

## "EL GOOFFAH."

*(A Mesopotamian Boat.)*

BY A. LOCHER.



THE natives of Mesopotamia possess a kind of boat, used solely for fresh-water navigation, which, for originality of design and manner of construction, is certainly very peculiar. It is probable, too, that the existence of such boats has hitherto scarcely been known beyond the boundaries of the country where they are in use.

"El Gooffah," as the Arabic speaking population of that region commonly calls this peculiar craft, is undoubtedly a boat of very ancient origin, dating its first use but little later than the raft,—the latter being probably the most primitive of all floating structures.

There is proof positive that the gooffah was in use in Assyria many centuries anterior to the birth of Christ, as unmistakable fac-similes thereof, represented on bass-reliefs, inscriptions and other antiquities, unearthed from among the ruins of Nineveh, Babylon and Kufa, attest.

The gooffah is nothing more nor less than a huge, perfectly round basket, of extremely strong and coarse wooden wicker-work.

It is constructed of various sizes, varying between four and eight feet in diameter, and between three and four feet in depth; which size, combined with its spherical shape and slightly rounded bottom, renders it capable of carrying

from two to ten tons of dead weight,—a carrying capacity, exceeding that of any other kind of boat of equal dimensions hitherto known.

The huge basket, which constitutes the framework of the craft, is rendered perfectly water-tight by a coat of asphaltum, carefully applied about an inch thick all over the inside and outside of the basket, after having been mixed with some other substance, which latter causes the asphaltum, almost as soon as applied, to become and remain as hard as stone, in spite of the intense heat of the sun.

The sides and bottom of the gooffah are from three to five inches thick, according to the size of the craft, and the rim is nicely rounded off.

As a good breeze is seldom blowing in that

region, and the water of the rivers scarcely ever ruffled, the gooffah can be loaded down with safety to within a few inches of the surface of the water, and, as the craft is destitute of a helm or rudder, it is both steered and propelled by means of a light wooden paddle, about five feet long.

For down-river navigation, one man generally constitutes the entire crew, except when the gooffah is deeply loaded, and consequently not as easily managed. When going against the current, however, this paddling is very fatiguing work, even for strong and expert "gooffajees" (Arabic for men who navigate the gooffah). So they prefer to fasten a long tough rope to the boat; and while one of them wades ashore, and pulls it by the rope against the current, the other one, who remains aboard, steers with his paddle, so as to keep the gooffah out of too shallow water, and from running foul of the river bank.

Owing to the total absence of anything like a keel in this truly Oriental craft, it has the somewhat objectionable characteristic of continually twirling slowly round and round on its center of gravity, as well when carried on by the current as when propelled by one paddle only; so much so, indeed, that persons not accustomed to this rotary locomotion are apt to feel dizzy, and sometimes sick in consequence thereof. This inconvenience, however, can be avoided by the employment of two paddlers, instead of only one; who station themselves a little apart from each other, and while one of them sweeps constantly to the right with his paddle, the other one does so continually to the left, by which simple proceeding the gooffah is naturally held in a steady position. By dint of time, however, people get so accustomed to the revolving, above referred to, that they soon begin to consider it rather a convenience, as the rotatory progress of the craft enables them to get a constantly revolving view of the scenery.

Gooffahs are extensively employed as ferry-boats on the rivers Euphrates and Tigris, as well as on their principal tributaries, and are, as such, really very useful in that country, which is so poorly provided with bridges.

Owing to their perfectly spherical shape and gently rounded bottom, it is all but impossible to capsize them; moreover, their draft of water, for the same reasons, is less than that of any other kind of boat, of the same size, in existence.

Some gooffahs are large enough to carry as many as twenty persons at once, if the latter stand upright. Camels, horses, cattle, sheep, etc., are likewise transported across the rivers by means of gooffahs.

In Mossul, Bagdad, and Bassorah, gooffahs play an important role as pleasure boats, for they are the only craft available there for the purpose. The natives, and residents of all creeds and complexions in those cities, delight in spending a few hours daily, in the morning or evening, or during those justly famous Mesopotamian moonlight nights, in little pleasure trips on the water.

cursion in the gooffah, over the smooth waters of the stately Tigris.

Both of the ladies wear the traditional "pagee" (pronounce: page-y), the stiff horse-hair veil worn by the women of the higher class of Moslems, Jews and Christians throughout Mesopotamia. The veil of the fair sex of Persia is composed of embroidered white linen or muslin; that of the women of the east coast of Arabia of dark red silk, and that of the women of Egypt, and certain parts of North Africa, of black cotton or thin woolen cloth of the same color.

The Mesopotamian horse-hair veil has the pecu-



A MESOPOTAMIAN "GOOFFAH."

In their gooffahs they cross, and recross the river in search of the cosiest palm-tree groves along its banks, where they ensconce themselves in numerous picturesque little groups. Then they quietly enjoy themselves—men and women smoke composedly the fragrant "narghileh" (water-bowl-tobacco-pipe), sip rákee (arack) or "shérbet" (lemonade), eat delicious dates, pomegranates, grapes, and other fruit of the country; chat, laugh, sing, relate stories, play cards, chess, and other games, or bathe in the cool waters of the silvery stream.

The sketch accompanying this article represents a Moslem merchant, with two of his wives and a negro slave, enjoying his customary evening ex-

pliancy of being utterly impenetrable to the gaze of the outsider, while it is perfectly transparent for the person who wears it. The face of a respectable Moslem female, according to Moslem notions, must never be seen unveiled outside of the threshold of her home.

And so, paddled by the faithful "gooffahjee," they slowly float over the placid waters, and under the evening sky, gently revolving as they go, so that sometimes they look east, and sometimes west, and north, and south. But, so long as the pipe draws well, and the air is cool, and the water feels soft and pleasant to the ladies' fingers, they care not how they float in this boat, without a stern and with never a sign of a bow.