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NEW ARABIC INSCRIPTIONS FROM THE BETHESDA  
SOUTH POOL EXCAVATIONS IN JERUSALEM

*In memory of Professor Khaled Nashef who passed away on 10<sup>th</sup> February 2009, a great scholar and a man with a genuine soul, who devoted much of his work to the archaeology of Palestine and the Palestinian cause*

Numerous fragmentary Arabic inscriptions were recovered during the course of archaeological excavations and reconstruction work carried out under the aegis of the White Fathers between 1865 and 1967 within the area of the Bethesda Pools next to the Church of St Anne's (Madrasa Salahiya) and north of the Haram al-Sharif in the Old City of Jerusalem<sup>1</sup>.

Altogether there are eighteen Arabic inscriptions. Of these, five were reused blocks in a wall (Feature 318) attributed to the Crusader period at the base of the South Pool. One inscription originated from the excavations in the 1960s (information about it was retrieved from the photographs of the excavation archives). Another was found in the rubble cleared during the building of a modern wall in the South Pool in the 1990s. The remaining eleven are stored together with excavation finds in the Museum of St Anne's, White Fathers. Unfortunately, no information regarding the provenience of this last group is known further than their discovery during the excavations at the site. Perhaps further work in the Archaeological Archives of the White Fathers, St Anne's, will provide additional information.

<sup>1</sup> The publication of these excavations is currently being conducted under the direction of C. Dauphin and S. Gibson (C. DAUPHIN, "The Bethesda Project at St Anne's in the Old City of Jerusalem", *POC* 55, 2005, 266). I am grateful to them for inviting me to prepare the Arabic inscriptions from the site for publication and to the White Fathers' community for their assistance while the recording was in progress.

The present report describes the five inscriptions on blocks reused in the Crusader-period wall (F318) at the base of the Bethesda South Pool (Nos 1-5), an inscription found during the 1960s (No. 6), an inscription found during the 1990s (No. 7), and an inscription in the excavation storeroom, but of unclear provenience within the excavation (No. 8). The remaining ten inscriptions (Nos 9-18) will be discussed in the Final publication of the Bethesda site.

#### INSCRIPTIONS NOS 1-5

Nos 1-5 are roughly incised inscriptions on small rectangular blocks found in secondary use within the courses of a wall (F318) that was built, apparently, in order to delimit the north-eastern part of the South Pool, and to strengthen the piers that had been built to support the upper building (the "Moustier") that was situated above it and to the north<sup>2</sup>. It appears that a few of these inscriptions had been broken and re-dressed with the typical chisel-combing of the Crusader period before being inserted into the wall. Another two inscriptions (Nos 6-7) were probably reused stones from pavements that once existed around the area of the pool in Crusader times.

Inscriptions Nos 1-5 represent (badly preserved) epitaphs incised into the surfaces of small rectangular blocks of soft limestone blocks. The writing is of a style common to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD, but the reading was complicated by the fact that the writing was not deeply incised and because the stones had sometimes been re-faced. The combed dressing style was clearly noticed on the surface of some of these stones.

#### *Inscription No. 1 (fig. 108)*

This inscription is on a small rectangular block (0.50 x 0.30 m) and consists of two lines. The upper and lower parts of the stone had been trimmed to be used as a building stone. Thus, it is likely that the inscription probably originally contained more than three lines.

#### *Arabic reading*

.A [بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم]

<sup>2</sup> Pers. comm. S. GIBSON.

- .B [.....] [ر] حم الله على؟  
 .C [.....] وا [بر] هيم؟

*Translation*

1. Basmalah.
2. .... may Allah have mercy on him .....
3. .... and Ibraheem .....

***Inscription No. 2 (fig. 109)***

This inscription may already have been damaged before the b  
 ers refaced the stone with combed chiselling. In this inscription  
 traces of two words have been preserved:

*Arabic reading*

- .A [.....] هذا [.....]  
 .B [.....] محمد [.....]

*Translation*

1. [.....] this is [....]
2. [.....] [ Muhammad] [.....]

***Inscription No. 3 (fig. 110)***

The remains of three words may be discerned in this inscript  
 The rest was disfigured by later hands, probably when the buil  
 inserted the stone (0.45 x 0.25 m) into the wall.

*Arabic reading*

- .A بسم الله [الرحمن الرحيم]  
 .B على محمد [د] [.....]

*Translation*

1. Basmalah
2. [May Allah] please Muhammad

***Inscription No. 4 (fig. 111)***

This inscription consists of four poorly preserved lines of writ  
 Line 3 consists of one word which was at some stage irretriev

damaged. The inscription is on a rectangular block of stone (0.36 x 0.43 m). The following is a suggested reading:

*Arabic reading*

1. [ بسم الله ] [ ال ] [ رحمن ] [ الرحيم ]

2. اللهم [ ا ] غفرلل ...

3. ....

4. اللهم [.....]

*Translation*

1. Basmalah

2. O, Allah forgive .....

3. ....

4. O, Allah [...]

***Inscription No. 5 (fig. 112)***

This block has four lines of lightly scratched writing on its surface. Visible in the first line are two words: "wa" (= and) and in the centre "Allah". The surface of the stone was badly disfigured. Hence, we are unable to offer a translation of this inscription, beyond noting that the style of the writing appears to be of the 8<sup>th</sup> century.

**INSCRIPTIONS NOS 6-8**

Judging by the smoothed surfaces of Inscriptions Nos 6-8 and the appearance of their lower parts (with traces of plaster on some of them) it would appear that these inscriptions were taken from their original location and reused in pavements during later periods. Inscriptions Nos 6-7 may very well have come from pavements that surrounded the chapel of the moustier in the Crusader period. It is unclear what pavement Inscription No. 8 might have come from. In any case, this secondary use inevitably damaged the inscriptions. These stones bear epitaphs, with Inscriptions 6-7 written in the kufic style of writing common to the 10-11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD. Inscription No. 8, however, represents a later style of writing and probably dates from the Mamluk period.

**Inscription No. 6 (fig. 113)**

Two lines of kufic writing are preserved in the surface of this hard limestone slab (0.14 x 0.17 m). The slab was clearly later intentionally broken on all four sides in order for it to be turned into a flagstone. The average height of the incised letters is 4 cm. A break across the surface of the stone probably occurred during a later use of the stone.

The first line is poorly preserved but individual letters may be traced and the second line appears to be part of the 'Ayat el- Kursi' invocation.

*Arabic reading*

1. .... ال ... او ا الع (لي or ادل)
2. (لا) اله الا هو (لحي القيوم لا تأخذه سنة ولا نوم...)

*Translation*

1. ....?
2. There is no God but He...

**Inscription No. 7 (fig. 114)**

Inscription No. 7 was incised into the surface of a hard pink stone slab (0.29 x 0.33 m; average thickness 5cm). The maximum height of the incised letters is 4 cm. The slab was shaped on all sides for it to be used as a flagstone.

Hence we must assume that some parts of the writing are missing. The original measurements of the inscription are unknown.

It would appear that this inscription is an epitaph of a Muslim woman. It has six lines. Line 2 clearly mentions that this was for the grave of a woman judging by the given name (خلافه ؟). Unfortunately the line which might have contained the year of her death is missing as a result of the later damage to the stone.

*Arabic reading*

1. بسم الله ال (رحمن الرحيم...)
2. (ه) ذا قبر خلافه ؟ تو (قبت...)
3. ... رحم الله ال (المؤمنين...)
4. (والمؤمنت لا اله الا الله ...)

5. ... هو وح(ده) (لا) شر(يك)(له) ...  
 6. (قل) هو الله اح(د) ...

*Translation*

1. Basmallah
2. This [is] the tomb of Khlafah ? she died...
3. ... may Allah have mercy for the believers
4. There no God but Allah alone ....
5. He has no companion ...
6. [Say] He is Allah, One ...

***Inscription No. 8 (fig. 115)***

The inscription is on a triangular fragment of hard limestone slab (0.35 x 0.26 m; thickness 4 cm). The average height of the letters is 10-12 cm.

There are remnants of three lines of writing. The first line has the word 'Basmallah', but lines 2 and 3 are difficult to read as a result of the damage. The size of the letters indicates that the original inscription was quite large and that it was probably inserted into a monumental building.

*Arabic reading*

1. بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم...  
 2. ....

*Translation*

1. Basmallah
2. ....

CONCLUSIONS

The above inscriptions illustrate three types of writing belonging to three periods: Late Umayyad/Abbasid, Fatimid, and Mamluk. The earliest (Inscriptions 1-5) may be dated to the 8<sup>th</sup> century AD and are similar to those published from Dayr Dubban and from other sites in

Palestine<sup>3</sup>. It should be pointed out that hitherto very few inscriptions belonging to the 8<sup>th</sup> century have been published from the area of the Old City of Jerusalem. Inscriptions 6-7, however, were written in the kufic style common to the 10<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> centuries AD and are similar to inscriptions uncovered in excavations south of the Haram al-Sharif<sup>4</sup>.

These tomb markers raise an important question: what was the function of the area of St Anne's during the Abbasid and Fatimid periods? It has to be admitted that very little is actually known. It is known, however, that Salah al-Din later converted the Frankish church of St Anne's into the Madrasa al-Salahiya in AH 588/AD 1192<sup>5</sup>, as attested by the large dedicatory inscription appearing over the main portal. This has led certain scholars to think that the Madrasa served already as a monumental institution at the time of Salah al-Din. However, according to the book (*Rihla*) by Ibn al-Arabi, who visited Jerusalem in 1092 and again in 1095, there were only two *madrasas*: one for the Shafies in the area of Bab al-Asbat, and another, known today as Madrashat Abu Akbah<sup>6</sup>, next to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Mujir al-Din reports that around 458\1058 the Shafii Shaykh Nasr ibn Ibrahim ibn Daud Abu al-Fath al Maqdisi al-Nabulsi founded a *zawiyh/madrasa* in the tower over the eastern part of Bab al-Rahma, which, eventually around 488\1095, was named al-Nasriyah after him<sup>7</sup>. The *madrasa* then became known as Madrasa al-Ghazaliyah in his honour. Ibn al-Arabi attended theological lectures there at the time of his stay in Jerusalem around 1092. The existence of these institutions probably also indicates that in the area of St Anne's, perhaps beneath the actual church, there was a *madrasa* during the Fatimid period, which was why Salah al-Din chose this

<sup>3</sup> M. SHARON, *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum Palaestinae*, Vol. 3 (D-F), E.J. Brill, Leiden, 2004, 20-35; 155-181.

<sup>4</sup> M. SHARON, "Arabic Inscriptions from the Excavations at the Western Wall", *Israel Exploration Journal* 23, 1973, 214-217, no. A-1-2.

<sup>5</sup> MUJIR AL-DIN AL-HANBALI, *al-Uns al-Jalil bi-Tarikh al-Quds wa-al-Khalil*, Amman, 1973, Vol. 2, 118.

<sup>6</sup> J. DRORY, *Ibn El-Arabi of Seville: Journey to Palestine (1092-1095)*, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat-Gan, 112.

<sup>7</sup> MUJIR AL-DIN AL-HANBALI, *al-Uns al-Jalil bi-Tarikh al-Quds wa-al-Khalil*, Amman, 1973, Vol. 2, 27-28.

site in order to rebuild it with its original function, as it existed during the 10<sup>th</sup>-11<sup>th</sup> centuries.

It is suggested that Inscriptions Nos 1-7 were originally inscribed marker slabs for tombs and that they were taken during the Crusader period from the cemetery located close to Bab al-Rahama (also known as the Mercy or Golden Gate) situated outside the eastern wall of the Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. Several Companions of the Prophet Muhammad were buried in this cemetery: Ubadah ibn al-Samit, who died in AD 654-655; Shadad ibn Aws ibn Thabit al-Ansari al-Khazraji, who died in AD 677-678; Muhammad ibn Karam, who died in AD 864<sup>8</sup>. The desecration of a Moslem cemetery, as evidenced by the stones from F318 in the Bethesda Pool, would have been consistent with the activities of the Crusaders in Jerusalem in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

The final inscription No. 8 has a style of writing which post-dates the Crusader period and perhaps indicates the intensification of Mamluk building processes in the area. It is similar to several inscriptions published from the Old City<sup>9</sup>, and Mamluk period buildings are known along the Via Dolorosa (or Tariq al-Mujahidin), notably the Al-Sallamiyya dated to *ca* 1338, located on the eastern side of Tariq Bab al-Atim, at the corner of that street and Tariq al-Mujahidin<sup>10</sup>, and Ribat Al-Maridini on the western side of Tariq Bab Hitta, at the corner of that street and Tariq al-Mujahidin<sup>11</sup>.

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<sup>8</sup> MUJIR AL-DIN AL-HANBALI, *al-Uns al-Jalil bi-Tarikh al-Quds wa-al-Khalil*, Amman, 1973, Vol. 1, 261, 263, 296; A. AL-ARIF, *Al-Mufasssal fi Tarikh al-Quds*, Jerusalem, 1961, 509-510; K. AL-ASALI, *Ajdaduna fi Thara Bayt al-Maqdis*, Amman, 1981, 133-141, 199-212; K. BIEBERSTEIN and H. BLOEDHORN, *Jerusalem: Grundzüge der Baugeschichte vom Chalkolithikum bis zur Frühzeit der Osmanischen Herrschaft*, Wiesbaden, 1994, Vol. 3, 199-200.

<sup>9</sup> M. BURGOYNE and A. ABUL-HAJJ, "Twenty-Four Medieval Arabic Inscriptions from Jerusalem", *Levant* 11, 1979, 112-137.

<sup>10</sup> M. BURGOYNE, *Mamluk Jerusalem*, British School of Archeology in Jerusalem, London, 1987, 299, Figs 25.1-2.

<sup>11</sup> BURGOYNE, *Mamluk Jerusalem*, 412, Figs. 37.1-2.

**SOMMAIRE : O. ABED RABBO, Nouvelles inscriptions arabes provenant des fouilles du Bassin Sud de la Béthesda à Jérusalem.** — Des dix-huit inscriptions arabes découvertes au cours des travaux de fouilles et de restauration entre 1865 et 1967 sur le site de la Béthesda, huit font l'objet de la présente étude épigraphique. Toutes sont des épitaphes. Incisées sur des blocs de calcaire tendre employés dans un mur datant de l'époque des Croisés au fond du Bassin Sud, les Inscriptions 1-5 sont du VIII<sup>e</sup> siècle ap. J.-C. et donc importantes du fait de la rareté des documents épigraphiques de l'époque de transition omeyyade-abbasside dans la Vieille Ville de Jérusalem. Les Inscriptions 6 et 7 sont écrites en coufique des X<sup>e</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècles, tandis que l'Inscription 8 aurait appartenu à l'un des monuments mameloukes de la Via Dolorosa. Marqueurs de tombes, les Inscriptions 1-7 auraient été arrachées par les Croisés au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle du cimetière proche de la Porte Dorée, où plusieurs Compagnons du Prophète étaient enterrés, la profanation d'un cimetière musulman étant compatible avec l'activité des Croisés à Jérusalem au XII<sup>e</sup> siècle. En outre, nous démontrons que dans le voisinage de Sainte-Anne, peut-être même sous l'église Sainte-Anne des Croisés, une école coranique (madrasa) existait déjà à l'époque Fatimide (X<sup>e</sup>-XI<sup>e</sup> siècles), ce qui expliquerait pourquoi Saladin choisit ce site pour y fonder la Madrasa al-Salahiyâ en 1192.