Rub’ Al Khali: An Account of Exploration in the Great South Desert of Arabia under the Auspices and Patronage of His Majesty ’Abdul ’Aziz ibn Sa’ud, King of the Hejaz and Nejd and Its Dependencies: Discussion

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DISCUSSION

Before the paper the President (Admiral Sir William Goodenough) said: Twelve months ago, almost to a day, we heard an account of a journey across the Rub' al Khali from south to north. To-night we are to hear an account of another, from north to south, from Hufuf to Jabrin, on to Shanna in the south, almost to the Hadhramaut, and then from east to west, to Sulaiyil. These journeys, both accomplished by Fellows and Gold Medallists of this Society, are complementary. They add names to a list, and a famous list, of travellers in Arabia whom we have been proud to include in our Fellowship and whose lectures and papers we have listened to and read in the Journal with great profit: Burton, Doughty, Gertrude Bell, Wavell, to mention only four of them.

It is agreeable to know that in Mr. Philby’s journey which he is going to describe to-night he had with him a copy of the Journal for September 1931, which contained Mr. Bertram Thomas’s description of his journey across the Rub’ al Khali and his map, which Mr. Philby tells me he was glad to have with him and to be able to make use of.

Mr. Philby was captain of the school at Westminster, that school where Sir Clements Markham spent the years of his boyhood and of which he was so intensely proud. From there Mr. Philby went to Cambridge and obtained a First Class in Modern Languages. He then went to India in the Civil Service, and his services in India, in ‘Iraq, and in Transjordan were many and varied. But it is Arabia which claims his interests. It is not the first nor the second, but the fourth time that he has lectured to us on his travels and journeys in Arabia. We have both listened to and read the descriptions of his journeys, and we may say, without any exaggeration, that his knowledge of that country is unsurpassed. We shall listen to-night to the account of his recent journey with great interest; and I think you will realize, Mr. Philby, that the size of this audience is an indication of the great expectation with which we look forward to your lecture.

Mr. Philby then read the paper printed above, and a discussion followed.

The President: His Excellency Hafiz Wahba, Minister of the Hejaz and Nejd, is with us, and I ask him to come on to the platform and address the meeting. He prefers to speak in his own tongue, but his speech will afterwards be translated to you by his Secretary.

H.E. Sheikh Hafiz Wahba, Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary of His Majesty the King of the Hejaz and Nejd to the Court of St. James, said a few words in Arabic which were translated by Monsieur Mahmood Riyad Zada, the First Secretary of the Hejaz and Nejd Legation in London, as follows:

Mr. Philby, or our brother Abdulla Philby, is a great and old friend of mine and of His Majesty King 'Abdul 'Aziz ibn Sa'ud. His love of exploration is very well known to all. Mr. Philby has always cherished the idea of crossing the Rub' al Khali and has often approached the King to grant him permission to do so. It was with great pleasure that I learned that His Majesty had allowed Mr. Philby to undertake the journey, and had graciously organized and equipped a special expedition for the purpose, and it is with great pleasure that we have all heard of the success of the expedition. I take this opportunity to congratulate Mr. Philby on his success and to express to him the pleasure which all Arabs feel at the accomplishment of this expedition which, of course, is the first scientific expedition of His Majesty’s Government of the Hejaz and Nejd in a part of His Majesty's territory. It is also with pleasure that I announce to you to-night that the scientific collection Mr. Philby has been able to make will be presented by His Majesty King 'Abdul 'Aziz to the British Museum.
In conclusion, I once more congratulate Mr. Philby on his success and thank the Royal Geographical Society for inviting me here to-night and giving me the pleasure of listening to such an interesting lecture.

Mr. Bertram Thomas: You have listened to a modest—I think a too modest—account of a magnificent journey. Mr. Philby has likened us two to Jacob and Esau. I am Jacob. I know I ought to feel heartily ashamed of myself, but what I actually feel is pride in standing to-night on this platform and paying my tribute to this great journey of Mr. Philby’s. It is a special privilege, because it was Mr. Philby who, ten years ago and more, first infected me with some of his enthusiasm for exploration in Arabia.

The point that interested me as much as anything was his identification of what may be a volcano, perhaps—I do not know what it is!—at any rate his identification of some natural phenomenon that he found in the middle of the sands—with Ubar. Mr. Philby said he had two guesses at Ubar. I only had one; and if you have two guesses at anything one at least is bound to be wrong. On the other hand, I do not claim that on that account my Ubar is likely to be more accurate than his.

I have during the past fortnight or three weeks, as a result of Mr. Philby’s own suggestion to me long ago, been studying Arabian authorities. At the time I made my journey I actually did not identify Ubar with Wabar; but you will remember that I was told by the Arabs of those parts that a buried city in the sands of Shu’ait was known to them as Ubar, and they actually pointed out to me deeply graven and quite abnormally extensive camel tracks in the steppe leading to it, or rather leading into what is now the southern bulwark of the sands. Well, that site of the traditional buried city is about 150 miles from the spot now suggested by Mr. Philby as Ubar. Still, I do not think that need worry us. You see, the mediaeval Arabian authorities have come to our rescue. Yakut was writing six hundred years ago, and I suppose he is the most reputable writer of those times. He it was who collected all the references of earlier writers about Ubar, and what his book says—inter alia—about Ubar is that it is a country that is 300 farsahs long and 300 farsahs wide. A farsakh, I might say, is the same as a parasang in Persian, and that is the distance a man can walk in an hour; that is to say, a farsakh is about 3 miles. So that Ubar, according to Yakut, is a country 900 miles long and 900 miles wide. That is quite large enough to include both Mr. Philby’s Ubar and mine! And the same writer goes on to say that Ubar lay between the Yemen, the Hadramaut, and the Mahra Yabrin, and that it was a land richly forested, with copious water, with perennial streams, and thickly inhabited; in short, a land flowing with milk and honey, as we should say.

Talking of honey reminds me of a story. I am sorry if I am detaining you at this late hour, but I really must tell you this Arabian story. It is about a hunter. This hunter went after wild animals, as hunters do, and found himself up in some mountains where, in a grotto, he found a hole in the rock; and the hole was full of bees’ honey, so he filled up his water-skin with honey and set off to the nearest town to sell it, followed by his favourite hound, a dog very like the one you have seen on the screen to-night. When he reached the outskirts of the town he met a saddler, and thinking the saddler might be a likely purchaser, told him about the honey. Well, the saddler said he would like to buy it. So the hunter proceeded to pour out the honey into a receptacle that the saddler had, and in doing so he spilt some of the honey on to the ground. Immediately all the flies that were flying around, and there are lots of flies in Arabia, came flocking to the honey. As they did so a bird passed over and, seeing a multitude of flies, swooped down. Well, the saddler had a cat, and the cat, seeing the bird, leapt upon it and devoured it. At that point the hunter’s dog, which detested
cats, sprang upon the saddler's cat and killed it. Of course that made the saddler very angry, and so he leapt upon the hunter and slew him. Now the hunter and the saddler belonged to two different tribes, and when these tribes heard of what had happened they each fell upon the other, and so great was the havoc that no man was left to tell the end—the end was known only to Allah, the Almighty. The moral of that story is that I quite agree with Mr. Philby that neither of us ought to spill any honey on the site of Wabar. Positive evidence of ancient habitations would appear to be slighter on the northern site than on the southern one.

Before sitting down I would like to pay a very sincere tribute to what I consider for a European an unprecedented march in Arabia. I refer to that section of Mr. Philby's journey west of the 51st line of longitude. I think that part of his journey particularly admirable. Nobody who has not been to Arabia can realize the tremendous physical difficulties that he had to face and surmount, and the firmness, knowledge, and resolution necessary to induce his Arabs to go with him. It is perfectly true that in winter, after rains, the Bait Imani and the Rashid, and some of the semi-steppe tribes, penetrate into these western lands following pastures, but that is altogether different from what Mr. Philby did. He went through that absolutely well-less area, 350 miles wide, which was almost pastureless at the time, with camels that were laden, with camels that were tired, with camels doing forced marches. That to any one who knows anything about the technical side of Arabian exploration is, in my opinion, an amazing thing to do. I very sincerely congratulate Mr. Philby. There are other points that I had proposed to refer to, but the hour is late. I am sure I am voicing the feeling of everybody here when I say how grateful we are to Mr. Philby for his most thrilling story and for telling us about what is indeed a historic journey.

The President: The exhibits on the table and others are being studied by Dr. Spencer. Dr. Spencer told me this afternoon that he could write a book about them. I told him that if he would come to this meeting and speak for five minutes we should be very glad to hear what he had to say. Dr. Spencer.

Dr. L. J. Spencer: During his wonderful journey across the Arabian desert Mr. Philby collected a large quantity of valuable material of all kinds, the value of which is greatly enhanced by the precise information of locality which accompanies each specimen. All this material has been generously presented to the British Museum by H.M. the King of the Hejaz. While this unique collection includes a certain amount of archaeological and ethnographical material, the bulk pertains to natural history, and the various objects are now being distributed among the several departments at South Kensington. The large series of rock specimens for preservation in the Mineral Department includes many curious and wind-worn stones. Of greatest interest is the material collected by Mr. Philby on the site of the supposed ancient city of Wabar, in the Rub' al Khali. Here, around two craters, he found large quantities of slaggy and cindery material, which at first suggested a volcano; also a lump of iron weighing 25 lb. together with a few smaller pieces of iron and fragments of iron rust. A preliminary examination of the iron shows that it contains nickel, and a polished and etched section reveals a structure (Widmanstätten figures) peculiar to meteoric iron. The slaggy and cindery material is a pumice-like glass, but it is not a volcanic glass. It is a silica-glass, produced no doubt by the fusion of the quartz sand. These pieces of silica-glass are often complete individuals or "bombs," consisting inside of a very cellular white material and covered with a thin lustrous skin of black glass free from bubbles. Light "black pearls" of this description were collected in considerable numbers. Some of them show tiny beads of the black silica-glass welded on the surface.
Since quartz fuses at about 1670° C., a very high temperature is here indicated. This association of silica-glass with meteoric iron around the craters can be explained only by the impact of a large meteorite.

Very little is yet known about meteorite craters as topographical features on the Earth's surface. They have been compared with the craters of the moon, but they are of course on a much smaller scale. Until quite recently, the only known example was the Meteor Crater in Arizona, the origin of which has been the subject of much controversy. More conclusive evidence was collected last year around a group of craters near Henbury, 50 miles south of the MacDonnell Ranges in Central Australia. Other supposed meteorite craters have been recently described from Ector County in Texas, from the island of Oesel in Estonia, from near the Stony Tunguska river in central Siberia, and at Lake Bosumtwi in Ashanti (Geogr. J., Sept. 1931, vol. 78, p. 270). Silica-glass in association with meteoric iron has been found around the craters in Arizona and Central Australia; but at Wabar there is a more abundant and varied development of this material—possibly because of the sandy desert. Mr. Philby's collection (from localities other than Wabar) also includes another form of silica-glass. These specimens have the shape of tubes and the thickness of a pencil, with a smooth glazed interior and a rough sandy exterior. These are fulgurites or "lightning tubes," and were formed by lightning striking the sand-dunes.

What exactly would happen when a very large meteorite comes into collision with the Earth's surface would be difficult to say—any nearby traveller would not return to tell the tale. An iron mass of a million, or even a thousand, tons entering the Earth's atmosphere with a velocity of 45 miles per second possesses an enormous momentum, and when suddenly checked the kinetic energy of motion must be immediately converted into heat at a very localized spot. All moisture in the surrounding rocks will be suddenly turned into steam, both silica and iron will be vaporized, and there would be a tremendous "back-fire," blowing out all the fragmentary material and what remains of the meteorite itself to form the rim of the crater. Fused silica full of steam bubbles would be spurted out. The only explanation that can be offered to account for the smooth lustrous skin of the "black pearls" is that this shower of molten silica passed through an atmosphere of silica and iron vapour.

The President: May I, Mr. Philby, first of all express to you the great appreciation of this Society and audience on your having reserved for us the first account of your journey and of the discoveries you made on that occasion.

The hour is somewhat late, and all I have to do in giving our thanks to Mr. Philby, which is a very pleasant and also very sincere task, is to say that Mr. Philby tells me that he has brought home material enough for many volumes—and I am not surprised—on the subjects akin to that which we profess in this building: the geology, the anthropology (which he has not even mentioned), the archaeology. He showed me one or two of the flint instruments which he has brought back, one an arrow-head in red flint which is one of the most beautiful things of that nature that you could possibly imagine—I will not say that I have ever seen, for it is not a matter of which I have expert knowledge. As to the exhibits here, am I treading on very dangerous ground when I say there may be considerable discussion as to whether they are all natural products or phenomena, or whether some of the pieces may perhaps be decayed and rusted iron, the product of man's hands? These are matters which, no doubt, those well versed in them will investigate; I can quite imagine that Mr. Thomas and Mr. Philby, although they are not prepared to spill any honey over it, may have a considerable discussion as to the possibilities of Wabar being Ubar.

There is one part of Mr. Philby's cavalcade which I think we ought to give
some credit to—he does himself—and that is his camels. Not lovable animals, they say; but they seem to combine those qualities which I and my brother officers here thought were accredited to those of our profession, that they are able to work and grumble at the same time. As to the journeys themselves we can speak with some confidence in this hall, for we have heard descriptions of many. I beg you to realize, Mr. Philby, that we feel the most sincere admiration for the resolution you displayed in going on in face of very considerable difficulties, and to accept our gratitude for your work and for the way in which you have described it this evening.