

The 16th March, 1963 marks the centenary of the birth at Geneva of Max van Berchem, the founder of the *Corpus Inscriptionum Arabicarum* and the greatest Arabic epigraphist of his day. He began his study of Arabic in 1882 at Strasburg, then at Berlin, and then at Leipzig under Fleischer and Krehl, and his thesis of 1886 — *La Propriété territoriale et l'impôt foncier sous les premiers califes. Études sur l'impôt du Kharag* — gained for him the degree of Doctor in philosophy, *maxima cum laude*, of the University of Leipzig. Realizing that a knowledge of the language and the power of deciphering inscriptions were not the sole conditions for his future work, he undertook a series of journeys in the East. He made his first visit in the winter of 1886/7, and wrote a memoir on the Mosque of al-Guyūshī. In 1888 he again returned to Cairo and then visited Palestine, Syria and Asia Minor. In the winter of 1888/9 he studied in Paris under Barbier de Meynard, Charles Schefer and Clermont-Ganneau. He again visited Cairo in the winter of 1889/90, and his *Notes d'Archéologie arabe* appeared in the *Journal Asiatique* in 1891 and 1892. In 1892/3 and 1894 he travelled in Egypt, Syria, the Haurān and Palestine, and in the following year in Northern Syria.

The main object of these extensive and systematic journeys was the collection of material for the great *Corpus* of Arabic inscriptions of which he was the originator and general editor. This project was conceived in 1891 and set forth in a masterly letter to Barbier de Meynard in 1892, a letter which was published in the *Journal Asiatique*. The task being too great for one scholar to undertake, he sought collaborators and obtained two: Halil Edhem, with whom he worked to produce the section on the inscriptions of Asia Minor (of which Sivas and Divrigi has already been published), and Sobernheim for Northern Syria (of which Akka, Hişn al-Akrād and Tripoli have already been published). He himself produced a great volume on the inscriptions of Cairo, which was published in four fascicules between 1894 and 1903.

He contributed the chapter dealing with the Arabic inscriptions in the *Archäologische Reise im Euphrat- und Tigris-Gebiet* of Sarre and Herzfeld, the *Amida* of Strzygowski, and the *Churasanische Baudenkmäler* of Diez. So great was his name that photographs and rubbings of Arabic inscriptions were sent him for decipherment from all parts of the East.

In November 1920 he came to Cairo for the express purpose of seeing through the press of the Institut français the first volume of his *Inscriptions de Jérusalem*, but before he had been many months in the country his health, already undermined by years of overwork, gave way. I saw him frequently during this period and he seemed to be what is called "fey" in the Viking Sagas, conscious of his approaching death. At this time some 150 pp. of his Jerusalem volume had been set up in galley-sheets and then made up into page form. He was suddenly told by the Institut français that he must give the "bon à tirer" for this part, so that the type could be used again, before any more of his text could be set up. Gone was the possibility of seeing the whole volume in type before any part was printed off, gone was the possibility of making innumerable cross references, etc. This, in my opinion, was the cruel blow that literally broke his heart. He suffered from sleeplessness, and his condition became so serious that he was advised to return to Switzerland. He arrived at Trieste in a blizzard and caught bronchial pneumonia, his weakened system was unable to resist it, and he died a few weeks after his return on 13th March, 1921.

Van Berchem, in spite of his learning, was the most modest and unselfish of men, ever ready to help scholars and students with advice and to put his great stores of knowledge at their disposal. His death was an irreparable loss for that branch of Oriental studies in which he was *facile princeps*.

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