Chapter VII

Nubia along the Nile

Nubia\(^1\) is a land of “savage, strong people armed with enormous shields and swords,” the ancients used to say. You shall not find such a country here, try as you might. All that is left of its ancient fame are the nakedness and black skin-color of its people. The Nubians are weak, lacking power, and rather humble. True, they are still armed with little spears which, moreover, are sometimes soaked in a vegetable poison; yet Mohammed Ali has subdued them to a great extent, and it is only very few villages that have succeeded in evading the taxes everyone has to pay, their inhabitants having removed themselves to distant mountains, out of reach of the soldiery.

The mountains come closer to the banks here. On either side of the Nile, strips of cultivated land stretch like two narrow ribbons, and a short distance past the Aswan cataracts, granite once again gives way to sandstone.

Towards the end of the day, the wind began to subside. How beautiful the evening was! The sun was setting down behind the Libyan mountains, which were engulfed in what appeared to be some kind of golden vapor; meanwhile, the peaks of the Arabian range opposite

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\(^1\) A historical region stretching from Aswan in the south of Egypt to central Sudan.
were already darkening and frowning; the foot-hills were pale, of temper color, with palm-trees and shrubs of acacia—picturesque in their greenery, despite being rather unremarkable in daylight—standing out vividly against them. The sun having fully disappeared, there was only a bright-red stripe left after the sunset; against it, the Libyan mountains silhouetted themselves in sharp zigzag lines. The sky was a clean, lofty sapphire color, with not a single cloud on it; I even thought, *What a pity to see it so empty*, but then a star shone in the East, followed by another, and suddenly the sky was all a-sparkle. The night fell—it all happened quickly. Our four *dahabias* 2 easily glided along the smooth waters of the Nile, the sails barely filled with a light northerly wind. All round us was silence; the Arabs sat, their heads hung down, as if the night was bending them to the ground, causing them more anguish than the day. How different they are from the nomadic Kyrgyz 3 of Mongol tribes, or even from the negroes, who would be able to appreciate the beauties of such a night to the full, spending it under the star-shooting sky without sleeping a wink. Indeed, the night was beautiful; everything on the Earth was mysterious, half-dark, as if the Earth was saying: “This is better, I can see the sky better now.”

Why, then, do I, like an Arab, wistfully gaze into the night, dissecting it as if in an anatomy lesson? Time was I used to know how to describe such nights, how to spend them, how to enjoy them! Yes, I can comprehend the exquisite artistic nature of the divine effect of this night, but my soul is silent! Truly, I know not why. Presently someone on one of the barques commenced murmuring a Russian song. Oh sadness! I believe the air is dry here; and although one cannot say that it is hot, one’s lungs would not absorb the air willingly, not even after a sultry day, as they would absorb the coolness of Neapolitan nights. There now, is that so? It must be so . . . Everything is asleep. The lights have gone out on the barques, and we are sailing forth, quietly and invisibly, like the spirits in magic fairy-tales. Sleep will not come—what a pity. A bitter thought moves heavily inside my breast, wishing to express itself.

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2 *A river boat.*

3 In the 19th century, the Russians referred to ethnic Kazakhs as “Kyrgyz,” whereas contemporary Kyrgyz were called “mountain Kyrgyz” or “Kara-Kyrgyz.”
What good is it!? Proceed with your story without delay and tell us some facts, says the reader. What do we care for your dreams? . . . Yes, let us proceed. Be patient, my gentle reader. Tomorrow, tomorrow! The moon has now risen; it is about midnight now: time to go to sleep. You, too, should go to sleep if you are able to do so peacefully. Sleep is a good thing.

On the day following, we crossed the tropic line near the village of Kelyabshi, in lat. 23°37′44″ N. Balbi⁴ is correct to note that the Tropic of Cancer is the hottest and the most difficult to inhabit. To our right, there were some ruins and, farther along, a magnificent entrance to caves.

It was the 15<sup>th</sup> (27<sup>th</sup>) of January. The sun was scorching. Past the tropic, there is no night dew any more, and it never rains beyond the belt of seasonal rains, which commences at about 20°. The only irrigation comes from the Nile, whence sakbiehs raise water day and night for the purpose of watering the fields; the air is very dry.

We climbed the Libyan mountains, which lock in the Nile extremely tight. Their peaks constitute a large stony plateau; there are no signs of life around: not a single blade of grass, not a single animal! We asked the native Nubians how far this stony desert stretched and whether it reached the sands. But who ever goes there, they answered, who knows? . . . Meanwhile, the Bedouins⁵ of the Libyan oases pass through these mountains in certain places, in search of water and coolness on the banks of the Nile. Indeed, some people, as I have already mentioned, use the mountains as their place of habitation: negroes, escaped slaves, whom anyone capable of overbearing them captures and sells back into slavery, and Nubians who hide themselves here temporarily from the payment of taxes and from Egyptian soldiers . . . and yet it is true that animals themselves are afraid of these mountains!

Now and again you can hear a shrill screeching sound from the bank, produced by sakbiehs and shadoofs, this last being similar to the water-raising “crane” pump we have in the Ukraine. A long pole goes through a beam, with a water-skin or some other vessel on one of its ends and a

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⁴ Adriano Balbi (1782–1848), Italian geographer.
⁵ Nomadic Arabs, the inhabitants of the deserts of North Africa and the Middle East.
stone, used as a counter-balance, on the other. The water is scooped by
hand out of one basin and into another and thus to a raised bank where
the crops are. A *sakbieh* is similar in its mechanism to that employed
for the dredging of canals. A number of ropes hang off a vertically
installed wheel, with two rows of pots attached to them. When one
row, consisting of empty pots, is lowered, the other one rises, emptying
its full pots into a special basin. Thereupon it stops. The mechanism
is very simple and useful; it is operated by bulls or horses. Its object is
the same: to bring water from the Nile up and onto the level of crops.
Harvest comes soon: barley, for instance, takes less than two months
after sowing to grow completely ripe. They reap two or three harvests
a year, depending on their labor; all they need to do is water the field
perpetually; the sun works hard.

Where the riverside mountains are low or narrow, the sands of the
desert are transported over them to the fertile banks of the Nile, replac-
ing any vegetation in some places, spreading devastation and death. A
rare single palm-tree of a mimosa bush can survive; but still, it shall all
soon be swallowed by the sweeping sands.

How vividly the ancients\(^6\) expressed the struggle of the elements in
the three-fold myth of Osiris, Isis, and Typhon. To Egyptian priests,
Osiris was the Nile and Isis was the Earth. The horrible Typhon was
the epitome of the desert, hurling masses of sand onto the banks of the
Nile and thus burying the latter. Hence the eternal struggle between
these gods. Osiris the ruler died by the hand of his brother, the mon-
strous Typhon. Isis, the spouse of Osiris, avenged his death by slaying
Typhon and reigned as a sole queen.

Kiris is quite a jolly place on the right bank of the Nile. The valley
is wide and covered with vegetation. Little houses or huts are scattered
around in a motley fashion. We went inside many of them to find them
as empty as those in Egypt. The wealthier ones have small courtyards
paved with stone; to understand what a luxury it is, allow me to add
that it is the yard itself that makes up the main dwelling. Leading off the
yard is a blind alley taking you to the back wall of the house, which you
must walk round before you can find the door. The owner apparently

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\(^6\) Author’s note: Heliodor, *Aethiop I*, IX.
wishes to conceal the door from the gaze of the curious, yet it is all so miniscule that even a child would not be lost in this imaginary maze. Inside the hut, there is a bed made of clay, a niche in the wall to keep pigeons in, also a knife and a jug—that is all they have in the way of household implements. A handful of straw serves as a roof while letting in light. Still, these cages are rather clean, unlike those in Egypt. Pariset\(^7\) says that these dwellings are occupied by families together with bullocks and camels: in fact, were a camel to stick its head inside, the entire house would topple. Leaning against this cage is another, intended for the wife and children. In the courtyard, you shall find a large pot of barley or *dourra*:\(^8\) this is the household stock from which to pay taxes. The Nubians themselves are modest in their needs, usually eating food straight from the field. There they have a little of everything, and at any time, there is something ripe, be it beans or barley, peas, lentils, or *dourra*. There is a large variety of grains and pulses, yet the quantities of it all are meagre, making one wonder how these people can survive while also paying their taxes. It is rare for someone to have five or six sheep and a camel. The reader will ask, “But where are their agricultural implements, such as harrows, spades, and axes?” They have almost none at all. What they do have is a kind of plough, although they would be better off without it. They usually make little holes in the soil with their hands, sowing a few seeds in each. The sun and the Nile—or, more precisely, the *sakhieh*, which, by contrast, works day and night—do the rest.

The Nubians have darker skin than the Egyptians, the latter being called—not quite justly—white, the former referred to as red. Both peoples—I mean *fellahs* here—go semi-naked; both differ little from each other except in their language. The Nubians, it must be said, are kinder, better than the Arabs. The Barbars, who inhabit Dongola,\(^9\) are a loyal people, dedicated to their master, and therefore preferred to all others for employing as servants in Cairo and Alexandria.

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8 *Dourra*, a sorghum grain found in the dry regions of Africa and Asia.
9 A city in northern Sudan. The term *Barbars* most likely comes from contemporary Egyptian usage and denotes people of non-Arabic descent.
Christianity was originally brought to Nubia by St. Matthew the Evangelist, the Nubians remaining Christians until 1500. In Lower Egypt, the Christian faith was spread by St. Mark the Evangelist, whilst Abyssinia, which to this day remains more or less true to our church, was converted by St. Frumentius in the 4th century.

How deserted the Nile is. Sailing from Cairo to Aswan, we would see the occasional *dahabia*; upon leaving Aswan, all we have met in five days are three large barques with Sennaar slaves; note, however, that the water is low. Not a single fishing boat! People living on the banks, who often have nothing to eat, could be much helped by fish, but they have no fishing rods, let alone nets. Still, after each inundation of the Nile, they gather some small fish that remains there along with silt and scarcely even has a name: something full of bones and not good, similar to roach in our rivers.

At last, we saw a crocodile nearby. A giant animal, about three sazhens\(^{10}\) long, it was basking on a sandy bank. A bird resembling a grey ibis, its constant companion on dry land, stood by on guard. The bird, frightened by our approach, must have awakened the reptile; the crocodile wagged its tail and plopped from the bank into the water. This bird is not the trochilus\(^{11}\) described by the ancients, for the latter, if they are to be believed, provides the crocodile with special services, picking worms out of its tongue—which, as we know, sits very deep in its throat—and completing other similar tasks. Another bird, with a beautiful two-pronged tuft on its head and a curved beak, somewhat larger than a woodcock, is quite fit for this purpose.

Humboldt\(^{12}\) notes that some crocodiles eat people, while others do not; that is true. The natives, aware of the habitation of cannibal crocodiles, take precautions there; but as far as other places are concerned, their carelessness is amazing, and they often pay for it. Children, animals of small size, calves, and donkeys fall prey to crocodiles the most frequently. Oftentimes a crocodile can overbear a bull. Wrapping its tail round the bull, the reptile drags it down to the bottom of the river to devour it there.

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10 Approximately 20 feet.
11 Also the Egyptian plover; believed to have a symbiotic relationship with the crocodile.
12 Friedrich Wilhelm Heinrich Alexander von Humboldt (1769–1859), German scholar and traveler.
The inhabitants of ancient Ombis domesticated small crocodiles. Their males fight a terrible war with their females. These last pay dearly for their love: firstly, it is accompanied by frightening tokens of crocodile tenderness, and secondly, the females know that the fruit of this love can fall victim to the males’ insatiable voracity. Hence they lay their eggs in places that are most hard to reach, such as high banks, burying them in the sand and eliminating any traces round them. Another creature to prey on the eggs is the ichneumon. The ancients worshipped the ichneumon, and not without reason: it fights an irreconcilable war with the entire crocodile species. The Nubians eat crocodile meat after cutting out of it, immediately upon killing the animal, the mucus bags, and yet the pungent smell of mucus is strongly felt.

About three hours’ journey from Korosko, the Nile becomes locked in by the mountains and the sands so tight that any cultivated land is reduced to a mere slope of the bank—that is, a space of about two or three sazhens—and beyond it, there is nothing but the desert, death, the Kingdom of Typhon! . . . The Nile continues mostly thus. When you think of the population of Egypt and Nubia, all of them crowding its narrow banks with the exception of a few oases and the Delta, you are bound to ask yourself, What would become of this population, up to five million people in number, were the Nile buried under the sands of the desert ambushing it from all sides?—which would be quite likely were it not for the annual flood tides that clear the river-bed.

Right at Korosko, the Nile turns abruptly to the west, describing an arc, which is the reason why, even when the water is high and there is no danger of cataracts, travelers often leave the river and cut across the desert. Thus they gain about 10 days while also avoiding the second and largest cataract on the Nile, impossible to pass when the water is low, as well as several lesser ones.

The Great Nubian Desert used to be impassable in consequence of attacks launched by the Arabs, and therefore caravans would usually choose a route through the Dongola Desert (which we shall also learn

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13 Ombos, contemporary Naqada.
14 A settlement on the Nile, about 200 miles south of Aswan.
15 Between 15 and 20 feet.
about on our way back), but these days, Mohammed Ali has an agreement with the Ababde tribes which obliges them to guide and protect the caravans, thus making the route completely safe in this regard.

The above-mentioned circumstances allowed Korosko, a recently established settlement, to gain certain importance. This is a place for caravans carrying ivory, senneh, and slaves (these last being nothing more than goods) to stop and load their cargo onto barques; a place whence they send camels laden with divers supplies for an army detachment stationed in the Sudan, as well as with merchants’ goods—in a word, with everything that is brought to Korosko by water, the reason being, as I have already noted, the double necessity to cross the desert, how terrible soever it might be. Korosko is situated in a beautiful location and immersed in the greenery of its pastures, palm-trees, and doums, its little houses only coming into view when you approach them. There is much activity and life about the place but no pleasure at all! Where is it, then, if one cannot find it even here?

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16 A subgroup of Beja; a nomadic people living between the upper Nile and the Red Sea.
17 Senna (S. alexandrina), a plant used for medicinal purposes and to make tea.