

The Heritage of Herodotus: Travel and Travel Writing in 19th Century Britain

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The proliferation of travel literature brought the wider world to the doors of English homes and generated an interest in exotic cultures, ancient civilizations, and foreign wares. The number of travellers and traveller's tales greatly increased after the end of the Napoleonic Wars and one destination that was particularly alluring was the biblical land of ancient Egypt. This paper examines British travelers to Egypt and how their published works both revealed and constructed a particular view of Egypt during the 19th century. Travel and travel literature accompanied and even facilitated the developing disciplines of archaeology and Egyptology, increasing the knowledge of and interest in the world of the Ancient Near East. This corpus of writing, often with its accompanying illustrations, also served to create a fabricated illusion of the biblical world, fashioned from both ancient and contemporary Egypt.

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One of the most energetic aspects of the 19th century was the eagerness for foreign travel. This enthusiasm was only surpassed by the zeal with which the travelers returned and published lively accounts of their journeys. Egypt was one of the most favored of travel spots and interest that was awakened initially from its biblical connections, soon gave way to commentaries on contemporary culture, as Englishmen followed the heritage of Herodotus in first traveling and then publishing. Scholars, clergymen, scientists, and a surprising number of independent women caught the fever of travel and lived to tell the tales to admiring audiences back home. An examination of British travelers to Egypt and their published works reveals how they viewed Egypt during the 19th century and what they produced with this view. Travel and travel literature provided a catalyst for tremendous learning during the 19th century and energized the nascent disciplines of archaeology and Egyptology. It also served to create the illusion of the reality of the biblical world constructed from both ancient and modern Egypt.

Traveler's tales accounted for one of the largest genres of literature in the Victorian era. In the 18th century what was the province of only the few and intrepid, became in the 19th century particularly popular. One contemporary periodical observed, "How times are altered since the tour of Europe, the grand tour, was the *ne plus ultra* of gentlemen travelers! No one can now pretend to have seen the world who has not made one of a

party of pleasure up the Nile, or taken a ride on camel-back across the Syrian desert” (Eclectic Review, 1825, pp. 306-307). Even as early as 1822 the vast number of travel books had been noted. In October of that year the *Quarterly Review* discussed eight accounts of journeys to Egypt with this illuminating introduction, “If the old Land of Egypt be not thoroughly known, it is not from any want of travelers and travel-writers, all of them in quest of something new, and all eager to add to the stock of information already before the public” (Quarterly Review, 1822, p.60). Some travelers went to Egypt for their health and others like Giovanni Belzoni were seeking to make money. Still others, like Sophia Poole, were accompanying family members and stayed for an extended time, even completing the writing abroad. These publications were frequently couched in an epistolary form, or the re-worked pages of a personal journal. Illustrations were often added, sometimes derived from sketches made on the spot by the authors. Prior to Napoleon’s arrival in 1798 the French had published 27 books on Egypt and the British only 13 (Reid, 2002). However, between 1798 and 1850, British travel accounts on Egypt rose to 114 to the French’s 54 (Reid, 2002). The door opened by Napoleon was flung wide by the British and they surged in. For the British public, ancient Egypt was illustrated, both visually and verbally by these publications. Travel books were firmly rooted in tradition and were accumulative in nature, each one being studied by subsequent travelers.

The discussions of ancient Egypt in Britain reached even a wider audience through the medium of periodical reviews. The review format, which had evolved during the preceding century, was to reach its peak during the Victorian era. As a means of disseminating information, it was a central feature of the literary discourse of the age (Shattock, 1989). For readers who did not take time to purchase or read a new travel account, they could get a summary and opinion in the periodicals. These periodicals were regarded as a format for, “the dissemination of information and opinion in a busy world which left no time for scholarly rumination or wide reading” (Shattock, 1989, p. 110). Two of the most celebrated periodicals of this nature were the *Edinburgh Review* and the *Quarterly Review*, both of which advocated certain political ideologies. They also had a tendency to exhibit a national bias, rather misdirected in the efforts to understand ancient Egypt. This is evident in their review of Champollion’s 1822 *Lettre a M. Dacier* in which he announced the decipherment of hieroglyphics. The reviewers were “extremely skeptical” whether his discoveries would have any practical application in archaeology (Quarterly Review, 1827, p. 188). At this point the reviewers placed much more value on the acquisition of antiquities, as we see in the more positive review of Belzoni’s work (Quarterly Review, 1827). Despite these failings, the reviews served the purpose of inviting interest and closer scrutiny of antiquity by reaching a wider audience. The extent of their circulation in the 1830s was between twelve and fourteen thousand (Shattock, 1989). The *Edinburgh Review*’s comments on Lucie Duff Gordon’s *Letters From Egypt* runs to 22 pages of quotes and adds a rather biased commentary by the reviewer. It also includes a brief historical sketch of Egypt’s history from the Persian period to the present day. The tone is authoritative and critical, though the reviewers were by no means specialists, and draws much information from Edward Lane’s work (Edinburgh Review, 1865).

The interesting descriptions and geographical and cultural information as well as the bias, omissions, misunderstandings and obvious errors in this literature had a direct impact upon the perception of places and periods such as ancient and contemporary Egypt until the advent of more scientific and ethnographic studies in later periods. There has been much discourse on the two aspects of Egypt that engaged the interest and drew hordes of tourists; one was the exotic foreign culture, what can be called the “Arabian Nights Egypt” and the

other, what remained of pharaonic Egypt, what one might call the “Egypt of Herodotus”. Much of the motivation for travel and commentary was derived from the biblical connection to Egypt. It is precisely this biblical connection which, in the minds and senses of many travelers, combined these “dual aspects of a single culture” (Fahmin, 2001, p. 8). It was exactly this combination of the *unfamiliar*, the Oriental and the ancient, which was believed by travelers to illustrate the *familiar*, their Old and New Testament.

Even as late as the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 the ghost of Herodotus still lingered in the minds and practices of foreign travelers to Egypt. His famed visit in the 5th century, which introduced the well-used description of Egypt as the “Gift of the Nile”, was known by most educated Europeans. “We have of course been dipping into Herodotus—everyone takes Herodotus up the Nile—...” wrote Amelia Edwards in 1873 (1877, p. 64). The celebrated Greek author was read and praised by travelers but also criticized by some, like the Frenchman August Mariette, who detested him for his lack of information regarding the ancient language (Fagan, 1992). Similarly our generation both admires and deplores the 19th century European and American travelers who visited Egypt and then wrote about their experiences. Like Mariette, we have expectations of these travelers, their attitudes, their behavior abroad and their discussions at home and often they fall embarrassingly short. British travelers in particular have come under condemnation for elitist, imperialist attitudes and in not only exhibiting condescension but in literally constructing the “other” culture they encountered. Yet like Herodotus, who should not have been expected to know that the language of ancient Egypt would soon be lost, the men and women of the 19th century were products of their time and place and we cannot be surprised or dismayed at some of their remarks. We should rather be surprised to find much that is empathetic and admiring in their travel books.

Europeans had figuratively come to Egypt via the Greeks and Romans until they literally arrived there. Every educated young man and many women had perused Herodotus, Diodorus Siculus and Strabo and in those pages read many curious comments about ancient Egypt. It was from this classical orientation that travelers viewed Egypt. Observations on antiquities and geography by Victorian travel writers were interspersed with abundant references to Herodotus, Strabo and others. Lucie Duff Gordon’s famous declaration that Egypt was a palimpsest, “...in which the Bible is written over Herodotus, and the Koran over that” (1983, pp. 67-68) suggests to us that her notion of the Egypt of the pharaohs, which included the biblical Abraham, Joseph and Moses, is what Herodotus presents in Book II of his Histories. But that is hardly the case. The Egypt of Herodotus was centuries past the patriarchal period and his explorations and visits with Egyptian priests were fairly limited. Time has vindicated Herodotus on some things such as the methods of mummification; however, much that he assumes and records as fact is now known to be inaccurate. Nor were the priests and native Egyptians he questioned in the 5th century as knowledgeable about their own past as one would assume. By the time of Herodotus the pyramids were already 2,000 years old, pharaonic Egypt was in the past, and most native Egyptians had no understanding of who had created the sculptures and structures in their midst. So for British travelers coming to Egypt, their preconceived perceptions of ancient Egypt were already problematic. These palimpsest layers, along with the sand which literally shrouded ancient Egyptian temples and tombs, contributed to a celebrated but somewhat unrealistic image in the 19th century. It would slowly be displaced by a more detached and scientific awareness. Like Herodotus, who constructed an unreal image of Egypt for 19th century readers, the Victorians have passed on their own creation of Egypt to us.

Many of the travel publications helped generate not only interest but eventually funding for the work of the

first generation of archaeologists, Egyptologists, linguists, and ethnologists. One of the most notable travelers was the flamboyant Giovanni Battista Belzoni whose exploits were chronicled in his *Narrative of Operations and Recent Discoveries Within the Pyramids, Temples Tombs and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia* published in 1820. The book included 44 plates of illustrations, some of which were displayed individually in London print shops (Mayes, 1961). The first edition of 1,000 quickly sold out and by 1822 it was in its second edition and was quickly translated into French and Italian. Belzoni's book had a tremendous effect on the reading public, galvanizing enthusiasm and interest by both scholars and laymen alike. The book's attention also profited by Belzoni's exhibit of antiquities at London's Egyptian Hall, which opened to popular acclaim on May 1, 1821. The first day over 1,000 people viewed it, and the *The Times* called it an, "...extraordinary exhibition..." (Mayes, 1961, p. 261) stating that Belzoni was distinguished above all other travelers for it. The book and exhibit also focused national attention on the quest for antiquities, in which Britain and France had for some time already been fierce rivals. At this stage of rediscovery the more immediate concern was the gathering of artefacts for private collections and national museums rather than the acquisition of knowledge. However critical we are of Belzoni and his more destructive methods of what he calls his "operations and discoveries", we must remember that there was no discipline of archaeology at the time, much less of any systematic procedures or standards in excavation.

More scholarly travelers than Belzoni stayed for some time in the country and their subsequent travel books evolved into seminal works on ancient Egypt such as John Gardiner Wilkinson whose 1836 *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians* established him as one of the most knowledgeable men of his day. Edward Lane traversed a similar path, arriving in Egypt in 1825. His work, *Manners and Customs of Modern Egyptians*, also published in 1836, focused on contemporary society. This contemporary Oriental culture was an intriguing aspect of the travel experience. It is not a coincidence that Lane produced a well-read translation of *The Thousand and One Nights* in 1838-1840. One of the most common responses to the country and culture can be seen in the first line from the first letter written by Lucie Duff Gordon who was to spend the remaining seven years of her life there, "I write to you out of the *real* Arabian Nights" (1865/1983, p. 19). The sensation of being in the Arabian Nights was closely associated in the minds of the travelers to their religious sensibilities. For a study of the classical authors was not the only preparation for travelers to Egypt. As one Frenchman noted of his research for the journey, "...first and foremost I reread the Bible..." (Chalbrand, 1855/1990, p.16). More than Herodotus, the biblical connection to Egypt provided not only impetus to travel but also patterns of preconceptions that were hardly changed after the visit. "That which most hallows and endears us to Egypt", wrote J.A. St. John in 1845, "is the knowledge that its soil received the impress of the foot of Christ" (1845, p. 2). The 1846 *Quarterly Review* summed up the prevailing attitude of associating ancient Egypt with the Bible, "The sacred traditions, which form the basis of all Christian divinity, lead us back to a people whose contacts with Egypt were continual, and most critically affected their culture; and we cannot speak of Israel without having our thoughts directed to Mizraim" (Quarterly Review, 1846, p.146). The reviewer's use of the name Mizraim, derived from the Bible, rather than Egypt, illustrates the focus. For biblical scholars and interested travelers, the culture of modern Egypt bolstered the scriptural narrative as readily as the ancient monuments. Lucie Duff Gordon's biblical layer of Egypt was immediately apparent to her as she reported in an early letter home, "all is so Scriptural in the country here" (1983, p. 21). What exactly was understood by the term *scriptural* is difficult to define. The location, of course, for all

believers was set and sure, but beyond that their idea of what Old Testament patriarchs and Mary and Joseph would have looked like and what they would have been doing would of necessity have been based on the European artistic productions which until at least the second half of the 19th century, made no effort whatsoever to be historically and ethnically accurate. The connection of contemporary Egyptians with traveler's biblical imagination was based primarily upon their geographic emplacement and picturesque appearance rather than any theological associations or real genealogical descent. The Coptic Christians provided Lucie Duff Gordon the most perfect examples of scriptural characters. She described a day spent within the Coptic community at Bibbeh and the "venerable old priest" who looked, "so like Father Abraham", that she felt, "quite as if my wish was fulfilled to live a few thousand years ago" (1983, p.30).¹

For many visitors there was little visible difference between a Copt and a Muslim and either fit comfortably in the role of a biblical character, though since the Copts were believed to be the direct descendants of the ancient Egyptians that had converted to Christianity, they were more likely to fit the picture (Horbury, 2003). To British travelers even small details of modern Egypt served to reinforce the link with the Old and New Testament tradition. Sophia Poole, the sister of the celebrated Orientalist Edward Lane, wrote home describing cattle she had observed which died of a severe disease and "reminded us of that in the time of Moses" (1844, p. 59). A. P. Stanley wrote, "it is one of the great charms of Eastern travelling, that the framework of life, of customs, of manners, even of dress and speech, is still substantially the same as it was ages ago", and recommended what could be seen as a mine of scriptural illustration (1856, p. 161).

The first decades of archaeological discoveries were enthusiastically embraced by travelers and scholars, as much to fill in the visual holes in the biblical narrative as to provide a basis for knowledge of an ancient civilization. In his handbook to accompany the Crystal Palace Egyptian Collection at Sydenham, John Gardiner Wilkinson, one of the first generation of self-taught Egyptologists, included woodcuts of musical instruments and referred to the example of the *taph*, "of the Hebrews, the timbrel, or tabret, that Miriam, and the women after her took in their hands" (1857, p. 27). The prevailing attitude was that, "where the Bible is silent, the hieroglyphics speak" (Tomkins, 1891, p. 101). Wilkinson's work had been the result of a careful study of tomb paintings and many of his interpretations were based on his biblical orientation. Numerous letters from Egypt arrived in England interspersed with quotations from scriptures. Indeed the scriptures colored even the loose translations of inscriptions. Florence Nightingale's raptures with the figure of Ramses II at Abu Simbel include her statement that he was, "...full of grace and truth, as his inscription bears, indeed he looks" (Nightingale, 1987, p. 98). Connections to scripture, however tenuous, were made and taken as fact. Speaking again of Ramses she wrote, "His name means, tried or regenerated by Ra"... The last two syllables Mss (for in the old Egyptian, as in Arabic and Hebrew, there are no vowels) immediately recall another name—and Moses does mean "saved", "regenerate", "initiated" (Nightingale, 1987, p. 101). Even after the advent of actual decipherment the relatively new science of Egyptian philology had not yet been firmly established enough to prevent a variety of etymological opinions and numerous and varying translations. Certain names such as Potiphar, Joseph, the locations, Tanis and Zoan were more likely to be advanced as translations because of more familiar to bible readers (Tomkins, 1891).

¹Duff Gordon comments in this letter that as she visited the village leader (a Copt) she was so overwhelmed she could hardly describe the house but, "felt I was acting a passage from the Old Testament".

Imagining biblical figures among the ruins was not limited to the especially devout and pious. Even rather more intellectual and less traditionally religious individuals remarked in the same vein. Harriet Martineau for example in exploring the remains of ancient Heliopolis stated: "It is a moment not to be forgotten when one stands at the foot of the obelisk, and looks round through trees and over-stretches of sand at these mounds, and thinks of Joseph coming here to fetch his wife, and celebrating the marriage with all the courtly and priestly pomp of the time: ...and of Moses, sitting here at the feet of the priest, nurtured with such care and wisdom as would be given to the education of the son of Pharaoh's daughter" (1848, p. 184). After viewing Heliopolis, they were taken by their guide to a very old sycamore tree, which was regularly shown to tourists, as the tree under which Mary and Joseph and the Jesus rested when they came to Egypt.² The Egyptians themselves were quick to apprehend the importance of the biblical record in their tourist's itinerary.

The biblical orientation of the genesis of Egyptology had a significant impact upon the popular perception of ancient Egypt and affected the methodology and interpretation of archeological efforts. It also provided the stimulus for 20th century scientific archaeology. Biblical archaeology was one impetus for the inauguration of the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1882. The *Athenaeum* announced the Fund's intent of focusing its initial excavation at Zoan (Tanis) for, "here must undoubtedly lie concealed the documents of a lost period of biblical history—documents which we may confidently hope will furnish the key to a whole series of perplexing problems" (James, 1984, p. 9).³ The very origin of the Fund is due to the energy of one of the most well-known travel writers. Amelia Edwards was already an established author when in 1873, in search of warmer weather; she came to Egypt, hired a dahabeeyah and sailed up the Nile. Her subsequent narrative of the journey entitled *A Thousand Miles up the Nile* was extremely popular and one might say it had the greatest effect on the author herself. She returned from Egypt on fire with interest in the ancient culture and with a determination to study and encourage archaeological work and site preservation. This study developed into such a passion that she was the driving force behind this seminal institution in Britain for Egyptology. The first leaflet sent to announce the institution stated, "A Society has been formed for the purpose of cooperating with Professor Maspero, Director of Museums and Excavations in Egypt, in his work of exploration. The Society undertakes to conduct excavations especially on sites of Biblical and classical interest..." (James, 1984, p. 15). Edwards' work and the subsequent energy it generated illustrates well both the biblical connection and the catalyst for future archaeological exploration embodied in 19th century travel to Egypt. Her bequest after her death funded the first chair of Egyptology in Britain at University College, London.

Victorian travelers to Egypt created an eidolon out of their travel experiences. The backdrop and scene sets were the remains of ancient Egypt; the giant towering pylons and pillars of the temples at Thebes, the colossal statues of Ramses II at Abu Simbel, and the intriguing details of tomb paintings, in short the Egypt of Herodotus. The characters were clothed in the contemporary costumes of the native Egyptians and their Oriental trappings of turbans and robes, beards and camels, the "Arabian Nights" Egypt. Through this double lens the "keen-eyed

²See also (Edwards, 1877, pp. 105-106) where the author expresses doubts about whether the Holy Family ever actually journeyed to Egypt but nonetheless could not help expressing how, "one would like to believe a story that laid the scene of Our Lord's childhood in the midst of this beautiful and glowing Egyptian pastoral".

³The group was originally called the *Society for the Promotion of Excavation in the Delta of the Nile* since the Delta area was believed to be the biblical land of Goshen. The name was later changed to the *Egypt Exploration Fund*, presently the *Egypt Exploration Society*.

travelers” (Kinglake, 1935, p. 215) saw what was, for them, a glimpse of biblical life and their thoughts and commentaries brought to their admiring countrymen at home the “staged” world of the Old and New Testament. British perceptions of Egypt, generated from the intellectual force of travel books, had a dual effect on the reading public. One was the development of a new academic orientation which would eventually evolve into the discipline of Egyptology and the other provided the material from which to construct an imaginary illustration of the biblical world. From the accounts of travelers the unfamiliar was made familiar.

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