

greatest number is the Wady Mukatteb, 'Written Valley,' through which the usual road to Sinai passes before reaching Wady Feirân. Here they occur by thousands on the rocks, chiefly at such points as would form convenient resting-places for travellers or pilgrims during the noon-day sun ;<sup>1</sup> as is also the case with those we saw upon the other route. Many of them are accompanied by crosses, sometimes obviously of the same date with the inscription, and sometimes apparently later or retouched. The character is everywhere the same ; but until recently it has remained undeciphered, in spite of the efforts of the ablest paleographers. The inscriptions are usually short ; and most of them exhibit the same initial characters. Some Greek inscriptions are occasionally intermingled.

These inscriptions are first mentioned by Cosmas, about A. D. 535. He supposed them to be the work of the ancient Hebrews ; and says certain Jews, who had read them, explained them to him as noting "the journey of such an one, out of such a tribe, in such a year and month ;" much in the manner of modern travellers.<sup>2</sup> Further than this, the most recent decipherers have as yet hardly advanced. When the attention of European scholars was again turned upon these inscriptions by Clayton, bishop of Clogher, about the middle of the last century,<sup>3</sup> they were still attributed by him and others to the Hebrews on their journey to Sinai. Since that time they have usually been regarded as probably the work of Christian pilgrims on their way from Egypt to Mount Sinai, during the fourth century. At any rate, the contents of them were already unknown in the time of Cosmas ; and no tradition appears to have existed respecting their origin. As to the character, Gesenius supposed it to belong to that species of the Phœnician, or rather Aramæan, which, in the first centuries of the Christian era, was extensively employed throughout Syria, and partially in Egypt ; having most affinity with that of the Palmyrene inscriptions. Prof. Beer of Leipzig, on the other hand, who has quite recently deciphered these inscriptions for the first time, regards them as exhibiting the only remains of the language and character once peculiar to the Nabathæans of Arabia Petrea ; and supposes, that if at a future time stones with the writing of the country shall be found among the ruins of Petra, the character will prove to be the same with that of the inscriptions of Sinai. Accord-

<sup>1</sup> Burckhardt's Travels, etc. 620.

<sup>2</sup> Cosmas Indicopl. Topogr. Christ. in Montfaucon's Collect. nov. Patrum, II. p. 205.

<sup>3</sup> See his Letter to the Society of Antiquaries, published under the title : "Journal from Grand Cairo to Mount Sinai," i. 188-190

etc. Lond. 1753. This is the Journal of the Prefect of the Franciscans in Cairo, already referred to. The bishop offers in his letter, to bear any proper portion of the expense which might arise from sending a person to copy these inscriptions. p. 4.