

EXPLORATIONS NORTH-EAST OF LAKE TIBERIAS,
AND IN JAULAN.

BY LAURENCE OLIPHANT.

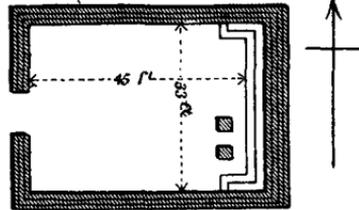
HAIFA, 30th January.

THE examination of the country to the east of the Jordan is, under existing conditions, attended with so much difficulty that I was glad to seize an opportunity which offered a few weeks ago to pay a visit to the northern and eastern shores of the Lake of Tiberias, and penetrate a short distance into Jaulan, with the view of visiting certain localities, where I had reason to believe that some ruins existed which had hitherto escaped observation. I was unfortunately prevented by circumstances from devoting to them the time and labour which they deserved, and was compelled, in more than one instance, to hurry past places where it would have been interesting to linger, with the mental reservation that I would endeavour to return, at some future time, for a more detailed examination.

I commenced my investigations immediately on crossing the Jordan, at the point of its debouchure into the lake. Here, at a distance of half a mile east from its mouth, are situated the ruins of El Araj, which consists of foundations of old walls, and blocks of basaltic stone, cut and uncut, which have been used for building purposes. The ruins cover a limited area. A little over a mile north of El Araj there rises from the fertile plain of El Batibah a mound strewn with blocks of stone, and remains which cover a considerable area. This is Et Tell, a spot which it has been sought by more than one traveller to identify with Bethsaida Julias. I will not here enter into the much vexed question of whether there were two Bethsaidas, as insisted upon by Reland and many others, or only one; or whether "the desert place apart," upon which was performed the miracle of the five loaves and the two fishes, was on a desolate spur of the range immediately to the north of this Tell, which would necessitate two Bethsaidas, or whether it was not, as Dr. Thomson supposes, at the north-east corner of the Lake on the shoulder overhanging Mesadiyeh, upon which assumption he constructs a theory which would involve only one; or whether, as suggested by Captain Conder, the Sinaitic Manuscript is right in omitting the definition (Luke ix, 10) of the desert where the 5,000 were fed, as "belonging to the city called Bethsaida," in which case the necessity for a second city of that name ceases to exist, and the miracle may have been performed in the plain at the south-east of the Lake. It is possible that excavations at Et Tell might enable us to decide positively whether it is the site of Bethsaida Julias, which we know was in this vicinity. A small native village has been built among the ruins, which do not at present afford to the passing traveller any indications of former magnificence; but I was unable at the time to examine them, as I was desirous of pushing on without delay to a spot where I was informed by a Bedouin sheikh who accompanied me from Araj that the fellahin, in the course of getting out stone for constructing a small village last summer, had laid

bare some stones on which were carvings and pictorial representations. After following the course of the Jordan, on its east bank, for another mile, we reached a spot on the barren slope of a hill a few hundred yards from the river, where some native huts had been recently built, and where large cut stones, carved cornices, capitals, and fragments of columns were strewn in profusion, while from the midst of them rose the walls of what appears to have been a synagogue; owing, however, to a later superstructure having evidently been reared upon the original foundation, I feel somewhat diffident in pronouncing upon this point decidedly. I will, however, state my reasons for coming to this conclusion, while the accompany-

ing sketches of the ornamentation I found here may enable others more competent to form an opinion than myself to judge of their origin. The dimensions and ground plan of the building with the columns still *in situ* closely resembled those of the small synagogue at Kefr Birim. The length was 45 feet, the breadth 33



feet. The building had an east and west orientation, and the door was in the centre of the wall on the western side. This does not, so far as I know, occur in the case of any synagogue hitherto found, but it was doubtless due to the necessities of the case, as the site for the building was excavated from the hill-side, the floor at the east end being about 9 feet below the surface of the earth at the back of the wall, while the slope of the hill would have made it inconvenient to place the door, as usual, on the south side. A more serious objection to this being a synagogue lies in the fact that the stones were set in mortar, which does not occur in the case of other synagogues; but there were indications to show that these walls had been erected upon older foundations. They were now standing to a height of 8 feet. There were no door-posts or lintel to the entrance. The floor, which was thickly strewn with building stones, fragments of columns, and of carved cornices and capitals, was below the level of the ground, and was reached by a descent of two steps, while opposite, running along the whole length of the eastern side, were two benches or steps, the face of the upper one decorated with a thin scroll of ornamental tracery; these may have served for seats. The depressed floor and stone benches are both features which occur in the synagogue at Irbid. Upon the upper bench stood the fragments of two columns about 4 feet in



FIG. 4.

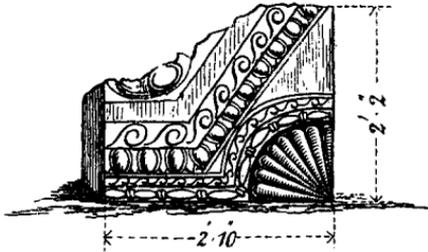


FIG. 5.

the floor. These blocks averaged 2 feet 6 inches by 18 inches. The capitals of the columns were in Corinthian style, 2 feet 3 inches in height, and consisted of a double row of leaves, which differed somewhat from the usual acanthus, apparently of a later or more composite order. The ornamentation and character of the niches (see figs. 4 and 5) so closely resembled those found at the synagogue at Kerazeh and elsewhere, being of the same florid and somewhat debased type, that they seemed to me to set at rest the question of the original character of this building, though it may subsequently have been diverted to other uses. Time did not allow me to do more than make rough drawings of the architecture, but I trust they are

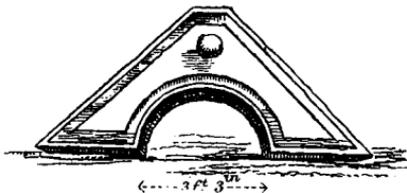


FIG. 1.

two small semi-attached fluted columns with Doric capitals, almost exactly similar to the one found at Irbid. Also one cut into a round arch, which



FIG. 2.

height, and 1 foot 2 inches in diameter. They were evidently not *in situ*, being without pedestals, and I can only account for their being in their present position by the supposition that they had been placed there recently. The other two appeared to be *in situ*, but their bases were much hidden by the blocks of stone heaped on

sufficient to enable a comparison to be made between them and the engravings in the "Memoirs." If I am right in my conjecture, this synagogue would probably date from about the second century of the Christian era. I also found a stone which consisted of the upper portion of

may have been placed over the lintel on the plan of the arch on the great synagogue at Kefr Birim. It measured 39 inches across the base of the arch (fig. 1). A most interesting object was a winged female figure, holding what was apparently a sheaf (fig. 2). The ornamentation of the cornice does not resemble any which I have observed either in the "Memoirs" or elsewhere, and is not unlike the so-called egg and dart pattern

(fig. 3). Other specimens of the ornamentation are seen in fig. 7. I have

not been able to form any conjecture which should identify this most interesting spot with any Biblical or historical locality. Its modern name is Ed-Dikkih, meaning platform, a name not inappropriate to its position. It is possible that during the next dry season the natives may continue their excavations, as stones are needed. I have

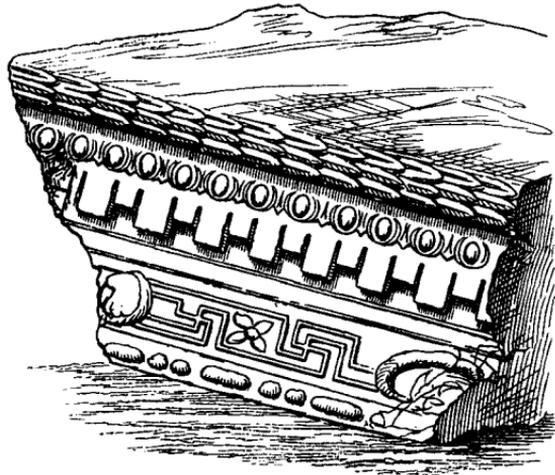


FIG. 3.

urgently impressed upon them not to deface or destroy any remains that may be unearthed; but they unfortunately watched my proceedings with an uneasiness and suspicion which I am afraid a gratuity failed altogether to dispel.

Wenow pursued an almost easterly direction along the lower flank of the range which



FIG. 7.

rose abruptly on our left, and in a mile and a half reached a spring and the remains of a small ruin called Umm el Araj. There seemed, however, to have been only two or three houses here, and finding nothing of interest we pushed on, and reached in half a mile more the ruins of Elahseniyeh. Here again I was fortunate in coming upon remains which have been exposed to view for the first time by the natives this year.

The portion excavated was not so extensive, nor did it reveal so much that was interesting, as Ed-Dikkih, but the area covered with old ruin was greater, and it was in ancient times probably the centre of a larger population. The character of the remains now exposed to view is very difficult to determine, owing to the confusion which has been created by their representing two periods, the building of the later having apparently been placed diagonally on the one that preceded it. They were situated upon a terrace of solid masonry about 5 feet high, now strewn with building stones. The upper or more recent chamber measured 20 feet across one way, but there was nothing to determine its length, no walls having been left standing; the dimension in one direction, however, could be gathered from the cement floor which still remained, a considerable portion of which was visible at a depth of 18 inches below the surface

of the earth. There appeared, 18 inches below it, a floor of solid stone, and this was evidently a portion of a building of some size, to judge from the blocks of stone which apparently were the foundations for the pedestals of columns. These consisted of five cubes of stone, each 2 feet every way, and 6 feet apart. As the stone floor on which they stood was 3 feet below the surface of the ground, the upper surface was 1 foot below it, and there may therefore have been more in continuation of the line in which they were, which the excavations of the villagers had not revealed. They ran north and south, and diagonally to the upper flooring of cement. There were some fragments of columns, pedestals, and carved cornices and capitals lying among the ruins of the vicinity, but they were much broken, and not sufficiently noteworthy to stop to sketch.

I had, unfortunately, no time to carry out my original intention of following up the Wâdy Ed Dâlieh, two miles higher to Elyahudiyeh, where ruins are reported to exist, but I was assured by the sheikh that they contained no remains such as I had seen at Ed-Dikkih and Elahseniyeh, so I crossed the plain back to the coast where the ruins of Mesadiyeh still remain to suggest that the similarity of their name to that of Bethsaida may furnish a clue to the identification with them of that town. They contain nothing of interest however, without excavation; but enough remains to show that the head of the Lake must in old times have been a great centre of population, since the towns near it are all from one to two miles apart, and I have heard of more ruins in the neighbourhood, which I hope at some future time to have an opportunity of examining.

As some confusion exists in all the maps to which I have had any access in the nomenclature of the five wâdies which intersect the country between the Jordan and the Wâdy es Samak, I have been very particular in obtaining the names as accurately as I could from the best native sources. Of these the Wâdy Jeramáya is the most wild and inaccessible, and except for the sportsman—it affords excellent cover for the large game which are said to abound in it—would probably not repay examination; the same cannot be said of the other wâdies, in which, especially near their heads, I have reason to believe some ruins are to be found.

Following the Lake shore, we passed at the mouth of the Wâdy Ejgayih the ruins of Akib; these consist of nothing but heaps of basaltic stones. There is near here a spot marked "ruins" in some maps, and called Dukah; they are also mentioned by more than one traveller. I found on inquiry, however, that a projecting cliff near 'Akib was called the Dukah Kefr 'Akib, or the precipice of 'Akib, and this has doubtless given rise to the confusion. A mile and a half beyond 'Akib we turned up the great wâdy of Es Samak. It is up this fertile valley, watered by a perennial stream, and which is in places two miles wide, and about seven miles in its greatest length, that it is proposed to carry the projected railway from Haifa to Damascus, as it affords an easy gradient from the depressed shores of Lake Tiberias to the elevated plateau of Jaulan; the rise in that distance being a little over 2,000 feet. As we ascend, I observe that only quite the lower strata are of limestone; all the rest is basaltic, and this formation is of vast

thickness. The whole of Jaulan is indeed an immense volcanic field, consisting of irregular heaps of amorphous lava and disintegrating scorixæ, with mounds of globular basalt.

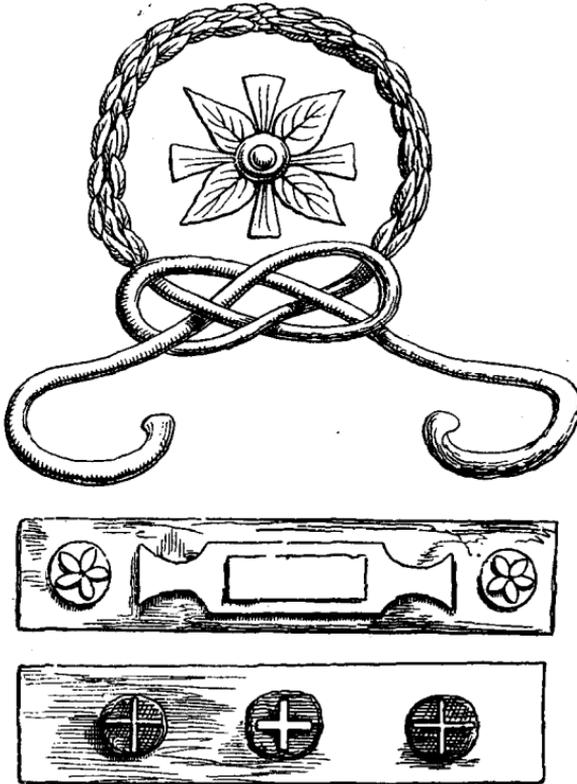
After ascending the wâdy for three miles we reached, a little below the margin of the plateau on the right side, the ruins of El 'Adeseh, but it happened to be so dark at the time that I could not distinguish more than heaps of stones, and I had no opportunity of returning to it.

The country is very sparsely peopled in the district of Jaulan in which we now were, one of the largest villages being that of El 'Al, built on the site of an ancient ruin ; but the place has been so much built over that little can be seen, though in the walls and yards of the houses are many vestiges of antiquity. In the stable of the house in which I lodged was a column *in situ* standing to a height of 6 feet, and in the yard a draped female statue, life size, in three pieces. The feet, which as far as I could judge were on a pedestal *in situ*, were partially covered with earth ; the rest of the figure, which had been separated from them at the ancles, was lying on the ground ; the head had also been separated from the body ; but each of the pieces was in good preservation. The left arm clasped what appeared to be a quiver, from which I gathered that the statue was one to Diana. An inscription would probably be found on the pedestal settling this question, but circumstances prevented my excavating sufficiently to find out whether this was the case.

My objective point was now Khisfin, a village lying five miles distant in a north-easterly direction, which has played so important a part in the history of the country that I was extremely anxious to investigate the ruins which exist there, and which have never been the subject of examination. After riding for an hour we came to the ruins of Nab, situated on a small mound. They consist of blocks of basalt building stone, some traces of foundations, some fragments of columns and capitals, and a tank, dry at the time of my visit, but which evidently holds water for some portion of the year ; it had apparently been much deeper at a former period, only the two upper courses of masonry being now visible. It was oval in shape, and measured about 60 yards by 30. A little off the road to the right stands a large tree on a mound which is a conspicuous object on the vast plain, and is called Ez Zeitfmi, or the hill of the olive-tree. In half-an-hour more we reached Khisfin, which is a large village for this part of the country, the houses constructed entirely of the hewn stones which here cover a greater area than any ruins which I have hitherto visited in this neighbourhood.

The earliest notice which I have been able to obtain of Khisfin is that of Yakubi, about 900 A.D. He mentions it as one of the chief towns of "the Province of the Jordan," Syria being divided in his day into three provinces, viz. : the Province of Damascus, the Province of the Jordan, and the Province of Palestine. Yakub in the thirteenth century mentions it as a town of the Hauran district below Nawa, on the Damascus road, between Nawa and the Jordan. Khisfin was doubtless at one time a fortress of the Saracens, as it is further mentioned as the place to which Al Melek

al 'Adil (Saladin's son and successor) fled after having been routed at the battle of Baisân by the Crusaders, who advanced upon him from Acre. As it is mentioned as being one of the chief towns of the province so long ago as 900 A.D., it is probable that its importance dates from a much older period, as indeed was indicated by some of the ornamentation which I found there. That it must also have been an important crusading stronghold is evident from the leading characteristics of the remains, as they now appear, and of the ornamentation, of which I give specimen sketches.



The walls of the principal fort now standing measure 68 yards one way, by 54 the other. They are 9 feet in thickness, and are eight courses of stone in height, the stones from 1 foot to 1 foot 6 inches square, but some are much larger. Within the fort are the traces of a second or inner wall forming a sort of keep in the centre, but the whole area is so encumbered with ruin that it would require more time than I was able to give to it to make accurate measurements, or a plan of the building. The village had almost the appearance of a quarry, so thickly piled were the blocks of hewn stone which enclosed the courtyards and formed the walls of the houses, while they were strewn thickly or stacked in heaps over all the neigh-

bouring fields. The lintels of the doors consisted frequently of large stones, some of which possibly had served the same purpose in old times, on which were tablets, rosettes, crosses, bosses, and other crusading devices.

I now proceeded in a westerly direction, and in two miles reached the ruins of Esfera, a mound covered with the usual hewn basaltic stones, and with traces of foundations. Two miles further on was the conspicuous hill of Tell el Muntar, which is also strewn with ruins of the same character; but at neither place were the remains of any marked interest;—they all indicated, however, the presence in ancient times of a large population in this section of country. Just to the south of Tell el Muntar we came upon a dolmen field—I counted twenty grouped in a comparatively limited area, averaging perhaps a hundred yards apart. Some were composed of three side stones with a covering slab, and in most cases were “free standing.” In others the superincumbent slab rested upon four uprights, and in others upon heaps of large blocks of stone. In no case did I observe the covering slabs to be so large as I have seen them elsewhere, probably owing to the weight of the basalt of which they were composed; but circumstances prevented my giving these interesting monuments upon this occasion the attention they deserved, and I was compelled to be satisfied with having discovered their locality. In support of Captain Conder’s theory it may be interesting to note that they were situated near water, as I shall presently show, and upon the verge of the precipitous ledge of rock which here forms the eastern cliff of one of the branches of the Wâdy es Samak, from which a magnificent view is obtained. The plateau here forms a promontory which splits the wâdy, and at its southern extremity is situated the old stronghold of the Crusaders, called the Kasr Berdauf, or Baldwin’s Castle. I saw the ruin from a distance, but was unable to visit it on this occasion. This I the less regretted as it has already been examined, and the small crumbling ruin which remains offers nothing of interest. On the other hand, I was impatient to reach a ruin hitherto unknown, and which was situated directly beneath the upper ledge of rocky cliff down which we were now leading our horses at no little peril to life and limb. After descending abruptly about 500 feet we came to a broad shelf, or small cultivated plateau, beyond the edge of which there was another steep descent to the bottom of the wâdy. It was upon this shelf that the ruins of Umm el Kanatar, or the “Place of Arches,” is situated. It may have derived its name from the first object which met our view, as, turning sharp to the right under the impending cliff down which we had just descended, we came upon a most singular and most picturesque spot. Here were two large arches, one partially ruined, but the traces of which were still plainly visible projecting from the rock against which it had been built, the other in a perfect state of preservation. This one measured 23 feet in breadth, 6 feet 6 inches in depth, and 16 feet in height. The ruined one was probably of the same dimensions, but as it was partially broken away there was no means of accurately judging of it. They had been built over a crystal spring, the waters of which still filled the small tank 23 feet long and 6 feet wide, with a depth of 2 feet of water, under the perfect arch, and

contained many small fish. It apparently escaped by an underground channel. Over the centre of the arch was a large slab of stone, upon

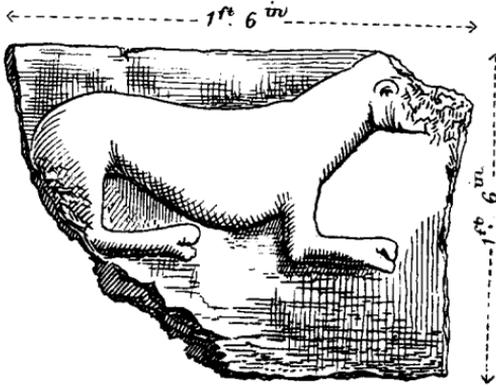


FIG. 1.

which had been an inscription now too effaced to be legible, and as it was 16 feet over head I had no means of examining it closely. At a slab at the side of the spring was a stone on which was the carved figure of a lion (fig. 1); and in front the wide-spreading arms of a magnificent old tree offered a grateful shade. At the time of year at which I visited these springs,

however, I was not in a position to appreciate its charms; a bitterly cold wind, accompanied by sleet, was blowing, and I had just before arriving at the dolmen field undergone an experience, which made the task of a minute examination of ruins or dolmens in an easterly gale of wind unpleasant in the highest degree. When allowing

my horse to drink at what seemed a puddle on the plateau, he had made a step forward and plunged head foremost down what turned out to be an overflowed well, with me on his back. We had some difficulty in extricating ourselves, but the severity of the cold wind was so much intensified by my drenched condition, that, not being in my good health otherwise at the time, I was compelled to hurry over these ruins. They are situated about fifty yards from the spring to the north, and consist of ruined walls enclosing an area apparently as nearly as possible of the same dimensions as the synagogue at Ed-Dikkih, but the traces of the western wall were concealed by such piles of large blocks of building stones that it was impossible to determine them. The southern wall was standing to a height of about 7 feet, and consisted of three courses of stone averaging a little over 2 feet each in

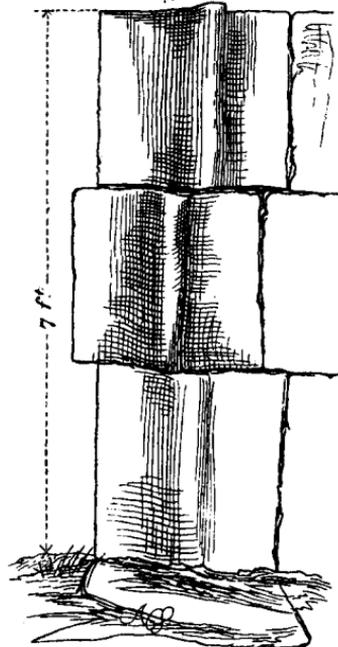


FIG. 2.

height, by about 2 feet 6 inches in breadth. The door was situated 15 feet from the south-east angle of the wall, and was 4 feet 9 inches in width ; the stones forming the door-post were slightly carved into a plain moulding (fig. 2). On entering, the area presented a mass of stone *débris*, and columns, and pieces of carving, tossed about in the wildest confusion ; six columns from 10 to 12 feet in height rose above the piles of stone at every angle, as though they had been partially overturned by an earthquake ; the shaken condition of one of the stones which formed the door-post, and which projected from the others, as well as the general aspect of such of the ruin as was still standing, confirmed my impression that the building had been destroyed by a convulsion of nature. It was difficult under the circumstances to determine the true position of the columns, or the exact plan of the building ; but the character of the fragments of ornamentation which still remained, the fact that the columns were all within the enclosure of the building, that the walls were without cement, the position of the door, and the moulding of the door-posts, all rather lead me to the same conclusion with respect to this building which I have arrived at in the case of Ed-Dikih, and to regard it as

having been formerly a synagogue. There was one stone on which was carved the representation of an eagle (fig. 3), a fragment of egg and dart cornice, closely resembling the one at Ed-Dikih, a large triangular slab cut in the shape of an arch and highly ornamented, measuring 3 feet 6 inches along the base line, and 5 feet 8 inches between the two extremities, and which I assume

to have been placed on the lintel of the main entrance (fig. 4) ; and there were fragments of Corinthian capitals.

It is highly probable that a careful investigation of these stones would reveal inscriptions which would throw more light on this interesting ruin than, during my hurried inspection

of them, I was in a position to obtain. I send these notes simply as a description of what I was able to observe, under circumstances by no means favourable to minute investigation ; but it is not impossible that I may be able to revisit this part of the country and supplement this paper with more details of the ruins which are noticed in it, as well as

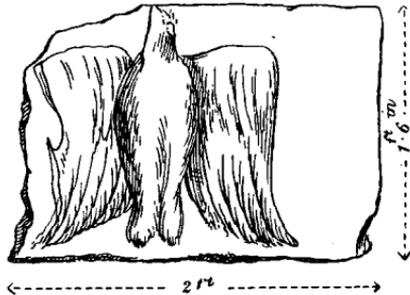


FIG. 3.

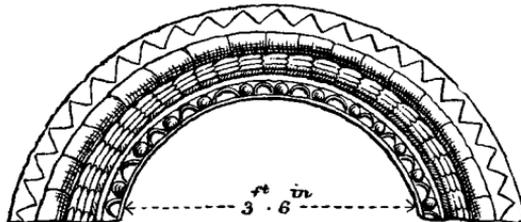


FIG. 4.

to look for others of the position of which I have received some information.

On my return to Tiberias, a Jew came to tell me that he knew a house which contained a stone upon which there was an inscription. I found it in the floor of a tumble-down dwelling inhabited by an old Jewish woman. As it was too begrimed with dirt to make anything of, I tempted the old woman with a bribe to let me take it up and carry it off, promising to return it. The inscription turned out to be in Greek characters, and as it may have escaped the attention of former travellers, a squeeze of it is forwarded herewith. I also annex the best copy I have been able to make, in case the squeeze does not arrive in good condition.

ΥΠΕΡΕΥΧΑΡΙΣΤΙΑΣ
 ΟΥΗΜΩΝΣΙΡΙΚΙΟΥ
 ΝΑΠΑΙΣΑΜΣΝΟΙΗΜΙ
 ΟΙΘΡΕΒΟΙΣΟΥΑΝΗΓΙΡΑΜΘ

I was also taken by a Jew to look at a stone built into the back wall of the synagogue, on which was an inscription. He told me that he had seen some gentlemen take a squeeze of this, and I therefore only took a hasty copy, thinking it probable that it would be found in the "Memoirs." As however, this is not the case, I presume it must have attracted the notice of some more recent explorers. The following is my copy:—

ΟΥΑΓ
 ΤΑ'ΕΤΗ 'ΟΕ
 ΩΜΗΝΑΔΕΝ
 ΙΝΖΗCΑCΑΝ
 ΚΒΝΥΜΦΗΝ

I am indebted to my companion, Mr. Guy Le Strange, for the list of the Arab names, which I append, of the places taken down from the natives on this trip, with their significations.

LIST OF NAMES OF PLACES.

1. El-'Adesi, for El-'Adeseh, العدسه, "the lentil."
In Palestine, concrete of small pebbles used for floors, from its resembling lentils, is known as "El-'Adesi."
2. El-Ahsâninyeh, the vulgar form of El-hassâniyyeh, الحسانية, "Belonging to Hassân," p.n.
3. 'Ain Esfera, probably for 'Ain Eso-Sfairah, عين الصفيرة, "the whistling spring."
4. El-'Akîb, العقيب, "the term."
5. El 'Âl الاعال, "the high."
6. El-'Araj, الاعرج, "the lame."
7. El Batîhab, البطيحة, "the swamp."
8. Ed-Dikkih, الدكة, "the platform."
9. Kasr Berdawil, قصر برداويل, "Baldwin's Castle."
10. Kersa, كرسى, (?) "the seat."
11. Khisfin, خسفين, p.n.
12. Mes'adiyyeh, مصعدية, "the place of ascending."
13. Nâb, ناب, "the eye-tooth."
14. Et-Tell, التل, "the hill."
15. Tell el Montar, تل المنظر, "the hill of the watch-tower."
16. Tell ez-Zeitûnih, تل الزيتون, "the hill of the olive-tree."
17. Umm el 'Ajâj, ام العجاج, "the place of whirl-winds" or "battles."
18. Umm el Kenâtir, ام القناطر, "the place of arches."
19. Wâdi ed Dâlieh, وادى الدالية, "the gorge of the vine tendril."
20. Wâdi Ejgayif, for Wâdi esh-Shakayyif, وادى الشقيف, "the gorge of the little boulder." Shakayyif, or Shagayyif, for the Bedouins change the dotted K into G, is the diminutive of "Shakif," meaning a "fragment" or "boulder" in the colloquial dialect.
21. Wâdi Jermâyya, وادى جرماية, p.n.
22. Wâdi es Saffah, وادى الصفاح, "the gorge of the slayer."
23. Wâdi es Samak, وادى السمك, "the fish's valley."
24. Wâdi Shebtb, وادى شبيب, p.n.
25. El-Yahûdiyyeh, اليهودية, "the place belonging to the Jews."