

THREE FRIENDS IN LEBANON, April, 1802

J. Malcolm Wagstaff



1 The route followed by Hamilton, Leake and Squire in April, 1802. Map produced by the Cartographic Unit, University of Southampton.

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INTRODUCTION

The brig *Mentor* nosed her way northwards, ten days out from Alexandria. On deck three young English gentlemen watched the magnificent mountain panorama slowly unfold on their right. As the sun set behind them, they could see Carmel to the south, terminating 'an extensive range of lofty hills'. Mt. Lebanon to the north was 'a complete mountain of snow'. Next to it they had a hint of the Beka Valley, while in the centre of the landscape was 'the hoary' Anti-Lebanon, rising above the whole. It was the 15 April, 1802. The men were Lieutenant John Squire (1780-1812)*, Captain William Martin Leake (1777-1860) and William Richard Hamilton (1777-1859). All three had been in Egypt following the attack by British and Ottoman forces which defeated the French army there in 1801, and were on their way home.

Hamilton was Lord Elgin's private secretary at the time and had been sent to Egypt to assist in the armistice arrangements. He was responsible, at least in part, for securing the Rosetta Stone, with its important trilingual inscription. Hamilton subsequently joined the British Foreign Office and, like his name-sake, Sir William Hamilton, served for several years as British ambassador at Naples. Squire was an officer in the Royal Engineers. He arrived in Egypt with the British expeditionary force and later had a distinguished military career, serving in South America, the Baltic, the Low Countries and particularly in Portugal and Spain. He died with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel in 1812, shortly after the third siege of Badajoz in which he played a distinguished part. As a member of the British Military Mission to Turkey, Leake had entered Egypt with the Ottoman army. He retained his commission in the Royal Artillery until 1823, when he retired with the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel. He was sent on missions to Greece in 1804-1810 and served with the army of the Swiss Cantons during Napoleon's Hundred

Days, but he really made his name through his research on the topography of ancient Greece. Leake and Hamilton knew each other before circumstances threw them together in Egypt, and travelled up the Nile into Nubia while they were there. They teamed up with Squire in Alexandria, and together the three of them deciphered the inscription on the base of Pompey's Pillar, a conspicuous feature of the Ottoman city. Their objectives in going to Syria together are not clear. Strictly speaking, they were taking a circuitous route home following the Peace of Amiens which had temporarily ended the war with France. Hamilton, though, almost certainly had diplomatic business in Damascus for Lord Elgin, still British ambassador to the Porte. Leake may have been carrying out a military reconnaissance in case renewed hostilities with France again brought British forces to the Levant. Squire, perhaps most innocent of all, may just have accompanied his friends for the trip, though his skills would have been useful to Leake. Their ship, the *Mentor*, was being used by Elgin to ship his collections from Athens to either Malta or Alexandria to be forwarded on a British warship to Britain. This article summarises the travels of the three friends during the nine or ten days which they spent within the boundaries of present-day Lebanon, drawing principally on the journal left by Squire and published by the Rev. Robert Walpole in 1820. Leake's journal, still in manuscript, is laconic in the extreme.

* Squire's transliterations are generally used throughout the article.

The *Mentor* anchored in the bay of Tripoli at 5.30 in the afternoon of 16 April. Hamilton, Leake and Squire sent their names to the Greek

merchant who acted as British consul, and then suffered a night of gales and rain squalls. The weather moderated sufficiently for them to go on shore in the morning, doubtless accompanied by personal servants. They were met on the beach by the consul's secretary and janissary, but they were warned not to have any contact with the local people since the plague had recently broken out and several people had died. The same two men conducted the friends round the town on the 19 April. In the morning they climbed a small hill to the south of Tripoli and gained a view of its site and situation, no doubt assisted by their telescopes. Tripoli, they saw, was situated beneath a rocky height on the inland edge of a triangular plain, the apex of which was a flat promontory towards the sea. They estimated that the town extended for about three-quarters of a mile north to south but was only 300 yards wide. North of the promontory was the anchorage – not very safe, despite some protection from south and south-westerly winds from some small islands. What the friends called the marina, where they had landed, was 'the size of a small town'. Further north still, towards the mouth of the river Kadisha*, they saw six isolated and irregularly spaced towers which they thought were of Saracen construction. They ascended one of them in the afternoon and took some compass bearings. The plain itself was full of mulberry trees, planted with great regularity, but a large quantity of stagnant water could also be seen, suggesting malaria in the summer months. The town had no defensive walls, though it possessed gates; it was merely enclosed by garden walls. Protection was given by a citadel, but it was in a wretched state and mounted few guns. In any case, as the two soldiers readily appreciated, it was commanded by a height only 150 yards away. The recent war between France and the Ottoman Empire had ruined Tripoli's trade, but this had included sponges found along the shore between Tripoli and

Beirut, raw silk, and locally-manufactured silk handkerchiefs for turbans and soap.

After a few more days in Tripoli the friends and their entourage set out on a round trip planned to take them to Balbec, Damascus, Aleppo and Scandaroon (Iskenderun) where they would be picked up by the *Mentor*. Their first foray on 21 April was a failure. They had been told that the direct route, via the Cedars, was blocked by snow and that it would be better to take a northerly route round the end of Mt. Lebanon. The countryside proved extremely dull and uninteresting, while they heard unfavourable reports of Maronite hospitality. They returned to Tripoli and camped by the Kadisha, setting out southwards in the morning.

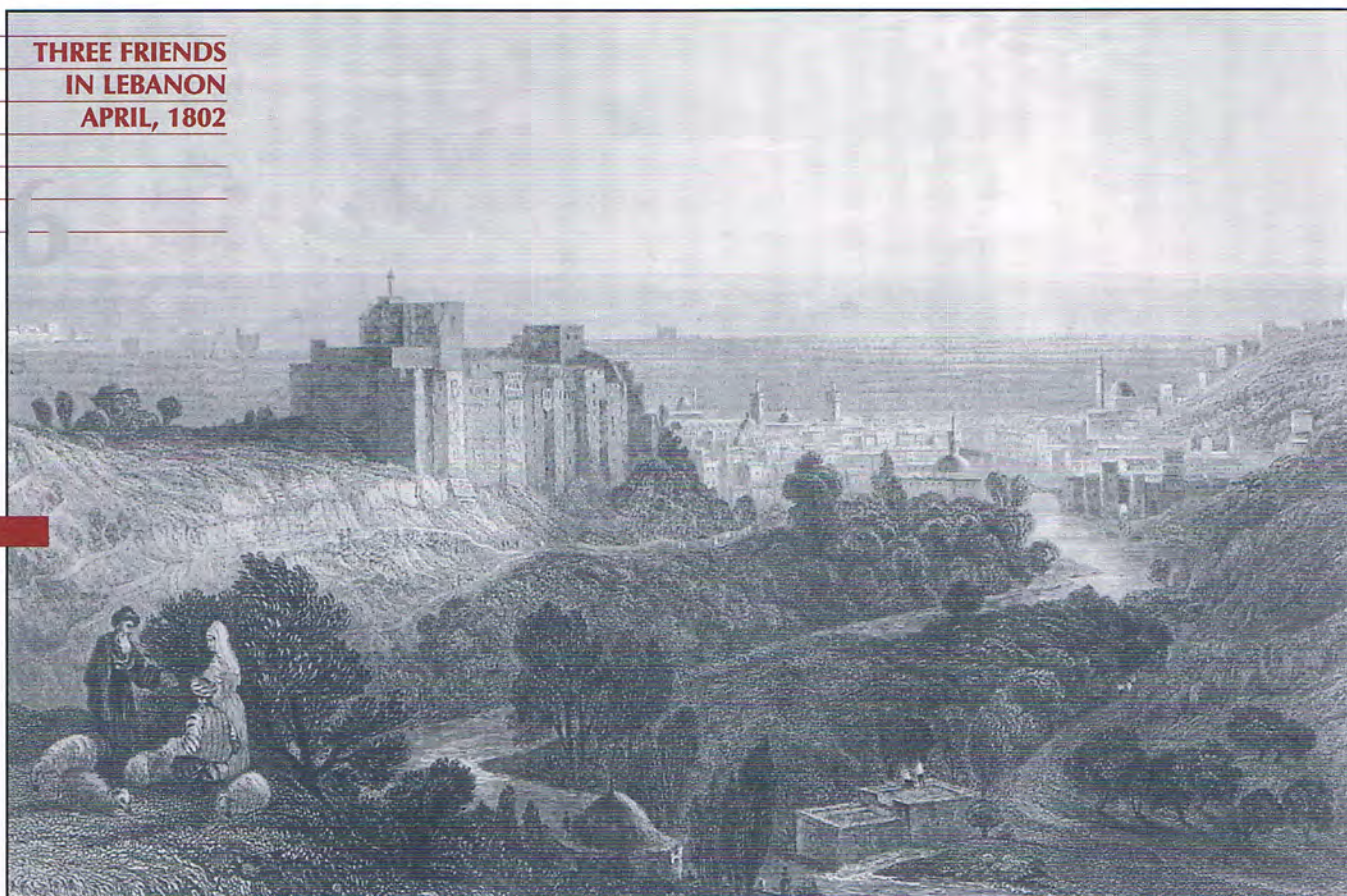
The party headed for Baitroun, across the 'roots' of Mt. Lebanon. The countryside was beautiful and romantic. Numerous small villages dotted the mountain sides; cultivation terraces carried cereals, vines, olives and mulberries. The people – Maronites – were unarmed (something the friends thought unusual in Ottoman domains) and had an air of liberty and independence. At Baitroun, then 'a small village on the sea', they slept overnight in 'a sort of public coffee-room, near the sea'. The next day they travelled only as far as Dgebail, another small village (supposedly the site of ancient Byblus, they noted), defended by walls and a tower. They were hospitably welcomed by Saad-el-din, the 20/21 year old son of the Druze Emir, Yousuf, and persuaded to spend the rest of the day with him.

Accompanied by an armed escort provided by their hosts, the friends rode inland from Dgebail on 24 April. The mountains were very well wooded, though clearings of cultivated terraces could also be seen. The road was rugged, narrow and stony. Beyond Kafr-Baal, a village of four or five houses, the route took them above the Waadi-el-Amid. Below them they could see the river and the villages of Duziyere and Hameige. Clouds passed beneath the snow-covered mountain summits. While spring had come to the coast, winter still ruled here. As they climbed they felt closed in by

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the 'snow-topped mountains, wild and horrid in the extreme'. The road became more difficult from the deep snow. They had to dismount. The horses slipped and fell. But a hundred foot high waterfall of five cascades on the Nahr-Mehaal provided spectacular compensation for the hardships. Leake noted large oak trees. Eventually, they reached Alcoura, a Maronite village of 100 square, flat-roofed houses at the foot of a lofty precipice.

The following morning, the foreigners attended the liturgy in the village church, noting, they thought, its similarity to the Latin mass*. Then they set out again, climbing through wild and uncultivated scenery, interspersed occasionally by large junipers, along a road partly over hardened snow and partly over gravel. Just after mid-day they could see the Anti-Lebanon range to the east, as well as the highest crest of Mt. Lebanon (3083 m) to the north and the Beka valley between. They crossed a saddle in the Lebanon range at around 1900 m. A steep road took them down the other side. The edge of the Beka plain was reached in two hours at the ruined village of Sardac. They

rode over the badly cultivated valley, seeing scarcely any trees, and soon came in sight of the ruins of the Temple of the Sun at Balbec (Baalbek). Camp was made just to the south of it at sunset.

After breakfast on 26 April, the three friends made a courtesy call on the Mitwali Governor, the Emir Djuhar. He received them well and was presented with a gift of Lyons silk. They might go anywhere they liked, the Governor declared, and stay in Balbec for as long as they pleased. After the usual pleasantries of pipes and coffee, they set out for the Temple of the Sun, accompanied by one of the Governor's servants and 'a large troublesome suite of inhabitants'. Despite the difficulties presented by the crowd, the friends enjoyed their visit and went on to explore the other ruins of ancient Heliopolis. The defensive wall survived in places, built from ancient blocks including inscriptions and sections of frieze. They noted a mosque and a church, but the modern settlement seemed to be unproductive and to have no trade whatsoever. In the afternoon they visited the Governor's brother,

the Emir Suldan, who had the reputation of being a great hunter and kept a falcon in his apartment.

The Governor remarked to the friends' travelling companion, Monsieur Laurella, on the next day that they had been shown more 'indulgence' than other Franks who had visited Balbec. He had learnt that they had eight watches between them and desired to be given one. The foreigners agonised about what to do until one of them, unnamed, who had the most valuable watch, volunteered to surrender it. The Governor did not think much of it and eventually asked for Squire's telescope. Only when it was given up were they able to escape from Balbec. They travelled south across the empty plain, reaching the Mitwali village of Kribe four hours later and camped by a well.

Early in the morning of 28 April the party set out in fine weather to cross the high Jabal Chmiss to the village of Maraboun. Here they turned south and rode into what is now Syria through a valley covered with mulberries and vineyards where the vines were carefully trained en *espalier*. From Serghay they went on to Zebdany, in the north-west corner of a beautifully cultivated plain where there were many vineyards, mulberries and a variety of fruit trees in blossom. In a picturesque spot nearby they saw a fine waterfall, about 60 feet high

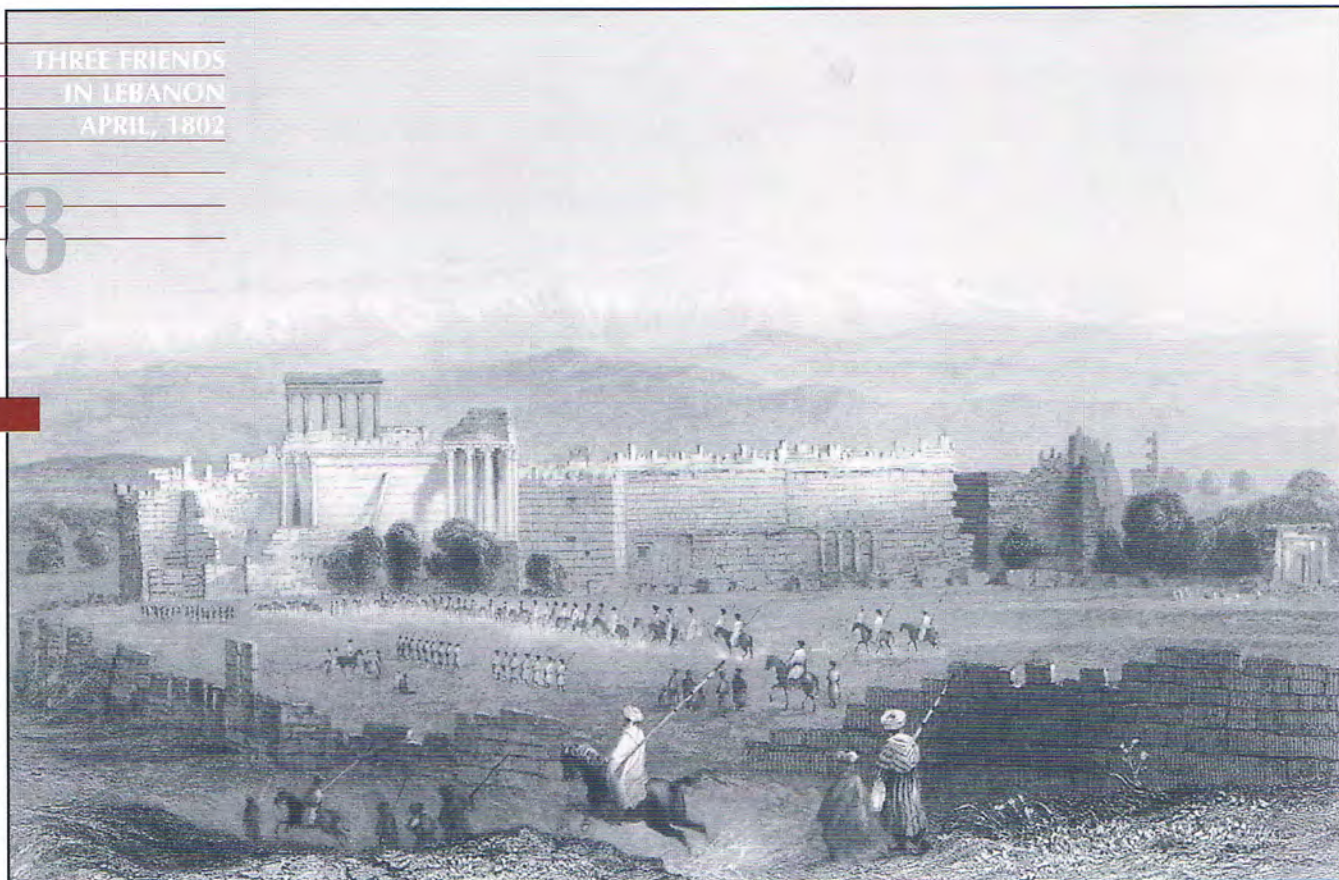
and divided into three cascades, with lofty poplar trees and a variety of shrubs around. The river was almost concealed by trees. 'These, intermixed with corn fields, and the brown lofty mountains above, afford some of the most beautiful views that can be conceived', wrote Squire in his journal. They passed Suke and Kafr-Senaiah, beautifully situated as Leake noted, and then traversed low mountains in a north-easterly direction to the Barada valley near Todaidy. Some distance on, they crossed the river by a bridge and stopped for the night. All along its banks were Lombardy poplars. An early start saw the friends on the way to Damascus, passing Tseieh and Dommer before climbing Jabal Qassioun above the city. As they came down the slope on the eastern side 'the city itself burst upon our view, presenting the most striking scene that can be conceived: an extensive plain, for the most part well covered with trees, and interspersed with numerous villages, and, immediately before us, the large city of Damascus, whose minarets, intermixed with trees, and contrasted with the terraced roofs of the houses, extending nearly three miles in length, produce an effect at once singular and picturesque'. Two and a half hours later they halted before the Governor's palace in the city. They stayed for three days before making their way back to the coast, as planned, through Homs, Hama and Aleppo, and reached Iskenderun on the evening of 8 June.

* Hamilton and Squire were the sons of Anglican clergymen

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CONCLUSION

Hamilton, Leake and Squire cannot be said to have contributed much to the western understanding of Lebanon in the early nineteenth century or to the study of its antiquities, despite their background and interests. They were fairly typical visitors for the time – intelligent, observant and delighted by the picturesque. Squire's journal reflects these qualities. It also provides modern scholars with a useful account of some particular parts of Lebanon and Syria which happened to lie on their route and supplies a number of anecdotes about local elites. Leake's journal is disappointing, by contrast; he had yet to develop the techniques of careful observations, precisely located in time and space, for which he is justly famous. However, he was able to draw on his first-hand experience of Lebanon and Syria years later when, as the Secretary of the African Association, he was faced with editing the papers left by Jean-Louis Burckhardt.

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3 General view of Baalbek and Anti-Libanus 1837 from M. Bartlett, W. Purser *et al.*, with descriptions of the plates by John Carne, London. Photo courtesy of N. Shehadi.

4 Souk Barrada pass near Zebdani, 1846 from M. Bartlett, W. Purser *et al.*, with descriptions of the plates by John Carne, London. Photo courtesy of N. Shehadi.