

Dioskourides: Three Rolls

For more than a century and a half, discussions about the great Library of Alexandria have invoked a curious piece of granite found in the Ptolemaic capital, sometimes claiming it for the Library, more often rejecting it—but almost without exception identifying it as a storage receptacle for three book rolls. The block in question bears the inscription Διοσκουρίδης γ τόμοι. In what follows I shall leave aside the question, probably insoluble, of the identity of the Dioskourides in question. My interest, rather, will focus on the nature of the artifact. Because of the many confusions in the history of discussion of the stone, I begin with consideration of that historiography.

The history of the publication and discussion of this granite block and its inscription is complicated and unhappily instructive. Its essential characteristics and text were recorded by Sir (Anthony) Charles Harris,⁽¹⁾ and by him communicated by letter to Samuel Birch.⁽²⁾ Birch in turn wrote to the great French archaeologist and epigraphist J-A. Letronne on 28 December [1847; Letronne died in 1848], and he published the information that Birch sent him, with some comments of his own, in the *Revue archéologique* 4 (1847-48) 757-759. Letronne recorded clearly the essential fact that the stone had been found in the land belonging to the house of the Austrian consul Anton von Laurin. He gave the dimensions as

(1) W. Dawson, E. Uphill, M. Bierbrier, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, 3rd ed. (London 1995) 191. Harris (1790-1869) was an English merchant in Alexandria.

(2) Dawson-Uphill-Bierbrier 45-46. Birch (1813-1885) was at this time Assistant Keeper in the Department of Antiquities of the British Museum.

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communicated to him (but translating from the quoted inches into metric dimensions); according to this rendering, the stone was 43.8 x 39.4 x 39.4 cm., and in its top was cut out a space 25.4 x 20.3 x 7.6 cm. Letronne allowed the possibility that it was indeed a container for books, but his lack of enthusiasm for the idea is manifested in a sharp rejection of the notion that it could have belonged to the Alexandrian Library. His reason was the bulk and weight of the stone, which he estimated at 173 kg.⁽³⁾ "Sur le premier point, il me paraît assez difficile de croire qu'on eût adopté pour une bibliothèque publique, une disposition si incommode, si dispendieuse, et qui devait tenir tant de place. Je l'admettrais plus volontiers pour une bibliothèque particulière. On conçoit, en effet, que les trois rouleaux renfermés dans leur capse en granit, protégées par un couvercle, il devenait fort difficile de les emporter avec le bloc qui les renfermait; on n'enlève pas commodément un bloc de granit qui, d'après ses dimensions, devait peser au moins cent soixante-treize kilogrammes" (758). Subsequent discussions have had little of substance to add to these remarks.

Unfortunately, the earliest subsequent discussions did not know of Letronne's remarks. Mahmoud el-Falaki in 1872, relying on local knowledge and oral testimony, described the stone as "une sorte d'armoire en pierre qui aurait été trouvée dans le jardin de la maison du consulat général de Prusse," and from this he concluded that it helped to establish the location of the Library. He cited H. Brugsch (in conversation) in favor of his view.⁽⁴⁾ This opinion of Falaki was cited by G. Botti in 1898, along with what purports to

(3) He does not give the basis of his computation, but his figure equates to 2.7 grams/cubic cm of granite, which is near the mean of the range of 2.5 to 2.8 variously cited. The figure is thus correct for the dimensions that Letronne believed the stone had.

(4) *Mémoire sur l'antique Alexandrie* (Copenhagen 1872) 53 (non vidi).

be a direct quotation of the notebook kept by Harris, in which for the first time a drawing of the object was published, along with the dimensions (omitting, by carelessness, the figure for breadth quoted by Letronne).⁽⁵⁾ Harris recorded that the block was “dug upon the ground of Mons. De Laurin at Alexandria 1847.” Botti further quotes a letter of G. Goussio, then president of the archaeological society in Alexandria, who explained the location of the house of von Laurin and that it was in fact the same as the Prussian consulate. But Botti takes no position himself in this place on the nature of the stone. Nor does he indicate any knowledge of Letronne’s earlier discussion. He thus represents the combination of an independent witness to Harris’s observation with the tradition represented by Falaki. Like all of his predecessors, he says nothing about the fate of the stone itself. Later the same year, realizing that he had been unclear on a couple of points, Botti wrote a short article making it clear that it was the land, not the house, of von Laurin that had been the source of the stone, and noting that he had no idea of the present location of the block.⁽⁶⁾

The Botti line of descent has one further offspring, uncontaminated by knowledge of Letronne’s publication. This is an article on the Alexandrian Library published by Admiral Sir Richard Massie Blomfield in 1904.⁽⁷⁾ Blomfield follows Botti in most respects, but he is unclear on the subject of the height of the

(5) G. Botti, *Plan de la ville d’Alexandrie à l’époque ptolémaïque* (Alexandria 1898) 64-66.

(6) *BSAAlex* 1 (1898) 51-53.

(7) “The Sites of the Ptolemaic Museum and Library, *BSAAlex* 6 (1904) 27-37. R. Massie Blomfield (1835-1921), made KCMG in 1904, retired in 1908 as the Director-General of Ports and Lighthouses for the Egyptian government after an Alexandrian career that began in 1879 as Comptroller of the port. See *Who Was Who 1916-1928* (London 1929) 100-101 and for more detail (but without documentation)

<http://www.fitzwalter.com/afh/Massie/massiehist3.htm>.

stone, treating Botti's figure for that (quoted from Harris) as if it were the breadth—correctly, as it happens. As he gives no drawing, it is not possible to discern his view of the height visually. He concludes that the stone was indeed a repository for book-rolls, but he firmly rejects the idea that it belonged to the great library.

It was Blomfield's article, it seems, that led to the unification of the two bibliographic traditions, for it somehow provoked misleading newspaper articles in both Egypt and Germany claiming that Evaristo Breccia had found a block from the Alexandrian Library. The article in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* (17.i.1907) led V. Gardthausen to point out that the block in question had already been described by Letronne sixty years before.⁽⁸⁾ Gardthausen concluded, "Es ist also kein Büchergestell, sondern eine monumentale capsä, die vielleicht zu einem größeren Denkmal, aber nicht zur alexandrinischen Bibliothek gehört hat." Gardthausen's remarks were in turn picked up by A. J. Reinach in the "Bulletin épigraphique" for 1908.⁽⁹⁾ Reinach took no position of his own in this brief notice, but both he and Gardthausen took it for granted that the newspaper accounts represented accurately claims by Breccia.

This was not the case. Breccia replied with some exasperation, "io non so come sia sorta la notizia di questo ritrovamento che fece il giro dei giornali d'Europa e d'America, ma so che purtroppo la pietra in questione non è stata ritrovata e che io non ho avuto mai occasione di occuparmene."⁽¹⁰⁾ Breccia suggests that those responsible had read Blomfield's article and "n'a pas pris la peine ni de lire l'article de l'amiral Blomfield tout entier ni de

(8) *BPhW* 27 (1907) 352.

(9) *REG* 21 (1908) 209.

(10) *BSAAlex* 10 (1908) 250-252 at 250. He goes on to cite el-Falaki and Blomfield.

voir par qui était signée la dite publication” (this from a letter he sent to one of the newspapers). He reiterates that the stone had disappeared since its discovery in 1847 and that he did not know its whereabouts. What he thought about the stone’s purpose is not clear, but he appears to have found Blomfield’s article persuasive.

Reinach then tried to make amends for his too-hasty note by writing a long article on the subject, published the next year.⁽¹¹⁾ This article remains the best general discussion of the stone. Reinach accepted the idea that the stone could have served as a book storage device, but only for a very valuable and rare book; he rejected entirely the notion that the block came from the Alexandrian Library. He had, like his predecessors, no personal acquaintance with the stone, but he saw the original of Harris’s notebook and reproduced it in extenso, revealing that Botti had omitted the words “Width and” before “depth” in giving the dimensions, and thus indicating that these two dimensions were identical. (In this respect his information agrees with Birch’s letter to Letronne.) Reinach also makes the valuable observation that other objects from von Laurin’s collection of antiquities had made their way to the imperial collection in Vienna, but he stressed that the granite block had not been found. After reproducing Harris’s sketch at the start, he produced his own, taking Harris’s dimensions as his base. This last sketch shows the inscription running across the top of a stone as tall as it is deep.

Reinach’s conclusions were adopted in their entirety by Breccia in a book published five years later.⁽¹²⁾ Breccia returned to

(11) *BSAAlex* 11 (1909) 350-370.

(12) *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* (Bergamo 1914) 80, noting that Reinach “a mis en lumière que son importance est minime pour la topographie d’Alexandrie antique.”

the stone in 1921, after discovering a remarkable Latin dedication erected by von Laurin in 1844 to Bogos Youssef Beg of a "RVS IN VRBE PTOLOMAEORVM BIBLIOTHECAE RVDERIBUS IMPOSITVM."⁽¹³⁾ As Breccia comments, it is hard to see to what this could refer except the discovery of the Dioskourides stone. If that is correct, however, it establishes 1844 as a *terminus ante quem* for the discovery. Breccia went on to say, "Sembra certo che la cista non sia passata nel Museo imperiale di Vienna dove sono entrate alcune delle antichità che avevan fatto parte della collezione Laurin. Ad ogni modo ho pregato il mio amico prof. Emanuele Löwy che attualmente dirige l'Archäologisch-Epigraphisches Seminar di Vienna, di voler fare qualche ricerca per eliminare ogni dubbio in proposito."

Six years earlier, however, Adolf Wilhelm had inveighed against just such remarks: "das ... Inschrift Διοσκουρίδης γ' τόμοι noch jüngst als verschollen bezeichnet werden konnten, während beide [referring also to another inscription] seit Jahren in Wien im Lapidarium des Hofmuseums geborgen sind, zeigt, wie wünschenswert eine Veröffentlichung der nun durch Erwerbungen aus Ephesus vermehrten inschriftlichen Denkmäler, zunächst der griechischen, der kaiserlichen Sammlungen wäre."⁽¹⁴⁾ No matter, Wilhelm has never been cited by anyone writing about this stone, as far as I can see, except for the person who at last in 1962 realized Wilhelm's wish for a catalogue, Rudolf Noll.⁽¹⁵⁾ Noll's catalogue gives a brief description, inaccurately giving 1848 as the date of acquisition and citing only Gardthausen and Wilhelm out of

(13) *BSAAlex* 18 (1921) 62-64.

(14) "Neue Beiträge zur griechischen Inschriftenkunde IV." *SitzbWien* 179.6 (1915) 34 = *Akademieschriften zur griechischen Inschriftenkunde* 1 (Leipzig 1974) 208.

(15) *Griechische und Lateinische Inschriften der Wiener Antikensammlung* (Vienna 1962) 47 no. 108.

the literature discussing the stone. He gives the title "Schriftrollenbehälter" to the object and gives the dimensions as 44 x 26 x 40 cm, thus for the first time revealing the fact that the height and breadth of the stone are not the same, as Harris's notebook and all of the literature dependent on it indicated. The "Fundort" is given as "Alexandria, Bibliothek," thus evidently accepting the library as the origin, a view that no one since el-Falaki had espoused.

Wilhelm might have found this disappointing, but he would have been equally dismayed to see that the catalogue's existence did not prevent scholars from continuing to describe the stone as lost. As late as 1995, one scholar could refer to "a mysterious stone box for scrolls, bearing the inscription: Three Volumes of Dioscurides. Unfortunately this important box vanished without proper studies."⁽¹⁶⁾ Nor is Noll's catalogue known to Diana Delia, whose 1992 article, essentially based for this point on Reinach's article of 1909, describes the block as "critical in pinpointing the location of the Museum complex more precisely."⁽¹⁷⁾ She provides a drawing of the stone that gives it the appearance of being only 7.5 cm (3 inches) high in total, so that the hollowed-out portion extends the entire height of the block; as no source is cited for this drawing, it appears to be an original misinterpretation of the information provided by Harris.

(16) M. Rodziewicz, "A Review of the Archaeological Evidence Concerning the Cultural Institutions in Ancient Alexandria," *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995) 317-332 at 319 with n. 11: "This box had been lost before 1848, but its publication seems to be known to Mahmoud El-Falaki." El-Falaki in fact knew of no publication, discussing the object from oral information. "Of Dioscurides" is also incorrect; the name stands in the nominative.

(17) "From Romance to Rhetoric: The Alexandrian Library in Classical and Islamic Traditions," *AHR* 97 (1992) 1449-1467 at 1454. She supposes like Reinach that such a box would have been used for rare books and have been provided with a stone lid.

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But two recent publications have brought some degree of bibliographic unification. Barbara Tkaczow's book on Alexandria (1993) includes "the Dioskorides Block" in its catalogue, giving the inventory number in the Kunsthistorisches Museum (III 86 L), the correct dimensions, and the most essential elements of the bibliography.⁽¹⁸⁾ Dating the block as "generally Ptolemaic," she comments, "The Dioskorides block considered as an element of the furnishings of a library (a receptacle for papyrus rolls) has become one of the fundamental arguments in favor of localizing the famous Library in this place and this region of the city, even though it is actually devoid of context and isolated. Other objects from this area (Objs. 139, 141, 218, 340, 341 and 344) do not support this theory." She does not take a final position on the actual use of the block.

At length the first full epigraphical publication of the block appeared in 2001, in Étienne Bernard's *Inscriptions grecques d'Alexandrie ptolémaïque* (pp. 167-169, no. 65, with Pl. 65). Bernard gives 1847 as the date of discovery, despite listing in his very full bibliography the article in which Breccia showed that it had been found by 1844. For dimensions, he unfortunately quotes from Letronne. Despite knowing that the block is in Vienna (he gives the inventory number as III 86 L), Bernard apparently did not see the original nor obtain a photograph, for he reproduces the drawing from Harris's notebook as his only illustration of the object, without apparently noticing that the proportions in the drawing do not match the quoted dimensions. He describes the object as a "caisson de granit contenant l'ouvrage d'un Dioskouridès" and dates it "époque ptolémaïque?", noting that "On peut hésiter entre l'époque ptolémaïque et l'époque romaine."

(18) *The Topography of Ancient Alexandria (An Archaeological Map)* (Travaux du Centre d'Archéologie Méditerranéenne de l'Académie Polonaise des Sciences 32, Warsaw 1993) 201 no. 38.

Bernand follows Reinach in rejecting the stone as evidence for the location of the Library, and he reports Reinach's arguments for Dioskorides of Anazarbus as the author in question as well as Letronne's rejection of that identification.

I was able to see this elusive stone in the reserve magazine of the Antikensammlung on 10 April 2002, thanks to the courtesy of Dr. Alfred Bernhard-Walcher.⁽¹⁹⁾ (See fig. 1) It is indeed an impressive block of stone, which takes two strong men to carry even a meter or two.⁽²⁰⁾ The dimensions are essentially as stated by Noll, although the rough finish of the stone (especially on the back and right sides) makes precision below the level of a centimeter difficult: 44.5 cm wide (across the inscribed surface), 40 cm deep, and 26.5 cm high. The surface is nowhere polished. The letters of the inscription, by contrast, are unimpressive, not deeply cut nor well made. Irregular in size, they average about 2.5 cm in height. There is a distance of 5 cm from the top of the front face to the top of the letters, and 19 cm below the inscription to the bottom of the block. There are traces of black paint in some of the letters; where it is lacking, the letters are barely readable (first omicron and final iota in TOMOI). Iota is particularly difficult to make out and may have been incised right at the edge. The cut in the top is some 22.5 cm broad, 19.5 cm deep and 7.5 cm high. Looking from above and from the front, the top surface has been left around this cut for a width of 9.5 (top), 10 (left), 12 (right) and 11 (bottom) cm.

What is it? In my view, Letronne already buried sufficiently the notion that it could be a book receptacle from the Alexandrian

(19) I am indebted to Bernhard Palme for helping arrange this access and for his hospitality in Vienna.

(20) Its actual weight should be around 115 kg, but I did not ask to have it weighed.

Library.⁽²¹⁾ Even if the numbers given by some ancient sources for the size of that library are fantastic, as I believe they are,⁽²²⁾ it takes only a moment's reflection to realize that such "boxes" could not have been stacked, and the library would therefore have had to possess an enormous area to hold its rolls. Even a collection of 50,000 volumes, a sort of minimum estimate, would have required 17,000 such stones, or about 7.5 km of single-depth "stacks." The more usual figures given, ten times that, would produce 75 km of stacks. The notion that only "rare" books would have had such treatment seems to me equally unrealistic. Special collections are a modern concept, not an ancient one. The great library will have had many rare books. Indeed, there is an internal contradiction in Reinach's argument on this point. If Dioskorides of Anazarbus (his choice for the Dioskourides of the block) was as popular as he thinks, his book would not have been rare. Even the notion that the stone belongs to the book-storage facilities of a private library demands special pleading. It was a fall-back position when the great library became an untenable theory, and it has nothing to recommend it.

There is another possibility, which I have seen in the literature only in the form of a preemptive rejection: the stone could have been a statue base. The closest proposal to this was Gardthausen's suggestion that it could have been part of a larger

(21) It is perhaps worth pointing out that even if it were, it would not be good evidence, or any evidence at all, for the location of that institution. The stone can certainly have been moved for reuse, and we have no evidence that von Laurin dug to a level deep enough to reach ancient ground levels. Moreover, the Museum is said by Strabo (17.1.8) to have been part of the palaces, which seem certain to have been considerably to the east of von Laurin's property. See most recently F. Goddio et al., *Alexandria: The Submerged Royal Quarters* (London 1998).

(22) See my "Alexandria: Library of Dreams," *ProcAmPhilSoc* 146 (2002) 348-362.

monument. Delia says (1454 n. 19), "A comparison with the statue bases unearthed near the Pergamene temple of Athene Nikephoros (presumably deriving from the library therein) demonstrates that the Alexandrian hollow bin did not serve the same purpose. The Pergamene statue bases are solid (not hollow); some exhibit depressions made by the weight of statue feet on the bases, and others have dowel holes through which statues were affixed. All are inscribed with the name and patronymic or ethnic of the scholar honored, not a name followed by a number of books."

The last argument is not cogent. The inscription of the Dioskourides block is unique; thus parallels or the lack thereof affect hypotheses equally. The entire argument is in any case circular, for it posits what it seeks to prove, namely that the block came from the great Library. Moreover, it is important to remember that the name is in the nominative, not the genitive as one might expect if the inscription gave the title of a work enclosed.⁽²³⁾ The idea of a book container has so captivated the modern imagination that some scholars have transformed the nominative into genitive by mistake.⁽²⁴⁾ But it is a nominative all the same, the right case for the base of a statue or bust. Moreover, the notion that the

(23) See, e.g., E. G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World*, 2nd ed. by P. J. Parsons (BICS Suppl. 46, London 1987) 34 nos. 6-8.

(24) P. M. Fraser, *Ptolemaic Alexandria* (Oxford 1972) II 30-31 n. 77. Fraser describes the idea that the stone could help localize the library as a "fantasy." He criticizes A. Bernand, *Alexandrie la Grande* (Paris 1966) 116 for reviving the idea. In the second edition of this book (Paris 1998) 131-132, A. Bernand starts by still maintaining the idea ("Mais une découverte singulière permet approximativement, dans le quartier que nous venons d'évoquer, de le localiser."), then quotes Letronne to conclude that the nature of the inscription "exclut l'idée qu'il puisse s'agir d'un élément de la Bibliothèque," citing the weight as calculated by Letronne and suggesting the private library-rare book hypothesis. He does not appear to notice the complete self-contradiction.

Dioskourides block is "hollow" is a misconception of Delia's, linked to her visual misrepresentation of the object. In point of fact, the cutting into the top of the block extends only a little beyond the one-quarter mark in height.

There is evidence for statues of learned men in the neighborhood in which the Dioskourides block was found. Delia cites one of them, a statue base for a rhetor named Aelius Demetrios.⁽²⁵⁾ What is perhaps even more striking is the fragmentary statue of a man holding an opened book roll, also from von Laurin's collection and now in Vienna.⁽²⁶⁾ This is dated to the imperial period; its provenance from Alexandria is recorded by Noll as uncertain. It was acquired by von Laurin in 1851. Reinach (354 with n. 2) mentions this statue, which he takes to be funerary in character. Kayser has more broadly suggested a religious context.

To return to the question of whether the cutting in the top of the Dioskourides block could have served for supporting sculpture: It is an error to imagine that all such bases contained identical types of cuttings. The statues from Pergamon to which Delia refers were in two cases clearly made of bronze, and the traces surviving on the stone are for the feet of standing bronze statues.⁽²⁷⁾ But not all statues in antiquity were standing bronzes. Consider, for example, a base published as *I. Pergamon* I 183, which is 40.5 cm wide, 48 cm high, and 38.5 cm deep. In its top is an "Einsatzloch" of 18.5 x 19 x

(25) Now F. Kayser, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines (non funéraires) d'Alexandrie impériale* (IFAO Bibliothèque d'Étude 108, Cairo 1994) 285-290 no. 98.

(26) Noll's catalogue, 47 no. 110; now Kayser, *Recueil* 240-241 no. 78.

(27) See the descriptions in M. Fränkel, *Inschriften von Pergamon I (Altertümer von Pergamon VIII.1; Berlin 1980) nos. 198-199; the tops of nos. 200-202 have probably all lost the original surface.*

6 cm (depth). It is very likely that what was inserted was the base of a bust, for the shape and size of the cutting is very similar to that on two herms in the same volume, *I.Pergamon* I 243 and 244; the latter, a block 50.5 x 50.5 x 24.8 cm, has a cutting in the top of 24 x 24 x 8 (deep) cm. as an Einsatzloch. Dowel holes in the bases of honorific statues can be quite substantial at times, too. One 4 x 12 cm in area is found in *I.Pergamon* III 38, and *I.Pergamon* III 43 has a dowel hole 5 cm deep and 13 cm in diameter.⁽²⁸⁾ All the same, the dimensions of the Alexandrian block suggest that it served to support a bust of Dioskourides.

(28) *Altertümer von Pergamon* VIII.3, *Die Inschriften des Asklepieions*, by C. Habicht (Berlin 1969).

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The stone was found in the ruins of the city of Pergamon, which was the seat of the Pergamene Kingdom. It is a dark, granular stone, possibly a type of basalt or andesite. The stone is rectangular, with a length of 40.5 cm, a width of 38.5 cm, and a height of 18.5 cm. It has a rectangular hole cut through the top, with a length of 34 cm and a width of 8 cm. The stone is inscribed with the name of Dioskourides, a Greek physician who lived in the 2nd century AD. The inscription is in Greek and reads: ΔΙΟΣΚΟΥΡΙΔΕΣ ΤΟΥ ΠΕΡΓΑΜΕΝΟΥ. The stone is now in the collection of the British Museum.

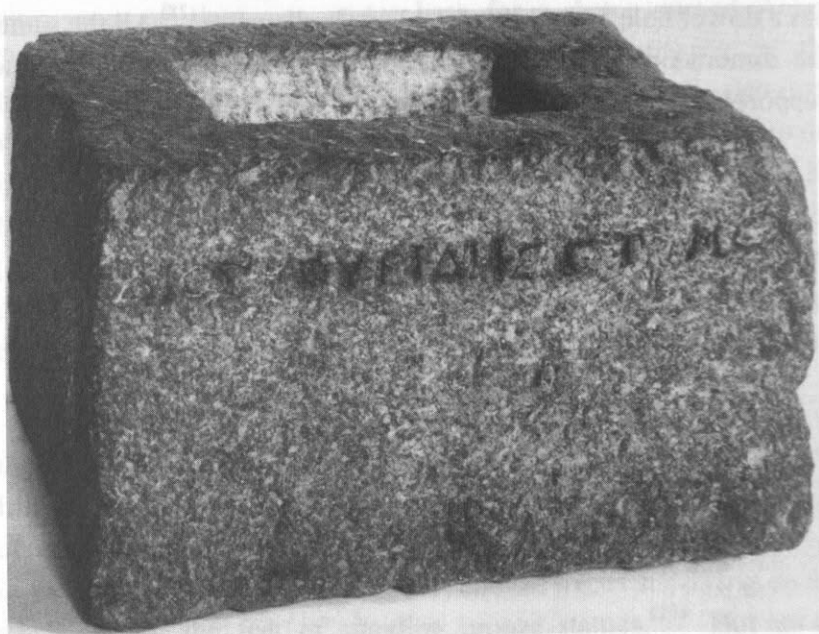


Fig. 1
Stone of Dioskourides

(26) *Rev. F. Kayser, Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines des provinces de l'Asie Mineure (I) (Paris, 1878), p. 102, no. 102.*

(27) *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines des provinces de l'Asie Mineure (II) (Paris, 1878), p. 102, no. 102.*

(28) *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines des provinces de l'Asie Mineure (III) (Paris, 1878), p. 102, no. 102.*

(29) *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines des provinces de l'Asie Mineure (IV) (Paris, 1878), p. 102, no. 102.*

(30) *Recueil des inscriptions grecques et latines des provinces de l'Asie Mineure (V) (Paris, 1878), p. 102, no. 102.*