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THE LABYRINTH ENIGMA: ARCHAEOLOGICAL SUGGESTIONS

By KAZIMIERZ MICHAŁOWSKI

My friendship of several decades with Jaroslav Černý was born in Egypt in the excavation areas of Deir el-Medîna and Edfu. He kept faith with philology, and I with archaeology. That is why, by virtue of a long-standing practice in excavation work, I take the liberty of dedicating to him the present archaeological suggestions.

Directly south of the pyramid of Ammenemes III at Hawâra are the scanty remains of what was allegedly one of the most splendid buildings of Ancient Egypt, arousing greater admiration in Greek travellers than the pyramids, i.e. the Labyrinth.[1] It seems that it was not a phonetic association with an Egyptian designation, but the complicated chamber arrangement by itself which suggested to Herodotus the name he gave this edifice, by association with the mythical Greek Labyrinth.

In present times only wide areas covered with broken limestone, fragments of limestone, and granite columns have remained; for beginning from the late Roman period this building became a huge quarry, supplying first of all raw material for lime-kilns subsequently discovered during modern excavations. The complex of the Labyrinth, which presumably extended as far as the canal mouth, was the subject of excavations undertaken by Petrie who, employing preserved fragments of columns and the few stone blocks, but above all on the basis of the descriptions given by Herodotus (II, 148) and Strabo (XVII, i, 37), reconstituted a part of the plan of this edifice. It is supposed to have included a great number of chambers, shrines, open courtyards, porticos and peristyles. Herodotus indicates that they numbered 1,500 subterranean chambers and 1,500 chambers above ground. They were grouped by threes or sixes, and every group had a courtyard surrounded on four sides by a portico. The entire complex of buildings was surrounded by an enclosure and ambulatory supported by columns. According to Strabo the chambers were covered by monolithic stone slabs, which also aroused the admiration of visitors. No materials, other than stone, were used for the building. According to Strabo every nome had a separate courtyard with chambers. Thus it would seem that it was an administrative and religious centre, in a word that this edifice was a sort of monument, a symbol of the geography of Egypt, erected by the rulers of the Twelfth Dynasty at the entrance to the Faiyûm oasis which they transformed into the main granary of the entire state.

What was this building essentially? The majority of investigators are inclined to

[1] Petrie, *Hawara, Biahmu and Arsinoe*; id. *Kahun, Gurob and Hawara*; id. *et al., The Labyrinth, Gerzeh and Mazghuneh.*

consider it to have been the mortuary temple of Ammenemes III. Its dimensions (305 m. × 244 m.), embrace an area in which all the great temples of Karnak and Luxor could be accommodated; the extremely complicated system of chambers is, however, strikingly different from the systems found in the mortuary temples of earlier and later Egyptian rulers; the layout of these temples was designed to fulfil the requirements of the dead Pharaoh's cult. As a matter of fact Petrie found on the site of the Labyrinth fragments of statues of Sobk, Ḥathor, the king, and two naoses; in 1895 a fine statue of Ammenemes III, now in the Cairo Museum, was found by chance in the vicinity. This statue is a real masterpiece of the Faiyûm School of sculpture, the distinctive characteristic of which was a far-reaching idealization of the kings' features.

Of late, some scholars[1] have tended to consider the Labyrinth a royal palace, a governmental centre for issuing orders, in the period of Ammenemes III. This point of view also is subject to serious doubt. The royal palaces were built as constructions of mud bricks, in which stone played only a subordinate role, except in the case of palace buildings adjoining a temple, where official etiquette required the ruler to show himself at the so-called 'window of appearance', from which he distributed to his subjects distinctions (necklaces etc.) for their merits; good examples are the palace of Ramesses III at Medînet Ḥabu, and that of Sethos I at Abydos. They are, however, buildings made on an incomparably smaller scale than the Labyrinth, and created for specific *ad hoc* purposes. Should one believe Herodotus' words, the whole system of subterranean chambers, which allegedly lay beneath the ground-floor structure of the Labyrinth, seems incomprehensible in a palace.

If, therefore, one doubts the identification of the Labyrinth with the mortuary temple of Ammenemes III on the one hand and with his palace on the other hand, an explanation may emerge in which the two views can be reconciled; namely to accept this edifice as a palace at the temple, an association often found in Egypt. Thus, one part of the Labyrinth would be a mortuary temple and the other a palace. Apart from the fact that we have no archaeological evidence to support this suggestion, such a compromise solution will not stand up to criticism, if we take into account the very size of the edifice compared with other archaeological complexes of this category which have survived until our times.

Thus the possibility remains of interpreting this building as a monumental administrative centre, a complex of offices erected by Ammenemes III, the construction of which was, perhaps, begun by his predecessors, who had established their Residence and centre of administration in the Faiyûm, the economic base of the kings of the Twelfth Dynasty. Is it possible that the royal residence called Itj-towy, of whose existence we know from texts, existed at that place? A fragment of an inscription carrying this name was also found at Hawâra; the position of Itj-towy, however, has so far not been identified.[2] A consideration of the political situation in the Middle Kingdom makes it reasonable to assume, on the one hand, that a centre of this sort

[1] E.g. Drioton and Vandier, *L'Égypte* (4th ed.), 254, and Daumas, *La Civilisation de l'Égypte pharaonique*, 82.
[2] Cf. W. K. Simpson, *JARCE* 2 (1963), 53 ff.

was established at a place situated almost at the border between Upper and Lower Egypt, a short distance from Memphis, the old capital; and on the other hand that, in view of the dissident tradition of the Heracleopolitan Dynasty, which no doubt still subsisted, such a centre would be designed to consolidate, in a monumental form, the unity of the State, the unity of all nomes subordinated to one ruler, forming one political organism firmly knitted together.

In fact, everything said so far accords with what we know of the history of those times, in respect of the aims of the internal policy of the Middle Kingdom; but there is no archaeological evidence to support the argument, and it is such evidence alone which could supply the final solution.

However, the purpose of the edifice called the Labyrinth is not the only problem connected with it which remains hypothetical. It is also difficult to imagine that a building erected during the Twelfth Dynasty could have survived to Strabo's times in an undamaged condition without receiving maintenance work of the kind effected by the Pharaohs on so large a scale on old buildings. We have, however, no detailed data on this subject.

There remains another possibility of attempting to solve the riddle of the Labyrinth. From the description by Herodotus who, apart from Strabo, is our main source concerning the exterior of the Labyrinth, it emerges that it was built by the Egyptian dynasts immediately after the driving out of the Ethiopian kings. That could therefore have been only under the Twenty-sixth Dynasty. In fact Herodotus' description of the accession to power of Psammetichus is in principle accepted by modern historians of Ancient Egypt.[1] It is remarkable that Egypt's economic condition in that period closely resembled that under the kings of the Middle Kingdom and, although the policy of the Saïte kings towards the Egyptian nobles took forms different from that of their Middle-Kingdom predecessors, it achieved the same aim, namely a new distribution of wealth in the feudal class. It is enough to mention here the income tax introduced by Amasis. It is, however, conceivable that such a monumental edifice as the Labyrinth, which must have entailed very high expense, could have been built in the Saïte Period. As we know, despite all internal and external troubles, at that time Egypt experienced economic prosperity. Herodotus (II, 175–80) wrote that under the reign of Amasis Egypt was very rich, and he enumerated the great number of buildings and monuments erected in that country by the king. Nobody else but Amasis substantially subsidized the reconstruction of Apollo's temple in Delphi.

The Saïte rulers were constrained to conduct an exceedingly elastic policy towards Upper Egypt. Even before the reign of Psammetichus I the problem arose of curbing the authority of Mentuemḥat, the governor of Thebes, whose bias in favour of the preceding Ethiopian dynasty was beyond any doubt. We know that his most devoted dignitaries, holding the title *ỉry-pʿt ḥɜty-ʿ* used by the former nomarchs of the fortress south of Memphis, kept watch over the king's interests in the whole of Upper Egypt. One of them, Samtowe-tefnakhte, held the titles 'General of Heracleopolis' and 'Chief

[1] E.g. Drioton and Vandier, op. cit., 575 ff.

of Boats'. At that time the princes at Heracleopolis had a privileged position, conceded to them by Psammetichus I.[1]

Thus, the geographical position of Hawâra would, in principle, correspond to the location of such a centre of power at that time. The hypothesis could then be formulated that the Saïte kings who had to solve problems of state policy similar to those with which their predecessors of the Middle Kingdom were confronted, judged it to be proper, for both symbolical and practical reasons, to erect a monumental complex of buildings which on the one hand would be the symbol of the unity of the state, and on the other hand would exist for carrying out practical functions in the field of state administration just at the site where such a centre of power had existed in the time of the Middle Kingdom.

Such a presentation of the problem would explain many facts difficult to understand. The building of an architectural complex, admired by Herodotus and Strabo as a labyrinth, near the pyramid and mortuary temple of Ammenemes III, would explain why the building had such a size, the like of which was found nowhere else in Egypt; and in this edifice we would expect to see the mortuary temple of one ruler only! Moreover, it is hard to believe that so colossal an edifice could have lasted from the time of the Middle Kingdom until our era untouched, without any maintenance work. And, finally, we deem it now difficult to accept unreservedly the fact that nothing has remained of so huge a building apart from a field of rubble composed mostly of fragments of limestone and granite and the remains of some foundations. We have been accustomed to such a scene of ruins only in the case of the mighty temples of the Saïte Period, erected in such great numbers in the Delta. The white limestone of these temples was used in vast amounts in the late Roman and in the Christian Periods for burning lime, evidence for which is provided by the numerous lime-kilns found in the vicinity of nearly all limestone buildings, Hawâra not excepted.

Therefore, in order finally to solve the problem of the Labyrinth, which according to Montet[2] has yet to be discovered, and the remains of which may still be hidden in kôms scattered along the Faiyûm corridor, additional methodical excavations, based on all known archaeological and historical data, should be carried out in the Hawâra area.

[1] Cf. Kees, *Nachrichten . . . zu Göttingen*, Phil.-hist. Kl., 1935, pp. 98–9, 101; Griffith, *Cat. of the Demotic Papyri in the John Rylands Library*, III (Manchester, 1909), 72–7.

[2] *Dict. géogr.* II, 210–11.