Some practical difficulties encountered when we attempted to cross the sand dune ridge between the Gurdan Reg and the Gaud-I-Zirreh.

On Tracking WOOLLY KULLIS and the Like

By GEORGE F. DALES and LOUIS FLAM

Archaeology is a many-faced deity. It (she?) can smile benevolently upon you and order gold and fame to be rained down upon your head; it can order wisdom and keen insight garnished with prospector's "luck"; it can tease and taunt and deceive and disappoint; create mirages and mansions and obliterate the same at will. It can inflict one with the incurable mania for adventure, for exploration, for seeking something beyond the bricks and bones and fashioned stones. It can send one into remote jungles and deserts in search of knowledge which can never be placed on museum shelves. Such is the search for paths traversed by ancient man, paths which provided the only physical links between ancient peoples and places. And such was our search in 1960 (Expedition, Vol. 4, No. 2, 1962)—then for ancient seaports on the coast of Pakistan—which
waste unmatched outside of parts of Central Asia. Lord Curzon (1906) gave us one of the most vivid descriptions:

"Seistan is one of the most unattractive, the most inhospitable... the most odious of places in the world. It is a country of marshes and swamps, of sands and solitudes, of extreme heat and extreme cold, famous for a wind, the most vile and abominable in the universe, presenting at all seasons of the year dangers to life which can scarcely be realized by those who only read of them at a distance..."

And yet, archaeological remains spanning at least 4,000 years of human occupation are as numerous as the innumerable sand dunes. Climatic change and the Mongol invasions have both been blamed for the devastation of the region, but when the story is more fully known, both may prove to have been relatively minor—or even mythical culprits.

During the early months of 1968 and 1969 we conducted explorations in the southern half of Afghanistan Seistan (supported by grants from the National Science Foundation and the American Philosophical Society). The 1968 season was devoted mainly to excavations at the peculiar site of Sorkh Dagh (Nad-i-Al) (Expedition, Vol. 11, No. 1, 1968). No trace was

The Islamic fortress of Trakun on the Rud-i-Biyaban, an ancient course of the Helmand River.
found of occupation earlier than Achaemenid Persian times of about the fifth century B.C.

The 1969 surveys shifted to the virtually uninhabited regions on the south side of the Helmund River. Regnar Kearton, graduate student of the University of Pennsylvania, and our faithful Afghan representative Elshan Aram, helped us steer, push, pull, dig out, patch up, and soundly curse our two vehicles through more than 600 miles of roadless desolation.

The first half of the trek retraced part of the route covered by Walter Fairweather's 1951 expedition for the American Museum of Natural History. Using Chahir Burj as our transient base camp, we followed an old—now dried up—arm of the Helmund called the Rud-i-Biyaban. Impressive remains of mediaeval Islamic forts and caravansaries line the route westward to the Iranian border. The most startling site of all is Trakun (Tarakan). Similar in a distance to a small mediaeval European fortified town, the brick ruins are perched on a butte measuring about 1,000 by 500 feet and rising precipitously 100 to 150 feet above the plain. Its last full occupation was perhaps 200 years ago but according to local tradition Rustam, a legendary hero in Persian literature, was born there. A thirteenth century Arab writer relates that Trakun was also the site of a famous pre-Islamic Fire-temple. But there are no archeological hints on the surface of anything earlier than Islamic times. Nor were identifiable pre-Islamic remains found anywhere along the Rud-i-Biyaban. This is peculiar because on the Iranian side of the border there are numerous sites dated by their painted pottery to between 3,000 to 2,000 B.C.

Attempts to drive the vehicles southward along the border were frustrated by the incredibly contorted ground surface. It conjured up visions of the horror of a World War I battlefield.

By proceeding eastward again, atop a relatively smooth gravelly plateau, we approached the jagged northern edge of another badland called the Gardan Reg. It was in this fantastically eroded basin that Dr. Fairweather in 1951 discovered graves and painted pottery which date as early as 2,000 B.C. What is most impressive in this rapidly deteriorating region is the widespread surface debris of black clinkers and slag. Abundant traces of copper in the slag indicated almost certainly that we were in the center of a vast ancient copper working area. Native copper is found in the mountains of Pakistan not many miles to the south. The steady winds which characterize this part of Seistan could have provided excellent natural drift for the kilns. But this is a job for the metallurgists, to explain this scene of

Expedition
miles and miles of slag, and archaeology has yet
to determine the age of all that impressive activity.
Most of it may have been carried on in pre-Islamic
times, but this requires much more investigation.

Our ultimate geographical goal was the
Gaud-i-Zirreh in the southwesternmost corner of
Afghan Seistan which forms a wedge between
Iran and Pakistani Baluchistan.

In terms of straight map distance, it wasn't
more than fifteen to twenty miles south of us, but
it might as well have been a thousand! We wound
our way southeastward through the Gaud-i-Zirreh,
hoping to skirt the barrier of fifty-foot high sand
dunes which separated us from our goal. Two
days of continuous disasters almost brought an
end to our tamperings with the solitude of that
dreadful place. Hours upon hours of digging out of
the sand, wandering and driving virtually blind
through an appalling sandstorm (near the end of
which it rained!), and having a rear-end of the
cold vehicle give up completely, instilled mem-
ories in our minds which will not soon be for-
gotten. It was by then obvious that the only way
to enter the Gaud was at its sand dune-free eastern
end. A short rest back at our transient base,
Chulpar Buriak, with a bath in the icy Helmand
River, rehabilitated us sufficiently so that we were
able to find the only motorable descent into the
depression.

Since the earliest official explorations of this
region almost a century ago, it has been gener-
ally agreed that the Gaud received its water from
the overflow of the Hamun lake which dominates
central Seistan. The overflow, resulting from un-
usually heavy flows in the rivers emptying into
the Hamun, reached the Gaud by way of the
Shela Rud. Officers of the British-Afghan Bound-
dary Commission traversed this region in 1894-96.
They described the Gaud as "a large lake of clear,
dee blue water, some twenty-five miles long and
five miles wide, standing in the midst of a wide
margin of solid salt." The Shela, at the west end
of the Gaud, still had water in it from the last
great flood of 1885 and smaller ones in 1891-92.
The same officers said that

"The banks of the Shela were inhabited, the
land on either side was cultivated, and a nu-
merous shepherd population spread them-
soever the southern desert within easy
reach of the lake."

Today even that last flicker of prosperity has
vanished. Now you are confronted with a totally
uninhabited salt-encrusted depression some sixty
miles in length and averaging about fifteen miles
in width. The only people we saw in a week were
three woolly Baluchis with their camels—prob-
ably from Pakistan—collecting salt at the extreme

The only motorable entrance from the desert
plateaus down into the Gaud-i-Zirreh depression.

20

eastern end of the depression. They were posi-
tively useless as far as helping us find our way
across the salt flats. In fact, their "information"
was potentially dangerous because of its gross in-
accuracy. There is not a drop of water in the
Gaud today. Its soft salty crust sucks your vehi-
cles down into it so that low gear, four-wheel
drive is the only way out of it. We consumed so
much of our precious gasoline just getting back to
the firmer northern edge of the depression that
our survey of the region had to be drastically
curtailed.

By following along the north edge of the
Gaud we were able to reach its western end and
establish a base camp. It was obvious that chances
of finding prehistoric settlements in and around
the depression were likely to be fruitless. What
has not totally disappeared as the result of wind
erosion has been smothered under the shifting
sands. It required several days of frustrating at-
ttempts to get anywhere near the Shela Rud. It
in fact required many miles of trudging over and
around the dunes from a secondary base where
the vehicles were abandoned. The impossibility

The eastern end of the Gaud-i-Zirreh.
The salt-encrusted surface made it almost
impossible to traverse with motor vehicles.

EXPEDITION

FALL 1969
of carrying much food and water necessitated a shorter stay in the Shela area than we know should have been spent there, but inasmuch as we were the first Westerners to enter the area in seventy years and the very first archaeologists, some miscalculations were bound to occur.

What a change from the description of the Shela given by the British officers. No cultivation there now—no numerous shepherd population—in fact, no population at all!

We found several fairly well-preserved mud-brick buildings dating from pre-Islamic to medieval Islamic times. About sixty yards south of the southernmost building is a modern shrine

 perch atop a steep-sided fifty-foot high mound. This is probably the shrine called Godir-i-Shah in the early British accounts. It consists of the grave of some local Saint decorated with an array of most peculiar objects. On one of the broken walls of the tomb are attached skulls and horns of local animals. Bits of colored rug hung from the twisted branches of long-dead trees, as well as a metal bell which was intended to break the deathlike silence of this desolate place. Scattered on and around the grave are hundreds of empty gun cartridges, obviously left by the occasional hunters as tokens to the Saint. But most startling were the stone objects which covered and surrounded the grave. There were about fifteen beautifully carved and polished columns of alabaster, each from twelve to eighteen inches high with straight or concave sides and a single groove across the top and base. There was also a polished alabaster disc and a more crudely made "weight" carved with a handle. Similar objects were found scattered on top of ordinary Islamic graves between the shrine and the Islamic building.

The practice of covering graves with chunks of alabaster is a very common one in Susian even today. It provides the only protection against the constant beating of the wind-driven sands. But to find objects such as these is another question. Such objects have perfect parallels at archaeological sites 500 miles away in northern Iran. The polished stone objects in the "warrior's" burial from Tepe Hisar (on display in the center of the Museum's Iran gallery) are identical. The Hisar burial is assigned to Period III-C which is dated around 1800 B.C. The strong suggestion is that we stumbled upon a Hisar III-C cemetery in the wastes of Susian. If so, this is the earliest material discovered on the Afghan side of Susian apart from the painted pottery found by Fairbanks in the Gardan Reg. The Shela must be revisited someday and an intensive search made for the early cemetery and settlement which we can now suggest are there. But it will require a great deal of planning and preparation. Water, food, labor must all be imported from villages along the banks of the Helmand. Different types of vehicles which can overcome the topographic horrors of that place will be required.

Our earlier suppositions regarding the archaeological potentials of Susian, which led us there in the first place, have not been disappointed, even though we ourselves did not make a "strike" apart from the alabaster discoveries. Just a few miles across the border in Iran, an Italian expedition at Shahri-Sokhta is finding beautifully preserved remains of a third millennium B.C. town.

In the rooms they have found lapis lazuli in abundance, both in raw chunks and in the form of polished beads. The tools for working the stone are there. Obviously the town was central in the international lapis trade which was flourishing between its only South Asian source in Bactria (northern Afghanistan) and southern Mesopotamia and Egypt. We do not yet understand why sites of this early period have not been found on the Afghan side of the Susian border. This demands the attention of a professional geomorphologist, attention which we hope to be able to provide at some future date. The key to the archaeological and cultural history of Afghan Susian is still awaiting the lucky explorer. Its potential was recognized many years ago by the Director of the Boundary Commission who wrote:

"Few countries in so small a compass contain so many and varied evidences of past events, both physical and human. It offers unique opportunities for the study of physico-geographical phenomena and their relations to human life."

GEORGE F. DALES, Director of the Afghanistan Project, is Associate Curator in charge of the Museum's South Asia Section and Associate Professor in the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Regional Studies Department. Since receiving his Ph.D. from this University, he has done archaeological work in many countries of the Near East and South Asia. In addition to the Afghanistan Project he also is directing excavations in Thailand relevant to the pre- and early Buddhist periods.

LOUIS FLAM received his B.A. in Art History in 1966 from Rutgers University. He is presently studying for his Ph.D. in the University of Pennsylvania South Asia Regional Studies Department. The 1969 Afghanistan expedition provided his initiation to field archaeology. He plans to specialize in the archaeology of South Asia.