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SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE HISTORY OF PHARAONIC EGYPT

By NIAL CHARLTON

I WOULD like to share some thoughts with those who read this Journal.

My qualification for having any thoughts at all on Pharaonic history is that nearly forty years ago I was lucky enough to enjoy a close friendship with Alfred Lucas. Lucas, the retired head of the Chemistry Department of the Egyptian Government, had joined Carter immediately after the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamūn, and had worked with Carter for the next ten years at Luxor. After that he had continued working at the Cairo Museum as honorary Chemist, and when I first knew him had spent fourteen years handling and studying every article from the Tomb. Because of my friendship with Lucas, I can fairly say that for four years, on and off, I lived with Tutankhamūn and his Treasure. Such an experience lives on in the mind.

I have read Madame Desroches-Noblecourt's book on Tutankhamūn. I think that it is brilliant: and I also think that she gets everything slightly wrong. And the reason, I believe, is that she has read all the evidence and not looked at the faces.

The Amarna age is unique in Egypt in that suddenly we are looking at real people. I admit that much of Egyptian Art is portraiture, highly skilled portraiture—I worked with two Coptic brothers, and a statue in the Museum was an obvious third brother—but the people are not quite real and living. They are looking past us, over our shoulders, into the next world. And then in the blackness of thousands of years there is a sudden string of lightning flashes, and we suddenly see the faces of real people frozen in the flash. And that is why the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty has a truly unique fascination. For a few seconds in all the long ages of Pharaonic history, we are looking at real people.

I had two sudden insights last year. Sir Peter Allen was in Berlin and sent me a full frontal picture of the Berlin Nefertiti. He had been shocked by the disfigurement of the left eye,¹ of which he had had no warning. I do not think that I had grasped it myself. Is it normally concealed and minimized in the photographs and copies? I think so. It is not that I did not know that there was something badly wrong with the family. The stone Colossi of Amenophis IV in Cairo are a portrayal of a repulsive deformity and all the sketches of his children emphasize the misshapen head, and the misshapen hips. The insight that came to me was that these deformities were the thing that mattered: the key fact was that the Eighteenth Dynasty had run out into something physically rotten. And of equal significance there was no attempt to hide the fact. Is

¹ A widely held view is that the missing eye is due to the fact that the piece is incomplete, deriving from a sculptor's workshop. Cf. R. Anthes, *Die Büste der Königin Nofretete* (Berlin, 1954), 5.—ED.

it not fair to say that the mark of all other Egyptian portraiture is the dignity of the God King, of his priests and nobles, and of his servants. With one or two exceptions only, the people portrayed are handsome, good specimens of men and women. By the standards of the rest of the three thousand years of Pharaonic life, the willingness of the Amarna Age to portray physical deformity reveals a mental deformity; or so I think.

The next insight came at the British Museum at the Tut^{ankhamūn} Exhibition. I had remarked that the really odd thing was that so much treasure had been lavished on a nonentity. 'But', said my wife, 'he has a nice face.' The second thing, therefore, that matters is that Tut^{ankhamūn} was a handsome boy.

I went back to Egypt last December for the first time for thirty years, and deliberately chose the long trip up the Nile from Cairo, because I wanted to go to El-Amarna, a place normally difficult to visit. One reason was that I wanted to give a secret personal salute to Pendlebury, but chiefly I wanted to see the place. It is isolated, isn't it? An enclosed bit of desert, shut in by a ring of cliffs. A good site for a concentration camp.

And so I offer my view of what happened at the end of the Eighteenth Dynasty. The family had bred out into something horrible, and the Egyptians had a God King on their hands who was a monster. Did they drive him from Karnak? Or did he go of his own wish because he could not bear the contrast between his splendid ancestors and his own miserable condition? El-Amarna was a lonely place, remote from any previous centre of Pharaonic life, and therefore suitable for the equivalent of a leper colony in which he could hide. This is a concept of Amarna very different from those usually current in the last seventy years. The normally presented picture is of a rather attractive rebel Pharaoh breaking clear from the prejudices of his age towards a purer monotheism, and a higher concept of this and that and so on. I had never been able to reconcile this romantic view of Akhenaten with the strong impression I had formed of a self-indulgent hedonism at El-Amarna. (This is a wholly personal reaction to what has survived.) I cannot read hieroglyphics, but I have also often suspected that some translations of the Aten Hymn owe more to Browning than to the original text.

The explanation that I am putting forward in a most tentative fashion would explain the hatred of Amenophis IV that does seem to have existed. (But what is the real evidence for it?) That he worshipped the Sun Disc has always seemed to me to be an inadequate explanation. So had lots of people before him, and Pharaonic Egypt was truly polytheistic.

Tut^{ankhamūn}'s return to Thebes is then also completely explicable. One of the family was physically alright, a handsome smiling boy. There would be immense relief that the God King family had recovered from the physical deviation, and that a normal life at Thebes could be resumed. But was it? There are two still-born children in the tomb. Did somebody come to the conclusion that the handsome boy was tainted too? And does the mummy in fact show signs of a blow on the head? These are questions that can be asked and there will be no answer in the documentary evidence. But I do suggest that somebody was very fond of the handsome boy and lavished every care when it came to burying him. That is the real evidence of the Treasure, of the affection for Tut^{ankhamūn}.

There are many points of detail over which I am still puzzled. First, some of the statues in the Treasure show clear signs of dual sex—for instance the statue on the back of a leopard. These unpleasant portraits could have been done at El-Amarna before the return to Thebes.

Second, when did the head of the mummy become detached from the body? I cannot find any reference to this in the Carter three-volume account (written mostly with collaboration by Lucas). Did the head come off the body in the awful tussle to get the body out of the glue in the gold coffin bottom? I mention this as perhaps an example of what can get tactfully left out of the most meticulous recording. Lucas never referred to this point, but the responsibility of handling the mummy was largely that of other people.

Finally, how does Nefertiti's damaged eye fit into the story?

I offer these thoughts on the Amarna Age more as stimulants to other people than as a personal attempt to reconstruct the whole story. It would be interesting to reassess the limited amount of hard evidence this way round. I am sure that Madame Desroches-Noblecourt would agree that any inscriptional evidence is totally irrelevant.

The Letter to the Hittite King

There is one word which every historian and pre-historian should repeat to himself three and four times a day. It is 'Pitldown'. We now know that there is always the possibility of planted evidence—planted for whatever motive, even the near highest.

There is one bit of the Amarna story that I now find too good to be true—it is too romantic. It is the letter to the Hittite King from the widow of Tut'ankhamūn, asking for his son in marriage and promising to make him Pharaoh. And so I just ask whether the validity of this letter has been re-checked in recent years. The sort of point that worries me is that Tut'ankhamūn died, presumably, at Luxor. His widow would presumably be with him. Why and how then was his widow writing letters at El-Amarna, some two hundred miles away? And is the translation beyond suspicion?

Gold

The profusion of gold in the Tut'ankhamūn Treasure has never had the quiet appraisal that it deserves. I suggest that it may be in the same class of organizational achievement as the construction of a pyramid. In the first place we do not know the total weight of gold in the tomb. The innermost coffin weighs 110 kg. but this is only a part of the total gold. The total has never even been assessed. The quality of the craftsmanship is the best evidence possible that there was a large community of goldsmiths in steady work. The early death of the King means that they would not have a great deal of time to complete the articles that were especially commissioned for the funeral. The quantity of these articles produced in a limited time is corroborative evidence that there was a large community of goldsmiths. A large community of goldsmiths working on the type of article that can be seen in the tomb needs a large quantity of gold on which to work.

What was the source of this gold? Some of it had clearly been 'recycled' from earlier tombs, but while the Eighteenth Dynasty was in power, not more, I suggest, than a small proportion. Loot from successful wars in Asia? There had not been much of these for a while. There only remains, therefore, the third source, mines in the Eastern Desert. These, it is known, existed, and some sites have been identified. In an arid desert, such as the Eastern Desert, there is no possibility of washing for gold, and any obvious nuggets in the wâdi beds would have been picked up in the previous two thousand years. There is no other solution apparently than that the gold-bearing rock was mined, crushed to dust, and the gold separated by fanning, and all this in an arid desert. It is irrelevant to say that this work was done by slave labour. Slaves, their women and children, and the soldiers with them and their women and children have to eat and even more to drink. Bringing water up to the vast throng at the mine would be in itself a major task. The gold in Tut'ankhamûn's tomb must have cost appreciably more than any gold mined today. There is no gold in fact now being mined in the Eastern Desert in spite of the fact that modern skills can go deeper and handle situations that the Bronze Age Egyptian could not.

My purpose at this point is to emphasize that the profusion of gold in Tut'ankhamûn's tomb cost more, much more, in human effort than its modern equivalent, which is perhaps obvious and that it was more 'valuable' which is perhaps not so obvious: and that the effort in total could well have been of the same order that produced a pyramid. The quantity of gold from the tomb of H̄etepheres is negligible in comparison. This reinforces the argument set out above that nobody would have done so much for a young boy Pharaoh, unless that boy had aroused great affection.

I would now like to pass on to some other topics which have also engaged my thoughts over the years.

The Link with the Lebanon

Towards the end of August 1939 I drove Lucas out to visit Bryan Emery at Saqqâra. Emery had discovered an interesting burial—the body was lying on its side, in the foetal position, in the usual predynastic style, but the body was wholly wrapped in linen bands: fingers, toes, every part wrapped distinctly, an excellent piece of work.

When, therefore, did the Osiris religion enter Egypt, and with it the Osirid position of the mummy? And why is there the curious link with Byblos, with the Lebanon? Anyone who has lived in Egypt knows that even today the Egyptians are excusably an inward-looking nation. They live in a big island, cut off from the rest of the world by deserts, and in Pharaonic times the north was a swamp (was it not?) as indeed was most of the Delta, making access to the sea difficult.² Today's Gayassas go along the canals, not the river branches in the Delta. The Old Kingdom and the Middle Kingdom were apparently totally enclosed worlds shut off from contact with the outside world, and yet their basic religion, the cult of Osiris, had this reference to people going to and coming

² For Pharaonic towns and harbours in the Delta see H. Kees, *Ancient Egypt* (ed. T. G. H. James, London, 1961), 183 ff.—ED.

from the Lebanon. Again I would like to see set out the hard detailed evidence for the link with Byblos in the Osiris legend.³

It would be relatively easy to show that the Osiris link with Byblos is a nonsense, by showing that it was quite impossible to get out of the early Old Kingdom. It would be as easy as it is to show that it was impossible to build the pyramids, and that, therefore, they do not exist. But the pyramids do exist, and alongside one of them is the Solar Boat. The Solar Boat is built with cedar of Lebanon, wood that can only have come from Lebanon. We know that the Lebanese were supplying timber to Jerusalem two thousand years after the pyramids were built, but it is difficult to see how they were delivering timber to Cairo in the pyramid age. They could obviously not get up to Cairo when the flood was on, to float it ashore at Giza, and during the rest of the year when the north edge of the Delta was a swamp there would not be enough water, it is easy to think, to sail rafts of timber up the main channels of the river. The steady north winds blow during the flood, and in summer when the river is very low.

The provocative question is, does the Osiris legend spring from the intelligence and personality of a timber merchant? Doubt comes on a visit to Byblos itself where the work of the remains is very crude by Egyptian standards.

The Pharaonic Irrigation System

The problem of how Lebanese timber was floated up the Nile, and there can be no disputing that it was so floated, reveals how little we know of the geography of Pharaonic Egypt and more particularly of the irrigation system. It is possible to buy four hundred pages on the Egyptian religion, with the suspicion that some modern European scholars could out-point any Pharaonic priest on the subject, but we know practically nothing about the Nile in those days. Was there basin irrigation? If there was no basin irrigation at that period, when was it introduced? The argument is sometimes advanced (by those who possibly do not understand Nile control) that the unified control by the Pharaoh of the two kingdoms was inevitable because unified control of the two kingdoms was necessary to run and control the irrigation system. This is probably nonsense. What do we know about the Pharaonic irrigation system? I suggest remarkably little. The one man writing in English on this subject was John Ball, and I would dearly like to see some of the Society's publication effort going on a reproduction of Ball's writings on the geography of Egypt. To me they are more important to an understanding of Egyptian history than most else.

Egyptian Place-names

Geography gives a transition to place-names and place-names to language.

It struck me as odd last winter that the language of Pharaonic Egypt collapsed so completely. In our own country pre-Anglo Saxon words survive in place-names, and even in America some Indian words also survive as place-names. But in Egypt everything appears to have gone. The capital of the ancient world for thousands of years is

³ Cf. Siegfried Herrmann, *ZÄS* 82 (1958), 48 ff. and my *Origins of Osiris* (Berlin, 1966), 17 ff.—ED.

Badr Shein or El-Qahira, the Arabic names. (It would give me much pleasure to be proved wrong on this.) One explanation is that the literate class, the scribes, were small in number and indeed that they survive as the Coptic minority, and their language nearly surviving. Because the scribes were few in number, the language shift was easy. This overlooks the fact that the vast mass of the people, the farmers, had their spoken language, and that they were there in their millions, one of the worlds densest and most conservative communities. And yet under the influence of Islam they changed their language fairly completely, and as far as we know, fairly fast.

Now that Arabic studies are somewhat divorced from religion, and now that there is some possibility of recognizing that there is a spoken language in Egypt, would it not be a splendid work of human archaeology or linguistics, to discover how much of the language of Pharaonic Egypt survives in the spoken language of Egypt? There must for example, be place-names that have survived, and of which I do not know.