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# UNCOVERING ANCIENT FOOTPRINTS

## Armenian Inscriptions and the Pilgrimage Routes of the Sinai

Michael E. Stone

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## INTRODUCTION: THE ARMENIANS

I must preface this record with some words of explanation. I am a professor of Armenian studies. That alone makes me a rare bird. Having grown up in Australia in the 1940s and 1950s, I have no conscious memory of even hearing of Armenians before I went to university. There, studying classics and Semitic studies, I read of Armenian translations of ancient Jewish works. Indeed, until I was a doctoral student, I had only the sketchiest knowledge about anything Armenian.

The Armenian homeland is in the Caucasus, the rocky and mountainous area north of present-day Iraq, its heartland lying between the Black Sea and the Caspian. According to tradition, King Tiridates III (287–330 CE) converted to Christianity in 301, and so it was that Armenia became the first Christian nation, three decades before the more celebrated conversion of Emperor Constantine the Great.

The Armenians spread from their homeland in the course of the first millennium and developed a diaspora that still sprawls over much of the Middle East and beyond. The earliest Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land included Armenians; indeed, the very first pilgrim whose name we know was an Armenian, Eutaktos from Anatolia. He came in the 360s, the days of Constantine's son, Constantius. From this auspicious beginning, Armenian pilgrims streamed to the holy places through the centuries. It was pilgrims who wrote the ancient inscriptions that were the object of my search.

Inscriptions are the only dated Armenian writing before the ninth century, and the oldest inscription known before our work in Sinai was from the end of the fifth century, roughly a century after the invention of the Armenian alphabet. Our discoveries changed this situation, and the story I will tell is of how that happened.

Through inscriptions, I had become fascinated with the history of the Armenians in the Holy Land, natural enough, I suppose, for a scholar of Armenian living in Jerusalem. In the unique chapter of my life recounted

here, three of my interests united: Armenian writing, inscriptions, and Armenian Holy Land pilgrimage.

I base this book on my journals recording five expeditions in search of Armenian inscriptions on the rocks of the Sinai Desert. The Armenian pilgrims, bent on reaching Mount Sinai, remain shadowy figures, but their graffiti incised on the desert's rocks are clearly identifiable. We traced them across the striking landscape of the Sinai, following—and sometimes discovering—the routes they traveled to the sacred mount. The impact of the desert itself, its majesty and its starkness, was profound. I am also a poet, and in poems I wrote about the feelings it evoked. These poems are part of the record, and I have introduced some into this account.

I have been a long time in turning my personal diary into this book. In recent years, I have had help and encouragement from my friend Lorenzo DiTommaso. Uzi Avner also always graciously answered my queries. The manuscript was edited in Jerusalem by Yael Moise. I am indebted to Roie Frieden, a wonderful photographer whose work is to be seen in figures 1, 2, 7, and 24. Cartographer Mitia Frumin produced the fine maps. My thanks are extended to SBL Press, particularly to Nicole Tilford and Bob Buller. The final editing was accomplished in an exemplary fashion. All helped me to avoid repetitions and tautologies.

My five visits to the desert, between March 1979 and July 1980, were unlike anything I have ever experienced. As time passes, the details fade from memory; only my journals, written up directly after each trip, preserve them.

I wrote the journals in the present tense, as events unfolded and in a changing political situation. Israel controlled the Sinai until 1982, and my visits took place before the Israeli withdrawal and the Sinai's reversion to Egyptian sovereignty. I retain the immediate narrative tense and the context of Israeli military government, for that was my experience. As I write these words in 2016, all that is only a memory. Today the Sinai is a scene of struggles between Islamic terrorists and the Egyptian army. How fortunate that I traveled there when I did.

Michael E. Stone  
Jerusalem, January 2016