

XVI.—*On the Himyaritic Inscriptions lately brought to England from Southern Arabia.* By Col. PLAYFAIR, H.M. Consul and Political Agent at Zanzibar.

[*Read April 24th, 1866.*]

THE Himyaritic is the language which preceded the modern Arabic in that portion of the Arabian peninsula now known as Yemen, or Arabia Felix. Himyar, so called on account of his predilection for red garments, was the first of the Kahtanite kings of Yemen who wore a crown of gold. He was the head of the great Himyaritic family which reigned in Yemen from his time till the Abyssinian conquest in A.D. 525, a period which has been estimated at twelve centuries.

During the first part of this lengthened period, the government of Arabia Felix was shared by other princes of the same family, and the nation was then known to foreigners as the Sabeans, from the fact of their descent from the great father of their race, Saba, or Sheba, the son of Joktan. Subsequently, when the house of Himyar flourished in unrivalled splendour, the name of Himyarites, or Homeritæ, according to the Greeks, began to replace that of Sabeans.

The immediate cause of the downfall of the Himyaritic dynasty was the religious intolerance of the last tobbas, or kings, who had embraced Judaism, and who persecuted with the most unrelenting fury such of their countrymen as had received the doctrines of Christ. Upon the pretext of the murder of the Jews by the people of Nejran, Dthoo Nowas, the sovereign of Yemen, took up arms against them, obtained possession of their city, and gave its inhabitants their choice between Judaism and death. They preferred the latter. Accordingly large pits were dug, filled with burning fuel, and all who refused to abjure their faith, amounting it is said to 20,000, were either cast into the flames or put to the sword. A few of the Christians who had escaped to Constantinople laid a detail of their sufferings before the Emperor Justin, who, in his turn, moved the Christian Emperor of Abyssinia to take up arms for the protection of his co-religionists in Arabia.

Even before this time the Himyaritic power had been on the decline, and now the tobba found that he had not sufficient influence to compel the subordinate princes to unite their contingents for the defence of their common country, which thus fell an easy prey to the Abyssinian invaders. I need not detail

the history of their government in Yemen, or how, in a very short time, they were in turn expelled by the Persians, or how a remnant of them remain to the present day in Arabia, in a position similar to that of the Pariah of India, an impure race filling the most degraded offices, and with whom no Arab will eat or associate.

Till a few years ago, little or nothing was known of the language of this people. Niebuhr met with no inscriptions during his journey in Arabia, though he heard of their existence; subsequently Seelzen, Wellsted, Cruttenden, and Arnaud found a considerable number in various parts of the country, which they copied with a greater or less degree of accuracy. A few inscribed stones, of a very fragmentary nature, found their way to India. but as far as I am aware not a single specimen reached this country until 1862. Shortly before that time, General Sir William Coghlan obtained at Aden a considerable number of bronze tablets and a marble altar; I also became possessed of a few, and a colporteur of the Bible Society obtained some very fine slabs from Mareb; these are now all in the British Museum. This collection consists of three distinct series: first, there are twenty-eight bronze tablets found at Amran, near Sana, the capital of Yemen; many of them quite perfect; they are mostly votive tablets, dedicated to the deity El Mukah. Secondly, there are a few inscribed stones and a marble altar, discovered in the vicinity of Aden; and, thirdly, there are the slabs from Mareb.

These last probably formed part of the great dam of Mareb, so celebrated in Arabian story. Some historians attribute its construction to Saba, or Sheba; others to Lokhman, king of that remnant of the Adites who renounced idolatry at the preaching of the prophet Húd. He is said to have settled at Saba, or Mareb, about 1750 B.C., and finding the country frequently ravaged by impetuous mountain torrents, while, at other times, it was parched for want of a sufficient supply of water, he conceived the idea of building a dam across the gorge of a valley contained between two mountains, which he thus converted into an immense reservoir for the reception of the rain water descending from the hills. The dam was built of cut stone secured with metal clamps, forming a prodigious mass of masonry three hundred cubits thick, one hundred and twenty feet high, and nearly two miles in length. It was provided with sluices, through which the water was conveyed into canals for the irrigation of the fields and gardens of Mareb, the richness and prosperity of which, owing to this reservoir, are a favourite theme with Arabian historians.

In about A.D. 120 this dam, which had stood for 1700 years, having fallen into decay, yielded to the pressure of water from within, and gave way, deluging the country far and wide, carry-

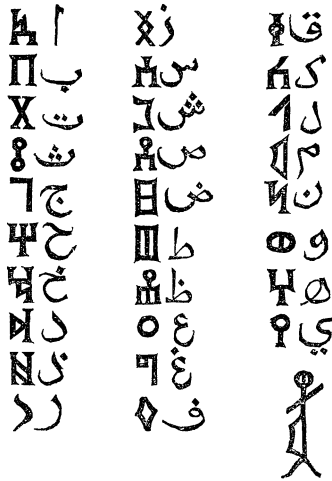
ing away the whole city with the neighbouring towns and villages, and reducing this fertile province to a state of utter desolation and ruin. The site of this great work has been visited by at least two Christian travellers, M. Arnaud and a Chaldean in the employ of the Bible Society, who both bear testimony to the numberless inscriptions scattered everywhere about; unfortunately, the ignorance and fanaticism of the inhabitants, and their jealousy of anything approaching to an exploration of their country, renders it an exceedingly difficult task to procure specimens.

The Himyaritic character, called by the Arabs *musnud*, or *upright*, is closely allied to the Æthiopic, and it was by the assistance of the modern Amharic that the clue was discovered by the late M. Fresnel, the French consul at Jedda. I have drawn out the alphabet of the language, with the corresponding characters of modern Arabic, not that these express the value of the ancient letters so well as the Æthiopic or Hebrew, but for the very sufficient reason that I am familiar with the one and I am not with the others; several forms of each letter occur in various inscriptions, but I have shown only one and the most common form.

The character is generally written from right to left, and there is one peculiarity which greatly facilitates the deciphering of the inscriptions, which is that a perpendicular stroke is inserted between every two words. In one solitary instance, that of the marble altar, the inscription is in the style called boustrophedon, from the turnings of an ox when ploughing; the first line is read from right to left, and the next from left to right, the letters being reversed.

All the inscriptions have been published in a handsome volume by the trustees of the British Museum, and in a smaller form in the *Journal* of the Oriental Society of Germany for last year, and in the twenty-second part of the *Journal* of the Bombay Branch of the Asiatic Society. My renderings of the inscriptions in the Arabic character are printed. It is to be hoped that these facilities for the study of this interesting character may tempt Orientalists to do more than has yet been done towards an elucidation of these inscriptions.

The volume of the German Oriental Society which I have just mentioned, contains an elaborate and learned article on the subject by the late Dr. Oseander. Unfortunately I cannot give you a summary of it as it is written in one language, German, and illustrated by two others, Hebrew and Ethiopic, with none of which I am familiar. I will not weary you with any detailed account of these inscriptions, but I may be allowed to make a few remarks in illustration of them.



THE HIMYARITIC ALPHABET.

Take, for instance, the first of my transcriptions and of the German collection, which corresponds to the 4c of the British Museum volume. The commencement is clearly "Raibuis and his brothers, the sons of Marthad and their tribe." Then follows the letter *z* and the word Amran; this probably is the same as *dthoo* amran, lord of Amran, where it must be remembered the tablet was actually found. Then follows an expression which is to be found in nearly all the bronzes of this series, with slight modification, "*kakniir shimharu almakah zaharan mazandan*", the meaning of which is that a dedication is made to a deity named El Mukah, the words *zaharan mazandan* being probably a specification of this deity, as one would say, Venus Aphrodite. Then follows a long passage of which I cannot even guess the meaning, save that it contains an allusion to "value" and "gold," and terminates with another proper name, "Am-Karib, son of Samh-Karib, son of Hutferm lord of Tethurim."

Another of these bronzes contains the names of a certain king of Hadaramaut; several of the marble slabs make allusion to the kings or kingdom of Saba (Sheba of Scripture), and perhaps the most interesting of all is the altar, on which it is recorded that it is dedicated by "Himathat, son of Wudthbin, the slave of K. Athitor;" *th* is frequently pronounced as *s* in Arabic. We thus obtain the name Asitar, which is unmistakably the Astarte of the Phœnicians, or the Ashtaroth of our Scriptures. At the end of this inscription the names of Astarte and El Mukah are conjoined, thus, "By or with Astarte, and by or with El Mukah."