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978-1-108-07608-1 - Thebes: Its Tombs and Their Tenants Ancient and Present: Including
a Record of Excavations in the Necropolis

Alexander Henry Rhind

Excerpt

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THEBES:

ITS TOMBS AND THEIR TENANTS.

CHAPTER I.

THEBES.

As the tombs of the Thebans are chiefly the subject of the present volume, and as the various accompaniments with which that people surrounded themselves in death were interwoven so remarkably with the details of their life, it would seem a desirable preliminary to indicate what degree of knowledge we possess regarding their ancient city. The main outlines, therefore, I shall endeavour to trace, pointing out how far actual materials come before us for survey, where they at present fail, and whence it is possible they may yet be supplemented. In course of such a review, it will unfortunately appear that a great deal is wanting for clearness of result; and as very many features remain obscure, cause for regret will frequently arise. Nor will this be only from a feeling of disappointment, that a picture so interest-

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ing in itself must stand incomplete, but also on the higher grounds which in archæological inquiries, as constituting their real value, should be always more or less proximately kept in view, that the importance of the relics, and especially of such relics, of the Old World, is not in relation to the merely technical or isolated facts which they individually exhibit, but to the conditions of life and human development which they with others unfold.

The links which connect us with the past are as manifold as the springs of our inner life, and the external conditions which surround us. But by their continuity and fine gradation, they become attenuated so nearly to an impalpable essence, that a reconstruction, showing the chain in its completeness, while it might hardly be necessary to assure us of the reality of the intertwining strands, would, nevertheless, task or transcend the utmost powers of human perception to follow them. If one long gleam of light were to be thus thrown back athwart the ages, the most self-confident gazer would anxiously hope that it might hover luminously over the great cities, believing probably that from them he would derive the best aid to carry him on from point to point, by finding there contemporary characteristics as in a concentrated focus. For, although the seats in which men have gregariously assembled cannot in all respects, or at least in all cases, be regarded as a full embodiment of their condition, or a precise criterion of their peculiar civilization, they are, upon the whole, the most trustworthy and intelligible

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HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE OF CITIES.

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indices of both. Being, as it were, the adaptable matrix developed, often produced, by the requirements, tastes, habits of their occupants, or by the necessities and circumstances under which they lived, towns might naturally be supposed to bear the direct impress of co-existing public, private, and social life. Moreover, if they possessed a metropolitan character, they might also be expected to exhibit some evidence of the relative standard of skill and capacity, as well as of the general resources, of a country, no less than of the manner in which, as regards domestic affairs, these were directed either by the genius of the people, or by the exigencies of the rule under which they lived.

And since it is from facts like these that can best, or indeed, alone be traced the relationship of epoch to epoch, of country to country, of the present with all the past, they may justly be regarded as among the most valuable constituents for historic investigation. The area of History has been greatly widening since Thucydides, in his preface, proposed to himself to record past facts as a basis of rational provision in regard to the future. And if a corresponding ancient maxim is to retain any force, that the essential principle of the science is the practical benefit of "teaching by example," it can only be by an extended application. We may, indeed, vainly look for lessons deduced from consideration of political detail or individual career in the past, which would be directly applicable to the changed and changeful conditions that have succeeded. Any such hope should recall all that is included in the truth thus

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condensed by De Tocqueville :—“ Il faut une science politique nouvelle à un monde tout nouveau.” But as even in this view we cannot afford to lose the advantage of gaining some experience of what has been the sequence of events, and to abide in the inexperienced boyhood, which the ancient orator not inaptly attributed to those who were ignorant of precedent occurrences, it must be recognised that any really practical teaching can only proceed from the very same comprehensive plan of treatment as systematic ethnography also requires. There is but one pathway to substantial results, and that lies through not solely or chiefly the annals of government, but through the analytical process which would exhibit the various developments of nations and races, the circumstances of their growth, their efforts in the scheme of human action and progress, as shown by the actual products, material and moral, of their existence. And what should be sought as the true studies for such pictures are photographs, so to say, of public and social life,—not compositions sketched according to assumed laws of reaction and causation, filled in with realities, it may be, but so grouped and interpreted as merely to reflect the mind of the artist instead of the spirit of the past.* The value of broad

* “ Was ihr den Geist der Zeiten heisst,
Das ist im Grund der Herren eigner Geist,
In dem die Zeiten sich bespiegeln.”—Göthe, *Faust*.

Or, as Sir Thomas Browne expresses it: “ And truly since I have understood the occurrences of the world, and know in what counterfeiting

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DETAILS OF FEW ANCIENT CITIES KNOWN. 5

conceptions, if well balanced, is at once to be admitted ; but all the more requisite is the corrective and vitalising influence of such series of facts, as might help to show the life of a people or period, not merely from one or two external points of view, but in its actuality and, as nearly as possible, in its aggregate.

From the degree, therefore, in which cities receive the stamp of contemporary thought, manners, and general development, they ought to be, in connection with relative chronological aid, one of the sources richest in illustration : and the ruins of those which have sunk are the depositories of more than curious architectural fragments. But, unfortunately, although very naturally, when their period of active existence lies far back into the past, the great majority have left in written records as little memory of the life once enclosed within their walls as the changeful course of events and the laws of resolution into crude matter have spared of their actual vestiges. Yet such recorded pictures, and such tangible remains, are each the necessary complement of the other. For, as we have not succeeded to the inheritance of the eastern prince, no wizard has for us combined both by freezing up actual examples of town life into petrifactive unity, if Vesuvius has partially embalmed for us two inferior specimens. Indeed, of many even of the great cities whose names are synonymous with central points in

shapes and deceitful vizards times present represent on the stage things past, I do believe them little more than things to come." — *Religio Medici*, xxix.

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THEBES.

the history of the world, we have so few authentic details, or so few remaining relics, that it is impossible clearly to reduce, into definite shapes, the mere hazy phantoms of their ancient renown hovering over more or less doubtful sites. Of not more than one or two, namely Athens and Rome, whose prosperity lies beyond a period so comparatively near to us as the Revival of learning, is it practicable, from a sufficient body of evidence, to form a reasonably full conception as to their structure, civic arrangements, and daily routine; and it is remarkable how very few are so happily circumstanced from the kindly dealing of time with their own vestiges or with coetaneous documents which more or less directly portray their characteristics, that they are capable of yielding even such modified result as the partial gratification of that instinctive desire which seeks to recall in something like their reality, the dwellings, haunts, and surroundings of the men of the past, and so to impart to history that body and consistency which scenery gives to the drama.

In the case of one of the most celebrated of all the cities of antiquity, Egyptian Thebes, the data bearing upon what its condition had been, are in certain respects unusually expressive, and in others anomalously silent. The site is certain. The remarkable preservation of individual ruins of singular extent and magnificence, show the peculiar development of native art as conjoined with architectural design, the direction of its bent, and a capacity for vast under-

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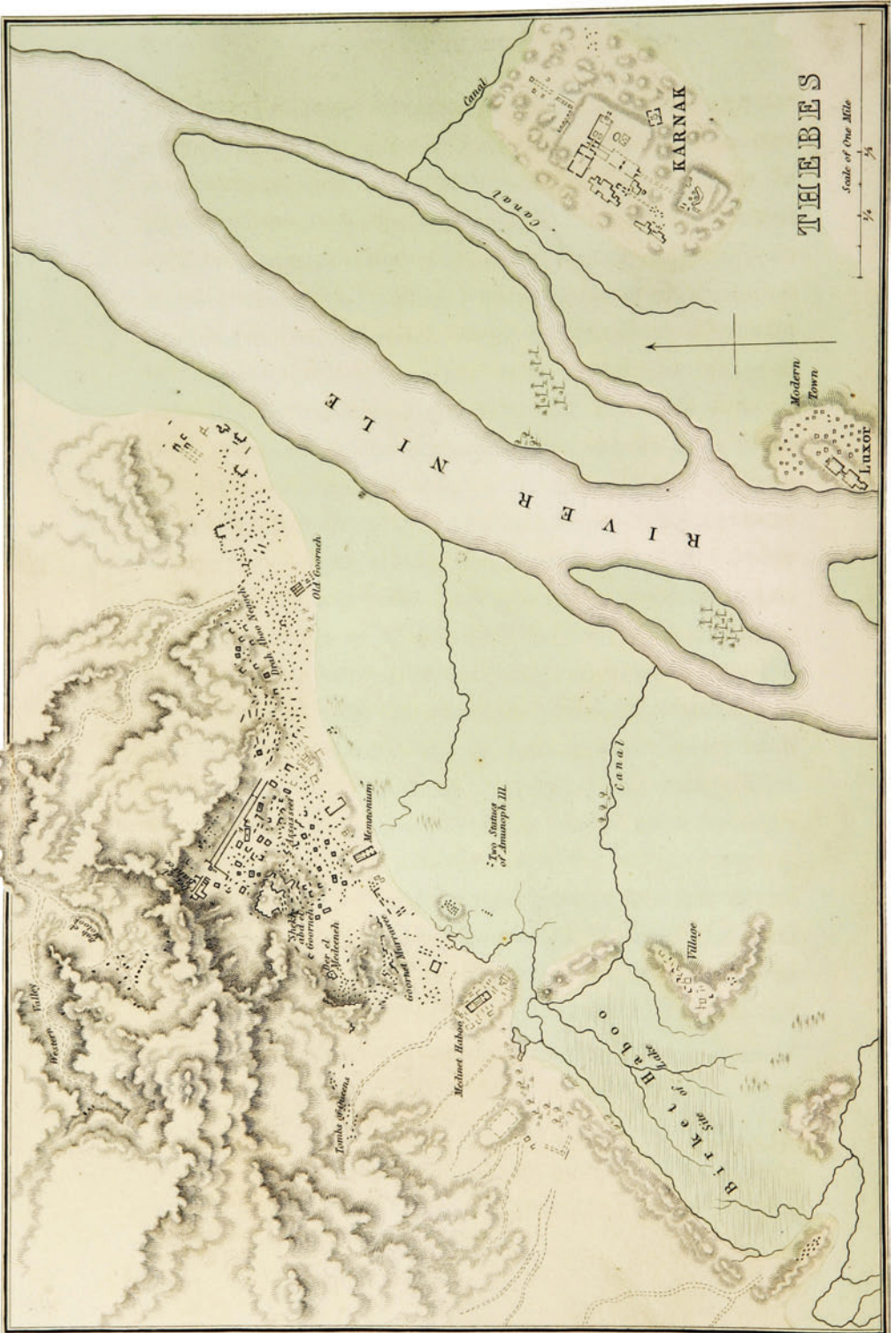
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Platz 1.



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PRESENT ASPECT OF ITS SITE.

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takings. Recovered relics and pictorial details from various sepulchral sources offer a key to a large number of the incidents of life which had concurrently performed their part. But of the actual structure of the city, of its general outline, much more of internal details, it is possible, from the very limited amount of attainable guidance, to speak only inferentially and in the highest degree vaguely. In the first place, the present aspect of the plain on which it stood is such as to offer almost no assistance on the subject. Not merely does it fail to present a sufficient body of vestiges for a reconstruction satisfactory to technical rules, but in itself it might equally defy the efforts of any beholder scanning the scene untrammelled by rigid procedure, and striving only to shadow forth to his own mind something like a resuscitation to satisfy the natural impulse which endeavours to conjure up dead cities when gazing on their graves.

Whence this arises will be more readily understood if, aided here by the map*, Plate I., we glance for a moment at the principal features of the wide prospect across and along the valley of the Thebäis, commanded from a lofty peak of the mountain range of the Western Desert, immediately overhanging the Necropolis. A rich plain of intensest green lies stretched out with unnatural minuteness under that cloudless sky. It is

* In this map prominence is given to the chief points, and the obscurity of overcrowding is as far as possible avoided. In the relation of the outlines I have with his friendly approval always had reference to Sir G. Wilkinson's excellent large Survey published in 1830.

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cut into two very unequal divisions by the sweeping curves of the broad and gently flowing stream of the Nile, which glides in where a bend in the hilly outline of the desert bounds the horizon to the south, and similarly is lost towards the north. First, as being immediately in front, although three miles distant on the eastern bank of the river, and almost casting its shadow upon the water, the eye rests on the great Temple of Luxor, with its obelisk, its low heavy towers, and its sturdy columns struggling in noble contrast with the mud or crude brick hovels of the modern village, which crowd around and even on them. A mile farther and to the north, the massive portal towers of Karnak overtop a grove of palms which partially hide the forest of clustering pillars, the avenues of sphinxes and bulls, the obelisks, the statues, the endless sculptured halls, and cells, and colonnades, covering an area full half a mile in diameter, amid acres of mounds which bury other buildings within the precincts of this sacred range, where age after age had lavished its efforts of religious zeal, grafting temple upon temple.* Between these two grand groups of

* It is scarcely necessary to say that it is no part of my plan to enter into minute descriptions of the various Theban temples, repeating details already elaborately set forth in the well-known repositories of Egyptian research, and which those who prize them in their completeness will prefer to seek there,— *e.g.* in Wilkinson's earlier work, *Thebes and View of Egypt*, or in its subsequent editions under different titles, the last being the *Handbook*, 1858; in his *Architecture of Ancient Egypt*; in Champollion's *Lettres écrites d'Égypte et de Nubie*, and his *Monuments de l'Égypte*; Rosellini's *Monumenti dell' Egitto*; Lepsius'