Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Bremen

DFG-Projekt "Digitalisierung und Erschließung des Nachlasses des Ägyptologen Adolf Erman (1854-1937)"

Brief von Norman de Garis Davies an Adolf Erman

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Tell el Armana, 28.02.1926

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My dear Erman,

Several weeks ago I ought to have written to you to thank you most heartily for the first part of the so-long-wished-for Wörterbuch. It was not wholly unheralded. Every post had brought me requests from booksellers begging to be allowed to supply me with the incomparable volume. But I said to myself "That authority is like a disease with Erman. It has been assuming greater and greater portentos and perhaps he is by this time capable of heroic generosity. I will wait a week or two". Wisdom is justified of all her children, and I believe for some days I was the proud possessor of the only copy in Egypt, and my bookshelves were the object of many a visit by interested inquirers (most of course unknown words of course began with 𓄡 or 𓅱). This was most kind of you - who am I that I should be the recipient of this first fruits of your life-work? Yet perhaps I am qualified by knowing less words in the dictionary than any living Egyptologist. There are many bitter disappointments in life & in science. This is one of the happy ones that you should have seen the first Wörterbuch egg of the clutch break, and the pretty little chick come out & walk jaunty about on its two yellow legs.

It was an additional trial to me however to have to leave Thebes with this unfinished work on my shelves a week ago. With heroic fortitude I have returned to the scene of my long and painful labours of twenty years back, apprehending — and not without good reason — that the last state of this man would be worse than the first. And so it is; except that this time I have my wife with me, whom I can blame for all the mishaps and on whom I can devolve all the jobs that are too difficult for me.

It is a question namely of copying the decoration of one of the rooms in the new palace to the north of El Tell which the E. Exploration Fund unearthed last year and which owing to the lamentable death of Newton during the season was in danger of sharing the fate of the Ellesmania pavement without even being copied by Petrie. A tracing & a description of one wall which my assistant made for the E.E.F. last spring convinced me that it was a unique and lovely thing; so I begged Lythgoe to let me come with my wife so that together we might try and secure a copy in colour. I have not erred. It is a priceless thing but in a lamentable state; large parts of it gone, others discoloured, others hanging by a stem of paint only so that a touch or a breath destroys them. It is doomed to destruction very speedily but I have got Frankfort to put a roof over it & I hope not only to get a coloured copy but to make some few see the original before it falls to pieces. It is a commonplace subject — pigeons, kingfishers, doves, &c, sitting in a papyrus

swamp above a pool whose margin is fringed with all kinds of delicious desert weeds & flowers. But the whole is healed with a freedom and naturalness as well as with a softness of colouring that is amazing. Almost the last stiffness is gone except for the lotus-pond. The upper part is gone so that we do not know how it ended above. Perhaps it is as well; what is left is so charming that it is more likely to have been spoilt than enhanced by any addition. With restorations it will make a picture that ought to create a sensation. So that we feel it a privilege to be the means of saving it for Art. It is time we had to pay for it; for we are living under very primitive conditions here, and, as our boxes failed to arrive & we found the house bare of everything, we had two or three days of amusing penury, and two of toil that tried our patience to the extreme, holding on to tracing paper with our hands (no pin will hold in the dust that backs the paint) while the wind flapped the paper, the sun beat down and the flies tickled! Now that it is roofed in, it is very different & only technical difficulties remain and the necessity of doing it all in three weeks or so.

On my way to the station at Luxor I saw Lorenzutti & his wife for a few minutes. They were just about to start off for the south but we hope to see them on our return to Thebes. He must have got together a mass of valuable photographs of sites not easily accessible, and that is a great service to render.

at Thebes I have been busy tracing Rekhmarê & have got the worst bruises — the transverse hall with the biographical stela which Gardner has just published in your first number — traced & the best part of the axial hall. I hope I shall live to see it published. The precedent of the Wörterbuch gives me renewed hope, especially as the Americans are partly responsible for this happy issue.

You have seen the astonishing news of the Rockefeller offer. I fear the Egyptian Government will not accept the bribe. They do not care about the money. They can squeeze the fellahin for that easily enough. They don't care for science & they are excessively proud & sensitive. As I said to Pearson "What do the Egyptians get out of it?". And he said "that is just what Nedawy Pasha said to me"! If Pearson had been a true American and had slipped a £1000 pound note into every Cabinet minister's hand, it would have been a settled thing & the future of the Museum would have been secure. Middle-height morality is the most useful. If Pearson were a little more unscrupulous & Zuwar Pasha a little less!

Thebes still exists but it never sees an inspector now and lives because the tourist has to be pleased & because the Metropolitan Museum Expedition is in the offing and watchful. But both are unsatisfactory supports for ancient history & art. The next decade may see more than one catastrophe in this respect, akin to the burning of the Alexandrian library.

With best regards to Frau Freeman & yourself from us both

Yours very faithfully

R Lizars Davies