

EGYPT THROUGH THE WESTERN EYE

What a Visit
Can Tell You
About Yourself.

BY RYAN MURDOCK

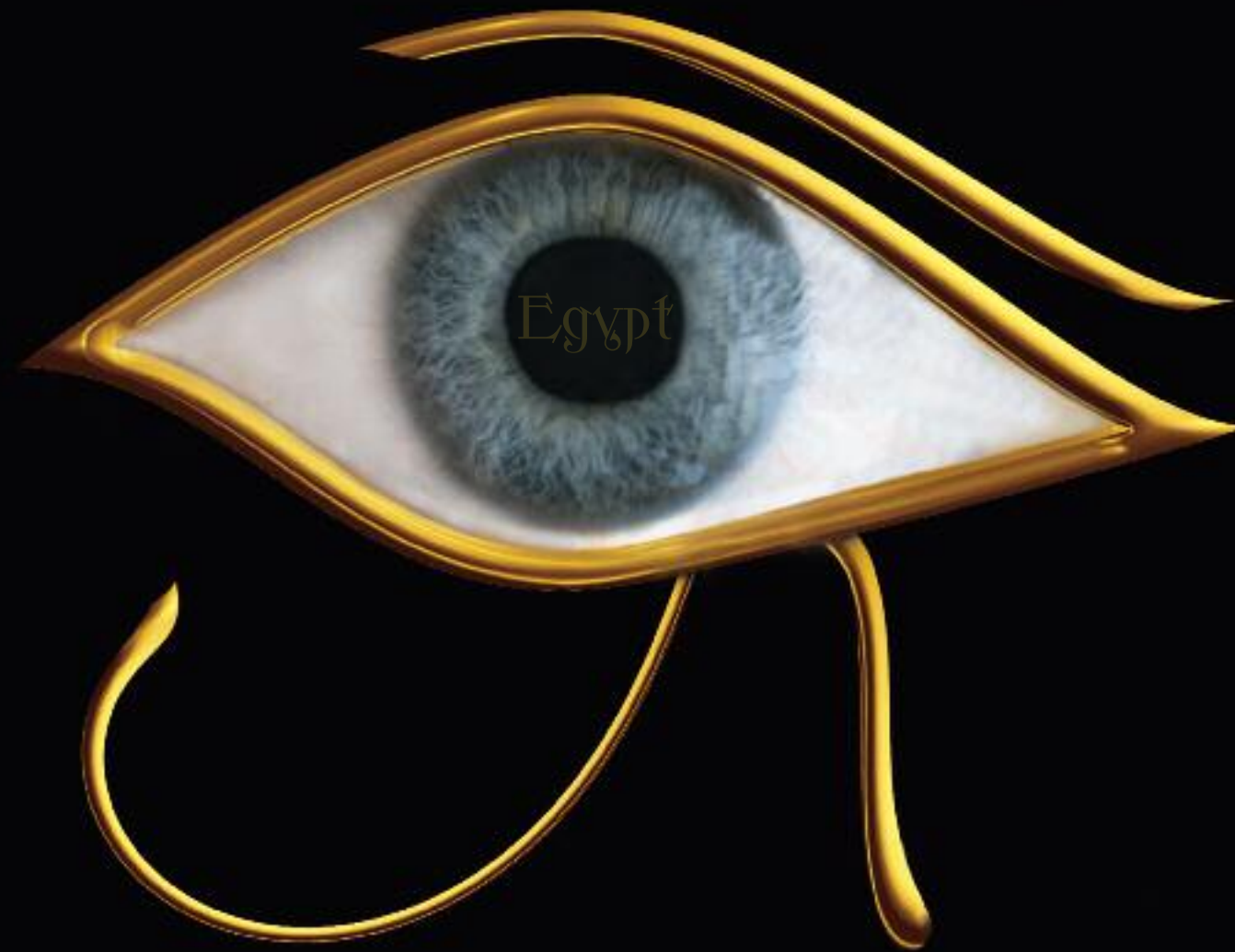
My hotel room was a world away from the mad pandemonium of Cairo's streets: a cool, sheltered eighteenth century oasis of calm, hospitality and sensory relief. Wrapped in the silence of my marbled balcony, I bit into a honey-drenched Arabian sweet and watched the Nile as it flowed soupy gray past the concrete fringe of Gezira Island far below. I'd been woken in the pre-dawn hours by the Muslim call to prayer. It began at a nearby mosque, its lonely warble echoing outwards, picked up by one minaret after another until it rippled into the distance, and the darkness was filled with it.

I, too, was responding to an insistent inner calling. I wanted to understand what a place like Egypt, visited by so many, could teach me about myself. Fortified by strong Turkish coffee, I laced up my boots, determined to start at the most obvious place: the intersection of dead time and space, where the desert meets the limitless gunmetal sky.



Tutankhamun's golden funeral mask represents Egyptian art at its height.

SPECIAL PHOTOGRAPHY
BY JASON GEORGE



The Pyramids

In ancient times, the Nile's east and west banks represented separate spheres: on the east were the dwellings, blessed with life from the rising sun, while the west was equated with the setting sun, the land of death—"the western lands,"—where blowing sand choked the silent mouths of tombs.

Today that distinction no longer holds, and Giza is just another busy suburb of Africa's largest city. Its roads are lined with faceless buildings, pasted with billboards of sleek-haired women advertising shampoo, and with the whirling fans of air conditioners bolted on next to a monotonous row of satellite dishes. Bent pieces of rebar stand up like mani-

acal antennas from the unfinished roofs, so that the modern city resembles one massive unending construction site. The Cairo of the present, a voracious amoeba, has nearly surrounded the colossal tombs, which are all that most foreigners associate with the country.

I entered the Great Pyramid through the gaping hole hacked into its side. The books I read as a child showed cutaway drawings of what I assumed were passageways with massive vaulted ceilings. In reality, they were little more than tunnels of slick rock at a 45 degree angle, with wooden steps hammered on for traction. I never imagined it would be so claustrophobic, or that the world's most famous tourist sites would feel like such an adventure. My stomach tingled with the

The eternal riddle of the sphinx at Giza continues to captivate mankind as it has for centuries.



excitement of a tomb raider as I pulled myself up bent double in a crouch, my back scraping the ceiling, and the smothering heat increasing with every step.

About a hundred and twenty feet later, I stood upright in the Great Gallery, its ceiling invisible in the gloom far above, with walls of Muqattam limestone cut and fitted so perfectly that even a knife blade wouldn't slip between the joints. Beyond it, a short tunnel and another crawl led to the King's Chamber.

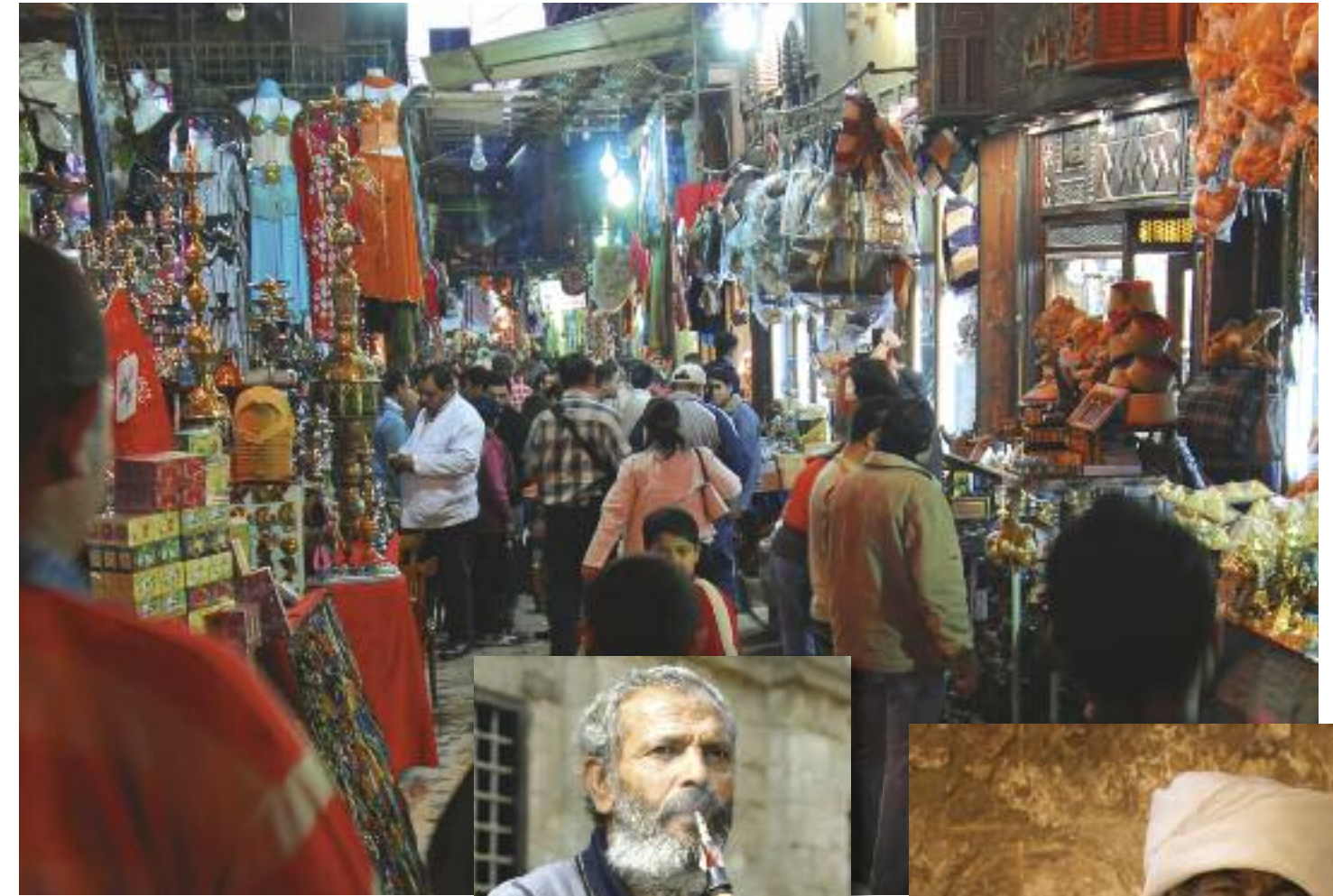
The room was large enough to house a double-decker bus, but it felt intensely confined. Perhaps it was the heavy air or the weight of all those stones pressing down. I had difficulty breathing, and the sweat rolled down my back. A group of four New Age devotees sat cross-legged in a chanting circle at the chamber's midpoint, while beyond them, a huge lidless sarcophagus of Aswan granite lay empty. The pharaoh Khufu was never buried there, and only one inscription of his



Egypt communicates to us in a language of symbols.

name was ever found inside the curiously barren structure.

Despite the immense effort of its construction, the Great Pyramid was a futile attempt to outlive time. To me it symbolized human weakness as well as physical strength, and it left me feeling strangely empty.



The Bazaar

Later, back in the city, the past gave way to the present at the Cairo bazaar—though echoes of the past crept in there too, clawing back modernity with musty, linen-wrapped hands. Narrow alleys overflowing with fabrics radiated off the main avenue—a crowded warren of shoving people and covetous touts, packed with glittering goldsmith shops, the gentle glow of jade and alabaster, reddish carpets woven with geometrical designs, conical piles of spices in yellow and orange, and tourist junk. Not to mention the ever-present papyrus scrolls painted with everything from Tutankhamen's gilded funeral mask to the American flag. On the fringes, men in dark *jalabiyya* sipped tiny glasses of mint tea and smoked the *sheesha*, lost in a gurgling world of apple-scented tobacco and quiet conversation, totally oblivious to the commotion of commerce.

In the narrow side streets near the bazaar, latticed balconies met overhead in a display of Moorish architecture drawn right out of Naguib Mafouz's "Cairo Trilogy." It was easy to imagine cloistered women hidden behind them, peering out at the excitement of the streets, as sunlight poured in through square holes, leaving a lattice work pattern on a carefully tiled floor. Walking those streets, I sensed that the eighteenth century was just as comfortable in Cairo as 2,000 BC was on its outskirts. The only century that felt impermanent was the present. It felt like a veneer, existing only on the surface, and as fragile as the slender bolts that fasten a satellite dish to a concrete balcony.



Modernity meets tradition at the Cairo Bazaar. (top). To the ancients, this ankh-shaped key was the symbol of life.

Luxor

That palimpsest of meaning intrigued me. I packed my bags and journeyed to Luxor to gain a sense of how deep the past of Egypt goes, and just how many layers overlap there.

At the center of town, a few steps up the bank from the life-giving Nile, sits Luxor Temple, built during a period when New Kingdom art had reached its peak (circa 1417 BC). The temple was dedicated to the Theban Triad of Amun-Min, his consort Mut, and their son Khonsu—just three of the principal deities in a vast pantheon that defies orderly description, and which was compounded by the many attributes and local associations attached to each god.

As I walked between the columns, I was struck by the vividness of Luxor's hieroglyphs and reliefs. Relentless desert winds had buried the site for centuries, concealing it so well that oblivious locals had built a mosque on top of it. We're left with a clear record of the shifts and turns of the temple, from ancient through Roman to modern times. In the darkest corners of the colonnades, some of the original paint has even been preserved.

There are literary records as well, of course. The two giant statues of Ramses II that flank the temple's entrance were reputedly the inspiration for the English poet Shelley's famous lines:

*"My name is Ozymandias,
king of kings:
Look on my works,
ye Mighty, and despair!"*

Shelley's verse reflects the sentiment that has shaped our interpretation of Egypt in the west and our fascination with it. Such colossal ruins unsettle us because they force us to confront our own impermanence. But as the Western Lands will attest, even the ancients were not immune to that.

Luxor should be seen in solitude by night. Only then can you fully appreciate its desolate grandeur, and only then can you recapture the whispering afterimage of priestly incantations from the deepest corners of the temple's past.

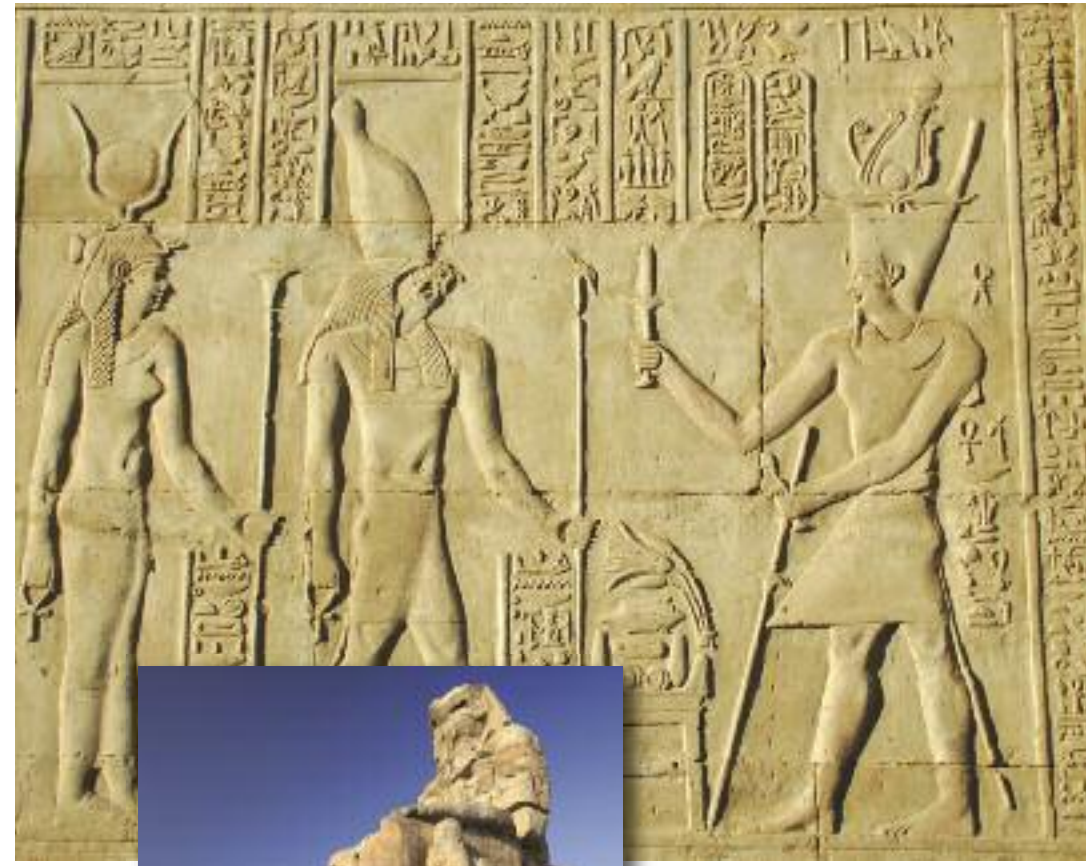


The stones of Luxor Temple (above) hold an afterimage of sacred rites.

Luxor's friezes and hieroglyphs, (top right) buried for centuries, are as clear as the day they were carved.

These stone giants (inset) were the inspiration for Shelley's famous poem "Ozymandias."

Four collosai of Ramses II (right) guard the gateway to ancient Egypt at Abu Simbel.



The Valley of the Kings

My hotel was located on the west bank, beneath the Theban Hills, and it, too, seemed to be of another time. In truth, it was less a hotel than a sprawling palace. Winding stone paths linked separate buildings of four suites, each grouped around their own peaceful garden courtyard. The domes of my ceiling were inlaid with cut glass, so that the sun cast gentle blue and green rays onto the crisp Egyptian linen of my canopy bed. The walls held cracked photos of life in Egypt during the French and British expeditions up the Nile, and I quickly became lost in their sepia tones. When I tired of imagining that pith-helmeted past, I swung open latticed windows onto my garden courtyard, where begonias, oleanders and cactus sheltered the birds whose song summoned my mornings and blessed the evening's cool.

But we mustn't forget that the west bank was also the realm of death. Not far from where I sat sipping a cool gin and tonic at the teak colonial bar, the Theban Hills were honeycombed with burials,

some well known and some as yet undiscovered. From about 1512 BC, the New Kingdom pharaohs began to construct their secret tombs in the nearby Valley of the Kings. Above ground sites like the pyramids of Giza were ridiculously conspicuous and had begun to attract grave robbers, from which waning governmental power could no longer protect them. The Egyptians believed that if their mummies didn't survive the present, neither would their spirits survive the afterlife. Being interred in a safe place was for them literally a matter of afterlife or death.

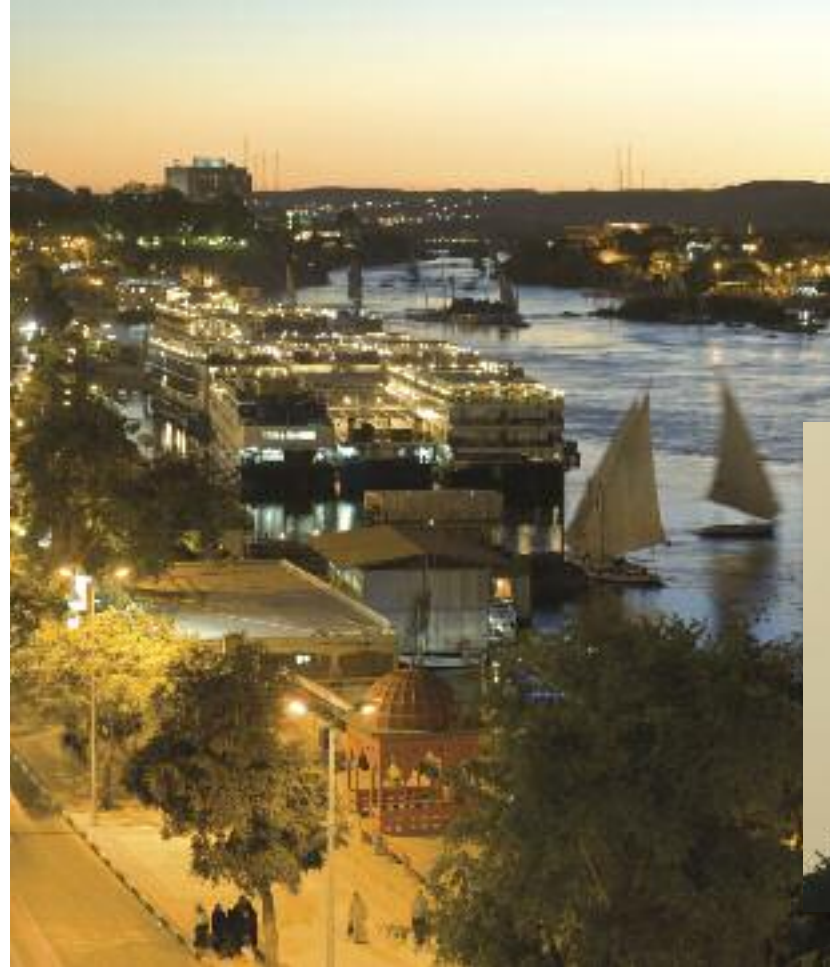
That lonely, baking valley was brought to the world's attention by the English archeologist Howard Carter's discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb—the first fully intact royal burial ever found. That simple tomb of a minor king was responsible for reigniting the world's interest in Egypt, and is probably responsible for all that we have come to associate with the country: pyramids, hieroglyphs, anthropomorphic coffins filigreed in gold, the mystery of magic, the presence of the gods and the power of the priests.

The relics of such a civilization are of course fascinating, but why do they have the power to obsess us so? Why are we more interested in Egypt's death than its life? This was a question I still hadn't solved.

Abu Simbel

I hopped one last flight to Abu Simbel, near the border of Sudan, the gateway to Egypt during its New Kingdom heyday. While Ramses II was waging colonial wars from the Beka'a Valley in Lebanon to the Fourth Cataract of the Nile in Sudan, he had four colossal statues of himself hewn into the side of a mountain in a forlorn patch of desert, facing east. We know it today as the Great Temple of Ramses II. More than anything else, it symbolized the absolute power of that ancient civilization. Every traveler who entered Egypt from Africa had to pass beneath those mighty colossi and endure their empty, eternal somewhat discomfiting stare.

The figures are not beautiful. There's



Feluccas cruise the Nile at Aswan (left).

A nation in transition, where graceful minarets still dwarf apartment blocks and satellite dishes (center).



no anatomy to speak of, no proportion, nothing that gives expression or saves from monotony. They are just immensely huge. And yet, there's something compelling about them.

As hordes of tourists shuffled past, blistered by the desert sun, I took a seat on a lone bench beneath the only tree I could find. The longer I stared at the collosai of the Great Temple, the more the smaller images on the façade became apparent. Ra, the sun god, to whom the temple was dedicated, was dwarfed by the pharaoh, just as he dwarfs all other figures in the composition. That didn't make sense, until I suddenly realized that Ramses was in fact deifying himself—trying desperately to seize eternal life by becoming a god.

With that act of deciphering, the clues fell into place. Egypt—our Egypt of the western mind—finally made sense. But for us, the message is of less importance than the medium of its understanding.



Egypt's Red Sea coast holds many wonders to delight the traveler.

Egypt communicates with us in a language of symbols—primeval symbols that resonate deep within our collective unconscious and continue to speak to something deep in our essence even centuries after it faded away: the horror of our own impermanence, the mystery of death and the obsession with an afterlife.

Egypt symbolizes our idealization and longing for a lost past, for a time when we were capable of forgotten feats of engineering, of building monumental works with simple tools, and the performance of miracles, known as thaumaturgy. That idealization springs in part from our dissatisfaction with the pedestrianism of our civic present. Ruins and the dreams we populate them with tell us more about ourselves than they do about the ancients. As travelers, we don't want the Egypt of today—we seek the Egypt of that idealized past, because we, too, dream of greatness. ■

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