

Negev Diary - April 19-21, 1990

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In 1978 I was invited to give a lecture at a University in the Midwest of the United States. While there, I met a man who said to me: "You're a professor of Armenian! Haven't you seen the Armenian inscriptions at Wadi Haggag, in the Sinai?" I hadn't, and after my return home to Jerusalem I arranged to travel down to the Sinai and see them. Thus began a fascination with the Sinai, with the inscriptions found on enormous rocks in the middle of the wilderness, and with the people that wrote them. I have pursued studies of these inscription for well over a decade now, following up the routes of the pilgrims and nomads who left their names or drawings on the rocks of this desert. Last year, I made an expedition down to the Negev desert in the south of Israel, to search for inscriptions there, north of the Sinai. The Sinai is now Egyptian. Modern states' borders cut contiguous areas arbitrarily. On my trip, as I have done in the past, in addition to the scientific documentation, I kept a personal diary which forms the basis of the present observations. It was made on a tape recorder and transcribed, and here I have tried to keep some of the sense of immediacy which this medium invokes. With me were three others: Uzi Avner, a desert archaeologist, Rina his assistant, and my fourteen-years old son Dan. Uzi and I had done all of the Sinai work together, and he is immensely knowledgeable about the deserts in the south of Israel and the Sinai. Dan was having a first experience of this desert work, and was an enormous help.

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We departed from Jerusalem at 6.00 am in a heavily loaded jeep and drove south. After three hours, we came to the turn off to Ein Ovdad. Ovdad was a Nabatean city, later Christian, and part of an extensive settlement of the Northern Negev. Ein Ovdad, "the spring of Ovdad" is an oasis, in a deep cleft, with plentiful water. The spring there was running strong. Notices forbade swimming. The cleft was green with vegetation, but the hills were bare, stony and barren. We set out to walk from Ein Ovdad to Ovdad itself in

search of rocks with North Arabic inscriptions and drawings seen by Uzi on earlier visit to this site.

We had found three different types of inscriptions in the course of our earlier expeditions. There were graffiti left by Christian pilgrims who has been *en route* to the holy sites of Mount Sinai, either from Jerusalem in the North or from Egypt in the south. Pilgrims still go there; we had found their names in Greek and Latin, in Armenian and Georgian, in Syriac and Ethiopic, in English and Bulgarian. We did not expect too many pilgrim inscriptions on this trip, for the site that beckoned us was not on the pilgrim route.

A second type of inscriptions were those of the nomad inhabitants of these wildernesses. These were in Old North Arabic (the linguistic ancestor of the Arabic Mohammed spoke), in Nabatean, and in Arabic. In addition, many of these nomadic people left drawings on the rocks, often crude, but occasionally of remarkable sensitivity.

Yet other inscriptions were left by conquerors and exploiters, ever ephemeral in this wilderness world. Some of the Arabic fell into this category, some of the Greek and Latin, and the Egyptian hieroglyphs we knew from the Sinai. What would the Negev yield?

We were in the rocky area between Ein Ovdad and Ovdad searching for limestone laced with flint which develops a very dark patina. The sort of rock affects the type of inscriptions. Softest is sandstone, of which there was much in the Sinai. Over the centuries sandstone develops a dark patina which shows incisions clearly. In the Ovdad area, however, Uzi had seen inscriptions not on sandstone, but on patinaed limestone. We set out by foot going parallel to the bed of Nachal Ovdad, the cleft bearing the waterway, though this part of it, higher than the spring, was dry. We uncovered a series of brown patinaed rocks along the course of the wadi upon which we saw rock drawings, of ibex, of camels, and human figures, as well as *wasems*, beduin markings and inscriptions. One inscription was in an unknown script, perhaps badly written Arabic, another clearly in Old North Arabic, over which were other fainter inscriptions over it. There were pools

along the bed of the wadi with water left from the winter, but the water was rather revolting in appearance. At one point we saw a group of seven birds of prey in the sky including an eagle, two buzzards and vultures. We also observed storks and many flowering plants (it was spring). All the desert is full of flowers of different colors, white and purple and yellow, different sorts of plants. By now it was 11:20 in the morning.

Uzi and Rina went back from the furthest point at which we found inscriptions to bring the jeep. Dan and I continued to survey on foot along the bed of Nachal Ovdad until we reached Ovdad. On the way rather interesting white chalk rock formations as it were the white cliffs of Dover in miniature. We stop in Mitzpeh Ramon for fuel and provisions. This is a small town on the edge of the great Ramon Crater, which is one of the major geological (and scenic) features of the Negev desert. In winter, you always hear about it snowing there. It had a certain "frontier" quality, as do many of the smaller settlements in the South. Left there about 12:50. On route from Mitzpeh Ramon to the western road which runs down the Negev near the Egyptian border, we observed by the road a bush (called Karkas Tsahov) of the same variety as is found at St. Catherine's Monastery and believed to be a scion of the burning bush. It looks a bit like a blackberry in general appearance.

The countryside is hilly. There are trees known as the Atlantic Pistachio which are green and are properly native to wetter areas than the Negev. They grow in the Negev, however, remnants of the vegetation of a period during which the Negev was much wetter than today. Most of the area, however, is brown hills dotted with low bushes.

As we drove, Uzi raised the issue of Nabatean roads. The Nabateans were a nomadic people who lived in the Negev, in southern Jordan, in the Hejaz and in the Sinai. In the last centuries B.C.E. they became great traders and they built the great cities of the desert, one of which is Ovdad. Another, perhaps the most famous, is Petra in Southern Jordan. We saw a series of square stone inclosures with rounded corners at a site near Wadi Ma'in. These, to the untrained eye, look like rough lines of stones, perhaps 30 cms

high, lying on the ground. Uzi thinks these may have been Nabatean campsites of a military character guarding a road that runs in that area. Similar sites exist in the Eilat area, others are known sites in the Sinai. Perhaps, in addition to the spread of inscriptions and the water sources, the spread of these sites should be taken into account, in the mapping of Nabatean roads. That is another problem, however, and we were on track of inscriptions.

We were heading for Mount Karkom. Recently Emanuel Anati, an archaeologist who has done a lot of work on rock drawings, had proposed that this is the biblical Mount Sinai. He recently published a book to propagate his theory which has not met with much acceptance. But clearly the site is significant, and Anati's photographs of drawings combined with information Uzi had about inscriptions to make it the chief object of our expedition.

Not far from the foot of Mount Karkom, we passed an extraordinary Nabatean campsite with a dozen or 15 of those same sort of camping areas we had seen previously and after that, about a mile from the base of Mount Karkom we saw a rock with inscriptions on it. When we find such rocks, we photograph the inscription, measure it, and carefully note the coordinates of the site. We do not take rubbings or latex impressions because the surface of the rocks is usually very friable and the patina easily damaged by such actions.

We camped for the night on a flat, rocky area at the base of Mount Karkom which is a long ridge, of some elevation. The ground is not the clean sand of the eastern Sinai, but a friable earth. We cleared stones, and slept there. I woke at 3 am and got my view of the desert sky. There were no mosquitos or insects, there never are in this desert. In the night there was some rain, but by morning the skies were very clear and blue. It looked as though it would be sunny today.

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By 7.30 am we had eaten, packed up and were ready to go. In front of me there is a series of substantial mountains each of which forms a part of the long range of Mount Karkom. We are at the base of the main ascent and we are going to ascend the middle of three peaks we saw before us.

Just near where we slept for the night are two small rocks on which there are rock drawings and a *wasem* and I photographed them first thing this morning. I had a long discussion with Uzi about some of the strange symbolic signs in the rock drawings. He pointed out the relationship between these and some of the very large rock pictures as large as two kilometers constructed in the Negev. He suggests that most of the symbolic rock drawings are also reflected in the great rock pictures and some of them may have phallic or other sexual fertility significance.

The ascent to Mount Karkom was very steep and quite difficult, but not very long. It took about half an hour. The general character of the ridge of this mountain is like a hilly plateau, of earth covered with stones. A good number of flints were lying around. Once we got up to the top we had a walk of an hour or an hour and a half until we reached an area which was marked by a large series of outcroppings of darkly patinaed limestone. This area which stretched the length of a valley on the mountain, running from north to south, was covered with these groups of rocks on which we found very large numbers of rock drawings of various signs and of inscriptions in North Arabic writing.

We didn't photograph everything, but only the most interesting or unusual group of rock drawings and all of the inscriptions that we could find. Our survey was far from complete. Nonetheless we must have photographed about forty or fifty frames of film in that area. The most dominant subjects were ibex and groups of ibex together with a dog which were repeated a large number times. We observed two pictures of a man and a woman in an *orans* position. We observed an unusual serpentine sort of sign splitting into two parts at one end which was repeated on a number of rocks and various other apparently symbolic signs whose meaning we couldn't guess. Another thing that was

notable about the corpus of materials on Mount Karkom was the fact that there was no Nabatean inscriptions, no Christian inscriptions, no hint of anything else. We found one quite old Arabic inscription but no recent Arabic that I could see.

Our clear impression is that we have only looked at one area of this mountain ridge which is a number kilometers long, and is well worth further work in the field. We know that we didn't exhaust even the one area where we found the concentration of inscriptions and there are very likely to be other such concentrations in further parts of that mountain peak. Why the inscriptions were written there and what their significance is for the human history of the Negev wilderness remains mysterious. Usually these North Arabic inscriptions are merely graffiti, one or two words, giving a personal name.

After the descent from Mount Karkom in mid-afternoon we drove to the Uvda valley, a very important site not too far from Eilat. Uzi had done extensive work on desert agriculture and the religion of chalcolithic peoples evidenced in their archaeological remains. In the Uvda valley, moreover, there were two sites we were keen to see. The first was a rock of white stone called kirton, quite large and standing on its own. On it was an odd inscription. the first two letters of which seemed to resemble Armenian but were not, while the other letters looked like a European Latin writing. However, it did not seem to make any sense. On the same face of the rock were some rock drawings and other signs perhaps Greek letters. I photographed this rock and we then proceeded to another site within the wadi. At the second site we also found strange scratching and apparently parts of a Greek inscription on the rock.

We left the Uvda valley and proceeded south towards Eilat, turning off to the left of the road to attempt to view a site with some standing stones. We didn't find this site and on the way back from the search the jeep got stuck in two deep ruts and it took a good deal of digging and effort for us to get the jeep out and eventually we reached Eilat after nightfall. We slept in Eilat and in the next morning Uzi and I worked on the descriptions

of the sites, the co-ordinates and drafting a description of the archaeological materials found for purposes of inclusion in the final written report of this expedition.

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In mid-morning we set out for the area of Timna in order to see some inscriptions there. Timna is a famous tourist spot, north of Eilat, to the west of the main road. A copper deposit there had been exploited in antiquity by the ancient Egyptians, as well as in more recent times. In Timna we visited the following sites. The first was a very large sloping rock very close to the ground, indeed it had probably fallen down, or fallen over. On the underface of this rock we saw a Greek description including '*Eutyche Despota*' in a frame. We had to lie on our backs and crawl in to see these inscriptions. We also found quite extensive drawings and other markings on the underface of this rock. Most of these inscriptions had not been noted previously. The second site we visited had extensive Egyptian rock drawings, including some of chariots, after which the site is named. It is well known. A third site not far from there, on a face high in the air, again contained a series of rock drawings. It is intriguing that the ground level has receded so much that it was possible to see on the rock massif the signs where the ground had once been, way above our heads as we stood at its base.

Then from there we proceeded to a third site which is known as the Roman Cave. In this cave we photographed a number of Greek inscriptions which Uzi knew, one of which at least included a Graecized form of a Nabatean name. Such Nabatean Greek inscriptions are not unusual.

Not too far from the known the Greek inscriptions of Roman and Nabatean origin, I happened to chance upon a very small inscription reading '*Michael*' in Greek. I also observed a cross in this cave indicating the fact of the presence of Christians there, perhaps as miners.

The fourth site we visited in the Timna valley was the large Egyptian relief and inscription high in the rock above the Temple of the Goddess Hathor. This brought home

the extent of the ancient Egyptian economic activities in the area. All of this took us from about 10:30 in the morning till after 2:00 at which point we returned to Eilat had lunch and then departed on the 5:00 plane for Jerusalem.

Epilogue

The expedition was rather successful, and we photographed nearly 200 new inscriptions and rock-drawings. These have been incorporated into the collection of the Project in Jerusalem and they make an auspicious beginning of our survey work in the Negev. That is far from finished and extensive survey and photographic work still awaits us in the Negev. The material we assembled must be studied and integrated with other bodies of knowledge, both archaeological and written. The inscriptions from the Sinai and from many of the Holy Places have already been catalogued, and the first volumes of the printed catalogue are in the final stages of preparation as I now write in the spring of 1991. The really good news, however, is that I have got the most persuasive reasons to go back to the desert.