

## **Politics and Heritage in Egypt. One and a half years after the Lotus Revolution**

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*We will fight, We will kiss  
London, Cairo, Rome, Tunis<sup>1</sup>*

### **Introduction**

The so-called Arab Spring still keeps many foreign affairs experts in its grasp. With the plunder of the Iraq Museum in 2003 in mind, the heritage community feared the worst. When at the height of the 'Lotus Revolution' the break-in in Egyptian Museum became public, many experts thought they saw their worst dreams come true: another 'cradle of civilization' threatened.<sup>2</sup> My own concerns induced me to publish *Politics and Heritage in Egypt* on 7 February 2011 just before Mubarak was dismissed by the military (Teijgeler 2011). One and a half years later I was wondering where Egypt's stricken cultural heritage would stand today.

Much has happened since 7 February 2011. The revolution took a course not many 'Egypt watchers' predicted. On 11 February 2011 Field Marshal Hussein Tantawi and the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces took power and forced Mubarak to step down after 18-days of revolt. A year later Egypt's military decreed a partial lifting of the nation's hated emergency laws, Mubarak a very sick man by now appeared before the court, and parliamentary and presidential elections were held.

However, the military regime was by many considered repressive and according to human rights groups at least 12,000 civilians have been tried before military tribunals since the end of the revolution (CBS News 2012). The promise to hand over power to civilians by the end of June 2012 was strongly doubted and not without reason. The newly chosen parliament firstly remained subordinate to the ruling military council and was meanwhile for one third considered illegal according to the Supreme Constitutional Court. Together with the 'constitutional addendum' the military leaders stripped the newly chosen president Mohamed Morsi, member of the Muslim Brotherhood, of many of his powers and reduced him to a mere figurehead. Today, Egypt is facing a power struggle between the military and the democratically elected president and MPs. The latest news (August 2012) is that the president fired the entire leadership of the country's defence establishment. But to quote Jason Kornwitz (2012): "...the one constant in Egypt's ever-changing political landscape is that it is ever changing"

Many feel that the revolution is unfinished and tens of thousands of protesters again took to Tahrir Square in Cairo at the first anniversary of the popular uprising. The spirit of a year ago was gone and "...replaced by new tensions between the country's political factions and the military rulers, and by anxiety over the rise of the Islamist parties" (The New York Times 2012).

Clearly, the '½ Revolution' did not bring the Egyptians the much desired prosperity. In the contrary, much seems to be worse than before January 2011 and unfortunately the heritage sector is no exception. Massive looting arose after the revolution and continues till today.

### **Rise of the looters**

The assumption of power by the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces in February 2011 did not reduce the threat to the Egypt's rich national heritage. In the contrary, since the revolution the looting only increased. In fact, in May 2012 figures from the Ministry of Interior show that "... illegal digs have swelled a staggering 100-fold since the revolution" (Herald Sun 2012). The figures are shocking: 5697 cases of illegal digs, 1467 cases of illicit trading in antiquities, 130 attempts to smuggle

antiquities abroad and at least 35 people have been killed in incidents connected to illegal digs, including 10 buried alive (AFP 2012). This was May 2012, who knows what the score is today.

### *Why the plunder continues*

Egypt's cultural policy is known for its long history and goes back to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century (El Batraoui and Khafagui 2010). Since 1985 the Ministry of Culture's sole task is culture and the Supreme Council of Antiquities occupies a central place in the ministry (Keshk 2012b). Egypt's public administration is typically centralized in decision-making. Yet, once the leadership is questioned as in a popular revolt all the disadvantages of a centralized department come to surface.<sup>3</sup> Subordinates who are not used to act without orders, who are not loyal to the department and the red-tapism are all cause of a ministry in shambles.

Because of the centralized organization structure the staff of the Supreme Council for Antiquities lacked loyalty and initiative to protect the sites. Besides, the departments that badly needed leadership were exposed to political strivings, which resulted in a frequent change of management. According to the Mohamed Abdel-Maqoud, the then director of the central administration for antiquities in Alexandria and Lower Egypt: "No one is responsible for Egypt's antiquities, and this has led to the absence of security and administration. These have been halted as there is no leader to take decisions on antiquities or to continue working" (Al-Ahram 2011).<sup>4</sup> A remarkable example of the mentality of some of the staff is the bickering over the visit of the UNESCO delegation to Cairo at the end of March 2011. A former secretary-general of the Supreme Council of Antiquities was cautious about the visit as he was afraid of outside interference. He explained that "...we are totally able to protect our monuments, and we don't need curatorship from anyone" (Al-Ahram 2011).

Since the first demonstrators appeared on the Tahrir Square Mubarak's power steadily crumbled. Ever more the government began to lose its hold on its subjects despite the chaos the regime deliberately created. Martin Jenkins was in Cairo and wrote: "...On 28 February all police forces disappeared throughout the country...[and]... at the same time thousands of prisoners were released from jails from Alexandria to Aswan" (Jenkins 2011).<sup>5</sup> With the policemen gone thieves and armed thugs began to terrorise the local population and plunder entire neighbourhoods. It seemed that some of the looters were identified as "... 'party thugs' associated with the Egyptian regime's Central Security Services" (Washington'sBlog 2011). The Telegraph reported: "...Cairo residents boarded up homes and set up neighbourhood watches of citizens armed with guns, clubs and knives as looting and violence engulfed the capital" (The Telegraph 2011). In April 2012 the former Minister for the Interior together with Mubarak stood trial charged with issuing the order for all police in the country to stand down, the release of prisoners and shooting of protesters. In short, the nation suffered from an ubiquitous security vacuum.

The cry for a 'strong leader', which the regime hoped for failed to be heard. In a fortnight the ensuing power vacuum was filled with the military council. Yet, the security vacuum persisted. One year later ministry officials admitted that the national boom of break-ins and plunder of the magazines and the sites partly reflects "...the failure of the police to fully take charge of security after they melted away" (Herald Sun 2012).

The police will have a hard time to brush up their image as they will be generally identified with the repressive Mubarak regime and more in particular with their extremely violent action during the uprising (Lynch 2011). Actually, it was the continued failure to reform the police that enticed the first demonstrations. New clashes on Tahrir Square between police forces and protesters at the end of June 2011 resulted in 1,000 injured. The lack of progress in police reform became obvious "...when police officers were captured on video screaming insults and making obscene gestures at rock-throwing protesters" (Bradley 2011). Only when the military moved in order was restored. Generally, the police before the revolution was a 'regime police' serving one man in a police state. What all Egyptians are longing for today is not a chance of people but a change in mentality. Yet, all agree that such a change will not take place overnight (Bradley 2011).

As the Tourism and Antiquities Police (TAP) were also released of their duties in January 2011 the archaeological sites and monuments were left totally unguarded leaving Egypt's heritage to the discretion of its robbers. According to the Art Newspaper the TAP had not returned by the end of March 2011 (Marei 2011). One year later these colleagues "... have largely returned to duty after months of work slowdowns, but their presence is sporadic; they appear and disappear at whim" (Fleishman et al. 2012). What does not help the situation is the fact that apparently the police is very reluctant to investigate cases of looting possibly because out of spite over the revolution or lack of directions from their superiors. With the police gone the army expanded its presence however largely to protect government institutions and not so much to halt the chaos. The impression is that most of the local guards on the sites stayed but they were unarmed. As a matter of fact, the police refused to arm the guards during their training.

Ever since the 1952 military coup that ended the reign of King Farouk the army played a major role in Egyptian politics. Again the army disposed of the nation's leader in 2011 but this time they did not seek out control; power sought it (Soliman 2011). Currently Egypt shows every sign of a country in transition. The military are involved in a power struggle with the Muslim Brotherhood and other democratically chosen representative bodies to at least maintain an independent role in the backyard of the political arena. Egyptians, meanwhile, grow increasingly worried about the military's ability to stem rising crime and sectarian violence. According to many their country is unrecognizable now "...[it is] a place with carjacking, soccer melees and brazen bank robberies" (Fleishman et al. 2012). Soldiers guard streets but few people feel safe. How serious the need for the restoration of domestic security still remains even in the summer of 2012 proves President Morsi's pledge to re-establish Egypt's fractured domestic security within 100 days of his inauguration (Tarek 2012).

It appears that the restoration of law and order is not on the top of the army's priority list. A Cairo gift shop owner summarizes "...many thugs [have] the feeling that authorities are too busy confronting politics to chase thieves or provide security" (Fleishman et al. 2012). By the same token safeguarding archaeological sites and monuments will not be high on their list either.

#### *Who are the looters*

To get an impression and to find at least a beginning of an answer as to who the looters are several sources were consulted.<sup>6</sup> Though not a thorough investigation the results do give some insight into the complexities of Egypt's politics and heritage. In February 2011 we wrote: "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" (Teijgeler 201:2). This still holds true today. We identified the following groups of potential looters:

- 'the digging poor'
- locals looking for golden artefacts
- local criminals and hoodlums
- law enforcement agents
- heritage employees
- angry mobs

Indeed, except for the angry mobs all of these people were involved in stealing Egypt's history after the revolution. Sometimes the looters operated individually or in very small groups but the most scary and cheeky groups were those of armed gangsters. Yet, it is difficult to establish the extent to which each group contributes to the plunder in its entirety.

#### The Local Population

Maybe the most astonishing aspect of the plunder of Egypt's history since January 2011 is the behaviour of the local population living next to or in the vicinity of the sites. Until that time Egypt's

official heritage policy always was that “...the value of heritage [has always been associated] solely with tourism. The local population was never educated and never made to feel like the owners of their heritage” (al-Rawi 2011). What is more, the locals were kept away from the sites and were forbidden to enter these tourist attractions. That the often foreign archaeologists in place never invited the people living around the sites did not help. All the same they did not form angry mobs or collectively pillaged the sites. In the contrary, many of them defended the sites just like the middle class revolutionaries defended the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir Square. Of course, not all of them were saints.

### ‘Digging Poor’

The expression ‘digging poor’ or better ‘subsistence diggers’ refer to local people who have sold “...’unofficially excavated’ archaeological and cultural material and the profit [is] used to supplement an already meagre income”(Merkelson 2010). Clandestine digging practices by the local population have been identified but certainly not on a massive scale.

### Sightseers

Especially, right after the regime change many magazines at the sites were broken into after which the illicit digging advanced. For one it was the local population that was curious as to what these storage rooms contained. These ‘sightseers’ wanted to appease their curiosity. After all, they had been kept away from the antiquities for such a long time. In the process doors, locks and chests were damaged or destroyed. Yet, the artefacts themselves were mostly left alone.

### Treasure hunters

Soon after the departure of the police local youths descended on several archaeological areas digging anxiously in the hope of finding golden artefacts. They were not highly organized and broke open tombs and storage rooms in quest of gold. Some of them started digging outside the major excavation areas or in areas set aside for future exploration (Herald Sun 2012). Though the ignorant were ‘only’ looking for treasures and not antiquities they did destroy many pieces in passing (Jenkins 2011). Also the thieves of the Egyptian Museum were said to be searching for gold. Mansour Bureik, the chief archaeologist in the Luxor area, said “...there was little chance treasure hunters would run across gold and gems that they dream of—which are found only in royal or aristocratic tombs... But Galal Mouawad, a senior archaeologist in the Giza area, said the potential for lucky strikes exist just about anywhere in the country” (Hendawi 2012). Keeping in mind the more than 25% youth unemployment these action are understandable nonetheless not justifiable. The treasure hunters remain criminals.

### Illegal occupation and use

In quite a few instances the local population encroached on the areas associated with the sites. At times people appropriate up to 15 acres of land. On one site 500 tombs were constructed with the intention to sell them and on another site a mosque was build. With the shortage of burial grounds in some overpopulated areas near the sites this is explicable. Besides occupied acreages are difficult to reclaim (Jenkins 2011). Others have reported corn fields, garbage dumps, illegal housing and fish farms on archaeological sites. No doubt that all these illegal site uses were not established overnight. Some of it is due to the lack of preservation, control and enforcement of regulations before the revolution.

### Heritage staff

There is not much to add to my observations in the 7 February publication. Sadly, some guards and museum employees cannot resist the temptation of the quick-money scheme. After all they are heavily underpaid thus a quick dollar is a serious option. They start digging by themselves or in small groups with friends or family, or join small criminal groups. Again the centralized heritage institutions contributes to this lack of loyalty.

## Gangs

The escaped prisoners together with the dispatched police forces formed a grim mix of gangsters. Sometimes the gangs were supplemented with local hoodlums or other opportunistic criminals. For them digging for antiquities is just one of their illegal practices. Characteristic of these gangs is their brutality. At some sites complete shoot-outs took place with the military or other security forces. Not uncommon they outgun the defending forces with automatic weapons. In some confrontations unarmed guards were even killed others required hospital treatment after being chloroformed by the looters (Jenkins et al. 2012). These organized criminals feel so confident that they even attack at daytime and not only at night-time. Armed with heavy equipment and high-tech tools they come in groups as big as 40 people.

In a number of pillage incidents the participation of law enforcement agents was proven. In at least one case a TAP officer was involved. The hordes of thugs the Mubarak regime used before probably also joined forces with the gangs. It goes without saying that these gangs form the biggest threat to Egypt's heritage.

## Angry mobs

Though groups of criminals prowled around the big cities after prisoners were released and the police disappeared from the streets, destructive frenzied crowds were wanting. An occasional government building was attacked and went up in flames yet an angry crowd ransacking the cities was strikingly missing. Instead of turning plunderers themselves neighbourhood watches had to fight off the thieving and pillaging criminals attacking their quarters.

The main reason for the absence of angry mobs might quite well be that the Lotus Revolution was 'of the people, by the people, for the people.' There was no outside intervention. Further many were still trying to 'complete the revolution.' Also when after two weeks the army took over many had still faith in their armed brothers who soon posted outside government buildings.

## **The defenders**

The formation of a human chain outside the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to defend the 100 year old institution on 29 January 2011 came to many as a complete surprise. But it are not only the liberal well-educated youngsters who chose to defend their history, in the country many villagers also decided to protect the ancient heritage around them. These defenders turned out to be more numerous than expected.

The local population has an interest in the major tourist sites as they are partly financially depended<sup>7</sup> on the spendings of the continuous stream of visitors (Jenkins et al. 2012). But this economic dependency on cultural tourism is not the only reason to explain this behaviour for smaller and lesser visited sites were protected too. Many were ashamed of their looting and thieving fellow-villagers as they were considered to bring dishonour on their communities (Jenkins et al. 2012). Actually, some of them who got caught were severely beaten up if they could not be handed over to the proper authorities.

The following post illustrates how some people acted upon the threat to their heritage at Luxor (Jenkins et al. 2012): *"...When we heard that some people had attacked the Cairo Museum and some houses we went around in groups [protecting the ancient sites and modern settlements on the West Bank] for three days. There were no policemen at all: they had gone back to the police stations to protect themselves [inside]. Some of the local groups went to look after the villages and the others either stood by the entrances of the Valley of the Kings or Hatshepsut's temple or Medinat Habu and the Queen's Valley, and the tombs. Because all of the sites are close beside each other [on the West Bank] Ahmed said it was easy for the locals to guard them. The people who are living near the sites*

*(most of whom are working in tourism) and the workers at the [tourist] alabaster factories went outside so that nobody could walk or even move in the streets. They made checkpoints and stopped and checked everyone. They even stopped Ahmed three times even though he is a local too”*

Still, the local residents were not the only ones to stand up for Egypt's treasures. In many cases the villagers mixed with heritage staff, guards, military or even police officers. For example two policemen joined a group of 'guardian angels' making it very clear that they did so in a private capacity. Various site inspectors as well as guards did not leave their post and stayed on as long as they could. It was often "...the only protection afforded to some of the world's most unique and magnificent monuments" (Marei 2011). It has to be said that not all their efforts succeeded. Every so often especially the heavy armed gangs got their way who in the end could only be chased away by the military. People repeatedly sought assistance and warned the nearby barracks or police stations. Sometimes the tourist police was redeployed upon the request of the locals.

Particularly right after the revolution defending the sites was the most urgent. In these lawless days the private initiatives of local inhabitants, individual heritage inspectors and guards made a significant difference in the preservation of Egyptian heritage. But the continuation of the country's insecurity made the criminal gangs return to the places where they were first chased off. It must have been very frustrating to see that what was defended at first was destroyed later.

### **The loot**

The pillaging reports make mention of some interesting details on the selection of the sites and subsequently the artefacts.

It appears that the market for antiquities is reflected in the selection of the sites. According to al-Rawi magazine pharaonic items came first and then Islamic artefacts. Consequently, Islamic monuments suffered less than ancient pharaonic sites (al-Rawi 2011). The western media would like to believe that Islamic artefacts were left alone out of reverence but it might well be that pharaonic items yield more profit than Islamic artefacts. Jewish and Coptic items were left alone. The Coptic Christians, 10% of the population, have a long history of politically and socially discrimination. In the hope of a better future and full citizenship rights many Copts supported the revolution. All the same several confrontations have been reported since the fall of the Mubarak regime (Elgohari 2012). The history of the Egyptian Jews goes somewhat along the same line. The small Jewish community fear for the relative undisturbed position since the Camp David Accords in 1979 with the Muslim Brotherhood coming to power. Despite the public disfavour of both communities Coptic and Jewish artefacts were not looted. Probably because their market value is far less than pharaonic and Islamic antiquities. Besides their numbers are small and perhaps they are more difficult to obtain.

Some reports state that the well-known tourist sites were left alone in the beginning but were robbed at a later date anyway. First the warehouses were looted or 'inspected', which would make sense as that would be 'an easy catch.' Also some of the magazines were just too crowded. Much of the artefacts excavated should have been moved already long time ago. Welding the doors of the magazines or hiding them behind false walls does make a difference but it does not give total freedom from looting. When later-on the storage rooms were protected the plunderers turned to digging on the sites (Hendawi 2012). It is also said that the authorities preferred to protect foreign missions at first above others (Jenkins 2011). A popular smuggler route out of Egypt by Jordan dealers seem to be the ports on the Red Sea. One dealer got caught with more than 3700 artefacts.

### **Post-colonial narrative**

These days many believe that heritage is part of common political discourse. In the creation of identity heritage can become a vital element, certainly in the design of a national identity. In Egypt archaeology as a heritage resource played an important role in the creation of its past. A past badly

needed for the start of the new independent nation after the Ottoman era. Yet, archaeology not only interprets the past but also enters into shaping Egypt's future.

Lynn Meskell (2003) renders a splendid overview of the close relation between colonial expansion and archaeology in Egypt. The grand discoveries by the heroic archaeologists in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century would not have been possible without the great empires who controlled the resources. In point of fact, where would Egyptology be today without the British Empire and vice versa. As colonial imperatives prescribe the subjugation of the local population so does Egyptology requires the control over their resources by colonial archaeologists. Both the people and their material culture need to be managed by the civilized Westerners.

In the 1920s and early 1930s the post-colonial discourse gave rise to a very distinctive narrative called Pharaonism. This form of Egyptian nationalism stresses its pre-Islamic history and glorifies the nation's pharaonic and Hellenistic past. This robust Egyptian national core distinguishes it from its Arab neighbours and the Islamic world. At the start it was sustained by the Egyptian western-oriented elite. Pharaonism soon found its way into the arts, in particular in the urban areas. Artists painted a new vision of the nation along pharaonic lines, neo-pharaonic architecture blossomed, and writers, journalists and play writers had a popular subject to present to the public. In short, Pharaonism was 'hot' in the interbellum period.

Especially, since Egypt was declared a republic in 1952 Pharaonism had to compete with forms of nationalism grounded in Arab or Islamic discourse. Though the young Nasser, one of the leaders of the military coup in 1952, was excited about pharaonist patriotism all changed when the new republic choose to adhere to a different nationalism (Meskell 2002:159). Nasser's Arab nationalism had no need for Egypt's pharaonic heritage. Everything before the revolutionary period was considered 'a dark age of corruption' (Hassan 1998:207). The Muslim Brotherhood at the time wanted to substitute Nasser's nationalism with their own 'Islamism.' For several reasons this construction of Egypt's identity failed. Sadat, the next ruler of Egypt, introduced Egyptian nationalism but his liberal policies were not accepted by the brotherhood who in the end had him killed. The struggle for Egypt's identity continued: some intellectuals asserted that Arab civilization is pharaonic and the Egyptian is Arabic, others turned to the Greece and Rome (Hassan 1998:211). Meanwhile, Pharaonism did survive symbolically yet the glorious past was no longer a basis for nation building. When we consider the pharaonic narrative today some of the events described above can be explained with little difficulty.

### Tourist industry

The image Egypt maintains abroad is particularly imbued with constructions of pharaonic dynasties. This is the dominant narrative on which the country's huge tourist industry thrives. In this representation of Egypt's history there is hardly any room for Islamic, Coptic or Jewish heritage. In this creation of the past history suffers. The industry even stretches the pharaonic image with hyper-real constructions of themed restaurants or complete Egyptian villages (Meskell 2003:163).

One solution, heard inside and outside the country, to the lack of security in the country is to prime the economy and more in particular tourism as this is a major industry. Apart from the fact that this a circular argument, tourists stay away because of the insecurity, the contribution of tourism to the national budget is over-exaggerated. True, the numbers are impressive. Before the revolution 10,000 visitors would enter Egypt daily as for today only 2,500 (Mauthner-Weber 2012). But as in other developing countries the tourist industry is largely controlled by big Western multinationals. According to Urry only 22-25% of the retail price remains in the host country (1990:64-65).

Still, some argue that due to their economic ties to the sites people became defenders instead of looters. Mennat-Allah El-Dorry (2011) paints a clear picture of local involvement in and around archaeological sites. Ever since the ban on the trade in antiquities the local population developed a grey economy. She explains "...people instead relied on selling their services as guides, or through receiving an income from inviting tourists to their home for an authentic meal. They also relied on

selling simple handicrafts. Peddling goods and services around the sites to visitors and tourists was once a huge source of income for locals” (El-Dorry 2011:20). Though the author draws the conclusion that this diminishing role in local economics is one of the causes of local looting, we would rather suggest that these economic ties, however small, could well be one of the reasons to protect the sites. That this massive touring of the pyramids and similar representations of the pharaonic past has far-reaching consequences for archaeologists and common Egyptians should not come as a surprise.

### Local involvement

The ‘Heritage Crusade’ or celebration of Antiquities has detrimental effects on the local population.<sup>8</sup> In the construction of the pharaonic image there is little room for the needs of the vast majority of Egyptians who have to live on a few dollars a day. They are reduced to reminders of economic inequality and stand in the way of the exotic experience of the rich tourists. For more than 10 years the local population near the sites has been considered a nuisance as they are said to harass tourists and threaten the sites. Many sites are walled in or fenced off to keep them out and to remind them that the pharaonic past is not theirs, they are for tourists and archaeologists (El-Dorry 2011). Everything is set in motion to accommodate these authorized users not seldom at the cost of local concerns and standards of living (Meskell, 2003).

There are even instances of forced eviction from the sites (Meskell 2000). How can we expect the villagers to be favourable to these excavations if they are not welcomed, nor by the tourists, the archaeologists nor by their own authorities? The fact is that the post-colonial attitude of Egyptologists are separating the living from the past. Separation with the support of the authorities as the SCA suggested in the summer of 2011 to make use of army units to clear illegal constructions on archaeological sites (Jenkins 2011).

Pharaonicism and the post-colonial attitude of the Western scholars also encouraged the fear for Islam. Not only numerous politicians in the West but also the Egyptologists feared the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood. They generally assume that common Egyptians have no relation with the pharaonic past and that the rise of Islam is to blame (Meskell 2003). They proved wrong in several ways:

1. Pharaonic artefacts were stolen because they bring the highest prices on the illicit antiquities market
2. Plundered Islamic artefacts followed the pharaonic items in popularity
3. Many local villagers did defend the sites and monuments from the pharaonic past

Besides, these scholars deny the recognized importance of Islam in shaping Egypt’s past up until this day. Others take their argument even further by adopting the post 9/11 rhetoric and presuming that any Muslim country is incapable of safeguarding the world heritage on their soil (Jenkins 2011). This clearly shows how archaeology is part of the political discourse.

### Supreme Council of Antiquities

The tight grip on the construction of the pharaonic past by post-colonial scholars can be easily illustrated by the fact that until 1952 the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) was under French management, almost 100 years! Though 50 years have passed since not much has changed within the service. Only since the recent revolution clear voices are heard for restructuring the supreme council. Especially, the young local archaeologists protest in general against high unemployment in their profession and more specific against the lack of excavation opportunities and the absence of permanent contracts. The field of Egyptian archaeology is still dominated today by Western archaeologists, including the creation of knowledge. Excavations by Egyptian archaeologists are rare (Keshk et al. 2011).

The SCA is vital in managing Egypt’s material past. Yet, the state inspectors are reduced to supervising the work of the foreign missions, registering newly discovered artefacts and securing antiquities storehouses (Keshk et al. 2011). As former Minister of Antiquities Zahi Hawass said: “Egyptian inspectors who accompanied foreign archaeological missions did little more than act as

facilitators. They would buy supplies and expedite permits, yet 95 per cent of them were unaware of the mechanics of scientific excavation” (El-Aref 2011a).

The majority of the excavations, in total over 200, are run by Western teams mainly American and European (Keshk et al. 2011). The Egyptian heritage authorities attach great importance to the foreign missions. On the request of their embassies the foreign missions left Egypt during or right after the uprising. Already in March 2011 15 new requests to excavate from abroad were received (Jenkins 2011). After Ramadan 2011 75 missions resumed their excavation projects and in January 2012 individual archaeologists received permission to excavate. In November 2011 the SCA even released an official statement to deny all rumours about ending the work of foreign missions (Khaled 2011). Within one year the Western scholars took control again over Egypt’s past – with the help of the SCA.

In the summer of 2011 the then secretary general of the SCA, Abdel Maksood, promised to hire more personnel on permanent contracts and raise their salaries. But the plans might be stalled due to the financial crisis. The protests of the young professionals are understandable though not all of their allegations do hold water. Remains the fact that there is a fundamental inequality between foreign and local archaeologists in the production of Egyptology knowledge, their maintenance and use. Another severe repercussion of the post-colonial attitude toward the past, reflected in SCA’s policy, is that the production of archaeological knowledge is mainly in the realm of the pharaonic past.

### **Critical steps forwards**

The description of and inquiry into the destruction and plunder of Egypt’s heritage after the popular revolt in January 2011 reveal a couple of fundamental problems, mirrored in a number of proposed measures. They are all about archaeological theory and practice.

#### Lack of education

The repeated observation that the local populations lack any relation with the heritage of the Pharaohs and thus need to be educated, is convincingly questioned by Meskell (2000, 2003). She shows that many examples of memorialization of the pharaonic past can be found in the urban landscape. “Antiquity is constantly invoked in representations and celebrations of Egypt”, she writes (Meskell, 2000:162). Remarkably, the unsubstantiated argument of a lack of education refers firstly to the pharaonic past and not to other narratives that compose Egypt’s past and secondly this presupposed divide, the learned and the ignorant, is needed to maintain Pharaonicism as the main narrative for Egypt. Discussing education and awareness raising is all about what you want to convey: an official interpretation of the times of the Pharaohs only or is there a popular version too?

#### New relations archaeologists - local population

A closely linked observation with the alleged lack of education is the proposal of a few archaeologists to (re-)establish the relation between the profession and the local inhabitants (Filser 2011; Jenkins 2011; ECHO<sup>9</sup>). To quote Jenkins (2011): “More guards, more guns and more plans are helpful, but it is the development of linkages and relationships between today’s people and the ancient stones and artifacts that will ensure the continued survival of Egypt’s past.” We could not agree more but this scheme does come rather late as this approach to archaeology, known as public or community archaeology, has been introduced already in the 1980s. At the same time it amazingly shows how apolitical Egyptology has been so far. But better late than never.

#### Proper documentation

One of the lessons learned is the need for proper documentation (al-Rawi 2011; Keshk 2012a). Some registration in museums and storerooms have been achieved but certainly not enough to identify stolen objects. Though the Egyptian Museum has a database the staff still do not know the objects’ specific locations (Keshk 2012a). In the museum sector the need for basic registration has been recognized for

quite some time, especially in developing countries.<sup>10</sup> What is surprising is the nonexistence of a list of known archaeological sites. This can be considered as an indication of an ill-functioning SCA that is the main responsible. True, but as the majority of the sites are used by foreign concession holders one wonders what they have contributed to a better site management. Who was filling the many storerooms that were very badly protected and, to top it off, overcrowded. It is just too easy to say that the SCA-inspectors were responsible for them. Anyway, this is a serious case of 'opportunity makes the thief.'

### New Supreme Council of Antiquities

There has been much criticism on the Supreme Council for Antiquities but it seems that the institution is ready for change. Jenkins (2011) reports in July 2011 that the SCA has "...undertaken many initiatives aimed at restoring the security of sites, recovering stolen artefacts and planning for the future." All these measures will cost money and, as mentioned above, due to lack of funds some of them might have to be postponed.

In the proposed SCA actions to retrieve stolen antiquities certain consequences of post-colonial politics can be recognized. In the past the once secretary-general of the SCA, Zahi Hawass, was exceptionally concerned with the return of ancient relics. They were once found on Egyptian soil and are now kept in prominent museums, many in the capitals of the former colonizers. In April 2010 he invited numerous countries whose treasures experienced a similar fate for a two-day conference. Hawass demanded the immediate repatriation of the lost artefacts and added that "...we will make life miserable for museums that refuse to repatriate" (StLouis Today 2010). He did not change his tune on the Second International Conference to Recover Stolen Antiquities organized by Peru in July 2011. As the Al-Ahram newspaper reports: "The protection of ancient artefacts, whether it be copyrights or the return of those held in international museums or smuggled antiquities, is one item on Egypt's minister of antiquities list at the Peru conference" (El-Aref 2011b).

In this setting the zeal of the SCA to curb the illegal trade in artefacts gets a different meaning. Apparently, to set history right is ranking high on the priority list of the SCA. The fact that the rich heritage is now leaving the country 'en masse' and is not so much due to illegal acts of Western colonial powers but by home grown criminals, will work many a SCA official into a rage. Therefore it is not surprising that the ties with international agencies like Interpol<sup>11</sup> are reinforced notwithstanding the Interpol database only listed 271 stolen objects (Mauthner-Weber 2012). For the same reason many Egyptian scholars and highly respected heritage institutions cooperated with ICOM to produce the Red List<sup>12</sup> published by ICOM in February 2012. Also, most of the international heritage organisations<sup>13</sup> keep track of the looting in Egypt. Unmistakably, the international heritage community underpins the Egyptian authorities desire to curb the illicit trade in art objects.

This leaves us with one more question. Why are the international heritage organizations so keen to support the fight against the illicit trade in artefacts. Is it perhaps because their 'cradle of civilization' is in danger? After all their colonial ancestors incorporated the Pharaohs into the early history of western civilization. Or do they collectively suffer from a guilty conscience as their governments hardly make any effort to combat this crime<sup>14</sup> while they live in the market country or because of their colonial past? That would be interesting to find out.

### Independent local initiatives

In the revolution more and more people learned how to take control over their life. In doing so they created a better future. Some of them even began to conquer the past. Various independent heritage initiatives shot up in the big cities of Cairo and Alexandria. This is maybe the best outcome of the revolution as far as Egypt's heritage is concerned.

Yasmine El Dorghamy, editor of Rawi Magazine comments on several projects. She reports "Independent groups have recently emerged to try to make up for this lack of awareness through

lectures and public awareness campaigns, inspired by the positive spirit displayed in the cleaning of Tahrir Square after Hosni Mubarak stepped down” (Keshk 2012b). The magazine itself is published since 2008 and can meanwhile be bought at Cairo’s newsstands and different international museum bookstores outside Egypt. Dalia Nabil, co-founder of the Treasures of Egypt at Risk group, declares that every day new groups are formed. Several initiatives have been active of late protecting these buildings, including the Heliopolis Heritage Initiative<sup>15</sup> and Treasures of Egypt at Risk.

The website Cairoobserver lists all kind of interesting facts and projects on Cairo’s architecture and building, urban fabric and city life. It is an attempt to fill a void in popular discourse focused on this city. Other initiatives are Front for Saving Egyptian Antiquities, Heliopolis Eyes, Megawra Built Environment, Save al-Moez Street, and the Egyptian Archaeologist.<sup>16</sup> Some aim to raise general awareness about Egyptian heritage while others focused on protecting specific historic areas (Keshk 2012b). These projects would be half as effective without the use of social media. Even Bloggers joined in such as Michel Hanna, online since 2005, a pharmacist who has been writing regularly about Cairo’s endangered architectural heritage for two years (Keshk 2012b).

## **Epilogue**

Much has changed in the relation between Politics and Heritage in Egypt one and a half years after the Lotus Revolution. It has proven to be an extensive relation. Judging from the depressing surge in the plunder of Egypt’s past one should come to the conclusion that the change has been for the worse. On the other hand the revolution also exposed the immense impact Pharaonicism has on the creation of Egypt’s past. Supported by the overwhelming number of foreign missions and the SCA other narratives had little chance to contribute to the Egypt’s diverse historic past. However, that might change in the long run.

A revolution is all about politics and this particular political discourse has (of course) reached Egypt’s heritage sector. Yet, the debate has not been pursued equally under the stakeholders discussed here. The young urban liberals who played an essential role at the start of the uprising took control over their historic urban landscape. They lobby the authorities for the preservation of historic quarters and try to raise awareness with their fellow citizens. Most of the independent projects deal with narratives other than the pharaonic past. The young Egyptian archaeologists made themselves heard when they demanded a say in SCA policies, equal rights and opportunities compared to their foreign colleagues. The protests show that there is much dissatisfaction with the SCA staff but it is not clear if it also reaches the content of archaeology itself. As for the foreign archaeologists there seems to be some slight movement in their attitude towards the local population. The weak cry for public archaeology is at least an encouraging sign of a change. Hopefully entire communities will soon be involved in the creation of Egypt’s past. Perhaps this will give rise to the idea that our profession can even learn something from local interpretation of the ancient past.

The present political discourse on Egypt’s heritage in fact all boils down to: ‘Who owns Egypt’s past’ The urban autonomous initiatives emanate good hope for Egypt’s past. From the viewpoint of international aid it would be a serious mistake not to support these heritage initiatives. Recent reports confirm that empowering local groups is the most effective approach for change in former closed societies.<sup>17</sup> Distribution of resources is always important as most of the time they are scarce. Most of the SCA’s budget directly or indirectly goes to measures to support Egypt’s legacy of the Pharaohs. Salima Ikram, professor of Egyptology at the American University in Cairo, feels that “...local work, in some instances, could do with better funding and a more rigorous research system” (Keshk et al. 2011). However, the key question is if western archaeologists easily give up their privileged position in controlling Egypt’s past. And will their governments set geo-politics aside, including their funding policies and not use archaeology for their own political gain? Here lies an enormous challenge as well as opportunity for western archaeologists to contribute to Egypt’s past and future.

Today’s Egypt appears to be a pastiche of identities and everyone sets their own priority. The Lotus Revolution has not ended yet and as the political power play continues so will the past continue to be

contested ground. Unquestionably, the new leaders will search for ideological support of their reign. Let's hope they will agree with Hassan who noted already in 1998 "A stable political future of Egypt depends upon an ability to integrate its pasts and recognize Pharaonic, Hellenistic, and Islamic heritage, and to place that variegated heritage within the course of global civilization" (Hassan 1998: 212). We have to wait (and see) in which way and by which course Egypt re-invents its identity in the times to come. One thing is crystal-clear though: The past is now!

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This slogan was heard when on 28 January 2011 students from The Really Free School formed a human shield outside the British Museum in solidarity with the people in Cairo who formed a shield around their National Museum to protect Egypt's treasures ([Real Free School] 2011).

<sup>2</sup> See for example the letter of the Presidents of 17 Organizations. The International Archaeological Community is following with great concern the events unfolding in Egypt. World Archaeological Congress, 6 February 2011.

<sup>3</sup> For example the inadequate reaction of the authorities on the looting of the mausoleum of Mohammed Cherif Pasha. As this religious monument is stranded between the Ministry of Wakfs and the antiquities authorities the blame for the lack of security is thrown back and forth. ([Badawi, M.] 2012; al-Rawi, 2011).

<sup>4</sup> cf Keshk et al. 2011

<sup>5</sup> Other reports state that the prisoners were not released but rose against their guards with outside help and in the resulting battle escaped from prison. See for example The Telegraph, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Next to the many newspaper reports there were some more substantial accounts and analyses. Around 50 incidents were examined published at <http://egyptopaedia.com/2011/> , accessed 31 July 2012. It is a Site by Site Database of the Damage to Antiquities in Egypt and was established by Kate Phizackerley on 31st January 2011 to record known (or strongly suspected) details of sites looted during the popular Egyptian uprising of January and February 2011 [accessed 23 July 2012]. Also al-Rawi (2011), Jenkins and Kempa (2012) and Joffe (2011).

<sup>7</sup> The benefits of the tourist industry for the local population is much smaller than many presume. See also page 8 under Tourist Industry.

<sup>8</sup> See David Lowenthal's *Heritage Crusade and the Spoils of History*, Cambridge University Press 1998.

<sup>9</sup> ECHO stands for Egyptian Cultural Heritage Organisation (ECHO), see their website <http://www.e-c-h-o.org/>

<sup>10</sup> The so-called Object ID project was initiated by the J. Paul Getty Trust in 1993 and the standard was launched in 1997. ICOM maintains the Object ID in close collaboration with UNESCO and other organisations fighting illicit trade. ICOM will actively disseminate information about Object ID and also organize workshops on its implementation. See <http://archives.icom.museum/object-id/>

<sup>11</sup> A combined UNESCO/Interpol mission took place from 3 to 13 May 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Full title: Emergency Red List of Egyptian Cultural Objects at Risk. More information at <http://icom.museum/press-releases/press-release/article/icom-publishes-a-new-emergency-red-list-the-emergency-red-list-of-egyptian-cultural-objects-at-risk-1/>

<sup>13</sup> International heritage organizations as ICOM, ICOMOS, IFLA and ICA. For more see their websites.

<sup>14</sup> Except the United States of America.

<sup>15</sup> The 'Oasis of Heliopolis' is a 20th century quarter that still keeps a good percentage of its original urban

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planning and buildings built in the Neo-Islamic architectural style that emerged in 1905.

<sup>16</sup> To find more on some independent initiatives: *Treasures of Egypt at risk*.

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Treasures-of-Egypt-at-Risk/287335894631496>; *Heliopolis Heritage Initiative*.

[http://www.facebook.com/Heliopolis Heritage Initiative?ref=ts](http://www.facebook.com/Heliopolis-Heritage-Initiative?ref=ts); *Rawi Magazine. Egypt's Heritage Review*.

<http://www.rawi-magazine.com/> and [http://www.facebook.com/pages/Al-RAWI-Egypt's-Heritage-](http://www.facebook.com/pages/Al-RAWI-Egypt's-Heritage-Review/130048000384044)

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<sup>17</sup> See for example: Kuehnast, K., Omar, M., Steiner, S.E., and Sultan, H. (2012). *Lessons from Women's Programs in Afghanistan and Iraq*. Special Report. United States Institute of Peace, Washington. Also

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