



Fig. 1. Egyptian revolution. 25th January, Day of Anger'

JANUARY 25TH: A GREAT REVOLUTION BETWEEN A PERIOD OF UNREST, AN INVALUABLE HERITAGE IN RISK AND A BETTER FUTURE

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The political situation in Egypt is not only affecting its society, but also its rich and valuable cultural heritage. In addition to the difficulties of preserving heritage in the midst of chaos and conflict, severe damages are affecting the historical legacy of the Pharaohs. A number of international institutions are supporting the Egyptian authorities to deal with the various problems, particularly in keeping an eye on illicit traffic of antiquities, in creating risk lists and in identifying looted artifacts. Despite these efforts, museums and archaeological sites face extraordinarily dire circumstances.

Keywords:

Egypt – heritage – conflict – risk – heritage institutions

1. EGYPTIAN AUTHORITIES AND HERITAGE

Egypt's unstable political situation continues to affect its cultural heritage over the past 18 months, following the revolution of January 25th. This article sheds light on the state of Egyptian heritage, with the reported numerous incidents of robbery of artifacts, looting of monuments and antiquities, illegal construction on archaeological sites, the impact of administrative reforms, and the impact of foreign support on the Egyptian heritage.

It is important to first explain how Egyptian antiquities and monuments are managed. Until 2011, the Ministry of Culture was the most authorized institution directly involved with Egyptian heritage, through its largest division, the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA). The SCA changed names and affiliations several times: 'Le Service des Antiquities' established in 1859 became the Egyptian Antiquities Organization in 1971, then the SCA in 1994; it was first affiliated to the Ministry of Public Works, later on to the ministries of Information, National Guidance, Education and since 1960, it became a part of the Ministry of Culture. In 1997, the Ministry of Environment took the responsibility of the preservation of Natural Reserves in Egypt. Five juridical sectors constitute the SCA, and these are: the Prehistoric, Ancient Egyptian and Greco-Roman

Sector; the Islamic and Coptic Sector; the Museum Sector responsible for central and local museums; the Technical Affairs Sector providing all types of monuments and antiquities services of architecture, conservation, engineering; and finally the Funding Sector.

Inventories of antiquities in sites and museums are conducted by documentation centers within the SCA in collaboration with the center of Information and Decision Support Center of the Ministries council. In this process, documentation sheets are disseminated and filled by local authorities together with photographic identification. It is important to point out that inventories exist on an administrative and a scientific basis and that juridical intervention only takes place in case of illegal traffic. Nevertheless, the SCA owns a number of storage facilities scattered around the Egyptian territory that have never undergone any process of thorough inventorying.

Conservation and maintenance of Egyptian cultural heritage is essentially financed by public funds: entrance fees for archaeological sites, museums, exhibitions, etc., which are directly transferred to the funding sector pool and by approval of both ministries of Planning and Finance, funds are allocated to the different sectors.

¹ Picture from Blog Egyptian Revolution, by Mahmoud Yassin



Fig. 2. The archaeological site of El-Hibeh (U.C. Berkeley. Excavations at El Hibet website).

Together with these public funds, some international donations are directed towards the Egyptian monuments and antiquities, such the UNESCO grant for salvaging Nubian Monuments during the 1960s (26 million dollars) and Getty's 1 million dollar grant for the conservation project of the Nefertari Tomb in the 1990s. Additionally, foreign missions are required to carry out the conservation for their findings, as stipulated by the Antiquities Law 117 of 1983.

Although the SCA's chief concern is with antiquities, it recently started to classify as monuments buildings and constructions from the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the responsibility of these classified buildings fell onto the Islamic and Coptic Sector.

The Ministry of Culture has also indirectly contributed to the conservation and rehabilitation of a number of historic buildings, into museums, art galleries and cultural centers, most of which date back to the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

The Ministry's other divisions include the Cultural Development Fund, the Plastic Arts Sector, the

National Library and Archives, and the Opera House. These divisions own and house a number of collections that constitute a substantial part of the Egyptian movable heritage. In addition to that, they too have conserved, rehabilitated and managed buildings from the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

2. THE ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM

In the rapidly changing political scene, a number of administrative decisions were issued in 2011 affecting the SCA. Formerly operating under the umbrella of the Ministry of Culture, it became, on January 31st 2011, a Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA), with Egyptologist Zahi Hawas as a minister, then downgraded to a cabinet-affiliated office under its old name, SCA. Subsequently, another reform took place under the National Rescue Government led by Prime Minister El-Ganzouri: the Ministry of State for Antiquities was reinstated with Minister Mohamed Ibrahim as its chief. Also the establishment of a new syndicate for archaeologists took place following a national inclination towards freedom, whereas during the past regime, syndicates were under full control of



Fig. 3. L' Institut d'Egypte under fire (National Geographic website).

the government and the state authorities. Moreover, the SCA's employees were continuously and persistently demanding to have their wages increased, to ameliorate their working conditions and to get clear contracts instead of the occasional commissioning agreements for which the SCA was notorious.

In an interview with Al-Ahram Weekly, Minister Mohamed Ibrahim revealed his action plan to a better management of Egyptian antiquities and monuments with the first of restructuring the MSA's Administrative Council. He also had a list of tasks to accomplish, such as inspection tours of sites and museums, cooperating with Cairo Governorate to develop the burnt National Democratic Party building to commemorate the 2011 revolution, improving the conditions of the Ministry's employees and meeting their demands... Despite this fervor, losses in the tourism sector and the lack of funding remain a challenge to the immediate implementation of Minister Ibrahim's plan. According to him, the MSA had a debt of more than 165 million dollars to construction companies carrying out conservation and development projects. In that lengthy interview between Minister Ibrahim and Al-Ahram Weekly reporter Nevine El-Aref, two issues were not raised: the MSA's future policies on repatriating Egyptian artifacts; and the division of competence in the field of museums between this ministry and other government institutions concerning arts and culture.

3. THE ENDANGERED HERITAGE

As early as the first few weeks following January 25th, it became clear that the Egyptian antiquities and monuments were in danger. In the absence of police officers and security forces, a state chaos extended everywhere and the treasures of Egyptian cultural heritage seriously underwent theft, looting, vandalism. Some attempts were prevented, for instance Egyptian youth act when some formed a human chain around the museum to guard and preserve the building; but many other attempts unfortunately succeeded. During the night of January 28th, thieves broke into the Egyptian Museum fleeing with 54 objects, some of which were later recovered. Also priceless artifacts were stolen from innumerable storehouses scattered throughout the country. Immediately after Mubarak's upheaval on February 11th, an attempt to smuggle the spectacular number of 3,753 artifacts out of Egypt by a Jordanian man was foiled. Police reported that among these were 48 ancient Egyptian statues, Roman

Age coins and 45 pieces of jewelry dating from the Medieval years of the Islamic era.

The month of March 2011 alone witnessed the theft of 145 Islamic artifacts from the storehouse of an American University in Cairo, two artifact storehouses were robbed near the Giza Pyramids, the mausoleum of Muhammad Sharif Pasha was looted resulting in the loss of around 1 million dollars worth of antiquities. And the incidents continue to occur; in March 2012, two qiswa pieces were stolen from the mausoleum Qubba Affendina in the eastern cemetery of Cairo. The qiswa is a historical and extremely valuable artifact consisting of ceremonial embroidered pieces of fabric traditionally offered by the Egyptian rulers for the Holy Kaaba in Saudi Arabia. Sadly, the MSA claimed that the qiswa was not listed as an artifact and therefore not the Ministry's responsibility, in order to avoid any blame.

Archeological sites and antiquities storehouses outside of Cairo were subject to looting too. For instance inscriptions in the tomb of Hetepka are reported missing in Saqqara, while in Abu Sir, the storage facilities of the Czech mission and Cairo University were broken into. In Lower Egypt, in the site of Tell El-Fara'in 27 objects are missing from the storehouse and another five artifacts from the storage of Tell El-Dab'a. The collection of Qantara, one of the largest warehouses in Sinai, comprising 800 Roman and Byzantine objects was stolen, and the Lahun pyramid suffered from illicit digging. Two mummies from the Roman Period may have been stolen from the storage facility at Tuna El-Gebel.

El-Hibeh site, a significantly important archaeological site with cemeteries and ruins of a walled ancient provincial town dating to a particularly poorly known archaeological era, was reportedly subjected to looting for months and the excavation team was banned from continuing its excavation work. During the revolution, when the State security was unable to halt the mayhem, it became clear that Egyptian archaeological and heritage sites in remote places were protected by low-paid guards, who were unable to provide the required security.

In sum, according to figures of the Associated Press obtained from the Interior Ministry, since January 2011, there have been 5,697 cases of illegal digs, 1,467 cases of illicit trading in antiquities, and 130 attempts to smuggle antiquities outside of Egypt. Moreover, at

least 35 people has been killed in incidents connected to illegal digs, among which the ten people who were buried alive trying to dig a hole in the southern city of Naga Hamadi, with many more killed in disputes over sharing the finds. An alarming account of an unstable year, where numbers reported were 100 times more than the previous year.

On another note, the destruction of historical buildings threatens Egyptian cities. Alexandria's cosmopolitan heritage is endangered. Since February 2011 a number of old villas of architectural value were torn down by their owners. Social media campaigns and heritage blogs like *Save Alex* and *The Walls of Alexandria* are failing to preserve landmarks of this Cosmopolitan city. Examples include the Greek Club, a 1920s popular restaurant and bar tavern, with vintage decor and an outdoor patio offering traditional Greek bouzouki music and food; the Cicurel Villa (built during the 1920s by French architects Léon Azéma, Max Edrei and Jacques Hardy); and the Aghion Villa, designed in 1926 by French architect Auguste Perret for Gustave Aghion.

The city of Mansoura, with its once large Italian community and strong architectural influence, is no stranger to destructive acts that happened for other reasons, though. Citizens of Mansoura lost the remaining wing of Khedive Ismail's palace built in 1866, a casualty of local hostilities against the National Democratic Party, since it served as its seat.

Such incidents are not new to Egyptians as it is a continuous struggle against greed corruption and lack of awareness. The list of similar cases in Cairo is long, but the saddest of all incidents was the burning of

“L’Institut d’Egypte” in December 2011. This scientific institute was founded by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1798, with a mission to advance high-quality research in various fields, ranging from biology and mathematics to fine arts and archaeology. It had its first seat in Beit El-Sinnari, before moving to its actual location on Qasr Al-Aini street. Its historical library holds about 200,000 manuscripts and rare books. In the attempt to put down the fire, volunteers managed to salvage 16 truckloads of wet books and manuscripts and moved them to the National Library of Egypt. The copy of “Description de l’Egypte”, one of eleven existing worldwide, survived the disaster. Some volumes show damage to its covers, but these can be restored.

Several initiatives were undertaken to conserve and restore the building and the Supreme Council of Armed Forces, temporarily playing the role of the President, took the responsibility of the conservation and restoration process. The mission was assigned to the Armed Forces and its engineering sector. Sadly, the MSA refused to supervise this project, claiming that it was totally inadequate and did not follow international specifications and norms specially for a 19th century wall-bearing structure, such as the use of cement mortar, reinforced concrete and incompatible material, in addition to the total substitution of the wooden floors by concrete slabs. Referring to experts Dr. Mohamed El-Kahlawy and Dr. Tariq El-Morri, the conservation and restoration process, which was only a political statement, violated all the norms and will lead to future cracks and the deterioration of the building in addition to its decay. Also, the assigned contractor, the Arab Contractors Company, the biggest construction company in Egypt, has not commissioned the work to any specialized contractor.



Fig. 3. Interior image of L' Institut d'Egypte showing the damage to the wood slabs and masonry walls (The Art Tribune website).

Fig. 4 L'Institut d'Égypte under restoration (Balad News website).



Here, the revolution revealed another problem facing the Egyptian built heritage: it is also being endangered by hasty political decisions of state officials.

Another threat, which urged UNESCO to clearly spread warnings, to the Egyptian cultural heritage is the illegal construction on archaeological sites. Incidents of encroachment were reported near the Pyramids of Merenre I, Pepy I and Pepy II, and near the Mastabet el-Fara'un in Saqqara, where a group of local villagers have forcefully moved onto 15 acres. In Beni Suef governorate too, the sites of Hibbeh and Ihnassia have witnessed construction activities. In Aswan too, there were reports that locals villagers have built on the site of the Roman Tomb near Kom Ombo. The police cleared 12 cases of encroachment there.

In October 2011, the Tourism and Antiquities Police and the Head of the SCA sent a force from the police station of Gamaliya to evacuate squatters in Islamic monuments of Historic Cairo, particularly those situated on Muezz Street. The largest pedestrian open-air museum of Islamic architecture (reopened to public and tourism in 2008 after a significant restoration and renovation project) was subjected to several assaults by illegal street merchants and unauthorized auto-transportation. An alarming accelerated rate of construction pushed the MSA to form a committee headed by the chief of the Antiquities Sector, in April 2012, to inspect these archaeological sites in order to tear down all encroachment on archaeological sites and historic monuments. Adding to these threats, the main sewage pipe exploded and for more than 24 hours, the street was submerged, threatening the whole area and its monuments.

Despite the efforts of the Egyptian authorities, whether the MSA, or the antiquities police, the state

of Egyptian heritage remains alarming. The number of cases of robbery, looting, illegal construction, is not accurately reported, meaning that much more has happened during the past 18 months. The international society is closely following the course of events in Egypt and many institutions are mobilized. UNESCO is monitoring Egypt and many other countries in the Arab World, where the Arab spring "has not necessarily been kind to world heritage sites". They therefore promised to cooperate with the Egypt's SCA to maintain the archaeological sites listed on the World Heritage List. Many governments offered help too. The German Archeological Institute in Cairo offered the SCA 40 training grants in the field of archaeology. The Sheikh of the Sharjah Emirate and the French Government offered their assistance in reconstructing the seat of "L'Institut d'Égypte" which was totally damaged during the fire. Bloggers and activists are working on raising awareness and a number of petitions that "Call to Protect Egyptian Antiquities" are increasingly finding participants and are being submitted to various governments.

4. INTERNATIONAL SUPPORT

As the list of stolen artifacts grows longer, antiquities authorities are moving quickly to prevent smuggling, while the experts are struggling to keep a close eye on European and American auction houses. The situation is aggravated with the lack of security, but an eternal problem remains: that is the poor documentation of millions of objects in museums and in storage facilities dispersed around the country. Authorities are faced with the difficult task of identifying and tracing stolen artifacts. In an effort to highlight the types of Egyptian artifacts most exposed to theft, the Emergency Red List of Egyptian antiquities that are under threat has



Fig. 5. The Muezz street flooded by the sewage water (El Badil website).

been compiled by ICOM, commissioned in June 2011 by the US Department of State. For this, a committee consisting of experts from the SCA and ICOM, along with international and local experts, collaborated. It is not a list of stolen objects, but rather a list of different categories of artifacts such as statues, vessels, daily life objects, textiles and manuscripts spanning from the Predynastic, Pharaonic and Nubian era to Greco-Roman, Coptic, and Islamic periods, that are most at risk of being illicitly exported and traded. Additionally, the US government has signed a cooperation agreement with the Egyptian authorities to trace traffickers of Egyptian antiquities inside the US.

5. CONCLUSION

After such a massive uprising against repression and mismanagement and popular demanding of “bread, freedom and social justice”, many questions remain unanswered; will the efforts of the Egyptian authorities, fully loaded with economic, political and security problems, coupled with the support of international institutions and grants from European

and US governments, be enough to ensure the future of Egyptian cultural heritage? Can they secure the safety of thousands of archaeological sites? Are they able to keep a rigorous inventory of museum collections and storage facilities? Can they preserve the historical monuments and the architectural and urban heritage of the Egyptian cities? These objectives represent the challenge facing the new Ministry of State for Antiquities.

On another note, will the January 25th revolution and all entailed incidents affect the awareness towards Egyptian heritage? Will it change the vision and perception of Egyptians towards a caring behavior to their country’s irreplaceable treasures? Will the Egyptians respond the words of wisdom of Albert Einstein “*learn from yesterday, live for today, hope for tomorrow. The important thing is not to stop questioning*”.

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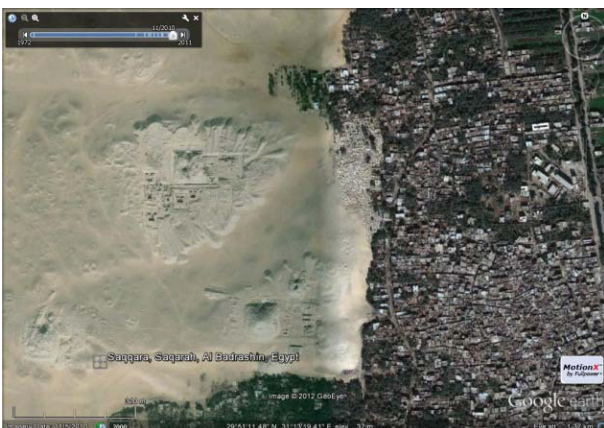


Fig. 6. Satellite image of Saqqara site showing the informal urban growth (Google earth captured image).

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