

Politics and Heritage in Egypt

*We will fight, We will kiss
London, Cairo, Rome, Tunis
(poem from the Really Free School)*

Utrecht, 7 February 2011.

The public outcry against the looting of Egypt's National Museum and several archaeological sites underlines the concern of the international heritage community over the safety of Egypt's heritage. Many remind us of the blast in 2001 of the Bamyán Buddha's in Afghanistan and the massive plunder of Iraq's heritage after the 2003 invasion. As common in times of unrest and chaos the information coming from the conflict zone is often contradictory and not always reliable. To make at least a little sense of the information it has to be put in its context. What is the socio-political and economical context of the recent plundering? What is the role of Egypt's cultural heritage in this 'Lotus revolution'?

The stolen Van Gogh painting

The Egyptian authorities were very embarrassed when in the summer of 2010 a Van Gogh painting worth an estimated \$55 million was stolen from the Cairo's Mahmoud Khalil Museum. The theft became even more uncomfortable when the authorities made conflicting statements. The fact that none of the alarms and only seven out of 43 surveillance cameras were working made the authorities even look worse.

The prosecutor general blamed the heist on the museum's lax security measures, calling them "for the most part feeble and superficial." He added that his office had warned Egypt's museums to implement stricter security controls after nine paintings were stolen in 2009 from another Cairo institute. Similar security lapses were to blame in that theft. The prosecutor general ordered the detention of Deputy Culture Minister and four of the museum's security guards while they are investigated on suspicion of neglect and professional delinquency. Also fifteen officials, including the director of the museum, have been barred from leaving Egypt until the investigation is complete. Later an Egyptian court has convicted eleven Culture Ministry officials on charges of gross negligence and incompetence, including the deputy minister of culture and the museum director.

Dr Zawi Hawass

The secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, Dr Zawi Hawass, has been on the front pages for some time now. Not only because he is an enthusiastic and eloquent speaker on Egypt's archaeology but also because he is a strong champion of repatriation of art objects to their countries of origin. In April 2010 he organized the *Conference on International Cooperation for the Protection and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage* that attracted 16 delegates and nine observers from abroad. At the wrap-up of the 2-days conference Dr Hawass threatened to make life miserable for museums that refuse to repatriate.

Egyptian authorities faced mounting criticism at home over the daytime theft of the Van Gogh from Cairo's Mahmoud Khalil museum. Soon after the heist the Minister of Culture who stayed in the clear pledged strict measures to protect its cultural and archaeological treasures. By mouth of Dr Hawass he promised to create a central control room to monitor all museums, supervised by his cabinet, and set up a committee to review surveillance of museums across the country. "We are currently setting up an additional 18 museums and they will all be supplied with state of the art security sensors against theft and fires," Zahi Hawass said in a statement. He also vowed to upgrade alarm systems at archaeological sites and museums across Egypt.

Against this background Dr Zawi Hawass cannot be expected to generously admit to the increasing number of pillages since the protests at the Tahrir Square started. If he would have done so he would at the same time disclose his failure to protect Egypt's museums and archaeological sites as he promised before.

Next, his position as secretary general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities is a political one. In an authoritarian regime like Egypt you cannot afford to be critical and can only rise on the career ladder if you conform to the ruling class. If Dr Hawass would confirm the looting he would at the same time send the message to the media that the government was not in control anymore and thus take position against the government and the ruling class of which he himself is part. His alliance with and loyalty to Egyptian leaders was rewarded when he was appointed the new Minister of Culture February 1.

It is in this light the statements by Dr Hawass have to be valued and why some of his messages contradict other reports of looting.

The looters

Looters of heritage institutions and archaeological sites are usually not a homogeneous group of offenders. It depends on the moment in the cycle of events that lead to a possible overthrow of the government which group will turn to plunder.

The looters caught in the National Museum were simple criminals. The ones who robbed the magazines of Saqqara and Abusir were probably local criminals and hoodlums too. Reports of massive digging near some of the pyramids and on certain sites are according to the latest reports of the same sort. At Saqqara they were only interested in 'treasures' – read golden artefacts - and not in antiquities. Unfortunately they destroyed many pieces in their quest. The fact that thousands of prisoners unexplainably escaped from prisons the last weekend in January could have induced the pillage. The villains will continue to be a threat to the safety of Egypt's heritage and valuable collections. As instability grows and in the absence of 'law and order' we will unfortunately see more of them. Next to the criminals, the digging poor might make their appearance on the sites. They will most likely enter the sites when the situation of chaos will last for some time.

Most agree that the digging poor are not much to blame though they remain responsible for their deeds. Once they will have an alternative to provide for their families they no longer constitute a threat to the sites. The violence and the plundering in general have been part of

president Mubarak's campaign to destabilize society for without his leadership the country is not safe, at least that is the president's message. Several reports on Tuesday February 1 make mention of loyal undercover police who were treated in hospitals after committing acts of violence and looting. Other accounts witnessed poor people from the suburbs who were paid to go and demonstrate in favour of the government in the centre of Cairo. Later life television reports showed police badges taken from pro-Mubarak demonstrators. This being the case, it is not likely that they are the ones who are responsible for the looting of Egypt's heritage so far.

It is, however, very likely that once the regime change takes place and the ruling class sees their power crumble to nothing, the former repressive forces as the police, secret service and the gangs of thugs (Baltagiya) will try to rob anything within their reach before leaving for safe havens. This is what happened in Baghdad in April 2003. Thus in the early days of the new regime the fresh leaders should reckon with these forces to plunder Egypt's heritage as much as they can. After all, they have nothing to lose.

Worrying is the fact that some heritage employees were involved in illegal digging on the sites. There is also the suspicion that some guards of the National Museum were involved in the break-in. The weak loyalty of the employees to their employer and institution has always been a problem in developing countries all over the world. It is one of the causes of corruption. Training, education, better payment and growing ownership (get them more involved) might contribute to a solution of this problem. Certain is that it cannot be solved in the short. These disloyal employees will continue to be a threat the more so once they assist the criminals.

When the present protesters finally manage to overthrow the government huge angry mobs can take to the streets and loot every institution that reminds them of the hated regime of Mubarak. In this turmoil the masses could vent their blind fury on heritage institutions in the cities. University buildings, libraries, archives, hospitals, ministries, museums – nothing is safe from a hysterical crowd. However, as demonstrators, probably from the middle class, have already defended the National Museum and warned for looters, many on Tahrir Square know of this danger. Besides, the army was deployed to defend the museum.

Although the old regime's tactics to create instability in the country apparently failed so far, the danger of Mubarak supporters attacking the heritage institutions has not yielded yet. This remains the greatest danger.

Some representations of Egypt's heritage

The present government has always needed the revenues of tourism. According to the Tourism Ministry tourism generated \$10.76 billion in income last year. Cultural tourism is essential for the whole sector as without the countries antiquities many tourists would not even consider travelling to Egypt. Many are dependent on this industry for their income. Next to the many jobs in the formal economy the poor also profit from this vast industry as part of an informal tourist economy. This economic dependency on cultural tourism will motivate many to protect their source of income. This happened to be the case when the local population f.e. in Saqqara tried to protect the site from robbers. Those who charged Tahrir

Square on horseback and camels are said to have been hired by the police from nearby Gizeh. On the other hand people on the square were willing to form a line to protect the museum. The old regime, as part of their divide and rule policy, tried to make the demonstrators believe that only the elite, yuppies influenced by the west benefit from antiquities. The recent events showed a more subtle picture.

Over the past three days, state television has been reporting alarmist news about violence and criminals among the demonstrations in an attempt to discredit the democratic movement. Part of this coverage was the fact that because of the continuing unrest Egypt's heritage was under threat.

The fear of the Muslim Brotherhood especially displayed in western media included the fear for disregard of non-Islamic heritage that came about before the birth of the Prophet. To connect the Egypt Muslim Brotherhood with extremist ideas seems to lack any ground. Both commentators and experts in the west and Egypt declared these fears without foundation.

What to do?

The statements from the international heritage community reflect a well-intended concern for the Egyptian people in general, their colleagues overseas and Egypt's rich heritage. However, some of the reactions seem not well founded and others are not even appropriate. The anxiety for the planned openings of certain exhibits on Egypt's heritage struck some as rather painful, though understandable. It comes across as selfish and harsh, not taking the suffering into consideration of the tens of people who lost their lives in the struggle for a better life. Are archaeologists more concerned with the 'cradle of civilization' than with the hardship of the people?

The modern approach to international cooperation as it changed under pressure of globalisation, is to concentrate on 'collective self-interest' and 'inequality'. This can be applied to the present state of the cultural heritage in Egypt. One report states that Egyptologists have issued an alert for the collecting world to be on the lookout for looted artefacts from the country. A very commendable initiative that makes a lot of sense. Yet, did the Egyptologists include the colleagues from Egypt or even other countries from the Middle East? That would have been an act of solidarity and a sign of modern 'collective self-interest'.

A surprising solidarity action was undertaken by the students of the Real Free School in London. They formed a human shield outside the British Museum in solidarity with Egyptian students, as people in Cairo formed a shield around their National Museum to protect Egypt's treasures. The picture of the spontaneous action was steadily retweeted throughout January 29 including Arab and Egyptian tweeters. These students through Web 2.0 tools knew how to connect with their fellow students in Egypt and realized that European heritage is also under threat by huge budget cuts installed by conservative governments all over Europe and an increasing gap between the wealthy and the newly poor.

Many museum associations have been making recommendations on security, ranging from hiring around-the-clock guards to installing alarm systems. The suggestion that the museum

community should invest more capital in these programs fails to see that money alone is not bringing universal happiness. The example from the Van Gogh heist clearly shows that if the political will of those in charge is absent the institution will in the end fail to protect its treasures. In site management we teach to get the local community involved for different reasons one being improved security. The loyalty of guards and other staff cannot simply be bought, they need to be actively involved and the management has to listen to them. It is the same in disaster management: people themselves are the most vulnerable link in the chain. In times of turbulence when law and order have vanished it is best to organize the staff and the local community. Technics do not make the difference, people do. A cry for help from these local communities has been circulated on the internet why not put our money there? Let us connect the local with the global.

Some archaeologists proposed to volunteer to go to Egypt and help protect the country's cultural heritage amid violent anti-government protests. Evidently they missed to see how Mubarak proponents use the sentiments against foreigners to disrupt society and point the cause for the disruption to external forces, preferably the USA. Last week it was utterly dangerous for all foreigners to be in Cairo. In addition, do these archaeologists consider the Egyptians not able enough to regulate their own affairs? The appearance of western archaeologist on Tahrir Square would stimulate the rumour of foreign interference, would play Mubarak's game and understood by the demonstrators as offensive.

Closing remark

Cultural heritage, and the threat to it, can only be fully understood if we are able to put it into context. Let us broaden our analysis to include politics and socio-economics in order to attune our proposals for assistance. Archaeologists from all over the world do have the responsibility to help protect the heritage from all peoples and from all creeds. But let us not forget to listen and discuss it with those involved in the home countries. Ultimately we are all Egyptians.

Rene Teijgeler
Culture in Development

E: contact@cultureindevelopment.nl

W: <http://www.cultureindevelopment.nl>