CHAPTER XX

SUMMARY

THOUGH in the foregoing sketch of the art of architecture in Egypt some changes in ideals and methods have been recorded, it still remains a remarkable circumstance, striking even a superficial observer, that it shows as a whole so little tendency to develop; and that having attained, at what we regard as an early period of its history, so high a degree of technical excellence, it should have made in the course of three or four thousand years so little actual progress, failing even to obtain in its own peculiar path any definite period of culmination.

That the radiating arch, the principle of which was known at least as early as the IIrd dynasty, should have remained a mere occasional constructive expedient is not a matter for surprise, for where there is an abundance of stone of large size there is no inducement to abandon a trabeated system of building for another which is no sounder in principle and less trustworthy in practice. What does cause surprise is that, in comparison with the history of any more modern art, there should be so little change to record, that details not essentially constructive should have been persistently adhered to for many centuries, and that in spite of Greek or Roman art the battering walls of the early mastabas and the hollow cornice of the Vth dynasty should dictate the form of the latest pylon of Edfu or Philae. Even when a new
decorative motive appears in Upper Egypt, as in the Hathor-headed columns of the shrine at Dér-el-Bahri, the same type is followed for 1500 years and re-appears with little alteration at Dendera.

Besides this negative characteristic, the typical architecture of the Empire has to a modern eye, as it probably had to a Greek, some positive faults. Such are:

1. The want of logic which gives the column a spreading capital, designed, it might be supposed, to distribute its support, but interposes a smaller cubical impost block between it and the beam, whereby the bulk of the column is largely wasted.

2. The similar fault which often makes the column bulbous, so that its base is much smaller than its largest section, and the excessive bulk does not proportionately add to its stability.

3. The ungainly crowding of enormous columns, and the excessive relation of solid to void.

4. The ineptitude with which incongruous elements are mixed, as in the Festal Hall at Karnak, where an internal peristyle of rectangular piers is used with inner rows of inverted and unsymmetrically placed columns.

All these faults are patent at Karnak, though perhaps obscured or condoned by the impressive effect of the whole; but in a less degree they occur constantly elsewhere, and lead to the conclusion, paradoxical as it may seem to some, that the Egyptians of the Empire, or their rulers, were deficient in architectural genius. Moreover, there is something in their accessory religious art which is ungraceful and repugnant to modern or classic taste. The original conception of the Sphinx as a human-

It should be noted, however, that these capitals were at first used only internally where the fault would not be obvious.
headed lion, symbolizes not ignobly a union of great mental and physical qualities; but to an unaccustomed eye, uninitiated in Egyptian occultism and its methods of expression, the representation of a divinity by a human body with the head of a bird or beast, whether hawk, jackal, or hippopotamus, has an aspect which is not far short of repulsive.

On the other hand, how are we to account for the accurate and finished work of the great pyramids, the skill combined with intuitive perception of artistic limitations shown in the portrait statues of the Old Kingdom, or the fine architectural qualities of Hatshepsut’s temple?

That the Egyptians had amongst them many skilful and inventive craftsmen with a sense of beauty in all the minor arts, is obvious from the numerous objects of domestic use and ornament which have been recovered from their tombs. The mural paintings also show, in representations of their occupations and amusements, that they were fond of physical recreation, and enjoyed to the full the pleasures of life. The very elaboration of their tombs and sepulchral customs, and of the funerary temples associated with them, testifies not to a gloomy character and a serious cast of mind, but rather to a dread of death, and to the intensity of their desire to mitigate their departure from the world of the living by prolonging its conditions in a future existence.

It is difficult to reconcile what seem to be inconsistencies in character and genius otherwise than by regarding the Egyptians as a mixed race. Whatever may be the facts as to the origin of the proto-Egyptian, it seems allowable to assume that in the Neolithic era Lower Egypt was populated by that same Mediterranean race to whom are attributed the artistic qualities which
are characteristic of the nations of Southern Europe. These people would gradually make their way up the Nile valley until they came in contact, as they inevitably would, with some other more distinctly African race, which would result in a mingling of the two in a hybrid race in Upper Egypt, probably still further complicated, in the course of time, by Semitic immigration from the opposite coast of the Red Sea.

That the predynastic people of Upper Egypt, who invaded the Delta and established an undivided kingdom under the first dynasty, had a strain of pure African blood, seems likely from several circumstances in the later history of the nation. These are (1) the common tradition that the land of Punt (Somaliland) was the ancient home of the race; (2) the fact that the religion of Egypt is strongly impregnated with fetishism; (3) the peculiar character of its most developed architecture, which has a kind of barbaric luxuriance, and an individuality incapable of assimilation with or by any other style; (4) the actual

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1 See ch. vii in the B. M. Guide, p. 122.
2 Mr. Statham speaks of the "characteristics which compel us to class Egyptian architecture, in spite of the greatness of its scale, and the impressiveness of its interior effects, as essentially a barbaric art." Hist., p. 37.
features shown in some of the portrait statues, which by their thick lips, smooth faces, and broad cheekbones, are differentiated from any European or western Asian type.\(^1\)

If these considerations\(^2\) are allowed any weight, it may be supposed that the conquerors from the south found in the Delta a population of a higher mental type and artistic capacity, by whom, under royal encouragement, the art of the Old Kingdom was developed. It is represented in architecture chiefly by the pyramids and other tombs with some fine statuary, and the remains of a few mortuary temples. Limited as it is in range, it is enough

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\(^1\) The fine colossal head of Thothmes III in the British Museum is distinctly negroid, though of a handsome type. It represents him in the prime of life, but the coarseness of the lips is confirmed by his head in the Cairo Museum. It is true that there is another portrait of him, which gives a very different impression (see Hall, "Near East," p. 250), but however irreconcilable the two may be, the argument that two types existed is not affected, and the fact remains that some of the rulers of Egypt must have had negroid traits. Col. Howard Vyse, describing the colossal figures of Rameses II at Abu Simbel, says that the features are those of negroes ("Pyramids," i, 47). This is not borne out by other representations of him, e.g., the black granite statue in the Turin Museum; nor does the head of his father at Cairo suggest any such family origin, but here again the sculptor must have had some source of inspiration for the Abu Simbel type.

\(^2\) They do not seem inconsistent with the facts summarized by Prof. Elliot Smith ("The Ancient Egyptians"), though he draws somewhat different conclusions. His theory seems to be that the so-called "Mediterranean" race was the indigenous basis of the whole Egyptian population, and that the intrusive element in the north was Asiatic, whilst there was some negroid infiltration from the south. The difficulty about this is that it does not sufficiently account for the singularity and exclusiveness of Egyptian culture, especially in the matter of religion.
to show that a simple but dignified style was in process of development, based on a plain stone construction, but not without details, such as mouldings and internal supports, apparently suggested by a more primitive use of palm trunks and smaller vegetable growths. The process must have continued, though there is no evidence left, until the XIth dynasty, when in the remains (unfortunately very imperfect) of Mentuhotep's temple, a fine example of pure architecture can be discerned. The few fragments of many temples which were built about this time, but rebuilt later, indicate that the same simple style was generally adopted. The tradition, though interrupted by some centuries of civil discord and foreign invasion, survived until the XVIIIth dynasty, when Hatshepsut's architect, Senmut, raised on an adjacent site at Der-el-Bahri what must, from an external point of view, have been the most beautiful work of architecture in Egypt (see frontispiece). Internally also it was brilliant with historical wall-reliefs, which in the simplicity and sureness of their technique, and in the vivacity with which they tell their story were at the time the best work of their kind.

But a change now came over Egypt. Though the peace-ensuing Hatshepsut was an enlightened patron of art, her warlike nephew Thothmes III did not share her ideals or taste, and in fact after her death tampered with a good deal of her work. The vast extension of the empire by foreign conquests brought wealth to the country, and encouraged grandiose ideas which sometimes took the form of a mania for the gigantesque. At the same time the change in royal burial customs led to a multiplication of funerary temples in which, for the aggrandizement of their founders, carved decoration
and pictorial reliefs were lavished without restraint on columns and walls.

In the smaller temple at Medinet Habu, which was begun by Amenhetep I or Thothmes I, the column of sixteen sides was still used, as it was in the internal peristyle which the latter added to the temple at Karnak, most of which was removed by his successors. Even as late as the reign of Amenhetep III, there is evidence in the temple at Amada, and if we may trust the French engraving, in the small peripteral temple at Elephantine, now destroyed, that simplicity of design was not yet sacrificed to luxuriance in carved ornamentation. But when Amenhetep founded a temple for himself at Luxor, his colonnades, though finely designed, were all constructed with the clustered type of column, which in a simpler form had been used for internal work from the earliest times, but which now altogether superseded the monolith-polygons. So far the work was not distinctly retrograde; but for the avenue in front of the court, he made use of the tall cylindrical column with the campaniform capital and small impost block, which are far less satisfactory to a critical eye. But the triumph of grandiosity, the subordination of elegance to bulk and density, was signalized at Karnak under the next dynasty, when Seti and his son added the stupendous hypostyle hall to Amenhetep's western pylon. Here the central avenue copied but exaggerated that of Luxor, whilst in the side aisles the slender clustered column of early days had become strangely transformed in the crowded ranks of immense cylinders, with a hoodlike enlargement of the uppermost quarter by way of capital.  

¹ The beginning of this transformation may be detected in some of the rock tombs of Tel-el-Amarna, late in the XVIIIth dynasty.
Though nothing so gigantic in columnar architecture was again attempted, Karnak became a type for many details of later works. The earlier style thus became practically extinct. The rulers of Egypt or their architects rejected the tradition which had formed itself in the use of their native rocks, and preferred to develop, in stone, forms suggested by vegetable growths, which may possibly have had their origin in an occasional use of timber. The peculiar and characteristic style thus evolved lasted for fourteen centuries, and was hardly touched by outside influences. Something of this persistence must be attributed to the conservative character of the Egyptian race, noted by Herodotus, due largely to the isolated position of the country. Such changes in art and religion as actually occurred, are attributable rather to indigenous elements of character than to external influences.

The personal vanity of the rulers had much to do with the perversion of architectural ideals. They dedicated temples to themselves, and adorned them profusely with their own statues, and with pictorial records of their own exploits. The colossi of Amenhetep were imitated, and even surpassed by those of Rameses II, who delighted in imposing representations of himself on the colonnades and forecourts of his chosen temples. Sculpture in these circumstances declined in quality, and though Rameses' gigantic effigies at Abu Simbel prove the survival of some skill in modelling, the limbs and bodies are clumsy and ill-proportioned, and whilst losing the quality of the older conventional art have gained nothing in naturalism.

It is hardly doubtful that the changes which were taking place in the XVIIIth and XIXth dynasties were influenced by the priesthood, whose growing wealth and
power gave them every reason to encourage, if not instigate, the building of temples and the maintenance in full vigour of the religious system. The facts that it became more superstitious, and that the veneration of animals was continually extended, seem to show that the priests were recruited from a stock in which the negroid racial element was still effective. The readiness with which the priests of Amen established themselves at Napata after the fall of Thebes, and the facility with which a Nubian dynasty was accepted in Upper Egypt, point to the same conclusion. Thus only it seems possible to explain the fact that a style of art which is to a large extent barbaric and unintelligent, should have prevailed in a country which had at various epochs down to the Christian era a leading position amongst the civilizations of the ancient world, and not the least when its rulers were foreigners, and its independence more nominal than real. That the permanence and unchanging character of its art was due to the conservative influence of the priesthood is a commonly recognized fact; and nothing speaks more plainly of the exceptional extent of this influence, than the readiness with which foreign conquerors bowed to the native superstitions, and officially adopted the established religion. Even under the Greek Ptolemies classical art seems to have had only a superficial effect. The architecture of the Egyptian Empire remained exotic to the end, and however astonishing and impressive it may be to the uncritical observer, however interesting and significant to the student of the race, it became after its early days an anomaly in the general history of the art, compelling the inquirer to look elsewhere for a further evolution.