

Sands And Empire

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Summer 2006, midday. I am sitting on cheap metal chewing on overpriced food. At least five languages are drifting through the crowded hall, the most common being Russian. I see through human stew. Japanese tourists chattering, irritated Spaniards eyeing the no smoking regulations, and awkward Americans stumbling over alien coins. It's no secret: The Hermitage is a locus of humanity, past and present. My parents take differing paths. My mother seeks Matisse's legacy of paint. My father hunts for Scythian gold. I have no purpose, so I wander. A great gate looms to my left, bearing the letters in seven tongues "Egyptian Antiquities," a portal to another time. I slip through the space, leaving a troubled world behind. Artifacts line the walls and punctuate the floor, caught in stasis. Visitors drift through the room as phantoms, silent and somber; it is poor manners to tread on the dreams of the dead. Sarcophagi seem to rise from the floor; intricate etchings crawl across their chests. The eternal wings of Ma'at embrace their stony forms, warding off desecration and obscurity. A mummy lies to my right, his face set in a pained smile, both mocking and fearful. The beautiful bones of Empire surround me, swathing my senses in the joys and insecurities of millions. I flow through the room, my eyes brushing against carved rock. A relief snags my attention. I draw close to the fragment of stone. The piece is less than eight square inches and sports no color. But it hosts the leonine-goddess Sakhmet, the deity of raw power. A bringer of wrath, or serenity, a master of plagues and their cures, She demands respect and admiration. Her face is clear cut, dynamic and untroubled. A smile curls across Her feline jaw. She is the master of Her domain, the lord of the sacred land, the earth's center. My gaze is held by Her ancient power, reverberating through the millennia. The power waivers for a moment; I cast my eyes to the Russian card, and scroll down for the date. "New Kingdom 1550-1075," the height of Egyptian civilization. The lioness smiles with reason. Her nation stretches into Africa, deals with world powers as unworthy rivals, and crushes those who stand against the Gods' will. Life is good.

It is striking how people stay the same in the ever-shifting world of politics and culture. Perhaps we weave an illusion to convince ourselves we really are progressing. It matters not whether we lie in ancient Egypt, expanding Rome, or Great Britain, we all are driven by the same fears: death and obscurity. The greatest tragedy isn't to die, but to be forgotten. The Egyptians saw that with unrivaled clarity. While many

civilizations strove to be invincible, Egypt sought to be immortal. They obsessed over the preservation of the body and soul. They wrote hymns and depicted the best in their lives, seeking an eternal culture. They erected monuments, temples, and tombs to fend off the sands of time. The Egyptian people knew, deep inside, that the Gods would not favor them forever, and took precautions not only to preserve themselves, but their entire civilization. That is why so many are drawn to them, more than the Assyrians, more than the Romans, or even the Greeks. The soul of the Egyptian society has survived. We can see (pieces of) them as they were: citizens of an ephemeral empire, tormented by the End, too wise to ignore it, yet too fearful to adapt. All of them calling through thousands of relics, "Remember us! See who we were, how we felt, what we feared. Hold our memories close, so that we may live past iron and wheels. We were here, we were human, we mattered, for there is no death worse than insignificance." The subsequent empires and despots have forgotten the Egyptian warning. A thousand years will pass and Hitler and Stalin blur into unredeemable past, proud and heartless titans reduced to the vague notion of evil. Great Britain was a quaint empire and France had its run. America is a passing fad. All empires feel that they will never die, that destiny will shine on them. All of them have gone and will go to their graves with no sense of sight. All save one. We should remember the Egyptian lesson. Empires rise and fall, but the best of the human spirit can be made eternal.