MISCELLANEA

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE NOMADS TO
THE BABYLONIAN POPULATION

Our knowledge of Mesopotamian history and the civilization in the third and second millennium B.C. is based almost entirely on the results of the excavations in the ancient towns of Mesopotamia. As a matter of course, the most attractive places for excavation were the principal towns, such as Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Nippur, Babylon, Aššur, Mari, Susa and many others. These excavations have yielded much archaeological material, showing on the one hand the plan of the towns, their temples, their houses, their quays, etc., and offering on the other hand much written information concerning the history, daily life, religion, literature, law, etc. The most conspicuous feature which has come to light as a result of the excavation of the third millennium towns of lower Mesopotamia is the existence of relatively large towns from the very beginning of habitation in the plains, towns inhabited by Sumerians and, originally, each one forming a political unit. These units soon began to fight among themselves for supremacy. This typical city civilization is described by A. Falkenstein in an article under the self-explanatory title „La cité-temple sumérienne” in the Journal of World History I (1954), pp. 784-814.

Studying the written information yielded by the excavations it has been recognized in the course of time that Semites of different stocks have intruded into lower Mesopotamia from ancient times onwards. These were the people from the surrounding steppes, who found their way into the fertile plains occupied by the Sumerian city-states. These bedouins, of course, did not leave striking archaeological evidence, but their typical Semitic names and their language infiltrated into the documents. About the 23rd century B.C. such Semites, the Akkadians, came into power over the whole of Mesopotamia for about a century, and well over a hundred years later, in the 20th century B.C., the Semitic civilization finally became dominant over the Sumerian civilization. It appears that the Sumerians, who had arrived in lower Mesopotamia at the beginning of the third millennium and whose numbers were never supplemented by new immigrations, had made way completely for the ever penetrating Semites in the beginning of the second millennium B.C.; but the influence of their civilization remained for a long time.

This is one of the most fascinating problems of ancient Mesopotamia — from where did these Semites come? Their way of living and their wanderings

through the Near East are illustrated by the history of Abraham. But as they wandered from place to place without leaving any archaeological traces, their origin is extremely difficult to trace. Several times already attempts have been made (notably by Th. Bauer, Die Ostkanaanäer, with supplement in ZA 38, 1928, pp. 145-170, „Eine Überprüfung der „Amoriter“-Frage“) to trace the origin of those Semites, from whose stock the names of many kings in the Old-Babylonian period were borrowed, especially those of the dynasty of Babylon, with its culmination point in Hammurabi, and who caused that dynasty to be named the Amorite dynasty.

In a recent study, entitled „Les nomades en Mésopotamie au temps des rois de Mari“ (1957), J. R. Kupper has approached the problem as a whole and achieved a fair measure of progress in its solution. As this problem is of the greatest importance for our knowledge of Mesopotamian society at the beginning of the 2nd millennium, a short sketch of Kupper’s book will be given here. As is shown by the title of the book, the archives of Mari, fruits of the successful French excavations on that site, form the basis of Kupper’s study, and it is indeed these archives which have afforded much new material relevant to the problem, just as they have already done so with reference to many other problems.

The author has traced four large groups of nomads, the Hanaeans, the Benjaminites, the Sutaeans and the Amorralcans (Amorites). The latter two are known from lower Mesopotamian sources, the former two mainly from the Mari texts.

The Hanaeans lived in the region of the middle Euphrates, and in the kingdom of Mari they formed an essential part of the population. Generally they were under the rule of the kings of Mari and they formed an essential, although separate part of the armies of these kings. They were organized in clans or tribes, each with its own name, and even in the army this organization was maintained. It may be supposed that these people lived in tents, and although the texts use the word ālānu, towns or villages, for these settlements, it may be accepted that these were camps. By the time these nomads, originally shepherds, etc., had become more or less bound to the kingdom of Mari, they had begun to settle and their name became connected with the country of Mari, with the eventual result that it came to denote the country itself.

Whilst the Hanaeans were still settling, the Benjaminites, dealt with in the next chapter, at first were still to be seen as mere nomads, wandering about through the whole of North Mesopotamia; there is evidence of them in the region of Mari, the regions to the north of it, and the region of Harran. Contrary to the Hanaeans, the Benjaminites (literally: sons of the south) were the eternal enemies of the kings of Mari. Tracing the names of some tribes of the Benjaminites, the Ub-ra-bi-a-yi, the Ia-ri-bi-i, the Ia-ab-ru-ri-i and the Am-na-ni-i,