

*Edgar James Banks (1866-1945) was an Assyriologist who did much of his archaeology in the first several decades of the early 1900s, was the first American to climb Mount Ararat in 1912, and crossed all the deserts from Turkey to Aden (Yemen) the same year. In 1900, Banks applied for and received permission from Ottoman authorities to dig in the modern-day city of Bismya, Iraq, site of the ancient city of Adab. Edgar J. Banks is responsible for most of the small cuneiform collections at universities, historical societies, seminaries, and museums throughout the United States. According to Banks biographer, Dr. Ewa Wasilewska of University of Utah, "He imported at least 11,000 such relics to the United States, and some estimates suggest the number may have been as many as 175,000 pieces." When universities re-discovered boxes from Banks over the years, they typically found clay Sumerian cuneiform tablets dates 2400-2100 B.C. wrapped in tissue paper, complete with a translation. Banks led an interesting life, a summary of which can be found in the excellent article, "The Forgotten Indiana Jones," by Dr. Ewa Wasilewska in The World and I Magazine ([www.worldandi.com](http://www.worldandi.com)). Banks himself wrote several books, and one of them, Bismya or The Lost City of Adab (1912), has been made available online by the University of Chicago Library ([www1.lib.uchicago.edu](http://www1.lib.uchicago.edu)). In hope of gaining access to archaeological sites, Banks secured a position in Baghdad in 1898 as an American consul to the Ottoman Empire. In 1900, Banks was chosen as leader of a proposed archaeological expedition to Ur. The venture, called the Oriental Exploration Fund (Babylon Division), was sponsored by the University of Chicago and financed by John D. Rockefeller. During the wait for permission to excavate, Banks supported himself by becoming acting professor of ancient history at Robert College (now known as Bosporus University in Istanbul). He also acted as assistant to the American ambassador to Ottoman Empire, John Leishman, with whom he became close friends. Banks received his long-awaited permit on October 3, 1903. It had taken Banks three years to obtain the Ottoman sultan's permission to begin his dig. Even then, he could not excavate Ur. Nor could he choose any other prominent sites. His excavations were to be at Bismya, the site of ancient Adab, in Iraq. Banks' work at this site showed that Bismya (ancient Adab) had been inhabited for at least 2000 years and the expedition uncovered a massive ziggurat, several temples, a palace, at least one archives of tablets, private houses and a cemetery. In 1921, film director Cecil B. DeMille invited Banks to become a consultant on movies that concerned biblical stories. Few recognize the name Edgar James Banks, despite that fact he was involved in the international politics of the Middle East well before T.E. Lawrence (of Arabia) even visited the region.*

#### Chapter 6

## 1912 Edgar Banks

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Edgar J. Banks wrote the following article, "To the Summit of Mount Ararat," which was published in *Open Court* Vol. 27, 1913, pages 398-410 and is available at the Boston Public Library.

"You cannot ascend Ararat, Effendi. No man has ever been to the top of the mountain, and no man ever can. Ararat is the mothe of the world, and Allah forbid that any man see her face. Men

come from England and from France, and they go into the mountain for three days or for four days or for a week, and then say they have climbed to the summit, but they speak not the truth for when they reach a certain place in the mountain, Allah casts a deep sleep upon them and bears them back to the base. Seek not to go up Ararat, Effendi, lest you too become a man of lies.”

The aged Kurd, who would dissuade me from climbing Ararat, was sincere. He was expressing the belief of most of the Kurds and Armenians and Turks and Persians who live in the little villages about the base and on the sloping sides of the great mountain. And yet in the wonderfully clear air the summit of Ararat, all white with snow, was distinctly visible; it seemed an easy climb of but an hour or two. The belief that the summit of Ararat is unattainable dates back at least several centuries, perhaps even to a great antiquity. Sir John Mandeville, the tale of whose wonderful travels was written about A.D. 1332, refers to it. He says:

And there beside is another hill that men clep [call] Ararat, but the Jews clep it Taneez, where Noah's ship rested, and yet is upon that mountain. And men may see it afar in clear weather. And that mountain is well a seven mile high. And some men say that they have seen and touched the ship, and put their fingers in the parts where the fiend went out, when that Noahs said *Benedicte*. But they that say such words, say they will. For a man may not go up the mountain, for great plenty of snow is always on that mountain neither summer nor winter. So that no man may go up there, no man never did, since the time of Noah, save a monk that, by the grace of God, brought one of the planks down, that yet is in the cluster at the foot of the mountain.

Ararat is of special interest, not only because of its unusual beauty and height, but because of the story that Noah's Ark rested there. However to connect the story with this particular peak is somewhat difficult. In ancient Assyrian times the name Ararat referred to the entire mountain range, rather than to an individual peak. St. Jerome, an early Christian writer, speaks of Ararat as the plain of the Araxes, which lies at the northern base of the mountain.

The tradition to which Sir John Mandeville refers, is still repeated by the natives, for they still tell how Hagop or St. Jacob frequently tried to reach the summit, but was always brought back to the base during the night. Finally when he succeeded, he brought back a plank from the ark, and some of the pitch with which the Ark was smeared. The plank was shown in the monastery at Aghurri until 1840, and the pitch was sought for its wonderful medicinal properties. The pictures of Ararat of two centuries ago plainly show the Ark standing on the summit of the mountain between two peaks.

On August 7, 1912, with my companion, Dr. Gibson of Chicago, I arrived at Erivan... We discovered that Ararat was under military control, and that special permission from the government must be had before we could climb it... Our first stop was at Etchmiadzin, the seat of the head of the Gregorian church. The little place has always been associated with the mountain...and carefully preserved in a chamber of the church, in the rear of the altar, is a piece of dark wood, three inches long and an inch in width, carved with the figures of Christ and of the Virgin Mary. The priests claims that it is a part of the ark.

Our first night on the mountain was spent in a little Kurdish village near the entrance to the great chasm which reaches into the very heart of the mountain. Aghurri is a modern town near the site of an earlier town of the same name. There it is said that Noah settled after he left the ark. There he cultivated the vine, and there he made the wine of which he drank. Seventy years ago his very vine used to be pointed out. There, too, used to grow the willow trees which sprang from the planks of the ark. But these interesting things may be seen no more, for on June 29, 1840, an earthquake shook the mountain to its foundation; a part of the mountain fell upon the village and completely buried it. Huge rocks, thousands of tons in weight, were hurled for miles down the slope. The shrine of Saint Jacob, far in the gorge, together with the plank from the ark, perished.

At night fall we found a camping place on a projecting rock, by the side of a great snow field, about fourteen thousand feet in height. The Kurds called the place *Kis Kalesi*, or Maiden's Castle... Here we heard the streams of water trickling far down beneath the rocks, and melted snow was our drink. Finally a thousand feet from the summit we reached the last barrier of great diorite rocks; beyond, the slope was not so steep, but loose stones of reddish porphyry, mixed with ashes, made climbing even more difficult. When half way up the ash field we observed the strong odor of sulphur, yet no fissures in the mountain side could be seen. In the hollow between the two summits it is said that the Ark rested.

At the edge of the snow-capped summit, there projected from the snow two wooden poles which once supported a large wooden box. It was placed there by some Russian officials several years ago to contain a book, that all who climbed the mountain might record their names, but the strong wind had broken the poles and hurled down the box, and we found it half buried in snow and ice. Once a Russian flag waved above the box, but the flag, now in shreds, was also frozen into the ice. Near the box is a pile of stones; search among them revealed a bottle and a tin box containing the names of those who had reached the summit. Of the few names which I saw, all were written in Russian; one man, more ambitious than the others, had left there a bronze plate engraved with his name and a date. The Summit of Ararat is frequently very cloudy, even when it is perfectly clear in the valley below. During the daytime

the hot air from the valley rushes upward, and reaching the snow fields near the summit is cooled. Thus the clouds are formed. An hour upon the summit chilled us through. The descent to the camping place took less than half the time of the ascent.

