

CROCODILES IN PALESTINE.

By THE REV. PROF. GEORGE BUCHANAN GRAY, D.D., D.Litt.

IT is not a little remarkable that the question still remains open whether crocodiles exist, or have existed, in Palestine. Yet, in the *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, the authors of the article "Crocodile," speak on the point with a certain amount of reserve, though admitting readily that there would be nothing surprising in finding the creatures in a marsh region, such as is found near Caesarea, with a climate resembling that of the Delta. Again, Dr. Post, writing on the same subject in *Hasting's Dictionary of the Bible*, referred to the Nile in connection with the crocodile, but said not a word of Palestine. Dr. Post's reputation as a naturalist and his long familiarity with the country would have given great weight to any statement of his on the subject; whether his silence was deliberate, and, if so, what it meant, may be left undecided. But in view of such silence, or reserve, as is exemplified in these two standard works, and the more decisive scepticism sometimes expressed on the one hand and the over statements which occur in some other writers, it may be of interest to re-examine the evidence. This may be conveniently divided into ancient, mediaeval and modern evidence.

1. *Ancient Evidence*.—The Old Testament cannot be cited here. In the A.V. the term crocodile does not occur, and the ordinary ancient Hebrew term for the crocodile, which doubtless existed, whether like the Arabic it was loaned from Egyptian or of Hebrew origin, is unknown. It is the general view of modern, who in this differ from ancient, interpreters, that the crocodile is *described* in Job xli, and if the entire passage is from one hand the term *leviathan*, which elsewhere has mythological associations, is applied to it (so R.V. margin in Job xli, 1). But there is nothing in the passage to suggest that the writer has *Palestinian* crocodiles in particular in view, and even if such existed in his time it is far more probable that he is thinking mainly of the crocodiles of the Nile; and the same must be said of the author of Psalm lxxiv, 14.

This silence of the Old Testament must not, however, be construed into evidence *against* the existence of crocodiles in Palestine, for the district to which, if, or when, they existed, they were mainly, if not wholly confined, lay outside the country occupied by the Hebrews,¹ and probably, during the period of the Old Testament at least, quite as many Hebrews were acquainted at first hand with the Nile as with the marshes of the Nahr ez-Zerka, and far more by hearsay.

The only positive ancient evidence is indirect and inferential; it consists of a name attaching to a city and to a river. Strabo² records that between Acre and Straton's Tower (Caesarea) was a place named Κροκοδείλων πόλις, and half a century later Pliny (*H.N.*, V, 17) relates: "fuit oppidum Crocodeilon, est flumen." It is necessary to insist, since some modern writers have implied or directly stated the contrary, that neither Strabo nor Pliny directly asserts that crocodiles then existed or had previously existed in any stream or river of Palestine. Nor does the name which they record quite *necessarily* imply this. It suggests it, as the name Συκαμίνων πόλις in the same passage of Strabo suggests the presence of sycamores; but the best confirmation of the suggestion will be proof that crocodiles have subsequently frequented the Nahr ez-Zerka with which the Crocodile river of Pliny has commonly and rightly been identified.

2. *Mediaeval Evidence.*—The general character of this is that it is hearsay evidence. But first we may notice a piece of evidence of the same nature as that of Strabo and Pliny. The Persian traveller Nasir-i-Khusrau relates: Leaving Haifa (in the year A.D. 1047) we proceeded on to a village called Kanísah, and beyond this the road leaves the seashore and enters the hills, going eastward through a stony desert place, which is known under the name of the Wādī Tamâshih (*i.e.*, wadi of Crocodiles). After passing two leagues, however, the road turns back, and goes once more along the seabeach, and in these parts I saw great quantities of bones of marine monsters, set in the earth and clay, and become, so to speak,

¹ Caesarea first came into Jewish possession under Alexander Jannæus.

² Strabo, XVI, 27 (c. 758): Μετὰ δὲ τὴν Ἄκην Στράτωνος πύργος . . . μεταξύ δὲ ὅ τε Κάρμηλος τὸ ὄρος καὶ πολιχνίων ὄνόματα, πλεόν ὄουδὲν, Συκαμίνων πόλις, Βουκόλων καὶ Κροκοδείλων πόλις καὶ ἄλλα τοιαῦτα, κ.τ.λ. It is worth remarking that in speaking of the similarly named Egyptian place (*cp.* Herod., II, 14, 8) Strabo more directly asserts the presence of crocodiles: so XVII, 37 (c. 811), Ἄρσινῶη-Κροκοδείλων δὲ πόλις ἐκαλεῖτο πρότερον σφόδρα γὰρ ἐν τῷ νομῷ τούτῳ τιμῶσι τὸν κροκοδείνον, *cp.* XVII, 47 (c. 817).

petrified by the action of the waves that beat over them (cited by Guy le Strange in *Palestine under the Moslems*, 477; who refers to Mukaddasi's statement that Al Kanisah is a day's march from Acre and also from Caesarea, *i.e.*, is midway between them). There are here two points of interest: firstly, crocodiles are still or again affecting the nomenclature of this region; it is quite improbable that the Arabic name is a mere translation of the *Greek*; but rather Arabic and Greek names alike must be explained by something intimately and lastingly connected with the region. And the second point is this: whereas the Persian traveller records having seen fossil monsters, he says nothing of having seen living monsters, from which we may somewhat safely infer that, like most travellers after him, he himself neither saw nor thought he saw crocodiles.

The following¹ will sufficiently illustrate the type of information to be obtained from mediaeval travellers from the West.

Fetellus² (twelfth century) writes: "In the river of Caesarea are crocodiles, horrible serpents. The mouth of the crocodile is distinguished from all mouths in this respect, that its upper jaw is movable, while its lower jaw is fixed. The crocodile has no lower exit. The crocodile, having eaten its food, seeks its wonted paths on the river bank, where, raised on its arms, its neck extended and its mouth open, as if to incorporate the breeze, it falls asleep. When it is fast asleep worms come to it, etc."

The author of the "City of Jerusalem"³ (c. 1220) writes: "Caesarea . . in which marsh are many cocatrices, which a lord of Caesarea put there having had them brought from Egypt."

In the "Itinerary of Richard" (IV, 14) occurs the statement that the river near Caesarea is "called the river of Crocodiles, because the crocodiles once devoured two soldiers while bathing therein."

Jacques de Vitry (thirteenth century) observes, "In fluvio autem Nilo plus quam alio inveniuntur crocodili . . in flumine autem Caesareae Palestinae similiter habitant": and Burchardt⁴ (c. 1283), "Caesarea . . is bounded on the west by the Mediterranean Sea, and on the east by a deep freshwater marsh, wherein is a multitude

¹ Cp. the careful discussion in Tobler's *Dritte Wanderung nach Palästina* (1859), pp. 375 ff., where further mediaeval evidence is cited or alluded to. See also *Rev. Bib.*, 1914, p. 564.

² *Palestine Pilgrims' Text Society*, Vol. V, p. 47.

³ *Palestine Pilgrim's Text Society*, Vol. VI, p. 32.

⁴ *Palestine Pilgrim's Text Society*, Vol. XII, p. 94.

of crocodiles"; the latter statement with little variation appears a century and a half later in John Palmer: "Caesarea . . . towards the east it has a wide and deep lake of sweet water, wherein are many crocodiles."

None of these writers assert, or even imply, that they had seen crocodiles in the neighbourhood of Caesarea; for even Fetellus' description of the crocodile which might suggest such a conclusion is too probably derived not from his observation of crocodiles in Palestine, but from long current description based on the more conspicuous crocodiles of the Nile. But the records prove clearly enough how regularly and persistently travellers who passed through Caesarea must have heard of the crocodiles in the water two or three miles north of the town, and that legends of the origin of these Palestinian crocodiles and of the name of the crocodile river were then current.

3. *Modern Evidence.*—Much of the modern evidence is also second-hand, but some of it is evidence reported by critical and suspicious enquirers. Of this type of evidence one or two examples will suffice. R. Pococke, in his *Description of the East*, II, Part I, p. 58, reports: "We afterwards passed the river Zerka, about three miles north of Caesarea; this, I suppose, is the river Crocodilon of Pliny. . . When I returned to Acre, they told me that there were crocodiles in the river Zerka, which I should not have believed if it had not been confirmed by very good authorities, and that some of them had been brought to Acre, which I found attested by all the Europeans there. . . They say the crocodiles are small, not exceeding five or six feet in length; but, however, that they have taken some young cattle that were standing in the river: so that it is probable a colony from some city of Egypt that worshipped the crocodile, came and settled there, and brought their deities along with them." The Swedish naturalist, Seetzen (*Reisen* II, p. 73 f.), at the beginning of last century, obtained similar information in Acre, and heard the old story of a couple of crocodiles having formerly been brought from Egypt; he was also informed by a sailor of Haifa of the finding of a crocodile of the Nahr ez-Zerka, measuring twenty-one feet.¹ Guérin, in his *Description de la Palestine: Samarie*, II, p. 317, records that on four occasions in the years 1854, 1863 and 1870, he crossed the Nahr ez-Zerka, and was

¹ Thomson, *Land and the Book* (1860, pp. 497 f.), reports information given to him of one measuring eighteen spans.

assured on each occasion, by different guides, of the existence of crocodiles, and of the caution necessary in bathing. The story of the Egyptian origin of the Palestinian crocodiles, as reported by him, speaks of two couples imported from Egypt, one placed in the Zerka, the other in a river to the south of Caesarea. More than one writer¹ reports the claim of the millers on the Zerka to have seen crocodiles in the river.

We may pass now to writers who claim themselves to have seen crocodiles dead or alive in Palestine. The only such claims, so far as I am aware, to have seen a living crocodile in a Palestinian stream are Macgregor's² and Schumacher's.³ What Macgregor actually claims is to have seen momentarily—in the Kishon, not in the Zerka—the snout of a crocodile just behind him and close to his paddle as he sat lunching in his canoe. But, as his narrative shows, (1) he had been recently discussing the existence of crocodiles in Palestine, and hearing accounts of them; ⁴ (2) he was not, himself, so certain of what he had seen as to refrain from hunting about—though in vain—to catch further sight of the animal in order to confirm his impression; all that he subsequently claims to have seen were the tracks of the animals on the sandy beach of the river. Some⁵ even of those who are quite convinced of the existence of crocodiles in the Zerka regard Macgregor's claim as unsubstantiated, and doubt or hesitatingly admit that the Kishon is a habitat of the animals.

Schumacher also gained only a momentary glimpse of a crocodile, and this in the course of a week's expedition undertaken with the direct aim of observing the animal. I cite the more significant sentences of his account, italicising his own claim: "With the object of hunting up one of those famous crocodiles which are said to be found in the swamps of the Nahr ez-Zerka . . . a specimen of which was killed by the German colonists in the Spring of 1878, and invited by the natives of the district to destroy these enemies, who

¹ Thomson, *loc. cit.*; see also *Survey of Western Palestine*, Memoir II, p. 3, "The crocodile is still found here according to Abu Nûr, the owner of the mill on the river."

² *Rob Roy on the Jordan*, pp. 443-452.

³ *The Excursion to the Crocodile River: P.E.F. Quarterly Statement*, 1887, pp. 78-85.

⁴ *Op. cit.*, pp. 432 f.

⁵ C. R. Conder, *Palestine* (1887),* p. 70; *Tent Work in Palestine*, 1889, p. 105. Cp. H. B. Tristram, *Fauna and Flora of Palestine*, p. 155.

annually look for a prey out of their flocks and herds, I gathered a few friends of the colony and encamped for a week near the marshes of the said river. After enquiring about the customary haunt of the crocodiles—a question which was warmly discussed among the members of the Ghawarni tribe of the swamps—I chose eight out of the best hunters of them, and . . . we began to make our way into the swamps . . . We finally arrived at a small lake of about 150 by 80 yards of clear, good water, the shores overgrown by high jungles of cane, the so-called Birket Timsâh, or ‘Crocodile Pool.’ This Birket was pointed out to be the regular hiding-place, of the beasts, and, in fact, we remarked certain flat pieces of ground on the shore on which the cane was trodden down, with traces of such animals. ‘Here they rest and expose themselves to the sun-beams about noontime,’ our guides exclaimed; but although we waited and watched in the jungle for hours, we could not discover any such animals . . . Half a goat was now fastened to a strong hook, and with an iron chain fastened to the shore, and this bait thrown into the pool; next morning, when we returned again the bait was gone, but nothing caught. *At our second arrival at the pool a crocodile was seen for a moment near the shore, but disappeared immediately, and never was discovered again . . .* We proceeded to several pools, crawling on our hands and feet in the mud below the tamarisk jungles in order to discover a crocodile. The next morning we explored in the same way the marshy region situate between Khurbet Kubbâra and the Tahîmet esh-Sheikh . . . but also these researches were resultless . . . from the Tahînet Abu Nûr, a mill built on the Nahr ez-Zerka, [we] followed the course of the river down to its mouth nearly . . . without result; all we came across were ditches, swamps, and jungles of tamarisks. I therefore hesitate to believe, as generally said, that these creatures are numerous in the marshes of the Zerka; and although their existence cannot be denied, their number must have been reduced to a couple or so.”

The value of Schumacher’s narrative consists, perhaps, quite as much in its description of the rough and difficult country¹ bordering the Zerka and the special haunts, as the native Arabs describe them, of the crocodiles as in his claim to have seen a single specimen for a moment; for, like Macgregor’s, the claim, though made in all good faith, may rest on misobservation; it is, indeed, much vaguer than

¹ Cp. *P.E.F. Survey of Western Palestine*, Memoir II, pp. 2 f.

Macgregor's, not telling us, for example, how much of the animal was seen.

Of dead crocodiles reported from Palestine it will suffice to refer to two. (1) Tristram¹ after speaking of the crocodiles in the Zerka, and of having seen "footprints in the mud, near the head-marshes not far from Samaria, which left not the smallest doubt that a crocodile of large size had been there very shortly before," continues: "the promise of a reward produced its effects, and very soon after a fine specimen was brought by my friends to Nazareth in a state of such decay that only the bones and the head could be preserved. It measured 11 feet 6 inches in length, and the skull, which is before me as I write, 19.5 inches long." (2) In the *P.E.F. Quarterly Statement*, 1893, it is recorded (p. 183): "Dr. Chaplin writes from Jaffa that he has been shown there the skin of a crocodile said to have been recently killed at a place called Mastankia el-Timsah, the pool of the crocodile, on the Nahr ez-Zerka. The fellahin ate the flesh and preserved only the skin without the head or feet. The animal seems to have been 8 or 9 feet long. The skin is in the possession of Mr. Alexander Howard, the well-known tourist contractor, who speaks of presenting it to the Museum of the Fund. Some crocodile eggs have also been found in the same locality." The skin duly reached London (*ib.*, p. 260), and is still in the Museum; the length up to the point at which the artificial head, with which it is now provided, begins is 6 feet 11 inches.

The nature of the evidence available for determining whether or when crocodiles have existed in Palestine has now been sufficiently indicated; a more exhaustive presentation of the evidence is hardly required. It is certainly remarkable that in spite of the efforts during the past century or two of several European naturalists or critical observers to obtain a sight of the crocodile alive in the Nahr ez-Zerka, so little success has ever been claimed—a momentary glance by one observer of a crocodile in the Zerka, a momentary glance by another of a crocodile in the Kishon. If a conclusion had to be drawn from this alone, it could not be decisive; but it is a different matter when account is taken, as it should be, of all the lines of evidence together. The significance of the ancient names might be explained away; the second-hand evidence of mediaeval travellers, if it stood alone, might be explained as due to an uncritical fantasy playing on the too suggestive name of the stream;

¹ *Fauna and Flora of Palestine*, p. 155.

the belief of two modern travellers that they had obtained a momentary sight of a crocodile and the belief of these and others that they had discovered foot-prints of crocodiles on the sandy beach or in the marshy brakes might have been delusive; and the eggs of crocodiles reported by several witnesses might possibly have been imported (though for what reason?); yet even these four suppositions become much less probable when they must all be made than if only one or even two of them were required. And the difficulty of avoiding the conclusion that crocodiles have inhabited at least one stream of Palestine becomes practically impossible, when, in addition to the necessity for all four suppositions, the evidence from crocodile carcasses in Palestine has to be met. For it is not a question merely of skins, but of skin and flesh;¹ if the crocodile obtained for Dr. Tristram came not from Palestine, it must have come from far up the Nile—some weeks' journey away. Neither the reward offered, nor the time allowed is likely to have been such as to render this alternative a possible one.

But if crocodiles have existed within recent times, there remains no reason to reject the evidence, second-hand though it be, of mediaeval travellers that crocodiles inhabited the Zerka in their time, though we need not, with the main fact, accept the legends that gathered around it. Again, it is more reasonable to adopt the most natural explanation of the ancient name of the Zerka, and to trace back the existence of crocodiles in it to some indefinite period before Pliny and Strabo. They were there in the time of some at least, and, probably enough, in the times of all the Biblical writers, though it is very doubtful whether any of those writers ever alluded to them; and this is not strange, for few, if any, of those writers would have been familiar with the streams that those crocodiles frequented. It is an interesting question whether the creatures have at last become extinct—a question that may prove nearly as difficult to answer with certainty as the question whether they ever existed—and, for the same reason, the inaccessibility of the Zerka marshes. In an interesting article in *The Spectator* (Feb., 1920, pp. 205 f.), Mr. Edward J. Thompson, the most recent investigator of the Palestine crocodile question on the spot, reports that: "during 1918, members of the Egyptian Expeditionary Force were

¹ This is true, at least, of Dr. Tristram's specimen, as is sufficiently clear from his own statements; and these Dr. Masterman, to the house of whose father-in-law the carcass was brought, confirms.

amused by the appearance from week to week, in the *Palestine News*, the organ of the Force, of an advertisement offering 'any price within reason' for a pair of Palestine crocodiles, alive and in good condition." Mr. Thompson, firmly convinced of the existence of crocodiles down to recent times, is induced to conclude that they are now extinct. "In May of last year," he tells us, "I managed to get a day on the Zerka and at Caesarea . . . From the Arabs I got the assurance that the crocodiles were still there, but nearer the sea. No one had seen them, but everyone had heard of them, and some knew people who had seen them. This was very unsatisfactory, and I think the Palestine crocodile is at last extinct." Possibly: in so far as he could obtain only second-hand information, Mr. Thompson was, however, only sharing the fortune of many travellers who had preceded him. It is, as I have already pointed out, the curious feature of this question that direct and first-hand evidence through two thousand years is so slight. The fresh facts are the unavailing offer of a reward, and the fact that Mr. Thompson's Arab informants do not claim themselves to have seen the creatures; in this differing, for example, from the informants of Seetzen, who reports as apparently no uncommon occurrence that crocodiles were brought to Acre—a report which, in another respect, viz., the small size it attributes to these creatures, is seen to be far from exaggeration when compared with the actual lengths of the crocodiles obtained for Dr. Tristram and the *P.E.F.* Yet Mr. Thompson prudently recalls that it is proverbially hard to prove a universal negative, and particularly hard when the district concerned is so little visited and carefully explored.

As to the distribution of the crocodile in Palestine, this may be said: the evidence for its existence in the Nahr ez-Zerka is by far the amplest and the strongest. The other two streams, for which the claim that they contain crocodiles has commonly¹ been made, are the Nahr el-Aujeh further south—probably the southern river intended in the legend reported by Guérin—and the Kishon. The more southern of these would seem to be at least as likely a habitat as the river Zerka for the crocodile; the actual evidence for its existence in the Kishon is a little ampler; in addition to Macgregor's claim already reported, Mr. Thompson reports a claim of Mr. Christie to have seen a crocodile there in 1894. But these

¹ Macgregor, *Rob Roy on the Jordan*, pp. 451 f., reports rumours of crocodiles even in the Jordan.

more detailed questions cannot claim to have received so decisive an answer as the general question: Have crocodiles existed in Palestine?

It is possible that with more settled conditions and increasing facilities for the investigation of Palestine questions, we may yet obtain evidence that crocodiles still exist, and at the same time add to the exceedingly meagre store of first-hand evidence of those who have seen them.

THE RED SEA (*YAM SŪPH*).

BY THE LATE JOSEPH OFFORD, M.R.A.S.

IN a lecture delivered before the "Institut Egyptien," and subsequently published under the title of *The Ten Plagues and the Passage of the Red Sea*, which also forms part of his book *From the Garden of Eden to the Crossing of the Jordan*, Sir William Willcocks used much of the information supplied in popular writings of Egyptologists upon the subject, including those of the late Dr. Brugsch.

From the views of the latter, or perhaps more from his personal knowledge of the Eastern Delta and the Palestine boundary upon the side of Egypt, Sir William has been led to the theory that the route adopted by Moses for the people, after leaving Egypt, was that along the Mediterranean littoral, on the coast road to Gaza, and that the *Yam Sūph* (or "Sea of Weeds," or "Reeds") of the Hebrew story in which Pharaoh's army was engulfed, was the Serbonic Marsh in the neighbourhood of Pelusium.¹ This was the district in which, according to Diodorus, a similar disaster befell a Persian army.

Sir William also, from his special knowledge of the Delta irrigation, past and present, includes in the term *Yam Sūph*, the ancient Pelusiatic or easternmost branch of the Nile.²

It may be pointed out that those Egyptologists who have possessed the profoundest knowledge of the old Egyptian writings,

¹ See *From the Garden of Eden*, p. 62.

² *Op. cit.*, p. 71. In support of the suggestion he there quotes Numb. xxxiii, 9; but verse 10 ("They left the *Yam Sūph* and camped in the Wilderness of Sin") would indicate the sea bordering the Sinai Peninsula.