Crocodiles in Palestine

E. W. G. Masterman

To cite this article: E. W. G. Masterman (1921) Crocodiles in Palestine, Palestine Exploration Quarterly, 53:1, 19-22, DOI: [10.1179/peq.1921.53.1.19](https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1921.53.1.19)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/peq.1921.53.1.19>

Published online: 19 Jul 2013.

Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)

Article views: 4

View related articles [↗](#)

Citing articles: 1 View citing articles [↗](#)

him, that he omitted to reverse them in his work. This, of course, implies that the engraver could not read Phœnician; and would tend to suggest that the owner of the signet had it executed in Babylon; and, in view of his pending appointment on the Mediterranean coast, he insisted on the inscription being in Phœnician letters, although he knew that character to be quite unknown to the gem-engraver—and it may have been unfamiliar to himself.

The cone is in fairly good preservation. It is bruised and flaked in one or two places; but these do not affect the reading. Considering all things, it may very well be assigned to the reign of Darius Hystaspes, 522–486 B.C.

CROCODILES IN PALESTINE.¹

By E. W. G. MASTERMAN.

THE evidence for "Crocodiles in Palestine" largely rests upon two particular crocodiles. With regard to the one which the late Canon Tristram obtained from the late Rev. John Zeller, of the C.M.S., in Nazareth, I think these few lines from Mrs. Zeller, who was there at the time, may be valuable:—

"First, I must say that we *never* heard of crocodiles in the Kishon, and it must have been a fancy of Mr. Macgregor's, and we told him so at the time.

"But we had often heard of crocodiles in the Nahr ez-Zerka, so that when one day a Nazareth man, who had been in that neighbourhood, told us that a crocodile had been killed there, and was still lying there, Mr. Zeller said that he would give a good backshesh if they brought it. The head and skeleton (backbone) and the tail were intact, but the legs were gone. From lying in the sun some days it was almost dried up; but still, it had to be kept at a distance for some time. Mr. Zeller at once said that Canon Tristram (our friend) must have the head, and it was carefully cut off, and, as we were almost starting for Europe, we took it there ourselves, and Mr. Zeller was present at the meeting when it was exhibited. We had no reason to doubt where the animal came from. Why should people have brought it from a

¹ See Q.S., 1920, pp. 167–176.

"distance to a small place like Nazareth? About the same time
"a man from Umm el-Fahum, in the south end of Carmel, brought
"us several crocodile eggs, also from the Nahr ez-Zerka. They
"were not oval or smooth like ostrich eggs, but looked like white
"stones, and contained a yellowish glue-like mass. I do not
"remember what we did with the eggs. Remember, this was
"fifty-one years ago!"

I may add that the late Rev. John Zeller told me all this in greater detail many years ago. He hoped at first to preserve the skin and body, but the smell became so overpowering, that he had to dispose of all but the head. Probably the loss of the feet was due to jackals or hyænas or dogs; the wonder was that so much remained under the circumstances.

As regards crocodiles' eggs being found, I heard of this several times when I was in Galilee.

The most important communication on the subject is contained in a letter written to us by Mr. Herbert Clark of Jerusalem, giving the details of the purchase at Haifa by himself and Mr. Howard of Jerusalem of the crocodile skin which the latter presented to the Palestine Exploration Fund and is now in our Museum.

When these two gentlemen, in May, 1893, were walking through Haifa one morning they found at the door of the Latin Monastery "a *fellah* talking to the servant of the monastery and on the ground between them lay a crocodile The *fellah* was trying to sell it to one of the monks to whom he had sold two eggs from the same crocodile the afternoon before." Mr. Clark not only saw these eggs but bought them from the monk. "The eggs were in the shape of a Cambridge sausage, blunt at both ends, of a bluish-white-china shell with marks on it like the marking on a tanned pig-skin." The eggs were subsequently given to Mr. Selah Merrell, the U.S.A. consul, and were sold with his large collection of curiosities to Harvard College. When questioned about how he got the crocodile the *fellah* said: "At this time of year, after the rains have stopped and the first heat of summer comes on, the females come out of the *burkies* or pools—of which he declared that two were known to be inhabited by these creatures—to lay their eggs in the sands, where they are left to hatch in the sun. Two of his friends had seen the tracks in the sand around the pool during the day, and he had joined them to watch for any which might appear during the early half of the moon-light night. They had not waited long after moon-light before

this one came out of the pool and, proceeding some twenty yards or so away from the water, began to lay her eggs. They then quietly intercepted her on the way back to the pool and shot and clubbed her to death. They then took the body home and ate the flesh." Mr. Clark then asked him if he believed there were more crocodiles in the pools or the river. He replied "that there were, but they were so timid that they were seldom seen. Who, indeed, has the patience to wait and watch for them? It is when they lay their eggs they may be caught. He had not killed any before this one, but some of his relatives had killed one the year before and eaten it."

Mr. Howard bought the skin, which was fresh and in good condition, for 20 francs, and in the Hotel he and Mr. Clark cleaned it up, salted and dried it. As Mr. Howard was just then departing for England he brought it with him and presented it to the Palestine Exploration Fund "with the condition that it should be mounted and put in the Fund's Museum with his name attached as the person who presented it." Mr. Clark adds that he has never heard of another being obtained or having been killed on the Nahr ez-Zerka.

With regard to the Rev. W. M. Christie, who is mentioned as having seen a crocodile in the Kishon in 1894, I have, in answer to a letter of enquiry, received the following statement from him:—

"The facts are these. I was riding at a gallop along the sands coming towards Haifa from the Akka side: as I neared the Kishon, I gradually pulled up, and was still going at a trot about thirty to forty yards north of where the river enters the sea. From a foot or so outside the water's edge, a something, which I should say was about five feet long, dashed into the sea and disappeared. I remember the words I uttered to myself. They were these: 'Well, if I were certain that crocodiles could live in sea water, I could say that was a crocodile.' I went into Haifa, and after getting settled in Krafft's Hotel, went over to see Schumacher. I told him of the incident, and he said it might very well be a crocodile, and spoke of reports such as have now been gathered together and reported in the *Spectator* and the *Quarterly Statement*. You can well imagine my reasons for indefiniteness. I was not on the outlook for anything on the sand. The horse was claiming my attention, and I was looking forward for the mouth of the river, which, as you know, used to form for itself a new mouth on every return of the rain, and had generally to be

“crossed by going out into the sea in a semicircle over the bar
“formed. My experience requires confirmation, and I do not think
“it ought to be taken too hastily to confirm some other doubtful
“case. Still, even now, I do not know what else could dash into
“the sea as it did.”

It will be seen, therefore, that Mr. Christie's evidence is no more conclusive than that of Rob Roy MacGregor, and that crocodiles have ever existed north of Carmel is “not proven.” With regard to the Nahr ez-Zerka, I think there can be no doubt. I may say that Prof. Day of the Beirut American College, probably the greatest living authority now on the fauna of Palestine, agrees with me in this.

While hoping that fresh evidence may be obtained of the existence of crocodiles in the “Crocodile River,” I sincerely hope it will not be at the cost of the final extermination of creatures that have managed to survive so many centuries in such a small area. Rather, if their existence were proved, would I see the marshes around the Birket Timsâh carefully protected.

THE SYNAGOGUE OF THEODOTOS AT JERUSALEM.

In the *Revue Politique et Littéraire*, *Revue Bleue*, for August 21, 1920, Prof. Clermont-Ganneau describes and discusses a synagogue of the Herodian period discovered at Jerusalem in the course of some excavations on Mount Ophel shortly before the outbreak of war in 1914. Here was discovered a large limestone block inscribed with a Greek inscription in characters exactly similar to those on the stele in the Temple of Herod (forbidding access to the Gentiles), discovered many years ago by M. Clermont-Ganneau himself. “Palaeographically speaking, the two inscriptions are assuredly contemporary.” His text and translation are as follows:—

Θ[ε]όδοτος Ουεττήν[ο]ν, ἱερεὺς καὶ ἀ[ρ]χισυνάγωγος, υἱὸς ἀ[ρ]χι-
σун[αγῶ]γ[ο]ν, υἱὸν δὲ ἀρχισυν[α]γῶγον, [ψ]κ[ο]δ[ο]μῆσε τὴν
συναγωγ[ῆ]ν εἰς ἀν[άγν]ωσ[ιν] νόμου καὶ εἰς [δ]ιδαχ[ῆ]ν
ἐντολῶν, κα[ὶ] τ[ὸ]ν ξενῶνα, κα[ὶ] τὰ δώματα, καὶ τὰ χρησ[τ]ήρια
τῶν ὑδά[τ]ων, εἰς [κ]ατάλυμα τοῖς [χ]ρήζουσιν ἀπὸ τ[ῆ]ς ξ[έν]ης
ἥν ἐθεμελ[ί]ωσαν οἱ πατέρες [αὐ]τοῦ κα[ὶ] οἱ πρεσ[β]ύτερο[ι] καὶ
Σιμων[ί]δης.