

What the Mason Left Behind

A mark on a block of stone, cut three thousand years ago by someone in a hurry.

8 min read

Before you read

- **excavation** — a careful dig to uncover things buried in the ground
- **trench** — a long narrow cut made in the ground
- **mason** — a worker who shapes and builds with stone
- **quarry** — a place where stone is cut out of the ground
- **inscription** — words or signs carved into a hard surface
- **deliberate** — done on purpose
- **overseer** — a person whose job is to watch over workers



The trench at first light. Most of the digging day is over by noon.

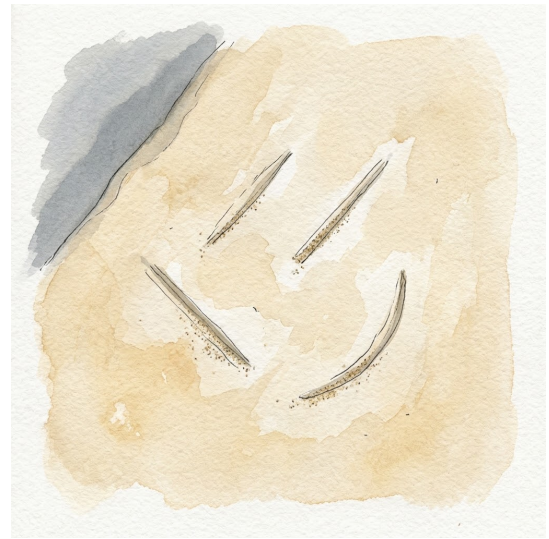
¹ Nadia found it on the fourth morning, and she almost brushed straight past it.

² The block was limestone, about the size of a suitcase, lying face down where it had fallen. She was clearing sand from the edge when her brush caught on something that was not a crack. Three short lines and a curve, cut shallow into the stone.

³ She did what she had been told to do on the first day. She stopped, she did not pull at it, and she called for Dr Mansour.

⁴ Her grandmother had worked this valley too, in the years when the **excavation** teams still carried their water in clay jars. She used to say that the tourists came for the gold and the kings, and that the real work was the rubbish.

⁵ Nadia had not understood that as a child. A broken pot, a fish bone, a sandal strap — none of it looked like history to her then.



The mark itself: quick, shallow, and nothing like temple carving.

⁶ Dr Mansour knelt beside the block for a long time without touching it. “Not an **inscription**,” she said at last. “Nothing holy about it. Look how fast it was cut.” She traced the air above the lines. “A **mason’s** mark. A team cut this block at the **quarry** and signed it so the **overseer** knew whose work it was. Some of these marks are gang names. One gang called themselves The Enduring.”

⁷ Nadia asked whether that meant the block was less important.

⁸ “Less valuable,” Dr Mansour said. “Not less important. A king’s wall tells you what a king wanted said about himself. This tells you there was a team, that somebody was counting, and that a man three thousand years ago wanted credit for his morning’s work. Which do you think is the rarer thing to find?”

⁹ They photographed the block where it lay, measured the **trench** from two fixed points, and wrote the mark into the day book before anything was lifted. That order is **deliberate**. A block moved before it is recorded loses most of what it can tell you, because where a thing was found is often worth more than the thing itself.

¹⁰ By ten o’clock the heat had pushed them back under the canvas. Nadia kept looking out at the block, smaller than it had seemed at dawn, and thought about the man with the chisel. He had been in a hurry. He had not meant it to last. It had outlasted almost everything else on the site.

¹¹ Her grandmother had been right about the rubbish, which was annoying, because she had also said that Nadia would work it out eventually.

Part A Choose the best answer

Circle the letter next to the right answer.

1. Why did Nadia call for Dr Mansour instead of lifting the block?
 - A The block was too heavy for her
 - B She had been trained to stop and report a find
 - C She could not read the marks
 - D Dr Mansour had asked for help with the trench
2. What did Dr Mansour decide the marks were?
 - A A holy inscription
 - B A message left for future diggers
 - C A mason's mark showing whose team cut the block
 - D An accidental set of cracks
3. Why is the block recorded and photographed before it is moved?
 - A The team needs the photographs for the museum
 - B Where something is found tells you as much as the object does
 - C Moving stone in the heat is dangerous
 - D The day book has to be filled in every morning
4. What did Nadia's grandmother mean by saying the real work was the rubbish?
 - A Clearing litter left behind by visitors
 - B Ordinary everyday objects reveal more about ordinary life than treasure does
 - C The excavation produced very little of value
 - D Broken things are easier to carry out of the trench
5. Which statement best describes how Dr Mansour judges the block?
 - A Valuable and important
 - B Valuable but not important
 - C Not valuable, but important
 - D Neither valuable nor important

Part B Write your answer

Answer in two or three sentences.

6. Explain the difference Dr Mansour draws between something being valuable and something being important.

7. The mason cut his mark quickly and did not mean it to last. Why does the passage end by pointing that out?

8. Nadia says her grandmother was right, “which was annoying”. What does that line tell you about Nadia?

Part C Think deeper

There is no single right answer here. Say what you think, and say why.

9. A king's wall and a mason's mark both survived three thousand years. Which do you think tells us more about life in ancient Egypt, and why? Use one detail from the passage in your answer.

10. Have you ever understood something an older person told you only long after they said it? What changed in between — the words, or you?

Answer key

For parents and teachers

Part A

1. B — she was trained to stop and report | 2. C — a mason's mark | 3. B — the find spot carries information | 4. B — everyday objects reveal ordinary life | 5. C — not valuable, but important

Part B

6. Valuable means worth money or treasure-like; important means it tells us something we could not otherwise know. The mark is worth little but reveals a working team, a counting system and a man wanting credit. Accept answers that keep the two ideas apart, even in simpler words.

7. It points out that what was meant to be temporary outlasted the grander work around it, and that history is often preserved by accident. Accept either reading — the irony, or the accident of survival.

8. She is honest, a little stubborn, and able to laugh at herself; the line shows affection rather than irritation. Accept any supported reading of character.

Part C

These answers vary. Mark the reasoning, not the answer.

9. Either answer earns full credit when it is argued from the text. The wall shows what a king wanted said about himself — deliberate and one-sided. The mark is accidental and shows ordinary working life. The strongest answers notice that the wall is a chosen message and the mark is not. Prompt with: which one was trying to be seen?

10. Any honest personal answer counts if it carries a reason. The skill is recognising that understanding can change without the words changing. Prompt with: what did you know later that you did not know then?

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