

Antiquity

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Editorial Notes

THESE Notes have more than once been written about primitive dwellings, but this is the first time they have been written *in* one. There is no better way of getting to understand any kind of house than to live in it for a time. This one is made of mud, size 15 feet 6 inches by 13 feet 9 inches, height about 12 feet. The roof is of twenty split palm-trunks, ten resting on each side of a single stout one supporting their ends. These beams support a closely set matting of wattles, which in turn support the outermost layer of mud. The floor is of sand or hard ground, and the walls are white-washed, about a foot thick and have four windows with wooden shutters. The room is furnished with wooden beds strung with local cord and two imported wooden armchairs. It opens sideways into a covered porch leading to an open courtyard. There are other rooms joined to this one by a wall and forming a square or rectangle.



This room is a unit in the courtyard type of house of which there must be thousands in the Nile Valley. It has no special peculiarities; but it is interesting just because the type *is* so common. Simple as it is, far more thought has been given to it than the casual observer might suppose. Even the making of a mud wall 12 feet high that will stand up and not crack is not a thing that can be done without experience handed down traditionally. The whole thing is an excellent example of adaptation to local conditions—here consisting chiefly of heat and cold, wind and sand. The walls retain the heat during the cold nights—and they can be very cold in mid-winter; and in summer you can sleep outside in the court.



The situation is at El Kab in the Sudan, at the top of the great bend where the Nile flows south-westwards. Rain rarely falls here, and when it does it is a disaster, causing some of the mud walls to disintegrate. This occurred in 1950 at Abu Hamed, 40 miles further up; it would be interesting to know why some houses survived and whether it was due to any special structural features.

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However, I did not come to El Kab to study mud architecture, but to make plans of a couple of forts which, though mentioned by Cailliaud and Jackson, were practically unknown. One of them proves to be quite a sophisticated affair, mainly of rough stone ; it is roughly rectangular, with solid roundish bastions at the corners and in the middle of each of the longer sides. The walls are never less than 9 feet thick and still stand to a height of 12 feet or more ; the original height was much more because it was carried on in mud brick, traces of which survive in places. Inside the fort were round stone huts, some of whose interior walls were finished with a coat of plaster, painted red. Of the date it can only be said at present that it must be before A.D. 1500 ; later when the pottery (of which there is an immense quantity lying about) and the plans of the gateways have been studied, it may be possible to be more precise. Linant de Bellefonds made a sketch of the castles in 1822, and it proved very useful, as it shows features that have since fallen into ruin ; it is reproduced in my *Fung Kingdom*, Plate 18.



The excavation of such a site would be extremely difficult for all kinds of practical reasons, nor probably would the results justify the labour and expense. In this respect the stone fort of El Kab is typical of many sites in all parts of the world whose prime need is that they should be planned, photographed and described, and specimens of the pottery collected and placed in a museum for comparative study and for reference by future investigators. Making a plan is not technically difficult ; at El Kab it took four days, but that was chiefly because the mere task of walking about and taking measurements over an irregular mass of fallen stone was lengthy and laborious (especially with only a single untrained Bishari as assistant). But there are many compensations, apart from the satisfaction of doing the job at all. There is no better way of getting to know a site than to plan it ; one has to walk over and examine every portion, and one accumulates a really representative collection of sherds. One gets some idea of what the living conditions must have been like. And (here at any rate) one is rewarded by views of the majestic river, whose aspect changes from morning to evening but is always a delight to behold, and a never-ending wonder. Here it must be nearly a quarter of a mile wide ; a little higher up it is a mile wide, and in one place nearly two miles, set with islands and bordered by green crops planted on the steep mud banks as the water gradually falls.



There are many other sites to be similarly investigated between here and Atbara ; only a few are marked on the map, and not one of them in the whole stretch of 200 miles has ever been examined by an archaeologist. It is an exciting prospect, and by the time that these Notes are being read I hope to have examined many of them. The map marks the ruins of a church at one place (Kuddik), and Jackson has seen another, with granite columns, now incorporated in a mosque (Artul Island). There are rock-pictures and castles of unknown age and character ; and there is at least one early neolithic site (Gereif). There is also of course the probability of lighting unawares upon some important new site.



Exactly one month has passed since I wrote the last sentence, and the proofs have reached me in another rather remote place. The forecast has been abundantly fulfilled. Several more of the stone castles have been found and planned. Beside two of them

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are churches built of red brick, the walls still six and ten feet high. Many of the pots used by the castle-people had crosses incised just inside the rim. Christianity was the religion of the Sudan for at least 700 years ; it is usually supposed to have yielded place to Islam soon after A.D. 1300, but the next two centuries are historically blank and it may have lingered on longer in certain regions. In one place just outside a small Christian village were the flattened remains of tombs that were covered with a cement-like plaster and may have been precursors of the Mahometan *gubbas*. On some of these I found broken tiles with inscriptions in Greek letters. These, though fragmentary, should help to provide a much-needed date for the period of the castles. That is a job for experts.



It is pleasant to think that two months still remain for more discoveries. Enough has been done already to show that there is a rich yield for field-archaeology in these parts, and that the principles thereof learnt in Britain are equally applicable here. They are in fact of world-wide validity. The art of interpreting superficial features demands, apart from practical experience, little more than keenness of observation, especially of minute and apparently trivial detail, combined with common-sense and imagination. Perhaps one might add patience and enthusiasm. It is desirable to work from a centre rather than to do a long trek ; a few sites done thoroughly—photographed, planned and described—are better than many observed casually in passing. While travelling one can never spare enough time to examine a site thoroughly ; conversely, while planning it one gets to know it thoroughly, and one discovers new features almost every day.



Some readers may be wondering whether work of this kind in the Sudan is affected by the political situation. It is not affected by it in any way at all, nor does it seem likely that it ever will be. Everywhere one meets with the greatest friendliness and hospitality, and if the transition to self-government is effected in an orderly manner, as one hopes, there seems to be no reason why future investigators of antiquities should not do their work as comfortably as the present writer is doing his.



It is only proper that these Notes should conclude with a tribute of sincere thanks to the British Academy whose generous grant has made it possible for them to be written. Some account of the expedition is to be given to them in a lecture next November.