

N E R V A L ' s D I A R Y

Le voyageur enthousiaste observe ...

February 4, 2000, on the eve of the year of the Dragon, 年龍, in Al-Karak, Jordan, the Biblical Karkor, and February 5, South of Amman

Ibn Battutah travelled here in September 1326 from Damascus to Mecca and wrote

ثم يرحلون الى حصن

الكرك وهو من اعجب الحصون وامنتها

واشهرها ويسمي

... (ensuite ils se dirigent) ... vers le château de Carac. Ce dernier est un fort des plus admirables, des plus inaccessibles et des plus célèbres ... [1].

The Book of Judges mentions Karkor קרקור, and Deuteronomium III:17 reads of the 'Slopes of Pisgah', אשדות הפסגה.

It is Moabite territory and my 1906 Baedeker is quite specific in naming the Megillath Ruth and other Biblical loci [2].

The Assyrian king Shalmaneser III battled Israel and her allies here in 853 B.C.; Payen le Bouteiller erected a fortress of the Crusaders in 1145 which was last commanded by Rainaud de Châtillon and was eventually conquered by Saladdin a few decades later. Earlier today I visited Mount Nebo, the place where Moses died – today a wonderful Franciscan church built over a Byzantine basilica – and Machaerus, the Herodian stronghold in which John the Baptist was beheaded.

Rich and bloody – history as it took place.

Travelling in and around the Terra Sancta is a special experience and in Jordan I have not been for 25 years, i.e. since my pre-Jerusalem time. Weather conditions did not permit me then to see Petra or the Omayyad desert castles or other historic sites as for instance this one. There are few places on earth where the layers of time and history are that manifold as they are here on either side of the Jordan river. Once again, Karl H. Jr., PhD, has come with me, who increasingly does the planning even if his interests are purely historical without any touch of medicine. Anyway, before I started to use my room in the rest house next to Karak Castle, I had already been asked to see two patients.

On the subsequent and fifth day, Showbak, another Crusader stronghold, and Petra, THE famous sight in Jordan, concluded the visit. Tomorrow we will drive back to Amman and fly home.

Dr. Oumeish, my pro forma host, and I discussed several areas of common interest after I had arrived in Jordan. Next to dermatology and history, for instance calligraphy and the role of writing in human civilizations. We are in touch since I contributed to an issue of the *Clinics in Dermatology* of which he was the editor [3]. Our encounter perfectly served to establish a closer personal relation. From my experience on the 'other side of the river' I am still very familiar with special problems of the skin in the area, e.g. leishmaniasis, a topic on which Oumeish has recently edited another special issue of the *International Journal of Dermatology* [4]. A lot of progress has been made in recent years

and the approach with a vaccine seems to be promising. Yahya Dowlati of Teheran contributed substantially in this respect.

Phototherapy at the Dead Sea level is promoted in Jordan as much as in Israel. When I consider the theories according to which this sunbathing was advocated for, almost 20 years ago, much has changed. The immunosuppressive role of UVA is out of the question today and there is no way of keeping up the old theorem that UV at the Dead Sea level is innocuous. Sure, for psoriasis it works well. The epidermal cell proliferation kinetics help explain that. For Caucasian tourists with European ancestry, caution must be expressed as for any type of excessive insolation, at least as far as severe damage to the dermis is concerned. Proper sun protection is necessary if one wants to enjoy the area. This is easily possible and the author who was a redhead in earlier days and is of skin type Boston I can state that from decades of personal experience. Sun and skin, a perennial question.

With the truly first year of the new millennium (2001) the inescapable point of retirement will come closer and closer to me. A frightening aspect for a workaholic because the status of emeritus so far was conferred almost automatically. By today, it has become very elusive and difficult to attain. 'Emeritus' still means *a desk and a room, a parking lot, computer and e-mail links, an affiliation in academia, perhaps one's name on the institutional stationery, etc.* – perquisites which make academic life much easier, make it practically possible in fact. Besides, the year 2000 brought a new restriction for me in so far as the Austrian government does not subsidize any more professional travel of scientists actively participating in foreign meetings beyond about \$ 300.00 per annum. Consequently, annual mileage will shrink dramatically and 'Nerval' may soon be travelling only by railway in Central Europe. So, presumably, the 'Year of the Dragon' will be my last full year in academia. My fortieth anniversary of public service with the Austrian government has already taken place (for which a nice diploma was issued), reminding me of the oncoming shutdown in office.

My enthusiasm for travelling on the heels of Marco Polo or Ibn Battutah is still strong, yet the state regulations and perhaps Mother Nature may have a word in this regard soon.

- 1 UNESCO (ed): Voyages d'Ibn Battutah, reprint of the translation by C. Defréméry and R. Sanguinetti (Arabic-French bilingual edition). Paris, éditions anthropos, 1854, vol I, p 255.
- 2 Baedeker K: Palestine and Syria, English edition. Berlin, Baedeker, 1906.
- 3 Holubar K, Schmidt C: Historical, anthropological, and biological aspects of sun and the skin; in Oumeish OY (ed): Clin Dermatol 1998;16:19–22.
- 4 Oumeish YO, Parish LC (eds): Leishmaniasis. Int J Dermatol 1999;17: 245–344.

à bientôt,

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