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THE MEGALITHIC TEMPLE AT BUTO.

HERODOTUS II. 155.

‘IN this city of Buto there is a sanctuary of Apollo and Artemis. The particular temple of Leto, which was described as the place of the oracle, is itself, I found, large and has a stair ten fathoms in height. But in what was visible to me, the most astonishing thing was this: there is in the enclosure there a temple of Leto, wrought from a single stone in respect of height as well as of length, and each wall equal to these [stones]. Each of these [stones] is of forty cubits. And for the covering in of the roof there is another stone imposed, having a supertecture (?) of four cubits’. *ἱρὸν δέ ἐστι ἐν τῇ Βουτοὶ ταύτῃ Ἀπόλλωνος καὶ Ἀρτέμιδος· καὶ ὃ γε νηὶς τῆς Λητοῦς, ἐν τῷ δὴ τὸ χρηστήριον ἔνι, αὐτὸς τε τυγχάνει ἑὼν μέγας καὶ τὰ προπύλαια ἔχει ἐς ὕψος δέκα ὀργυιέων· τὸ δέ μοι τῶν φανερῶν θῶνμα μέγιστον παρεχόμενον φράσω· ἔστι ἐν τῷ τεμένει τούτῳ Λητοῦς νηὶς ἐξ ἑνὸς λίθου πεποιημένος ἐς τε ὕψος καὶ ἐς μῆκος· καὶ τοῖχος ἕκαστος τούτοις ἴσος· τεσσαράκοντα πήχεων τούτων ἕκαστόν ἐστι· τὸ δὲ καταστέγασμα τῆς ὀροφῆς ἄλλος ἐπικέεται λίθος ἔχων τὴν παρωροφίδα τετράπηχυν.*

This passage has an interest greater than its mere subject, and seems to demand a more exact attention than has commonly been bestowed upon it. We may not indeed feel much concern about the details of a building in the Delta not apparently of the first importance. But it is a question of some magnitude for the student of antiquity, whether Herodotus was or was not a reckless liar; and we cannot limit more narrowly than this the issue presented by the above description together with the current expositions of it. That the text is genuine there is no reason to doubt; and the attempts to get rid of the problem by conjectural emendations are as unsatisfying as they are arbitrary. The interpretations of it offer us a choice. Herodotus, it is held, here asserts that he saw at Buto a cubic monument of stone measuring about seventy feet, of which the material was either (1) a single block, or (2) four enormous slabs, with a second (or fifth) stone for the roof.

To prove that he did not see any such monument, nor any which by honest mistake he could suppose to be such, we need not appeal either to the general conditions of mechanical art, nor to the evidence of existing remains as to the limit of Egyptian achievements in this kind. Herodotus, if he meant what has been supposed, may be sufficiently exposed and refuted out of his own mouth. In the 175th chapter of this same book he expressly

states that, in the size of the stones employed, all builders, so far as he was aware, had been surpassed by the gigantic buildings and decorations, at Sais and elsewhere, attributed to King Amasis: and he describes with minute accuracy the particular specimen which most impressed him. This was an oblong block of stone, measuring in its greatest dimension about thirty-five feet, and hollowed out, so as to make a chamber, with walls something less than two feet thick. It was brought down the river from Elephantiné, an operation which extended into the third year and occupied 2,000 men. It was to have been placed in the sanctuary of 'Athené' at Sais, but that design was not completed; for when it had been tugged as far as the entrance, there were signs of discontent and rebellion, which, as Herodotus puts it with quaint humour, raised in the king's mind a 'religious scruple'; and the block remained outside. Whatever be the value of the anecdote, the description of the chamber, as Herodotus saw it *in situ*, is no doubt correct. Existing monuments show that the Egyptian gangs could have accomplished as much as this, or perhaps a little more; though the narrator justly reckons it a prodigious example of profuse and patient labour. But if he had seen at Buto such a structure as he has been supposed to represent, his astonishment at Sais would be itself astonishing and absurd. Taking even the less miraculous view which gives the building five stones, the slab which formed the roof must on any estimate have weighed many times as much as the chamber of King Amasis. Yet the builders (it would seem) not merely brought this slab down to the neighbourhood of the coast, but coolly lifted it seventy feet or more into the air, and put it on their structure like a lid. Even to erect the monolithic walls, allowing for the thickness which they would need to be stable, was a feat compared with which the performance of Amasis was child's play. The whole thing grossly exceeds the limits of possibility, as defined by the author himself. Nor can he be excused on the ground of inadvertence. The account of the sanctuary at Buto is manifestly shaped with the intention of assuring the reader that the describer was cautious and observant; he discriminates with a precision, which, if not genuine, must be deliberately fraudulent, between what was and what was not within the view permitted to him. If then, for the pleasure of raising a momentary wonder, he could in this fashion put forward a circumstantial falsehood, it is really useless to estimate his authority. If Herodotus said this, his assertions, as such, are absolutely worthless,—a somewhat uncomfortable conclusion.

It is therefore satisfactory, so far at least, to see, as upon closer consideration we must, that whatever the words of the author may mean, they will not bear either of the meanings which have been put upon them. As to the first supposition (if indeed it is worth notice), to imagine the temple as carved out of one block, though it might seem to satisfy the words *νηὸς ἐξ ἑνὸς λίθου πεποιημένος*, leaves all the rest of the description, the 'stones' of forty cubits and the 'other stone superimposed,' unexplained and senseless. Nor is the alternative any more admissible. If the meaning were that each wall of the temple was a single block or slab, it would have been

quite easy and simple to say so. But in that case *the temple* was in no sense 'made from one stone', nor could it be said with sense that 'each wall was equal to these stones',¹ when in fact the stones actually were the walls.

Since then Herodotus happily has not made either of the statements suggested, it remains to discover, if possible, what he did mean. Now one thing may be remarked. Though both the interpretations propounded assume that, in *ἐξ ἐνὸς λίθου πεποιημένος ἔς τε ὕψος καὶ ἐς μῆκος* 'wrought from a single stone in respect of height as well as in respect of length', the preposition *ἐξ* (*from*) denotes the material *of* which the temple was made, and although this assumption is consistent with common usage, it is hard to see how it can possibly be right in this place. For if 'made from a single stone' refers to material, what is the relevance of the addition 'in respect of height as well as in respect of length'? Material has no concern with dimensions; whatever is in this sense 'made from one stone', is necessarily so made in respect of all its dimensions. And the objection is increased by the particular dimensions specified. If it were said that 'the temple is made from one stone in length and *breadth*', this might perhaps pass for a singularly clumsy way of expressing the fact that its walls, both the longitudinal and the *latitudinal* (so to speak), were monolithic. But to specify *length* and *height*, and these alone, seems on this supposition not useless merely or awkward, but simply unintelligible. Surely therefore we must suppose that, since *ἐξ ἐνὸς λίθου πεποιημένος* cannot here bear its ordinary sense consistently with the context or with a sane meaning, the writer must have used it in some exceptional sense, the other, from its manifest impossibility, never even occurring to his mind. And another sense is easily found. The preposition *ἐξ*, used with reference to an operation such as building, may point to the material, but also may not. It may refer to the starting-point from which we commence, as for instance in the phrase *ἐξ ἐδάφους*, *from the foundation upwards*. And if we give this meaning to *ἐξ*, we can see at once the purport of the added words of dimension. A building would be 'wrought' or 'constructed *from* a single stone in respect of length', if, counting the courses of masonry horizontally or lengthwise, the first and lowest course was a monolith. And it would be so constructed 'in respect of height', if the end of the wall, the first course counting vertically, was a monolithic pier. The temple is described by Herodotus as so constructed in respect of both these dimensions or directions, that is to say, its walls stood upon monolithic sills, and were also terminated by monolithic piers. *From* these sills and piers, that is to say, starting from them as a given framework, the temple was 'made' or 'built' in the usual way, and of blocks comparatively small. And this will explain, what upon any other supposition seems to me incomprehensible, what the author means by saying that 'each wall of the temple is equal

¹ It is surely obvious that *τούτων* and *τούτοις* refer to the same things, that both therefore signify *the stones*, and that *ἴσος τούτοις* cannot mean anything but 'equal to these stones.' The attempts which have been made

to avoid this, *e.g.* by the rendering 'each wall is equal *in these respects*', viz. height and length, are desperate in grammar. Neither do they touch the main difficulty, that the meaning thus violently extracted is itself absurd,

to these stones'. The monoliths determined the dimensions of the walls, which were equal in height to the height of the piers, and in length to the length of the sills. What struck his eye was in the first place the stately and solid effect given to the building by this framework, and still more the size and mass of the monoliths, which he reckoned to be nearly 70 feet long or high respectively. Nor were even these the most remarkable. So far as appears, he could not enter the building, nor view it otherwise than from in front and at a distance. But even so he was convinced that the architrave, 'imposed for the covering in of the roof', was also a monolith, 'having a projection (?) of four cubits'. From this way of speaking, since the author thus supposes himself to have indicated the length of the architrave, we may infer, what otherwise would not be quite clear, that the building was square, the front, as well as the sides, measuring forty cubits. If then we suppose the 'projection of four cubits' to include, as it may, the projection on both sides, the length of the architrave will be forty-four cubits; if the 'projection' is that on one side only, forty-eight; at the utmost therefore something near eighty feet. In the sills, the piers, and the architrave alike, he gives one dimension only, the long one, leaving the other dimensions, as would be the inclination of an observer not writing technically, to be estimated roughly by the natural and necessary proportions. Something we may perhaps allow for exaggeration on the part of his informant, or deception of his eye; but there is no reason to think that his report is not perfectly honest and true to the appearances. Even a monolithic beam measuring eighty feet (by six feet by six feet, let us suppose) would be no miracle among the buildings of Egypt. But it was enough to inspire awe in a beholder accustomed only to the composite pillars and entablatures of Hellas; and we may well believe that, when Herodotus came to Buto, he had never before seen or fancied anything like it.

In considering the dimensions of the beam, it has been so far assumed that the doubtful word *παρωροφίς* (*supertecture*) signifies, as it naturally might, the 'projection' of the roof beyond the main building, in short the *eaves*. This is disputed, some taking it, partly on the authority of a not very lucid explanation in Pollux, to mean the *depth* of the entablature or of some part of it.² The point is of little or no importance, and my reason for noticing the former explanation is only that, upon the whole passage, it seems natural to think that the author means the 'four cubits' of the *παρωροφίς* to determine the measurement of the beam, by reference to that of the other stones already given: if so, the *παρωροφίς* must be its projection. If the *παρωροφίς* be its depth, its length or greatest dimension is not given; for we could by no means assume that it was exactly equal to the breadth of the front.

It will be noticed that Herodotus speaks of this beam as 'set upon (the building) for the covering in of the roof', τὸ δὲ καταστέγασμα τῆς ὀροφῆς

² τὸ μεταξὺ τοῦ ὀρόφου καὶ τοῦ στέγους Pollux, cited by Blakesley, who however himself recommends the other interpretation.

ἄλλος ἐπικέεται λίθος. These words by no means imply, or even, when possibility is considered, suggest, that the one stone made the roof. But they do, I think, contain a suggestion, which probably occurred to Herodotus as not unlikely, that the roof was supported on a series of such beams, or even composed of such. His whole description of Buto and its sanctuary implies that he had there no advantages as a visitor, and could by no means satisfy his curiosity. The phrase 'what was visible of this sanctuary', twice repeated within a few sentences, savours strongly of disappointment. At the oracle itself he seems to have seen nothing except the objects in an outer enclosure, as they appeared to a person looking in, with the stair of the main temple for a background. Of that which here chiefly caught his eye, the chapel which we have been discussing, he has noted exactly so much as he could thus ascertain, that is to say, the apparent size of its principal stones. And in speaking of these, he has confined himself precisely to those which were actually visible, mentioning therefore the monoliths as running the *length* of the building and also the *height*. Whether there were also *latitudinal* monoliths he does not expressly say, and could not be sure, for the front had probably a door, and the back was out of sight. The whole account, thus considered, so far from impeaching his veracity, shows a strong desire for facts, which indeed appears to have been no less characteristic of him than his love of things extraordinary, though for want of sufficient knowledge his judgment was of course often at fault.

In criticizing the sense which he seems to have put on the expression νηὸς ἐξ ἑνὸς λίθου πεποιημένος ἔς τε ὕψος καὶ ἐς μῆκος, we must carefully notice, what an English translation necessarily conceals, the protection against misunderstanding which is given by the order of the words. In the English 'made from a single stone', the words 'made from' raise in themselves the notion of *material*, which therefore seems to determine the sense of what follows. But in the Greek νηὸς ἐξ ἑνὸς λίθου, on the contrary, the notion of *material* is from the first excluded as inconceivable, a thing so extravagant that, if it had been meant, it must have been represented by an expression incapable of any other sense, for example, by νηὸς μουνόλιθος, as in chapter 175, where it is meant, it is represented by οἶκημα μουνόλιθον. As the words stand here, it is natural to take ἐξ ἑνὸς λίθου without hesitation in the only sense which makes them credible; and this sense determines that of the sequel. The reason why Herodotus allowed himself an expression which, when recast in English, becomes misleading, is simply that the other never occurred to his mind as imaginable. The case may be easily illustrated in our own language. 'All the Popes ever since the first century, each in the dignity of his tiara and pontifical vestments, run round the interior of the church of St. Paul without the Walls'. Here is a sentence which, though it could not mislead any but a very ignorant reader, suggests a grotesque idea, and would certainly be rejected by a good writer. But arrange it thus, 'Round the interior of the church of St. Paul without the Walls run all the Popes ever since the first century, each in the dignity of his tiara and pontifical vestments', and we have what, if not unexceptionably elegant, is

perfectly clear and inoffensive. It is still, as much as ever, grammatically possible to refer the statement to living Popes, and to suppose them literally 'running' round the church. But a reader, to whom this notion occurred, might well be told by the author that he was expected to know something besides grammar: and the like reply might have been made by Herodotus to a Greek reader who accused him of suggesting, when he wrote *νηὸς ἐξ ἐνὸς λίθου πεποιημένος ἕς τε ὕψος καὶ ἐς μῆκος*, that the building described was made of one single block.

It is proper to add that my attention was directed to this passage, and to the need of some better explanation, by Mr. Somers Clarke, now and for some time past engaged, as an architect, in researches among the monuments of Egypt. I have submitted to Mr. Clarke the question, whether it is likely that the temple at Buto was really such as Herodotus, according to my version, describes. He replies in the negative: such a method of building would not be in accordance with the highly conservative practice of the country. He thinks that Herodotus was deceived by appearances, probably by stucco (*gesso*) and painting. This opinion I readily accept, and indeed have not the knowledge which would entitle me to dispute it, even if I were so disposed. It is plain, from the passage itself, that Herodotus had not the power to examine the building closely, or to correct the impression of his eye; and his informants, if he had any, may well have been ignorant, careless, or misunderstood. But there remains the separate question, certainly not less important from a general point of view than that respecting the structure itself: what Herodotus really says about it, what is the opinion into which he was (*ex hypothesi*) misled by appearances. By no *gesso*, painting, or other disguise could he have been honestly and permanently deceived into the assertions which have hitherto been attributed to him. He had, and he shows us that he had, direct testimony (to say nothing of his common-sense) that they were grossly false. But his actual assertion is of another quality. It is, we will suppose, mistaken, but it is not absurd. It is not inconsistent either with the facts of nature, or with any positive knowledge which he can be shown or is likely to have possessed. There is no reason therefore to suppose that he did not honestly believe it, or that he omitted any obvious or accessible means of verification. It is to be added to the list of the numerous and for the most part inevitable errors of his zealous but undisciplined curiosity; it does not tend to show what the current interpretations would prove at a stroke, that he cared not in the least whether he spoke truly or falsely, and that his assertions, all and sundry, must for historical purposes be not weighed but simply ignored.

A. W. VERRALL.