

‘ALI B. ‘ISĀ’S PILGRIM ROAD :
AN INSCRIPTION OF THE YEAR 304 H.

(916-917 A. D.)⁽¹⁾

BY

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As Harold Bowen observes in his excellent biography of ‘Ali b. ‘Isā⁽²⁾, the source material for the life and times of that good man, the « good vizier » par excellence of ‘Abbāsid days, is exceptionally ample. Almost every detail of his long and very active public life of 89 years is known to us through the happy preservation of a large number of chronicles and biographies. Probably the life of no other Prime Minister of the ‘Abbāsid caliphs is better documented. And yet I propose in this brief communication to add one more little detail to his biography : another evidence of that faithful man’s practical piety, a deed of « good works » not recorded in the manuscript sources but preserved through the fortunate survival of a crude but precious inscription discovered some years ago in the Ḥijāz.

It is, I think, appropriate that this document should add one more item to ‘Ali b. ‘Isā’s long list of public benefactions. Whatever his mistakes in state policy (the result, it would seem, of an overzealousness on his part in restricting the expenditure of state funds), he was never rightly accused of corruption, malfeasance or venality. He was, if anything, too honest, too frugal and ascetic for his age. His donations to

⁽¹⁾ Communication présentée en séance du 5 avril 1954.

⁽²⁾ *The Life and Times of ‘Alī ibn ‘Isā* (Cambridge, 1928), p. vii. Bowen’s scholarly work makes it superfluous to refer to the primary sources in connection with most of the biographical details that follow. See also Zettersteen’s article in the *Encyclopaedia of Islām*.

charity were generous in the extreme. We are told that when he was out of office, 'Ali's income amounted to 80,000 dinars a year, and that of this he bestowed 50,000 in charity. And when in office, although his salary and estates brought him as much as 700,000 dinars, he increased his private expenditures by only 10,000 a year. He is said to have provided, at one time or another, pensions for as many as 45,000 scholars and students ⁽¹⁾.

We know of several of his specific benefactions for the public weal in the nature of public works : when Baghdād was suffering from a particularly virulent epidemic of plague, 'Ali built a new hospital in the Ḥarbiyyah quarter at his own expense, and improved the facilities of four others ; he gave instructions for the repair of old mosques and hospitals and for the building of new ones throughout the empire ; having discovered that certain mill-wheels which he had constructed on one of his estates took too much water from the fields he converted the building which housed them into a mosque ⁽²⁾ ; toward the end of his Vizierate he deeded most of his fortune to the *waqf* and freed all his slaves ⁽³⁾ ; and it was he who founded the *Diwān al-birr*, or Office of Good Works, whose funds for the upkeep of the holy places in Medina and Mecca were drawn from Baghdād taxes ⁽⁴⁾. Mecca, where 'Ali spent more than one period of exile, was a particular object of his pious affection and benefaction. Shortly before the act about which I am about to speak, he was instrumental in building a water-system for the holy city (completed in 302 H., that is 914/915 A. D.) ; he ordered a well dug in the Millers' Market, and opened another spring for the use of pilgrims ; and he personally subsidized the caravans of donkeys and camels that brought water from Jiddah to Mecca ⁽⁵⁾.

It was undoubtedly 'Ali b. 'Īsā also who, at about this time, urged various improvements and renovations in the sacred enclosure and the Great Mosque, including the replacement of wooden by stone columns in the north wall of the mosque and the construction of the Bāb Ibrāhīm ⁽⁶⁾. In gratitude for the kindly reception he received in Ṣan'ā during his

⁽¹⁾ BOWEN, *op. cit.*, p. 133. — ⁽²⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 127. — ⁽³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 149. ⁽⁴⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 129. — ⁽⁵⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 128. — ⁽⁶⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 128-129.



Fig. 1.

later exile there, he built an aqueduct in that city and arranged for a well to be dug in the debris of the famous Himyarite castle of Ghumdān ⁽¹⁾.

The enumeration of these good works provides the background for the document with which this paper is concerned. In June, 1941.

⁽¹⁾ *Ibid.*, pp. 234-235. MAS' ŪDĪ, *Murūj*, IV, p. 50, says :

بنا فيه سقانة وحفر فيه بئرا ورائت غمدان

there came into my possession a photograph of a stone inscription found in the old tailings of the gold mine known as Mahad Dhahab ⁽¹⁾ in the Ḥijāz, 246 miles from Jiddah ⁽²⁾. This inscription, engraved in Kufic characters on an irregularly shaped block of stone ⁽³⁾ measuring about 45 by 60 centimeters ⁽⁴⁾, is dated 304 H. and reads as follows : (Fig. 1).

TEXT :

- (١) بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم
 (٢) امر عبد الله
 (٣) جعفر الامام المقتدر بالله امير
 (٤) المؤمنين اطال الله بقاءه الوزير ابا
 (٥) الحسن على بن عيسى ادام الله عز
 (٦) ه بعمارة طريق الجادة لحاج بيت الله
 (٧) لما رجا من جزيل ثواب الله و
 (٨) جرى على يدى القاضى محمد بن مو

⁽¹⁾ Properly Mahd Dhahab, «Cradle of Gold»; popularly spelled in English, Mahad Dahab.

⁽²⁾ The photograph was given to me by my friend Mr. K. S. Twitchell, then active in the Saudi Arabian Mining Syndicate, Ltd., a subsidiary of the American Smelting and Refining Company. In April, 1947, I presented orally the substance of this inscription at a meeting of the American Oriental Society in Washington, D. C., but this communication was never written or published. Mention of its existence was made in my *Rare Islamic Coins* (American Numismatic Society *Notes and Monographs*, n° 118, New York, 1950), p. 21. Subsequently Mr. Twitchell has published a photograph of the inscription in the second edition of his *Saudi Arabia* (Princeton, 1953), opposite p. 77, together with a translation of the text with which I furnished him. May I take this opportunity of thanking Mr. Twitchell for his kindness in placing the inscription at my disposal. The stone is, I believe, still in the office of the Mahad Dhahab mine. It was, incidentally, Mr. Twitchell who provided me with a photograph of a still earlier Islamic inscription from the Ḥijāz, that of Mu'āwiya's dam, dated 58 H. (cf. George C. MILES, «Early Islamic Inscriptions near Ṭā'if in the Ḥijāz», *Journal of Near Eastern Studies*, VII (1948), pp. 236-242).

⁽³⁾ I am informed that the particular variety of stone is called *andesite*.

⁽⁴⁾ These dimensions are only approximate; no scale accompanies the photograph, and Mr. Twitchell was able to recall the size only approximately.

- (٩) سى اعزه الله وتولا ذلك
 (١٠) ابو احمد بن عبد العزيز الـ...ى
 (١١) ومصعب بن جعفر الزبيرى
 (١٢) فى سنة اربع وثلاثمائة

The last line, containing the date, is carved in relief; that is, the background is cut away, so that the letters stand out in black against a gray background, in contrast to the rest of the inscription in which the engraved letters appear in gray against a black background.

TRANSLATION

1. In the name of Allāh, the Compassionate, the Merciful :
2. ordered 'Abdullāh,
3. Ja'far the Imām al-Muqtadir bi'llāh, Commander
4. of the Faithful (may Allāh prolong his life), the Vizier abū-
5. al-Ḥasan 'Alī b. 'Īsā (may Allāh perpetuate his glory),
6. to build a broad highway for the Pilgrims of the House of Allāh
7. (with the hope of meriting a rich reward in Allāh's sight); and
8. [this work] was administered by the Judge Muḥammad b. Mū-
9. sâ (may Allāh exalt him); and this was executed by
10. abū-Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, al-...i ⁽¹⁾,
11. and Muṣ'ab b. Ja'far al-Zubayri;
12. in the year 304 ... ⁽²⁾ [916/917 A. D.] ⁽³⁾.

COMMENTARY

Line 1 : the customary introduction.

Lines 2-4 : 'Abdullāh is the usual epithet preceding the name of the

⁽¹⁾ I have been unable to decipher the *nisbah*. There appear to be two «teeth» (that is, two letters such as *bā'* or *tā'*, etc.), followed by *hā'* (?) and another letter, and the final *yā'*.

⁽²⁾ This final word is curious. It may possible be *sanah* repeated.

⁽³⁾ See below why we cannot be more specific about the date in terms of the Christian era.

Caliph. Strictly speaking, al-Muqtadir (295-320 H. : 908-932 A. D.) ordered the work done, but this is purely protocolary formality; lip-service had to be paid to the Caliph, although in all probability the undertaking owed nothing to his initiative.

Lines 4-6 : Note that the Vizier's name is in the accusative (*abā*, instead of *abū*), but as I have said, it was doubtless 'Ali that conceived the work and set it in motion. The *kunyah* *abū'l-Ḥasan* is preserved also in *ṭirāz* inscriptions, for example in one of the year 302⁽¹⁾. There are other textiles bearing 'Ali b. 'Isā's name as Vizier⁽²⁾, but, so far as I know, no other inscription carrying his name has been published. For this reason alone, the inscription is valuable.

Line 6 : *ṭarīq al-jāddah li-ḥājj bayt Allāh* : obviously the meaning intended is a very big road, and therefore I have translated «a broad highway». As my late very distinguished friend Ernst Herzfeld (to whom I showed the photograph of the inscription in 1941, and who helped me with several illuminating observations) remarked, it means «a road of many miles». Can we hope to identify the road itself? After a careful perusal of P. Casanova's very learned discussion⁽³⁾ of the pilgrim routes in north-western Arabia in connection with the Ma'din Banū Sulaym, to which I shall refer again in a moment, I have concluded that it would be best to abandon the attempt. The network of historical roads and by-passes and short-cuts related to the pilgrim routes from Medina to Mecca and from Baghdād (or Baṣrah) to Mecca in this area is exceedingly complex; and their identification with existing routes makes the task even more difficult. I can only suggest that 'Ali b. 'Isā's road was either an improvement of the pilgrim road from Medina to Mecca built at

⁽¹⁾ *Répertoire*, n° 964. The *kunyah*, *abū'l-Ḥusayn*, on another *ṭirāz* of Miṣr of the year 301 (*Répertoire*, n° 960) must be a mistake, either of the artisan or of the decipherer of the inscription.

⁽²⁾ Cf. *Répertoire*, n°s 959, 967, 968, 975, 976.

⁽³⁾ P. CASANOVA, *Une Mine d'or au Hidjāz*, in *Bulletin de la Section de Géographie* (Comité des travaux historiques et scientifiques), vol. XXXV, Paris, 1921, pp. 69-125, especially pp. 81 ff.

Zubayda's (Harūn al-Rashīd's wife's) behest, the *Darb al-Sharqi* that Burton followed; or else a part of the great Baghdād-Mecca route⁽¹⁾. Without having visited the area I can contribute nothing new to the topography. Mr. Karl Twitchell has told me that he and his pilot once observed from the air near Mahad Dhahab the traces of a broad highway, perhaps 50 meters wide; it was abandoned and lay some 30 kilometers east of the present Medina-Mecca road. But to attempt to correlate this and Casanova's assemblage of historical material with the present inscription is beyond my competence.

Reverting to the text, I would like to read *li-ḥujjāj* («for the pilgrims») in place of *li-ḥājj*, which strictly speaking is not correct; but while the inscription is rather obscure at this point, there is, in my opinion, no room here for a second *jīm*, and the reading as I have given it is the only possible one. According to Ibn-Jubayr, the phrase *li-ḥājj bayt Allāh* occurred in an inscription at the Ka'bah dated 167 H.⁽²⁾; another, according to al-Fākihi, relating to certain water works in the Ḥaram at Mecca, dated 194 H., reads *سقاية لحجاج بيت الله*⁽³⁾.

It is of interest to note that with the exception of the Umayyad Caliph 'Abd al-Malik's milestones⁽⁴⁾, our inscription is, so far as I know, the earliest epigraphical record of Islamic road-building.

Line 7 : This is one of the earliest recorded epigraphical uses of this type of pious phrase, and, so far as I have been able to determine, the earliest in this particular form⁽⁵⁾.

⁽¹⁾ See particularly CASANOVA, *op. cit.*, pp. 89, 114, 119, and the sketch map on the latter page.

⁽²⁾ Cf. *Répertoire*, n° 48; CRESWELL, *Early Muslim Architecture*, II, p. 382. Incidentally Lane (*Modern Egyptians*, 5th ed., London, 1871, I, p. 168) remarks on the use of *ḥajj* as a collective noun, meaning «pilgrims».

⁽³⁾ Cf. *Répertoire*, n° 38; CRESWELL, *op. cit.*, p. 384.

⁽⁴⁾ *Répertoire*, n°s 14-17.

⁽⁵⁾ We have *وعظم أجره واحسن جزاه* in 155 H. at Ascalon (*Répertoire*, n° 42); *رجاء ثواب الله عليه* in 241 H. in the Great Mosque at Córdoba (LÉVI-PROVENÇAL, *Inscriptions arabes d'Espagne*, n° 1; *Répertoire*, n° 373); *رجاء ثوابه العظيم* in 250 H. in the Great Mosque at Elvira (LÉVI-PROVENÇAL, p. XLIV; *Répertoire*, n° 504); and very similar and almost contemporary, *رجاء ثواب الله الجزيل* in 318 H. on the

Line 8 : *wa-jarra 'alā yaday* : this is the usual phrase preceding the name of the principal functionary who was put in charge of a given piece of construction. Epigraphically it occurs as early as 172 H. on a cistern at Ramla ⁽¹⁾, but aside from this there is, unless I am mistaken, only one other instance pre-dating the inscription under discussion—on the copper sheets in the Qubbat al-Ṣakhrāh, dated 216 H. ⁽²⁾.

Lines 8-9 : Al-Qāḍi Muḥammad b. Mūsā : the literary sources inform us that Muḥammad b. Mūsā was governor of Mecca in 306 H., but our inscription makes it clear that he must already have held this office two years earlier. It is interesting to note that he was an active builder and restorer, and he appears to have been associated with 'Alī b. 'Isā in the architectural alterations that took place in Mecca in 302 H. Two years after 'Alī's deposition, in the year 306 H., he is reported to have undertaken further work in the Great Mosque and certain changes in the walls and gates ⁽³⁾.

Line 9 : *tawallā* : referring to both the following names. That the highway was indeed a very large enterprise is further attested by the use of this administrative verb introducing the names of two more individuals who presumably actually supervised the work in the field. They were perhaps what we might call contractors. So far as I know this is the earliest epigraphical use of this phrase.

Lines 10-11 : I regret to say that I have been unable to identify either abū-Aḥmad b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, of unknown or rather undeciphered *nisbah*, or Muṣ'ab b. Ja'far al-Zubayri. It is perhaps a reasonable

tower of the church of Santa Cruz at Ecija (LÉVI-PROVENÇAL, n° 29; *Répertoire*, n° 1131).

⁽¹⁾ *Répertoire*, n° 53; see also in vol. V, p. 189; cf. CRESWELL, *op. cit.*, II, p. 164.


⁽²⁾ *Répertoire*, n°s 209-210; cf. CRESWELL, *op. cit.*, I, p. 56.

⁽³⁾ F. WÜSTENFELD, *Chroniken der Stadt Mekka* (Leipzig, 1861), various texts in vol. I, pp. 327, 344; vol. III, pp. 148, 160; BOWEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 129, 231 (evidently Hilāl al-Ṣābī' is wrong in calling the Qāḍi Aḥmad b. Mūsā). Zambaur *Manuel*, p. 21) gives only the following dates for the governors of Mecca in this period : 300, Mūnis; 306, Muḥammad b. Mūsā; 317, Ibn-Mukhārib or Mukhalid.

assumption that the latter was a descendant of Muṣ'ab b. al-Zubayr, governor of Medina in 65 H. and of Baṣrah in 67 H. ⁽¹⁾, and who incidentally is mentioned in connection with the legal aspects of the Mine of the Commander of the Faithful, to which I shall refer in a moment.

Line 12 : The date : we cannot be more precise in translating the date into the Christian calendar. 'Alī b. 'Isā entered upon his duties as Vizier for the first time on the 10th of Muḥarram, 301 H. (Aug. 16, 913 A. D.) ⁽²⁾; and his first term of office came to an end with his shameful arrest on the 8th of Dhū'l-Ḥijjah, 304 (June 2, 917) ⁽³⁾. Since Dhū'l-Ḥijjah is the last month of the year, we can only say that the work was finished (probably?) sometime during the year 304, and certainly not later than the 8th of the last month of that year; in other words, between July, 916, and the beginning of June, 917.

THE EPIGRAPHY

The Kufic is simple and virtually unadorned, the only attempt at elaboration being in the crochets terminating some of the letters, particularly those with tall vertical shafts. The only remarkable letter combination is the *lām-alif* (occurring twice), which assumes a curious harp-like shape : . In general one might say that the style of the inscription as a whole is peculiarly lacking in elegance, considering the high station of the personages named and the evident importance of the undertaking. In this connection it should be remarked that despite its superficial appearance to the contrary, the stone appears not to have been broken after it was inscribed. All the lines are complete, or very nearly so. The engraver began with two logically balanced lines, but thereafter he simply started each line at the extreme right-hand edge and continued until he came to the irregular left-hand contour of the stone, with the result that a number of words are clumsily divided between the end of one line and the beginning of the next.

⁽¹⁾ ZAMBAUR, *Manuel*, pp. 24 and 39. — ⁽²⁾ BOWEN, *op. cit.*, pp. 114-115. —

⁽³⁾ *Ibid.*, p. 152.

It is strange that this crudely shaped block should have been chosen for a commemorative tablet of this official nature. Whoever engraved the stone could surely have trimmed a more presentable and regular block for the purpose ⁽¹⁾.

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* *

There is, of course, no way of determining how close the find-spot of this inscribed block is to the place where it was originally set up for the pilgrims to read and to acknowledge their indebtedness to their benefactors. I have already referred to the difficulty of identifying the



Fig. 2.

exact route in question. Nor have I any suggestion to explain the presence of the stone among the tailings of the old workings of the gold mine. It is, however, not unlikely that the original location was not far from Mahad Dhahab, for there can be little doubt that the modern mine, with its traces of medieval as well as of very ancient workings, is to be identified with the Ma'din or Ḥarraḥ Banū Sulaym, famous in Umayyad times as the property of the Caliph 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Aziz, who bought the land from Bilāl b. al-Ḥārith, to whom the property had been given in fief by the Prophet ⁽²⁾. This mine is commemorated on certain remarkable gold dinars (fig. 2) of the year 105 H. (723/724

⁽¹⁾ In answer to my question whether it would have been difficult to find a suitable block of stone in the vicinity which could have been trimmed to a regular rectangular shape, Mr. Twitchell wrote me that on the contrary there exists a well about one mile distant from the site lined with well-cut andesite blocks.

⁽²⁾ Balādhuri, *apud* CASANOVA, *op. cit.*, p. 72; cf. MILES, *Rare Islamic Coins*, pp. 20-21.

A.D.) ⁽¹⁾ as the Ma'din Amīr al-Mu'minīn ⁽²⁾. It was located on the route between Baghdād and Mecca at a point which was estimated by Casanova to be roughly 41° 20' E., 23° 30' N. The actual location of Mahad Dhahab is 40° 52' 45" E., 23° 29' 52" N.; the correspondence is so close in view of the inexact cartographical facilities which Casanova had at his disposition about 1920 ⁽³⁾, that one might say that the coordinates are virtually identical.

We may, therefore, I believe, safely conclude that the inscription originally stood somewhere near the important way-station of Ma'din Banū Sulaym on one of the Mecca pilgrim routes of the early 4th century of the Hijrah.

⁽¹⁾ MILES, *op. cit.*, n° 66.

⁽²⁾ Casanova (*op. cit.*, p. 79) considers that there can be no doubt about the identity of the Ma'din Banū Sulaym and the Ma'din Amīr al-Mu'minīn of the coins.

⁽³⁾ Cf. Casanova's own remarks (*op. cit.*, p. 75): « . . . quand il s'agit de l'Arabie centrale, on ne peut que regretter cette absence ou insuffisance de renseignements ».