Kilroy in the Desert*

by
Dr. Willard G. Oxtoby

The Second World War has not yet receded far enough into history for the legend "Kilroy was here" to have faded completely from memory, or from countless rocks and walls throughout the world. James J. Kilroy, a shipyard inspector in Quincy, Massachusetts, who tired of climbing into tanks only to discover that he had already checked them, began early in the war to chalk his name on equipment he had inspected. It wasn't long before the slogan began appearing not only all over the shipyard but wherever American men and equipment went.

Kilroy was neither the first nor the last to leave his name in a place, nor was his motive the only one. From antiquity there survives a corpus of graffiti I shall call "inscriptions" because we possess no more substantial record of their authors: the Safaitic inscriptions.

Large tracts of the landscape of southern Syria, eastern Jordan, and northwestern Saudi Arabia are littered with smooth, rather shiny, purplish black basalt stones and boulders. In that region of minimal rainfall and vegetation these stones are about all one sees. The present-day traveler speeding along the Amman-Baghdad highway will notice the telephone poles paralleling the road, and he may observe the small ridge of earth covering the pipeline which twenty years ago conveyed oil from Iraq to the port of Haifa; but the rock-strewn landscape is a monotonous and forbidding one. It is only when one looks closely at some of the stones that the desert proves not to be as uncharted as it might at first seem.

Beneath one's feet there are paths, criss-crossing the gravel and small stones around the mudflats but becoming difficult and losing themselves among the large stones on the hills. The summits of many of these hills, however, are marked by rounded cairns, seldom more than six feet high but visible on the horizon at a distance of several miles. The cairns are particularly numerous along the eastern edge of the rock-strewn region, almost like lighthouses along a coastline, as though they were landmarks to caravan "navigation" on the clearer terrain adjoining. A supposition of this sort is confirmed by a close examination of the cairns, where most of the Safaitic inscriptions have been found.

The builders of the cairns used stones on which they or others before them had inscribed their names. When one scratches through the dark patina of the stone, the fresh stone appears lighter, and even after nearly two thousand years' exposure to the elements the inscriptions are usually legible. The stones being too numerous and heavy to carry, and the scratches too shallow for latex "squeeze" impressions, the explorer's technique is to copy by hand what he sees, and to photograph the text as well.

Individually, the texts seem unpromising. A routine Safaitic inscription reads simply, "By N, son of N." In enough cases to sustain further interest, however, an inscription will go on to trace the author's genealogy back several generations (sometimes more than a dozen), will name his tribe, or will state in a few words what the author was doing. Frequently, too, a divinity will be invoked or a drawing or symbol will adjoin the text. Thus these thousands of inscriptions, when studied in quantity, provide us a fair amount of information about the life and activities of the tribes which produced them.

The Safaites were nomads. They write of being in a place in a particular season or year,

(†) See plate p. 49.
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of migrating, of fleeing or of finding good pasture. The camel is the animal most common in treir drawings. But from the drawings we know that they also used the horse and other domesticated animals, and that, mounted on horseback, they hunted such wildlife as gazelles and ostriches. The territory which they roamed was on the fringes of the Roman Empire, considerably to the east of the trans-Jordanian cities of the Decapolis, and south-east of most of the frontier outposts which the Romans established in the Syrian Desert to provide a secure defense for their position in the eastern Mediterranean. The inscriptions provide evidence of Safaitic contact with the Nabataeans, the Palmyrenes, and especially the Romans, and it would appear that they were written from about the first century B.C. through the third century A.D.

Today the beduin of the region, and the Arab frontier guards stationed there, do not recognize the Safaitic script to be Arabic; they describe it as "looking like English" (meaning our capital letters), for the characters are of bold basic geometrical shapes and not joined together. The script is related not to the familiar Arabic cursive (a development from the Aramaic family of alphabets, especially Nabataean) but to the script of ancient South Arabia, the land famed as Sheba. The script lives on in Ethiopic, but Safaitic was its northernmost historic extension.

Safaitic is one of a fair-sized family of Arabic dialects which flourished between the Indian Ocean and the Syrian Desert during the millennium before Muhammad. Historically it is a dead end, because it was the spoken language of Mecca which was through the Qur'an to become classical Arabic; but, allowing for a few peculiarities, Safaitic is accessible by way of the grammar and vocabulary of its more literary cousin. For the activity of scholarly reconstruction, this relationship is both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, classical Arabic provided the key during the last century for the first decipherments of the texts; and the scholar continues to resort profitably to known Arabic names for his vocalization of the names of the Safaites and to the lexicon of literary Arabic for a clue to their vocabulary. But on the other hand, this close kinship with later Arabic can detract from an understanding of the Safaitic authors in their own right. One is tempted to project the later Arabic developments back into Safaitic; and in the absence of substantial earlier material, what alternative has one? The other pre-Islamic dialects known through inscriptions might, to be sure, function as a "control" in the process, were it not for the fact that they, too, have been deciphered on the basis of classical Arabic. We have, ultimately, to work from the known to the unknown, and convincing knowledge at this stage of the study consists chiefly of the resemblance of the two rather than their individuality.

It is, frankly, rather surprising that beduin should write at all. Human literacy emerged in the Near East, to be sure, but among sedentary populations. One thinks of literacy as a luxury which nomads on a marginal level of subsistence can ill afford. Certainly the modern-day beduin have been illiterate, and embarrassed by the fact; to one explorer's explanation of what the inscriptions were, a beduin replied, "Since when could beduin read and write? Were our ancestors better than we are?" But nomadism, far from being crude, represents the close adaptation of life to a certain set of environmental conditions (indeed, perhaps the optimum adaptation, as some unsuccessful Point Four agricultural experiments in the region lead one to think). The literacy of the Safaitic nomads must stem from their close contact with settled centers of literate civilization, most plausibly through the caravan commerce which linked southern Arabia with the Mediterranean.

The preservation of these texts for nearly two millennia we owe primarily to the hardness of the rock and the dryness of the climate, but the inscribing of the texts was no accident. Engraving such hard stone is an accomplishment, and in some cases it is clear from the handwriting that the same scribe wrote the names of different persons. What was the purpose of such effort? As with all discussions of

graffiti and of symbols, scholarly opinion ranges between two poles which have been characterized as the idle-markings school and the serious-purpose school. A picture of a camel, with the legend "By N. son of N. is the camel," may be a casual drawing, but it may also express a desire for the abundance and safety of the herd or even be thought efficacious toward that end. The question of motive is most acute and elusive when one comes to religion. One modern interpreter claimed that the making of each inscription was a votive act, in which the stone became a token of the individual's union with the deity whose sacred precincts the lava district was. If one is going to assume every act a profoundly religious act, such a view may follow; but this assumption requires a level of fervor, even fanaticism, seldom sustained over the centuries. But that *some* of the inscriptions were explicitly religious cannot be denied: prayers for security, and requests that the divinity blind anyone who would efface the inscription.

The Safaites invoked a number of divinities worshipped by their neighbors, thus attesting to a degree a unity of culturs in the Syrian desert. The goddesses Allat and Ruda are two of the figures known in the South Arabian pantheon, while the worship of Dhu-Shara and Ba'alasamin suggests the influence of the Nabataeans and Palmyrenes. Some tribes had their own *tyches* of fortune divinities. Another god is Yitha', the root of whose name, "to save," is cognate with Joshua and Jesus. Whether Yitha' was "savior" in general or "Jesus" in particular has been a subject of scholarly argument; but if Yitha' be a case of Christian influence it must be seen as a transmission of name only, for Yitha' appears in Safaitic without the title Messiah (Christ) and without any demonstrably Christian symbolism. The beduin on the fringes of the Roman Empire before the fourth century, in short, had little to do with Christianity.

As with decipherment, so with interpretation: the scholar describing the beduin's religion places his material in a conceptual framework which affects what he observes. How does one relate these texts to other knowledge? Classical Muslim writers on pre-Islamic paganism described tribes and oases, but without distinguishing between the practices of their beduin and sedentary populations; thus one may err in delineating the specific features which comprise beduin religion. But once one decides on a description, one faces the problem of origins. Does beduin religion represent a survival of the most primitive Semitic religion, or did the beduin, far from being innovators, borrow their divinities from the ancient civilizations? To portray the beduin as purveyors of "original" Semitic religion implies a confidence as to what that religion was—a confidence I cannot share. I am more convinced by similarities and analogies with religion elsewhere: again, one works from the "known" of neighboring civilizations to the reconstruction of the Safaitic picture. Such a method admits an allegation of borrowing as acceptable documentation in matters religious, and amounts to a begging of our question. But in the absence of the data sufficient for a treatment based on internal Safaitic documentation alone, this is the only method by which one can work.

One cannot expect new discoveries to resolve the basic methodological problems of scholarly reconstruction, but we can hope to known more than the eight thousand Safaitic inscriptions published during the past century. Only a fraction of the edge of rock-strewn region has been explored. From Damascus into the "panhandle" of Jordan the trail of these ancient Kilroys has been plotted; the course which it takes into Saudi Arabia is a piece of unfinished business. There are certainly more cairns and more texts awaiting the hand and lens of the copyist, and the patience and ingenuity of the scholar.

Willard G. Oxtoby
Yale University

Editor's Note: Dr. Oxtoby is the author of **Some Inscriptions of the Safaitic Beduin**, New Haven, American Oriental Society, 1968.