



How the Holy Family

Lived In An Egyptian Small Town

Archaeology

By Frank Thone

INTO Egypt fled Joseph and Mary and the Child, with the mad blood-lust of Herod at their heels. Once across the border they could rest, and slip into the safe obscurity of a small town, until such time as it would be possible to return to their own land. They would rent a small house, and Joseph would hunt up jobs of wood-working such as carpenters can always find, and life in exile would not be so different, after all, from life at home.

They would scarcely even be noticed as foreigners. There were no end of Jews in lower Egypt, and the arrival of another family from the North was merely something for a few bored immigration officials at the border to note down in crabbed Greek on a long-since-perished papyrus roll, before they turned back to their office gossip, forgetting the newcomers before the dust of their plodding donkey had settled in the road. When all is said, this episode in the life of Christ is and will remain obscure. Half of a terse chapter in the Gospel according to St. Matthew tells all we know about it.

But recent researches by American archaeologists in the ruins of an old Egyptian town have thrown a flood of new light on how the common people lived in the villages and small cities of Egypt during the time the Holy Family sought refuge there. Out of the dust of centuries they have dug the remains of the little houses of sun-baked brick where the folk lived their unobscure lives. They

have found door and window frames of wood, wooden stools and reading desks, wooden rakes and pitchforks—even wooden door locks with wooden keys! There evidently was no lack of work for Joseph. They have found glass dishes and woven baskets, such as Mary must have used in her house-keeping. They have even found quaint little wooden toys, oddly like modern playthings sometimes, such as Joseph might have made in his odd moments for the amusement of the little Jesus.

This is a new kind of Egyptian archaeology. The scientists of the spade have hitherto concerned themselves mostly with the relics of the great. The tombs of the nobles, the pyramids of the pharaohs, the enormous temples of the gods, with their stiff but beautiful statues, their rich treasures of gold and gems, their long and magniloquent inscriptions in picture-writing—these have been the chief documents in the history of the ancient land by the Nile that men of modern times have studied.

But history does not consist wholly of the record of the wars and wranglings of the great. There are also the laborious poor, on whose multitude of bowed backs all thrones have always been borne. What of the common people of Egypt?

This democratic view of history, which gives a sort of posthumous ballot even to the subjects of ancient absolutisms, led the Near East Research Committee of the University of Michigan to seek for a site in Egypt where kings and nobles were scarce

and where the common people had lived their common lives, had been laid away in undistinguished graves and been duly forgotten. They wanted a good, typical Egyptian small town—a mummified Main Street.

Such a place they found finally not in Egypt itself but in the Faiyum oasis. This valley of green, which lies across a naked ridge of stone hills in a basin cut down into the Libyan desert, is a sort of annex or suburb of Egypt proper. Ages ago it was carved out of the plateau by a number of tributary streams which then flowed into the Nile from the west. Finally a great lake formed in the valley.

By the time of the Old Kingdom in Egypt the lake was already below sea level but remained stationary for some time owing to increased rainfall. Later Pharaohs of the Middle Kingdom reopened the silted-up channel from the Nile and irrigated a large section of the former lake bed. Regulators controlled the inflow and possibly allowed the irrigation water to drain back into the Nile Valley.

At last, at the end of the days of native-born monarchs in Egypt, came Alexander the Great, and following him, the Macedonian house of the Ptolemies, whose long dominance ended with the fascinating but tragic Cleopatra. The lake had subsided still farther and a wide stretch of fen land intervened between its shores and the irrigated area. This region the Ptolemies brought under cultivation in one of the greatest reclamation projects carried out in ancient times.

The Greek dominance during this period of settlement has its monuments in the names of the towns: Bacchias, Dionysias, Karanis, Theadelphia, Ephemeria. There was even one city whose name has a familiar ring to American ears—Philadelphia. This Ptolemaic boom in real estate started more than two and a half centuries before the Christian era, and ended in the decline and partial abandonment of the settlements when irrigation went to wrack and ruin during the civil wars that attended the downfall of the dynasty. Twice in later days these towns experienced a similar fate, their complete desertion falling in the fifth Christian century.

Thus the task of archaeologists who would study the small-town life of Egypt at a given period of its history is simplified if they select the ruins of one of these towns in the Faiyum. It had a definite beginning and a definite end, and the situation is not complicated by finding manifold layer beneath layer of antiquity, as would be the case in almost any village in the Nile Valley proper, where the same sites have been inhabited from Neolithic times down to the present day.

The town of Karanis, which the University of Michigan expedition selected as a specimen city for its investigation, had a population of perhaps five thousand in its best days. Dr. A. E. R. Boak, who initiated the work which is still being carried on, states that he expects after further study to know exactly how many taxable people lived there during at least one period in the town's history, and even to know their names. Among the papyri recovered from the ruins are numbers of tax lists. Egyptian officialdom has held the all-time world championship in ingenuity and thoroughness of taxation schemes, and it is a pretty safe bet that no person or piece of property in Karanis ever escaped the attention of the assessors.

But without waiting for the deciphering of the tax rolls and other written records it is possible to learn a good deal about these small-town folks of long ago. The broken walls of the buildings themselves, buried in wind-drifted sand, present a story that he who digs may read.

Karanis has known three different building periods, and there are three

Laboring as their forefathers labored: Egyptian workmen moving one of the stones of the temple by the same primitive means that the pyramid-builders used.

levels of foundations, one above the other, separated in places by layers of compact sand. The lowermost layer dates from Ptolemaic times, the middle layer from the period of Augustus and the Principate, and the upper belongs to the days of later Roman Empire. Each tells the same story: an energetic period of encouragement to agriculture and efficient administration of the irrigation system, followed by a decline into official slackness and graft, which in turn brought on popular discouragement, farm abandonment and consequent ruin of the towns. After the third death of Karanis there was no more resurrection.

But the three towns that grew successfully on the same site were very much alike, and fundamentally they were not unlike towns of similar size in mediaeval Europe, or the Maya Empire, or modern America. There was a center around which the life of the place circulated, and this was a building of stone. There were the houses and shops in which the people lived and drove their trades, and these were of less pretentious construction. Here, as elsewhere in Egypt, house construction was of sun-baked brick, much the same kind of thing we call adobe in our own Southwest. The walls were built fairly thick, and the houses were small and set closely together.

The principal building, occupying the place in the Karanian scheme of things that the county courthouse holds in our modern Main-Street towns, was the temple. The ruins of its stone walls, and a stone altar that attests to its character, have been brought to the light of day. The presence of a temple as the most pre-

tentious edifice does not argue that the people of Karanis were more pious than they were patriotic. Religion and citizenship were the same things, both in Egypt and in Rome; Pharaoh or Caesar was not only a civil ruler but a high-priest and a god in his own right.

But it is in the rooms of the houses where the people once lived, roofless now and with broken walls, that the most human and appealing chapters of the story of humble life in ancient Egypt may be read. Here are the few pieces of furniture that sufficed the simpler needs of an Oriental people. Here are the tools of field and workshop, the pots and baskets and bottles of the home, the quaint toys of the play-yard. In the empty houses where they were left when their discouraged owners moved away they lay for years untouched. The desert air is so dry that they did not decay, as such perishable stuff would have in a moister climate, and at last the roofs and walls fell in and the drifting sands completed the burial. And there they lay until the inquisitive spades of American scientists brought them up into the sunlight of a later day.

The villagers of Karanis might almost be said to have lived in an age of wood. Scores of objects that with us are made of metal are found ingeniously whittled out of timber. Perhaps the most remarkable and complicated mechanisms are the wooden door locks, opened with wooden keys. These are, to be sure, much larger affairs than the compact iron-and-brass devices that guard our own front doors. The wooden blocks that cover the sliding wooden (*Turn to page 270*)



NATURE RAMBLINGS

By Frank Thone



Bats Awakening

WHEN we talk of animals coming out of hibernation in the spring, we usually think of bears and squirrels, and that semi-legendary creature so important on February 2, the groundhog.

But there are other animals whose winter sleep is coming to an end, and when they come out of their caves they come a-flying. Literally flying, for they are winged. Bats hibernate, as do their heavier-bodied brethren who have to go afoot all their lives. There isn't anything else for them to do, if they want to survive the winter at all. Bats, at least all non-tropical bats, are insect-eaters and catch their prey on the wing. Since there are no insects awing in winter it is up to the bats to figure out the best way to spend the long winter evenings, and for creatures that cannot read, or play checkers, or listen to the radio the best thing to do is sleep. So they sleep, in long festoons within dark caves or deserted buildings.

There is one superstition about bats, held principally by women, that dies hard. They think that a low-flying bat is likely to get tangled in their hair. Even in these modern times of enlightenment and bobbed hair, women still duck and writhe uneasily when one of these noiselessly-flitting little animals swoops too near.

As a matter of fact, no bat ever collides with anything when it is flying. No matter how dark it may be, the bat always avoids all obstacles, even such slender things as twigs and wire. It is hardly possible that the animals can see these things in the dusk, but it is not known definitely how they become aware of them in time to swerve. Most naturalists conjecture that this uncanny power of locating things in the dark is due to specialized and highly developed organs of hearing.

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Small Towns in Ancient Egypt—Continued

bolts are half the size of a common brick, and the keys are six or eight inches long. But apparently they served their purpose.

More orthodox in appearance are wooden hayforks, carding combs, spindles, door frames. A curious piece of furniture is a wooden reading desk. This is in the shape of a wide but shallow trough. The two boards that form its top meet in the middle to form a wide "V", which prevented the rolls of papyrus that were the commonest books of that day from falling off. The desk is only about four inches high, and must have been used by a student sitting cross-legged on the ground, as Orientals still do.

Most of the wooden articles are made of ordinary varieties of timber, but the carpenters showed the preference they have always had for good tools. Numbers of mallets and wedges have been found that are made of mahogany.

It is in household gear, however, that the ruins are richest. The people of Karanis were not rich and they lived simply, but they had their own standards of comfort and were apparently able to maintain them when times were good. Metal pots and pans for the housewife's kitchen-work were of course unknown, but earthenware pots she had in abundance and in all conceivable sizes and shapes. Great pottery jars for the household supply of water stood by the door, on stone stands. Pottery lamps hung from the ceiling beams or stood on brackets.

Anybody who thinks that glassware for table use is a modern invention will have his eyes opened if he walks through the rooms of the museum at Ann Arbor. These Karanian women liked nice things, too, even if they weren't princesses, and they could set well-shaped glass bowls, goblets and bottles on the table when there was company for dinner. Most of it is delicately-tinted glass, too; the blues and greens are especially attractive.

And when the party was on, it seems not unlikely that the ancient Karanians "made whoopee" in a style not unlike that of Main Street—or Broadway. Witness a pair of wooden castanets: evidently the Egyptians of that day did not need to wait for Spanish teachers, although in that climate fringed shawls were a superfluity. Witness also a set of dice, spotted in exactly the same pattern that marks the dice of today. "The boys in the back room" had their own

ideas of relaxation in those days as they have now.

But the folk of Karanis, whatever their daily labor or household cares or even frivolities, had one touch of nature that makes them even more kin to us of the present time. All through the village are the reminders of children. The toys scattered about, perhaps as the children left them before their parents decided to pack up and go to a more prosperous town, are mute witnesses of the affection which the Egyptians have always felt for their offspring.

They are, moreover, witnesses of the unchanging minds of children through the ages, for the outstanding pieces of the toy section in the University of Michigan museum are things on which children of today would pounce as eagerly as did their prototypes of twenty centuries ago. There is a handful of marbles, stained and discolored now, but round enough and of the right size, so that your own boy could take them outdoors this minute and "knuckle down" with them. There are wooden toys on wheels, especially little wooden horses, so like those favored by toddlers of four or five that these old Egyptian toys could be repainted and sold at any toy shop without being noticed as unusual at all.

But perhaps the prize of the whole toy exhibit is a rag doll. It is probably the oldest rag doll in the world, though certainly not the first rag doll that was ever made. It is not a big rag doll, and certainly not a beautiful one. It is just a wisp of linen cloth tied over a chance bit of stuffing with string—the kind of thing that a busy mother makes in a couple of minutes to quiet a clamoring youngster. Or perhaps some little Egyptian girl made it herself, and crooned happily over it afterward. The workmanship is crude enough to be that of a child's fingers. But it was enough to satisfy the budding maternal instinct of a young daughter of Egypt, in the far-off days when, somewhere under the same sky, a slim foreign girl from the North, but little older than herself, sat under a palm-tree tending her infant Son.

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Scientists who have been studying insect flight say that the rapidly whirring wings of some insects are very similar to the rotating propellers of airplanes.