A Journey to Inner Africa

Aslanyan, Anna, Kovalevsky, Egor

Published by Amherst College Press

Aslanyan, Anna and Egor Kovalevsky.
A Journey to Inner Africa.

For additional information about this book
https://muse.jhu.edu/book/85740

For content related to this chapter
https://muse.jhu.edu/related_content?type=book&id=3001774
Chapter V

From Minya to Esneh

How beautiful are the nights, how warm and abundant with stars! New stars appear, shining as they never do in the North. It is hot during the day: 20 degrees\(^2\) at noon is quite ordinary. Sometimes there are clouds strolling across the sky; but you must not forget, reader, that it is winter now, the month of January being only half-gone. Our steamboat is flying fast, stumbling over sandbars, threatening any moment to stick its nose into the silted bank of the Nile, whence it would take much time and effort to pull it free. The boat’s captain is an Arab, his knowledge limited; withal, the Arab is careless; he observes everything that unfolds before him with indifference, as if in a daze, and keeps saying, “Allah kerim!\(^3\) What is it these Muscovites fuss about, whither are they hastening? Whatever is written in the stars, so be it. Inshallah! . . .” So many times have I mentally thanked Mohammed Ali for providing me with a steamboat. Firstly, we can now cover a daily distance that would ordinarily take five or six day in a barque; secondly, he afforded me the opportunity to enlarge our company by several Russians for another five days or so.

---

1 Esna, a city in central Egypt, 55 miles south of Luxor.
2 25°C.
3 Arabic for “Allah is generous.”
Of course the banks of the Nile had heard Russian speech and seen Russian men ere, albeit seldom, but this must have been the first time they heard a Russian choir song. Time passed quickly and imperceptibly. Objects gave way to more objects. Villages and towns fled us, as if able to guess that we were coming with a special order from the Pasha. The worst thing about these towns and villages is that they bear a strong resemblance to dried mud, and for quite a natural reason too: they are built of mud or of brick made from silt, with some straw added, dried in the sun. The only thing that brings some variety to them are dove-cotes, which rise like pepper-castors, white-washed—nay, smoothed-out. There are numerous dove-cotes everywhere; pigeons are eaten here, they are sold here, whereas in Constantinople or in Mecca, killing a pigeon is regarded a crime. On the left bank of the Nile, there is a village called Burach, which we passed not long ago; there they have a rule that no-one should be allowed to marry until he sets up his own dove-cote. This is what happened once with regard to this rule.

One Mohammed Ali, or Ali Mohammed (there are more Mohammed Alis and Ali Mohammeds here than there are Ivan Ivanovics in Russia) wanted to marry, but he had no dove-cote. So off he goes, first to the father of the bride and then to the mullah. “Where is your dove-cote?” the latter asks.

“I have none, but I will have one anon.”

“Then shall be the time for you to marry.”

“The father will not let his daughter wait.”

“You shall choose another.”

“No-one else will give his daughter away to me, for I am poor.”

The mullah contemplates that, but lets him go without permission.

After a while, Ali Mohammed comes to him again and is asked the same question. The young man answers in the affirmative. The mullah goes over to assure himself and sees that the groom’s dwelling has been made into a dove-cote.

“But where will you live yourself?”

“The law says nothing about that,” says Mohammed Ali, and soon afterward he marries, having set his marital bed in some hole he has dug the previous day.
In the houses of most peasants, you shall find nothing, except perhaps a pot, as well as a great many children; a piece broken off a palm-tree serves as furniture, a rag made of palm leaves as a bed; almost everyone has a rag, its thickness depending on the owner’s wealth. Then again, were he to have anything else, it would be taken by the Turk or swept away by the Nile during its inundation. I must say, however, that it is not so much the taxes levied on the population that cause poverty—the taxes, as we shall see, being not very substantial—as it is the carelessness of the Arabs.

We were much amused by rafts laden with clay pottery, which were never out of our view, being floated from the upper parts of the Nile; that is a pretty clever idea. Thousands of pots and jugs, goullehs, are tied together three-fold, the bottom ones placed neck-down, all floating in the shape of an immense raft, about 15 sazhens long and almost as wide; at its top are four half-naked rowers propelling the raft, each using instead of a paddle a bundle of palm branches, entangled together in a haphazard fashion and tied at the end. They travel in this manner for some 1,000 versts down the Nile. When a steamboat approaches, they try to steer aside, as far as possible, for waves buckle the rafts as if they were leaves. I can imagine what happens to them when a strong wind blows—and there can be rather strong winds on the Nile.

Every day we would halt for a few hours for the purpose of stocking up on coal. That would, of course, occur at the larger cities. Siut is one of Egypt’s most prominent cities, with 20,000 inhabitants. This is where the insurgent Mamluks once found shelter, giving the place an aspect of independence which until recently distinguished its people. But Mohammed Ali knew how to bring them to the same level: rather than giving people more influence, so as to ensure they had equal rights with the aristocracy that had established itself here on its own will, he shoved closer together the aristocracy and those who had been sticking out their heads high from behind them and thus provided

---

4 A bottle used to filter water and keep it fresh.
5 An obsolete Russian measure of length, about seven feet. Fifteen sazhens is approximately 100 feet.
6 Approximately 660 miles.
7 Assiut (also Asyut).
them all with a common denominator—they now enjoy an equality of sorts. I once asked a Greek priest whether his parish was oppressed by the Mohammedans.

“We no longer distinguish between confessions of faith in Egypt,” he said. “Everyone is equal under Mohammed Ali.”

“So everyone is content?” I asked further. The cautious Greek said nothing.

Siut is orderly and clean. One building is easily noticeable amidst the rest: the palace where Ibrahim Pasha lived when he ruled over Upper Egypt. The city stands on the site of ancient Lykopolis.

Girga used to be rather a prominent city too, but the Nile has gradually eaten away nearly a third of her. Situated not far from ancient Ptolemais,8 she was once the capital of the Sayyids.9 There are merely 9,000 people here today, including those belonging to a paper-mill owned by Mohammed Ali.

I visited the mill and inspected it in all its detail. Up to 700 people work here daily; their wages are calculated per output of yarn and per piece of paper fabric, which amounts to about 50 kopeks in paper money; a substantial daily pay for the natives. The interior is spacious and clean, the men neatly dressed, cheerful and healthy-looking, working so deftly as you would never expect from Arabs! How can it be related to the omnipresent poverty and other things you see and hear around yourself? Thus as you describe only those phenomena that present themselves before you, without forcing your views to conform to any previously formed opinions, you are occasionally bound to contradict yourself or waver in your definition of things, until finally a chain of experience learned over a long—alas, too long—time allows you to draw a positive conclusion.

We went to a Catholic monastery and were met by a man in a turban and half-Turkish, half-Arab dress, rather dandy: he was a priest, a Franciscan monk from Tuscany. The church is good, but their mass is too aberrant, although less so than what we had seen at St. Anthony’s Monastery.

---

8 Ptolemais Euergetis (also Fuyyum).
9 It is not clear what Kovalevsky has in mind here. Possibly the reference is to the fact that the city was a seat of Persian governor during the Sassanian period.
There are black spots in the sheer cliffs of sandstone that accompany the flow of the Nile, and sometimes one can see pillars there: these are ancient necropolises or caves where the Christians once hid themselves from persecution; a great many of these caves have witnessed the martyrs suffer painful deaths. It is sad to think that in the era of horrible disasters, at its very birth, Christianity was spreading wider and faster than today, in the time of complete religious tolerance.

Our Consul General has an agent in Keneh for the patronage of Russian Mohammedan hajjis, the pilgrims who usually travel from thence to Mecca via Cosseir. The agent is a Coptic merchant who acts as an agent for most nations. Keneh is situated half an hour away from the Nile, on the bank of a dirty canal, and there is nothing good to be said about it.

At last the dull groves of the date-palm, Phoenix dactylifera, have been livened up by the emergence of a new variety of the palm-tree, Cucifera thebaica, known in these parts as doum. This is the only palm-tree that is twiggy; it produces quite a rich shade and has bright, green-yellowish foliage; its leaves, wide and pointed, stick up in bunches; its fruit, large and with a core in the middle, is filled with pleasant liquid while itself having an astringent taste.

We visited the ancient city of Thebes, as well as Luxor and Karnak, and the tired soul awoke once again . . . I no longer thought that anything would be able to astonish me to such a degree. Wilkinson is almost right in saying that these are the largest and the most glorious ruins of the ancient and modern times. Champollion Jr., in awe of the marvelous sight of these ruins, exclaims, “I shall refrain from describing anything here; my images would either fail to achieve even one-thousandth of what they should be or indeed, were I to present a mere light sketch devoid of colors, I would be thought a zealot or possibly a madman.”

10 El Qoseir, a port city on the Red Sea in eastern Egypt.
11 Thebes is the Greek name for the ancient Egyptian city of Waset; Luxor is a major city in Upper Egypt; and Karnak is an ancient Egyptian temple complex in Luxor.
12 Sir John Gardner Wilkinson (1797–1875), British traveler and writer.
13 Jean-François Champollion (1790–1832), French scholar and founder of modern Egyptology, best known for his work on deciphering Egyptian hieroglyphs.
In this chapter I shall forego a detailed description of ancient Thebes: the city requires thorough study, and on the way back, I shall dedicate a few days to its exploration and possibly a few pages to its description. Presently, let me give you a sketch of the pharaohs’ holy city.

A series of Sphinxes runs along the road from Luxor to the ruins of the temple and the palace in Karnak: an entire street of Sphinxes, all enormous in size, capable of dwarfing any of their European replicas if one were to put them next to each other; yet it is all corrupt, disfigured, half-buried in sand. One enters Karnak amidst pylons, quite preserved and covered with hieroglyphs from top to bottom. Thereupon on one’s right there emerges an entire row of pillars, the size of which no-one would ever dare attempt to achieve today; the bright strip of the Nile shines through them, spangled with the rays of the setting sun, and further beyond is Thebes, the City of a Hundred Gates, so battered and scattered that one can hardly make out its remains. Only the so-called statue of Memnon14 and another one stand by the necropolis, the field of death.

All that is situated under a marvelous, transparent sky, against whose horizon copses of palm-trees are vividly outlined; it is here, near these majestic ruins, near these magnificently pensive faces of the Sphinxes, under the breeze of omnipresent mystery, that these palm-trees truly belong.

Let us turn to Karnak. From the walls that have been preserved in many places; from the hundreds of pillars that are still standing, supporting enormous capitals; from the obelisks of which but one has retained its primaeval beauty, the rest having been reduced to mere rubble and plinths—from all that you can readily imagine the whole: one room is nearly equal in size to St. Peter’s Church in Rome! Also present are heaped stones, striking in their immensity and clearly showing how the room used to be furnished. There are no Arab huts here (except those clinging to the place on the left side, in the manner of swallow nests), which affords you the opportunity to embrace the entire site of the ruins in one go. Not so in Luxor. You have to search for the walls of the temple over an entire Arab village where they have been placed:

14 The Colossi of Memnon, the twin statues depicting Pharaoh Amenhotep III.
прильнувшикъ съ лѣвой стороны, въ видѣ ласточкінныхъ гнѣздъ, и это даетъ возможность обнять все мѣсто развалинъ съ одного раза. Не то въ Луксорѣ. Вы должны отыскивать стѣны храма по всей арабской деревнѣ на

которую ставятъ ихъ тамъ примѣнена изба, тамъ высиится голубятня; комната древней гробницы служить жилищемъ цѣлой семьи; подъ портикомъ помѣщается хлѣбный магазинъ наше.

Въ Луксорѣ поражаетъ васъ обелискъ: это лучший какой мнѣ случалось видѣть; другой, соответствующій ему, находится въ Парижѣ; примѣчательенъ также ги-
here is a hut adjoined to it, there rises a dove-cote; the chamber of an ancient tomb serves as a dwelling for a whole family; a bread store owned by the Pasha sits under a portico.

In Luxor you are amazed by an obelisk—the best of all I have ever seen; another, similar to it, is in Paris; also of note is a giant Sphinx. Like Karnak, Luxor consists of a number of monuments, the earliest of which belong to the time of Amenhotep III, the latest to that of Ramses. More rows of pillars, scattered here and there, oppress with their mass the poor village whose site they occupy; many are half-buried under drifts of sand and rubbish, some overgrown with prickly shrubs and scanty grass. There is no trace of a bridge to be seen, however—one that would link this part of the city to that on the right and to the necropolis; if a bridge did exist then it was probably a pontoon one, although it seems more likely that they used to cross the Nile in boats.