

ARCHAEOLOGY

Homes of Ancient Egypt

"A Classic of Science"

**"They Sacrificed the Pleasure of Seeing Passersby to
The Advantage of Never Being Seen From the Outside"**

L'ARCHEOLOGIE EGYPTIENNE
par G. Maspero. Paris, Maison Quan-
tin, 1887. Translated for the SCIENCE
NEWS LETTER by Helen M. Davis.

THE SOIL of Egypt, incessantly washed by inundations, is a black mud, compact, homogeneous, which on drying acquires the hardness of rock: the fellahs have used it from time immemorial to build their houses. Among the poorer, these are scarcely more than rudely shaped piles of earth. A rectangular space 2 or 3 meters wide by 4 or 5 long is enclosed by a wattling on palm branches, which they cover inside and out with a coat of mud; as this clay cracks when the water evaporates, they stop up the chinks and then spread on a new coat, until the whole has a thickness of 10 to 30 cm., then they stretch more palm branches mixed with straw above the room and cover over the whole with a thin layer of compacted earth. The height is variable: usually the ceiling is very low, and one cannot stand up suddenly for fear of getting a bump on the head; sometimes it is 2 meters from the ground, or even more. No window, no skylight where air, or light can come in; sometimes a hole, usually in the middle of the roof, lets the smoke out of the room; but that is a refinement by no means known to all.

Sun-Dried Brick

It is not always easy to distinguish at first glance which huts are mud-plastered and which are of unburnt brick. The common Egyptian brick is nothing but mud, mixed with a little sand and chopped straw, then made into oblong tablets and dried in the sun. The head workman digs vigorously in the place where it is desired to build; others carry away the clods and pile them in a heap, where some tramp them with their feet and reduce them to a homogeneous mass. When the paste is sufficiently ground up, the head workman runs it into molds of dry wood. They are then carried away by an assistant and taken

out to dry in the air, arranged like a checkerboard, at a little distance from one another. Builders are careful to leave them in the sun half a day or a whole day, then they place them in a pile in such a way that the air may circulate around them freely, and do not use them for a week or two; others are content with several hours' exposure to the sun and use them while still damp. In spite of this negligence, the mud is so stiff that it does not lose its shape easily: when the face turned to the outside has nearly crumbled away under atmospheric influences, if we dig into the wall itself, we find most of the brick intact and distinguishable one from the other.

Fast Brick-Making

A good modern worker can mold a thousand bricks per day without fatigue; after a week of practice, he can make about 1,200, 1,500 or even 1,800. The ancient workers, whose tools did not differ from tools of the present, must have obtained results just as satisfactory. The mold which is generally used is 22x11x14 cm. for medium sized bricks, 38x18x14 cm. for large bricks; but larger or smaller shapes are not infrequently found in the ruins. The brick of the royal workshops was sometimes impressed with the cartouche of the reigning sovereign; those for private use have on the face one or more conventional designs traced in red ink, the imprint of the molder's fingers, or the seal of the maker. The greatest number have no mark to distinguish them. Burnt brick was not often used before the Roman era, except as flat or round tile. Enamelled brick seems to have been fashionable in the Delta. The most beautiful specimen which I have seen is that preserved in the museum of Boulaq, carrying in black ink the names of Rameses III; its enamel is green, but some other fragments are colored blue, red, yellow or white. . . .

The common people lived in veritable huts which, though built of brick, were worth scarcely any more than the hovels

of the fellahs. At Karnak, in the Pharaonic town, at Kom-Ombo, in the Roman town, at Medinet-Habou, in the Coptic town, houses of this kind rarely have more than 4 or 5 meters frontage; they are built with a ground floor which is sometimes surmounted by some living quarters. The well-to-do people, merchants, secondary employees, heads of workshops, had somewhat larger rooms. Their houses were often separated from the street by a closed court: a long passageway, down the length of which the rooms were ranged. More often the court was lined with rooms on three sides; still more often the house presented its facade to the street. It then had a high wall painted or whitewashed, surmounted by a cornice, and with no opening except the door, or pierced irregularly by windows. The door was often of stone, even in unpretentious houses. The jambs project slightly at the sides, and the lintel is supported by a painted or sculptured gorge.

Interior Plan

Crossing the threshold one passes successively through two little dark rooms, the last of which leads into the central court. The ground-floor ordinarily served as a stable for the donkeys or the cattle, as a granary for wheat and provisions, as cellar and kitchen. Wherever the upper floor still exists, it reproduces almost without modification the arrangement of the ground floor. It was reached by an exterior stairway, narrow and steep, broken at frequent intervals by little square landings. The rooms were oblong and received light and air only by the door: when it was decided to cut windows to the street, they were air-holes placed almost at the height of the ceiling, without regularity or symmetry, adorned with a sort of wooden grill spaced like bars, and closed by a solid shutter. The floors were brick or flagstone, or very often formed of a bed of trodden earth. The walls were whitewashed, sometimes painted in vivid colors. The roof was flat and probably made as it is today of palm branches laid one over the other, and covered with a layer of earth thick enough to resist the rain. Sometimes it was surmounted only by one or two of the

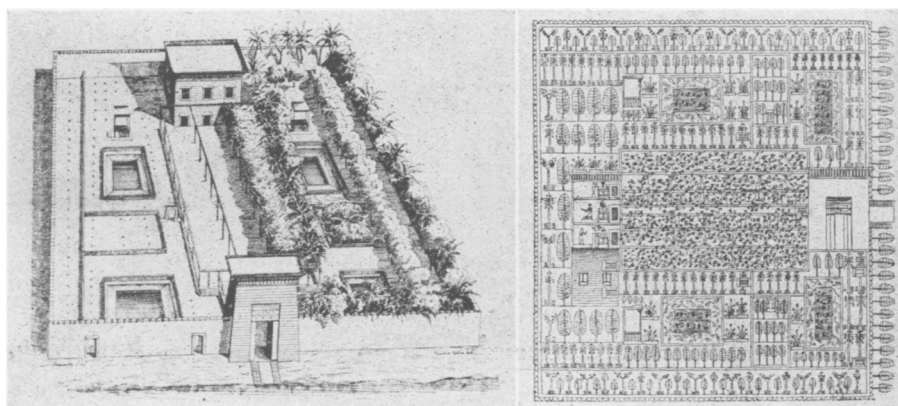
wooden ventilators which one finds so often in Egypt; usually there were erected there one or two isolated rooms, serving as the laundry or as a dormitory for the slaves or the watchmen. The terrace and the court played a large part in the domestic life of the ancient Egyptians; there the women made the bread, cooked, and chatted in the open air; the whole family slept there in summer, protected by nets from the attacks of mosquitoes.

Mansions of the Wealthy

The mansions of the wealthy and of the lords covered a considerable extent: they were usually situated in the midst of a garden or a planted court, and presented to the street, like the houses of the common people, only walls, crenellated like those of a fortress. The domestic life was hidden and as it were turned in upon itself: they sacrificed the pleasure of seeing passersby to the advantage of never being seen from the outside. Only the gate told something of the importance of the family which hid itself behind the walls. It was preceded by a flight of two or three steps, or a portico with a colonnade ornamented with statues, which gave it a monumental appearance; sometimes there was a pylon like those which marked the entrance to the temples.

The interior was arranged like a little village, divided into sections by irregular walls: the dwelling house at the back, the granaries, the stables, the servants' quarters distributed about the various parts of the enclosure, according to rules which still escape us. The details of the arrangement seem to vary infinitely; to give an idea of the mansion of a great Egyptian lord, part palace, part villa, I can do no better than to reproduce two of the many plans which the tombs of the XVIIIth dynasty have preserved for us.

The first represents a Theban house. The enclosure is a square surrounded by a crenellated wall. The principal gate



THE THEBAN HOUSE

The plan of this house, shown on the right, was found in a tomb in Thebes. It represents the small but comfortable establishment of a well-to-do citizen. The grape arbor fills the center of the "front yard." It is flanked by tree-bordered walks surrounding four duck-ponds, and even the ducks on the water may be seen in the plan. Maspero's perspective drawing on the left shows how the house looked, with and without the shrubbery.

opens from a road bordered by trees, which runs along a canal or a branch of the Nile. The garden is divided into symmetrical compartments by low walls of dry stones, similar to those which one often sees in the large gardens of Akhim or Girgeh; in the center, a huge arbor is supported on four rows of small columns; on the right and left, four pools of water inhabited by ducks and geese, two tree-nurseries, two summer-houses, and paths bordered by sycamores, date-trees and palms; at the back, facing the gate, a two-story house of small dimensions, surmounted by a painted cornice.

The Palace of Ai

The second plan is taken from the hypogee of Tell-el-Armana. It shows us a house, situated in the rear of the gardens of a great lord, Ai, son-in-law of the Pharaoh Khouniaton and, later, himself ruler of Egypt. An oblong pool extends in front of the gate: it is bordered by a gently sloping platform provided with two staircases. The form of the building is a rectangle longer across the front than along the sides. A great gate opens in the center and gives access to a court planted with trees and bordered with storerooms filled with provisions: two small courts placed symmetrically in the elongated corner rooms serve as stair-wells for the steps which lead to the terrace. This first building forms an envelope around the lodgings of the master. The two facades are ornamented with a portico of eight columns, interrupted in the middle by the opening for the grand doorway. Crossing the threshold, one came out into a sort of long central corridor, cut by two walls pierced with gates so as

to form three courts in a row. The one in the center was bordered by rooms; the other two communicated on the right and left with two smaller courts, where the stairways which lead to the terrace are placed. This central building was what the texts call the *akhonouti*, the private dwelling of the king and the great lords, where the family and their closest friends alone had the right to enter. The number of terraces, the arrangement of the facade, differed according to the caprice of the proprietor. Most frequently the facade was single; sometimes it was divided into three parts, with the middle part projecting. Again, the two wings may be ornamented by a porch on each floor, or surmounted by a sun-room; the central pavillion sometimes looks like a tower which dominates the rest of the building. The facades are frequently decorated with long slender columns of painted wood which have no function and serve merely to enliven the somewhat plain appearance of the building. The interior arrangement is scarcely known; as in the common people's houses, the bedrooms were probably small and ill-lighted; but, on the other hand, the reception rooms seem to have had at least the dimensions still used today in Egypt, in the Arabian houses. The ornamentation of the walls does not admit of scenes or pictures like those which we find in the tombs. The panels were whitewashed or covered with a uniform tint and bordered with a multi-colored band. The ceilings were ordinarily left white; but sometimes they were decorated with geometrical ornaments.

Science News Letter, December 5, 1931

"Even the cook and the cabin-boy learned to navigate the ship when

Bowditch

was on board." His "New American Practical Navigator" first appeared in 1802. The latest edition is 1931.

An extract from the first edition will be

THE NEXT CLASSIC OF SCIENCE