

THE OLD CITY OF ADRAHA (DERA) AND THE ROMAN ROAD FROM GERASA TO BOSTRA.

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A SHORT extract from a journal written during a tour east of the Jordan, in the year 1874, may be interesting to the readers of the *Quarterly Statement*, in view of the proposed Survey of that country. So far as I know, no other traveller has followed my route from Gerasa to Dera and Bostra. It is on the very outskirts of settled habitation, and not always safe. My escort consisted of the Sheikh of Sûf, his brother and one or two retainers ; and we encountered no difficulty.

Leaving Gerasa, we rode over a low rocky ridge, thinly sprinkled with ilex, and then up a glen which gradually narrowed into a ravine. Traces of a Roman road were visible here and there cut in the rock. About five miles from Gerasa we reached the top of the pass, and had a splendid view southward, down the glen to the valley of the Jabbok, and north-east down another glen towards the great plain of Arabia. We entered the latter glen, still following the Roman road, having wooded ridges on each side, and occasionally a few patches of cultivated ground. We saw several ruins, but no modern habitations. The calls of shepherds, and the tinkling of bells were heard amid the hills, and a mounted Arab appeared at intervals on some commanding spot, as if watching our little caravan. As we descended, the glen opened, the forest became less dense, flocks and herds were seen on the pastures, and a few husbandmen were at work in the fields.

At length we emerged from Wady Warrân, for such is the name of this beautiful valley, and entered the open plain—a vast expanse of rich pasture land, extending on the east and south to the horizon, while on the west it rises by an easy slope to the wooded hills of Gilead. A short distance to our right lay the ruins of Kubab, a small village apparently once fortified ; or it may perhaps have been one of those walled caravan-serais which one so frequently meets with on the borders of Arabia. Around its wells and watering-troughs were collected the vast flocks of the Bene Hassan Arabs, whose tents we saw in a circling out on the plain. The ground along the foot, and on the lower slopes of the hills, is extensively cultivated by them.

We rode northward, still in the line of the old road, passing a Roman milestone beside a heap of ruins. Traces of villages, now deserted, were visible everywhere. Two, near the road, named Idhamah and Usleth, were marked by large green mounds honeycombed with caves. I observed in this region that most of the villages are, at least in part, subterranean, the houses being excavated in the calcareous rock, with nothing above ground to mark their site except mounds of rubbish. One called Sâl,

beside which we encamped a fortnight later, when on our way to Gadara, had a population of some forty families, all Troglodytes.

Two hours' smart riding from Wady Warrân brought us to Remtha, a populous village built on a little isolated hill in the midst of a cultivated plain of unsurpassed fertility. Here also were large numbers of caves, some used as dwellings, others as granaries. We now ascended a low bleak ridge, a spur from the Gilead range, and had from the top a magnificent view of the plain of Hauran, bounded on the east by the mountain range of Bashan, and on the north by Hermon. I was greatly struck with the change which had passed over that whole region since my previous visit in 1854; then most of it was desolate, now it was almost entirely under cultivation. Signs of industry and growing prosperity were everywhere visible. In a few minutes more we entered *Dera*, having been just seven hours and a-half in riding from Gerasa.

The ruins of this strange old city I estimated as about two miles in circuit. They cover a semicircle, round the arc of which sweeps Wady Zedy, a glen from 50 to 60 feet deep, with steep, and occasionally precipitous banks, and a little stream flowing through it. It is a singular fact that while the rock in the sides of the glen is either white limestone or conglomerate, the buildings are composed, like those in almost all the other towns of Bashan, of black basalt. The present village, which contained some 50 or 60 families at the time of my visit, occupies but a fraction of the old site. Most of the inhabited houses are modern; built, however, of old materials, with flat stone roofs rudely constructed, and occasionally stone doors. There are many other houses, in fact long lines of them, evidently much more ancient, but now almost completely covered over by the accumulation of ruins and rubbish. *Dera* is in this respect in part a buried city. I entered one or two of those cave-like houses, and found them similar in plan and style to those I had seen in other old cities of Bashan—massive walls, constructed of roughly hewn blocks of basalt, stone doors of the same material, and roofs formed of long slabs closely laid together. Most of these houses were originally above ground, as is evident from the position of the doors; but it is probable that there were other dwellings near them excavated in the soft rock. We found it dangerous riding over the site, as portions of the old roofs are apt to give way under the horses' feet.* Excavation here might throw some light on the architecture and antiquities of Bashan. But *Dera* is not the only town in which some of the old houses are now buried. I have seen houses in Bozrah, Suweideh, Nejran, and other places, entombed under heaps of ruins.

In the centre of the town is a large building with an open court

* When at *Dera* I heard nothing of an "underground city" such as is described by Wetzstein in his *Reisebericht*. There are certainly many caves, as there are at most other towns and villages in this region, which were used in part as dwellings, and in part as granaries. But *Dera* is one of those ancient sites which would well repay excavation.

surrounded by rude cloisters. On one side is an old church or mosque, the roof of which is supported by six ranges of short columns and piers, all evidently taken from more ancient structures. I saw on some of the stones and shafts, Phœnician letters rudely cut, as if masons' marks, and I also found some imperfect Greek inscriptions bearing dates of the Bostrian era.

At the western end of the town, is a large reservoir, partly hewn in the rock, and partly lined with fine masonry, apparently Roman. Beside it are the remains of baths. The water was brought to it by an aqueduct from the fountains of Dilly, about 15 miles to the north, and appears to have been conveyed across the glen through air-tight pipes or perforated stones. Another aqueduct, also apparently of Roman origin, brought water into the town from the east, but I did not follow it to its source. On Smith's map an aqueduct is represented as running from Dera across the plain by Remtha and Sâl towards Um Keis (Gadara). Of this I saw no traces whatever, and from the nature of the ground I do not believe an aqueduct could be carried along that line. In the bed of the glen to the east of the town is a well, beside which are some ancient remains, including a sarcophagus of basalt, ornamented with rude sculptures.

Dera I believe to be, not the Edrei of the Bible, the capital of the giant Og, but the Adraha of the Roman Itineraries, which is located by the Peutinger Tables, 16 miles from Capitolias, and 24 from Bostra. It became an episcopal city of the province of Arabia, and its bishop Urbanus was present at the first Council of Constantinople, A.D. 337.

From Dera we took a straight course to Bostra, partly to trace the old Roman road, and partly to examine a section of the country which, so far as I knew, had been hitherto unexplored. We encountered no difficulty, although on the very outskirts of settled life. The Roman road was visible from the moment we crossed the glen, and we followed its course to the gate of Bostra, to which it runs in nearly a straight line. The ancient pavement is in places perfect; and the road crossed the Zedy by a Roman bridge of a single arch, in excellent preservation, with the ruts of chariot wheels several inches deep on its pavement. Villages, some in ruins, some partially inhabited, dotted the whole country to the right and left; and large sections of the soil were under cultivation. We saw husbandmen, and shepherds, and yokes of oxen in the fields; while away on the southern horizon we also saw the black tents of the Bedawin. We halted for a time at Ghusam, a large village with old and massive houses. The gate admitting to an ancient court-yard was still perfect. It was of stone and double, each leaf measuring 7 feet 2 inches high, 3 feet wide, and 8 inches thick; and it was so well balanced on its pivots above and below, that a man was able to shut and open it with ease.

Not the least interesting part of the Survey of Eastern Palestine will be the tracing of the Roman roads, and the exploration of the strange old cities. I venture to predict that some most remarkable discoveries will be made in the new Survey.