

On the Later Arabic Inscription in Qaṣr Burqu'

by

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In his article 'An Examination of the Ruins of Qaṣr Burqu' (*A.D.A.J* XIX, 1974, pp. 93-100), Dr. Heinz Gaube attempted to elucidate "the question of the chronological sequence of the different parts of the building". He is here carrying further the work of earlier scholars namely Schroeder, Field and Sauvaget.

Dr. Gaube's work on Arab monuments in *Bilād al-Shām*, notably his monograph on Khirbat al-Baiḍā' or al-Qaṣr al-Abyaḍ in the Syrian Desert, has already won him due scholarly recognition.¹ The following notes are meant as a modest contribution to complement his study on Burqu'. The corrections given here should be read in conjunction with his article published in the last issue of this *Annual*. It is hoped that they may be of some use for a more comprehensive study of Qaṣr Burqu' in the future.

Dr. Gaube indicates four periods which are of relevance for the dating of stages of construction - reconstruction and restoration of Qaṣr Burqu': two of these are pre-Islamic and include a Byzantine period; then the Islamic Umayyad period, when construction was undertaken under the auspices of the crown prince al-Walid b. 'Abd al-Malik in A.H. 81 (A.D. 700); and finally a later Is-

lamic period when the palace was supposedly used as a Khān. This periodization is done on the basis of epigraphical evidence both Greek and Arabic. Leaving aside a Greek inscription which is now kept in the Chicago Natural History Museum, Dr. Gaube reproduces a Greek inscription from the Christian Byzantine era; the well-known Arabic inscription of al-Walid; and a further Arabic inscription of a much later period, which he however considers as 'two' inscriptions.

The main aim of these notes is to suggest a more correct reading and dating of what I would describe as a single later Arabic inscription of six lines found on the same wall as al-Walid-inscription.

For the purpose of clarity we may review all the Arabic inscriptions for Burqu' reproduced in Dr. Gaube's article. There is first the well-known Umayyad inscription which, in the reading of Field and Sir Hamilton Gibb runs as follows:

- 1 — اللهم بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم هذا ما
- 2 — بنا الامير الوليد بن امير المؤمنين هو
- 3 — لا البيوت سنة وحدة وثمانين

This inscription is essentially relevant for the purpose of these notes be-

(1) Heinz Gaube, *Ein arabischer Palast in Südsyrien, Hīrbet al-Baiḍa* (Beiruter Texte und

Studien, Band 16), Beirut, 1974.

cause of its date (81 A.H.) as will be seen presently.

Dr. Gaube then speaks of "Two other Arabic inscriptions preserved above the Walid-inscription" to use his own words. The 'first' of these he designates as A. and gives as follows :

- 1 — قرأ هذا الخط بالكوفي
- 2 — هارون ابن سماعيل
- 3 — الزبيدي ولقاله [في سنة]
- 4 — سبع مائه واثنين وثمانين

and the following is how he renders it in English:

- (1) It read this Kufi-script
- (2) Hārūn Ibn Šamā'a
- (3) Az-Zubaidī He saw it
- (4) [in the year] 782 (= A.D. 1380).

He then gives what he considers as the second of the "Two other Arabic inscriptions", this he reproduces as:

- B.
- 1 — سنه كتي سنة ثاني عشر
 - 2 — وثمان مائه

and he renders it in English thus: (1) [The] year [this] was written [is the] year (2) 812 (= A.D. 1409). All the square brackets above are Dr. Gaube's. On the basis of his reading he considers what he calls "the first of the two inscriptions" as giving "a *terminus ante quem* for the restoration work". He takes the figure 782 to denote a *Hijrī* date, and with an equivalent A.D. 1380, it becomes

an important point of departure in his subsequent discussion.

A re-examination of these six lines of this Arabic inscription however, leads to some interesting and significant conclusions.

1. The first point that should be made is that these six lines are in fact only one complete inscription, written at the same time.

2. Secondly its more correct reading is as follows:

- 1 — قرأ هذا الخط بالكوفي
- 2 — هارون ابن سماعيل
- 3 — الزبيدي ولقاله
- 4 — سبع مائة واثنين وثلاثين
- 5 — سنة كتب سنة ثاني عشر
- 6 — وثمان مائة

It can then be rendered as one statement:

- (1) This inscription in Kūfic was read by
- (2) Hārūn Ibn Shammā'a
- (3) Al-Zubaidī and he found it goes back to
- (4) seven hundred and thirty-two
- (5) years. Written in the year twelve.
- (6) and eight hundred.

The second word of line (3), line (4) and the first word of line (5) should be considered as one sentence:

(ولقاه سبع مائة واثنين وثلاثين سنة)

The phrase (لقاه) indicates a colloquial form of (لقي له) which literally means "he found for it", but here conveys "he found it goes back to". There is, thus, no need to impose an additional [في سنة] at the end of the third line. Nor is it necessary to resort to further square-bracket additions.

3. An interesting fact emerges from this method of interpretation. Hārūn Ibn Shammā'a not only was present at Qaṣr Burqu' in the year 812 A.H. (a fact that is obscured in Dr. Gaube's reading), and not only did he read the Umayyad inscription of 81 A.H., what is more interesting is that having deciphered the old Kūfic inscription, Hārūn Ibn Shammā'a then proceeded to work out the length of the period of time that had elapsed between al-Walīd-inscription (i.e. 81 A.H.) and his own day (i.e. 812 A.H.). By simple deduction he concluded that this period amounted to 732 years.

4. It thus becomes clear that the figure 782 given by Dr. Gaube is neither the correct reading of the figure in line (4) (the correct reading being 732), nor is it in fact a date at all.

5. The correct figure 732 is simply the period of time between the year 81 A.H., in which the work of reconstruction by al-Walīd took place, and the year 812 A.H. in which a certain Hārūn b. Shammā'a stood and inscribed his own 'commentary' and autograph in a rather ordinary and not very articulate hand on a stone close to the old Kūfic inscription commemorating the work of the Umayyad crown prince.

The figure 782 should therefore be discarded completely as an A.H. date together with its equivalent A.D. 1380, and the correct figure 732, should be seen for what it is: a period of time and not a date.

For any consideration of the post-Umayyad history of Qaṣr Burqu', therefore, the only date emerging from this later inscription is 812 A.H. (1409 or 1410 A.D.). Further excavations and tidying up operations may reveal other inscriptions; at any rate such operations would hopefully throw more light on the history of this monument.

6. The inscription under review is non-official in character, and does not really necessarily indicate a new stage of restoration of the Burqu' complex, although it provides a *terminus ante quem* for the re-building of certain parts of it.

The identity and position of Hārūn Ibn Shammā'a al-Zubaidī remains unknown. Whether he was an official an

artisan, a merchant, or just a traveller it is not possible to tell.

Finally, the inscription is an example of the interest shown in ancient monuments in Islamic Arab Society. Arabic literary sources provide us with interesting references to inscriptions and graffiti which learned men, travellers and some-

times officials lefts as a personal testimony on ancient buildings which they visited. The inscription of Hārūn b. Sham-mā'a al-Zubaidī is a living illustration of this interest in ancient monuments and their history.

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