

The Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti Project of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem

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The Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti project at the Institute of Asian and African Studies of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem is approaching the end of an extended process of digitization.

I was drawn to establish the Rock Inscriptions and Graffiti Project by the discovery of the Armenian graffiti in the Sinai, which happened in the last years before the Sinai Peninsula reverted to Egyptian sovereignty under the 1979 peace treaty between Israel and Egypt. These inscriptions, many only containing the pilgrim's name and sometimes a cross or an appeal for Divine mercy and protection, had been scratched on prominent rocks in the Sinai Desert. Most of the graffiti were located along the routes to Jebel Musa (Mt Moses), that is the mountain traditionally identified as the biblical Mt Sinai. At its foot stands St Catherine's Monastery and scholars are familiar with the collections of manuscripts and icons for which this ancient monastery is renowned.¹ In the Mt Sinai area too, on the ancient wooden doors of the basilica, and by the famous steps up to the mountain peak, Armenian pilgrims had left their names and petitions.

I undertook a series of five expeditions to the Sinai in the late 1970s and continuing to mid-1980. My primary goal was to document the Armenian inscriptions of which I had been informed. By way of background, I should say that the oldest Armenian inscription known before the Sinai discoveries was from the very end of the fifth century. It was on a basilica in Tekor, now in the Kars province of Turkey. The inscription is lost, but photographs of it survive.² The Armenian alphabet had been invented by St Mesrop Maštoc' at the beginning of the fifth century, and it was a crucial element in the evangelization of Armenia.³ My own interests were primarily philological, relating to texts and their transmission. Although many Armenian manuscripts preserve scribes' colophons, a substantial number do not. Palaeography is, therefore, the main tool used to date these manuscripts.

The oldest dated Armenian manuscript is the Gospels of Queen Mlkē, dated to 862 CE, preserved in Venice, at the Mekhitarist Monastery. Fragments of older manuscripts exist, often preserved as *feuilles de garde* in later manu-

1 Forsyth and Weitzmann 1974.

2 Stone et al. 2002, illustrations 2 and 3.

3 The story of its invention is preserved in the *Life of Maštoc'*, composed in the fifth century by his student Koriwn; translated by Norehad 1982.

scripts. But none of these bears a date⁴ and the dating by palaeographic typology has been impressionistic. A firm developmental palaeographic analysis based on dated manuscripts was called for and to answer this need the *Album of Armenian Palaeography* was prepared, which contains very high quality images of nearly 200 dated manuscripts.⁵ Tables of letter-forms and a detailed introduction complement the images. The *Album* is based on dated manuscripts,⁶ all of which are later than rock inscriptions.

On my first trip to the Sinai, in 1978, I saw inscriptions that impressed me as being very old indeed. Later developments enabled me to date the oldest of them on archaeological grounds to the first part of the fifth century, that is, within decades of the discovery of the alphabet, traditionally dated to 406. In the course of the subsequent expeditions that were designed initially to clarify the routes that the pilgrims who left the graffiti travelled, broader issues concerning Christian pilgrimage arose that demanded resolution. Since travel routes in the desert are determined by the goal of the journey—Mt Sinai for the Christian pilgrims—and by the topography, issues of human traffic in the desert became of increasing interest to me. This interest extended beyond the Christian pilgrims themselves, and came to include the various travellers and tribes that lived in and moved through the desert. These were not only the Arabic speaking Bedouin but, in Roman times, the Nabateans, who wrote in Aramaic in the form of Semitic script that eventually developed into the ‘normal’ Arabic script, as well as some inscriptions in Greek. Speakers of close to a dozen and a half languages left graffiti in the desert.

The particular significance of graffiti from a palaeographic point of view and their bearing on the study of manuscripts is the following. It is the usual assumption that the traditions of manuscript copying and of the incision of inscriptions, in particular the formal inscriptions of funerary or dedicatory character, were distinct, particularly because the artisans expert in stone masonry are different from scribes. Thus, in the Armenian tradition, which I know well, and in other languages, formal stone inscriptions tend to be more conservative in style than manuscript book hands. In Armenian, indeed, manuscript hands changed over the centuries far more than the formal epigraphic hands and, to this day, formal inscriptions may be written in a script form that is extraordinarily archaic. This gap can be seen by comparing printed books, not to speak of informal book hands, with contemporary stone inscriptions.

4 As far as is known today, and certainly none bears a fifth century date.

5 Stone et al. 2002.

6 Armenian manuscripts often contain colophons, which form the basis of dating. On the colophons see Sirinian 2014 and Stone 1995.

Graffiti, for the most part, were not written by trained masons, but by literate people accustomed to writing on leather, papyrus, or paper. The hands used in graffiti should be viewed, therefore, as part of the series of manuscript hands and not of epigraphic ones.⁷ In fact, some graffiti are written in a formal hand, and others in semi-formal, or occasionally informal hand. This is true, I can say, of Armenian. Experts in other scribal traditions must make their own determinations. In view of considerations like these, however, the discovery of graffiti in Armenian in the Sinai desert is most significant. Because of their early date, they partly fill the gap in the series of book hands from the inception of writing down to the Queen Mlkē Gospels.

After the end of the expeditions in mid-1980, I realised that I had at my disposal an extraordinary corpus of images of Sinai inscriptions. They included more than just Armenian, for many of the sites that contained Armenian were covered in inscriptions in various languages—Greek, Nabatean, Georgian, Latin, and Arabic among them. Photographs of Armenian inscriptions frequently included those in other languages, and I had photographed hieroglyphic inscriptions, Nabatean, Greek and Latin, as well as Ancient North Arabian. I decided to establish a database to organize this material and which would list and provide information about all graffiti and other rock markings. To my own numerous photographs from the Sinai, I was able to add more photographs provided by a number of scholars, mainly archaeologists, and also to include in the data of many published inscriptions, from the *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, from the book by Abraham Negev on the inscriptions from one main site Wadi Haggag in Eastern Sinai, and certain other inscriptions.⁸ Moreover, I was able to undertake one further expedition to the Negev desert in the South of Israel. To clarify the pilgrims' routes I studied and also photographed many graffiti from Christian holy places in Jerusalem, in Nazareth and in Bethlehem.

7 This is my conclusion after comparing the scripts of graffiti with the scripts of formal inscriptions and of manuscripts. Formal inscriptions—foundation, dedicatory or similar—are written in the uncial script down to this day. This script was falling out of use by the tenth century in manuscripts. Such formal inscriptions are very occasionally written in the later, formal minuscule hand (*bolorgir*), but virtually never in any of the other book hands. The scripts of graffiti resemble book hands, or sometimes even less formal hands than that. Among the reasons, to think that graffiti were written by people untrained in stone masonry are instances where two lines forming an angle do not meet, or meet, but one continues beyond the other, and other such 'lapses' of the execution.

8 Negev 1977; *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* II, 1889–1942, Euting 1891, and more.

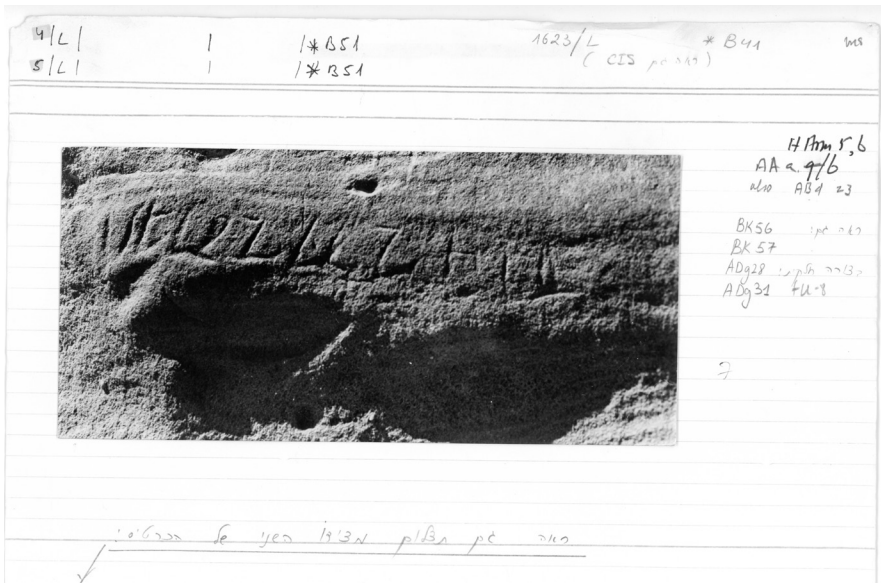


Fig. 1. Rock 3, Wadi Haggag, the oldest Armenian inscription H Arm 6, (ԱՆԱՆԻԱ / ANANIA), 4.5 x 3.5 cm, photograph and the original handwritten notes by the Rock Inscriptions Project team.

Although this was early in the development of computer applications to the humanities, I wished to do as much of the work as was feasible on computer. Internet was not yet available; external hard drives were limited in size and very expensive. Initially we worked with DOS and the program dBase 2, were able to catalogue the thousands of inscriptions, rock drawings and Bedouin signs, and to produce two main results. One was a physical file of images, mainly black and white negatives and prints and a number of coloured slides; the other was the computerized data resource which showed the location of the inscriptions, the language, a copy of the inscription and relevant bibliography. In the early stages of the work, it was impossible to store digital images. After the Project migrated to Macintosh, using 4D relational database management system, we prepared a sample with images integrated, but that was shortly before the main thrust of the work ended.

In 1992 the project produced a three-volume catalogue of the images we held, totalling 8,500 inscriptions, petroglyphs, *wasems* (Bedouin tribal markings) etc.⁹ In the *Introduction* to the *Catalogue* I wrote: 'This catalogue is to be viewed, therefore, as an invitation to scholars to pursue further research on

9 Stone 1992 and 1994.

these epigraphs'.¹⁰ Sadly, I must say, this invitation was little utilized, though some scholars have done work on the hieroglyphic inscriptions, the one Ge'ez inscription, and some of the Nabatean.¹¹

I myself published the Armenian inscriptions in 1982 in a volume in which the late Michel van Esbroeck contributed a publication of the Georgian inscriptions, and William Adler two Latin inscriptions.¹² Subsequently I published a few more Armenian inscriptions of which people gave me photographs.

About two years ago, the decision was made to mount the whole corpus onto Internet. This way the material in the catalogue and the black and white images could be made available to interested scholars, together with images of the inscriptions. They can be accessed by geographic area, by language, by date (when such survived), and so forth. The database is now up and running and available at <<http://rockinscriptions.huji.ac.il>>.

Nearly all the images have also been mounted on-line, and at the time of writing, the final stages of this labour are still underway. I am pleased to repeat here the invitation that I extended in the printed *Catalogue* in 1992: scholars are invited to research and publish the material, and the only requirement the Project has is to acknowledge its contribution. We can also make high-resolution images available for the cost of the preparation involved. The black and white photographs are available in the Project's room at the Institute of Asian and African Studies of the Hebrew University.

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¹⁰ Stone 1992, I, 9.

¹¹ The unpublished Nabatean inscriptions are the largest group.

¹² Stone 1982, 1985; Stone and van Lint 1989.

¹³ I take this opportunity to thank not just programmers Oron Joffe (the project itself), Ephraim Damboritz (migration to Internet), Editorial Assistant Avital Kobayashi Pinnik, but also the graduate assistants who contributed so devotedly to this work. Various bodies helped fund the work including the Research Fund of the Israel Academy of Sciences (now Israel Science Foundation), the Antiquities Authority of the State of Israel, the Research and Development Authority of the Hebrew University, Mr James D. Wolfensohn, the Sarkes Tarzian Fund of the University of Pennsylvania, and the Harvard Semitic Museum.

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