

MONDOFOTO

In the narrow streets of Elephantine Island

Text from Giovanni Belzoni (1820)¹ – Photographs by Maria Pennacchio (2007)



“Next morning early I went to see the island of Elephantine, named by the Arabs El-Shal.

As I could get no boat from the shore where we were, we went to the old town, and crossed in the ferry-boat, which is made of branches of palm-trees, fastened together with small cords, and covered on the outside with a mat pitched all over. There were nine of us in this boat. Its length was ten feet, its breadth five, and it might weigh about fifty pounds. It cost, when new, twelve piastres, or six shillings.”



“... the cataract, which, when the water is high, scarcely deserves the name; for it consists merely of several rapids, where the river is divided in its course by various granite islands scattered about, ...”



“There is in this spot, say the Arabs, great treasure, left by an ancient king of the country, previous to his departure for the upper part of the Nile, on a



war against the Ethiopians. He was so avaricious, that he did not leave his family any thing to live on; and he was in close friendship with a magician,



whom he appointed to guard his treasure till his return. But no sooner was he gone, than his relations attempted to take possession of the treasure:



the magician resisted, was killed in the defence of his charge, and changed to an enormous serpent, which devoured all his assailants. The king is not yet returned,

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but the serpent still keeps watch over the treasure; and once every night, at a particular position of the stars, he comes out of the caves, with a powerful light on



his head, which blinds all that attempt to look at it. He is of an enormous size; descends to the Nile, where he drinks;

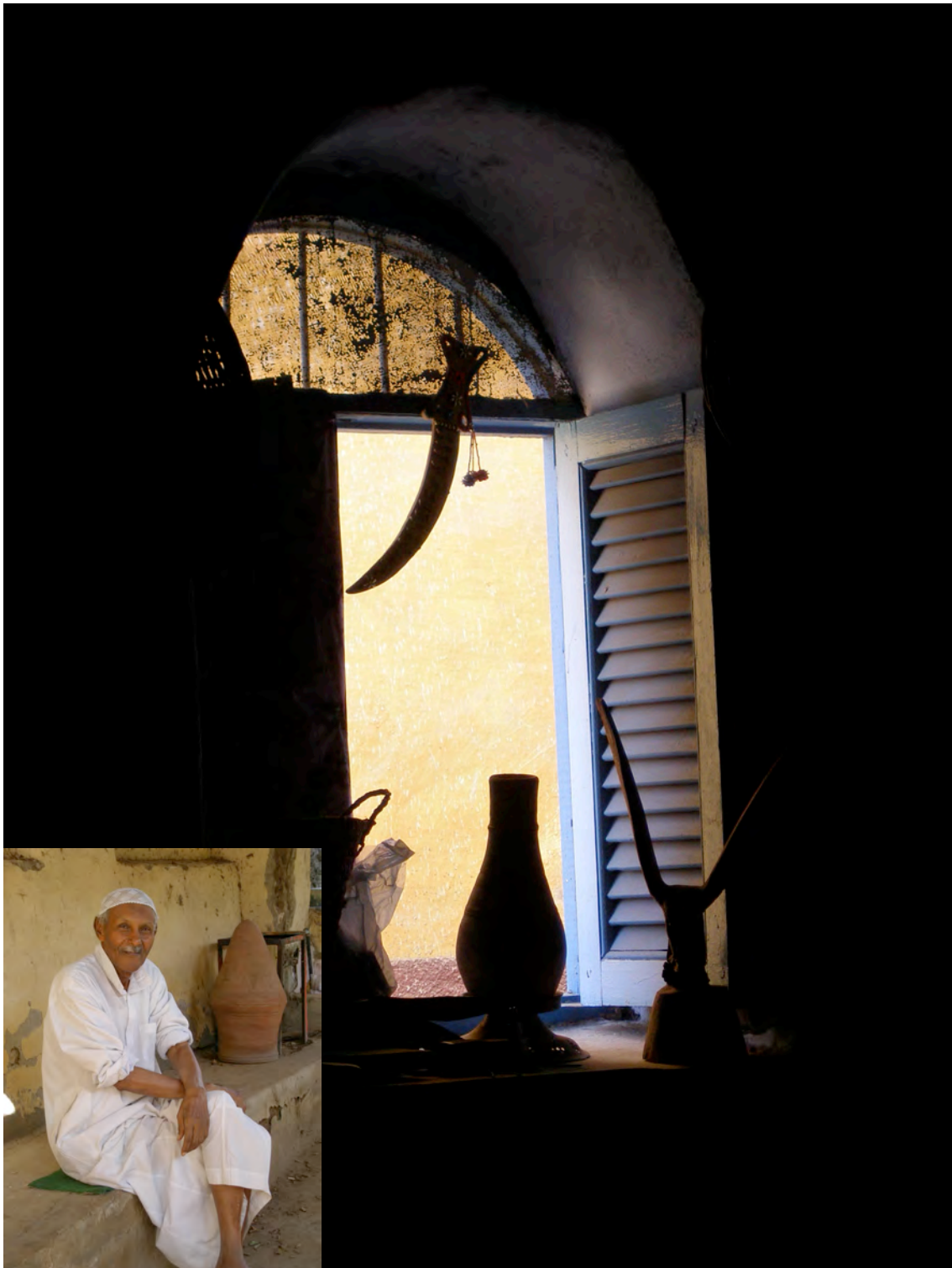
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and then returns to his cave, to watch the treasure



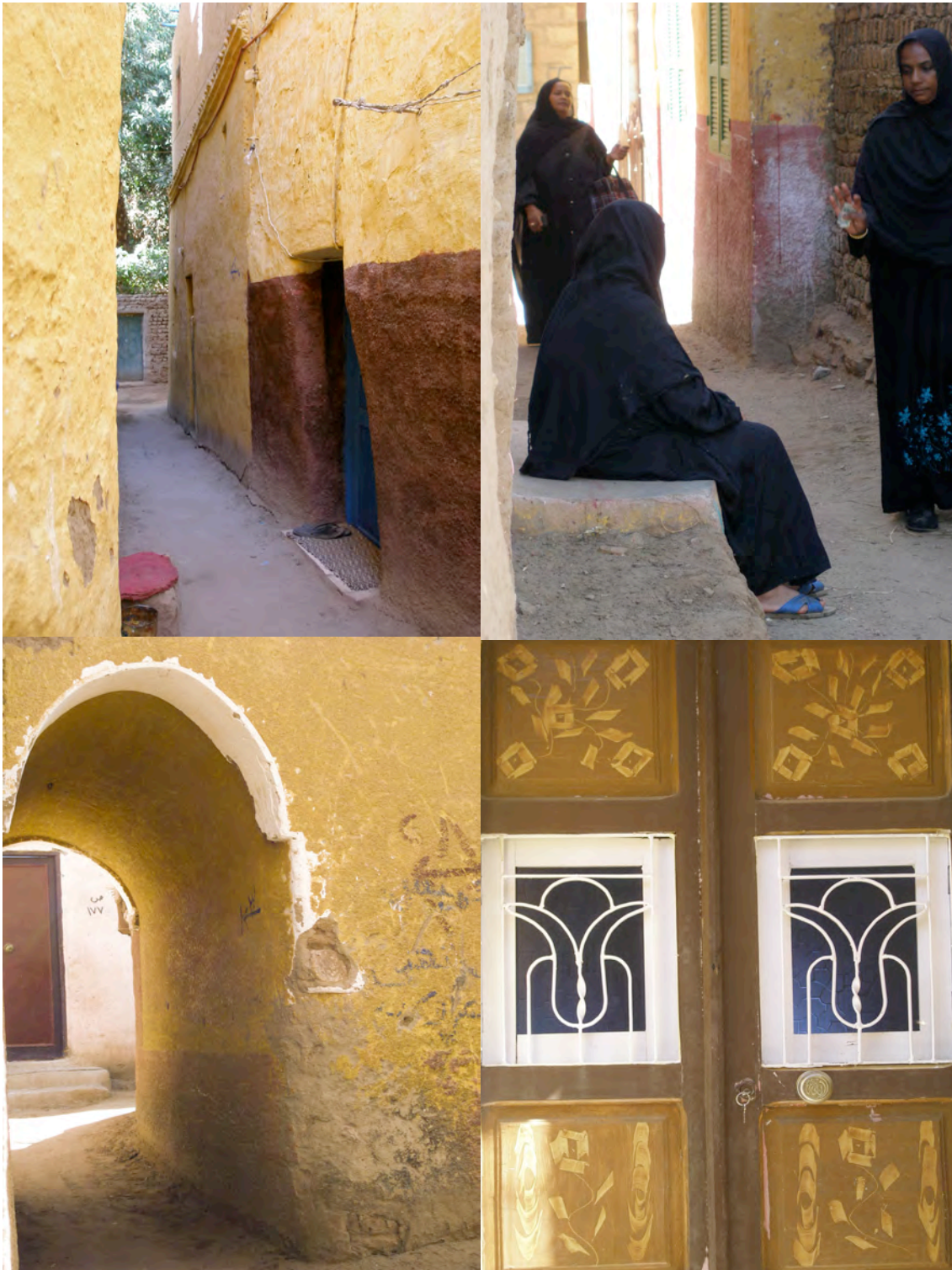
till the king returns.”



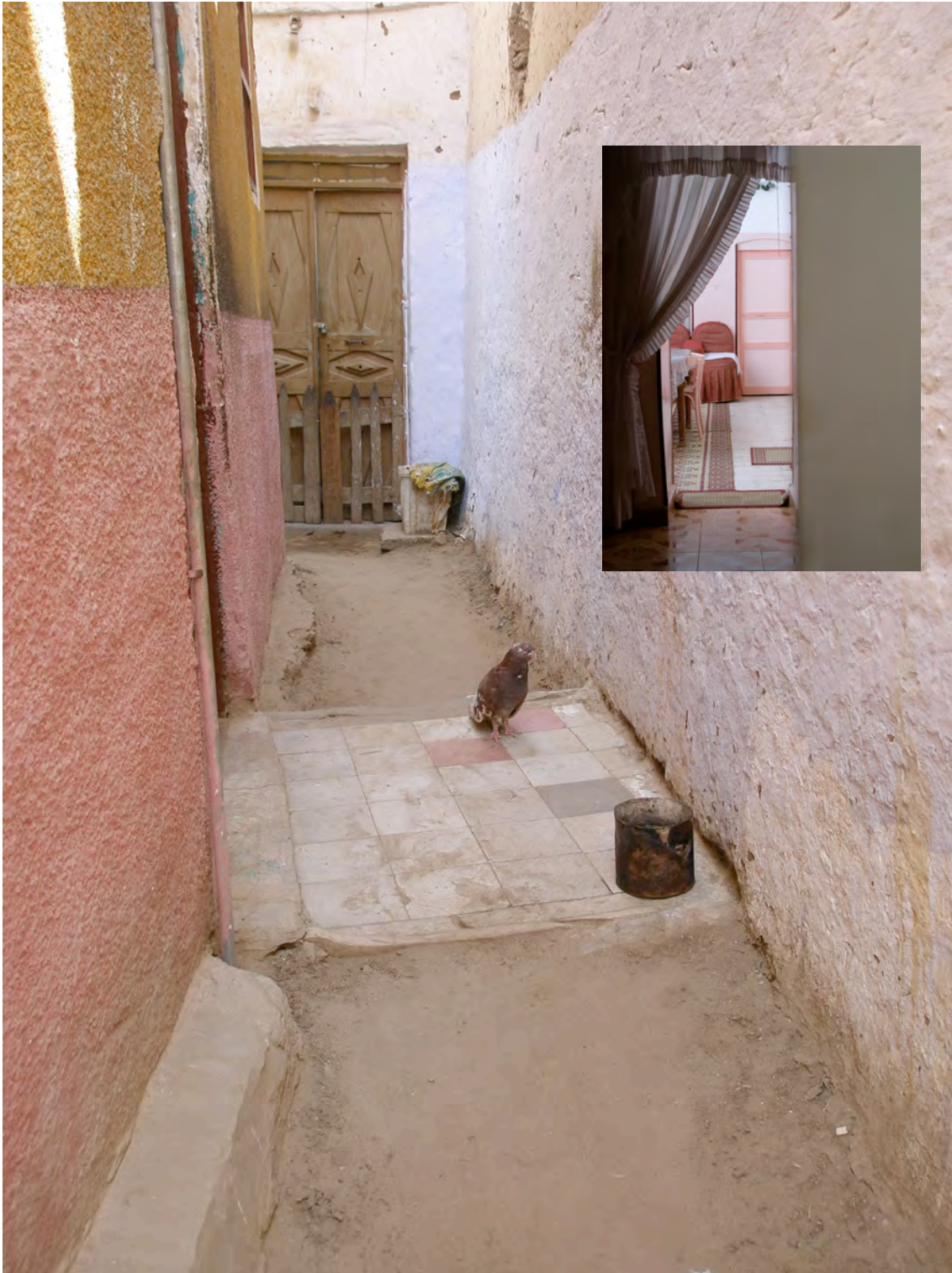
“The sun was then setting, and the shades of the western mountains had reached across the Nile, and covered the town. It is at this time the people recreate themselves in various scattered groups, drinking coffee, smoking their pipes, and talking of camels, horses, asses, dhourra, caravans, or boats.”



“Showy as the appearance of the Aga was, the inside of his house was not in conformity with his dress, which by no means corresponded with that of many persons in Cairo employed by the Turkish government;”



“... Mrs. Belzoni took an opportunity to visit his harem, or seraglio, which consisted of two houses;



for the old Aga had separated the old wives from the young, though he still visited them.”

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¹ From *Narrative of the operations and recent discoveries ... in Egypt and Nubia ...*, by Giovanni BELZONI (1820). Pp. 60-62. London: John Murray.