

Au Temps des Pharaons

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The same feeling emerges of the enigmatic monument which M. Barsanti cleared for the Antiquities Department, near Zaouiet-el-Aryan, halfway between Giza and Sakkara. It is the great actual curiosity of Memphite Egypt; because the building is dated with certainty to the end of the thinite period, it allows us to locate in time those where we find the same construction methods.

The construction of the monument is situated at the bottom of a cut-out cavity in the shape of a T, which is 100 meters long, 25 meters wide and 30 meters deep. The walls of the cavity are simply cut out from the the limestone plateau; the profiles have such a sharpness to it that it seems that they have been cut out from the rock with a stretched thread, as if it was a clod of butter. We arrive at the bottom by an inclined plane, which has at the center a slide for the materials and at each side a vertiginous staircase of which the steps show signs of usage. (PL. VI, 1).



Plate VI, 1

The pit had been filled by rubble and sand; it was necessary to take out more than 4,000 cubic meters of excavated material to expose a pavement of enormous blocks of pink granite. Mr. Barsanti hoped, by removing one of these blocks, to find a funerary vault underneath: because several fragments found in the rubble had the name of the King Nofirka, of the II dynasty, written on it. The raised stone showed another block and, underneath there were three other superimposed on each other, the last one rested on rock.

Where was the vault? To find out, Mr. Barsanti hired granite tailors, who had worked at the d'Assouan dam of the Nile, and he made them pierce a tunnel through the granite, a work worthy of the Pharaohs. The tunnel where I was able to go into, in 1907, guided by Mr. Barsanti, served only to demonstrate that all this mass is compact; also because many Egyptologists think there is no space hiding inside the pavement, and it served only as a foundation for a monument that was never built. Mr. Barsanti firmly believes that this floor is a ceiling which covers an intact tomb; his conviction is largely based on the presence of a singular structure on the pavement. In one of the granite blocks an oval vat has been cut out; it is two meters long and one meter deep; a beautiful lid with four ear cups protects it; The whole thing is polished like a mirror and shaped with the same care as an ornament. (PL VI, 2).



PL VI, 2

"It was with real emotion", M. Barsanti wrote, "that I took it to myself to lifting the lid; but when the inside of the tank showed, I found it completely empty. I only noticed that the side walls were lined with a black band 10 centimeters high. Probably it is the very light deposit of some liquid that was enclosed in the vat, as an offering or libation, and which has evaporated over the years." (*Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte*, VII, p. 285) It could be that there was a funeral chamber vertically below the tank, as it is

customary for mastabas, which have a receptacle for offerings on their top. In order to solve this puzzle, Mr. Barsanti was authorized by Mr. Maspero to move one by one all the blocks superimposed of the quadruple row; he did not put them back until he had explored the entire depth of the pits of Zaouiet-el-Aryan.