

The Secret Garden

By Peter Martin

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In the beginning, the Bible describes a fruitful paradise and an ideal man and woman. Now archaeologist David Rohl says he has found the real Garden of Eden, in Iran. Peter Martin joined him on a journey through Old Testament country to trace the steps of Adam's descendants back to their original home.

After a 700 mile drive from Ahwaz in the south-west of Iran, we had come out of the northern end of the Zagros Mountains into Azerbaijan province and down onto the Miyandoab Plain, where barren foothills black-dotted with an occasional Bedouin tent had suddenly given way to ... there's no other way to say it ... an earthly paradise of large, walled gardens right and left, and a profusion of orchards heavy with every kind of fruit. The odd cement factory and petrochemical plant aside, that is. No longer with the road to ourselves, open trucks barrelled along, laden with apples, pears, grapes, melons, maize cobs and bouncing tomatoes. In true-Brit celebration of our arrival, archaeologist David Rohl and I exchanged half-daft smiles. With a fine sense of occasion, Siamak Soofi, our interpreter, quoted a line from an ancient Persian song: "Last night I dreamt that the sun and the moon kissed each other."

In its wonderful unlikeliness, the notion suited the moment exactly. For according to very specific geographical references given in the book of Genesis, we had just entered biblical Eden, with the Garden of Eden - Genesis ref: "eastward in Eden" - now all around us and swinging away between two small mountain ranges to our right. Directly ahead, under the far range, lay the sprawling, smog-fuzzed city of Tabriz.

"Paradise lost ?" asked Rohl. But hold on ! The Garden of Eden ? It was important not to get carried away, of course. For one thing, there are walled gardens - Persian gardens, with shade trees and fountains - everywhere in Iran, and nowhere in Genesis does it suggest Adam and Eve took their ease so municipally. Secondly, Tabriz requires to be fed. Hence the intensively worked fruitfulness of the immediate area. It's the city's kitchen garden. But here's a strange thing: in every small town hereabouts, you see at least

one big public wall painted with a folk-art depiction of paradise, a mountain of God with water gushing down to dense orchards and lush pastures below. Six thousand years ago, the same icon symbolised the home of Enki, a Sumerian god and the cross-cultural equivalent of Yahweh, God of the Old Testament. At that time, this area was known by two names: Aratta, and the Edin.

But could this really be biblical Eden ? Take chapter two of *Genesis*, verses 10 to 14. It says there that Eden encompasses the sources of four rivers: the Euphrates and the Hiddekel (Hebrew for the Tigris) - no problem with either of those - plus the Gihon and the Pishon. Scholars since Josephus, the 1st century Jewish historian, have argued as to which two rivers these might be, and you won't find either, as named, on any modern map. According to David Rohl, however, the true identities of the Gihon and Pishon were cracked by one Reginald Walker, a little-known scholar who died 10 years ago. Walker had published his findings in the quaintly titled "Still Trowelling", newsletter of the Ancient and Medieval History Book Club, in 1986. "But because the prevailing wisdom even among most biblical scholars is that the Old Testament is little more than myth," said Rohl, "nobody took him seriously."



So let's reconsider Walker's findings. Just north-east of where Rohl and I, with our half daft smiles, had entered the supposed Eden, there's a river called the Aras. But before the Islamic invasion of the 8th century AD, as Walker discovered, the Aras was known as the Gaihun, equivalent of the

Hebrew Gihon. Amazingly, as Rohl subsequently found, Victorian dictionaries had referred to the river as the Gihon-Aras.

So what of the fourth river rising in the Eden of Genesis, the Pishon ? Walker's only other local candidate was the Uizun. But again, it seems to have given up its secret fairly easily: Pishon, according to Walker, is simply the Hebrew corruption of Uizon, wherein labial "U" becomes labial "P", "z" becomes "sh", while "o" and "u" are well-accepted linguistic variations.

Then Walker made another discovery on one of his maps: a village called Noqdi. Could this be a trace of the land of Nod, the place of Cain's exile after the murder of Abel ? Noqdi's location certainly fitted the Genesis reference: "in the land of Nod, which is east of Eden."

"Reginald Walker never came to Iran," Rohl explained, "and I do have one or two reservations about his phonetic juggling. But, taken altogether, the possibilities were so astonishing, I had to come and see for myself." After two research trips here, during which he discovered additional Eden locators that fitted Genesis, Rohl is convinced.

The likeliest location of the Garden of Eden is by no means the only jaw-dropper in Rohl's new book, "Legend: the Genesis of Civilisation", published on 12th October 1998 (Century, £20). But then that's true to form. Just three years ago, in his first book "A Test of Time", then in the TV series "Pharaohs and Kings", Rohl stood Egyptology on its ear by claiming that the accepted chronology of ancient Egypt was wrong. Not only did he present good evidence that the pharaonic chronology should be shortened by 300 years, when you apply the shorter chronology it makes for an unprecedented series of fits between Egyptian history and Bible narratives.

In the main, academics weren't kind to Rohl's thesis. Leading Bible scholar Professor Thomas L Thompson insisted that any attempt to write history based on "a direct integration of biblical and extra-biblical sources is not only dubious but wholly ludicrous." Then again, in the wake of Rohl's work, Professor Israel Finkelstein, head of archaeology at Tel Aviv University, has already lowered the dates of Israelite archaeology by a century.

A "Test of Time" began in the middle of Genesis and gave a new context to Adam's line from Jacob and Joseph onwards. In "Legend", the bold Rohl

begins with Adam and Eve and affords their immediate line a historical and archaeological place. Not all his evidence is original. Indeed, he draws it from a stunning variety of sources and disciplines. But Rohl's real achievement is the way in which he's pieced the evidence together into a coherent, properly magnificent story, the first of all stories, for the first time. He "finds" Noah in all manner of sources, puts a date on the Flood and identifies where the Ark landed; no, it wasn't Mount Ararat - but more of that later. Thereafter, he traces the migration of Noah's spreading line down through the Zagros Mountains into the plain of Sumer. The Sumerians, whose high period was the 4th and 5th millennia BC, were astonishing: inventors of writing, the wheel, metalwork, and seagoing navigation. Then Rohl demonstrates how these people first made sea-trade contact with north Africa, and later swept into Egypt to become the first pharaohs. Erich von Daniken's dingbat theory of a visit from outer space notwithstanding, Legend's exposition, accompanied by splendid photographs and illustrations, would certainly explain how pharaonic Egypt advanced in culture so quickly.

Ahwaz, start point of our journey to Eden, is a ramshackle Klondike of an oil town south of the Zagros Mountains. On the night before setting off, Rohl was explaining the logic of the route. Bizarrely, or perhaps not, the hotel's only Muzak tape was a medley of Christmas carols: "Silent Night", "The Holly and the Ivy", "While Shepherds Watched ..."

Of course, we could have "done Eden", plus garden, by flying to Tabriz and jumping into a taxi, as tourists surely will from now on. Instead, we elected to start our journey hard by the plain of Sumer, south of the Zagros. This, so says the Bible, is the place where the descendants of Adam settled in the period immediately following the great Flood. The so-called "*pottery trail*" is good evidence of that southerly cultural migration. The oldest pottery, 7th millennium BC, comes from north of the Zagros. The next generation of pottery, from the 6th millennium, turns up halfway down through the Zagros. Roughly 2,000 years later, the first "modern" pottery appeared at Uruk, the second city on earth. By then, it was being mass-produced on fast pottery wheels and was of poorer quality than the 7th-millennium coil-made originals. Plus ca change.

Starting south of the Zagros, our self-given task was to make the journey of Adam's line in reverse, to travel backwards in time from Sumer through the Zagros Mountains to the first of all places: Eden. Along the way we would

encounter some of the godlike characters and ancient beliefs that inform the Old Testament, including the creation myth of Adam and Eve.

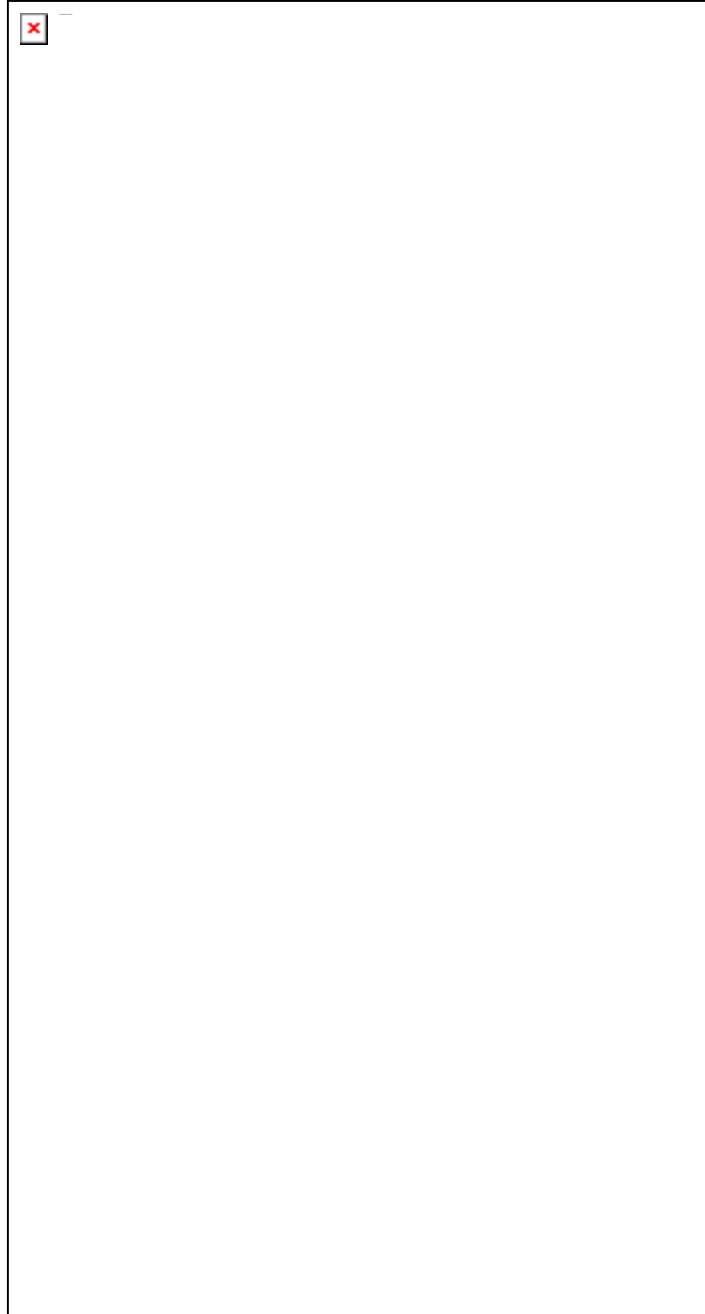
With a 7 am start from Ahwaz, we drove through flat, boring oilfield country in the early light, oil flares against the skyline like tall black candles with tremendous flames, as for Old Nick's birthday. As it happened, we were following a route to Eden that was also taken long ago by a royal emissary. "The world's first postman carrying the world's first royal correspondence" is how Rohl had described him. Told on 3,500-year-old clay tablets indented with cuneiform script, the postman's ancient story forms part of the epic of Enmerkar, who was a priest-king of Uruk. Our postman was the poor instrument of a long-distance argument between Enmerkar in Uruk and the (unnamed) lord of Aratta, Aratta being the Sumerian name for Eden. Enmerkar wanted to build a fabulous temple in Uruk for the great Inanna, goddess of love and fertility, and he repeatedly demanded that the lord of Aratta send him large quantities of precious metals and gems for the job.

"The problem wasn't stinginess on the lord of Aratta's part" Rohl explained, "He was terrified of losing Inanna forever to the cities of the plain. The god Enki had already been removed from the mountains to Eridu, the first city on earth. Now he's going to lose Inanna to Uruk." The royal row went on for years, with the emissary trekking back and forth through the Zagros Mountains, three months each way. It would take us three days.

But how does this Sumerian story tie in with that of Adam's line, post-Flood? The first genealogical "fix" is that Noah's son Shem appears to have been the eponymous dynastic founder of Sumer - as the linguistic journey went: Shem, Shumer, Sumer. By extensive analysis of ancient legends, Rohl has also demonstrated that Enki is the equivalent of Yahweh, God of the Old Testament. On the same reckoning, Inanna is a niece, if a culturally removed one, of the biblical Eve. Yet another "fix" is the double identity of Enmerkar - who, again, turns out to be a well-known Old Testament figure. But let Rohl do the unmasking: "The 'kar' part of Enmerkar is an add-on epithet meaning 'hunter', and he is also celebrated as the 'builder-king of Uruk'. But Genesis, too, tells of a 'mighty hunter in the eyes of the Lord' - Nimrod, Noah's great-grandson - and credits him as the builder-king of Erech. Same man, same city?" For Rohl, the clincher is in the rest of Enmerkar's name. "Drop the 'mighty hunter' epithet, and you're left with Enmer. Now knock

out the vowels - because early Hebrew didn't record vowels - and you've got Nmr. Now knock out Nimrod's vowels, and who have we here ?" Rohl smiled. "We can argue about that stray 'd', if you like."

Our first stop was to see a man-made mountain of God, the ziggurat at Choga Zambil in what was ancient Elam, just north of Sumer. A youngster as ziggurats go, it was built by the Elamite king Untash Gal in the 2nd millennium BC. A grey desert fox trotted across an upper terrace and disappeared. Over black tea and biscuits sweet enough to make your dental fillings sing falsetto, produced by our Jeevesian driver, Hosien Mokhtari, we discussed sacred mountains and why it was that Old Testament figures would ascend one to talk to God. "You can understand their awe of mountains", said Rohl. "Imagine it - life-giving water in the form of a spring actually coming out of the top of a mountain. Now why would it do that unless God willed it ? A high mountain was where God lived. So once these people had migrated from Eden down through the Zagros here to the plain, they had to build their own mountains by way of ensuring continuous contact with God."



The Choga Zambil ziggurat is a beauty. With a base about the size of three football pitches, the whole thing is girded with information: entire courses of brick going all the way round it, each brick indented with still-crisp cuneiform script. Soofi, pointing out the perfect brick arches, gave a chauvinistic snort: "Roman arches !" Centrally, there's a recessed stone staircase, and at the top there was once a "dark chamber" to which the priest-king would ascend to commune with a god and, according to iconography of the same period, to couple with a prostitute elect. But what

had this ziggurat to do with Adam's line ? The name game again: "Chief god of the Elamites was Enshushinak," Rohl explained. "'En' is Sumerian for 'lord'. 'Sush' is the city of Susa, our next stop. 'Inak' we don't know, but it might just be Enoch, Adam's direct descendant - Enoch, lord of Susa ?"

Back on the route of the ancient postman, the sun was getting hot - as in 47° hot - enough to make the eyeballs begin to dry up on a very short walk. "The English know how to make these long trips, especially old English ladies," said Soofi fondly. "But the Spanish, the Italians ! Cut half an hour off their shopping, and they don't speak to you any more."

Next stop: the ancient city of Susa, 3rd millennium BC, and the tomb of Daniel, he of the lions' den. Susa, now a mound like a small South Down, was excavated by the French Egyptologist Jacques de Morgan, in the 1890s. Justly terrified of local brigands, he built Chateau de Morgan, the castle here - "The most impressive dig house in the world," said Rohl, enviously. Beside Susa's mound is what Muslim's believe to be the tomb of Daniel. "Following the Islamic invasion of 8th century Persia," Rohl explained, "many exotic sites were named after Old Testament heroes, who also appear in the Koran." Daniel's tomb or not, it's a place of affecting dignity. A mosque, the ceiling inside is a perfect dome - a single point breaking into eight mirrored facets to form the round, then breaking outwards again in prayer-decorated tiles to form the square base building: Persian geometry. "In finer mosques," Soofi told us, "the dome point breaks into 16 facets, sometimes 32. The point is the infinity of God." Beneath the dome, the tomb is now encased in glass and pillared silver. In the immense quiet, local people kissed the tomb and prayed.

Now, following our emissary's route into the foothills of the Zagros, we entered Old Testament country - mud-brick villages, stony hills ploughed to the near-vertical, little lone stacks of flat rocks denoting ownership of crop fields. Here and there, under a rag sunshade, you'd see a lookout keeping a beady eye, especially for sheep going where they shouldn't. Farmer and shepherd: the ancient enmity - Cain and Abel. In the Zagros the only winter fuel is donkey, sheep and goat droppings, which are whacked into briquettes and piled with conspicuous neatness, like village treasure. The country is also dramatically lumpy with another kind of treasure. You see unexcavated occupation mounds everywhere, the sides occasionally crumbled to reveal

strata of past millennia. Some villages are built on mounds, their history stacked beneath.

We often encountered the postman's ancient way, the wide, stony track plain to see. Rohl said, "You have to picture him carrying Inanna's sacred standard, and her awe-inspiring effect: 'For her, they humbly saluted with greetings like mice.' En route to the Edin, he had to pass through seven 'gates', as in 'seven steps to heaven'. And the order of the gates, one to seven, starting at Susa, indicates that Aratta (Eden) had the spiritual status of heaven." Traditionally, "gates" are associated with mountain passes, but here they're something special - spectacular river-cut mountain gorges that have their own geological name, tangs. We got out to look at one, standing on the cliff edge, our eyeballs drying, the serpentine Kerkeh River 200 feet below. "What tangs tell us", said Rohl, "is that the rivers were here before the mountains rose up."

When our postman came through, he crossed his third gate, a wide tang, by walking over Pol-e Dokhtar, the Bridge of the Daughter. Whose daughter, nobody knows. One reconstructed arch and a few stone stanchions remain. But high above the spring waterline, his path runs along the cliff terrace past some Neolithic caves, turns left onto the bridge ... down a stone ramp on the far side, and off around another mountain. Once, after being dictated a long message by Enmerkar, the emissary was asked to repeat it back but couldn't remember it all: "My Lord, I am heavy of mouth." At which point Enmerkar is credited with writing the world's first letter, on a clay tablet.

Who was Adam ? Aware that he has no hard evidence, Rohl sees him this way: "Adam is a metaphor for the oldest ancestor in memory, the first historical man, the head of a genealogy, a spiritual and political leader in one. He is, too, I think, the representative of the first settled people, former hunter-gatherers, who, through the Neolithic revolution, learnt to domesticate animals and to plant crops. Religion is a function of settlement, of social organisation, of hierarchy, and of needing a political leader/shaman-priest who is in touch with the gods of nature. Adam, with Eve, probably represents an important marriage between two such settled tribes. They're the founding family of civilisation."

"But you can 'find' these founding characters in different ancient legends. Eve in *Genesis* is described as 'the mother of all the living', the same

epithet used for Ninhursag, the Sumerian 'Mistress of the Mountain'. It looks, too, from the legends, that Inanna is a daughter of the great mother goddess Ninhursag. But you not only find the same characters in different legends. In the Sumerian creation myth, Enki is cursed by Ninhursag for eating forbidden plants growing in paradise. Enki begins to fade away - his ribs pain him - but Ninhursag relents and creates a goddess called Ninti to cure him. Ninti means 'Lady of the Rib' but it also means 'Lady of Life'. It's a Sumerian pun. But the Genesis author simply took the first meaning. And so the story of Eve's creation from Adam's rib was born."

By 8 am next morning, after a night stop in Kermanshah, we'd come to Behistun, source of the Kerkeh River, which we'd been following with our postman since Susa. There's a mountain here, with a lively spring coming out of its base, and a pool with trees curtsying into it, lilies and bulrushes. The ancients believed not only that the earth was flat but that it floated on a freshwater, underworld ocean. Any place where water came out of the rock was known as an abzu - the sacred entrance to and exit from the abyss. This was once a place of Enki, lord of the underworld ocean. "Of course, there's the motif of miraculous spring water all through the Old Testament too", said Rohl. "When Moses and the Israelites are in the desert dying of thirst, the miracle isn't a rainstorm or an oasis appearing. Moses strikes a rock and out comes water."

Today, the most magnificent feature at Behistun is the rock-face bas-relief of the Persian king Darius I meting out royal justice to a whole line of uppity pretenders to his throne. They certainly knew how to do monuments in 521 BC. The entire history of Darius, whose empire stretched from Turkey to Egypt, is written on the rock face in three different cuneiform scripts. But his story was lost to modern understanding until the 1830s, when an intrepid Englishman, Henry Rawlinson, spent the best part of three years dangling from a rope at the rock face deciphering the scripts. Luckily, I'd seen a photograph of the relief in Iranair's in-flight magazine; but it's invisible now, covered with scaffolding and a crude planked roof, under a preservation order.

Long before Darius, there was some Palaeolithic occupation here, and the Parthian Greeks left behind an oddly camp statue of Hercules. But now there's a roaring trunk road too, and the pool is circled by hideous concrete. Offended, Rohl was railing about official vandalism when the otherwise

affable Soofi lost his temper, arguing that it was the West's fault for inventing concrete, the motorcar and tourism in the first place. After a long sulk, he brightened. "Sure, the Iran government wants tourism but has no idea how to attract it." Then he laughed: "Our officials, they think they smell kebabs, but it's just a donkey being branded."

Three hours on, we were way up into Kurdistan, at the summit of the highest mountain in what Rohl believes is the biblical land of Havilah, "rich in gold and silver". There are a couple of worked-out gold mines in the area and, a few miles on, the Gold and Silver Rivers. We'd stopped at a caravanserai, a travellers haven-cum-fortress, now in ruins. How crafty of Satan to have taken Jesus to a mountain top to tempt him. You feel omnipotent here, all the world beneath you.

By late afternoon we'd come to the Throne of Solomon - another natural mountain of god and home of Enki, but with a lake in the top and a feisty brook spilling out, source of the Gold River. Five metres down, the lake is freezing, appropriate for an entrance to the abyss. Now it's a place of informal pilgrimage and family recreation, kids splashing about in inner tubes. There's also the ruin of a Zoroastrian "fire temple", possibly 1st millennium BC, fire altar still intact. "Remember the magi ?" said Rohl. "According to some Bible scholars, they were most likely Zoroastrian priests. By way of explaining Jesus' famous 'missing years', one theory has him coming to this region for Zoroastrian tutelage."

As we stood at the lakeside, sun touching the horizon, the air was cut by a singing voice, clear and astonishing. The song, "The Head of the Caravan", reckoned to have been written in the 14th century, is played over a Tannoy here every sunset. The voice belongs to Iran's celebrated Mohammad Resa Shajarian. "When he was 14", said Soofi, "he sang like a divine eunuch. He's 60 now, and the lady who looks after him is, well, 17." But the music: not four beats to a bar, as in the Spice Girls or Mozart, but 16 beats, sometimes 32, voice and instruments flying between major and minor with no effort or inhibition, a complexity of music of ancient memory, in which you can hear flamenco, Indian, Chinese, Greek, Gaelic. The lake went bronze, then suddenly black. On the drive to Takab, our night stop, Soofi sang for us until he was hoarse. Tomorrow, Eden.

Next morning, we wound down out of the mountains, through the ancient seventh gate, and onto the Miyandoab Plain, where our emissary, "... like a huge serpent prowling about in the plain, was unopposed". His destination was the one-time city of Aratta, which has never been found. And so we entered the supposed heart of Eden and then, passing between Lake Urmia on our left and Mount Sahand on our right, the garden, orchards aplenty, brash Technicolor-painted mountains of god on this wall then that, Rohl and I smiling and gawping, Soofi relating how the sun kissed the moon, and Tabriz up ahead.

What came next was a shock for Rohl especially. The great city walls of Aratta are described in ancient records as being painted with red ochre. This was Rohl's third visit to Tabriz, but he had never entered it in this quality of high-summer light before. "Look at that," he said. The mountain directly behind the city, like no other we'd come across in the Zagros range, is of the reddest ochre clay. It glowed red. "And Adam?" Having read the book of Rohl - my other, now battered travelling companion - I needed no prompting: Adam made of clay, Adam meaning "red-earth" man in Hebrew. Every myth must have its raw material.

In Iranian cities, since there are no pubs, clubs or trendy restaurants everyone's idea of a glitzy night out is to go to a hotel lobby. In Tabriz, there's only one half-decent hotel, and it was a madness of people: great assemblies of black-clad women, men shouting and smoking like Turks, kids having pushchair races, playing football. Just 10 generations after Adam, humanity had become similarly unruly and noisy. Which is precisely the reason given in *Genesis* for Yahweh deciding to wipe out his creation. As *Genesis* also tells it, none of us would be here at all were it not for one wise and devout man, the chosen survivor, Noah, hero of the Flood.

Thus it was, in the teeming hotel lobby, that Rohl told of Noah: "A multicultural sort of character, Noah has three other ancient identities - the Sumerian 'Ziusudra', Old Babylonian 'Atrahasis', and the Akkadian 'Utnapishtim'. As in the story of Noah, Utnapishtim also sends out a dove and a raven to find dry land."

And the date of the Flood? In his book, after a truly heroic deployment of evidence - including sliding chronologies and a review of water-laid silt strata, most notably at Ur of the Chaldees - Rohl plots it at about 3,100 BC.

But he'd reviewed a good number of ancient flood epics - there are over 150 world-wide - before coming across the flood record of the Meso-American Mayan culture. "The Mayan calendar - they were exceptional record-keepers - fixes the date for their great deluge at 3,113 BC. Strange, that."

Biblical Peoples	
The different cultures and dynasties that occupied Old Testament country, according to David Rohl's new chronology	
Sumerian	3100 - 2100 BC
Elamite	3000 - 647 BC
Akkadian	2100 - 1920 BC
Old Babylonian	1667 - 1362 BC
Assyrian	1000 - 612 BC
Neo-Babylonian	625 - 539 BC

There is a problem with the popular idea that Noah's ark came to rest on Mount Ararat. "The one which recent Christian explorers have been heading off to," said Rohl, "is Mount Aregats, which was first identified as the Mountain of the Descent around the time of Marco Polo, if only for its impressive size. Marco Polo was a notorious fibber, anyway. But Aregats is way across in eastern Turkey, north of Lake Van." So where might the true site be? "In Genesis it says the ark came to rest on the mountains of Ararat, and all the Jewish and early Christian commentaries place it in the Zagros range in the Land of Kardû, the ancient name of Kurdistan. That's south of Lake Van and south-west of Lake Urmia. The Babylonian priest-historian Berossus, 3rd century BC, even tells of people removing pieces of bitumen from a ship and taking them home as talismans. Then there's the Assyrian king Sennacherib. After campaigning in Kurdistan around 700 BC, he worshipped a plank he'd recovered from the ark."

But which mountain is it, David? "Well, a lot of people seem to have known - Berossus, and the Koran mentions it, so does the 10th-century Muslim writer Ibn Haukal. The pilgrim saint Jacob of Nisibis apparently knew too ... It's a mountain called Judi Dagh in the Zagros range about 100 kilometres due north of the town of Mosul. When Sennacherib collected his sacred plank, he

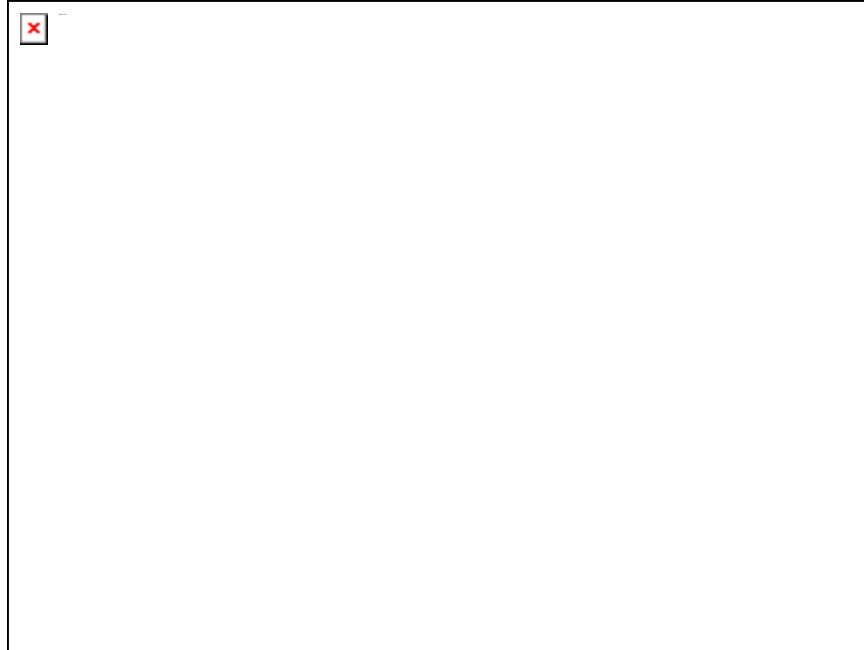
celebrated his visit by carving several reliefs of himself at the foot of Judi Dagh. We also know that the 5th-century Nestorian Christians built several monasteries there, including one on the summit known as the Cloister of the Ark." Which, taken all together, would seem to settle the matter once and for all.

Next day, we set off to tour the supposed garden, heading "east of Eden", as directed by *Genesis*. Ten miles out of Tabriz, you're in Old Testament country once more, but not the stony-ground sort. There's a spacious, rural luxuriance, good sheep pasture, dark-soiled fields, the mud-brick villages presiding on their history-packed mounds, with orchards and vineyards drawn close about them, and stands of poplar behind. At the roadside, we bought grapes approaching the size of ping-pong balls.

In physical geography, this is a natural garden - a fertile plain some 60 miles wide and 200 long, enclosed between two mountain ranges, which come nearly together at the eastern end. In *Genesis*, it says the garden is watered by its own unnamed river. But as Rohl confirmed on his first visit, this plain too has its own river winding through it, the Adji Chay. "And just a century ago," he said, "it had been known as the Meidan, which is Persian for 'walled court' or 'enclosed garden'".

Another key reference in *Genesis* describes the river Gihon as winding "all through the land of Cush". As with the four rivers of Eden, the whereabouts of Cush has been debated for centuries, as Rohl explained. "Josephus associated Cush with the ancient African kingdom of Kush, south of Egypt, making the Gihon the Nile, which prompted others to hazard that the Pishon was the Indus or the Ganges. Spanning three continents, this would have made the original Eden absurdly big."

Rohl's candidate as the locator for the land of Cush is Kusheh Dagh, the Mountain of Kush. Sited about 100 miles east along the garden valley, it forms part of the northern wall. As per *Genesis*, the Gihon River winds clear through the vicinity. The foothills are lumped all around with unexcavated mounds.



Between them, Walker and Rohl appear to have scored another direct hit with the land of Nod, place of Cain's exile "east of Eden". First, in order to get to the village of Noqdi, you do indeed have to leave the garden valley via its eastern exit. Noqdi itself - standard mud-brick, poplars, orchards - sits at the back of a valley next to an occupation mound so big, you want to fall on it with trowels. Two old men we spoke to knew no history of the village beyond their great-great-grandfathers' time. They had heard tell of another town somewhere in the area, Old Noqdi, but they'd not been there.

The teasing bit is that the "i" of Noqdi means "of". A village "of" Noqd therefore implies a larger region for Noqd. At this frustrating point on his last trip, Rohl went to the nearby town of Ardabil, located some officials and, via them, some local maps. What he found convinced him. "The whole area beyond the eastern exit comprises two districts: Upper Noqd and Lower Noqd. Not to labour the point, but if Cain had gone any further east, he'd have ended up in the Caspian Sea."

We headed back into Eden through Cain's exit. About the possibility of regaining paradise, Soofi said, "Oh, heaven's not there any more. The only way to regain it is inside ourselves." But he had a smile coming on. "Once we had wisdom, then we settled for knowledge, now it's mostly information. As the Koran says, 'like donkeys loaded with books'".

On our last day, we drove a little way south of Tabriz to inspect David Rohl's nomination for the original settlement of the Garden of Eden and Adam's own Mountain of God. Mount Sahand has a small lake in the top, the water rising up through a one-time volcanic chimney. A stream trickles from the summit, then flows through the Garden into Lake Urmia.

As you approach Mount Sahand, there's a narrowish, fertile valley dominated by the small mud-brick town of Osku, which sits on its own bulky occupation mound. "What do you think?" said Rohl. Yes: if you were a tribe of hunter-gatherers who'd come by a few husbandry and farming skills, and you had scouted the whole area for the ideal spot to settle, this would be it. It's as if the plain has lapped up into the valley and left its lush best just here: dark earth and an extraordinary density of olive groves, fruit orchards, walnut and almond trees. It's so comfortable besides: well-watered by the river, in the lee of the mountain, with benign puffy-breasted hills leading down to the valley floor. This would be a place to make home.

A few miles on, near the summit of the mountain, there's a sight to sober any western mind ... cave dwellers ... a troglodyte village called Kandovan, which means "honeycomb-like", after the rock-hole dwellings. The inhabitants think of this as their mountain. Of Turkish origin, they call it Jam Daghi, Mountain of the Chalice, and hold its cascading river to be sacred, using it for everything they need with due respect. Sole concessions to the present millennium are a village phone line, front doors on the caves, windows wedged in, and a corner shop selling cigarettes and sweets.

Like the Throne of Solomon, the Mountain of the Chalice is a place of pilgrimage and recreation - and of healing. The water is said to be especially good for the kidneys. Coachloads of schoolchildren, girls black-clad and faces covered, come for the educational experience. There are tourists too, but the villagers appear to give no quarter. Mercedes vs. donkey driver in a stony narrow? Mercedes backs up. Literally holed up above the snow line for three months of every year, Kandovans stow their animals in cave cellars next to or under their living rooms. But they work their fertile mountain hard and it gives back a saleable surplus: corn, fruit, nuts, seeds, herbs and flower medicines.

The mountain has a sort of double summit: twin peaks. Certainly one, the Mountain of the Chalice, was once a home designate of Enki. And the other?

"The 'Bright Mountain of Inanna', I shouldn't wonder," said Rohl. Of course, he's bound to be wrong on a few points, but that hardly matters up against the accumulated evidence of his thesis overall: the decoding and plotting of the four named rivers of Eden; the discovery of the unnamed river that was said to water the garden; the identification of the lands of Havilah and Cush; and the fair certainty that the place of Cain's exile, the land of Nod, is there still. Rohl didn't ask me the big question, but the answer is yea and verily: I do believe I have been to the Garden of Eden.