

THE DISAPPEARANCE OF THE PAPYRUS PLANT
IN EGYPT.

By JOSEPH OFFORD.

IN Isaiah xix, 7, the prophet, according to the Authorised Version, foresees the destruction of "the paper reeds by the brooks." The literal accomplishment of this prophecy of the disappearance of the prolific growth of the papyrus plant, which was one of the chief natural phenomena of Lower Egypt in ancient times has been noticed by several writers. But the abundant growth of these plants in the Delta in antiquity, as demonstrated by Egyptian landscape artists, has never been more interestingly described than by M. Georges Benedite, in an essay upon illustrations upon the monuments of the netting of water fowl he has recently published.

In this treatise he convincingly shows from the tomb reliefs and paintings of aquatic birds, and their habitat, the extraordinary abundance of the papyrus plant in Lower Egypt and the Delta during the long period in which these designs were being executed. He explains that the chief sites, where the sport of bird netting, or the killing of birds for food by means of the Egyptian boomerang, were in the then semi-lacustrine regions of the Northern Delta approaching the sea, the natural features of which have been quite altered in character by subsequent depression of the land, or increase of the Mediterranean's level. So abundant, under the Middle the dynasties and the earlier ones, were the papyrus plants there, that hieroglyph acting as determinative for this country was a threefold stemmed papyrus plant. From some of the Isis-myths we are also informed that the Delta was filled with the same rich vegetation in the Pre-dynastic and mythical eras.

This aquatic plant also was, in the earlier texts, especially placed under the patronage of the Deltaic deity, Butó. A similar abundance of the papyrus must also at one time have existed in Middle Egypt, because the Cow-goddess Hathor is, at Thebes and numerous other sites, delineated as standing partially concealed among the

tall waving papyri. In all the tableaux or reliefs, the marshy, riverine, and lacustrine regions, which were intersected by the Nilotic branches and connecting canals, is geographically figured by tufts or fascines of papyrus and other water-nourished reeds and grasses, the tufts of seedlings and flowery coronets being depicted in greater proportionate profusion than their leaves.

That they are specially aquatic plants their faithful drawing reveals to any botanist, but the Egyptian artists, with the meticulous pains they invariably exercised, left the question quite certain by, and this is especially the case with the papyrus, adding at the roots the graphic symbol for water, of wavy lines, even to the vignette or hieroglyph, calling attention to the subject being that of aquatic plants, or of districts wherein such flourished.

In the tableaux of aquatic bird netting, they sometimes added other water-frequenting animals, such as the ichneumon.

These reliefs and paintings of scenes representing the snaring of wild fowl are one series of the graphic records for the preparation for the funeral feast provisions, or for the obtaining of poultry as sacrificial birds for temple worship. Some may be also pictorial presentiments of the happy sport to be enjoyed by the defunct in the next world, whose Elysian fields, and lakes, and canals were a duplicate of the mundane Egypt. The scenes indicate the bird-hunting amidst dense groves of papyri, and faithfully represent Egypt's natural feature of their age. To-day, as foretold, this type of vegetation has vanished, and the only papyri growing in a natural state in all Lower Egypt known to me are in the Esbekieh Gardens fountain at Cairo, or the botanical gardens, or at the Barrage.
