Chapter X

Giraffe- and Ostrich-Hunting

Ipsambul¹ and Thebes

Our caravan, full of the sick, moved forward slowly. For the most part we marched at night; during the day, we sought protection from the heat of the sun, the burning wind, and the waves of quick-sands in some ruin or in a poor hut of some Barbar, for as I have noted, the borough of el-Ghajar is quite deserted. It did, of course, provide us with the chance to know the country more intimately, yet I have to admit that, after an arduous march, I would have no slightest wish to pay such a price for this knowledge. Nomadic Arabs would often approach us and then, despite all our precautions, something would inevitably go amissing.

The Arabs of these parts deal in ostriches and giraffes. Live giraffes have recently appeared in Europe; hunting an adult giraffe is not easy—one can, perhaps, kill it but not catch it; usually a giraffe is found at an early age and grown at home. We saw a domesticated one in Dongola: it is, no doubt, the most beautiful of all animals. It wagged its small

¹ Abu Simbel, a village near the site of the temples of Abu Simbel dating to the reign of Ramses II.
head, similar to that of a chamois and perched on a swan-like neck, with such grace, and its glittering eyes looked round so sweetly that one could not take one's gaze off it. Arabs know the price of a giraffe; jellabs asked 2,000 francs for that one.

Ostrich-hunting is very toilsome. Having set off in pursuit of the light-footed bird, they give it chase on dromedaries, but not too closely, so as not to lose sight of it while not exhausting the dromedary; it is impossible to catch up with it in the morning or at night; but when the high-noon heat grows unbearable, they increase the pace of the dromedary and, finally, make it run at full speed. The camel cares nothing about the heat! While the ostrich becomes fatigued, and yet it does not give up easily and often dodges the skillfully launched lance, straining what energy it still has left; then they employ another trick, driving the ostrich to a thicket of shrubs, and unless it be very experienced and shrewd, it becomes entangled among the branches, an easy prey to its pursuers.

Ostriches are readily domesticated. In the Sudan and Dongola, many keep ostriches in their households, sometimes riding them, although one has to be extremely agile to be able to keep one's balance in the narrow space between their two wings, which they usually spread when running, especially at full speed; then no horse is capable of keeping up with the ostrich. My landlord in Dongola had an ostrich—the poor thing was used to carry water.

During our journey, I often heard about an English sailor, one Captain Horton, who had passed through these parts in 1822 or so and, as one can see, left lingering memories. Firmly resolved to reach the sources of the Nile, he taught himself—beforehand, on his way to them—to bear any hardship, any changes of climate, going half-naked, as all Arabs do, and being as indefatigable as they are; he could swim like a fish and easily absorbed the customs of the natives and even their language, while also, in addition to all that, being brave as befits a true sailor! And yet nothing could save him from the perilous climate of the Sudan: he died of fever! . . .

In the wake of the profound studies conducted by Lepsius, who spent three years in the country, and of the descriptions provided by
Drovetti, Belzoni, Salt, Norov, and finally, Champollion Jr., I dare not describe the ruins of ancient Egyptian monuments so as to create from them the kingdom of the pharaohs or, at least, a chaos of hypotheses; many have already labored over that; and yet anyone is bound to do as I did, stopping involuntarily before the giants of Ipsambul, which seem to have come out of a cliff and remained there, waiting for us.

Four colossal statues, each 65 feet tall and 25 feet across between the shoulders, are carved in the cliff, and so is the temple itself, which they sit leaning against. They had been buried under the sands of the desert, the very entrance to the temple remaining out of reach despite all the efforts of travelers wishing to penetrate inside; but then Lepsius managed to open it. The interior of the temple, hermetically sealed theretofore, is well-preserved, and even colors in some spots remain very vivid. Among its many images and hieroglyphs, I was struck by some hieroglyphs carved in relief next to the ancient ones, still bearing the traces of their recent birth: it turned out that they had been inscribed by Lepsius and had not had the time to merge with the rest. Our offspring, however, shan’t be able to distinguish between them any more, and it may well be that one of their future decipherers will read them thus: “Thutmose, blessed by the tutelary sun, the beloved son of Lepsius, the slayer of the Persians and the Ethiopians, returns to Berlin in the year 1844,” &c. Imagine what comments he will make thereupon.

Having come out of the temple, I halted once again by these colossi: their immensity oppresses rather than elates you; this lack of finesse, these small figures barely reaching up to the knees of the colossi, representing their wives and children, cast gloom as one reflects upon their pettiness.

The same unloading and reloading of our baggage took place by the first cataracts, but now my companions were working full swing: everyone hastened to return home, and we were extremely glad to find, upon our arrival at Aswan, a steam-boat sent to fetch us, the very same

---

2 Bernardino Michele Maria Drovetti (1776–1852), Italian-French officer and diplomat; became a well-known antiquarian and collector of Egyptian artifacts after taking part in Napoleon’s invasion of Egypt. Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778–1823), Italian antiquarian and archaeologist, one of the pioneers of European Egyptology. Avraam Sergeevich Norov (1795–1869), Russian writer and explorer; traveled to the Holy Land and Egypt.
one that had recently been prepared in England for Mohammed Ali’s voyage: the luxury of its rooms appeared somewhat miraculous to us, coming as we had from the deserts of Nubia.

We halted near Thebes and went ashore at ancient Necropolis.

According to Champollion Jr., pharaohs of the 18th and 19th dynasties are buried in the valley of Biban-el-Moluk, or ancient Biban-Uru. Today it is a field, dug up, spotted with hillocks, deserted, and desolate. Burial chambers made in a nearby sheer cliff are strewn with ballast and sand; tombs have been toppled over, taken away, or destroyed so far as human weapons can be used to conquer these stone monoliths; in a few places statues and drawings, glittering with colors, have been preserved. But let us transport ourselves to this field of death as it was 3,000 years ere our time, in one of its solemn moments.

In Egypt—where the clergy used to enjoy enormous privileges and where the military, being the defenders of the homeland (although acting more by the right of the powerful), also appropriated many advantages for themselves—it was the people that shouldered the entire burden of state duties. But when Menes entered a close alliance with the people intending to overturn the power of the priests, which was supreme in the state, it seems that he granted the people the right to elect kings. It has at least been historically proven that during the whole time of sovereignty in Egypt, the people enjoyed the right—a formidable one, bearing in mind Egyptian religious beliefs—to pass judgement upon deceased kings.

If there ever was a people of whom it could be said that they lived for death, it was the Egyptians. As soon as a citizen came into his rights, as soon as a king was enthroned, his first concern was to build himself a dwelling for eternal rest, which he extended over his entire life, adorning it with drawings and statues until, finally, the hand of death halted him in his work, which had cost more than his earthly home. Now imagine what the thought of losing this dwelling must have meant to him! . . . The assumption made by many—that the Egyptians hoped to be summoned again into the same life several centuries later, as long as their bodies were preserved intact—this can be readily believed once you have reflected upon their care for the security of tombs and
upon their rituals related to burial. Let us presently turn to the valley of death. The King is dead. The people are in deep mourning. The heads of men are sprinkled with ashes; their luxurious belts replaced by ragged pieces of rope. The wives and daughters of the King are covered with mud. The lesser priests are busying themselves by the corpse, preparing it for embalming. The high priests are composing a burial ceremony, which must exceed in its lavishness any celebrations that took place in the King’s life-time, how profligate soever he may have been. People everywhere are obliged to pray and observe lent for the deceased, and rich sacrifices are being offered to gods. Finally, the time required by law—72 days—has passed. The King, resting on a lavish bed which costs several hundredweights of gold, is solemnly placed at the threshold of the burial chamber that he has built whilst alive, where he remains until the people’s judgement is passed upon whether or not he deserves his burial. In a portico covering the entrance—a fine portico in the Doric order, which existed for millennia before appearing in Greece—42 selected judges sit, gathering opinions and votes. Necropolis is full of people, yet there is silence and awe everywhere; everyone understands the holy nature of the place.

The deceased, whilst alive, knew how to show his virtues, how to flaunt them, dazzling the people with the generosity of his kindness and with the ceremonial offering of sacrifices to gods; but his inner life is not known to the people, the depth of his soul being a mystery they cannot penetrate, and therefore the people demand a ceremonial burial, avid for spectacle as ever. True, sometimes there would rise the voice of an orphan who had not been admitted to the King to complain about unjust judges; at other times the cry of a widow or a beggar would be heard—only to be drowned by the vox populi. When that, too, fell silent, a high priest came on a raised platform and uttered a speech, whose rapturous expressions conveyed all the great deeds and virtues of the deceased, which deeds were presented in pictures and inscribed in hieroglyphs on the lavish sarcophagus carved out of a single piece of pink-grained granite as well as on the walls of the burial chamber. The priests were envious of the important right of the people and wished to guide the masses with the power of their own eloquence—all in vain,
for the Egyptian people, already developed and matured, were able to decide upon their own opinion. This time the priests and the people agreed in their opinion. The court was ready to pass judgement, when suddenly the crowd wavered and parted: “Another vote, another vote!” people shouted as an old man approached the coffin. Tall and gaunt, he had deep-sunken eyes, which bore witness to prolonged and terrible sufferings. He would sooner be taken for a visitor from beyond the grave than for a living man.

“Wait!” he cried. “An unjust judge is swayed to the wrong side by the weight of gold, usually belonging to someone else or acquired by evil means. The deceased King swayed you to his side by the glitter of virtues that had been borrowed, invented, that had cost him nothing. His heart, possessed by vice, was not in them. He committed good deeds in public while committing evil deeds in secret; the former he did out of fear, the latter out of passion. Listen to my words. At high noon, when even the busiest streets of Thebes become empty, I lay exhausted, dying, tortured by the mortal heat and thirst, in a deserted alley. Nearby, under a canopy, stood a cup of water, put out by charitable people for passers-by, yet I was too weak to approach it and thus unable to avail myself of the blissful moisture, nor of the equally blissful shade of the canopy. Their proximity only tried my patience, increased my thirst, and made the torture worse still. At last I saw a man coming out of an obscure little house; he wrapped himself tight in his thick sheet, clearly attempting to make himself unrecognizable; but when he turned his face to a woman who remained at the door, recognize him I did: it was the King! You say he performed good deeds under a veil of secrecy, content for them to be witnessed by gods alone, as befits a wise man; but now you can see how much good his nefarious soul contained. He who performs a good deed rejoices in his heart when he has a chance to perform another afterward; he who returns from a place of vice is bound to push away a hand reaching out to him for help. I thought of the King the same as you have done hitherto, and therefore I addressed him, as I would have addressed one of you, asking him, begging him in the names of gods, who protect the powerful and the poor in equal measure, to help me up and walk me to the canopy where the water was. What did he
do? . . . You shall be horrified, you shan’t believe it . . . He pushed me away with his foot, for my outstretched body was in his way!”

A wave of horror, clamor, and disbelief agitated the crowd, which was able to remain calm in the most frightening moments.

“Who will believe it? . . . How can one believe in such an inhuman deed? . . . Where is your witness? . . . ”

“He is over yonder!” the old man said, pointing to the sun, and the sun, covered with a stray cloud, the similar of which appear so rarely in the blue skies of Thebes—the sun came out from behind the cloud in all its dazzling shine. The people, taught by religion itself to see truth in images and symbols, cried in terror at the sight of this formidable testimony. The body of the deceased was toppled from the lavish bed and onto the ground, and the people—just, law-obeying, and moderate even in their feelings of revenge—were satisfied with these signs of disgust, and so they dispersed, filled with fear and awe, having witnessed heavens take part in their judgement. The judges proceeded to fulfill their duties.

They walked along a dark corridor to a small chamber, which served as the ante-chamber to the splendid temple where the sarcophagus stood. Then stone-masons proceeded to wreak terrible devastation. Some destroyed the walls of the room, where the great deeds of the deceased were depicted in images they themselves had toiled over for many years; others, unable to destroy the sarcophagus, erased the images of the King carved in it. Meanwhile, the judges threw out of the sarcophagus three coffins, nested one inside another so as to preserve the body. These coffins, destroyed and desecrated, were taken outside, to the field of death, for everyone to see. Nor did the formidable judges stop there. Wherever the name of the King or its image appeared, be it on monuments or public buildings, it was chiseled away, erased, or defaced. Moreover, the pages describing his deeds were torn out of the very annals of history, and the name of the pharaoh was preserved by the priests alone, and later the just Manetho3 conveyed it to posterity in his chronicle.

---

3 Likely an Egyptian priest of the Ptolemaic era who lived in the early 3rd century BCE; believed to be the author of Aegyptiaca, a history of Egypt written in Greek.
The body lay in dust, as if no-one wished to touch it for fear of defiling himself or provoking the wrath of the people. It was not until late at night that the wife of the deceased came to the priests and persuaded them, by begging and offering them money, to place the corpse in the defaced sarcophagus, which had been toppled over and now lay amid the rubble of the all but destroyed temple...

As we stood on a sheer range that used to serve as a tomb for the aristocracy of Thebes, we embraced the entire ancient city, which, due to its enormous size, truly deserved its name: the City of a Hundred Gates, as Homer had called it, although in reality the city could have hardly had any gates as we know them today; it probably had not even been surrounded by a wall; whatever ancient historians say, such an immense mass of stones would have left some traces behind, as happened in Babylon and in any place where a wall had once been; yet here no-one had seen any signs of it. If by the word gates Homer meant “pylons”—objects akin to truncated pyramids, whose walls, set at a more right angle, have no steps and are covered with various images and hieroglyphs—or if he meant “rows of pillars,” which indeed formed entrances to palaces, &c., then it is possible that there were indeed an entire hundred of them, for many survive to this day.

Two enormous statues—their faces being pensive, silent witnesses to millennia—reign over the ruins and the valley of death, bestowing great significance upon this lifeless desert. One of them, situated on the northern side, used to be famous as the Colossus of Memnon, which made sounds at sunrise. The veracity of this evidence is recorded in 72 inscriptions, Greek and Latin, made by those who used to come here to listen to and wonder at the Colossus of Memnon; among these inscriptions, by the bye, are those made by Emperor Hadrian and Empress Sabina.4 Such a miraculous phenomenon had long been argued about, until the opinion prevailed that the rays of the sun, as they appeared, drew moisture out of granite grains of the statue, which produced a rustle akin to the sound of a human voice, sometimes a painful groan, as can be seen from the evidence of some of the

4 Publius Aelius Hadrianus Augustus (76–138 CE), Roman emperor from 117 to 138 CE; Vibia Sabina (83–136/37 CE), Roman empress, his wife.
inscriptions. Yet as far as I can judge, this opinion is not substantiated. The fame of the Colossus of Memnon is known to have spread during the reign of Nero—namely, soon after it had been broken by an earthquake. Septimius Severus, unsatisfied with its unclear sounds, believed that if a broken statue was able to make a sound, then upon being fixed, so to speak—upon being re-created and put back in its place—it would, no doubt, commence to speak properly; however, the opposite occurred—the statue lost its gift. Why, reader? The effect produced by the rays of the sun upon granite remained unchanged, ditto the surroundings; indeed, why has a similar phenomenon never been observed in granite cliffs? And if it has been, then the observations are so far-fetched that one cannot help but doubt them.

The Greeks called it the Colossus of Memnon, although it, as well as the one next to it, had been erected by Amenhotep III, both depicting him.

Farther downstream along the Nile, one can see the tops of the Memnonium, half-buried in silt. Beyond the statues, scattered pillars, pylons, and propylons can be glimpsed, sometimes standing there in all their splendor, sometimes humbled into the dust; farther down there is Gurnah, which deserves little attention, and finally, the Ramesseum; this last, even in the proximity of Karnak, is marvelous. It may lack in grandiosity and have no forest of pillars surrounding it, but its pillars are of finest quality. What makes it remarkable is this: it had long been thought to be the tomb of Ozymandias; the Greeks, inspired by the priests’ tales, relayed the miraculous stories of this imaginary tomb to us, in the words of Diodorus Siculus; according to them, there was a library nearby, famous for an astronomical circle, extraordinary in size and made of pure gold.

5 Author’s note: Letronne et al.
Editor’s note: Most likely Kovalevsky refers to Antoine Jean Letronne, La statue vocale de Memnon considérée dans ses rapports avec l’Égypte et la Grèce: étude historique faisant suite aux recherches pour servir à l’histoire de l’Égypte pendant la domination des grecs et des romains (Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1833).
6 Lucius Septimius Severus Augustus (145–211 CE), Roman emperor from 193 to 211 CE.
7 The memorial temple of Ramses II on the site of Thebes, across the Nile from Luxor.
8 The Greek name of Ramses II.
9 Diodorus Siculus (1st century BCE), Greek historian.
“J’espère que, dans ce siècle éclairé des lumières de la critique et de la philosophie, l’immense cercle d’Ozymandias et l’observatoire de Bélus trouveront peu de croyance,” Montucla writes; another long-standing belief is thus destroyed.

Among the pillars of the Ramesseum, there lies in the dust an enormous granite colossus, which once depicted Ramesses the Great.

Finally, farther beyond the river rise giant ruins, known as Luxor and Karnak, now poor Arab villages.

I must admit that as far as art is concerned, I have never seen anything greater than Karnak; I was about to complete the description I had made upon seeing these ruins for the first time, but the impression they produce upon one defies any systematic manner of description. The readers would, however, find much pleasure in reading the accounts of Karnak and, generally, of Thebes in the findings of Champollion Jr., Rosellini, Wilkinson, and finally, in the latest studies by Lepsius.


Translator’s note: “I hope that in this age, enlightened by critique and philosophy, the enormous circle of Ozymandias and the observatory of Belus will find little credence.”

11 Ippolito Rosellini (1800–1843), pioneer of Italian Egyptology.