

the tree of knowledge, Qurna, Iraq

By **Brook Wilensky-Lanford**

"It was easy to recognize: a deciduous tree among the date palms that lined the sandy banks of the Tigris, protected by a diminutive four-sided brick wall."



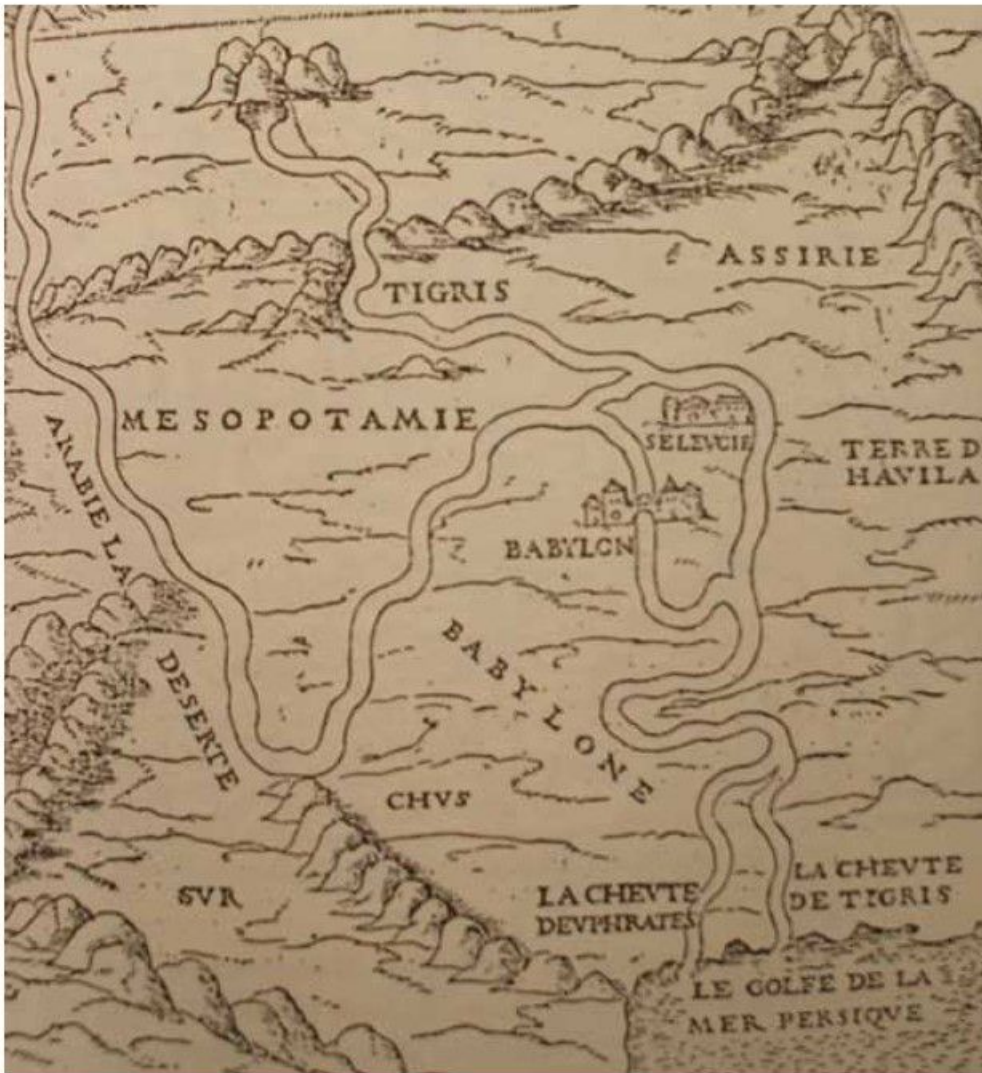
I.

On New Year's Eve, 1919, British riverboat captains, or "sappers," from the Inland Water Transport service attempted to climb the Tree of Knowledge. Perhaps they were drunk. Had they looked closely at the tree, stationed in a brick enclosure on the sand, they would have noticed that it was already dead and unlikely to carry their weight. Its trunk was twisted, its bark had long since peeled away, and, though the tree was still standing, its dry roots were spindly as twigs.

But the sappers didn't look. They climbed the tree and snapped its trunk in half.

Photographs in sections I, III, V, and VII by Capt. Charles Henry Weaver, 1915–19, copyright Dr. Gerard Bulger.

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II.

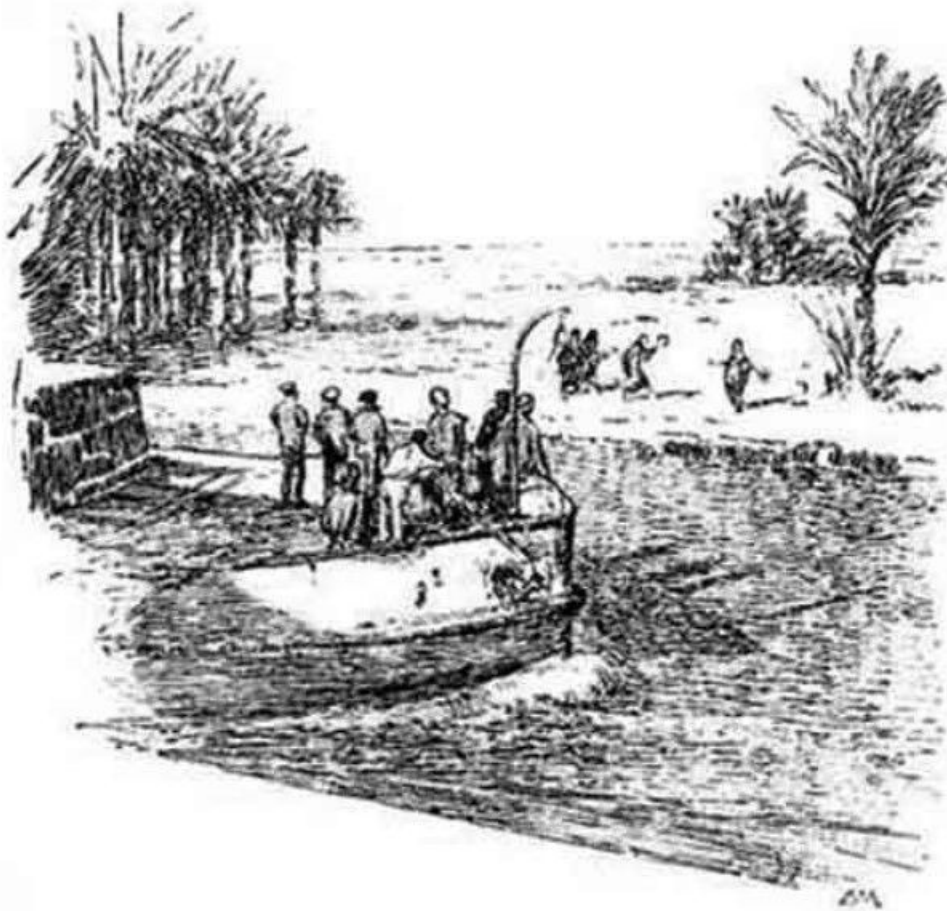
There was a time when Iraq was synonymous with Eden. In 1920, the *New York Times* defined Iraq as "that country whose capital city is Baghdad and which contains the Garden of Eden." The Book of Genesis tells us the Garden of Eden was watered by a single river, which later split into four, two of which are the Tigris and the Euphrates. Religious tourists have been coming to Iraq since 1561, when John Calvin augmented his commentaries on Genesis with a map of Mesopotamia.



III.

Nineteenth-century archaeological finds, including a written version of the story of the Flood and Noah's Ark hundreds of years older than the earliest-known copy of the Bible, convinced skeptics of the land's place in antiquity.

There were so many biblical sites in Iraq that bored British surveyors jokingly named tiny desert towns after them—Fort Sodom, Pillar of Salt, Lot's Wife. The names made it through numerous map revisions and were not officially expunged until 1925. Some had been granted legitimacy by archaeologists. (One might visit the palace of Nebuchadnezzar, the remains of ancient Babylon, and a ziggurat thought to be the Tower of Babel.) Others were hoaxes, such as the shriveled swordfish in a Baghdad museum, identified as the whale that swallowed Jonah.



IV.

In southern Iraq, the Tigris and Euphrates join to form the Shatt al-Arab, which flows sixty miles to Basra and the Persian Gulf. At the point the two rivers meet, there was a small town called Qurna; according to local legend, the Garden of Eden once stood there. The evidence was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil.

It was easy to recognize: a deciduous tree among the date palms that lined the sandy banks of the Tigris, protected by a diminutive four-sided brick wall. By 1920, it had been dead for so long no one remembered what kind of tree it was, exactly. It could have been eucalyptus, pomegranate, or olive. Everyone agreed it was not an apple tree.



V.

A few charitable visitors, like William Huede, a British military man returning home from India in 1817, tried to put the Eden claim in the context of the area's environment. "The few trees, and the little cultivation [Qurna] may boast," he observed, "are certainly as a garden in the midst of a barren, black, desolated wilderness: without this wilderness, however, it would be only a marsh overgrown with rushes, a few palms, and fifty or sixty miserable huts."

The Flame of War in the Palm Groves of Eden



Indian transport on route to the base through a palm grove. A generous concession from the land between the stores.

With the Anglo-Americans in Mesopotamia. Palm-enclosed water on the banks of the Tigris, and two British soldiers in the act of pouring drinking water into a flour sack.

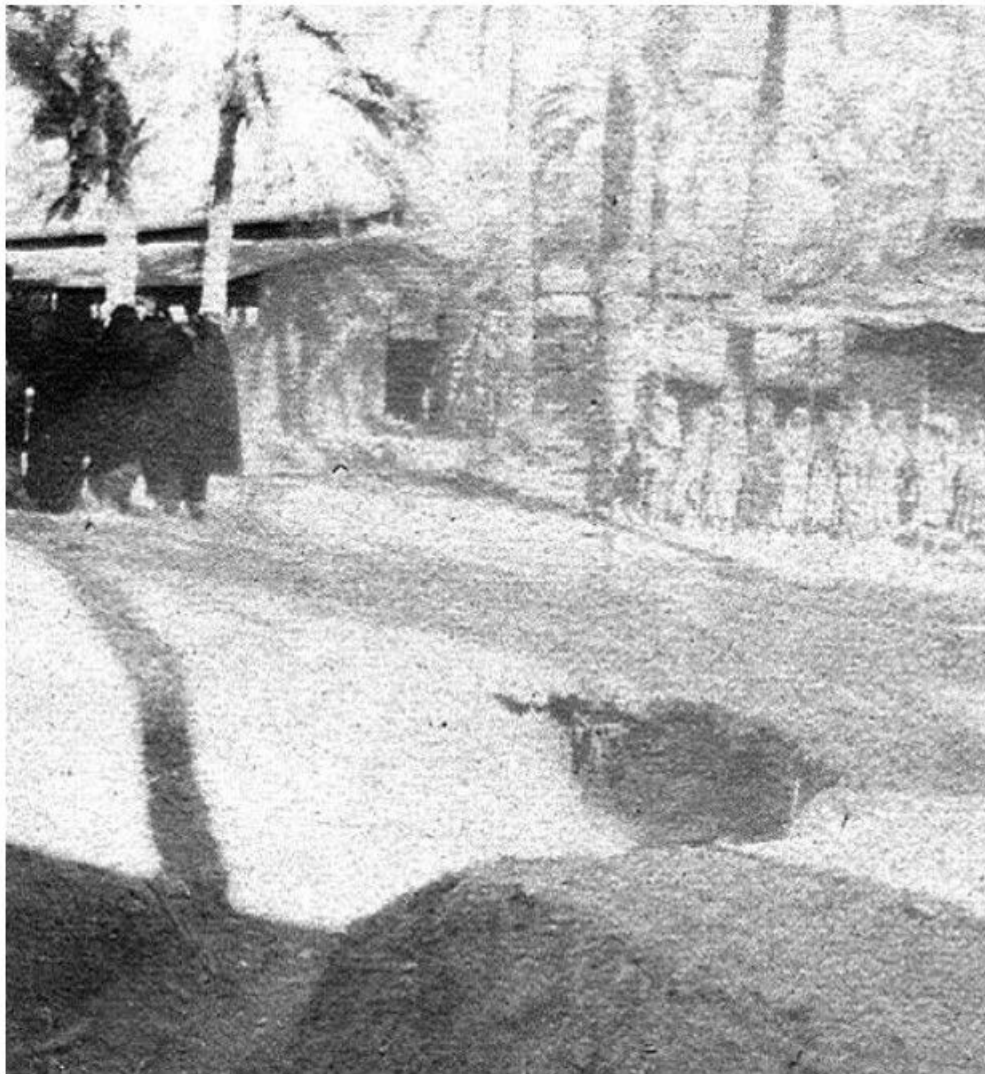


Best one for "frigidities." German now which was converted into a Tigris bag.

VI.

In 1914, with the Turks allying with Germany, the British endeavored to seize control of Mesopotamia in order to safeguard their access to Iran's oil and the shipping routes through Basra. Qurna was one of the first towns to be taken. After a quick victory over the Ottomans' single ship, the *Times* of London crowed, "This smart little affair has given us complete control of the country from the junction of the Tigris and Euphrates to the sea, and the richest part of the fertile delta."

As the war devolved, British impressions of Qurna became less benign. Military commanders called Qurna the "Garden of Hell." Journalists quoted "an anonymous Tommy" who claimed Qurna's malarial swamps were home to "mosquitoes as big as a bat that bit to the bone." When Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden, God placed cherubim with "flaming and turning" swords at the gates to keep them from returning. "We sure didn't need a flaming sword to keep us out," British servicemen announced. "Whenever we had the chance we got away."



VII.

When the Ottomans surrendered, in 1918, the British set about turning their military operation into a colonial enterprise. But the transition from Ottoman to British rule did not go smoothly. Colonel A. T. Wilson, the acting civil commissioner of Iraq, saw many small signs that the situation was souring; he called them "storms in a teacup."

Qurna itself was quiet. It was, after all, a town of only five thousand people, most of whom were occupied with growing dates and weaving reed mats. The biggest building in town was the Civil Hospital the British had built, which attracted more than 140 patients a day from as far as forty miles away, despite having room for only four inpatients at a time.

The civil surgeon reported that patients had an "expectation of an instantaneous cure" no matter the ailment, and a "distinct aversion" to surgery. Though the hospital employed one Arab as a "sweeper," the public latrines remained "quite hopeless." People "deposited their excreta in any odd corner of the compound," the surgeon complained, "a direct means of spreading disease."



VIII.

When the sappers broke the tree, the town was furious, nearly lynching them. Angry telegrams from across Iraq poured into the local British telegraph station. There were so many that the young major in charge, Cyril Blomeley, started a separate folder marked "Tree of Knowledge." After four days, the folder was overflowing, and Blomeley registered "great anger among the Arab people."

Blomeley sent twenty-eight-year-old captain Marmaduke Tudsbery, of the Royal Engineers, to Qurna to investigate the incident the incident and pacify the population. The assistant political officer in charge of Qurna insisted the tree had been alive when it was broken, a few green leaves still hanging from its branches. But others told Tudsbery that the tree had been planted about a century before. He reported back to Blomeley: The tree "was possibly a few hundred years old and had been dead a long time." It could not be the Tree of the Knowledge; the grievances of the locals were unwarranted.

Nevertheless, the Military Works Department quickly resolved to resurrect the tree. Soldiers mixed cement and applied it to the break. They picked up the broken trunk and pressed it to the stump, holding it upright until the cement dried. Finally, they reinforced the tree's brick pedestal with concrete. Blomeley reported to Basra headquarters that this solution "gave much satisfaction to the people," ending a "troublesome little episode."



IX.

In 1944, with the British once again occupying Iraq, Australian war photographer Frank Hurley landed in Qurna long enough to take a dozen photographs, mostly postcard-ready images of date groves, reed boats, and local tribesmen. But one picture, entitled *Tree of Knowledge, Legendary Garden of Eden*, is different.

In the background, a boat resembling a dilapidated wooden house sits above the Tigris. On the lower deck, a dark-skinned man in a white *dishdasha* stands with his hands behind his back. Before him, a wooden ramp has been folded out onto the sand. On the upper deck, just above his head, a large American flag hangs; just over the ramp, another flagpole flies an even larger Union Jack.

A black-clad woman carries a metal water jug in one hand, and with the other leads an emaciated cow along the sandy riverbank. In the foreground is the dead tree, its branch broken away from the concrete and fallen over the same brick pedestal, its tip resting on the sand a few feet away.



X.

Qurna's residents did not generally refer to the tree as the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil. Some called it Adam's Tree, others called it Abraham's Tree—this should have hinted at its real importance in a land where the worship of sacred trees, which are often connected to a holy person, is common. Each tree is enclosed by a small protective wall with a small opening for worshippers, who pray for fertility and to be healed of mysterious ailments like birth defects and sudden blindness. With each prayer, the person ties a small green piece of cloth, representing life, around a branch of the tree.

There are rules dictating the treatment of a sacred tree, which Iraqis in Qurna would have learned as children. Once a tree is sacred, it stays sacred, whether it is dead or alive or has been reduced to a stump. If another tree is planted or grows near the first, it becomes sacred, too. To harm the tree is forbidden. One must not break off a branch, or pick up a fallen dead branch. One must not touch the tree for any purpose other than prayer, lest its saint punish you. One must not eat from the Tree of Knowledge.

People traveled long distances to pray at this particular tree. With 143 hospital patients arriving each day, Qurna's sacred tree likely received many visitors. From a distance, the green cloths would have resembled leaves.



“TREE OF KNOWLEDGE” DEAD

FROM OUR BAGHDAD CORRESPONDENT

The “Tree of Knowledge,” which has stood from time immemorial in the traditional site of the Garden of Eden at Qurna, at the junction of the Euphrates and Tigris, and was visited by thousands of sightseers, has withered and died.

Doubtless concerned for the continuity of knowledge, the enterprising local authorities have planted a new one.

XI.

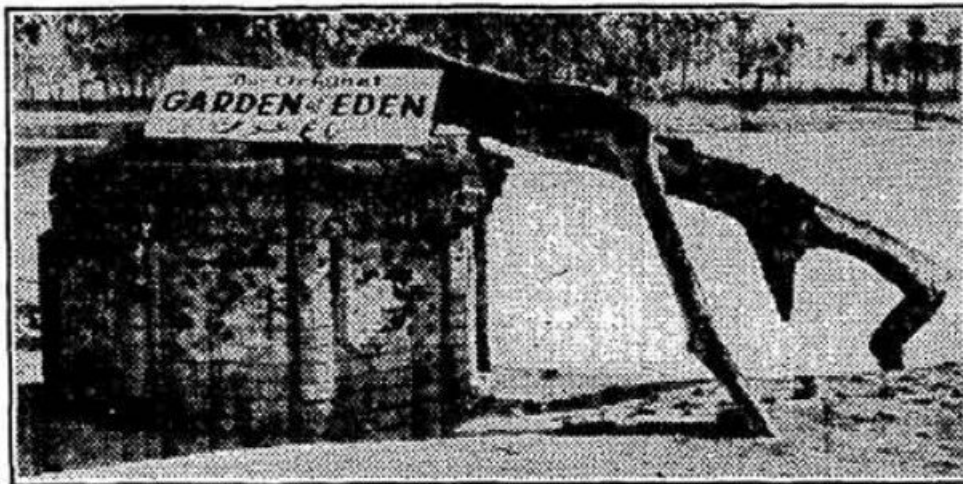
Just before Christmas, 1946, the *Times* of London published a brief novelty item in its Imperial and Foreign section: “‘Tree of Knowledge’ Dead.” The Baghdad correspondent reported that the Qurna tree had died and the “enterprising locals, doubtless concerned for the continuity of knowledge,” had planted a new one. The story sparked a week’s worth of hearty editorial-page debate from former British servicemen, starting with Tudsbery, who protested that, since the tree had been dead all along, this was not news. The officer in charge of Qurna at the time disagreed; the tree had been alive. Blomeley noted that, since no one knew how old it was, it *could* still be the Tree of Knowledge.

On New Year’s Eve, exactly twenty-seven years after the Inland Water Transport sappers broke the Tree, the *Times* published a letter from Mr. Norman C. Wright, an agricultural adviser to the British government, who had recently returned from Iraq on a Scientific Advisory Mission. “The antiquity of the tree itself has been clearly disproved,” he stated, “and the authenticity of the site as the original Garden of Eden is (to err on the side of understatement) open to serious question.” More important, Qurna was ugly and abandoned. At present, wrote Wright, the tree’s spot on the riverbank had a “far from romantic appearance, reminiscent of a series of ill-kept cabbage patches.”

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THE TREE OF KNOWLEDGE at Qurna, the traditional site of the Garden of Eden, taken in 1944. In a letter published to-day it is suggested that a garden under joint Anglo-American and Arab auspices should be re-established in this historic setting.

XII.

To prove his contention, Wright sent the *Times* his own photograph, taken only months after Hurley's. Beyond the dead tree trunk, there is nothing but the wide, empty expanse of the Tigris. The only sign of human life is the hand-painted board someone has placed on the pedestal: "The Original Garden of Eden."

It would be unfortunate, wrote Wright, if "some attempt were not made to preserve for posterity this traditional abode of our earliest ancestors. To replace a single tree hardly appears consistent with the lavish resources of our modern civilization." Britain should build a *real* garden, with local flowers and trees and fruit. This "veritable" Garden of Eden would be "a visible sign that we had truly used the fruits of the Tree of Knowledge to improve and increase the fruits of the earth," a monument to commemorate all that the British, Americans, and Arab states had done to "preserve the integrity and welfare of the Middle East."



XIII.

On the occasion of the Iraqi monarch's state visit to Spain in 1956, the country's Directorate of Propaganda printed a limited-edition glossy pamphlet called *The Land of Two Rivers*. Among the tokens of progress depicted within—tweed-clad Iraqi scientists looking through tiny binoculars, giant concrete irrigation works, women in white cotton uniforms working at sewing machines—is a photograph of the tree.

A tourist couple stands outside the reed fence, looking in. The man, in a polo shirt and gray slacks, rests his left hand on the reed rail, his right hand positioned behind his back. He is too tall to fit through the archway without bowing his head. The woman wears a white sleeveless sundress and sandals. They are facing away from the camera, toward the tree. Beyond the back wall of the park is the Tigris, now empty of boats, its far shore marked by a line of date palms.

This Tree of Knowledge is flourishing, its branches crowded by tiny green leaves. It has outgrown the space allotted to it and uncomfortably abuts a mud-brick building next door. In the shadow of the young tree is the brick pedestal, weathered and crumbling, now treeless. A large fence made from woven bundles of marsh reeds encloses the park, and an open archway allows people to enter and pay their respects.



The Tree of Knowledge, Qurna, Iraq

Brook Wilensky-Lanford

A digital project, part of The Medium
Was Tedium

Brook Wilensky-Lanford is the author of *Paradise Lust: Searching for the Garden of Eden* (Grove Press, 2011). Her essays and reviews have appeared in *Salon*, the *Huffington Post*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and *Killing the Buddha*, where she is an associate editor. She lives in Jersey City, New Jersey.

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