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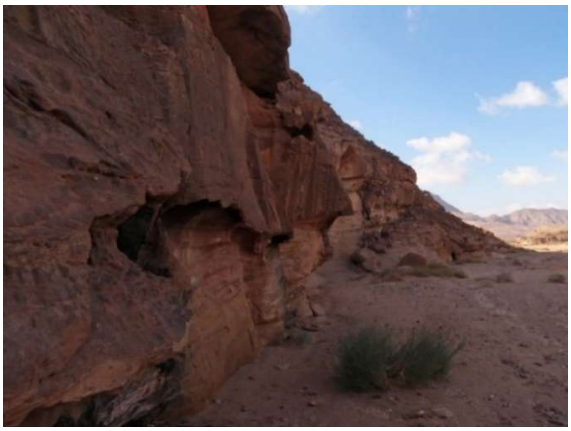
The Rock Inscriptions of Wadi Mukattab, Sinai*

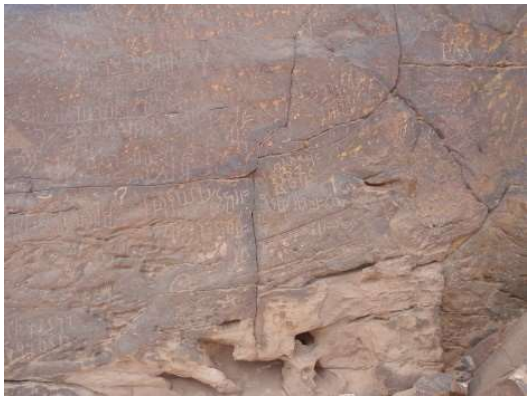
The first Western visitor to the Sinai Peninsula, whose travelogue has come down to us, was a woman named Egeria: a pious nun from France or Spain, who visited Mount Sinai in 380s CE as part of a comprehensive pilgrimage to the Holy Land. She entered the peninsula from the Port of Clysma (modern Suez) and traversed the desert tracks of western Sinai, following a course symbolically reminiscent of the 'Route of the Exodus.' Along this path, amid the desert rocks, Egeria encountered an interesting phenomenon. "All around the mountains," she wrote, "caves have been carved out, and if one just took the trouble to put up some curtains, they would make marvellous bedrooms. Each bedroom is inscribed with Hebrew letters." The place described by Egeria is most likely Wadi Mukattab, the 'Valley of Writings,' which is located northwest of Jebel Musa, the site traditionally identified as Mount Sinai. The name, given by the local Bedouin population, derives from the numerous inscriptions covering the red sandstone rocks along the wadi. These inscriptions were indeed written in a Semitic language – but, as we shall see, it was not Hebrew.

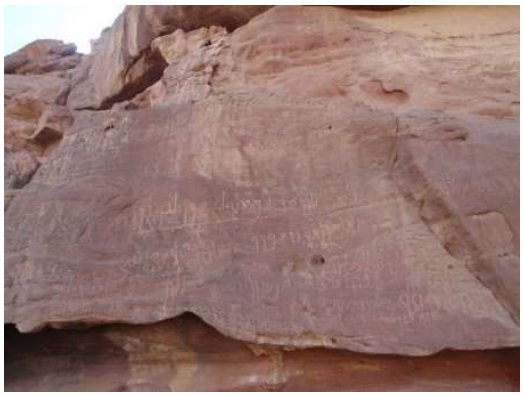


About two centuries later, around 550 CE, the 'Hebrew letters' of Sinai caught the attention of another ancient traveller, the Egyptian monk Cosmas Indicopleustes, who considered them to be traces left by the Israelites. In his account, the *Christian Topography*, he writes:

> And when they had received the law from God in writing, and had learned letters for the first time, God made use of the desert as a quiet school and permitted them for forty years to carve out letters on stone. Wherefore, in that wilderness of Mount Sinai, one can see, at all their halting-places, all the stones, that have there been broken off from the mountains, inscribed with Hebrew letters, as I myself can testify, having travelled in these places. […] And the Israelites, who had but newly acquired the art of writing, continually practised it, and filled a great multitude of stones with writing, so that all those places are full of Hebrew inscriptions.

* The images used in this essay were taken from the folder "Sinai > Wadi Mukattab – inscriptions" at the Manar al-Athar website.



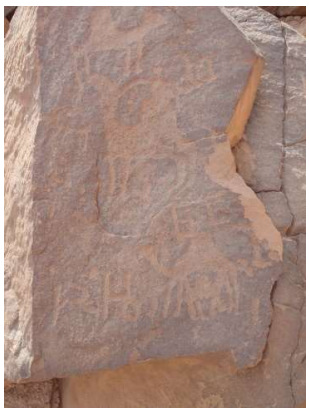


After Cosmas, the Sinai inscriptions lay forgotten for over a millennium. It was only in the eighteenth century, with the renewed pilgrim traffic to Mount Sinai and the scholarly interest that arose around the identification of its true location, that learned visitors began to copy and publish the rock inscriptions. The first scholar who correctly identified the language of the inscriptions as Nabataean was a German named Eduard Beer in 1840. Beer's identification and partial decipherment of the language is considered by modern scholars to be an act of genius, as no other written record in Nabataean, which could have been used as reference material, was known at the time. The Nabataeans are described in ancient sources as Arab nomads who occupied the desert lands during the Roman period. Beer noticed the similarity of the Sinai inscriptions to Arabic and was able to decipher certain names and verbs with the help of Arabic parallels. The linguistic linkage between Nabataean and Arabic continues to be studied by scholars to this day, as more and more rock inscriptions in Nabataean and early Arabic continue to be discovered in the deserts of the Negev, Jordan and Saudi Arabia.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the number of Nabataean inscriptions discovered in Wadi Mukattab and in other parts of western Sinai increased rapidly, as a growing number of scholars and institutions took part in the exploration. The methods used to record the inscriptions also developed over that period: from hand-written copies to squeezes, and finally to photography. This allowed for a more comprehensive investigation of the corpus of Nabataean inscriptions and enabled scholars to address some fundamental questions concerning their contents and periodization, as well as the purpose they might have served.

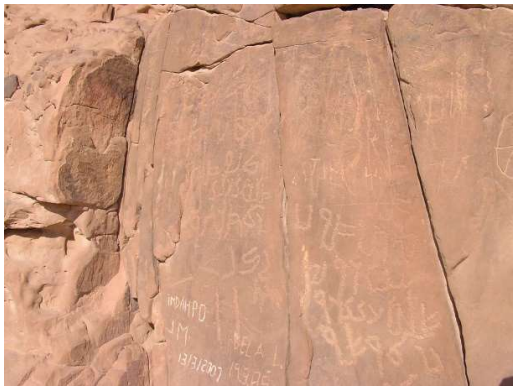
The first reference to the inscriptions' content can be found in Cosmas's account, in which he relates that according to certain Jews, the inscriptions record "the departure of so and so, of such and such a

tribe, in such and such a year, in such and such a month." Considering that Nabataean was a dialect of Aramaic, the fact that the inscriptions were legible to Jews of Cosmas's time is indeed plausible. And although his interpretation of the Israelite origin of the inscriptions was ultimately proven to be incorrect, his account of their content is not so far from the truth. For the most part, we now know, the Nabataean inscriptions contain the names of their inscribers, set within certain greeting phrases, the most common being "blessed be," "peace to" and "remembered be." Many inscriptions are accompanied by drawings of animals (usually camels), and sometimes entire scenes of pasture or hunting are depicted. The dates that appear in certain texts fall within the first three centuries CE, which is indeed the period when most of them were inscribed.



The question of the purpose of the inscriptions is strongly related to the identity of the inscribers: who were the Nabataeans that wrote their names on the rocks, and what brought them to Wadi Mukattab in the first place? The suggestions raised by scholars include pasturing shepherds, traveling merchants, touring pilgrims, workers from the nearby turquoise mines, and soldiers safeguarding the roads. However, the laconic content and the lack of archaeological context render a definitive answer impossible.

Interestingly, the Sinai rock inscriptions are not a uniquely Nabataean phenomenon. Many more inscriptions, from later periods and in various languages, are found in Wadi Mukattab and in other parts of Sinai, often clustered together on the same rocks. In some places, one can easily recognize modern graffiti etched by contemporary tourists next to the ancient Nabataean texts.



It seems, then, that the urge to commemorate one's name on a rock in the middle of the desert is a common and recurring human trait, shared by many of the travelers in the wilderness of Sinai, both past and present.