

Copy of an Arabic Inscription in Cufic or Karmatic Characters, on a Tombstone at Malta; With Remarks and Translation

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ART. VIII.—*Copy of an Arabic Inscription in Cufic or Karmatic characters, on a Tombstone at Malta; with remarks and translation, by JOHN SHAKESPEAR, Esq.*

A FAC-SIMILE in plaster, from which the accompanying lithograph is copied on a reduced scale, having been presented by Sir Grenville Temple, Bart., to the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland, it has been submitted to the inspection of the members of the Society as well as of visitants: and, attempts have subsequently been made, in this country, at deciphering and translating it.

In the first volume, however, of the *Fundgruben des Orients*, or *Mines de l'Orient*, printed at Vienna, in 1809, and commencing at p. 393, some account has before been given of this tombstone, together with what is there considered a translation of the inscription; and, part of that account it seems advisable here to transcribe, which is as follows:

“Della dimora dei Saraceni dominanti in quest' isola di Malta ne rimane qualche monumento. Nel cortile della casa d'uno dei nostri principali cittadini si trova incastrata nel muro una pietra quasi quadrata, essendo di palmi due e tre once di larghezza, ed un pajo d'once più lunga, nella quale a gran caratteri arabi è scolpita una lunga epigrafe. Di essa presero più copie diversi forestieri eruditi. Noi ne mandammo una, presso a cinque lustri sono, al proposto Giovannantonio Goti, il quale ci scrisse averla inviata a Monsignor Assemani, per farla da lui spiegare, ma poi non ebbimo verun riscontro. La comunicammo anche al nostro Camillo Falconet, membro pensionario dell' Accademia reale delle iscrizioni e belle lettere di Parigi, versato in più lingue e scienze, il quale ce ne diede la spiegazione. Questa è, che il contenuto nel cerchio di mezzo è un epitaffio d'una figliuola d'un Arabo (e questi tra uno de' principali Saraceni che quì dominavano) di nome Hassan, e che le altre parole scolpite ne' tre lati esprimono alcune sentenze sopra la morte, tolte dall' alcorano. Fin quì il Conte Ciantar, nella Malta illustrata, T. I. p. 691.”

“Questa indicazione sommaria e poco soddisfacente di ciò che è contenuto nell' iscrizione, è tutto quello che si potè sulla stessa sapere dopo gli studj fatti dai dotti citati dal sudetto Conte. Molti altri insigni eruditi se ne occuparono in seguito, ma sempre invano.

Nessuno riuscì mai a darne una traduzione ragionevole e compiuta. Alla fine noi abbiamo il vantaggio di averla attualmente, e ci facciamo piacere di comunicarla agli amatori dell' antichità. Siamo tenuti di questa traduzione a S. E. il Cav. d' Italinsky, fu Inviato Straordinario e Ministro Plenipotenziario di S. M. l' Imperatore di Russia presso la Porta Ottomana, il quale, condotto dalle vicende de' tempi a Malta, e dietro alle sollecitazioni di molti maltesi e stranieri, s' indusse ad occuparsi nel decifrare questo antico monumento, la di cui interpretazione sembrava impossibile. Egli osservò che realmente era impossibile che si potesse tradurlo nei paesi esteri, poichè tutte le copie tratte dall' originale erano scorrettissime. Asserì di più che malgrado le molte sue osservazioni fatte sull' originale, trovò due lettere, che, o per i guasti cagionativi da tempo, o per la singolarità dei caratteri, sono assolutamente indecifrabili. La parola *giace* e la frase *preda della morte*, sono più presunzioni che spiegazioni di caratteri che non si poterono, per quanto si facesse, decifrare."

After some farther remarks, the writer continues, " Ecco una copia esatta di questo rimarchevole monumento del duodecimo secolo, col testo in caratteri arabi, colla traduzione e note, tali quali ce le comunicò il sudetto Sigr. Cavaliere."

Notwithstanding, however, the hopes of a correct reading and translation, which might have been entertained from the attempts made, on the spot especially, as above related, yet the " copia esatta," as afterwards given in modern Arabic characters, and ascribed to the Cav. d' Italinsky, is too far remote from the original to merit being again submitted to the public ; and the like observation may be fitly extended to the lines subsequently given as a translation.

In the *Maltese Penny Magazine*, of the 19th Oct. 1839, this tombstone is again noticed : and, though the observations there made, are chiefly taken from the *Mimes de l'Orient*, as above referred to, yet some little new is added, especially a Maltese version ; the modern Arabic and the translation, however, are founded on the productions attributed to the Cav. d' Italinsky, and approach but in few particulars, if in any respect, nearer than his to the truth.

Soon after the fac-simile of the inscription reached the Society, a translation of the introductory and historical part, contained in the centre and hereafter marked (A), was effected, and for the most part with exactitude, by the skill and care of Mr. Norris, as read before the members at their meeting, on the 3rd of Nov. 1838. Other attempts have subsequently been made, not only of the central part,

but of the marginal portions also: and Mr. Lane, the learned translator of the *Arabian Nights*, must be especially mentioned, as having made great advancement towards ascertaining both the correct reading and the real sense of the epitaph. That gentleman discovered the versification of the lines marked (n) (c) in the following transcript, an important aid, nay, on some occasions, a sure guide in the research. Mr. Lane's success, too, in other particulars, which will hereafter be noticed, evinces his intimate acquaintance with the language of the original. Still doubt remains as to the correct reading of a few words; and, consequently, as to the strict meaning intended. This chiefly arises from the indeterminate nature of the characters, void of the diacritical points as well as of the marks for short vowels and other purposes, which facilities occur in more modern Arabic writings.

Judging from the copy before us, the original must have been carefully engraved in the character called Karmatique by le Chevalier Marcel, in his *Paléographie Arabe*, being a florid style of writing, founded on the more ancient Cufic. The lady, to whose memory the tablet was executed, was doubtless of a high family: and, the first patronymic attached to her father's name, shows him to have been an Arab of the celebrated tribe *Hudhail*, to individuals of which tribe poetical effusions of various kinds may be found attributed in the *Hamása*: so, to Abu Sakhr Alhudhalí, in grief for the loss of his mistress, is among others ascribed a short ode, of the force and beauty of which the following lines may impart some faint idea:—

What, and I swear by Him whose will must be,
 Death follows life—grief joy, at whose decree,
 Since She, whose friendship once what bliss to share!
 Leaves me a prey to anguish and despair,
 Do I not envy brutes the life they lead?
 See, mates with mates at peace the desert tread:
 Then, love for Her! let each successive hour
 Double thy fervour and augment thy power;
 No rest I covet till I reach the tomb,
 No consolation ere the day of doom.
 Wondrous, with Her, how light time winged his way,
 Without Her, now, how heavy hangs the day!

In addition to what is mentioned above relative to this monument, we find in the *Malta Penny Magazine*, before noticed, that the “stone belonged originally to the noble family of Sciara, in whose possession

it yet remains, being still to be seen in the wall of a house situated in Strada Stretta and Str. Brettanica, appertaining to the Baronessa Parisi, and at present occupied by the Judge G. B. Satariano."

At the end of the first volume of *Mines de l'Orient*, is an attempted fac-simile on a reduced scale, as well as in the *Malta Magazine* above quoted: it will be evident, however, from a comparison of them with the plaster impression now owned by the Society, that both the former are very deficient in correctness.

Transcript of the Epitaph in Naskhî or modern Arabic characters.

(B)

اقى الموت اخرجني قصرا فيا اسني لم تنجني منه ابواني واغلا

انظر بعينيك هل في الارض من بابي او دافع الموت او الموت من
(B) و صرت رهنا بما قدمت من عمل محضاً علي و من خلفه باق:

(C) يامن را القبر انا (A) و مقامي في البلا
قد بليت به و باسم الله الر عبر و في
الترب غبر جن الرحيم و صلي الله نشوري
اجفاني و علي النبي محمد و علي اذا ما جيت
اما في في اله و سلم تسليها لله خلقي
مضججي العز و البقا و علي خلقه كتب الغنا اخي فحد
(B) ولكم في رسول الله اسوة حسنة هذا قبر وده
ميمونة بنت حسان بن علي الهذلي و عذار السوسي
توفيت رحمة الله عليها يوم الخميس السادس
عشر من شهر شعبان الكابر من سنة تسع و ستين و خمسمية
و هي تشهد ان لا اله الا الله وحد لا شريك له

The middle part (A) of this inscription presents no great difficulty to the translator, except as to the word above marked (') apparently a proper name, which, from the indefinite nature of the characters

has not yet been ascertained : and the sense of this portion may be the following :—

In the name of (the¹) God, the merciful, the merciful: and (the) God bless the prophet Muhammad and his family, and with salvation save ! To (the) God (belong) glory and immortality ; but, on his creatures is written² perishableness : and, to you in the messenger of (the) God is an excellent example. This is the tomb of Maimúna, daughter of Hassán, son of Ali, of the tribe Hudhail and of Sús : she resigned life, the mercy of (the) God upon Her, thursday the sixteenth of Shaubán the great³, in the year five hundred and sixty nine⁴, testifying that there is no God but (the) God, one, to whom there is no companion.

Of the marginal portions (b) (c), which are almost wholly poetical, it is more difficult to ascertain both the reading and meaning ; for which reason, it may be of use to write them again, distinguishing the verses, and exhibiting the diacritical marks now usual in Arabic. And, though it is not clear which portion of the two was actually designed to precede, yet the lines marked (b) may, without inconvenience, be first noticed.

انظر بعينيك هـ في الارض من باقى
او دافع الموت او للموت من راقى
الموت اخرجني قصرا فيا اسقي
لم تنجني منه ابواي واغلاقي
وصرت رهنا بما قدمت من عمل
محضا علي وما خلفه باقى

¹ The article is used in the appellation of the Being adored by Muhammadans, by way of distinction from the indefinite الله *iláh* (any being) adored ; which latter words occurs towards the end of this part of the inscription.

² Doubt may be entertained as to the correctness of كتب in the fifth line, here translated “is written”; yet, this reading seems fully sanctioned by the Koran; so, in سورة العنكبوت we find كَتَبَ عَلَيْهِمُ الْقَتْلَ *killing is written (destined) upon them.*

³ The reading الكبير in the ninth line, here rendered by “the great,” is questionable. Mr. Lane writes it الكبير

⁴ Twenty-first of March, 1174, of our era.

*Death made (too) narrow for me (or straitened to me) a palace ; for,
 wo is me !*

My gates and bars protected me not from him :

*And, I became a pledge for the deeds I (should) have done previously
 (to death),*

Solely¹ (remaining) upon me ; and, what follows is immortal.

The verses marked (c) on the two recesses, may be thus transcribed :—

يَا مَنْ رَا الْقَبْرَ اِنِّي قَدْ بَلَيْتُ بِهِ
 وَ التُّرْبَ غَيْرَ اَجْفَانِي وَ اَمَاقِي
 فِي مَضْجَعِي وَ مَقَامِي فِي الْبَلَاءِ عِبْر
 وَ فِي نُشُورِي اِذَا مَا جِئْتَ خَلَاقِي
 اَخِي مُحَدَّدَةٌ

¹ That good works alone remain of value after death, is frequently testified in the Koran ; so, in the *سورة النحل* the angels are represented as saying to the righteous *ادخلوا الجنة بما كنتم تعملون* enter the garden with what (or for what) ye have wrought : again, *والذين صبروا اجرهم* and we shall certainly reward those who are patient

with their reward, according to the utmost good which they shall have performed.

Again, in the *سورة و الصافات* it is said, *وما تجزون الا ما كنتم* and ye shall be recompensed only as to what ye shall have done : and, in

the *سورة المجاثية* we find, *من عمل صالحا فلنفسه و من اساء فعليه*, whoever does that which is right, (it is) for himself ; and, whoever doeth evil, (it is) upon (him) self.

The preposition, to which the primitive sense, upon, is given in the passage just quoted, is rendered by Sale *against*, which may be correct, being probably designed as the opposite to the preposition used in the foregoing sentence ; and Mr. Lane renders the same word, *against*, in translating the last hemistich of these verses ; yet, the meaning here preferred, seems best to fit the reading

adopted : so, in *سورة و الطور* we find *فاصبرو او لا تصبرو سواء عليكم* then be patient, or be not patient, it is equal upon (or in regard to) you.

In this part, Mr. Lane's endeavours were mostly successful: the first words, however, appended at it were to the verses, he left undeciphered; and, the reading here ventured on, is, in a great measure, conjectural. The expression in the latter part of the first hemistich may refer to the trial by Munkar and Nakir, immediately after the body is deposited in the tomb; or, perhaps, rather to the state of probation continued even in death: so, in the *سورة الملك* we read

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا

who created death and life, that He might prove you (as to) which of you is best in act¹. The idea expressed in the second hemistich, probably refers to the Eastern practice of painting the eyes. The meaning of the latter hemistich may be borrowed from the Koran,

as in *سورة الملك* we read *وَالِيَهُ النُّشُورُ* and to Him is the rising again.

The last word, too, if rightly transcribed, is, no doubt, derived from

the like source; so in *سورة البقر* it is said *وَمَنْ يَتَعَدَّ حُدُودَ اللَّهِ*

فَاُولَئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ and whoever transgresses the limits (statutes) of God, then those, they are the wicked.

A translation of the portions marked (c) may literally then be:

*O thou, who beholdest the tomb, in which my trial I have borne,
And the earth has filled with dust the lids and corners of my eyes,
In my bed and my abode in trial (or in wretchedness) is warning,
And in my rising again, when I come before my Maker.*

O brother (take warning, for) then are the limits (statutes, or-donnances or punishments²) of Him (the Creator).

For the English reader, the Arabic verses have been paraphrastically attempted as follows:

(u)

Death comes resistless; look this globe around,
What art averts him? Who immortal found?
Goodly my mansion, death expelled me thence;
'Gainst him my gates and bars a vain defence:

¹ Maracci, in a note, says, that the souls of the dead, according to Muham-madans, remain with the bodies in their tombs till the resurrection, after which, they go to heaven or to hell.

² Among lawyers, *حدود* is generally applied to the punishments fixed by a judge.

Pledged for my deeds, the good I'd done my store,
Now all I claim, exposed to death no more.

(c)

O thou, who view'st the tomb, where suffering lies
My altered body, filled with dust mine eyes,
Know this my wretched state is soon thy own ;
And both must stand before our Maker's throne :
Then come, for deeds as done, so Heaven ordains,
Eternal pleasures or unceasing pains.



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