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978-1-108-08021-7 - Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt: In Company with Several Divisions of the French Army, during the Campaigns of General Bonaparte in that Country: Volume 2

Vivant Denon

Excerpt

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TRAVELS

IN

UPPER AND LOWER EGYPT.

CHAPTER XI.

Town of Siut or Lycopolis—Character of the Lybian Range of Mountains—Antient excavated Tombs—Doom Palm-tree—The Red and White Coptic Convents—Large Town of Girgeh, and Abundance of Provisions—Conversation with a Nubian Prince—Thieving Disposition of the Egyptians—Arabian Tales, and Manner of relating them—Baths—Thunder in Egypt—Arrival of the Flotilla—Battle with the Mamelukes at Samanhut—Pursuit of Murad-Bey—Approach

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*proach to Tentyra—Character of Egyptian
Architecture—Magnificent Portico—Style
of the Ornaments and Hieroglyphics.*

SIUT is a large well-peopled town, built, to all appearance, on the site of Lycopolis, or the city of the Wolf.—Why the wolf, which is an animal of northern climates, and is not found here? Is it a worship borrowed from the Greeks, the account of which we have received from the Romans, who at that time paid but little attention to natural history, and might have confounded the jackal with the wolf? No antiquities are found in this town, but the Lybian chain, at the foot of which it stands, here exhibits such a vast number of tombs, that without doubt this town occupies the territory of some very ancient and flourishing city. We arrived here an hour after noon, and

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and we employed the remainder of the day in procuring food for the army, in exercising the sick, and in taking possession of barks and provisions, which the Mamelukes had not been able to carry away with them.

I hastened to visit the Lybian chain of mountains, so eager was I to put my finger on an Egyptian mountain. I had seen two ranges since I left Cairo, without having been able to risk climbing any one of them. I found this, as I had supposed, a ruin of nature, formed of horizontal and regular strata of calcareous stones more or less crumbling, and of different shades of whiteness, divided at intervals with large mammillated and concentric flints, which appear to be the nuclei, or, as it were, the bones of this vast chain, and seem to keep it together, and prevent its total destruction. This decomposition is daily happening by the im-

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pression of the salt air, which penetrates every part of the calcareous surface, decomposes it, and makes it as it were dissolve down in streams of sand, which at first collected in heaps at the foot of the rock, and are then carried away by the winds, and encroaching gradually on the cultivated plain and the villages, change them into barrenness and desolation. The rocks are near half a league from Siut; and in the road is a very pretty house of the kiachef, who was agent for Soliman-Bey. The rocks are excavated by a vast number of tombs of different dimensions, and decorated with more or less magnificence, and this too can leave no doubt of the proximity of the antient site of some considerable town. I took a drawing of one of the largest of these monuments, to which a plan is annexed. (See Plate XV.) All the inner porches of these grottoes

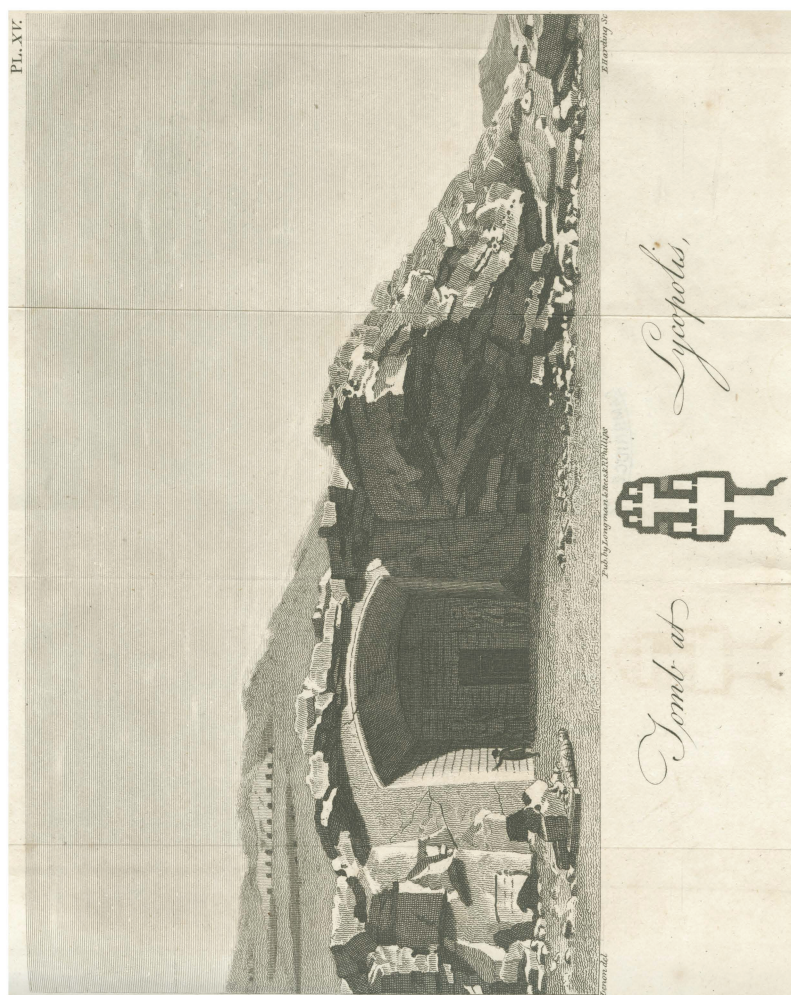
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grottoes are covered with hieroglyphics; months would be required to read them, even if one knew the language, and it would take years to copy them. One thing I saw by the little day-light that enters the first porch, which is, that all the elegancies of ornament which the Greeks have employed in their architecture, all the wavy lines, the scrolls, and other Greek forms, are here executed with taste and exquisite delicacy. If one of these excavations was a single operation, as the uniform regularity of the plan of each would seem to indicate, it must be an immense labour to construct a tomb; but we may suppose that such a one, when once finished, would serve for ever for the sepulture of a whole family or even race, and that some religious worship was regularly paid to the dead; else where would have been the use of such finished ornaments of

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inscriptions never read, and of a ruinous, secret, and buried splendour? At different periods or annual festivals, or when some new inhabitant was added to the tombs, funeral rites were doubtless performed, in which the pomp of ceremony might vie with the magnificence of the place; which is the more probable, as the richness of decoration in the interior part forms a most striking contrast with the outer walls, which are only the rough native rock, as may be remarked in the view that is annexed. I found one of these caves, with a single saloon, in which were an innumerable quantity of graves cut in the rock in regular order: they had been ransacked in order to procure the mummies; and I found several fragments of their contents, such as linen, hands, feet, and loose bones.

Besides these principal grottoes, there is
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such a countless number of smaller excavations, that the whole rock is cavernous and resounds under the foot. Further on to the south, are remains of large quarries, the cavities of which are supported by pilasters: some of these quarries have been the abode of pious hermits, who in these rocks, among these vast retreats, united the austere aspect of an inhabitant of the desert to the gentle majesty of one who partakes of the bounties bestowed by a river, which dispenses to its banks plenty and fertility. This was the emblem of their life ; before their retreat, cares, wealth, agitation ; afterwards, calm and contemplative enjoyments ; the silence of nature too imitated the reserve to which they were compelled : in these regions the unchanging and august splendor of the sky, forcibly impells to constant but chastened admiration ; the dawn of day is not en-

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livened by the cries of joy or the bounding of animals ; the song of no bird proclaims the return of morn, even the lark, which in our climates enlivens and animates our fallows, in these burning regions only calls to his mate, but never chants his happiness ; the grave dignity of Nature seems to inspire with the deep sense of humble acknowledgment, so that the grotto of the cenobite seems to have been placed here by the order and choice of the Deity himself ; and every animated being partakes with him in his grave and silent meditation.

Small niches, stucco facings, a few red paintings representing crosses, and some inscriptions in a language which I took to be Coptic, are the only remains which give evidence to the former habitation of the austere cenobites in these gloomy cells. In the season in which we visited them, nothing
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