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An Egyptian revival

Ancient Egyptian monuments have been admired through the ages by many peoples, including later Egyptians. One graffito, written by an Egyptian of Dynasty 18 (1570–1293 BC), recounts how a day was spent admiring the great Step Pyramid complex of Djoser, by that time already more than 1,200 years old. But the Egyptians not only appreciated their monuments, they also took active steps to preserve them. One of the earliest documented examples of monument excavation, a task undertaken by Prince Thutmose around 1440 BC, is recorded on a stela uncovered by T. B. Caviglia in 1811. According to the text on the stela, the young prince was hunting near the pyramid complex of Giza. He became tired and chose to nap under the head of the Sphinx, whose body was buried under the desert sands. In a dream, the Sphinx asked Thutmose to clear the sand away so that he (the Sphinx) could breathe more freely; if Thutmose accomplished the task, the Sphinx would reward him by making him king of Egypt. The young prince removed the sand and, as promised, was later crowned King Thutmose IV.

A number of other less apocryphal records document Egyptian efforts to conserve their heritage. Prince Khaemwese, fourth son of Ramesses II, is credited with relabeling some of the tombs in the Saqqara complex after the original inscriptions bearing the names of the owners had worn away. Later, during the Saite Period (664–525 BC), the artistic styles of the Old Kingdom were copied so faithfully that it can be difficult to differentiate the original art from that created 2,000 years later.

The earliest foreign interest in Egypt's monuments was exhibited by ancient Greek and Roman travelers. Although a number of Greeks are known to have sojourned in Egypt, the earliest records were probably produced by Hekataios of Miletos in the sixth century BC. His actual writings have never been recovered, but references to his travels are found in works by other authors, especially Herodotus. Thales, the father of Greek geometry, also visited Egypt in the sixth century BC and made some computations on the Great Pyramid. In fact, it became fashionable for Greek intellectuals to travel to Egypt to study with priests: Solon, Pythagoras, and Plato are all reported to have done so. About 450 BC the Greek historian Herodotus (490?–425 BC) traveled to the Nile Valley. Famous for his interest in the early history and ethnography of different cultures, he compiled the information he gathered from his travels into a multi-volume treatise called *The Histories*. In Book II he described Egypt, then under Persian control during the waning

years of the pharaonic period. Portions of his account are the only record of many aspects of Egyptian culture. His discussion of mummification, for example, is the only complete description that survives to the present day. Unfortunately, many of his accounts were not based on first-hand knowledge but were told to him by local guides and other informants through an interpreter. By the time of his travels, Egypt had been visited by so many conquerors and curiosity-seekers that much of the information relayed to Herodotus was intentionally exaggerated or false. In addition, Herodotus embellished certain stories to emphasize what he believed were significant differences between Greece and Egypt. The following passage shows that Herodotus found Egyptian culture and people very different from his own:

The Egyptians appear to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind. Women attend markets and are employed in trade, while men stay at home and do the weaving! Men in Egypt carry loads on their head, women on their shoulder. Women pass water standing up, men sitting down. To ease themselves they go indoors, but eat outside on the streets, on the theory that what is unseemly, but necessary, should be done in private, and what is not unseemly should be done openly. (Herodotus II: 33-7)

A century after Herodotus, Alexander the Great marched into Persian-controlled Egypt (332 BC) and was hailed as a liberator. After he visited the great oracle at the Temple of Amun in Siwa Oasis he claimed to be of divine descent. Thereafter, Alexander spent relatively little time in the Nile Valley, but was so impressed with Egypt that he wished to be buried at Siwa. In June of 323 BC Alexander died of a fever in Babylon. His body was embalmed and placed within an elaborate funerary shrine, which, according to Diodorus, was dragged to Egypt by sixty-four mules. Alexander's successor in Egypt, General Ptolemy, met the funeral party and ordered the body be taken to Memphis. It remained there for several years until a tomb could be constructed in Ptolemy's capital, Alexandria, rather than in Siwa.

Ptolemy's successor, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, appointed Manetho, an Egyptian priest and Scribe of the Sacred Shrines of Egypt, to write (in Greek) a history of Egypt. This work, now known only from excerpts quoted by other authors, was the first comprehensive history of Egypt.

Early tourists

Egypt's ancient and splendid culture began its final decline in 30 BC when the armies of Octavian Caesar marched into Egypt, and Cleopatra VII, under threat of public humiliation by the conquering Romans, committed suicide. Rome reduced Egypt to a vassal state and exploited it for its agricultural potential. The Roman administration also moved against the native

Egyptian temples, curtailing their tax-exempt status and carefully controlling the priesthood. Five years after the Roman conquest, the Greek geographer Strabo noted that many sites were already in disrepair from lack of use, and some were partially buried by encroaching desert sands. However, Rome did improve lines of communication within Egypt by establishing a road system and maintaining a police force to ensure safe travel throughout the country. News of the wonders of Egypt, as well as the increased security, prompted many tourists to visit the Nile Valley. To meet this new demand, small inns sprang up for weary travelers, and enterprising contractors hired out boats, pack animals, and tour guides to visitors wishing to see the ruins. In actuality, many elements of today's tourist trade are little changed from Roman times.

Many tourists began their travels at the port of Alexandria, which had an international reputation for scholarship, medicine, and entertainment of all types. Once satisfied by Alexandria's varied offerings, the tourists' next stop was the Giza pyramids, which at that time were still adorned with white limestone casing. Travelers often inscribed comments or names on the casing stones, and by the time of the Arab conquest the graffiti were so numerous that it was said they could fill a book of 10,000 pages.

Other tourist attractions included the Temple of Apis at Memphis and the famous "Labyrinth" in the Fayum, a vast funerary installation of Amunemhet III (1850–1800 BC). While in the Fayum, visitors were also invited to see and feed the sacred crocodiles. From the Labyrinth, the tourists traveled upriver to Thebes to visit the temples at Luxor and Karnak, as well as royal and private tombs that by that time had already been heavily plundered. The highlight of many trips was a visit to the Colossi of Memnon. Partially destroyed by an earthquake, one of the two statues emitted mysterious sounds in the early morning. Tourists flocked to hear and speculate about the origins and meaning of the sound. When Emperor Septimius Severus visited the statue in AD 202, the statue was not obliging, and in an attempt to persuade the god to speak, Severus restored the head and torso, unintentionally silencing the statue forever. Today it is believed the moaning sound was caused by a combination of wind, evaporating dew, and the expansion of the stones in the early morning heat.

The Romans were greatly impressed with the culture of Egypt, and it was fashionable to own and display a few Egyptian artifacts. Obelisks were highly prized, and they were exported throughout the Mediterranean world where they were erected in gardens and public squares. Pyramid-shaped tombs were built even in Rome. The emperors themselves indulged in Egyptianizing fantasies, adopting Egyptian customs or trappings. Hadrian (AD 117–138) adorned his Villa Adriana at Tivoli with an imitation Egyptian landscape complete with canals and temples and Roman-manufactured

copies of Egyptian statues. Perhaps for the sake of true antiquity, authentic statuary was also imported from Egypt.

The earliest account of a non-Greek or Roman European to visit the ancient sites of Egypt was that of Lady Etheria of Gaul. In AD 380 this intrepid nun ventured to the Holy Land in an attempt to identify sites mentioned in the Bible. In Egypt she visited Alexandria, Tell el Maskuta, possibly ancient Pithom (the city of the Israelites' labor in the Book of Exodus), and several other sites.

The rise of Christianity in Egypt marked the end of the ancient way of life. Unlike the Roman tourists who had been curious about Egyptian religious beliefs, native Christians were determined to erase all traces of ancient "heretical" ways. The edict of Theodosius (AD 392), ordering the closure of pagan temples throughout the Roman empire, officially sanctioned Christian efforts. In AD 397 the fanatical patriarch Cyril and his army of monks destroyed the Serapeum at Memphis and other Egyptian temples. The official persecution of the pagan religion was continued by Emperor Justinian, who in AD 580 ordered the arrest of the last priests of the Temple of Isis on the island of Philae and the silencing of the oracle at Siwa. The ancient Egyptian religion was decreed illegal, and its symbols were regarded as evil and sinful.

The native Egyptian literary tradition also disappeared. During the Graeco-Roman period, Egypt was multicultural, and the ruling elite spoke and wrote Greek. With the official closure of the temples, the only guardians of the old hieroglyphic literary tradition – the priests – were eliminated. Yet the ancient script continued to intrigue Europeans, and for the next millennium there was much speculation about the nature and content of the ancient texts.

The Arab conquest

The Arab conquest of North Africa in AD 640 instigated another wave of interest in the culture of ancient Egypt. While the rest of Europe was in the Dark Ages, the Arabs, who had a passion for literature, astronomy, mathematics, and geography, were the most enlightened people of their day. The Arabs, like all visitors to the Nile Valley, marveled at the temples and pyramids and speculated about their purpose. To broaden their knowledge, they translated Greek texts into Arabic. Unfortunately, their appetite for knowledge often led them to destructive investigations of the monuments in search of new texts. Most famous of the Arab explorers was Caliph Harun al-Rashid (AD 786–809, whose feats were celebrated in the Arabian Nights), who paid translators gold based on the weight of each translated manuscript. For centuries the

Arabs pursued treasure hunting with an intensity rivaled only by that of nineteenth-century European collectors. It was so widely practiced that, by the fifteenth century, treasure hunting was classified as a taxable industry, and writing guidebooks was a lucrative business. Even more devastating than treasure hunting was the large-scale dismantling of the pharaonic monuments near Cairo; the stones were then used to build aqueducts, mosques, and fortification walls for the growing Arab city.

One of the most reliable records of the condition of Egyptian monuments during Arab rule was written by a medical and philosophy instructor in Cairo, Abdel Latif (c. AD 1200). He reported that it took half a day to cross the ruins at Memphis and that the sights were so marvelous, they confounded the mind. Additionally, Abdel Latif described the head of the Sphinx in detail (the body was then covered by sand): the face was brownish red and the nose and beard were still intact. As reported by Makrizi, another Arab historian, the nose of the Sphinx was wantonly shot off in 1378 by Mohammed Sa'im al-Dahr, who, in retribution for the damage, was lynched by the local inhabitants.

More information about the wonders of the Holy Land and Egypt was relayed to Europeans by the crusaders as they returned to Europe in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. After the Turkish conquest of Egypt in 1517, traders and explorers from outside the Islamic world regularly entered Egypt and reported their findings. About 1624 Pietro delle Valle returned to Europe with a large quantity of papyrus and parts of mummies. The papyri stirred a great deal of excitement among European scholars and stimulated Athanasius Kircher, a German Jesuit and professor of Oriental languages, to publish the first treatise on hieroglyphs in 1643.

Things Egyptian caught the public's attention and fantasy. "Mummy" became a household word. In the seventeenth century, eating the dried flesh of a mummified corpse was considered a medical cure-all. It is ironic that the zeal for mummy may have been a case of mistaken identity. Bitumen (in Arabic, *mummiya*) is a mineral pitch that is reputed to have some medicinal value. The flesh and wrappings of Egyptian mummies were covered with a dark resinous substance, likened to bitumen, and were therefore referred to as mummy. This confusion, linked with the assumed esoteric knowledge of the ancient Egyptians, may well have contributed to the misplaced notion that consuming the dried flesh of a mummified corpse served a medicinal purpose.

As with any lucrative business, fraud soon entered into the mummy trade. Modern corpses were covered with bitumen, wrapped, dried in the sun and sold as mummy to Europeans. Eventually the Turkish governor of Egypt, probably seeking to profit from the mummy trade himself, imprisoned all

traders and levied such harsh taxes on mummy that trade soon dwindled. Yet the threat of government regulation did not entirely prevent fraud or the export of mummy, which persisted until the early nineteenth century.

The dawn of scientific inquiry

Scientific efforts to study and document Egyptian monuments began in 1639 when the astronomer John Greaves of Oxford arrived in Egypt and initiated the first extensive survey of the Giza plateau. As a mathematician and student of ancient Greek, Arabic, and Persian, he was well qualified for the undertaking. His 1646 publication, *Pyramidographia*, provided the most accurate survey of the structures available at that time. Furthermore, he presented a critical assessment of the accounts of ancient authors and correctly identified Khufu as builder of the first pyramid, Khafre the second, and Menkaure the third. He also described the Arab accounts of the pyramids, including the opening of the Great Pyramid by el Mamoun in AD 820.

European scientific inquiry into Egypt's past was strongly linked to the political conditions of the late eighteenth century, which centered on nationalistic expansion in the Middle East and the control of sea routes that served lucrative colonies. England, France, Italy, and other European powers installed resident consuls, government-appointed men of widely varying abilities and experience, to oversee national trade interests and protect the "special rights" of their citizens in Egypt. The consuls often behaved as if they were a law unto themselves, with only moderate respect for the Mamluks who then ruled the Nile Valley. The foreign officials extended legal protection to their citizens who traveled in Egypt to collect information and antiquities, and the consuls themselves became major forces in the widespread and aggressive acquisition of antiquities, often at the behest of the European national museums, which were bitter rivals attempting to amass great collections. These collections of Egypt's treasures would later become the core of many European museums.

Napoleon's invasion and its aftermath

In April 1798 Napoleon was authorized by the French government to mount an expedition to seize Malta and Egypt and build a canal at the Isthmus of Suez to ensure the isolation of Britain from her Indian colonies. By July of the same year, Napoleon entered Cairo victorious.

Napoleon's campaign in Egypt ushered in a new era of Egyptian studies. In addition to 40,000 soldiers, Napoleon brought a special scientific commission of approximately 150 specialists in the disciplines of geography,

geology, history, botany, zoology, medicine, and linguistics. These specialists were equipped not only with the appropriate instruments for their respective scientific inquiries but also with a library holding virtually all the then-published works on Egypt and a printing press (the first in Egypt). To ensure the coordination and dissemination of the research, Napoleon founded the Institut d'Égypte in Cairo.

In August 1798 the British navy under Admiral Nelson trapped and destroyed the French fleet east of Alexandria at Abukir Bay. The French soldiers, who were still battling the Mamluks, were stranded in Egypt. As the French forces moved south in pursuit of the Mamluk armies, the scholars continued their documentation of the land, its fauna, flora, customs, and ancient monuments. They marched an average of 40 to 50 kilometers a day, sometimes stopping only long enough to do a quick sketch and at times working with the drifting smoke of gunpowder around them. During their journey they were harassed by armed locals and plagued by hunger and disease. The military escort, in spite of the overwhelming difficulties, was quite aware of the importance of the scientific mission and on several occasions offered their musket shot to be melted down for pencil lead. On 27 January 1799 the expedition arrived at Luxor; they were so impressed with the magnificence of the temples that they broke into applause and spontaneously formed ranks and presented arms.

By 1801 the French were readying themselves for another British attack. The French scholars, exhausted and demoralized, fled to Alexandria with their scientific samples, notes, and antiquities in hope of leaving the country. With them was one of their most important finds, a large granite (previously identified as basalt) slab engraved in hieroglyphic, demotic, and Greek scripts that had been discovered reused in the fort at the port of el Rashid (known to Europeans as Rosetta) in July 1799. The importance of the multilingual inscription was immediately apparent to the French scholars, and the stela had been placed on exhibit in the Institut d'Égypte shortly after its discovery. When the French scholars fled to Alexandria, they were not about to leave the Rosetta Stone, as it had come to be called, behind. Their plan to leave the country with the monument was not to be, however, for the French were defeated by the British military at Alexandria, and, as part of the capitulation, were forced to cede the antiquities held by the scientific mission to Britain. After the war the French scientists returned home with their remaining collections and notes, as well as a cast of the Rosetta Stone and copies of the texts.

The most lasting legacy of the French campaign in Egypt was the publication of *La Description de l'Égypte*, a massive, twenty-four-volume work that documented the geography, architecture, natural history, and ancient monuments of Egypt. Engravings of the ancient monuments were done by

Dominique Vivant Denon (1747–1825), who traveled throughout Egypt with the Napoleonic mission. Denon was an accomplished artist, author, diplomat, and confidant of both Louis XV and Napoleon. In spite of not being able to read the hieroglyphs that covered the monuments, Denon's engravings are so accurate that they are still used by scholars today.

The publication of the *Description* lured many scholars and artists to Egypt. One of the most accomplished was David Roberts (1796–1864), whose renderings of the ancient monuments of Egypt and the Holy Land are so accurate that they, too, are used by modern scholars to determine the condition of the monuments in the nineteenth century.

Engravings and illustrations by Denon, Roberts, and others were widely circulated in Europe where they made a tremendous impact. Not only were accurate images of Egyptian temples available to scholars, but also the interest of the general public was sparked, and clothing, furniture, and decorative arts were embellished with Egyptian motifs.

The cessation of war in Egypt, the installation of foreign consuls, and the “Egyptomania” sweeping across Europe resulted in a dramatic increase in European visitors to Egypt. One of the most colorful and enterprising was the Italian Giovanni Belzoni (1778–1823). Belzoni and his young wife initially travelled to Egypt in 1812 to interest Mohammed Ali Pasha in a new invention, an ox-driven water pump. Unfortunately, Belzoni found the Pasha less than exuberant about the new water-wheel, but while he was in Egypt he was introduced to Henry Salt, the influential British consul-general. Utilizing his engineering skills, Belzoni helped the British agent move a colossal head known as the “Young Memnon” from the temple of Ramesses II in Luxor (fig. 1.1). The success of that project (the statue is now in the British Museum) led to more commissions, notably the removal of the sarcophagus of Ramesses III. Belzoni explored much of the west bank at Luxor, discovering six tombs in the Valley of the Kings and many private sepulchres. His techniques were often crude, as reflected in the following passage from his memoirs recounting the discovery of a cache of mummies:

I sought a resting place, found one, and contrived to sit; but when my weight bore on the body of an Egyptian, it crushed it like a band-box . . . I sunk altogether among the broken mummies, with a crash of bones, rags and wooden cases . . . and every step I took crushed a mummy in some part or other. (Belzoni in Vercoutter 1992: 182)

Belzoni performed many other salvage projects for Salt during his career in Egypt, including clearing the entrance of the temple of Ramesses II at Abu Simbel. There he employed techniques more sensitive than those he used in Luxor, and he managed to document the reliefs and inscriptions within its chambers. He also spent several days at Giza, where, on 28 February



Fig. 1.1. Belzoni moving the “Younger Memnon” from the Ramesseum (AD 1816).

1818, he found the entrance to the pyramid of Khafre. He immortalized this achievement by writing his name and the date on the wall of the burial chamber. Approximately 6 meters in length, this defacement remains one of the largest examples of graffiti in the world.

In 1821 Belzoni returned to England and held a great exhibition of his artifacts in Piccadilly, including facsimiles of two chambers of the tomb of Seti I. His treasures eventually found their way to the British Museum and form the basis of its collection. Belzoni never returned to Egypt but died of dysentery on his way to Timbuktu.

Britain was not alone in the aggressive exploitation of Egyptian antiquities. Her principal rival was France, represented by the French consul-general, an Italian named Bernardino Drovetti (1776–1852). During the execution of his diplomatic duties, Drovetti and his agents collected myriad antiquities that were sold to the great museums in Paris, Berlin, and Turin.

By 1820 the rivalry between Salt and Drovetti became so acute that they entered into an astounding gentleman’s agreement: all antiquities on the west bank of the Nile were fair game for Salt while those on the east bank were reserved for Drovetti. With the help of a spyglass, the French consul trained a watchful eye on his domain from his house perched atop the first pylon of the Karnak Temple.

In 1858 the viceroy of Egypt, Said Pasha, took steps to control excavation and to regularize the removal of artifacts by forming the Egyptian Antiquities Service under the direction of a Frenchman, Auguste Mariette (1821–81). This development marked the beginning of a new age in the exploration of Egypt.

The academics

Although the tales of treasure hunters such as Belzoni are entertaining, there are many academic heroes in ancient Egyptian studies dating to this same period. The work of Auguste Mariette, Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, Karl Lepsius, and Sir William Flinders Petrie laid the foundation for modern study, and many of their conclusions remain unchallenged. Employing evidence provided by artifacts and inscriptions on statues and stelae, these scholars began to reconstruct the history and culture of ancient Egypt.

As mentioned above, in 1858 the viceroy of Egypt appointed Mariette to head the Egyptian Antiquities Service. A noted archaeologist, his discoveries include the Valley Temple of Khafre and the Serapeum. He is also credited with assisting Verdi in the libretto of the opera *Aida*, which was intended to be performed at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869. Mariette attempted to impose government control over all excavations in Egypt. Under his supervision, dozens of mastabas at Meidum and Saqqara, part of Karnak, the Serapeum, and the temples at Dendera, Luxor, and Edfu were excavated, making them accessible to scholars and tourists. He was fair in personal dealings, pleasant, likeable, and a diligent worker, qualities that were instrumental in building good relations with the foreign excavators who were now dependent upon his permission to work. Although his excavation techniques, strained by the great number of sites and workmen, were somewhat crude even for his day, he was widely respected.

Unfortunately, few detailed records were made of most of his discoveries, and little attempt was made to conserve what had been exposed during excavations. Although his techniques were not significantly different from those of the robbers he wished to curtail, his finds were deposited in government storehouses rather than on the antiquities market; and, although he could not entirely prevent tomb robbers from continuing their work, he did curtail the dealers by enforcing a ban on the export of antiquities from Egypt.

One of Mariette's greatest achievements was the establishment of the Egyptian Museum in 1863, the first national museum in the Near East. This was no small feat, for although scholars appreciated the need for safeguarding Egypt's past and the establishment of a national collection, this goal interfered with the growth of the collections throughout Europe. In addition, the very government that established the Antiquities Service often undermined it. In 1855 the best of the Egyptian national collection was presented to Archduke Maximilian of Austria by Khedive Sa'id for diplomatic purposes. When Empress Eugenie requested a similar gift in 1867, Mariette refused, damaging his standing with the Egyptian viceroy.