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BRIEF COMMUNICATIONS

The Tura Caves

THIS note is offered because of the possibility that many Egyptologists may not be aware of a most interesting survival of the practical work of the Fourth Dynasty.

A few miles south of Cairo on the east bank begins that vast block of limestone which forms the main mass of the Eastern Desert. The quarry at Tura, the accompanying cement works, and the steel works are a large feature of the industrial life of Egypt to-day. But Tura was also the quarry for the Pyramids, as was reported by Herodotus (2. 8):

As one proceeds beyond Heliopolis up the country, Egypt becomes narrow, the Arabian range of hills, which has a direction from north to south, shutting it in upon the one side, and the Libyan range on the other. The former ridge runs on without a break, and stretches away to the sea called the Erythrean; it contains the Quarries whence the stone was cut for the pyramids of Memphis . . . (Rawlinson's translation 1858)

In 1940 it was decided to clear out the Tura Caves (note the word, indicating the view that they were a natural formation), with the object of storing the first portion of Middle East Forces reserves of ammunition. These caves were blocked with the accumulated bat dirt of thousands of years. The process, once started, continued and by 1942 Tura Caves were holding large quantities of ammunition, the Army's stores of signal and weapon equipment of high military value, bombs for the R.A.F., signal and radar equipment for the Navy and R.A.F., a workshop, and a hospital. The order is roughly of time not of importance, and the object of the list is to give an indication of the size of the place.

In spite of the name, Tura Caves were not a natural phenomenon, but a huge beautifully wrought quarry, or stone mine, whence had come the limestone blocks for the pyramids. There can be no disputing this, because in 1942 at one point at the end of the quarry a pyramid block was found lying on wooden rollers, still after some five thousand years awaiting delivery. On the side was a job code number in lamp black. To me that job code number was and is the most moving relic of Pharaonic Egypt. It indicates the presence of a working engineer, part of that huge team of engineers and managers who first designed the programme for building a pyramid, and then carried it out. For those without experience, the design and layout of a construction job code itself demands an unusual combination of intelligence and industry.

There are still problems. The normal explanation of the method of transporting the pyramid blocks from Ma'âdi to Gîza is that it was done by barge on the flood. But the distances are such that it is easy to think that the current at the peak of the flood would have carried the loaded barges well past Giza before they could have got across the river. And indeed this must often have happened. The job must have been done on the waning flood, with the implication that the job of transporting the output of a year's quarrying and receiving the input for a year's construction must have been crammed into a few weeks. And that involves calculations of the numbers of men and barges employed which could indicate quite clearly that it was impossible to build the pyramids. But they were built, and they deserve the more their title of a wonder of the world the more closely their construction is scrutinized.