Shelley's "Ozymandias"

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Shelley’s *Ozymandias*

By Johnstone Parr

Shelley’s sonnet entitled *Ozymandias* and signed “Glirastes” was published in Leigh Hunt’s *Examiner* on January 11, 1818 (p. 24).

I met a Traveller from an antique land,
Who said, “Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desart. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read,
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
“My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings.”
Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!
No thing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

GLIRASTES.

The ultimate source of information concerning Ozymandias is the account in Diodorus Siculus’ *Bibliotheca Historica* (first century B.C.). Diodorus remarks that at the second gateway of the funereal temple or “tomb” of an Egyptian king known as “Ozymandyas” are three statues, each of one entire stone, the workmanship of Memnon of Sienitas. One of these, made in a sitting posture, is the greatest in all Egypt, the measure of his foot exceeding seven cubits. . . . This piece is not only commendable for its greatness, but admirable for its cut and workmanship, and the excellency of the stone. In so great a work there is not to be discerned the least flaw, or any other blemish.

Upon it there is this inscription:—“I am Ozymandayas, king of kings; if any would know how great I am, and where I lie, let him excel me in any of my works.”

No other ancient or classical historian—Herodotus, Strabo, Pausanias, Thucydides, Xenophon, Arrian, Tacitus, or Pliny—mentions Ozymandias or his statue.

Historians and archaeologists of the twentieth century seem to be agreed that Ozymandias is the Greek name for the notorious Egyptian pharaoh Ramses II (1901–1234 B.C.), and that the statue of Ozymandias stood near this pharaoh's funereal temple at Thebes now known as the Ramesseum. This gigantic colossus, computed to have been about 60 feet high and to have weighed 1000 tons, lies in a highly mutilated state among the ruins of the Ramesseum today. A photograph of its remains in Breasted's *History of Egypt* (1919) may be compared with a drawing of the statue that appeared in Sir Henry Light's *Travels in Egypt* (1818). See Plate I. The photograph in Breasted's book was taken from virtually the same spot upon which the artist stood to draw the remains for Light. A second comparison can be made by observing the view of the statue from its other side as it appears in Wilson's *The Burden of Egypt* (1951) and in the French Commission's *Description de l'Egypte* (1812). See Plate II. From these representations we can observe that all of the statue which now remains is a part from the waist upwards, and that all that remained in Shelley's day was a half-torso, a mutilated head, and part of a foot. In Shelley's day the face of the head was so obliterated that no one could have discerned a "frown," a "wrinkled lip," or a

ant the statement (in the Greek text of Teubner, 1853, p. 66) that the statue was executed by Memnon of Sienitas. The point is significant because any traveler-historian mentioning the "statue of Memnon" does not necessarily refer to one of the famous twin Colossi of Memnon, different statues several hundred yards away from that of Ozymandias. Incidentally, the Cogan translation (pp. 32–33) also renders the expression "the workmanship of Memnon."


Hall (Deputy-Keeper of Egyptian Antiquities at the British Museum) maintains that Ramses II and his son Merneptah were respectively the Biblical pharaohs of the Oppression and the Exodus. Hall, pp. 403–404.

3. This scholarly and accurate work of the Commission appeared in an expensive set of twenty huge volumes entitled *Commission des monuments d'Egypte* (Paris, 1809–1828), the first volume of which, *Description générale de Thèbes*, compiled by MM. Jollios and DeVilliers, contained minutely detailed descriptions of the statue of Ozymandias. The volume of *Planches* which pictured all the monuments appeared in 1812.

4. The learned traveler-historian Dr. Richard Pococke visited Thebes in the eighteenth century and recorded the statue's measurements: "There are ruins . . . of a very large colossal statue; it is broke off about the middle of the trunk, the head is six feet broad; from the top of the head to the bottom of the neck, it measures eleven feet; . . . it is twenty-one feet broad at the shoulders; . . . and the foot is four feet eight inches broad." A *Description of the East and Some Other Countries* (London, 1742); cited from the reprint in John Pinkerton, *General Collection of Voyages* (London, 1808–1814), XV, 248—hereafter cited as Pococke.
"Statue of Memnon, Thrown Down at Thebes"

"Fragments of Thousand-Ton Colossus of Ramses II"

PLATE I. STATUE OF OZYMANDIAS
“Des Débris de la Statue Colossale d’Osymandyas”

“The Ramesseum at Thebes, with the Shattered Colossus of Ramses II”
(John A. Wilson, The Burden of Egypt, Chicago, 1951. Fig. 29a.)

PLATE II. STATUE OF OZYMANDIAS
PLATE III. MAP SHOWING STATUE OF OZYMANDIAS
(French Commission, Description de l'Egypte. Planches.
Tome Deuxième. Paris, 1812. Plate 19.)
"sneer of cold command." And rather than "Two vast and trunkless legs" there were no legs at all. What were once legs had become shapeless masses of stone, with the exception of a part of a foot lying among the debris. The vainglorious epitaph—"on the pedestal" says Shelley—was apparently not on the remains of the statue in Shelley's day; and even if it had been, no one could have read it in 1818 because Egyptian hieroglyphics were not understood until Champollion deciphered the Rosetta Stone in 1822. No pedestal is clearly seen in the drawings, but the map prepared by the French Commission (see Plate III) does indicate either a pedestal or the position where a pedestal had been; and, although definitely not the head of Ozymandias, nearby is a partly sunken head ("Tête colossale enfouie") of another statue.

Since the statue lay precisely thus in Shelley's day, it becomes obvious that Shelley's description is not in conformity with the facts, and that any contemporary "traveller" who reported to Shelley such a description as we find in his sonnet had not seen the remains of the statue. But it is also obvious that Shelley must have had information from some source other than Diodorus, for Diodorus reported the statue whole and without blemish and yet in Shelley's day it was partially demolished. Naturally inquiries have been made as to where Shelley learned of the colossus that he (or his "Traveller") purported to describe.

No very convincing answers have been forthcoming. Some years ago Mr. Thompson examined the works of several eighteenth- and nineteenth-century traveler-historians (Pococke, Norden, Savary, Denon, Hamilton, Belzoni, and the French Commission) with the idea of discovering Shelley's source, deciding finally upon Savary. A year later Mr. Pettit suggested the work of M. Dominique-Vivant Denon. Recently I pointed out the existence of the epitaph in Sir Walter Raleigh's History of the World, and subsequently Mr. Notopoulos cited it in Clarke's Travels in Africa and in the Quarterly Review. I have re-

5. Richard Henry Hamilton, President of the British Association and possibly the foremost British authority on Egyptian antiquities in Shelley's day, visited Thebes and wrote in 1809 that "the face [of the statue] is entirely obliterated." Egyptiaca (London, 1809), pp. 167-168.


9. James A. Notopoulos, "Shelley's Ozymandias Once Again," MLR, XLVIII (1953), 442-443. Incidentally, I find the passage in Clarke on p. 249 rather than p. 151. Notopoulos suggests also that "a mediate source" might be Horace Smith. Smith visited the Shelles in December, 1817, and wrote a sonnet on Ozymandias as a corollary to Shelley's and published it in the Examiner on February 1, 1818 (p. 75). Smith is un-
examined all of these possible sources, and many more besides, with very little conviction that Shelley's account came from any of them. One must agree that Denon's account is striking; for he wrote (italics mine):

At some paces from this gate [of the Ramesseum] are the remains of an enormous colossus; it has been wantonly shattered. . . . Is it the statue of . . . Ozymandias? [Denon thinks not]. . . . Ozymandias had . . . caused an inscription to be engraven *on the pedestal* of the statue, in which he defied the power of man to destroy this monument . . . [but this statue] has disappeared, the *hand* of time and the teeth of envy appear to have united zealously in its destruction, and *nothing of it remains* but a shapeless rock of granite.

One may be struck by the fact that some of the phraseology of Denon's account appears in Shelley's sonnet, and that Denon is the only traveler who actually states (as does Shelley) that the inscription was "on the pedestal." But Denon's description is otherwise not in accord with Shelley's, and nowhere does Denon cite the inscription which looms so large in Shelley's poem.

This vainglorious epitaph which Diodorus reports having been on the statue is cited in the traveler-historian accounts of Pococke, Norden, Savary, and the French Commission, but not in those of Hamilton, Light, Denon, Belzoni, or Legh. It appeared also in several places where no description of the statue is given: in Raleigh's *History*, Clarke's *Travels*, the *Quarterly Review*; and (three unmentioned heretofore) in Pauli Ernesti Jablonski's *Opuscula quibus Lingua et Antiquitas Aegyptiorum* (Lyons, 1804), I, 189, the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (Fourth Edition, 1810, XV, 588), and Constantin F. Chasseboeuf de Volney's *New Researches on Ancient History* (London, 1819), II, 422.

One may almost suspect that the arrogant epitaph of Ozymandias had become virtually a commonplace. If so, the account of Denon becomes more significant than hitherto admitted.

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likely inasmuch as his sonnet gives the statue a single leg, and his rendering of the epitaph is quite different from Shelley's.

10. In addition, I have examined in vain the Egyptian travel-histories of Leo Africanus, François Bernier, Dr. Thomas Shaw, James Bruce, Mungo Park, Carstan Niebuhr, John Lewis Burckhardt, Henry Salt, Count de Forbin, and Thomas Legh.

11. *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*, trans. Arthur Aiken (New York, 1803), II, 52–54. See also the translation of E. A. Kendall (London, 1809), I, 218–222. Pettit reports nine editions or translations of this work between 1802 and 1810. But Pettit and Denon are both wrong in stating that Ozymandias is mentioned by either Herodotus or Strabo; and Pettit fails to cite the part of the passage which notes that the statue is "shattered."


15. *Description de l'Egypte* (Paris, 1809), I, 199, 147, 156.

No evidence seems to be conclusive that Shelley consulted any of the works yet suggested except Clarke's Travels and the Quarterly Review, both of which are listed in Mary's Journal and therefore presumably were observed by Shelley. Both of these works cite the vainglorious epitaph, but neither of them contains any sort of description of the statue. As for Shelley's source, we are still unable to do more than speculate. We may assume that here he has modified his source material, or we may surmise that his information came from some source which mis-reported the facts.

In connection with the latter possibility we may notice that among the people visiting the Shelleys in October and again in November of 1817 was a friend named Walter Coulson, who edited a London periodical called the Traveller. The only pertinent copies of this magazine which I can discover are those for the first week of January, 1818, now in the British Museum. The October-December issues (wherein Shelley might have read a badly-reported feature article on Ozymandias) are not to be found. According to the Library of Congress and other large libraries in this country, they are not in America; and according to the director of the British Union-Catalog of Periodicals, they are not in England either. But if these October-December issues of the Traveller ever turn up, we might discover Shelley's mis-informed "Traveller from an antique land."

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18. Professor Frederick A. Pottle has kindly pointed out to me that the sunken head ("Tête colossale enfouie") noted in Plate III "may have seemed to Shelley more memorable and satisfactory than the faceless above-ground head of the actual statue."
20. See also William S. Ward, Index and Finding List of Serials Published in the British Isles, 1789-1872 (Lexington, Kentucky, 1953).
21. Grateful acknowledgment is made to the University of Alabama Research Committee for the purchase of microfilms and photostats used in the preparation of this paper.