial have also brought money to spend. The richer the man who brings the body, the greater the toll taken.

#### Burial There is Costly.

Burial sites within view of the great mosque bring a high price. Tax is laid on every corpse imported from India, Persia, etc. Many bodies are smuggled in. It is told of one astute Persian pilgrim that he divided his grandfather's skeleton and sent it in separate parcels by mail to save freight and tax.

When a death caravan reaches the outskirts of Nedjef, they unpack their gawsome baggage and prepare the various bodies for burial. The crude methods of embalming or mummifying would expose Nedjef to disease were it not for the dry desert air. The very few folk of Nedjef who work for a living make money manufacturing fancy shrouds, stamped with Koranic sentiments, for the burial of corpses brought in by the pilgrims.

Others turn out prayer bricks ("Torba"), which every Shia uses in his daily prayers. These are made from holy clay, scooped up from the great cemetery and pressed into tiny odd-shaped bricks, and also stamped with an inscription from the Koran. When a Shia prays, he lays this torba on the ground, faces Nedjef, and prostrates himself, touching his forehead against the sacred brick.

In all of this unnatural city one sees not a tree or shrub; not even a potted plant. It is a dry, prisonlike place of somber gray stones and mud-plastered walls. Remove its mosque, its one priceless possession, and Nedjef, with its horde who live on those that come to pray, would perish from the earth. In the 1,200 years of its eventful life, not one useful article has been manufactured within its fanatical precincts.

Yet in all Islam, Shias turn to Nedjef to say their prayers. To Nedjef every good man must make the pilgrimage once in his life, and at Nedjef he hopes to be buried when he dies.



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#### Making It Short

In a heated Hollywood controversy between picture men, one of the producers present said:

"I can cut this short in two words—Im Possible."

Experience is like a light hung at the stern of a ship.

The tongue of a woman is her sword—and she never lets it rust.

#### Mrs. R. Was Practicing Art of Guest Dodging

One Saturday Mrs. R. was leaving her home to go downtown shopping. Two ladies with suitcases were going up the walk toward the house of her next-door neighbor. Mrs. R. happened to see her neighbor walking quickly toward the street corner where she intended to board a street car. Thinking that she would be disappointed if she missed the guests who at that moment were on her porch, Mrs. R. called to her neighbor several times without making her hear.

Finally, by hurrying, she caught up with her and somewhat breathlessly delivered the news.

"Shut up, you fool! Shut up!" said her neighbor in an angry tone. "I saw them coming, and I was trying to get away before they saw me. I had planned to visit some friends in the country tomorrow, so I would not have to get Sunday dinner myself. You don't think that I intend to stay home and cook for them, do you?"

Fortunately, the street car arrived in time.

#### A Girl Story

Charlie Chaplin told a New York reporter the other day a girl story.

"Girls are more beautiful and more—er—practical than ever," he began.

"A girl named Montmorency sat in a moonlit California rose garden with a young man named Fetherstonhaugh. Fetherstonhaugh bent over her and said in a passionate voice:

"Miss Montmorency—Augusta, if I may call you so—I am not rich in this world's goods, but—"

"With a slight wave of her cigarette she silenced him.

"That will do, Mr. Fetherstonhaugh," she said. "No!"

#### Overcrowded Moscow

More than 70,000 residents of Moscow, Russia, live in houses unequipped with running water and even without sewerage, as a result of the great recent growth of the city population. Last year homes for 100,000 persons were built, but the city increased by 450,000 in that period.

#### For Colds, Grip or Influenza

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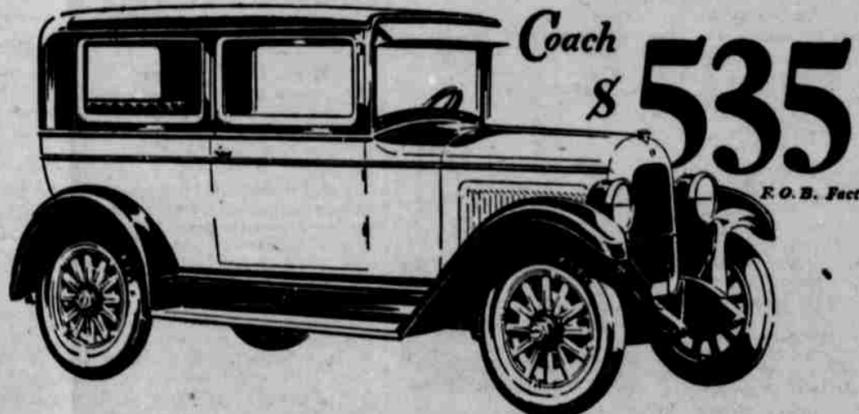
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