

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE TEMPLE OF MUT.



PART I.

INTRODUCTION.



CHAPTER I.

THE Arab village of Luxor stands on the site of that part of ancient Thebes which was built on the east bank of the Nile. The cultivated land on each side of the river, which is in some parts of Egypt very narrow, here spreads out into a broad oasis; on the Luxor side this is as much as four or five miles broad, on the west bank from a mile and a half to two miles. As one comes up the river from the north the chain of hills on the left hand is almost continuous. Near Cairo this is called the Mokattam range; the hills form a bank low, perpendicular, cut out like a raised map, or like a bank of sand through which a stream of water has eaten its way. As one travels south the ridges at times approach the water so closely indeed as to rise a sheer wall from its edge; with their regular horizontal stratifications, worn and weathered into small roughnesses, they seem to be

B

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

graven with vast hieroglyphic inscriptions; and as seen from the boat, these look scarcely more irregular than the square-hewn doorways of the tombs hollowed out in the face of the cliff. Here and there the rocky walls open out to show, if one has luck to note it, some ruined city of Roman times with Titanic walls and great empty gateways: a city built out of the rock it stands on, and so rough-hewn and huge that one questions whether this too is not a freak of nature. Sometimes the hills retire again from the river, leaving a broad space of cultivated land and a belt of desert; and the clefts that run up these hills end in a top so flat that one cannot but imagine the summits levelled by a gigantic plane.

In the north there are no hills on the west side of the river; but a great raised bank of sand on which pyramids stand—the only breaks in the long soft curves of the horizon; but below Thebes the Libyan hills begin to form themselves, and as one approaches Luxor there is a chain on the right hand and on the left; these open out broadly on each side and nearly close again some way above the village. The flat-topped hills on the east break at Thebes into the points and ridges of the Gebel el Geir; the square-shouldered Libyan chain of the west descends with slopes and precipices sharply outlined against more distant mountains. The fainter tints of the north have given place to the gold of the limestone hills, showing in ethereal

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAP. I.] THE FOUNDING OF THEBES.

3

colours of rose and blue in the morning, glowing with a richer rose and more vivid blue shadows in the sunset. The fields between the river and the hills stand deep in corn and luxuriant crops of vetch and bean; there are groves of palm mingled with the thicker foliage of the sycamore-fig and tamarisk. All the plain on either hand is intersected with canals large and small, fed from the great sweep of shining river by means of the *shadoof*, whose workers chant their interminable narratives; and by the *sâkiyeh*, whose creaking wood groans out a strange Gregorian melody to the treading of the oxen. Behind the fields a strip of sandy desert stretches up to the barren hills.

This then was the site of that provincial capital, which under the kings of the 11th dynasty, about three thousand years before Christ, became the capital of Egypt.

One must not think indeed that the place was uninhabited before. Egypt was perhaps fuller of life than it is now. All the graveyards since the Arab conquest form but little patches on the country; while the mountains are pierced and the ground under one's feet hollowed from end to end of Egypt for the graves of the old inhabitants of the land. One has only to journey a few days up the Nile to understand the satire of the Israelite's taunt, "Are there no graves in the land of Egypt?"

Thus we find in Thebes traces of habitation

B 2

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

dating even before the time when the Antefs and the Mentuhotepts made it into their capital—traces not indeed of the houses of the people or the palaces of the kings, for such habitations they esteemed in truth mere “inns” for their life, and built them to endure for a season. But what remain to us, after four thousand years, are the dwellings of the gods and the “Eternal Habitations” of the dead.

Having once become the capital, Thebes retained the supremacy through the glories of Egyptian history, through party strife of native kings and through sack and destruction of the foreign invader. Builder succeeded to builder and restorer to restorer. The city never wholly declined from its pre-eminence until Alexander established his rival capital in the north.

Even after this the Ptolemaic kings built at Thebes, decorated its earlier temples, and added to their dignity by gateways and precinct walls: until the name of the hundred-gated Thebes can have been no hyperbole.

In Roman times the current of progress set in a new direction. The conquering race, whose civilisation was in some ways so much ruder, had yet a force which drew the tide of progress northwards.

“It is Roman” a fellah, who receives two piastres a day for his digging, will say with supreme contempt, turning from the object he has disinterred: or the Arab guardian of a temple will scream out

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

his fury at the ruthless Roman destruction ; “Bad, stupid Romans, not understand hieroglyphics,” I heard one cry.

But arts which had been at their finest some three thousand years before, learning such as the priests taught Moses, declined before the sterner qualities of the conqueror, and civilisation, which had dwelt so long in Egypt, followed the Roman to Europe.

While yet Hellenic influences, mixing with the old world of thought, were forming centres of philosophic speculation in northern Egypt, Christianity made its unnoticed entrance into the land.

Though in the north indeed, where it clashed with base mythologies and impious Emperor-worship, there streamed from the combat the blood of martyrs, witnessing in the spectacles to angels and men the truths of an opponent creed ; yet through the rest of the land it spread with an extraordinary speed, converting rather than combating the ancient belief. Thus the Ankh, the sign of life, became to the Copts the *tau* cross ; and when the Temple of Hatshepsut became Deir el Bahari, “the Convent of the North,” the bodies in their mummied wrappings displayed the chalice and ears of corn on the breast, while Anubis, the god of the dead, was painted below.

In quite another wise came the next movement of religious fervour when Mohammed’s half-tamed hordes swept over Africa ; and above the temples of Egypt there grew up Arab villages whose in-

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

habitants retained in strange stories of Afrîts or in uncomprehended ritual some of the tradition and religious ceremonies of an alien past.

But while a little was thus retained much was lost. Tombs were plundered ; papyri were destroyed, for their lore was judged by the all-sufficient standard of the Koran either impious or superfluous.

Yet after all the destruction of old foes, ruthless conquerors, and semi-civilised invaders, the wealth of monuments that Thebes has still to show gives some slight indication of the glories of the past.

Three days are judged by the majority of tourists a sufficient time in which to see the monuments of a capital whose rise and fall occupied a longer time than the whole history of Europe from the Roman supremacy to the present day. This time must be parcelled out so that each day shall give a passing glimpse of two or three temples, whose history occupies some centuries, and of tombs of royal, official or private people.

No one during this period, with such a programme to carry out, can be expected to go round by a small temple which lies between Luxor and Karnak ; and the Temple of Mut can hardly hope to claim even half an hour's study except from the comparatively leisured.

Yet a temple which has been built and added to through a period of two thousand years or more ; on which most of the illustrious Pharaohs during

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

that time have left their record ; which has yielded between thirty and forty statues of themselves and their subjects, some high and important officials, some private persons ; which is unique in its statues of the goddess to whom it is dedicated ; and which moreover occupies one of the most charming temple sites in Egypt, is surely worthy of a little study.

The temple of Luxor is little more than a mile from the great temple of Amen at Karnak, and from the front of the temple at Luxor an avenue of ram-headed sphinxes extended to the southernmost gate of the temple precincts at Karnak. The mouldered bases of these sphinxes can still be seen as the high road leaves the village of Luxor. This high road, an uneven dusty track, raised above the level of the fields so that it may be unaffected by the inundation, continues its way about a quarter of a mile from the river bank until it enters the palm grove which surrounds Karnak.

Just before reaching this grove the road parts into two ; the left-hand track, traversing the grove and striking again the avenue of sphinxes, leads up to the Ptolemaic gateway in front of the temple of Khonsu, where one first catches sight of the whole length of the Great Temple of Karnak. It is a beautiful road, for the palms cast interlacing shadows on the path, and the sphinxes, here in better preservation, hold between their paws little figures of the king who erected them. Before this

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

road reaches the pylon another avenue of sphinxes, some buried, some showing above the dust heads of rams or men, parts from it and runs with an irregular curve to the east, and presently passes before the front of the Temple of Mut.

The road which one left to the right before entering the palm grove, is a broad track. It passes the end of a small ruined temple, roofless and with walls broken down, skirts the outer curve of the Sacred Lake at Mut, and, rising slightly, disappears between sandheaps, forming a gap through which one sees the distant rosy hills of the Gebel el Geir.

Thus the Sphinx Avenue under the palm trees on the west, with its branch which leads to the northern gate of the Temple of Mut, and the broad track to the south, form three sides of a rough parallelogram enclosing the temple with its precinct; the fourth side of the parallelogram is formed by high mounds of tumbled sandheaps.

The area so enclosed is an arid sandy tract—the sand not so loose that it is blown by winds, but dry and infertile, bound into a hardish soil by the dead roots of thin straggling grass.

At the south-west corner of this area is the ruined temple before mentioned, in front of which two colossal standing statues are pitched forward on their shoulders. At the north-east corner is another ruined temple, and in front of this also a great statue of a king rests on the earth in such

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

wise that one cannot see if the head is buried or destroyed.

Approximately in the middle of the space thus left is a lake, the Lake of Asher, shaped like a horseshoe, and on the promontory of earth which this encloses stands the Temple of Mut.

Towards the end of a stay in Egypt in 1894, I first went to see this temple, having heard no more of it than that there were granite statues with cats' heads to be seen there; the donkey boys knew it, but it was not a usual excursion. Yet it was a place to seize upon the imagination.

The gateway into the first court was filled with earth nearly up to the top. A few yards to the north of this lay yet another gateway, and between the two a triple line of sphinxes. The creature next to the northernmost gate has a man's face, which looks serenely out of the choking earth. From this gate a grove of feathery tamarisks stretches northwards again to Karnak; and beneath the tamarisks runs yet another avenue of mouldered sphinxes.

The temple itself was so much destroyed, and the broken walls so far buried, that one could not trace the plan of more than the outer court and a few small chambers.

The walls of this outer court were banked up slopingly with earth, and out of the earth-bank came here and there at short intervals a lion head in black granite or the headless shoulders of a

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-07617-3 - The Temple of Mut in Asher: An Account of the Excavation of the Temple and of the Religious Representations and Objects Found Therein, as Illustrating the History of Egypt and the Main Religious Ideas of the Egyptians

Margaret Benson and Janet Gourlay

Excerpt

[More information](#)

woman's figure. The figures were scattered irregularly—at one place a group, at another a single mutilated head, and again two figures close together leaned towards one another as if they were secretly lamenting the downfall of the great gods. On the east side of the court a doorway opened, and where the mounded earth grew level a flagged pathway led to a little shrine high on the sand heaps.

At the far end of the temple a lion-headed figure quaintly whitened by saltpetre from the soil stood out against the background of the lake.

To the south one looked towards Luxor, where out of the group of Arab houses rose the pylons and obelisk of the temple; the great obelisk of Karnak, and its pylons and halls golden in Egyptian sunlight, showed to the north above palm and tamarisk. Through breaks in the palm grove to the west one could see the Libyan hills, with precipices sharply outlined, azure against rose; from the higher sand-mounds were visible, still more distant and faint, the peaks of the eastern range.

Round the promontory on which the temple stood lay the lake thick and green; shoals of tiny silver fish glanced and darted in the water; here and there a pied kingfisher hovered over the lake, dropped like lead into the water, and emerging with a fish curving from his bill, flew to some jutting stone, carved or squared in old Egyptian days, to swallow down the prey; great fishing hawks wheeled