

FROM THE FJORDS TO THE NILE

**Essays in honour of Richard Holton Pierce
on his 80th birthday**

edited by

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Bridging Gaps: Archaeological sources and resources in museums

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Introduction

Museums and archaeology share a common engagement to find, recover, safeguard, study and explicate the material world.¹ This brief open-ended essay is about the methods and scopes of museums regarding their use of archaeology as a source and a resource in exhibitions about Ancient Egypt and Nubia, and how archaeological finds and research in different academic fields may serve to generate, expand and sustain museums' activities. Bridging the gaps between disciplines and laying the grounds for free-choice learning and for the elaboration and dissemination of knowledge is, in my view, a first step. The second step has to do with a self-reflective turn we have been witnessing during the last decade or so in European museums holding archaeological material from non-Western countries. This new turn has to do with an increased awareness of the sustainability of such endeavours. Establishing a politics of trust between museums, cultural and research institutions and local populations is the next step.

Objects of knowledge and free-choice learning

During the late 1980s, a number of museums around the world, for various reasons, had to reassess their museological projects and practices. According to Dominique Poulot (2005; cf. Naguib 2004; 2013), the shift from what he describes as the 'depot museum' to the 'exhibition museum' has transformed the institution of the museum both in its conception and in its management. Permanent exhibitions have a shorter lifespan and are regularly reorganized; they often travel, are thematically oriented and make use of various participatory approaches. Aesthetics, the production of experiences, design, the originality of the display and performance are central elements. From the perspective of a didactic, taxonomic and descriptive museology, the trend is now to use polyphonic narrative and a museology of intersecting gazes. Multimedia has been a major instrument in bringing this approach to fruition and new potentials are appearing all the time (Naguib 2004: 58f.). The polyphonic narrative in exhibitions about ancient cultures juxtaposes different perspectives and connects research with education, entertainment and dissemination. It directs attention to the many lives and changing meanings an artefact has had, to its relation to other objects, to sites, to people, to cultural practices and to geopolitical contexts. Thus, biographic narratives about archaeological objects may include presentations of excavations, comparisons between modern archaeological methods and those of the past, and also dealing with difficult matters such as forgery, illicit excavations, and the plundering and destruction of cultural heritage (Naguib forthcoming).

These new approaches to archaeological material in museums offer the flexibility needed for free-choice learning, which, according to John Falk and Lynn Dierking (2000), forms the basis of lifelong, self-motivated learning. The idea behind free-choice learning is that anyone – young and old – can decide what, where, when and how she or he wants to learn. Museums play an important role in making learning attractive through their exhibitions and outreach programmes. Both museums and archaeology have the materiality of things as their focal point. Their task is to not only protect the unique but also to reclaim the humble, often fragmentary things such as potsherds, ostraca, statuettes, scraps of papyri, pieces of coffins, linen wrappings or beads, and make them into 'objects of knowledge'. Materiality encompasses,

¹ According to the ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, 24.08.2007: 'A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment' (retrieved 23.4.2016).

then, the material properties of things, their shape, type, age and style as well as their relations to people and to what things convey about the more intangible aspects of culture. Several exhibitions about ancient Egypt combine the biographies and materiality of things with multidisciplinary. In planning and organizing exhibitions about ancient Egypt and Nubia, museums draw upon the knowledge of scholars and experts in different disciplines and fields within these. Instead of setting an ancient civilization like the Egyptian one in a 'time out of time' mode and what Anna Wiczorkiewicz (2005) has described as 'fairy tales', 'ghost' and 'detective and adventurer' stories, exhibitions rely on different approaches and combine an aesthetic-historical frame of representation with education and entertainment. In addition, exhibitions have become more self-reflective and probe accounts about excavations, local politics, environment and scholars. The catalogues and other publications produced include various in-depth studies in addition to pictures of objects with shorter texts describing the different artefacts with details about materials, size, date, provenance and translations of texts if the pieces are inscribed. Among the more recent exhibitions adopting this approach are *Ancient Egypt transformed: The Middle Kingdom*² at the Metropolitan Museum, New York (Oppenheim *et al.*: 2015) and *Faith after the Pharaohs*³ at the British Museum (Fluck, Helmecke and O'Connell 2015). Another one is the exhibition *Taharqa - The Black Pharaoh*⁴ at the Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek in Copenhagen, which was supplemented by publications about the historical background of the collection and central figures such as Carl Jacobsen, Valdemar Schmidt, Flinders Petrie and John Garstang, who had been so committed to building it up (Bagh 2011; 2015; Jørgensen 2015). In these kinds of exhibitions, the artefacts exhibited do not 'speak for themselves' as art objects in a timeless decontextualized environment. Instead, they are set in a mixture of their own contemporaneity and of the different regimes of historicity they have witnessed. They are presented with the learning and enjoyment wishes of varied audiences in mind. Online exhibitions complete the in-house exhibitions and continue to offer the public the possibility of learning more about the work of archaeologists and other experts even after the exhibitions have been taken down. Thanks to the new media, the visitor has the illusion of being in direct dialogue with objects of the past and realizes that scientific interpretations are not absolute but prone to continuous reassessments. Different questions are asked; new answers are provided.

The self-reflective turn and *disjecta membra*

One of the major problems that museums holding collections from ancient Egypt and Nubia have had to deal with is the thorny question of the *disjecta membra*. For centuries, monuments, archaeological finds and artefacts of all sorts and sizes have been taken away from their original contexts and dispersed around the world in different museums and collections. Some, like the Rosetta Stone or the painted bust of Nefertiti, have become iconic pieces of their museum's collections. Others, like Egyptian obelisks, have become landmarks in various capitals. Most, however, are either exhibited in museums' galleries or kept in museums' storerooms or in private collections, or have simply disappeared.

Parallel to the multidisciplinary and free learning approaches we witness that self-reflection has become an added element in both permanent and temporary exhibitions about ancient cultures, ancient Egypt and Nubia included. The self-reflective approach brings to the fore the ways in which both archaeology and the institution of the museum have evolved. It entails a somewhat critical look at oneself by reviewing and explicating the circumstances in which certain actions and events took place. In the context of museums, it means interrogating their own histories of collecting and excavating. It involves mapping the trajectories of objects in time and space in order to reconstruct the various networks that brought them to the museum and to review their status in the museum's collection. Taking the example of the Vorderasiatisches Museum im Pergamonmuseum, Berlin, Markus Hilgert and France Desmarais argue that archaeological museums, especially in western Europe, are today facing

² <http://www.metmuseum.org/exhibitions/listings/2015/ancient-egypt-transformed> (12.10.2015-24.1.2016).

³ http://www.britishmuseum.org/whats_on/exhibitions/faith_after_the_pharaohs.aspx (29.10.2015-7.2.2016).

⁴ <http://www.glyptoteket.com/whats-on/calendar/taharqa-the-black-pharaoh> (10.4-28.6.2015).

complex challenges related to the political and cultural crises in the countries from which the objects in their collections originate. The future of archaeological museums as public spaces of education, transcultural encounters and multi-perspective discourse, as well as their social and political significance, will hinge on their willingness and ability to meet these challenges, take on their individual historical burdens and make the appropriate ethical choices... (Hilgert and Desmarais 2015: 22).

For Hilgert and Desmarais, museums must take responsibility for their past. They have to account for and document the history and provenance of the objects in their care, and make this information broadly available to both the countries of origin and internationally.

The exhibition *In the Light of Amarna. 100 Years of the Find of Nefertiti*⁵ was an example of the self-reflective turn in museums and of bringing together pieces that originally belonged to the same site. To mark the anniversary of the discovery of one of the most renowned ‘bones of contention’ in archaeology, namely the bust of Nefertiti on 6th December 1912, the Egyptian Museum and Papyrus Collection at the Neues Museum in Berlin inaugurated this special exhibition (Seyfried 2012). It comprised about 400 objects and several had never been shown publicly before. Fifty of these were loans from other museums in Germany and internationally such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the British Museum and the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. The exhibition did not just focus on religion and art during the Amarna period but offered a comprehensive overview of daily life in Akhetaton, as Tell el-Amarna was called at the time. Further, it also placed the discovery of the bust of Nefertiti within the context of Borchardt’s excavations in 1912 and examined the history of the depiction of the bust of Nefertiti both as an archaeological object and as a widely marketed ideal of beauty. It was clear that the organizers hoped the exhibition would be a blockbuster. The exhibition and several articles in the catalogue of the exhibition examined the way in which foreign powers, here the British, French and German, worked in colonial settings and how they negotiated the division of labour between them. The texts produced for the exhibition explicated the conditions in which the excavations, sponsored by the businessman James Simon (1851-1932) and the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft, were initiated. They also touched upon the claims of repatriation that were launched by the Egyptian government in 1924. However, these details on the geopolitical conditions and economic facts were presented from the German point of view and mainly as disputes between the French and German authorities. The catalogue is silent about the Egyptian national socio-political and cultural situation at the time. Ironically, the colonial period in Egypt is also known as its cosmopolitan era. During the nineteenth century and until WWII, Egypt was a popular destination for Europeans. The quest for rare and exotic experiences and picturesque sites was not the only reason. Politics, economy and the establishment of new markets and job opportunities were other important factors in this attraction. This coincided with the policy of modernization introduced by the Egyptian rulers at the time. They welcomed foreign capital and recruited European scholars, businesspersons, urban planners, engineers, architects and skilled workers for their various projects (Naguib 2001; 2002; 2008). Among the foreign investors were institutions and individuals such as the Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft and James Simon, and Denmark’s Ny Carlsberg Foundation and Carl Jacobsen, who sponsored excavations in different locations in Egypt and Nubia (Bagh 2011; 2015; Jørgensen 2015). As Donald Malcom Reid rightly points out, archaeology in Egypt and Nubia had become the terrain of conflicting interests among Western imperialist powers. Decisions about Egyptian excavations and the politics of division of finds known as *partage à parties égales* were taken without involving Egyptian scholars and specialists in the field. The division of power between Britain and France was reinforced by the *entente cordiale* of 1904. France continued to dominate the cultural life in Egypt and controlled the concessions of archaeological excavations to foreign missions as well as the protection and documentation of the country’s antiquities. The most prestigious institutions they created are the Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte, today the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA), and the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Both institutions were under French leadership from 1858 until the revolution of 1952. Their main function has been to fight the looting of antiquities, the administration of

⁵ <http://imlichtvonamarna.de/> (December 7th 2012 - April 13th 2013).

concessions for excavation, the documentation and registration of monuments, and the preservation and conservation of the ancient Egyptian and Nubian cultural heritage (Reid 2002; 2015).

The second challenge Western archaeological museums face according to Hilgert and Desmarais relates to the manner in which exhibitions are conceived and how they shape ‘surrogate cultures’ by putting together groups of objects from various archaeological settings (Hilgert and Desmarais 2015: 23). Thus, it also concerns the controversial question of *disjecta membra* and by extension the legitimacy and ethical dimensions attached to cultural property. The world of museums is divided on the question of repatriation of cultural property and the different factions on these issues all have persuasive arguments for their cause. Defending the rights of the British Museum on the issue of the Elgin Marbles, Neil MacGregor, then director of the museum, declared:

All great works of art are surely the common inheritance of humanity ... it is essential that there are places where the great creations of all civilizations can be seen together, and where the visitor can focus on what unites rather than what divides us. (MacGregor 2004).

John Henry Merryman (1986; 2009) proposed two dimensions to the discussions regarding policies about cultural property. One approach is ‘nation-oriented’ and the other is ‘object-oriented’. The nation-oriented approach is tied to cultural nationalism. Accordingly, objects *belong* within the physical boundaries of the nations within which they are found or within which they are historically associated: the Elgin Marbles belong to Greece, Italian Renaissance paintings belong to Italy. (Merryman 2009: 187)

The object-oriented approach is more cosmopolitan and underscores three conceptually interdependent factors. These are *preservation* and the safeguard of various forms of material culture, *truth* in imparting knowledge and information about the object, and *access* for both scholars and the public. In *Who Owns Antiquity? Museums and the Battle over Our Ancient Heritage* (2008), James Cuno challenges the nationalistic positions and claims by countries like Italy, Greece, Egypt, Turkey and China that the acquisition of undocumented antiquities by museums encourages the looting of archaeological sites and that the ancient artefacts are the property of the state. He writes that ‘antiquities are the cultural property of all humankind’, they are the ‘evidence of the world’s ancient past and not that of a particular modern nation... antiquity knows no borders’ (Cuno 2008: 127). He reiterates these arguments later in *Whose Culture? The Promise of Museums and the Debate over Antiquities* (2009), and in *Museums Matter: In Praise of the Encyclopedic Museum* (2011), and stresses the role of museums in conveying knowledge about ‘our common past’ and ‘our common heritage’ and how this knowledge can lead us to respect for, and understanding of, different cultures today. He argues that ‘[i]t is the promise of the encyclopedic museum to counter the nationalization of culture and its claim on antiquity’ (Cuno 2009: 28), and that ‘[b]y displaying the sheer variety of art from varied visual cultures, the encyclopedic museums encourage a cosmopolitan view of the world’ (Cuno 2011: 62). The cosmopolitan perception of, and practice in, antiquities has slowly been making its way in museums and archaeology (Meskell 2009). It draws upon Anthony Appiah Kvame’s statement that from a cosmopolitan standpoint the universal always takes precedence over the local or national culture (Appiah 2006). Such an approach takes into account the various regimes of historicity that antiquities convey and how these intertwine in intricate ways. In practice, it implies that cultural artefacts and antiquities that have been taken more or less legally out of their countries of origin during colonial times are today transnational and, hence, belong to world culture and to humanity’s common heritage. The road to viable solutions for these complex matters is still long and tortuous and it will surely take many years for the different parties to come to terms.

Developing politics of trust and the road to cosmopolitan practices

As mentioned above, multidisciplinary and free-choice learning are the first steps in developing archaeology as a source and a resource for museums. Self-reflection in museums holding ancient Egyptian and Nubian archaeological collections is an important second step. Until now, these have been short-term measures used mainly in the planning and organization of temporary exhibitions. In order to develop

long-term methods and a politics of trust among the many institutions, audiences and stakeholders supporting them, museums need to elaborate and put into practice varied sustainable projects that engage with both national authorities and local communities.

Sustainability is an ongoing process of social and cultural learning. Jon Hawkes maintained that culture constitutes the 'fourth pillar' of sustainable development besides the economic, social and environmental ones (Hawkes 2001). Adding the cultural dimension to sustainability acknowledges the significance of more intangible elements of culture pertaining to notions of identity, education, different bodies of knowledge and ways of enduring in times of change. Archaeological site museums and interpretation centres on the sites may play an important role in this matter in the future. Efforts in this sense are being implemented by different excavation projects, such as, for instance, the Amarna project.⁶ Such projects have to be carefully planned and monitored. Writing about archaeological site museums in Turkey, Nevra Ertürk lists some of the main challenges such museums may encounter. Among the most important are the insufficient number of staff, inadequate facilities and poor display techniques, ongoing excavations, abandonment after the excavation seasons are over, inaccessibility and a lack of communication between the tourist and cultural sectors (Ertürk 2006: 343-344). The looting and acts of vandalism that have taken place in recent years in a number of locations in Egypt and the Middle East, especially in Irak and Syria, are significant reminders that it is crucial to elaborate and apply durable, cosmopolitan, practical solutions. Archaeological site museums and interpretation centres, which may be organized as branches of other, more established national and international museums, the so-called universal/encyclopaedic museums, require viable and effective management in order to achieve appropriate on-site preservation, documentation, research, training and exhibition. The main advantage of such practices in archaeological sites and museums is that the finds recovered from the excavations remain in their geographic and cultural contexts. They will not add to the countless ancient Egyptian *disjecta membra* in the already overfilled storerooms of other museums. Instead, they will be displayed in exhibitions on site and may be sent out on loan for special exhibitions abroad. Such projects and plans imply elaborating and putting into practice a cosmopolitan vision of museums and archaeology. To be realistic and sustainable, the projects must be well funded and must benefit the locality in which they are initiated. This demands the instigation of plans to raise public awareness and education among the local populations and encouraging their active involvement through workable long-term collaborative programmes.

Concluding thoughts

In their use of archaeology as a source and resource, museums in Western countries holding ancient Egyptian and Nubian artefacts emphasize the materiality and affective presence of the objects displayed. They apply an aesthetic framework in exhibitions, and experiment with different formats for visitor participation and free-choice learning. Exhibitions are more self-reflective; online, virtual exhibitions are available on the Internet and make the collections more accessible to varied audiences. These approaches bring the faraway past nearer to the present and render it more comprehensible. However, these same museums and Egyptian authorities still need to address and settle the many controversies regarding questions of cultural property and the restitution of antiquities. Demands for repatriation of cultural property have prompted novel perceptions of ownership pertaining to the realm of museums, especially among universal/encyclopaedic museums. Rather than boasting about their collections and presenting themselves as temples of knowledge, they now underscore their role as the custodians of a universal and diverse cultural heritage and of the world's memory. They stand now as cosmopolitan institutions that promote the dissemination of knowledge and respect for all cultures whether these have disappeared long ago or are still alive. More than 30 years ago, John H. Merryman (1986) argued that a way of resolving restitution claims might involve instigating a cosmopolitan approach to antiquities – what he called 'cultural internationalism'. This step entails instituting cultural agreements between the different parties in terms of long-term loans or joint stewardship as a form of 'sharing' culture (Lyons 2014: 262). Marc-André Renold goes even further in this direction. Taking the Rosetta Stone as an example, he suggests

⁶ <http://www.amarnaproject.com/>

that a way of resolving disputes about ownership of antiquities and other cultural artefacts that have been taken away from the nation of origin would be to think in terms of cultural co-ownership (Renold 2015). The attitude of Egyptian authorities seems to have become more receptive to such ideas and open to negotiation. An article published in the aftermath of the 'Arab Spring' in the Egyptian newspaper *Al-Ahram Weekly* reflects this. The article takes up the case of the bust of Nefertiti and describes the Neues Museum in Berlin as Nefertiti's foster home. Here, the tone has changed from accusations of theft and claims of restitution of stolen art to the acceptance of facts and the acknowledgement of the care the bust of the queen and other Egyptian antiquities are receiving in that museum.⁷

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⁷ <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/News/4691/47/Nefertiti's-foster-home.aspx> (last accessed 25.11.2013).

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