

# Fire and the Sword: the Technique of Destruction

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IN the course of excavation, diggers at many sites come upon a layer in the accumulated debris having such a considerable ash content as to convince them that the settlement occupying the site at that particular period had been destroyed by fire; and this supposition is of course strengthened if the ceramic forms or other cultural objects contained in the mound change at this point. While in very many instances these deductions are probably correct, it is the purpose of this paper to examine what destruction by fire entails in the way of preparation, how it is affected by the style of structures involved and whether the total destruction of villages by fire or their inhabitants by the sword is as simple a procedure as would sometimes appear to be imagined. Having taken part in the destruction by fire of a number of villages of the type that obtains, and must have obtained for centuries past, in the Indo-Afghan borderlands, I have learned by experience that the casual application of a torch will not necessarily set fire to anything.

The destruction of a village in Waziristan was almost always accompanied by strenuous opposition on the part of its disgruntled inhabitants, and it is difficult to believe that in the 2nd millenium B.C. reaction was very different. A house with mud and rubble walls and a flat mud covered roof has to be prepared for burning or it will not burn at all: the two essentials being extra fuel and a good draught. These houses will not burn by the simple application of a torch to such woodwork as forms part of their fabric; elaborate preparation must be made if they are to be even rendered uninhabitable.

The architecture is of rubble walls with a single doorway and a few, if any, small windows. The roof is of three inch poles carried on two large beams in prolongation from one end wall to the other, their butts supported centrally by a bracket on two wooden pillars; on these poles is a thick layer of brushwood and on this about two or three inches of mud. Such houses can be dealt with as follows. Firstly, dry brushwood must be stacked round the walls inside and then draught provided either by digging a good deal of the mud off the roof and hacking out draught holes in the brushwood layer, a most laborious method and one likely to be attended by fatalities if the enraged householders are being fussy over the damage being done to their property, or by cutting the main supporting pillars with explosive, which drops the roof in the centre producing draught vents round the top of the walls where the roof poles protrude. The stacked brushwood on each side of the door was sprinkled with kerosene and this was fired with a torch made of kerosene-soaked sandbag wired to a stick, lit with a match (FIG. 1). When the inhabitants discovered that we used their cut brushwood goat-pound fences to burn their houses, they fired these themselves and effectively made house burning impossible. Where this had been done, only the destruction of valuable main beams by explosives was possible. Even where houses were thoroughly burned they could be, and in fact were, made habitable after a few months work<sup>1</sup>.

In the course of such operations could one, if one had wished, have wiped out the inhabitants by the sword? The evidence is that even employing skilful means of deception and rapid night marches no inhabitants were ever encountered—all had managed to make a safe get-away. At the same time however there was a stringent and effective blockade, families being driven up into the snow-line without shelter and with the

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<sup>1</sup> Experience gained in Operations in Waziristan against the Mahsuds and Wazirs, winter 1919-20.

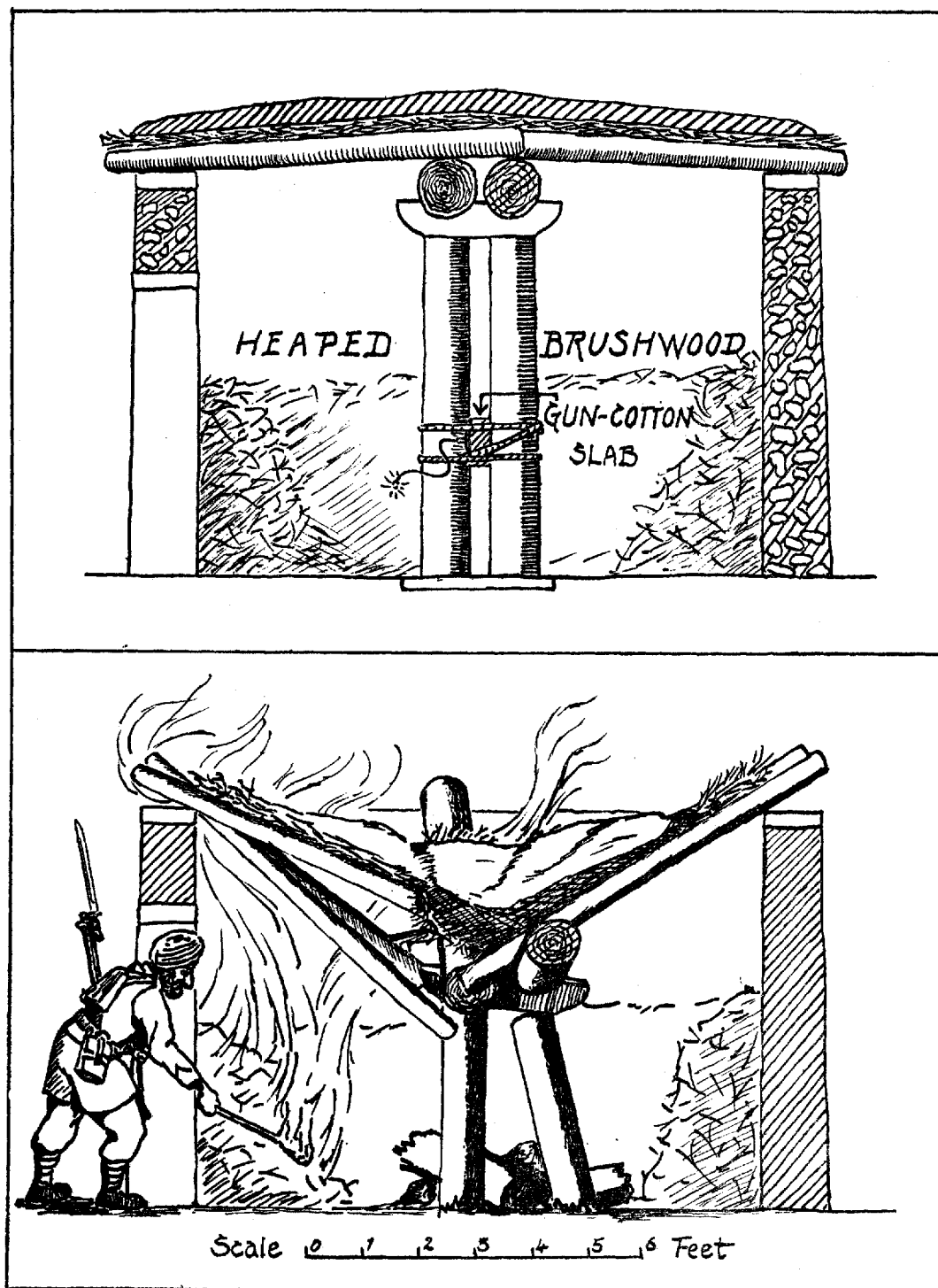


FIG. 1. TWO STAGES IN THE DESTRUCTION OF A HOUSE WITH FLAT MUD ROOF IN WAZIRISTAN

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temperature falling at night to 7° Fah., and though they suffered considerable hardship, few died. In the light of these facts let us judge what probably happened in the past.

Wooden, reed or daub and wattle houses and houses having thatched roofs could be fired without difficulty by raiders in a matter of moments, but houses with flat mud roofs, as are deemed to have existed throughout much of the Middle East, could not have been fired in the scramble of a raid, and if no extra fuel were available they could not have been fired at all. There are two possibilities, either the tentative reconstructions of houses with flat mud roofs that are often made are in many cases incorrect or equally in many cases the so-called destruction level is nothing of the kind.

The remains of the burnt house in the highest level of the Sohr Damb of Nal in South Baluchistan, though difficult to sort out, seem to indicate a thatched roof with a ridge pole carried on a king-post<sup>2</sup>. If this were the normal roofing of houses in the Indo-Iranian borderlands of the 2nd millennium B.C., their destruction by burning would have presented no difficulty. It seems probable however that many houses whose remains show an ash layer were mud roofed and were in fact never destroyed by fire. The interior of a Wazir house where fires have burned for many years on an open hearth with no chimney and very little ventilation, presents a floor thickly coated with a fine grey dust hopping with fleas and a brushwood ceiling kippered black with smoke. More houses in monsoon areas, and the monsoon probably spread at least to the Iranian border in the 3rd and 2nd millennia, collapse from rain than are ever destroyed by fire. The falling down of one's house is to an Indian what the demise of a grandmother is to an office-boy, the stock excuse for a holiday, and when a house collapses in this way and the site is levelled for a new one, the debris, where the standards of hygiene are at a Wazir level, contains a thick layer of ashy earth floor and blackened brushwood which would in due course present an archaeologist with conclusive evidence of an invasion and destruction by fire and the sword.

Let us now attempt to apply some of this practical experience to the events of the 2nd millennium B.C. Early in that period those involved in warlike ventures would, as a habit normal also in peace, carry in a pouch or some such container a flint blade, a lump of iron pyrites and some tinder, and with these could produce a fire probably more efficiently and rapidly than we can with matches, if the experience of picnicking is any criterion. They could have provided themselves with torches impregnated with vegetable oil, resin or pitch, and carried out the necessary preparation with ropes and axes. If the houses had thatched roofs, a torch applied to windward would set all ablaze at once; with flat mud roofs however they would have faced all the difficulties we met in Waziristan, and deprived of dry brushwood could have carried out no burning whatsoever.

Modern frontier expeditions, like the Romans, made a defended camp their first task after an advance, and one difficulty encountered was to carry out an effective destruction before having to disengage and withdraw to one's camp. Did this trouble our invaders of the 2nd millennium? One would imagine that they might remain *in situ* and, if it were cold, warm their hands at the cheerful blaze. But it is doubtful whether the local inhabitants, if at all warlike, would leave the attackers undisturbed. Danger from shot weapons—bows and arrows and javelins, would not be so great as from modern rifles, but even so in enclosed scrub country a number of casualties could quite easily be inflicted without running much risk.

Modern operations avoided both night for the actual destruction and being involved in the dense smoke of the burning. Darkness and smoke both give excellent opportunities for counter-attack. A charge of swordsmen, especially delivered from the intensified

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<sup>2</sup> 'Excavations in Baluchistan', 1925, by H. Hargreaves, *Mem. Archaeol. Sur. of India*, No. 35.

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dark against an enemy shown up by the glare of burning, could deal out many casualties and the same would be possible over familiar ground under cover of smoke. Today automatic weapons ensure immunity from such counter attacks, but in ancient times they would have been most effective. It seems likely therefore that the considerations which made us avoid darkness except for the approach, and smoke except as a screen to cover our withdrawal, would have been even more compelling for our early raiders.

Did the invaders clear out by night or did they still occupy the scattered villages from which they had driven the inhabitants? No modern force would lightly take the risk of nighting in scattered groups on unfamiliar ground. A savage enraged enemy would have every opportunity by concentrating on one group of wiping it out by a night attack, and nothing would have been more simple against ill-disciplined raiders.

It would appear therefore that only large invading forces could have carried out the relatively protracted destruction of mud-roofed houses with any degree of security and that widespread destruction must indicate an invasion on a large scale; and even so unless extra fuel were available the houses could not be burnt, they could only be pulled to bits and their woodwork used for fuel as was done in Waziristan to villages near to the camp. Having regard to these facts it is probable that the houses that were burnt on the N.W. Frontier of India in the widespread destructions of *c.* 1800 B.C. had thatched roofs.

All levels containing an ash layer cannot be due to destruction by burning; very many must represent dirty ash-impregnated floors. At the mound of Sar Dheri, twelve miles west of Mardan in the N.W. Frontier Province of Pakistan, the excavators stated that three final occupation levels, all showing signs of destruction by fire, were observed in the uppermost 8 feet of deposit, this being apparent from three successive layers of ashes<sup>3</sup>. As however the same families of potters occupied each level leaving the evidence of their kilns, either there were no forcible conflagrations or these folk showed great tenacity in returning to the old homestead; a fact which leads us to consider whether the sword wiped out all or even the majority of an invaded people.

As has been shown from modern experience, dwellers in anything but the most open and easy terrain take to the hills, scrub or forests and evade their attackers quite easily. Did then people in ancient times never get wiped out by the sword? Of course they did, the answer as far as the Near and Middle East are concerned being paradoxically enough 'cities of refuge'. These were excellent to shelter villagers when an alarm had gone out that raiders were out in strength, but if the local kinglet of such a stronghold, buoyed up by the short-term prudence of flattering courtiers and soothsayers, decided to outface a Shalmaneser I or some similar tough character, then there was no escape for those trapped by the conqueror who killed or enslaved them.

In cities in the Orient today, and possibly throughout most of the world until relatively recent times, upper storeys of buildings were of wood or of daub and wattle with wood frames. Such structures, as distinct from single storey mud-roofed houses, would lend themselves to wholesale destruction by fire and many cities were totally destroyed. We can take it, however, that there was seldom a replacement of one set of inhabitants by another. Usually in fact the original people remained to serve the conquering minority, except where there was a mass migration of people displaced by more powerful invaders. It was the collapse of civilization under the impact of barbarism, the extinction of good administration causing canals to silt up, communications and trade to disappear and cities to fall into ruin, that produced famine, chaos and devastation to a far greater degree than Fire and the Sword.

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<sup>3</sup> The report of the extensive excavations at this site, including a 52 feet deep test pit, has not yet been fully published.