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978-1-108-01742-8 - Travels and Discoveries in the Levant, Volume 1

Charles Thomas Newton

Excerpt

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TRAVELS
AND
DISCOVERIES IN THE LEVANT.

INTRODUCTION.

IN February, 1852, having been recently appointed by Lord Granville to the Vice-Consulship of Mytilene, I visited the Levant for the first time. In receiving this appointment from the Foreign Office, I was, at the same time, instructed to use such opportunities as presented themselves for the acquisition of antiquities for the British Museum, and with this object I was authorized to extend my researches beyond the limits of my Vice-Consulship; a small annual allowance being granted me for travelling expenses.

In the volume now offered to the public I have recorded the researches and observations during a residence in the Levant of seven years, from 1852 to 1859.

The series of letters in which the work is arranged, were for the most part written in the Levant, at the date which they bear. Much new matter has, however, been inserted in various parts of the text, and these additions have been thrown, for the sake of uniformity, into the form of letters. Perhaps a

more united and harmonious composition could have been produced by recasting the whole of the original letters into one continuous narrative, than by such an amalgamation as I have attempted; but the record of a traveller's first impressions, in their original freshness, will, in most cases, interest the public more than any subsequent composition which may be distilled, in the laboratory of his memory, out of confused and faded images.

In the series of Letters I have inserted several from my friend Mr. Dominic Ellis Colnaghi, now H.M. Consul at Bastia, who left England with me in 1852, and of whose companionship and assistance I had the advantage during the greater part of my sojourn in the Levant.

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IN THE LEVANT.

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LETTER I.

ATHENS, *March 20, 1852.*

WE left Southampton on the 17th February, 1852, in the Peninsular and Oriental Company's steamer "Montrose," from which we were transferred at Gibraltar to the "Ripon," then on her way to Alexandria with the Indian and Australian mails. As I passed through the Straits for the first time and saw the blue expanse of the Mediterranean stretching far away before me, I felt that the true interest of my voyage had there and then commenced. I had made my first step on that ancient highway of navigation of which the Pillars of Hercules were so long the extreme western boundary. My destination was that Ionian coast whence, in the 7th century before the Christian era, issued forth those enterprising mariners who first among the Greeks traversed the length of the Mediterranean and boldly competed with Phœnician traders in the ports of Spain. As, sailing on the track of these early adventurers, I thought over their Odyssean voyages, the recollection seemed to inspire me with fresh hope and energy. I compared myself to one of the old Phocæan mariners seeking for a Tartessus in unknown Western waters, and long cherished visions of discoveries in the Levant seemed to ripen into a positive presentiment of

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success as I advanced on my way towards that land of promise.

We arrived at Malta after a very prosperous voyage, and were most kindly welcomed by my old friends Captains Graves and Spratt, who took a warm interest in my projects, and gave me much valuable information respecting that Levantine world in which I was about to establish myself, and to which I was as yet an utter stranger.

As we had to wait several days at Malta for a steamer to Patras, I took the opportunity of visiting the curious ruins at Krendi, which are generally considered to be of Phœnician origin. These ruins are situated on the south coast of Malta, opposite to a small island called Filfile. They consist of two groups of enclosures formed by masses of stones ranged upright like a paling, over which others are placed horizontally. Some of these stones are from 15 to 20 feet high. The whole have been quarried out of the tertiary calcareous rock on which the enclosures are built. The principal group consists of three large elliptical enclosures, set obliquely to which are three smaller enclosures, also elliptical; this is situated on higher ground than the other group, which is nearer the sea.

Within the outer enclosures are inner walls, in which there is an approximation to regular masonry. The lower part of these inner walls is composed of uprights about six feet in height, above which large blocks are built into regular horizontal courses. In the principal temple are two doorways, through which the central enclosure is approached from the

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east. These have jambs, ornamented with small holes, evidently drilled with a screw, the marks of the worm being visible in each hole. The angles of the jambs are cut away so as to form a kind of pilaster, a slight projection in the upper part of which serves to indicate a capital. The jambs of the doorways, the lintels, and the threshold-stones, are pierced with holes, showing the position of the hinges and bolts of the doors. The irregular ellipses formed by these walls terminate at either end in a kind of apse; in several of these apses the inner wall remains to a considerable height, and bends inwards as it rises, as if it had converged to a conical roof, formed by approaching horizontal courses of masonry. Within the apses are no remains at present of fallen vaulting, as might have been expected if these recesses had been covered over; but the disappearance of all such evidence *in situ* may be accounted for by the fact that these ruins have been cleared out within a recent period.

The inner walls of these ellipses are pierced with a number of square apertures cut out of the large blocks, some of which seem intended to admit light or sound, like the openings in Gothic churches to which ecclesiologists have given the name hagnoscope. Others communicate with small chambers like cupboards, cut in the rock.

Within the enclosures are several altars, formed by large slabs of stone set upon short pillars. One very tall piece of rock towers above these enclosures. Steps cut in the rock lead up to the top, in which is a hollow, as if for a man to stand in. Perhaps this

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isolated rock served as a watch-tower or place for signals.

The lower group is of smaller extent than the upper one, but has its inner walls, doorways, and apertures better preserved. In both groups the space enclosed within the walls is floored over with a rude concrete, composed of gravel and small pieces of stone.

In the upper group I found a block of stone in form like a square Roman altar, on each face of which, within an oblong panel, is a rude relief representing a tree in a basket. Close by this stone is another, on which is carved a rude spiral or volute. In the upper group were also found seven small female figures, cut out of Maltese stone, a skull, a number of human bones, and some stones, shaped like women's breasts. The figures, which are now preserved in the Museum at Malta, range from 1 ft. 8 in. to 1 ft. 2 in. in height.¹ Four are entirely nude, the others draped. Two are seated. The heads are broken away. The proportions and execution of these figures are alike barbarous. The enormous hips and breasts, and bulging outlines, suggest the notion that they are of African origin. At any rate the type represented is unlike that of any of the races of the ancient world, so far as we know them through art.

In both groups of enclosures great quantities of broken pottery have been found. Having obtained authority from the Governor, Sir William Reid, to remove this pottery to the Museum at Malta, where it might be properly cleaned and examined, I transported two cartloads of it, and removed at the same

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time the curious altar with a tree on it, which the sacrilegious hand of the British sightseer had already begun to chip and deface.

The pottery I found to be of several kinds; black ware of a heavy, brittle kind, made of black earth, and ornamented with rude rows of notches or indented triangular marks; finer black ware, less brittle and more polished; coarse red ware, and coarse and fine drab ware. Some of the finer black and drab ware had incised patterns of the rudest kind. All the varieties seem to have been baked in the fire, and have a polished surface. I sent some specimens to the British Museum. Pottery somewhat similar in character has been found in the island of Jersey.

Dr. Henry Barth, the well-known African explorer, has given a detailed description and a plan of these remains in Gerhard's "Archäologische Zeitung" for 1848.² He supposes that both groups of enclosures were hypæthral temples, enclosed within a common *peribolus* wall, of which he found some traces.

According to his plan, the entry into the upper temple is from the east; a doorway opposite to this entry leads into the middle chamber. In the eastern chamber he found an aperture in the wall, communicating with a small outer chamber; through this hole he supposes that oracles were delivered by the priests. In the museum at Malta is a conical stone, three feet high, resembling in form the well-known symbol of Aphrodite, placed in her temples at Paphos and elsewhere.³ This stone, Dr. Barth states to have been found in the most eastern chamber of the upper temple.

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The enclosures at Krendi are very similar to the remains at Gozo, known by the name, Torre dei Giganti; but these latter present certain differences in plan, which have been carefully noted by Dr. Barth. Two heads from female figures discovered within the enclosures at Gozo, have been published by Della Marmora, and seem to be no less barbarous than those at Krendi.⁴ On the whole, it may, I think, be inferred that the remains in both islands are the work of some race much lower in the scale of civilization than the Phœnicians as we know them in ancient history. I am disposed to regard these temples as the work of some indigenous people, who having been brought into contact with Phœnician settlers at some time or other, imbibed from this source some scanty tradition of the arts of civilization; whether, however, these remains should be assigned to a remote or to a late period of pagan antiquity, can only be determined by further evidence.

The day before I left Malta, Mr. Lushington, the chief Secretary of the Government, invited me to be present at the opening of some tombs, at a place called Santi, near Bengemma. These are all cut in the solid rock, on the slope of a hill facing the north, and commanding a beautiful view of the sea. Our party was accompanied by a Maltese gentleman, Dr. Onofrio, who found a tomb when required, with as much sagacity as a pointer finds a partridge.

Each tomb is entered by an oblong aperture cut in the rock, about six feet deep and twice as broad as an English grave, in the side of which is a flight

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of steps. At the bottom of these is a square opening large enough to admit easily a man's body, which leads to a small chamber with a curved ceiling. Each chamber contained one or more skeletons laid on a ledge, and several vases. In one of the graves the heads lay to the N.E., in another to the N.W. The pottery was coarse and unvarnished, of a drab colour, and is probably of the late Roman period. Roman coins are found in these tombs, and as I was informed, Greek coins and vases; but I could not verify this assertion, for everything at Malta is dispersed as soon as found, from the want of a well-organized museum.

It is to be regretted that these tombs are not explored in a more systematic manner than at present, when gay parties meet to hold their picnics over the open grave; the pale ale and champagne corks contrasting strangely with the broken vases, relics probably of a funeral feast held on this spot fifteen hundred years ago.

We left Malta in the English mail steamer "Medina," and arrived at Patras after a very stormy passage. Here I first saw a Greek town. The strange half-savage look of the inhabitants, with their shaggy capotes and white kilts, seemed quite in harmony with the wild desolate character of the landscape, shut in by high mountains, which at the time of our visit were covered with snow.

We were most kindly received by the British Vice-Consul, Mr. William Wood, who has been engaged in the currant trade at Patras for some years.

He took us to see a fine marble sarcophagus in

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the garden of a M. Kritikos. On the front is a relief of eight naked boys, with the type of Cupid, but wingless. At one end of the sarcophagus are Bellerophon, Pegasus, and the Chimæra; at the opposite end a female sphinx seated. These sculptures are executed in a better style than is generally found on sarcophagi.

The bottom inside is perforated with round holes, five inches above which is a thin slab. The body, probably, was placed on this, the perforations below being intended to drain off all that was dissolved in the process of natural decay.

Having to wait for an Austrian steamer to take us to Corinth, we rode to see a castle at Rhion, the Gibraltar which commands the narrowest point in the gulf.

In this fortress were a number of prisoners, the most determined cut-throats and bandits in all Greece. They were kept in cells, through the bars of which we could see them. Their eyes had a ferocious glare, like those of wild beasts in a cage. Two sentinels were pacing up and down with their muskets loaded, ready to fire in case there was any attempt to escape, and a cannon was placed so as to command the whole line of windows. One of these brigands managed to escape two or three years ago, and afterwards committed fourteen murders, and when he was again tried and condemned, threatened the judge and jury with death. When he was taken to execution, he managed to conceal a small knife, with which he cut his cords, and then defied the executioner. It happened, however, that among the