

*A RECENT VISIT TO PETRA: A Lecture.* By Mr. ARTHUR W. SUTTON, F.L.S. Delivered at a Meeting of the Institute on February 3rd, 1908. (Short account by the SECRETARY.)

THE city of Petra, capital of Edom and emporium of commerce in early times for caravans traversing the Arabian desert to and from the Persian Gulf to the Tyrian cities, has lain in desolation and ruin since the eruption of the Arabs under Mahomet; but nevertheless, in its solitude it excites the admiration of the traveller for the marvellous beauty of its temples and tombs sculptured out of the native sandstone rock, geologically known as "the Nubian sandstone," rich in colours of red, purple and their varieties. It has generally been approached by western travellers either from Egypt by the Sinaitic mountains and the Arabah Valley, or from Jerusalem by way of the Dead Sea. Both ways are full of difficulty and some danger from the predatory Arabs which requires tact, and the expenditure of liberal *bachsish*. But the party of Mr. Sutton entered the city from the eastern side by way of the remarkable gorge known as the Sik—a torrent bed or cleft in the rock, a mile and a half in length from where it descends from the table-land of Edom to the point where it opens out on the wide expanse of the city; and where, from the obscurity of the lofty walls shutting out the sun, at a sudden bend is revealed the façade of the most beautiful of the temples called "the Temple of Ghuzneh," glistening in the sunshine, and displaying in its portico of Corinthian columns, and entablature richly sculptured, a marvellous example of architectural skill which strikes the beholder with wonder. But this is only the first of a succession of splendid façades by which the whole of this vast amphitheatre has been adorned by its Nabathæan inhabitants.

This is not the proper place to attempt a description of Petra, which has already been done by numerous travellers; and was admirably illustrated by the coloured photographs taken by Mr. Sutton, and thrown on the screen by the lantern, accompanied by his personal description of them. When the expeditionary party, of which the writer was a member, visited the city in 1883, we entered it from the Arabah Valley on the west,\* crossing the plain at the foot of Mount Hor, which rises grandly in a cliff facing the western region of the Arabah and

\* An account of this visit is given in *Mount Seir, Sinai and Western Palestine*, published by the Palestine Exploration Society, p. 85 (1885).

the Badiet-el-Tih; the scene of the Israelitish encampment during the Forty Years. It was on breaking up their encampment that they desired to ascend on to the Edomite table-land, and asked permission of the King of Edom to pass by "the King's Highway," but were refused (Numbers xx, 16-21). Mr. Sutton supposes (with other writers) that Moses desired to lead the Israelitish host right through the city of Petra up into the table-land beyond. This would have been an impossible task; both owing to the narrow and difficult pathways leading into, and out of the city; and moreover the Israelites in passing through the city would have been exposed to attack from a hostile population. It was through "the border" of Edom, not its centre, that the tribes desired to pass, and this highway was discovered, and in all probability identified by the members of the expedition of 1883-4. The road strikes off from the Wady-el-Arabah towards the mountains at a point a few miles north of Mount Hor. It was partly explored by our party, and the rocks on either side were covered by rude drawings of animals; there can be little doubt, the writer believes, that this was the King's highway by which the Israelites desired to ascend to the table-land of Edom and Moab; and probably Mr. Sutton will admit this view.\*

Perhaps this article cannot be better closed than in the words of Dean Burgon's elegy—on witnessing the desolation of Petra which had been foretold by the prophets—and is now plainly revealed to the traveller of the twentieth century:—†

And this is Petra :—This the lofty boast  
 Of Edom's once unconquerable coast !  
 These the gay halls through which in days of old  
 The tide of life so rapturously rolled ;  
 These the proud streets where wealth with lavish hand  
 Poured the rich spoils of every Orient land ;  
 All that the seaman's timid bark beguiles  
 From Cush and Ophir, Tarshish and the Isles ;  
 Afric's red gold, Arabia's spicy store  
 And pearl and plume from India's farthest shore.  
 How changed ! how fallen ! All her glory fled ;  
 A widowed city mourns her many dead.  
 Like some fond heart which gaunt disease hath left,  
 Of all it lived for—all it loved bereft ;  
 Mute in its anguish ; struck with pangs too deep  
 For words to utter, or for tears to weep."

\* Mr. Sutton has now accepted this view.

† Mr. Sutton has given a detailed account of his visit in the *Friends' Witness*, vol. i, No. 2 (1908).

And of Mount Hor, the tomb of Aaron (Jebel Haroum) Dean Burgon thus speaks; after referring to the rocks and mountains around:—

“ And one there is which beetling o'er the rest,  
Pillows a prophet on its rocky crest;  
Uplifted high, where none but stars may keep  
Their bright-eyed vigils round his saintly steep.”

“ *Petra*,” a poem by Dean Burgon, 1845.