Palm Trees in Paradise

Victorian Views of the Ancient Near Eastern Landscape

NAOMI F. MILLER

1

"The Saviour Returns to Nazareth." Palm trees add an exotic flavor to an otherwise typical English landscape.


2

Map of the Near East, showing places mentioned in the text.
commercial, and scientific contacts. Napoleon and the French were active early on in Egypt and North Africa, and the British, too, eagerly sought power and influence. At first only the intrepid traveled to the Near East, frequently disguised as Arabs, Turks, or Bedouins; by the end of the century, however, Europeans traveling in the area were more common, and tourists were derided for adopting local costume (Thornton 1983).

Nineteenth-century Europeans already had some idea of what to expect from the published reports of previous travelers. Their information about the region as it was in ancient times, however, came primarily from the Bible and classical writers. One can imagine the ironic tone of one traveler who commented, "When we passed that way on our journey from Burrah to Baghdad, the land was flooded by the spring rains, so we saw nothing of the beauties of paradise" (Hume-Griffith 1909: see Fig. 4). This traveler may not have been aware that he was actually passing through what might be better described as a pre-Edenic landscape (see box on Garden of Eden).

In report after report, travelers contrast Herodotus's description of Babylonia, whose fertile fields were said to yield 200-fold, with the sorry state of the modern countryside. One visitor considered Syria to be a country so highly favoured by Heaven, that it unites, by a happy combination of various properties of soil and climate, the advantages of every zone...yet, in every age [it has been] wasted and depopulated by the ravages of conquerors. The very play-ground of ambition. (Conder 1830)

Another scholar wrote:

Babylonia was once the most fertile spot on the face of the earth...but now this whole region is little more than a desert. The yearly incursions of the Arabs compel the inhabitants to seek the protection of the walled towns, whose governors more slowly, but as surely, rob them of their little all. (van Lennep 1875:22)

Many of the European tourists to the Near East, especially those visiting the Holy Land, tried to imagine what life was like in biblical times. Whether to compare or contrast, they have interpreted what they saw through their interest in the Bible (Fig. 7):

The lands of the Bible have passed through various vicissitudes, and been overrun and occupied by many strange nations. Yet it is acknowledged that in no other portion of the globe have traditions, customs, and even modes of

Where is the Garden of Eden?

As recorded in Genesis, "And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads" (Gen. 2:10). Some scholars thought the four rivers were scattered from Ethiopia to the Indus, and north to Armenia (Mt. Ararat). But others figured that the four rivers were in lower Mesopotamia. The etymology of the word Eden is consistent with a location in lower Mesopotamia, for the Akkadian word edinu, derived from edin in Sumerian, means plain (Davis and Gehman 1946).

The Sumerian "genesis" story describes how this undifferentiated pre-Edenic world of sky, earth, and the waters became separated:

When heaven had moved away from earth, And earth had separated from heaven,

...And the name of man was fixed;
When the Sky God, An, had carried off the heavens, And the Air God, Enlil, had carried off the earth;
When the Queen of the Great Below, Ereshkigal, was given the underworld for her domain. (Wolkstein and Kramer 1983)

Insofar as Eden has a real world referent, current opinion places it at the head of the Persian Gulf, where its four rivers, listed from east to west, could be the Karun (Pishon), Karkheh (Gihon), Tigris, and Euphrates (Fig. 4). This marshy region where the separation between solid land and water is blurred could have been the model for the Sumerian vision of undifferentiated Creation.
Artistic Trends

By the latter half of the 19th century, "Oriental" subjects in painting, literature, and music had become very popular in the West. Artists were among the many tourists to the Near East, and their responses and motives were similar to those of their literary counterparts. Illustrations depicting the Near East in antiquity became less fanciful, but showed anachronistically modern landscapes. An example of the growing sophistication and interest in accurate representation can be seen in two views of Mt. Ararat, the first published in 1846, complete with palm (Fig. 9b), and the second in 1884 (Fig. 9a).

Biblical scenes were set against an ethnographically traditional and topographically modern backdrop. For example, Horace Vernet "shocked" his audience by depicting biblical characters in Bedouin dress and to justify his use of these modern details wrote an article entitled "Some Analogies that Exist Between the Costume of the Ancient Hebrews and that of Modern Arabs." (Thornton 1985).

Art historians have noted that an interest in accurate portrayal was within the mainstream of the "realist" tradition of painting in the latter half of the 19th century (Clark 1976). The Orientalist painters did not extend their interest in realism to the depiction of widespread poverty (Stevens 1984:81) or the more "modern" aspects of the Near Eastern scene, but when it came to landscape painting, artists did try to capture the strong light and barren vistas.

Contributions from Archaeology and Epigraphy

A new source of information in the 19th century was the texts and art that were emerging from ancient mounds after millennia of burial. During the second half of the 19th century, major archaeological excavations were underway throughout the Near East. Many of the sites belonged to cultures familiar from the Bible (Babylonia and Assyria), and the new information was incorporated into biblical interpretations (see box titled "Glimpse of History's Dawn"). Important Assyrian archives and bas-reliefs began to tell a different side of the story.

Assyrian reliefs uncovered at Nineveh and elsewhere depict a stylized view of the landscape, the background against which murder and mayhem could be shown. In one such relief, King Assurbanipal (6th/7th c. B.C.) reclines in his garden in the presence of his wife and servants; the severed head of the Elamite king hangs inconspicuously in the trees (Fig. 10a,b). Figure 10b shows an imaginative reconstruction of the historical Mesopotamian scene. The critical characters are all there—the king, wife, servants, and hounds—although the artist neglected to pick up on a convention of Assyrian garden portrayal: unnatural combinations of plants, like palm trees and grapevines.

Assyrian texts published at the turn of the century complement contemporary representations of gardens. They record that the Assyrian kings collected exotic plants on their military campaigns, and grew them together on royal estates. A Tiglath-pileser I relief states:

"Glimpse of History's Dawn"

The existence of the Sumerians, a non-Semitic pre-Babylonian people with their own language and culture, was first seriously proposed in 1869. Thirty years later, details of Sumerian civilization finally began to make an impression on the public at large, and a dramatic one at that. For example, the Sumerian texts and inscriptions found during the University Museum's excavations at Nippur inspired this headline in the New York Herald of August 30, 1896, "History is Upset." These finds, the headline continued, "will change completely the chronology of the Old Testament and astound orthodox believers. Glimpse of history's dawn; remarkable discoveries showing that we are thousands of years older than we thought we were."
Cedars and urkarna trees / and allakanish trees, in the countries / I have conquered...I took, / and in the gardens of my land / I have planted them. And rare / garden-fruits / which were not found within my land / I took / and in the gardens of Assyria / I have caused them to flourish. (Budge and King 1902:91)

Long before Europeans suspected the existence of Assyrian gardens, they knew about the Hanging Gardens of Babylon from classical sources. The ancient author Josephus said that Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, tried to re-create the mountainous terrain of his home-sick Persian wife. The gardens were supposedly built on stone vaults or terraces, irrigated by mechanically raised waters of the Euphrates river. Soon after the discovery of the Assyrian reliefs, scholars recognized a relationship between earlier Assyrian gardening practice and the later historical accounts of the Hanging Gardens of Babylon (Perrot and Chipiez 1884-445, Figs. 11, 12).

Modern Views of the Ancient Near Eastern Landscape

The dominant impression in many rural areas of the Near East today is one of an environment modified by humans. Trees are largely restricted to the banks of watercourses and cultivated plots, and in many areas of former forest, animal dung is a major fuel. Victorians, too, were quite aware of the importance of fuel and the effect of over-exploitation on the environment (Fig. 13). In 1832, for example, Thomas Upham wrote that forests are mentioned so frequently [in the Bible] as to convince us, that the Hebrews anciently were not often compelled, like the modern inhabitants of Palestine, to burn the excrements of animals for fuel, although it may sometimes have been the case, as is probable from Ezek. 4:15. (1832:16)

Some travelers noted the reduced state of the Lebanese forest, and others pointed out that erosion had dramatically changed both the shape of the land itself and the climate (Gage 1871). But these authors had no way to date the changes they saw. Thus, even though some people recognized that landscape change must have occurred over the millennia, visual images of the ancient landscape did not generally incorporate these observations.

It is fair to ask how far our understanding of the ancient Near Eastern landscape has progressed in the past hundred years. Modern paleoenvironmental research has demonstrated that fairly widespread deforestation and degradation of pasture area had occurred by the time of the early civilizations (Miller 1991), and that detectable human modification of the vegetation had already begun in some areas as early as 6000 B.C. (Köhler-Rollefson 1982). We will never know just what the Babylonians and Assyrians saw when they looked out across the steppe or traveled into the mountains, but we are to be transported back 3000 years, we might not find the view totally unfamiliar. Yet, if we looked closely, we would notice an absence of some species, especially introduced crops and weeds from the New World and elsewhere. There would also be better quality pasture, with lower proportions of plants that are unpalatable to grazing animals. Forests would be more extensive, and probably denser as well. And at any particular location, the topography could well be different, as over the centuries wind and water have rearranged the shape of the land itself. If we traveled back to yet earlier times, or to regions remote from the ancient centers of population, the vegetation and landscape would be even less recognizable.

11 "Temple in a royal park." Historical traditions helped to explain archaeological discoveries: "One is familiar with the famous hanging gardens of Babylon, the bas-reliefs teach us that the Assyrians, too, sometimes aimed at this type of luxury. On a fragment that comes from Kuyunjik [Nineveh], one sees a row of trees surrounding a terrace that supports a series of pointed arches." (Perrot and Chipiez 1884-445, fig. 41)
Today, scholarly works occasionally include artists' reconstructions of ancient settlements, but these are generally placed in a generic, simplified setting. A major modern source of popular representations of the ancient Near Eastern landscape is illustrated Bible stories and similar materials aimed at children. Depictions range from schematic or fanciful backgrounds to plausible renderings of the present-day rural landscape. Victorian sensibilities are still encountered, as is the caption to a photograph of the Jordan river:

"Trees and shrubs on the banks of the River Jordan glow in the evening sunlight. It was probably just such a peaceful sight as this which greeted the Israelites as they came down to the Jordan, ready to cross over into the promised land" (Rowland-Ellis, wish 1981:21). A lack of imagina-
tion may prevent us from visualizing landscapes much different from today's, and more research would probably sharpen our reconstructions, but after a hundred years, we have not surpassed the depictions made by our Victorian forebears.

References
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Kathryn L. Glesener is Assistant Professor of Landscape Architecture at the Graduate School of Fine Arts, University of Pennsylvania. She holds degrees in landscape architecture from Cornell and Harvard, and a doctoral degree from Oxford in archaeology. Her research on techniques of excavating ancient gardens and on the interpretation of the remains of ancient landscape design has been undertaken at Sardis, Turkey; Casto Coppe, England; and, currently, on the Palatine Hill in Rome, as well as at Madaen and Caesarea in Israel.

Anne Tentsch received her Ph.D. in anthropology from Brown University in 1980. She is a Research Fellow in the Dept. of Archaeology at Brown University, former director of the landscape archaeology project at Hunte's Morven in Princeton, and a founding member of Landscape Archaeology Research Associates. In 1981 Dr. Tentsch was awarded the first James Morton Ritchie Research Fellowship in Preservation by the Ritchie Charitable Trust to apply the techniques for garden archaeology discussed in this article to other 18th century gardens in Maryland, Virginia, and South Carolina. She has published extensively and in the co-edited, with Mary C. Brandt, a forthcoming volume of essays on historical archaeology entitled Material Culture, World View, and Culture Change.

Lydia Mikelipulsiher received her Ph.D. from Southern Illinois University. She is a cultural/functional geographer with particular interest in house adaptation in the New World since 1492. For the past 18 years she has been a University of Tennessee in the eastern Carolinas, including a decade spent studying Galways Plantation. During this time she has taught at Hunter College, Hartmouth College and, for the last ten years, at the University of Tennessee where she is an associate professor. She is an advisor to the Smithsonian Institution's Museum of Natural History on the up-coming exhibit "Seeds of Change" and on other projects having to do with contact and exchange between the Americas and the Old World.

Gail E. Wagner has been associated with the excavations at SunWatch Village for the past 50 years. As the project paleoethnobotanist, her work involves the identification and interpretation of plant parts, seeds, and woods used by the village inhabitants. Wagner obtained a Ph.D. from Washington University in 1987, with a dissertation on corn and Fort Ancient plant remains. She has been involved as a paleoethnobotanist on projects in the Midwest, Southeast, Palestine, and India. At present, she is collaborating with The Ohio State University. In 1981, she completed a 16th century South Carolina low-country plantation garden. She is currently Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Anthropology at the University of South Carolina, Columbia.

Steve Ford, Mark Bowden, and Vince Gaffney are graduates in archaeology from the University of Reading. Steve Ford now manages a consultancy, Thames Valley Archaeological Services. Mark Bowden works in Newcastle for the Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England. Vince Gaffney is completing a doctorate, having carried out work on sites in Wyoming. Geoff Moule (consultant here) is a leader with an amateur interest in archaeology.

Noreen F. Miller received her Ph.D. from the University of Michigan. She is now a Senior Researcher at the Museum of Applied Science Center for Archaeology (MASC) at The University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. Her research focuses on agriculture, settlement, environment, and plant use in the ancient Near East. She is currently working on archaeological remains from The University Museum's excavation at Gordion, Turkey, and has worked on plant materials from sites in Turkey, Iran, Tunisia, Turkmenistan, and elsewhere.