

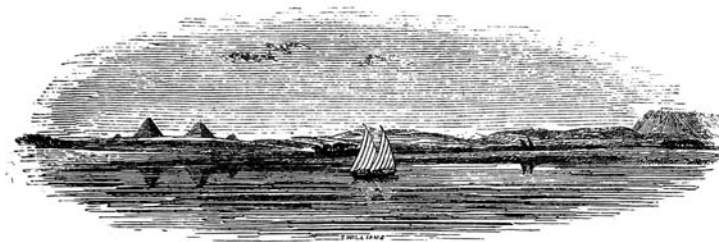
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John Gardner Wilkinson

Excerpt

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MANNERS AND CUSTOMS
OF THE
ANCIENT EGYPTIANS.



VIGNETTE A. The Pyramids, during the Inundation, from near the Fork of the Delta.

CHAPTER I.

Origin of the Egyptians. — Slow Increase of the Delta. — The Ægyptus of Homer. — Ethiopia sometimes put for the Thebaïd. — Early State of Society. — The Hunter, Shepherd, and Agriculturist. — Hierarchy of Egypt. — Menes the first King. — Neither Osiris nor any other Deity ever supposed by the Egyptians to have lived on Earth. — Period elapsed from Menes to the Persian Invasion. — Oldest Monuments of Egypt. — The Pyramids. — Osirtasen Contemporary of Joseph. — The Pastor Kings not the Jews. — Early Advancement of Egypt, from the Monuments and Scripture History. — Nothing certain before Osirtasen I.

THE oldest and most authentic record of the primeval state of the world is unquestionably the Scripture history; and, though the origin of its early inhabitants is only traced in a general and comprehensive manner, we have sufficient data for conjecture on some interesting points.

VOL. I.

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I am fully aware of the profound metaphysical import of the first book of Moses, but the allusions to real events are no less obvious and important; and it is to these alone that I shall have occasion to advert in the present inquiry.

Every one who considers the features, the language, and other peculiarities of the ancient Egyptians, will feel convinced that they are not of African extraction, but that, like the Abyssinians and many inhabitants of the known valley of the Nile*, they bear the evident stamp of an Asiatic origin; and Juba, according to Pliny†, affirms that “the people of the banks of the Nile, from Syene to Meroe, were not Ethiopians‡, but Arabs.” And if feature and other external appearances are insufficient to establish this fact, the formation of the skull, which is decidedly of the Caucasian variety, must remove all doubt of their valley having been peopled from the East: and some may even consider it directly alluded to in the book of Genesis§, where Ham, the son of Noah, and his immediate descendants, are said to have inhabited the lands of Ethiopia, Egypt||, Libya, and Canaan. The name of Ham¶ is, in fact, the same as that of Egypt, Khem, or Cham; and Moses may have pointed out the eastern origin of the Egyptians

* That is, the Neel-el-Azrek, ‘the Blue,’ or more properly ‘the Black Nile,’ in contradistinction to the Neel-el-Abiad, ‘the White (River) Nile.’ Azrek is commonly used to signify black as well as blue.

† Plin. lib. vi. 34. ‡ That is, *Blacks*. § Gen. x. 1—6.

|| Mizraim, or Mizrim, a plural word applied to Egypt (Gen. i. 11. *et passim*), is the Hebrew mode of expressing the ‘two regions of Egypt’ (so commonly met with in the hieroglyphics), or the ‘two Misr,’ a name still used by the Arabs, who call all Egypt, as well as Cairo, Musr or Misr. Thummim or Thmim is in like manner ‘the two truths.’

¶ Ham is also put for Egypt, as in Psalm lxxviii. 51. and other parts of Scripture.

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CHAP. I. ORIGIN OF THE EGYPTIANS. 3

by introducing him as a son of Noah. But it is more reasonable to suppose that a colony of Asiatics settled in Egypt at a subsequent period, and that to this cause we ought to attribute the marked distinction between the head of the Egyptians and the Blacks. Conjecture, however, is unable to fix the time when the event took place; and though it may be ascribed to an era when parts of the earth were already thickly peopled, yet probability suggests that it occurred when nations were in their infancy, and at a period far beyond the reach of history.

There has always been a striking resemblance between the Egyptians and Asiatics, both as to their manners, customs, language, and religion; and some authors have considered the valley they inhabited to belong to Asia rather than to Africa*: others, again, have divided the country into two parts, the east and west banks of the Nile, assigning the former to Asia, the latter to Africa, and taking the river as the boundary line of the two continents. In manner, language, and many other respects, Egypt was certainly more Asiatic than African; and though there is no appearance of the Hindoo and Egyptian religions having been borrowed from one another, which many might be induced to conclude from their great analogy in some points, yet it is not improbable that those two nations may have proceeded from the same original stock, and have migrated southwards from their parent country in central Asia.

* Plin. v. 9.

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It has been the opinion of many that colonisation and civilisation descended the Nile from Ethiopia, and that the parents of Egyptian science came from the land of Cush. But this notion appears from modern investigation to be totally at variance with fact; and the specimens of art that remain in Ethiopia are not only inferior in conception to those of the Egyptian school, but are deficient in that character which evinces originality. Indeed, I question if the name Ethiopians was exclusively applied to the inhabitants of the country lying beyond Syene; and there is abundant reason to believe, as I shall presently show, that Ethiopia, when mentioned in the sacred history and by many profane authors, in conjunction with Egypt, frequently signified the Thebaid, the school of learning and the parent of Egyptian science.

Ethiopia, though a vague name, was applied to that country, lying beyond the cataracts, which in the Scriptures, and in the Egyptian language, is called Cush; and black people*, designated as natives of "the foreign land of Cush," are generally represented on the Egyptian monuments, either as captives, or as the bearers of tribute to the Pharaohs.

That *civilisation* advanced northwards from the Thebaid to Lower Egypt is highly probable; and the custom of giving precedence to the title "Upper Country," in the hieroglyphic legends,

* Plutarch says Egypt was called Chemi (χημη) from the blackness (χαμει) of its soil. May not Ethiopia, 'the black country,' have been a translation of Chemi?

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HAP. I. SLOW PROGRESS OF THE DELTA. 5

may be adduced as an argument in favour of this opinion. But the period at which this civilisation commenced is not within the limits of history; and neither this nor its gradual descent northwards are subjects on which we can speculate with certainty or satisfaction. And, indeed, if we listen to Herodotus, and other writers who maintain that the Delta is of recent date, we are led to the necessity of allowing an immeasurable time for the total formation of that space, which to judge from the very little accumulation of its soil, and the small distance it has encroached on the sea, since the erection of the ancient cities within it, would require numerous ages, and throw back its origin far beyond the Deluge, or even the Mosaic era of the Creation.

Tanis, now San, and in Hebrew Zan or Tzan (Zoan), at a very remote period of Egyptian history was already founded upon a plain or "field*," at some distance from the sea shore; and the vestiges of its ruins are still traced within a few miles of the coast.† The lapse of 3190 years, from the days of the great Remeses, has neither made any sensible alteration in the circumjacent levels, nor protruded the land to any distance beyond it into the sea; and if in such a length of time the alluvial deposit of the Nile has been unable to work a

* Psalm lxxviii. 12. and 43. 'In the field of Zoan,' נַשְׂרָה זֵעַן.

† That is, of the lake Ménzaleh. Thenesus (Thennési) stood in that lake, or marsh, and consequently much nearer the sea. Again, Canopus, and many other towns and buildings of which vestiges remain, were, as at present, immediately on the sea shore, in the time of the Ptolemies and Pharaohs, upwards of 2000 years ago.

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sensible change, how can it for a moment be supposed that a period of a thousand years, which elapsed between the Deluge and the early part of that king's reign, would suffice for the formation of the *whole* Delta? Remarks which apply with still greater force to Pelusium, Taposiris, and Canopus, which actually stood upon the sea shore: for, as the learned Bochart justly observes, since the Egyptians themselves reported the Tanitic Mouth, and the towns of Busiris, Taphosiris, Butus, and Pelusium, to have existed even in the early time of Osiris and Horus, they must have known them not to be of recent date; and Homer allows Menelaus to have come to Canopus.* And that Tanis was already built in the age of Remeses the Great, we have evidence from the sculptured monuments now existing in its ruins, in addition to the positive authority of Scripture, Moses himself assuring us that it was founded long before the Exodus, seven years after the town of Hebron.†

It is, then, evident that neither was the period elapsed between the Deluge and the building of Tanis sufficient to form the Delta, nor the constant accumulation of the alluvial deposit of the Nile capable of making so perceptible a change in the extent of that district, as to authorise us to suppose the upper parts of the country peopled and civilised, while the Delta was a marsh; how

* Bochart's *Sacra*, lib. iv. c. 24.

† Numbers, xiii. 22. 'Hebron was built seven years before Zoan.' It already existed in the days of Abraham. 'And Sarah died in Kirjath-arba: the same is Hebron.' Gen. xxiii. 2. conf. Josh. xv. 13. and Judg. i. 10.

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much less then can we suppose Ethiopia to have been already inhabited by the ancestors of the future colonisers of Egypt, while that part of the valley lying below the cataracts of Syene was undergoing its formation?

Much consequence has been attached to an expression of Homer, that “the distance from the Isle of Pharos to Αἴγυπτος was as much as a vessel with a fair wind could perform in one day;” and this is constantly adduced as a decisive proof of the great accumulation of alluvial soil in the Delta*, and of its rapid advances into the Mediterranean, since the era of the Trojan war. But a very imperfect acquaintance with the situation of the Isle of Pharos, and the nature of the ground on which Alexandria is built, ought to have prevented so erroneous a conclusion; and if we readily account for the misconstruction of the Αἴγυπτου προπαροίθη† of the poet, we are surprised at the notion which extends the river and its alluvial deposit *over the space between* the Canopic mouth and the Pharos, hitherto unwashed by the fertilising waters of the rising Nile. And if a certain deposit does take place *in the harbour* of Alexandria, it is very trifling, and by no means capable of having united Pharos to the shore, which was done artificially by means of the Heptastadium, whose increased breadth, owing to many subsequent additions, now forms the base of the chief part of the modern city. Ancient

* Plutarch de Iside. s. 40.

† Odyss. Δ. 355. By the harbour and fresh water at the I. of Pharos, Homer evidently alludes to the site of the modern Alexandria, close to the island.

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Alexandria, the successor of the town of Racôtis stood on the *rock* of the Libyan desert, which is still beyond the reach and above the level of the inundation; and the distance from the line of the coast to Pharos is the same as in the days of Homer. The error respecting its having been a day's journey from Egypt originated in the misinterpretation of the word *Αἴγυπτος*, which is used by the poet to designate both the Nile and Egypt; and that the river was so called in ancient times is testified by the authority of Diodorus, who states that Nileus, one of the early monarchs* of the country, transferred his name to the stream, "which previously bore that of Ægyptus."† Arrian‡ again justly observes, that "the river, now called by the Egyptians and others Nile, is shown by Homer to have been named Ægyptus, when he relates§ that Menelaus anchored his fleet at the mouth of the Ægyptus;" and the bare inspection of the verse to which he alludes suffices to prove his remark to be correct. It is, then, to the Nile, not to the coast of Egypt, that Homer alludes: and thus the argument derived from his authority must cease to be brought forward in support of the great encroachments of the Delta, and

* Diodorus places him as the predecessor of Chembres, who erected the great pyramid.

† Manetho says Egypt took its name from Sethosis, who was also called Ægyptus, and was brother of Armais. Josephus contra Ap. lib. i. c. 15. Aulus Gellius tells us Egypt was formerly named Aeria. (xiv. 6.) *

‡ Arr. Exped. Alex. lib. v. and lib. vi.

§ Odys. Δ. 477. and Ξ. 257. :—

‘ Πεμπταιοὶ δ’ Αἴγυπτον εὐρρέιτην ἰκομεσθα,
Στήσα δ’ ἐν Αἴγυπτῳ ποταμῷ νεᾶς ἀμφιέλισσας :’

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CHAP. I. ALLUVIAL DEPOSIT OF THE NILE. 9

of the constant advance of the land into the receding sea.

To any person who has examined the levels of the alluvial deposit of the Nile in various parts of its course, as from the first cataract to its mouth at Rosetta*, it is well known that the perpendicular stratum of soil, if I may so call it, decreases in thickness as it approaches the sea; and thus at Elephantine the land has been raised about nine feet in 1700 years, at Thebes about seven, and so on, gradually diminishing to the mouth. There, indeed, the deposit is lessened in a very remarkable degree, much more than in the same decreasing ratio, in consequence of the greater extent of the land, east and west, over which the inundation spreads; so that, in a section representing the accumulated soil and the level of the low Nile, the angle of inclination would be much smaller from the fork of the Delta to the sea, than from the Thebaid to the Delta. And this is satisfactorily proved by the increase of the banks and the surface of the country at Elephantine, Thebes, Heliopolis, the vicinity of old Cairo, and other places, where the positions of ancient monuments attest the former levels of the land's surface, and enable us to ascertain the increase within a known period. Around the base of the obelisk at Heliopolis, erected by Osirtasen I. about 1700 years before our era, the alluvial soil has accumulated to the height of five feet ten

* The banks during the low Nile are upwards of 30 feet high in parts of Nubia, in middle Egypt 20, and decrease as they are nearer the mouth.

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inches* ; and, comparing this with Elephantine, we shall find that a monument placed there at the same period would have been buried to the depth of about nineteen feet. Heliopolis stood to the south of the Delta ; and the diminution northwards, for every mile, in an expanse of increasing breadth, must have been proportionably greater as it approached the sea, till at the shore it became almost imperceptible, even after the lapse of many ages.

Having endeavoured to show that no argument can be derived from the appearance of the Delta, to favour the supposition of this district having been formed at a period when the upper part of the country was already inhabited, it is necessary to observe that I limit my remarks exclusively to the Nile, whose nature is very different from that of most rivers, and particularly those whose deltas have been created and rapidly increased by materials brought down by their waters, and deposited at their mouths. These, consisting of trees and other vegetable productions, have tended to form here and there a nucleus for the construction of islands, afterwards connected with the mainland, and consolidated by alluvial deposit and fresh materials constantly adhering to them ; but this peculiarity is totally unknown at the mouth of the Egyptian Nile.

It is not my present intention to enter into any speculation upon the formation of the alluvial land

* In my *Egypt and Thebes* (p. 313.) I have said 'between seven and eight feet.' This was from information I received at Cairo, and, suspecting it to be erroneous, I sent to have it ascertained, and found it to be as stated above.