The Hamah Inscriptions

W. WRIGHT

To cite this article: W. WRIGHT (1873) The Hamah Inscriptions, Palestine Exploration Quarterly, 5:2, 74-77, DOI: [10.1179/peq.1873.013](https://doi.org/10.1179/peq.1873.013)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1179/peq.1873.013>

Published online: 02 Jan 2014.

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

Article views: 7

View related articles [↗](#)

THE HAMAH INSCRIPTIONS.

BY THE REV. W. WRIGHT, OF DAMASCUS.

THE existence of the Hamah stones was made known by Burckhardt in 1812, but not with sufficient emphasis to arouse to action English archæologists.

For the last six or seven years I have occasionally heard of these inscriptions, but seldom from any one qualified to give a correct account of them. And after one has been taken a score of times to see a wonderful inscription, which turns out to be only natural stone cracks, or at best a piece of Nabathæan, he does not feel sufficiently enthusiastic for a gallop of two or three days to verify the tale of some ignorant Arab. From all accounts I inferred that the inscriptions were only a conglomeration of wasm, or marks on stone, similar to those burnt on the camels by the Arabs. I, however, resolved to make a careful inspection of the inscriptions the first time my duty led me to the neighbourhood of Hamah. Meantime, Mr. Johnson, in the first *Statement* of the Palestine Exploration Society, and Captain Burton, in "Unexplored Syria," have done much to bring these important remains before the British and American public.

The copies of the inscriptions, as presented to the public, were necessarily unsatisfactory, from the manner in which they were taken. Mr. Johnson says, "We did not succeed in getting squeeze impressions, for fanatical Moslems crowded upon us when we began to work upon the stones, and we were obliged to be content with such copies of this and other inscriptions found on stones *over* and *near* the city gate, and *in* the ancient bridge which spans the Orontes, as could be obtained by the aid of a native painter."*

Mr. Johnson seems to have seen only one of the stones, that in the corner of the shop, for he incorrectly speaks of the others as "*over* and *near* the city gate, and *in* the ancient bridge," no doubt led into topographical errors by the vague reports of the people.

Captain Burton describes the location of the stones where I found them, and where they must have been for a long time; but the inscriptions which he brought away were also the work of "the native painter." In "Unexplored Syria,"† he says, "the ten sheets accompanying this article had been applied to the blackened or reddened face of the four stones—one of which, it will be seen, has a double inscription—and the outlines were afterwards drawn with a reed pen."

Captain Burton, not having full confidence in the native painter and the subsequent corrections, pressed me to get squeezes for the Palestine Exploration Fund, and Mr. Drake, the able representative of that society

* First Statement of American Palestine Exploration Society, page 31.

† Vol. I., 335. "Unexplored Syria" reached me without the Hamah inscriptions, so I have not been able to compare them with the casts.

in this land, knowing that my duty led me towards Hamah, urged me to get, if possible, plaster casts, of all the inscriptions. Mr. Green, H.B.M.'s vice-consul at Damascus, had been also looking forward for an opportunity of becoming thoroughly acquainted with northern Syria, and to secure if possible the Hamah stones, or at least facsimiles of them.

An invitation from the Governor-General of Syria, who was on a tour of inspection throughout his province, gave the opportunity, and on the 10th November, 1872, we started from Damascus, I on a missionary tour, and Mr. Green to join the Waly.

On the second day, when in Yabroud, in our school, I secured three large ancient manuscripts of ecclesiastical legends, written on thick cotton paper. They are bulky volumes, bound in strong boards, and written in Karshouni.*

On the 25th November we were the Waly's guests at Hamah, and the next morning early we sallied out to find the inscriptions. We had not been able to get "Unexplored Syria" before starting, and so we had to commence operations without any advantage from the labours of our predecessors.

We had first to find the stones, and that simple operation was not so easy as might seem, for everybody denied any knowledge of them at first. At last we resolved we would ask every one we met, and curiously enough, after this resolve, the first man we spoke to was Suliman el Kallas, in the wall of whose house was inscription No. I.†

The finding of the other three stones, for there are only four inscribed stones in all, not five, as in some accounts, occupied a considerable portion of the day. Meantime, while we were hunting up the stones in an independent fashion, the governor was taken to see them, and had telegraphed to the Sultan, asking him to accept them for the Constantinople Museum. As Mr. Green and I anticipated, Subhi Pasha was far too learned an archæologist not to recognise at a glance the value of the Hamah inscriptions, and far too patriotic to let them pass into the hands of foreigners. He is probably the most learned man among the Turks, and has one of the finest private numismatic and general archæological collections in the world. The Constantinople Museum is his own creation, and he was glad to secure for it these treasures. He, however, consented at once to let us have plaster casts of all the inscriptions, and promised also to bring the stones to the serai, where we could work at them at our leisure. Under other circumstances we should have experienced great difficulty in taking casts of the stones, for a series of fruitless attempts by foreigners to secure the stones had brought the Hamathites to consider the inscriptions of extraordinary value, and we heard many expressions of defiance, and threats of violence towards anybody that tried to interfere with their sacred and valuable treasures. Later on, when

* See Rénan's "*Langues Sémitiques*," page 266.

† I shall speak of the stones in the same order as Burton.

it became known that the governor would take the stones, we heard men vowing that they would destroy the inscriptions.

Mr. Green and I became nervous as we saw a repetition of the Moabite stone tragedy almost imminent. We assured the men, in whose ground the stones were, that the Waly would not take them without paying more than their value, and that now that the Sultan had accepted the stones, anybody who injured them would be severely punished. We thus enlisted the cupidity and fear of the Hamathites in favour of the stones. When we informed the Waly of the danger, he put the inscriptions under the protection of Ibrahim Pasha for the night, and we warned also the city guards that dire punishment would be inflicted on them if any mishap befell the stones. They were carefully guarded that night, and on the following day the governor paid for the stones, prices varying from three to fifteen napoleons each, and they were all lodged safely in the serai.

The stones once within our reach we worked incessantly at them until we had duplicate plaster-of-paris casts of all the inscriptions. We were much delayed by the difficulty in procuring gypsum, and getting it burned and pounded, and we also had to remove from the inscriptions the dirt and fog of ages, and some of them were almost filled with lime mortar dashed into them. Several attempts also were made to decoy us from our labours, but at length, after patient hard work for nearly two days, we had the stones perfectly clean, and got perfect facsimiles of the inscriptions.

Captain Burton says "the fancy of the copyist had been allowed to run wild" in the copies which he procured; and though he says "these vagaries have been corrected," it is to be feared that some of the artistic fancies of "the native painter" may still be found in the published inscription.

I am happy to say that our casts have none of the vagaries of the native painter. They settle the first question for English archæologists, which is not, as Mr. Hyde Clarke supposes, "whether these drawings, reproduced by Captain Burton, are to be considered inscriptions or not,"* *but whether they are perfectly correct or not.* As facsimiles they answer in the affirmative by the actual lengths of lines, and bars, and letters, and blanks, perfect even to the faults of the stone.

The removal of the stones produced a greater commotion in Hamah than will be readily supposed, and the fact of a British consul and Protestant missionary being the guests of the Waly of Syria, seemed strange and portentous in the eyes of the fanatical Moslems, but was somewhat reassuring to the cringing native Christians. Celestial portents, also, were not wanting, for on the night following the removal of the stones to the serai a meteoric shower in all its eastern splendour was seen by the Hamathites, who saw in every brilliant sparkling train the wrath of Heaven predicted against Hamah in the event of the stones ever being removed. Next morning an "influential deputation"

* "Unexplored Syria," Vol. I., 353.

waited on the Waly to tell him of the evil omens of the night, and to urge a restoration of the stones; but the Waly assured them that inasmuch as no one was hurt the omens were good, and might be regarded as the approbation of Heaven to their loyalty in sending these precious stones to their beloved sovereign the Commander of the Faithful.

Of the stones I have little to add to Burton's description. There are four stones and five inscriptions. The stones are close-grained basalt (fully ripe, as the Arabs say) from the east of the city. Many such stones are lying about, some of them with Greek inscriptions, and some carved into the figures of animals, &c.

No. 1 is only a fragment. The lines seem to be broken across the middle, and therefore the sense is not likely to be complete. When taken out of the wall it proved to be only a thin piece broken off a large stone. The remainder of the inscription is yet to be found.

No. 2 proves, by the last line ending in the middle of the stone leaving a blank at the left side, that the inscription reads from right to left, beginning at the top.

No. 3 is the stone which was so efficacious in lumbago, that a man had only to put his back against it to be made perfectly well. This stone was very large.

No. 4 is on the end, and 5 on the side, of the same square stone, that in the corner of the shop, proving that the lines are read horizontally, and not from bottom to top and *vice versâ*, as Mr. Hyde Clarke asserts. The two faces were carefully dressed for the inscriptions, but the part of the stone most remote from the inscriptions was undressed. The stone was doubtless placed in the corner of a square building.

No. 5 has parts of the upper and lower lines defaced and illegible. This is the inscription the facsimile of which is printed in the first *Statement* of the American Palestine Exploration Society, and incorrectly described as "one of the inscriptions found upon the bridge."*

All the inscriptions except the first are complete, barring the defaced letters. The boundaries of the inscriptions and lines are clearly defined by raised bars. The stones on which they were inscribed were very large. It took four oxen and fifty men a day to bring one of the stones a distance of half a mile. The others were cut in two, and the fragments inscribed were carried to the serai on the backs of camels. The stones were dressed narrow towards the parts on which the inscriptions were found, and the bases were undressed for several feet. Apparently they had been inserted in masonry with the dressed and inscribed parts standing out of the wall. They seem to have been intended to be publicly read, and were therefore doubtless in the vernacular of the people of Hamah.

NOTE.—The casts have not yet arrived, March 31, 1873.—ED. *Quarterly Statement*.

* First Statement of American Palestine Exploration Society, page 32. Burton speaks of the American facsimile as No. 4, Vol. I., page 333, though he correctly describes No. 4 as having only four lines.