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978-1-108-01675-9 - The Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia

Giovanni Battista Belzoni

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The Pyramids, Temples, Tombs, and Excavations, in Egypt and Nubia

The Italian adventurer Giovanni Belzoni (1778–1823) is one of the most colourful and notorious figures in Egyptology. After the Napoleonic invasion of Egypt, European interest in the country, and especially in its antiquities, led to a demand for artifacts, the larger the better. Belzoni happened to be pursuing his two careers, as circus strong-man and hydraulic engineer, in Egypt in 1815, when he was asked to organise the transport of a 7-ton statue of Ramesses II from Thebes to the British Museum. After the success of this enterprise, he turned his attention to the discovery of other antiquities, though using techniques – such as blasting his way into tombs with gunpowder – which were deplored by serious contemporary scholars. His narrative of his adventures, including some genuine discoveries, was enormously popular at the time, and remains readable and entertaining today. This reissue omits the plates from the original edition, which are too large to be reproduced satisfactorily in this format.

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NARRATIVE
OF THE
OPERATIONS AND RECENT DISCOVERIES
WITHIN THE
PYRAMIDS, TEMPLES, TOMBS, AND EXCAVATIONS,
IN
EGYPT AND NUBIA;
AND OF A
JOURNEY TO THE COAST OF THE RED SEA, IN SEARCH OF
THE ANCIENT BERENICE;
AND ANOTHER TO
THE OASIS OF JUPITER AMMON.

BY G. BELZONI.

SECOND EDITION.

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1821.

P R E F A C E.

As I made my discoveries alone, I have been anxious to write my book by myself, though in so doing, the reader will consider me, and with great propriety, guilty of temerity; but the public will perhaps gain in the fidelity of my narrative, what it loses in elegance. I am not an Englishman, but I prefer that my readers should receive from myself, as well as I am able to describe them, an account of my proceedings in Egypt, in Nubia, on the coast of the Red Sea, and in the Oasis; rather than run the risk of having my meaning misrepresented by another. If I am intelligible, it is all that I can expect. I shall state nothing but the plain matters of fact, as they occurred to me in these countries, in 1815-16-17-18 and 19. A description of the means I took in making my researches, the difficulties I had to encounter, and how I overcame them, will give a tolerably correct idea of the manners and customs of the people I had to deal with. Perhaps I have spoken too much of the obstacles thrown in my way, by the jealousy and intriguing spirit of my adversaries, without considering that the public will care little about my private quarrels, which to me, of course, appeared of the greatest consequence on the spot, in these countries. But I hope that a little indulgence may be allowed to my mortified feelings, particularly when I reflect that it was through them that I was compelled to leave Egypt before I had completed my plans.

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PREFACE.

I must apologize also for the few humble observations I have ventured to give on some historical points; but I had become so familiar with the sight of temples, tombs, and pyramids, that I could not help forming some speculation on their origin and construction. The scholar and learned traveller will smile at my presumption, but do they always agree themselves in their opinions on matters of this sort, or even on those of much less difficulty? Much has been written on Egypt and Nubia by the travellers of the last century, by Denon, and the French sc̄avans, whose general account of these countries has scarcely left any thing unnoticed; and by Mr. Hamilton, to the accuracy of the latter of whom I can bear the most ample testimony. But what can I say of the late Sheik Burckhardt, who was so well acquainted with the language and manners of these people, that none of them suspected him to be an European? His account of the tribes in these countries is so minutely correct, that little or nothing remains for observation in modern Egypt and Nubia.

I have, however, one more remark to make on myself, which I am afraid the reader will think very vain: it is this, that no traveller had ever such opportunities of studying the customs of the natives as were afforded to me, for none had ever to deal with them in so peculiar a manner. My constant occupation was searching after antiquities, and this led me in the various transactions I had with them, to observe the real character of the Turks, Arabs, Nubians, Bedoweens, and Ababdy tribes. Thus I was very differently circumstanced from a common traveller, who goes merely to make his remarks on the country and its antiquities, instead of having to persuade these ignorant and superstitious people to undertake a hard task, in labours, with which they were previously totally unacquainted.

My native place is the city of Padua: I am of a Roman family,

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which had resided there for many years. The state and troubles of Italy in 1800, which are too well known to require any comment from me, compelled me to leave it, and from that time I have visited different parts of Europe, and suffered many vicissitudes. The greater part of my younger days I passed in Rome, the former abode of my ancestors, where I was preparing myself to become a monk; but the sudden entry of the French army into that city altered the course of my education, and being destined to travel, I have been a wanderer ever since. My family supplied me occasionally with remittances; but as they were not rich, I did not choose to be a burthen to them, and contrived to live on my own industry, and the little knowledge I had acquired in various branches. I turned my chief attention to hydraulics, a science that I had learned in Rome, which I found much to my advantage, and which was ultimately the very cause of my going to Egypt. For I had good information, that a hydraulic machine would be of great service in that country, to irrigate the fields, which want water only, to make them produce at any time of the year. But I am rather anticipating. In 1803 I arrived in England, soon after which I married, and, after residing in it nine years, I formed the resolution of going to the south of Europe. Taking Mrs. Belzoni with me, I visited Portugal, Spain, and Malta, from which latter place we embarked for Egypt, where we remained from 1815 to 1819. Here I had the good fortune to be the discoverer of many remains of antiquity of that primitive nation. I succeeded in opening one of the two famous Pyramids of Ghizeh, as well as several of the tombs of the Kings at Thebes. Among the latter, that which has been pronounced by one of the most distinguished scholars of the age to be the tomb of Psammuthis, is at this moment the principal, the most perfect and splendid monument in that country. The celebrated bust of young Memnon, which I brought

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from Thebes, is now in the British Museum; and the alabaster sarcophagus, found in the tombs of the kings, is on its way to England.

Near the second cataract of the Nile, I opened the temple of Ybsambul; then made a journey to the coast of the Red Sea, to the city of Berenice, and afterwards an excursion in the western Elloah, or Oasis. I now embarked for Europe, and after an absence of twenty years, returned to my native land, and to the bosom of my family; from whence I proceeded to England.

On my arrival in Europe, I found so many erroneous accounts had been given to the public of my operations and discoveries in Egypt, that it appeared to be my duty to publish a plain statement of facts; and should any one call its correctness in question, I hope they will do it openly, that I may be able to prove the truth of my assertions.

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HAVING experienced the public condescension towards me, not only in the acceptance of my Narrative, but in their general approbation, I conceive it my duty to express my sincere feeling of gratitude and devotion towards the British nation; and should chance again put me in the way of dedicating my humble services to Great Britain, I shall never fail to remember the generous enthusiasm by which the simple account of my operations, &c. has been received. I think it also my duty to make some remarks on events which have happened since the publication of my volume, and which are calculated to strengthen my opinion in various points, in particular concerning the Temple of Jupiter Ammon in the Oasis el Cassar, and on the Egyptian Labyrinth. According to the descriptions of my old guides, Herodotus and Diodorus, I was led to suppose that the Oasis el Cassar might have been the seat of Jupiter Ammon, as I mention in page 418. It agreed in all points—in its products, and in the distance from the sea, mentioned by Herodotus, cap. clxxxi. Speaking of the Libyans who inhabited the

sea-coast, he tells us, that penetrating the Desert for ten days' journey west, pillars of salt are discovered, from the summits of which flows a stream of water equally cool and sweet; he speaks also of the celebrated Fountain of the Sun, which I mention in my Narrative, page 421. The amazing quantity of salt, the distance, and the fountain, together with many other concomitant circumstances, would have been sufficient proof to induce a hasty writer to conclude that he had reached the seat of Jupiter Ammon; but as I do not possess either the talent or the skill to enable me to judge at first view, caution is therefore the only method I can adopt previous to giving my firm opinion. The Oasis named Siewha was the only rival to that of El Cassar; its distance from the sea, its situation and products, combined to favour a supposition that it might have been the seat of Ammon, though it has not the above fountain. Mr. Brown, the celebrated traveller, and Hermann, have visited that Oasis; but neither asserts positively that place to have been the seat of Jupiter Ammon.

I have the pleasure to acquaint my kind reader, that since my first edition has been published, intelligence has been received that Mahomed Ali, the Pacha of Egypt, had sent an expedition of three hundred soldiers to Siewha; and that two European travellers, Messrs. Linon and Ricci, took that opportunity to visit the above Oasis; and that having examined it at their leisure, they found but scanty and insignificant remains of antiquity. Admitting,

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therefore, that Siewha is not likely to be the sacred spot where Ammon had his temple, what other can it be in these deserts but that which I visited? There are, indeed, two other Oases, that of Siout and that of Esne, (the Augila and the Garamantes mentioned by Herodotus, cap. clxxxii.); but these are so situated that they confirm me in my first opinion. According to that author, the first is about ten days farther on from the Oasis el Cassar; and the second is at other ten days from that, which is towards the Lotophagi. Having considered all these circumstances, with the ruins and tombs I found in the Oasis el Cassar, which has not yet been visited by any European, I hope my reader will not condemn me if I venture to assert, that the seat of Jupiter Ammon cannot be any other than the Oasis el Cassar, described in this volume, pages 418-19.

The next is the Egyptian Labyrinth. There is scarcely any point in the various opinions of the antiquarians which has been so much disputed as this: the seat of the Egyptian Labyrinth is so elaborately described by Herodotus and Pliny, that one would suppose one could go straight to it, and find it there; but to the disappointment of travellers, there is not a single vestige whatsoever left to prove its situation. Many industrious antiquarians have formed various conjectures on that subject, but none give us a positive idea of the seat of this stupendous edifice. Many inquiries have been made of me since the appearance of my publication, and

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I have been almost blamed for not having found its seat. One of the northern journals supposes that I have positively trod upon it, according to my own description, without perceiving that I was on these magnificent ruins. This the writer supposes to be that very place which I called the city of Bacchus, as described in page 385, and plate 23.

The supposition, which arose from the circumstances of my having found several cellars under ground, which would agree thus far with the description of the Labyrinth, is very ingenious and fair from one who has not seen that place; but to prove that I have not committed such an error, I shall only refer to the description of those magnificent ruins, given by Herodotus in cap. cxlviii. and to the description I give of several cellars constructed under ground of sun-burnt bricks, and not more than ten or twelve feet square: as I think the comparison with these 1500 apartments, courts, and stupendous halls covered with white marble, of a sublime workmanship, will fully persuade my reader, that the most enthusiastic mind could not find the smallest ground, to suppose that spot to have been the great Labyrinth of Egypt.

The next, and perhaps the most interesting point, will give more ground to criticism than any other part of this volume. It is my asserting that the Egyptians knew how to form arches with the key-stone. I must certainly acknowledge, that in an enlightened

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age and country like this, it is somewhat presumptuous on my part, to make an assertion which will, if proved right, change the epochs and the origin of arches. I had time to reflect; I took the opinion of many wise and learned men on this subject; and I fully ascertained that they are still in the dark as to whether the Egyptians did or did not know the construction of arches with the key-stone. The arches I have described to be in Thebes are supposed by some to be Roman, by others Saracen; but none can decide, or give any other reason that the Egyptians did not know the use of arches, than that they built no bridges; and that the Greeks themselves had no bridges, till a certain epoch, for want of knowing how to make arches.

In the midst of all these several suppositions, I beg my reader to permit me to give my humble opinion, as it is said that every one can speak his own. In the first instance, I beg to observe, that the manner of building and erecting walls, by the Egyptians, is so totally different from that of any other nation, that if any traveller please to pay a little attention to all he sees in Egypt, particularly on what is known to be done by other nations, and then to compare them with the Egyptian works, he will find that there is a peculiarity in the latter, which renders them totally distinct from any other. I will not enter on the stony works, as that would carry me too far to explain the point intended; but confine myself to the brick work, as my principal document, by which I shall endeavour to persuade my reader, that the Egyptians knew

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how to construct arches by the key-stone, as we do in these days. The reason I give in this volume, at page 176, will perhaps be convincing enough to any one who will go and make his observations on the spot, as he will see clearly that none but the Egyptians could have taken the amazing trouble and labour to erect such walls, to no other purpose than to enclose their tombs; and it cannot be said that the Greeks built those arches in Thebes; for if the Egyptians had not known that art, the Greeks must have been equally ignorant of it.

The Romans are the only people who, according to some, could have erected these arches. I cannot agree with such supposition, as I cannot find a reason why the Romans should make such laborious work to preserve the Egyptian tombs, at an epoch when the Egyptian nation was almost extinct, and regarded by the Romans themselves as a conquered nation, and especially, when their old rites and customs were almost lost in oblivion. I cannot see, I repeat, what interest the Romans could have for so doing: I must therefore persist in observing, that these works are so totally different from the Roman manner of building, and so peculiar to the Egyptians, that I am certain if any impartial traveller will make the above observations in examining the difference of the works of other nations, particularly the Saracens, which are to be seen in various places in Thebes, and indeed, near to these very arches, and built with the same bricks from the ruins of the Egyptians, he will not hesitate to conclude, that these arches were built by the Egyptians.

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The only point which could be produced, perhaps against my assertion is, that the Greeks might come to the knowledge of the arch, and introduce it into Egypt at an epoch when the rites and religious ceremonies of the Egyptians were still in force, I mean under the early Ptolemies; but how this can agree with the epoch of the first invention of the arch, I leave to others more instructed than myself to consider, and even then it still will prove that these arches now existing in Thebes were made by the Egyptians.

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