

THE ANTIQUITIES OF EL-MUHRAQA AND I KINGS 18, 31

El-Muhraqa is the south-eastern peak of the Carmel range (Keren-ha-Carmel). It rises to a height of 482 m. above sea-level, from where a commanding view over the Plain of Esdraelon may be enjoyed. The Kishon flows at the foot of the mountain.

El-Muhraqa is famous as the traditional site of the dramatic episode narrated in I Kings 18, 20-46, known as the Sacrifice of Elijah, where Elijah confronts the prophets of Baal in the presence of King Ahab.

Recent investigations have failed to reveal the existence of antiquities on the site occupied by the little Carmelite chapel (1883, De'ir el-Muhraqa), though the neighbourhood is rich in sites of potential archeological interest. Documentary evidence, however, proves that at least two structures of historical interest once stood on the limited platform of stone, on which the present chapel stands: a) a mosque of unpretentious proportions; b) a circle of twelve stones. We shall mainly concern ourselves with the latter monument, as it awakens associations with I Kings 18, 31, where Elijah is described as building an altar from « twelve stones corresponding to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob ».

We have been unable to trace any reference to the circle of stones in any modern commentary of the episode (Alt, Eissfeldt, De Vaux, Ap-Thomas, Junker, Wurthwein, Rowley). Since it is inconceivable that no relation exists between the monument and the biblical verse, we propose to recall the historical witnesses at our disposal and then discuss briefly the possible significance of the circle of twelve stones for the understanding of I Kings 18, 31.

Historical witnesses

BENJAMIN of TUDELA, 1163, is the first traveller to furnish information about Muhraqa. He reports:

« On the top of the mountain can be recognized the overthrown altar which Elijah repaired in the days of Ahab. The site of the altar is circular, about four cubits in extent, and at the foot of the

mountain, the river Kishon flows past »¹.

Benjamin is not an eye-witness: he says nothing about the composition of the altar from twelve stones. He takes it for granted that the structure represents an altar, indeed the very altar repaired by Elijah, though this contradicts I Kings 18, 38, where the text affirms that the heavenly fire consumed « the stones and the soil ». The shape of the altar is defined as circular, its diameter four cubits (180 cm), a relatively modest construction, but large for an altar. Since Benjamin is the first literary witness to Muhraqa, we fail to understand how Z. Kleinman (Kal'ai) could suggest that it is « Christian tradition that fixes the place of the altar of Yahweh erected by Elijah at Muhraqa »².

R. JACOB OF PARIS, 1228 or 1235. Unlike Benjamin, R. Jacob made a personal visit to Muhraqa, with a group of pilgrims, as it would seem. He writes:

« From Haifa we went along the length of Mount Carmel, about four parsang, and from there, climbed up to the altar of Elijah of blessed memory at the top of the mountain. Beneath the mountain, facing the altar, is the torrent of Kishon... and at the site of the altar, there is a building where the Ismaelites light candles in reverence for the sanctity of the place »³.

It follows from the first line quoted above that Kopp erred in holding that no Jewish medieval pilgrim ever visited Muhraqa⁴.

R. Jacob of Paris is the first to witness to the presence of a Moslem shrine on the site and a tradition of Moslem devotion to Elijah.

ANONYMOUS LETTER-WRITER, 1625. This source is cited by A. Carmel. It would be the first to provide Jewish testimony to the number of stones from which the circle was composed.

« Carmel is a large, very high mountain, and at the top of the mountain there is an altar of twelve stones, which Elijah the prophet of blessed memory built in the days Ahab, King of Israel »⁵.

CHIBBATH YERUSHALAYIM. According to Kopp, this is a composite work making use of earlier material such as Gellioth Erets Yisrael (c 1630), *Seder ha-Doroth* by Jechiel Halperin, and Benjamin. *Seder*

¹ MASA'OTH RABBI BENJAMIN, *Otsar'Masa'oth*, Eisenstein, Y., Tel Aviv, 1969, p. 15.

² *Enc-Mikrait*, s.v. *Carmel*, vol. IV, col. 328.

³ *Eleh ha-Masa'oth*, Eisenstein... p. 66.

⁴ « in das Innere bis nach Muhraqa ist wohl keiner der jüdischen Pilger in Mittelalter vorgedrungen » Cf. KOPP, *Elias und Christentum auf dem Carmel*, Paderborn 1929, p. 57.

⁵ A. CARMEL, *To'doth Haifa bi-mei ha-Turkim*, Haifa 1969, p. 37, footnote 51.

ha-Doroth notes the number of twelve stones for the monument, and that a deep canal, where the water had been, was still visible (sic!)⁶.

RADZIVIL, Nicolaus, 1583. No christian document from byzantine or medieval times has come down to us which makes reference to Muhraqa, though the Crusaders built a castle at Jokne'am, nearby, in order to protect the pass through Wadi el-Milh to the coastal plain. Radzivil would consequently be the first Christian to make any allusion to the place: what his sources were, we cannot surmise. He writes about

« ...Mount Carmel at the top of which is shown the place where Elijah built his altar »⁷.

PHILIP OF THE TRINITY, c. 1638, Carmelite. He left Rome in 1629 on a visit to Persia and India. On his return he journeyed to the Holy Land where he met the members of Fr. Prosper's community, the first Carmelite foundation in the Holy Land since their expulsion at the time of the Crusades. Philip is the first Christian to leave an eye-witness account of Muhraqa. His description is of special interest, as the tradition it transmits could not have been influenced by the Carmelites, who had only returned in 1631 after an absence of three hundred and forty years. There is consequently no basis for Conder's suspicion that the localisation at Muhraqa of Elijah's sacrifice is a recent Carmelite tradition⁸, just as there is no reason for Kleinman to be uncertain whether the name Muhraqa (= burning) represents an ancient local tradition or not.

According to Philip:

« On the top of the mountain, towards the eastern side, about nearly half its distance, is a place called EL KORBAN by the Arab inhabitants, that is to say, the SACRIFICE, because there St. Elijah sacrificed before King Ahab. It is held in the highest veneration among Jews. There are twelve great stones to the eternal memory of those which St. Elijah erected. People are not wanting who believe them to be the same: they bear Hebrew characters »⁹.

Philip confirms the Jewish testimony concerning the number of stones and the veneration of Jews. He remarks the presence on them of Hebrew letters, which suggests that the stones were flat. Elijah on the contrary, is supposed by I Kings 18, 31 to have used twelve rough boulders picked up on the site. Note that the use of uncut

⁶ CL. KOPP, *Ib.* p. 57.

⁷ *Hierosolimytna peregrinatio*, Antwerp 1614, p. 24.

⁸ CONDER, *Tent-Work in Palestine*, London 1879, p. 170.

⁹ PHILIPPUS A SANCTISSIMA TRINITATE, O.C.D., *Itinerarium Orientale*, Lugduni 1649, p. 120.

stones for the building of an altar is commanded by Ex. 20, 25. D'Arvieux will later inform us that the Hebrew characters are graffiti, not monumental inscriptions. Finally Philip mentions efforts to explain the structure: a) either it was a memorial in memory of those stones used by Elijah, or b) they were the identical stones the prophet had made use of.

DOUBDAN, J., 1651. This traveller recalls « the vestiges of the mosque built by the Turks, which they call Mansur », seen from a distance on the journey from Haifa to Nazareth, but makes no mention of the circle of twelve stones¹⁰.

D'ARVIEUX, 1660. He was French consul for the region. On a diplomatic mission to the Emir Tarabei, who lived at Um ez-Zeinat at the time, D'Arvieux passed Muhraqa on horseback. He continues:

« When one climbs up from the torrent of Kishon to the top of the mountain which forms the Cape of the Massacre¹¹ and the eastern angle of Carmel, one sees a large ring (« rond »), in the form of a basin, around which there are twelve great stones, which represent the twelve tribes of Israel. It is pretended that the altar built by the Prophet stood in the centre of this basin. The Jews hold the place in singular veneration and sometimes pass entire nights in prayer to God, and in reading the chapters of Holy Scripture which relate to this famous event. Another of their customs is to engrave their names and those of their children on these stones. They pretend that this attracts the most abundant blessings from heaven on them »¹².

We cull an additional detail from d'Arvieux concerning the monument: the stones stand around a basin-like depression. We have not been able to ascertain the significance of this depression¹³. As remarked previously, the Hebrew characters are graffiti, traced by the hands of pious Jewish pilgrims.

It is strange to note that Abel, who quotes this passage from D'Arvieux on his visit to Muhraqa, omits the sentence concerning the twelve stones¹⁴.

¹⁰ *Le voyage de la Terre Sainte*, Paris 1657.

¹¹ His translation of Ras el-Moccata, by which Muhraqa was then named.

¹² *Mémoires*, II, Paris 1735, p. 294.

¹³ If we understand this depression to have been hollowed out of the rock, which is probable, then the « rond » of D'Arvieux would represent a typical feature often in connection with megalithic monuments and not unknown in the vicinity of Muhraqa itself. In addition we note the conclusion of Fr. Vincent that « megalithic tombs are always found in the situation, on the slope or on the rocky summit of some steep hill »; a description fully applicable to Muhraqa. Cfr. *Monuments en Pierres Brutes dans la Palestine Occidentale: Revue Biblique* (1901) p. 298.

¹⁴ *Géographie de la Palestine*, I, Paris 1933, p. 351-352.

BREMOND, 1666, names the place of the Sacrifice KORBAR, and mentions the existence of a structure of twelve stones with many Hebrew characters¹⁵.

NAU, M., 1667, is not an eye-witness. He writes:

« One tells me that in memory of that memorable action, one may still see there twelve stones with Hebrew inscriptions which the Moslems venerate, and they have built a kind of mosque where they light lamps out of devotion »¹⁶.

LAFFI, D., 1679, informs us that Jews come to Muhraqa in pilgrimage from distant countries (« da lontani paesi »).

He names the place COBAR and says:

« In that place there are twelve great stones in eternal memory of those which the saint placed there, and many are of the opinion that they are the same ».

Laffi's account is hearsay and mainly depends on that of Philip of the Trinity¹⁷.

GIAMBATTISTA OF ST. ALEXIUS, 1765-1775, Carmelite. He was the architect of the 18th-cent. Carmelite monastery on the site of the actual one, which previous building was destroyed by Abdallah Pasha in 1821. Giambattista visited Muhraqa and found

« above, on the highest hill, a little chapel (« portico ») which served as an oratory for the Christians in front of which there are twelve stones arranged in the form of an altar; around these the Hebrews gather to pray »¹⁸.

Giambattista is the last European to have left an eye-witness account of the circle of twelve stones. Thereafter visits to Muhraqa cease, on account of the French Revolution and its aftermath. By the time the next reliable visitor inspect the site, they have disappeared. He is C. W. M. Van le Velde¹⁹.

Van de Velde gives a detailed description of the old mosque, by now a crumbling ruin (op. cit. p. 242 f), but has nothing to say of any structure of twelve stones. The same may be said for Miss M. E. Rogers (c. 1858), who attaches a sketch of the ruined mosque to her description²⁰. From another sketch signed by Van de Velde, numer-

¹⁵ *Viaggi d'Oriente*, it. ed. 1779, p. 209.

¹⁶ *Voyage Nouveau de la Terre Sainte*, Paris 1744, p. 657.

¹⁷ *Viaggio in Levante al Santo Sepolcro*, Bologna 1679, p. 465: *Descrittione del Monte Carmelo*.

¹⁸ *Compendio Istorico*, Torino 1780, p. 309; A. Carmel was not able to find this valuable book in Jerusalem, in the university library. A copy is found in the library of « Stella Maris » Monastery, Haifa.

¹⁹ *Reise durch Syrien und Palestina in der Jahren 1851 und 1852*, Leipzig 1855-1856.

²⁰ *Picturesque Palestine*, ed. Wilson, vol. III, p. 105.

ous cut stones can be seen on the site, but one cannot be sure that they constitute a circle. They may have fallen from the old mosque in decay, or be paving-stones from a yet older structure. The existence of a circle of twelve stones is ignored by other famous scholars who visited the site about that time: Robinson, Tristram, Stanley, the Survey, Conder, Guérin, Mülinen, Oliphant, and Geikie; but Kopp later discusses it in detail (1929).

The monument, as such, disappeared between 1765 and 1850. The stones could not have been incorporated into the old mosque as Lambert surmised²¹, because the two structures coexisted. The dispersed stones, if they were dispersed, might have been cut up to be reutilized in the building of a modest chapel for the Carmelites (1868, rebuilt in 1883). Otherwise they might have been cut up by Arabs for building purposes, some time prior to 1850²².

The nature of the Circle of twelve stones

From the foregoing accounts it is clear that tradition made efforts to explain the circle of twelve stones, either as a monument raised by Jews in memory of the event narrated in I Kings, 18, or even as the identical stones placed there by Elijah. The corollary of the latter hypothesis was that Muhraqa was the site of Elijah's altar. The sacrifice was thought to have been offered in the centre of the circle on a constructed altar, the one repaired by Elijah, which apparently was the one destroyed by the heavenly fire, leaving the circle of stones intact. In this way the hypothesis could be harmonized with I Kings 18, 38, where the text describes the fire as consuming the holocaust and wood « and the stones and the soil ».

Precisely the latter phrase « and the stones and the soil » is considered by modern exegetes to be a gloss²³. Gray explains the gloss by referring to an outcrop of rock on the terrace just below Bir el-Mansurah, generally thought to be the site of the ordeal, « which to primitive imagination might resemble large stones fused together by heat »²⁴.

The gloss would then represent a topographical feature which a later hand incorporated into the text, because popular tradition had linked it to the episode of Elijah's sacrifice. The terrain is littered with small basaltic stones, which might have reinforced the im-

²¹ Archives of « Stella Maris », Haifa.

²² From the list of Christian visitors to Muhraqa between 1638 and 1765-1775, it is hard to understand A. Carmel's contention that there are no witnessings by Christians to the sanctity of the places associated with Elijah for the early part of the period between the 16th—18th cent.

²³ Cfr. *Jerusalem Bible*, engl. version, commentary to I Kings 18, 38.

²⁴ J. GRAY, *I and II Kings. A Commentary*, London 1964, p. 358.

pression that the earth had been scorched by fire.

The hypothesis which sees in the monument of twelve stones a memorial erected by Jews, raises the question as to when these were in a position to carry out such a project. Kopp, very impressed by the twelve stones, considered that they dated from the time of the Old Testament — a cautious statement: « noch in das Alte Testament hineinreichen »²⁵ — and that they encircled the place of Elijah's altar. He is of the opinion that the Jews who resettled Mount Carmel after its incorporation into the Hasmonean Kingdom by Alexander Jannaeus, came upon the twelve stones and recognized in them an indication as to the site of Elijah's altar. Since the Northern Kingdom came to an end in 722 B. C. with the exile of the northern tribes and the virtual unpeopling of Mount Carmel by Jews, the memorial would have to be dated at some time between the date of Elijah's sacrifice (c. 865 B. C.) and the fall of Samaria (722 B. C.). It is even theoretically possible to imagine that it was built by Jews during the Hasmonean period, or even later, as a gesture of zealous religious elements wishing to identify themselves with Elijah in his struggle against paganism. It is most unlikely that byzantine monks could have been responsible for it.

E. Friedman made a different approach to the problem of the nature of the circle of twelve stones, by remarking that the circular form, not to mention the unusual dimensions of the stones which so impressed travellers, recalled the structures of prehistoric man²⁶.

Mr. Olami, in charge of the Archeological Survey of Mount Carmel, is in no doubt that the description strongly suggests a megalithic monument. The Archeological Survey has revealed a relatively large number of megalithic structures in the vicinity of Muhraqa, confirming, in most cases, the observations previously made by Müllinen. The megalithic stone-tower, observed by Oliphant at Rujdm-baht, only one mile to the north of Muhraqa, has unfortunately since disappeared²⁷.

Most interesting however is Chirbet ed-Du'abé situated on a hill facing Muhraqa. On the slope near the migrash (parking place) only a few hundred metres away from the chapel is a field covered with cut and semi-cut stones of considerable dimensions, between one to two metres cube. Nearby there is an arrangement of stones resembling a megalithic tomb. There is reason to believe that the field was an ancient quarry. Here then could be the source of the material for the monument of twelve stones raised at Muhraqa.

²⁵ KOPP, *Ibidem*, p. 63.

²⁶ *Notices historiques sur l'Ordre de N. D. du Mont Carmel*, Rome Tere-sianum 1969, p. 5 (mimeographed).

²⁷ Cfr. KOPP, *o. c.*, p. 67.

The possible significance of the circle

That the circle of twelve stones was a megalithic monument is a more natural explanation than the one defended by Kopp. The hypothesis of a memorial does not satisfactorily account for the unusual dimensions of the stones.

If we set out from the assumption that a megalithic monument once crowned the hill of Muhraqa, we are obliged to conclude that it stood there in the days of Elijah. The twelve stones would then be a topographical feature in the vicinity of Elijah's altar, which a later editor incorporated into the text, for motives which are not difficult to discern.

Verses 31-32a of I Kings 18 represent, in fact, a problem for the critics. Many (Kamphausen, Kittel, Benzinger, Skinner, Eissfeldt) regard them as an intrusion. R. de Vaux, who agrees, writes:

« They give the impression of being a gloss. They would be better understood as describing a new construction than a restoration; the twelve stones recall those of (Ex 24, 4) and of Joshua (Jos. 4, 1), The anxiety for the twelve tribes in the Kingdom of the North is rather strange. The style is hardly correct. Each of these arguments is unconvincing, but taken together they render the passage very suspect, and if one suppresses them the text does not suffer »²⁸.

The translators of the Septuagint were no less embarrassed by the verses, and rearranged the order in an effort to harmonize what appeared to be a story of two altars.

The position of the aforesaid critics is not unanimously accepted. It is denied by Burney, Šanda and especially Junker²⁹.

Montgomery opens up a different perspective: he suggests the possibility that the vv. 30-31 include early variant notions as to the altar: the tradition represented by v. 30b, knows of an altar of Yahweh which Elijah rebuilt; the v. 32a makes Elijah build a new altar³⁰.

Gray goes further suggesting after Šanda, that the text refers to two complementary structures:

« There may well have been an altar to Yahweh on the south-east spur of the range overlooking the scene of the victory of Deborah and Barak, and the reference to the building in vv. 31 and

²⁸ *Elie le Prophète*, edit. Études Carmélitaines, vol. I 1956, p. 62.

²⁹ J. JUNKER, *Der Graben um den Altar des Elias: Miscellanea Biblica*, Madrid 1961, p. 550.

³⁰ *The International Critical Commentary: Kings*, Edimburgh 1951, p. 304.

32, may refer to superstructure, as is suggested by the fact that only twelve stones were used »³¹.

The solution proposed in the present article would be similar to that of Gray, only instead of two complementary structures, it proposes that the biblical text refers to two distinct structures: the first, the broken-down altar of Yahweh which Elijah repaired; the second, a circle of twelve stones in the vicinity.

A later, most probably deuteronomic editor, introduced the circle of twelve stones into the narrative, enveloping it in a context, the purpose of which was to present Elijah as another Joshua, renewing the Alliance of the patriarchs, hence the allusion to Jacob to whom the word of Yahweh had come: « Israel shall be his name » (I Kings 18, 31). As R. de Vaux has pointed out the verse 31 refers the reader to Jos. 4, 1. The book of Joshua, in turn, as a whole, tries to establish a deliberate parallelism between Joshua and Moses³². Joshua sets up twelve stones taken from the Jordan at Gilgal as a memorial to the miraculous crossing of the river. (Jos. 4, 20). Moses builds an altar of twelve standing stones (*matseva*) and offers a sacrifice after the conclusion of the Alliance (Ex 24, 3-6). It is suggested that the circle (*gilgal*) of twelve stones at Muhraqa had come to be looked upon as memorial to the miraculous fire which consumed Elijah's sacrifice.

The word *gilgal* means « ring of stones ». It was used as a proper name for several places, cf. Dt 11, 30; 2K 2, 1. The Israelites encountered these monuments when they entered the land of Canaan, and tended, so it seems, to link them to significant persons and events in their national history.

If we accept Gray's theory that v. 38 is a gloss based on a physical feature of the terrain, then vv. 31 and 38b are both glosses containing topographical features which have been incorporated into the text, perhaps by the same hand.

If the *gilgal* of Muhraqa is indeed a megalithic monument, the fact is a powerful argument in favour of the proposition that the biblical text means to locate the episode of Elijah's sacrifice in the vicinity of Muhraqa. The alternative hypothesis that we are dealing with a memorial erected at a later date by Jews, would demonstrate the antiquity and seriousness of Jewish tradition concerning the site.

³¹ GRAY, *Ibidem*, p. 356.

³² Cfr. *Jerusalem Bible*, commentary to Jos 3.

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