

HIGHLIGHTS OF ARCHAEOLOGY IN BIBLE LANDS

by

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CHAPTER TWO

KEYS THAT UNLOCKED TWO IMPORTANT LANGUAGES

TWO DISCOVERIES in modern times have made possible the understanding of two languages that are very important to the study of archaeology. One of these was the finding of the Rosetta Stone and the learning of the secret of the Egyptian hieroglyphics, and the other was the copying and deciphering of the inscription on the Behistun Rock, making possible the reading of the Babylonian language.

THE ROSETTA STONE

The discovery of the stone. For many centuries travelers to Egypt saw on the ruins of ancient temples, palaces, or tombs, or on the walls, pillars, or ceilings of old buildings, many inscriptions which were in the old hieroglyphic or pictorial language of old Egypt, which no scholar knew how to read. When Napoleon invaded the land of Egypt in 1798, he took with him scholars who were assigned the task of investigating the ancient Egyptian monuments. In 1799 Boussard, his French engineer who was excavating near Rosetta, at the mouth of the Nile River, uncovered a black granite stone 3'9" high, by 2'4 ½" Wide, by 11" thick.

At the top of the rock were 14 lines of the Egyptian hieroglyphic language seen so often on ruins of ancient buildings. Below this were 32 lines of another script, and at the bottom of the stone were 54 lines in Greek letters. The Greek words were read and understood, and it was surmised that the other languages told the same story as did the Greek.

Eventually the stone found its way to the British Museum, and scholars set to work to decipher the two unknown languages.¹

Deciphering of the stone. A young Frenchman by the name of Champollion, using the method of comparing the known (Greek) with the unknown (Egyptian), succeeded in the year 1818 in deciphering the Egyptian languages. The middle writing on the stone was a cursive type, and was the vernacular of the common people. The top language was the picture writing, or hieroglyphic (sacred) language of Egypt. Following this discovery, scholars were able to read hundreds and thousands of old Egyptian inscriptions hitherto a mystery. Much of the history of ancient Egypt was suddenly made known to the world. ²

THE BEHISTUN ROCK

The discovery and copying of the inscription. Shortly before the middle of the nineteenth century, when archaeologists were beginning to uncover ancient Assyrian palaces and many inscriptions were made available to scholars in the old cuneiform language of Babylonia and Assyria, it was providential that an important discovery led to the deciphering of this formerly unknown tongue.

In the year 1835 Henry Rawlinson, a young English army officer who was traveling in the region of the Zagros Mountains of Persia, saw a great bas-relief and inscription located high up on a cliff. The almost perpendicular side of the hill had been smoothed, and the inscription stood 350 feet above the base of the hill. Other travelers had seen this remarkable work of man, but Rawlinson proceeded to copy the inscription. Natives of the land helped him to reach the 14-inch ledge which extended along the bottom of the inscription, although it was now broken in places. By the help of a ladder held steady on the ledge by an attendant, he managed to copy the columns of writing. 3

Deciphering the inscription. Rawlinson found that it was actually a threefold inscription, like the Rosetta Stone. The one language was old Persian, the second was Median, and the third, Babylonian. Rawlinson began a long and earnest attempt to solve the riddle of the unknown Babylonian language. His knowledge of modern Persian was a great help to him in coming to understand the old Persian. Then he worked on the Median language, and finally deciphered the Babylonian.

He discovered that the inscription and relief were ordered done by King Darius I of Persia around 515 B.C. The bas-relief pictured the king leading his army in triumph over a revolt which he put down, and the writing tells the story of his success. The results of Rawlinson's discovery were printed in Europe in 1847.

Ten years later authorities of the British Museum gave copies of a cuneiform inscription to four scholars, including Rawlinson, for them to read. The translation work done by all four agreed so substantially that all doubt was removed that the old Babylonian language had been certainly unlocked. 4

Perfecting the text of the inscription. The text of King Darius' mountainside writing has been perfected by several more recent efforts to climb the precipitous cliffs. In 1903 Professor A. V. Williams Jackson, of Columbia University, climbed the rock to check the passages that were in doubt by scholars, and he for the first time took pictures of the relief and inscription.

In 1904 the British Museum sent an expedition to the rock under the direction of Leonard William King and Reginald Campbell Thompson. They made use of a rock shelf above the inscription to enable them to get closer to it. Their copy of the text became the standard of publication for many years. 5

But in the year 1948 the Baghdad School of the American Schools of Oriental Research sponsored another expedition to the Behistun Rock. Professor George G. Cameron, of the University of Michigan, was director. The purpose was to check portions of the inscriptions about which uncertainties and difficulties still remained; to attempt to read sections of the inscription which had never been copied because the ledge below it was broken at those places; to photograph both the relief and inscription and make molds of the former; and to determine, if possible, how the ancient Persians reached the place on the rock to do their work. 6

Cameron had at his disposal the modern skill and engineering methods of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company, whose riggers reached the shelf located two hundred feet above the inscription. There steel pins were cemented into holes that had been drilled in the rock. Then by means of cables and a scaffolding the professor was able to begin the tasks of examining and copying the inscription and of taking pictures.

He was able to check various disputed places in the text, and thus he was able to settle long-standing difficulties. He also succeeded in copying the hitherto uncopied portions of the inscription. Some of these were identical with the known parts. He made a mold of a portion of the relief in order that a cast could be made and a representation of old King Darius be presented to the English-speaking world.

An oblique gash was discovered providing a pathway around the mountain, and below the end of the path was a platform with two steps leading down from it. Holes in the top step indicated rails of wood had been used. But below these two steps there had doubtless been a further stairway that was chiseled away after the completion of the work. Thus was revealed how the old-time workers reached the scene of their operations. 7

1. Ira M. Price, *The Monuments and the Old Testament*, ed. 1925, pp. 15-17; J. A. Hammerton, ed., *The Wonders of the Past*, ed. 1937, pp. 250, 251.

2. *Loc. cit.*

3. Price, *ibid.*, pp. 43-45; Hammerton, *ibid.*, pp 761-767.

4. *Loc. cit.*

5. George G. Cameron, "Darius Carved History on Ageless Rock," *The National Geographic Magazine*, Dec. 1950, pp. 825-844.

6. *Loc. cit.*

7. *Loc. cit.*

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