

PERSONAL.

25th January, 1927.

Eric Maclagan Esq.,
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My dear Eric,

My brief journey to Egypt is over, and I am here in Budapest again. I expect not to go away until the end of February; I shall be in Geneva for the Financial Committee and Council's meetings during the first week or 10 days of March, and shall perhaps go to France for a few days after that.

As you have doubtless been advised, there is going to be a congress of Byzantine archaeology at Belgrade from April 6th to 11th, and arrangements are to be made to enable the congressists to visit the most interesting Serbian monasteries. Peirce and I are going, and I only wish there were some chance of seeing you there, for I am impatient to talk with you about Egypt.

I only presented one of the letters which you kindly send me: the one to Aboukassem. As it happens, (and very confidentially,) Robert Bliss had heard about Abou's silver treasure through a Paris dealer, and asked me to look at it for him and to advise him whether or not he should buy it. As you made it quite clear to me in your letter that there was no chance of your taking the treasure, I sent your letter to Abou, though I had already communicated with him on my own.

I did not make any offer, and I have not advised Bliss to do so. Although Aboukassem is now talking about much less extravagant figures than he was a year ago, he demands £10,000 for the lot even now, and that is far more than I would ever advise anyone to pay for it, far more also than I think he is at all likely to get. Of course it is obviously a treasure of very great interest archaeologically, but the things are not really of the first order. The chalices are all smaller than mine and rather coarse in comparison with it, the inscriptions are less fine, and the execution less accomplished and delicate. The platters or patens are less interesting in every way than the one belonging to Bliss. All these pieces are shown by their inscriptions to have been votive offerings, and they may or may not have been actually used as chalices and patens. The chalice with figures in relief on it and the ampulla, which is also decorated with reliefs, are very interesting, but though the quality, of the latter especially, is good, it does not come up to what I had expected from the photographs. Many of the pieces have interesting hallmarks on them. The whole collection has suffered seriously from excessive cleaning, apparently with acid which has almost entirely removed the patina, and left a blank surface with small speckles of the patina still remaining here and there. Some of the pieces which appear to have been rebellious to the cleaning treatment, like the pretty candlesticks, were even attacked with the file. All this appears to have happened when the treasure was in the hands of the Bishop of Homs. I suppose that the wounds thus inflicted will heal in time and that the objects will gradually improve in appearance; but poor Aboukassem, if he paid, as he says, £8,000 for the Treasure and has undergone a lot of expense in connection with it since, does not seem to me to be likely to recoup himself completely. Of course, he is surrounded by a lot of commission sharks who are trying to see the things over his head and take all the profit themselves, and he is pretty sick of the whole business, but I think he has got a longish way to travel yet before he realizes that he will have to make up his mind to cut his losses before he can hope to sell.

Your letter of advice about Egypt in general was a godsend to us. The visit to Saqqara, where Firth and his family were most kind and showed us everything, was essential. The third-dynasty buildings which Firth is uncovering at the base of the step Pyramid are everything you said about them. I have never seem more beautiful masonry anywhere; the fluted columns with their capitals and the mouldings are of the very highest quality, and the whole thing made an even greater impression on me than even the granite Temple of the Sphinx, superb as it is. The reliefs in the Saqqara tombs are most delightful, but Firth's IIIrd dynasty buildings and the statue of Zoser now in the Cairo museum opened to me a view of Egyptian art which I never would have had if I had not seen the buildings. The whole Old-Kingdom collection in the Cairo museum takes on a different light when one knows Firth's discoveries—among which not the least are the fragments of the hard-stone and rock crystal vases.

With my eye full of Saqqara, the Temple of the Sphinx and the Cairo museum, I suffered a dreadful shock at Luxor, and I am afraid that I never, as long as I live, will be able to look with enjoyment or sympathy at such things as the Karnak and Luxor temples and the Ramesseum; the dirty coloured sandstone of which they are built is a hideous material to start with, their huge dimensions only accentuate their inappropriateness to the structural methods employed, the carved decoration covering their wall looks mechanical and monotonous, and they are on about the same artistic level as the statues of the Siegesallee or the Albert Memorial. I was also greatly shocked by the poverty and vulgarity of the tombs of Seti I., Tutankhamen and the rest in the Valley of the Kings, where I shall never set foot again. On the other hand, I very much liked what remains of Der el Bahri and several of the less assuming tombs—like the charming one with the paintings of little naked dancers. I also liked the late Ptolomaic temple at Der el Medinoh, and one of the surprises of my journey was the excellent quality of a good deal of the late stud. For instance, in the midst of the horrors of Karnak, I found my eye resting with gratitude on a small red granite building with reliefs, and this I also found to be IV. century B.C.

In Cairo, I spent a great deal of my time in the museum, and on the whole it seems to me to be admirably arranged. I can't understand why they have made so little of their early hard-stone vases, slate palettes and flint blades, which are all jumbled up in badly lighted cases, while a lot of muck is beautifully shown, but it would be ungracious to grumble about this, when so much of what one most wants to see is so admirably set out. I enjoyed myself enormously in the room devoted to the Old and Middle Kingdom of sculpture and jewelry, and also in the Coptic rooms. I had suspected from photographs that the Tutankamen grave furniture was pretty poor, and I was confirmed in this by the sight of the originals. Some of the jewelry is good, I admit, and I did like the dagger with the rock crystal nob on the handle. But when one looks at the Middle and Early Kingdom jewelry next door, the Tutankamen stuff fades into the background.

Saqqara and the Cairo museum gave me a very different idea of Egyptian art from the confused images I had derived from things seen in the European museums and private collections. I was very far from imagining how supreme the Old Kingdom stuff is in very branch of art. I suppose it is because the good small objects and reliefs of the New Kingdom appear to have found their way to Europe in much greater proportion than the early stuff, that I had imagined that the general level of art under the New Kingdom was much higher than it really is. I was far from being prepared for the pompous emptiness of Karnak. We saw a good many mosques at Cairo, and on the whole I was very much disappointed by them. There are a lot of interesting Byzantine capitals scattered about, and some of the plaster work at Ibn Tulun and elsewhere is pretty good, but what remains of the Cordova mosque seems to me to be in a different street altogether from anything in Cairo. From my hasty visit I have the impression that Arab architecture was good while it remained close to Byzantine models, and that it rapidly deteriorates when it gets away from them; also that it never was as good in Egypt as it was in the Caliphate of Cordova

or even in the Moorish kingdom of Zaragoza. I have no use whatever for the tombs of the Caliphs. I did greatly enjoy the Arab museum. The wood carving and pottery is endlessly rich. What a thousand pities that they did not start collecting before all the rock crystals and early textiles had left the country! Considering how short a time the Coptic museum has been going, its collection of woodcarving is magnificent, and the ruins of the IV. century building, in which part of it is housed, are of very great interest. I was, on the whole, rather disappointed in what remains of the Coptic churches. Poor little St. Barbara is being shockingly restored. However, I had perhaps expected too much of the Coptic churches and not allowed sufficiently for the fact that only the humbler ones remain. I have certainly nothing to complain about where the capitals and other fragments in the Cairo and other museums are concerned.

We were there on the Coptic Christmas, and Bill and I assisted at a superb midnight Mass, which lasted from 7 in the evening until 1 a.m. There, as in the Coptic churches and elsewhere in Egypt, Bill was most useful. His tender and succulent person attracted all the fleas, as he had done earlier on the Dalmatian coast, and I got through my entire visit to Egypt without being bitten once, while he was one large bite from start to finish.

The museum at Alexandria was a surprise to me. I had expected it to be pretty good, but I was astounded by the quality of the great porphyry seated statue (though you had warned me) and of much else in the museum, including a lot of the quite early stuff, I mean the III. and II. century B.C. I had a magnificent time there and also with Benachi, whose collection of Fatimide textiles is a perfect marvel. It is curious that the same person who has formed that collection should have got such shocking duds as many of his ivories are: did he show you his large panel representing a king on his throne, which was patently copied from the rock crystal centre of the Cup of Chosroes in the Cabinet des Médailles? He was most kind to us, and gave us a lot of time, and invited us to come to see him at Athens, where he is shortly going to remove himself and his collections, and also to cruise with him in the Aegean in his yacht.

Later. I have just this moment received your letter of January 21st with the admirable photographs of Baalbek. Thank you ever so much for them. I will write at once to Sir William Geary telling him how kind I think it is of him to have supplied me with a set.

[unsigned]