



Egyptomania, Orientalism, and Esotericism in Shelley's Representation of Ancient Egyptian Ruins

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Abstract

This study explores Shelley's engagement with the three discourses of Egyptomania, Orientalism, and esotericism in his representation of ancient Egypt, examining how the three disciplines intersect in his portrayal of the ancient Egyptian monuments. The study also shows how Shelley draws heavily upon the tradition of ruins of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in his investigation of the significance of the Egyptian history and cultural legacy. Shelley employs Egyptian motifs to develop his own thematic concerns, expressing his contempt of warfare, his vehement opposition to religious dogma, and his scathing critiques against tyranny. Egypt, with its iconic pyramids, sphinxes, and monumental temples, serves as a metaphor for the fleeting nature of human achievements as well as a symbol of Oriental despotism. While employing Egypt as a symbol of tyranny, Shelley's poetry paradoxically conveys a profound admiration for the Egyptian civilization. To him, Egypt was not just a repository of ancient ruins but the source of all human knowledge. In this multifaceted portrayal, Shelley's poetic representation of Egypt stands as a testament to his complex relationship with the land's history, fusing disdain and aversion with fascination and a profound admiration for its ancient legacy.

Keywords: Shelley, Egyptomania, Orientalism, Esotericism, Ruins, ancient Egypt

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The poetry of P. B. Shelley reveals a deep interest in ancient Egypt, which was influenced by the growing obsession with Egypt throughout the Romantic era as a result of the Napoleonic Expedition and the wave of European explorations of Egyptian antiquities. This fascination is evident through the recurring references in his poems to Egyptian motifs, employed as metaphors to convey his thematic concerns. Particularly noticeable in his early long works like *Queen Mab* and *Alastor*, Shelley's interest in ancient Egypt encompasses pyramids, obelisks, sphinxes, ruined temples, and the enigmatic Zodiac, as well as the majestic Nile and the desert terrain. Shelley's poems showcase his consistent use of Egyptian metaphors, revealing an enduring engagement with the symbols of ancient Egypt. Moreover, Shelley's interaction with the ruins trope, popularized by Volney's influential work *The Ruins*, helped shape his perception of Egyptian monuments as symbols of Oriental despotism and tyranny. The Romantic poets' fascination with Egypt was partly related to the Romantic movement's interest in the exotic, the mysterious, and the sublime. Poets like Shelley, Lord Byron, and John Keats found inspiration in the ruins, myths, and the cultural heritage of ancient Egypt; the allure of Egypt and its attraction was a reflection of their fascination with the country's enigmatic landscapes and its distant past. Moreover, Egypt's ruins served as potent symbols of the transience of human empires and the inexorable passage of time. The Romantic poets, deeply influenced by the poetic tradition of the ruins, saw in Egypt's ancient crumbling monuments an expression of their own contemplations on mortality, decay, and the sublime.

The Romantics' interest in Egypt was part of a broader European craze for the ancient civilization of Egypt during the eighteenth century, reaching its zenith following Napoleon's three-year Egyptian expedition from 1798 to 1801, a period that launched the long obsession now famously termed *Egyptomania* (Parramore, 2008, p. 18). Napoleon's invasion of Egypt brought 150 scientists and artists, whose mission was to meticulously survey and document the ancient land, unearthing its secrets and treasures. This campaign left its mark on the European consciousness, giving rise to a captivation with Egypt that penetrated various facets of European thought and artistic expression, leading to the appropriation of Egyptian themes and motifs into literature and various art forms. Along with the celebrated *Description de l'Égypte*, the monumental encyclopedic work produced by the French army of *savants*, Dominique Denon's *Voyage dans la Basse et la Haute Egypte, pendant les Campagnes du Général Bonaparte*, published in 1802 and translated into English as

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Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt in 1803, had an extraordinary impact on the popular imagination (Curl, 1996, p. 119). Denon's book not only captured the public imagination in both France and England, but also, as noted by John Fritze (2016), unleashed a new wave of public fascination, sparking a new wave of *Egyptomania* and establishing itself as the first popular travelogue of the nineteenth century. The influence of these two works in particular extended beyond scholarly pursuits, fostering a widespread adoption of Egyptian themes and motifs in literature and the arts. The rivalry between the French and the English in collecting Egyptian artifacts led to a surge in Egyptian artifacts flooding into European and American museums and private collections, further fueling the burgeoning obsession with this ancient civilization. Contributing to the expansive legacy of *Egyptomania*, the Romantics embraced this fascination, allowing the allure of ancient Egypt to pervade their creative expressions.

Shelley's fascination with ancient Egypt is also connected to his interest in the Romantic tradition of ruins. During the English Romantic period, the obsession with ruins reached a heightened intensity, along with the movement's focus on nature, imagination, and the sublime. Influenced by the French intellectual Constantin-François Volney's 1791 treatise *Les Ruines, ou méditations sur les révolutions des empires*, translated into English in 1792 and again in 1802 as *The Ruins, or Meditation on the Revolutions of Empires*, the Romantic poets used the imagery of decay to grapple with the anxieties and aspirations of their own age, a tumultuous epoch marked by revolutionary fervor, political upheaval, and the flourishing industrial revolution. In their verses, the ruins became more than mere decaying structures; they embodied the complex interplay of decline and progress that defined the Romantic response to the challenges of their time. Shelley in particular found himself enthralled by the evocative potential of ruins. As evidenced in poems like "Ozymandias," *Queen Mab*, and *Alastor*, he embraced the Volneyan perspective that saw historical relics as testaments to the transient nature of earthly power. *The Ruins*, with its stark portrayal of empires like Palmyra and Babylon reduced to dust, resonated deeply with Shelley's republican ideals and his strong condemnation of tyranny.

While acknowledging the destructive potential of human ambition, Shelley also recognized the capacity for individual and societal transformation. This dialectic between decline and the potential for renewal is central to understanding Shelley's engagement with the idea of progress. However, Shelley's engagement with ruins

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and the theme of progress was not confined to the influence of Volney; he drew inspiration from a diverse range of sources, including the Gothic tradition's fascination with the uncanny and the sublime and the revolutionary ideals of William Godwin. Godwin's radical ideas, emphasizing individual rights and opposing monarchical tyranny, deeply influenced Shelley, whose belief in the potential for human progress served as a driving force behind his poetic expression of the need for social transformation. The crumbling edifices in his verses are not merely nostalgic reminders of lost grandeur; they serve as potent symbols of the cyclical nature of history, the fragility of human achievements, and the enduring potential for regeneration and progress. Through his engagement with ruins, Shelley confronts the anxieties of his age while offering glimpses of a future shaped by a commitment to social justice. His writings convey the message that amidst deterioration, there is potential for hope to flourish, and that the ruins of bygone eras can serve as inspiration to build a more promising future.

Published at the height of the French Revolution, Volney's *The Ruins* was a very influential critique of contemporary political systems that offered a sweeping vision of human history and the rise and fall of empires. It served as a primary source of inspiration for several of Shelley's poems, employing the ruins of ancient empires to impart various lessons to contemporary Europeans. The opening invocation in Volney's book establishes a tone that is remarkably similar to Shelley's portrayal of ancient ruins in numerous poems:

What useful lessons, what affecting and profound reflections you suggest to him who knows how to consult you! When the whole earth, in chains and silence, bowed the neck before its tyrants, you had already proclaimed the truths which they abhor; and confounding the dust of the king with that of the meanest slave, had announced to man the sacred dogma of Equality (2000, p.1)

The ruins' lesson directed to the tyrants of the chained earth is a lesson of equality, telling the traveler about the frailty of human glory and the impermanence of all civilizations.

As Volney is meditating upon the significance of the ruins of Palmyra in Syria, a supernatural apparition, the "Génie of the tombs and ruins," appears to him and injunctions him to "interrogate these ruins," and to "read the lessons which they present to you!" (p. 9). The Génie then launches Volney into space, taking him on a voyage to reveal to him a comprehensive picture of human history. The Génie informs him that the decline and fall of the ancient Oriental civilizations was caused

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by political tyranny and economic inequity which weakened them and resulted in foreign invasion. What happened in Palmyra happened to the French *Ancien régime*: “What glory is here eclipsed, and how many labours are annihilated! . . . Thus perish the works of men, and thus do nations and empires vanish!” The destruction of the ancient empires of Egypt and Asia makes him reflect upon the fate of European countries:

Reflecting that such had once been the activity of the places I was then contemplating, who knows, said I, but such may one day be the abandonment of our countries? Who knows if on the banks of the Seine, the Thames, the Zuyder-Zee, where now, in the tumult of so many enjoyments, the heart and the eye suffice not for the multitude of sensations, who knows if some traveller, like myself, shall not one day sit on their silent ruins, and weep in solitude over the ashes of their inhabitants, and the memory of their former greatness. (p. 8)

An important aspect of Volney's influence on Shelley's work comes from the fact that Volney had created an ugly image of the Muslim Orient and of Islam. Edward Said refers to Volney's contribution, among others, in shaping the Orientalist discourse and to his influence over literary figures (2015, p. 168). Shelly's condemnation of the tyranny of Eastern civilization is related to the Orientalist concept of Oriental despotism that figures prominently in Volney's depiction of the Muslim Orient. Though it has a long history in European culture, the idea of Oriental tyranny reached its zenith in texts from the fifteenth century onward. The idea has its origin in the time of the Greeks, as major Greek authors focused on the distinctions between their Athenian democratic system and the despotic political systems of the Oriental countries, particularly those of Egypt and Persia. A negative attitude towards ancient Persia developed against the backdrop of the Graeco-Persian wars of the fifth century BCE, which persisted in the European attitude towards the Orient. The Orientals as seen by the Greeks, were, according to Zachary Lockman:

ruled by tyrants, despots whose power was absolute; the people were servile, virtually slaves; society was hierarchical, rigid, almost socially immobile, with an immense, indeed unbridgeable, gap between ruler and ruled; Asian despots and their courts might be immensely wealthy and powerful but they were also vulgar, corrupt and immoral. By contrast, the Greeks tended to depict themselves as a virtuous, modest people who treasured their liberty above all

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else; the city-state, the polis, was composed of free citizens mindful of their civic rights and obligations and resistant to tyranny. (2010, p. 13)

The dichotomy of despotic Orientals versus the democratic Westerners found in Greek thinking has been used by European writers from the fifteenth century as the foundation for the concept of "Oriental despotism," which was then formulated later by Montesquieu and became central to the discourse on the East since the Enlightenment (Raiyah, 2010).

In Shelley's political agenda, Egypt becomes the absolute symbol of tyranny; Egyptian monuments are the work of despots, "Conscienceless destroyer[s]," who aimed to immortalize themselves at the expense of their people's "want and woe." The pyramids and the Egyptian colossal statues of the pharaohs are emblems of Oriental despotism that Shelley sets out to attack throughout his poetry and prose. Shelley's depiction of the pyramids as the supreme symbol of tyranny echoes Volney's thoughts in his *Travels through Syria and Egypt, in the years 1783, 1784, and 1785*, published in 1787, that the pyramids "by their huge and heavy structure, attest much less the genius of a nation, opulent and friendly to the arts, than the servitude of a people who were slaves to the caprices of their monarchs." Volney does not hide his delight at the thought of the destruction of such ancient works as being a means of restoring "to the people what cost them so much fruitless toil, and which renders the pride of unprofitable luxury subservient to the meanest of necessities" (2000, p. 283-84). "The pyramids shall fall," Shelley announces in "To Liberty", ushering a future "paradise on Earth" in which virtue, truth and peace will eventually prevail:

The pyramid which guilt
First planned, which man has built,
At whose footstone want and woe
With a ceaseless murmur flow
And whose peak attracts the tempests of the sky.
The pyramids shall fall
And Monarchs! so shall ye!
Thrones shall rust in the hall
Of forgotten royalty
Whilst Virtue, Truth and Peace shall arise
And a Paradise on Earth
From your fall shall date its birth, (2004, p. 29)

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“Shelley’s professed hatred of tyranny and slavery,” Emily Haddad (2016) remarks, “is of course not limited to their oriental manifestations, but his poems consistently associate these horrors with the Middle East.” For Haddad, the poem “links Islamic and pharaonic symbols (“palace and pyramid”) in an Orientalized depiction of tyranny and its ‘sister-pest,’ slavery” (p.18).

Paradoxically, while he vehemently condemned tyranny and oppression, Shelley was not totally opposed to the ideas of empire. In his prose work *A Philosophical View of Reform* (1820), he commends the work of Western missionaries as being instrumental in effecting change in the East: “it cannot be doubted but the zeal of the missionaries of what is called the Christian faith, will produce beneficial innovation there, even by the application of dogmas and forms of what is here an outworn incumbrance.” The introduction of European culture, Shelley claims, will contribute to positive change in the eastern societies and will induce the degraded peoples of the East into a renewed appreciation of their own past glory. He anticipates that the Indians’ exposure to the works of such Western philosophers as Hume, Lock, and Rousseau will end the conditions of oppression and enslavement they have endured for long. Citing the case of Muhammed Ali of Egypt, he expresses his hope that the cultural contact that this enlightened ruler is establishing with the West will eventually lead the Egyptians into change: “that change which Time, the great innovator, will accomplish in that degraded country; and by the same means its sublime enduring monuments may excite lofty emotions in the hearts of the posterity of those who now contemplate them without admiration” (1820, p. 27). The contact with the West will help the Egyptians value their own past history and re-appreciate their ancient civilization. Shelley argues, in the words of Michael Rossington (1991), that “civilized Europe can thus redeem the monuments of Ancient Egypt, returning them to their due eminence, their sublime grandeur having been corrupted by the present degraded state of their country” (p. 25).

“A Retrospect of Times Old” is Shelly’s first poem in which he “achieves what might be called a historical vision” (Campbell, 1972, p. 45). Drawing primarily upon Volney’s *Ruins*, Shelley directs his focus towards the decaying legacies of princely ambition, cataloging a roster of ancient despots whose fallen statues attest to the fate of human pride. Notably, the list is topped by the Egyptian pharaoh Sesestoris, whose name represents the legendary figure whose accomplishments are likely based on three specific pharaohs, Senwosret I, Senwosret II, and Senwosret III of the Twelfth Dynasty (Silverman, 2003). Shelly’s note to the poem adds the names

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of two of his own contemporary countrymen to the list of “legal murderers”: Duke of Wellington and Horatio Nelson. Similar to many of Shelley's other historical poems, “A Retrospect” adheres to a tripartite structure encompassing the past, present, and future, commencing with a lament over the remnants of once-mighty empires forged on the glories of military conquest:

The mansions of the Kings are tenantless
Low lie in dust their glory and their shame.
No tongue survives their virtuous Deeds to bless,
No tongue with execration blasts their fame,
.....

There Desolation dwells! — Where are the Kings? (2004, pp. 69-70)

The achievements of these ambitious leaders are now buried in the dust, signifying their decline and the passage of time. Shelley emphasizes the pervasive desolation and raises the question of the absence of these once-mighty kings, a reminder of the transience of power and the inevitable passage of time. The poet wishes to resurrect those kings and military heroes to retrieve their stories from the clutches of oblivion to retell them to the world as a reminder of the fate of all tyrants and warlords:

Cannot Oblivion's silent tauntings call
The kings and heroes from their quietude
Of Death, to snatch the Scrolls from her palsy hand,
To tell the world how mighty once they were. (p. 69)

The poem captures the theme of impermanence, the rise and fall of empires, and the fleeting nature of human achievements. A violent condemnation of the devastation caused by ambition and conflict, the poem highlights Shelley's steadfast opposition to oppression and violence.

The way that the atmosphere surrounding the ruins is depicted also shows the influence of Volney's *Ruines*; one example is his mention of the *simoom* sand storms that are typical of the Middle East and North Africa. This unmistakable Middle Eastern setting further underscores the stereotypical association of the Orient, particularly Egypt, with despotism:

Stillness keeps watch before each grass-grown gate
Save where amid thy towers the Simoom's sigh
Wakes the lone lyre whose mistress sleeps below
And bids it thrill to notes of awfulness and woe (p. 70)

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“The ‘lone lyre’ in Shelley’s poetry refers to both the Memnon harp and the Aeolian harp. These two prevalent metaphors in English Romantic literature find their roots in Egyptian archaeology, specifically alluding to the Memnon colossus at Thebes. The Colossi of Memnon are two massive statues standing in front of the ruined mortuary temple of Amenhotep III of the eighteenth Dynasty on the west bank of the Nile at Thebes. The two statues were well known to the ancient Greeks and Romans, as well as early modern European travelers and explorers. The northern Colossus, also known as “the vocal Memnon,” became a famous tourist destination throughout antiquity because of the deep ringing sound resembling the human voice that was heard when the first light of the morning sun fell upon it. The statue began to “sing” after an earthquake, most likely in 27 BCE, caused fissures in it. The distinctive sound was created when morning sun rays struck dew that collected in these crevices. This phenomenon stopped when the statue underwent restorations during the Roman period (Shaw, 2003, pp. 69-70). Employed by the Romantics, this image then developed as to be conflated with that of the Aeolian harp, a musical instrument conceived by Athanasius Kircher in 1650 (Dix, 2018, p. 290), possessing the ability to play of its own accord when subjected to external natural influences such as the wind or the heat of the sun. The degree to which “the idea of Memnon’s harp had fully taken hold of the Romantic imagination” is demonstrated by the image’s recurrence in British Romantic poetry (Rosenmeyer, 2018, p.187). In Shelley’s poetry, the image appears also in “Henry and Louisa,” and *Alastor*.

Shelley employs Egypt as a means to criticize imperialism and to depict the destructive consequences of war. “Henry and Louisa” is an early anti-war poem set in Egypt during the British campaign in 1801 under Sir Ralph Abercromby against the French army left by Napoleon in Egypt. The poem may be inspired by James Montgomery’s “The Battle of Alexandria,” which celebrates the heroism of the British troops in the battle. Shelley may have felt that the liberal journalist Montgomery “was betraying his beliefs by celebrating a general who had led an army in a foreign campaign that not only killed and maimed many Britons and French but brought death and misery to thousands of innocent Egyptians as well” (Reiman, 2004, p. 445). Unlike the glorification of the British soldiers in Montgomery’s poem, Shelley focuses on the suffering they caused to the innocents in Egypt, calling those soldiers “legal murderers”:

Where are the Heroes? sunk in death they lie.

What toiled they for? titles and wealth and fame.

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But the wide Heaven is now their canopy,
And legal murderers their loftiest name, (2004, p. 116)

He also calls them “Britannia’s hired assassins” (p. 125), which indicates Shelley’s staunch opposition to war. The main plot of the poem tells of the young Englishman Henry who leaves his beloved Louisa to pursue glory and fame in the Egyptian military struggle. Seeking honor and recognition in the military campaign, the ill-advised man is “by vulgar Glory driven” (p. 117). Posing as a man, Louisa follows him to discover him grievously wounded on a battlefield in Egypt. Overwhelmed by grief and the desire to be reunited with her love for eternity, she takes her own life. As the site of the battlefield of the two contending foreign powers, Egypt stands for the imperialistic ambitions of Western powers:

Now had the Genius of the south, sublime
On mighty Atlas’ tempest-cinctured throne,
Looked over Afric’s desolated clime,
Deep wept at slavery’s everlasting moan
And his most dear-beloved nation’s groan.
The Boreal whirlwind’s shadowy wings that sweep
The veined bosom of the northern world
That hears contending thunders on the deep,
Sees hostile flags on Egypt’s strand unfurled,
Brings Egypt’s faintest groan to waste and ruin hurled. (p. 125)

Egypt, referred to as “the genius of the South” and “the veined bosom of the northern world,” is torn between the hostile forces and can be heard groaning as the competing nations engage in combat over her borders. Paradoxically, Egypt is seen as part of the South and at the same time “the *veined* the bosom of the northern world” – a reference to the Nile - by virtue of its location above the equator. The theme of the vainglory of military victory that feeds on the blood of soldiers and innocent people is set against the backdrop of the Egyptian ancient ruins, a reminder of the absurdity of all political grandeur:

At distance o’er the plain
Britannia’s legions swiftly sweeping,
Glory’s ensanguined harvest reaping,
Mowed down the field of men,
And the silent ruins, crumbling nigh,
With echoes low prolonged the cry

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Of mingled defeat and victory. (p. 129)

Louisa's weeping over her dying beloved is "more sweet than Memnon's plainings wild," alluding once again to the weeping statue of Memnon found in various poems of the period, including the aforementioned James Montgomery's "The Battle of Alexandria," which initiated Shelley's vehement condemnation of war waged under patriotic or religious pretexts.

Shelley frequently portrays Egypt as the quintessential illustration of ancient political and religious despotism, as in *Queen Mab*, his vehement critique of the established order and the present social ills. The poem encapsulates a plea for transformation and foretells a forthcoming golden era for humanity. In the first canto, a fairy named Mab arrives in her enchanted chariot, rouses the sleeping soul of the slumbering Ianthe, delicately lifting the disembodied spirit from its resting body, and guiding it through an enlightening celestial voyage to the outermost reaches of the universe. Their quest for enlightenment, the selection of Palmyra, and the protagonist's intellectual progression, transitioning from the contemplation of past civilizations to envisioning universal renewal, bear striking similarities to Volney's ascent in *The Ruins*, where he is metaphorically "lifted by the wing of Genius" (Alvey, 2009, p. 33.). Mab unveils to Ianthe visions of the past, present, and the future. The past and present are marked by oppression and suffering inflicted by monarchies, yet a transformative shift is prophesied in the future, foretelling an amelioration in the human condition and the emergence of a utopian state. Whereas the poem reveals a deep dissatisfaction with the past and present of mankind, it expresses a sense of hope in the future, based on the belief in the perfectibility of man and a faith in moral progress.

Ancient Egypt is depicted in the poem as an ancient civilization where despotism led to suffering and injustice for its people. In Canto II, Shelley addresses the theme of human pride, highlighting the conceit of past human accomplishments; the ruins that the fairy shows to Ianthe symbolize the transience of human achievements and the futility of pride in material possessions. Shelley associates Egypt with the inception of oppressive religio-political regimes, attributing the development of these systems to the ancient Egyptian priests. In this view, the priests of ancient Egypt are thought to have crafted intricate structures that intertwined religious and political authority, serving the purpose of sustaining and extending the oppression of the populace. Shelley draws upon Volney (2000), who posited that Egypt served as the cradle of all religious systems. Volney contends that the priests of ancient

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Egypt pioneered the amalgamation of politics and religion, giving rise to a detrimental structure termed state religion, a governance framework where religious and political authorities were intricately interconnected. He notes that “religion, having strayed from its object was now nothing more than a political engine to conduct the credulous vulgar” (P. 148). This oppressive system was deliberately designed to perpetuate the subjugation of the subjects. The implication, Shelley maintains, is that the religious beliefs and practices were exploited as a means of controlling and suppressing the population, “where kings first leagued against the rights of men, / And priests first traded with the name of God” (2004, p. 228). The pyramids are the quintessential symbol of this oppressive regime.

The pyramids of Egypt figure prominently in Shelley's poetry. As in “To Liberty,” Shelley anticipates in *Queen Mab* the fall of the pyramids; however, the Nile will pursue its flow. Along with Palmyra, the pyramids are symbols of tyranny, whose fall will usher a new millennial age of liberation for mankind:

Beside the eternal Nile,
The Pyramids have risen.
Nile shall pursue his changeless way:
Those pyramids shall fall;
Yea! not a stone shall stand to tell
The spot whereon they stood;
Their very scite shall be forgotten,
As is their builder's name! (2004, p. 177)

The next lines add an additional symbol of repression and enslavement, the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, serving as another allusion to Oriental despotism. The final two cantos of the poem celebrate the crumbling of ancient oppressive regimes and announces the triumph of reason and love and the coming of a new utopian future age of mankind: “All things are recreated, and the flame / Of consentaneous love inspires all life” (p. 225). The pyramids will fall apart through the working of time:

Pyramids,
That for milleniums had withstood the tide
Of human things, his storm-breath drove in sand
Across that desert where their stones survived
The name of him whose pride had heaped them there. (p. 230-31)

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The hopeful note at the ending of *Queen Mab*, like Volney's *Ruins*, signals the impact of the revolutionary ideals of the French Revolution, indicating a shift towards a more hopeful and transformative outlook in Shelley's work.

Beyond the negative connotations of despotism as in *Queen Mab*, Shelley's Egypt also serves as a source of hidden truths and esoteric wisdom. It is noteworthy that Shelley was deeply interested in the occult and esoteric knowledge, which found expression in various facets of such literary works as *Queen Mab*, *Alastor* and *The Witch of Atlas*. Shelley's fascination with the occult began in adolescence, leading him to delve into studies of alchemy, astrology, and magic to seek alternative explanations for the mysteries of the universe, an interest that he shared with his wife, Mary Shelley (Hogg, 1858; Holmes, 1974). Shelley's fascination with ancient Egypt was deeply entwined with his interest in the occult. This enthrallment went beyond mere historical curiosity and transcended the Orientalist fascination with the exotic; it stemmed from his profound interest in the hidden knowledge believed to be preserved within the Egyptian myths, symbols, and practices. Influenced by the mystique surrounding the Egyptian hieroglyphs, which remained undeciphered at the time, Shelley envisions them as repositories of profound secrets about the universe as in *Alastor*, one of his most ambitious poems.

Alastor, or the Spirit of Solitude is an allegorical poem about a youth whom the narrator calls the Poet. According to Shelley's preface to the poem, the protagonist, is "led forth by an imagination inflamed and purified through familiarity with all that is excellent and majestic, to the contemplation of the universe. He drinks deep of the fountains of knowledge, and is still insatiate" (2012, p.5). The poem traces the journey of the poet-philosopher, propelled by a desire to unveil "strange truths in undiscovered lands" (p. 11). The quest for the profound mysteries of nature compels him to venture into the Earth's distant and exotic locales. Finally, his failure to discover the mysteries of nature leads him to embrace death as a means of dissolving into the origin, the source of time and place and the fount of the ultimate truth. The poem is indebted to both Volney's *Ruins* and Denon's *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt*. A travel in time (Makdisi, 1998, p. 138), *Alastor* is a journey that follows a certain temporal trajectory passing through various ancient spots until it reaches the oldest civilizational landmarks in ancient Egypt. For Elizabeth Fay, *Alastor* "concerns a haunted poet who chases poetic vision by chasing Egypt" (2021, p.104).

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The Poet wanders among the ruins of ancient civilizations, passing through the awe-inspiring remains of Athens, Tyre, Balbec, the desolate grounds of Jerusalem, the crumbled towers of Babylon, the timeless pyramids, Memphis, and Thebes:

The awful ruins of the days of old:
Athens, and Tyre, and Balbec, and the waste
Where stood Jerusalem, the fallen towers
Of Babylon, the eternal pyramids,
Memphis and Thebes, and whatsoe'er of strange
Sculptured on alabaster obelisk,
Or jasper tomb, or mutilated sphynx,
Dark Ethiopia in her desert hills
Conceals. (2012, p.12)

The reference to the "mutilated sphynx" echoes Denon's notes that the sphinxes in the avenue between Karnak and Luxor "have been wantonly mutilated, with a few exceptions" (1803, p. 261). Significantly, Shelley situates the ancient Egyptian monuments in Ethiopia, in accordance with the Greek convention of using Ethiopia as a broad geographical term that encompasses much of this region, a practice seemingly adopted by Shelley (2012, Fraistat & Crook, p. 392) :

Among the ruined temples there,
Stupendous columns, and wild images
Of more than man, where marble demons watch
The Zodiac's brazen mystery, and dead men
Hang their mute thoughts on the mute walls around,
He lingered, poring on memorials
Of the world's youth, through the long burning day (p. 12)

In both *Queen Mab* and *Alastor*, Shelley employs Egyptian imagery to convey the idea of an ancient, mystical knowledge that transcends conventional understanding. In *Queen Mab*, Shelley taps into the mystique surrounding ancient Egypt, portraying it as a repository of hidden truths and arcane wisdom, and in *Alastor*, Shelley's protagonist, in his quest for beauty and truth, embarks on a visionary quest, encountering ruins and symbols that evoke ancient Egyptian mysticism. The Sphinx, a recurring symbol in *Alastor*, becomes a metaphor for the enigmatic and inscrutable aspects of the existence.

The prevailing currents of Egyptomania, combined with Shelley's intellectual pursuits and personal experiences, converged to shape his poetic representations of

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Egypt in works like *Queen Mab, Alastor,* and *The Witch of Atlas*. In *Alastor*, wandering through the desolate temples with massive columns and otherworldly figures surpassing human shapes, the Poet contemplates the enigmatic carvings embellishing obelisks, the inscriptions within tombs, and the damaged sphinxes. “The Zodiac’s brazen mystery” is refers to the famous zodiac in the Temple of Hathor in Dendera, taken to France by Napoleon’s Egyptian Expedition and housed at the Louvre. Shelly is influenced by Vivant Denon’s spirited account of the Dendera zodiac. Denon was struck by the beauty of the architecture of the temple and enthralled by the zodiac: “I felt that I was in the sanctuary of the arts and sciences . . . How many ages of creative ingenuity were requisite to bring a nation to such a degree of perfection and sublimity in the arts!” (1803, p. 40). Denon adds, “On casting my eyes on the ceilings I had perceived zodiacs, planetary systems, and celestial planispheres . . . I saw that the Supreme Being, the first cause, was every where depicted by the emblems of his attributes . . .” (p. 42). Another possible source for Shelley’s interest in the Dendera zodiac is his close friend John Frank Newton, one of the greatest influences on him. Newton believed that Egypt was the source of all morality and religious beliefs (King-Hele, 2021, p. 38). Peacock, Shelley’s friend and biographer, elucidates Newton’s impact on Shelley, particularly in relation to the belief in the incorporation of the secret truths of the ancient Egyptians within the Dendera Zodiac. According to Peacock, Newton asserted that the “most ancient and sublime morality was mystically inculcated in the most ancient Zodiac, which was that of Dendera” (1909, pp. 30-31). Many writers of that era shared the belief that Egypt was the source of religion. For example, Charles François Dupuis argued in *Origine de tous les cultes* (1795) that Egypt was the cradle of all myths and religions, including Christianity, and that the Greeks borrowed heavily from this ancient culture for much of their art and religion.

The walls and the thoughts of the dead men are described in the poem as “mute” because the hieroglyphic script had not yet been deciphered at the time of the poem and would not be until 1822, thanks to the work of Jean-François Champollion. The hieroglyphics were long believed to stand for hermetic knowledge and esoteric wisdom, rather than being a language script. Since the time the ancient Egyptian language ceased to be understood, there “arose the misunderstanding, not to be resolved until Champollion, that the hieroglyphs were to be ‘read’ in a purely symbolic manner. . . They were believed to embody the secret knowledge of the Egyptians” (Hornung, 2001, p. 13). The Poet continued to gaze upon those

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“speechless shapes,” until profound insights illuminated his vacant mind like a powerful revelation, and he momentarily perceived the enthralling secrets of the universe's inception:

Gazed on those speechless shapes, nor, when the moon
Filled the mysterious halls with floating shades
Suspended he that task, but ever gazed
And gazed, till meaning on his vacant mind
Flashed like strong inspiration, and he saw
The thrilling secrets of the birth of time. (p. 13)

Conspicuous by their absence in Shelley's Oriental adventures are the inhabitants of the Eastern countries, including Egypt, that the Western protagonists of his poems visit. Only one Arab character appears in this group of poems. The enigmatic Arab maiden that appears to the Poet in his dream and offers him food is considered by some critics as representative of the natives of Egypt. Cian Duffy (2004) claims that the Poet's tour to Egypt is reminiscent of the archeological finds made by Napoleon's Egyptian Expedition and that his treatment of the Arab Maiden is a reflection of the growing tension that existed between the French Expedition and the local population. The foreign traveler clearly exploits the indigenous lady and ignores her:

Her native resources are diverted to support his foreign “task,” a “task” which, while undeniably significant in world-historical terms, remains both unintelligible and of no obvious or immediate benefit to herself. It is no doubt significant, in this regard, that Shelley points first to the Arab Maiden's donation of her food; we remember, after all, that the primary aim of the Egyptian Expedition was to secure food supplies for the French Republic. (p. 412 - 13)

By deliberately sidelining the current inhabitants and portraying the East as devoid of human presence, Shelley subtly implies its convenient re-appropriation into a romanticized Western narrative. In *Alastor*, the Poet's journey eastward becomes a metaphorical descent into the past, facilitated by erasing the contemporary context and reducing the region to a landscape of picturesque ruins, devoid of a thriving present. According to Makdisi (1998), the empty cities of the Orient

become tombs and museum-like images, representing antiquity. Without present life or past history, these cities exist not for the sake of their own cultures but for the European explorer who ‘discovers’ them, implying that they wouldn't exist without the confirmation of their existence by the explorer. This perspective

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reduces them to 'dead civilizations,' a concept echoed by some contemporary critics (p. 142).

The Poet's selective focus on ancient ruins while ignoring contemporary inhabitants suggests a problematic simplification of a complex and diverse region. This approach allows for its symbolic appropriation into a Western framework.

Shelley frequently conveys his profound admiration for the Egyptian past, highlighting the historical and cultural significance of the Nile River, along with the flourishing civilizations that have thrived along its banks, as evidenced in *The Witch of Atlas*. In a similar vein to *Queen Mab*'s visionary quest and evoking the dreamlike ambiance of *Alastor*, *The Witch of Atlas* reveals a utopian future for humanity through a mystical odyssey. The poem's ethereal figure, the Witch, is both a personification of magic and an incarnation of the creative power of poetry. Accompanied by the winged "hermaphroditus," the mythic androgynous creature that she creates from fire and snow, the Witch embarks on a grand voyage of discovery down the Nile.

Shelley's principal source for the poem's geographic terrain lies with Herodotus' *History*, which Shelley read in 1818 (Colwell, 1978, p. 89), although the geographical accuracy is subordinated to the symbolic vision of the poem. The parallels between the poem and the *History* are unmistakable. The poem follows almost the same route described by Herodotus and makes the same stops. Like in the *History*, the Witch's journey in Egypt includes stops at Lake Moeris, an ancient lake situated to the southwest of Cairo, the Mareotid lakes south of Alexandria, and the Great Labyrinth. Herodotus' account of King Amasis of the twenty-sixth dynasty, the city of Memphis, and the bull god Apis are also paralleled by the poem. The Witch's geographical journey through various landscapes, encountering diverse terrains and cultures mirrors the course of the Nile, which flows through different regions, shaping the environment along its path. As a creative force, the Witch uses her magical powers to shape and cultivate the landscapes she encounters. This parallels the life-giving qualities attributed to the Nile, historically recognized for its role in nourishing the land of Egypt through its annual flooding, bringing fertility and abundance to the region.

Shelley portrays the Nile as a majestic and tranquil entity, likening it to a flock of "silver-fleeced sheep," for its purity and shimmering beauty. Beginning its journey at the steep heights of Axumè, an ancient city in present-day Ethiopia, the Nile's course takes it through the landscapes of Egypt and Ethiopia until it gracefully

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spreads its waters across the plains. This geographical span emphasizes the vastness of the Nile's influence in the region. The Witch sees towns and imposing structures as she floats down the Nile. These buildings' "crested heads" allude to their grandeur and prominence, emphasizing the architectural wonders that line the riverbanks:

But her choice sport was, in the hours of sleep,
To glide adown old Nilus, where he threads
Egypt and Aethiopia, from the steep
Of utmost Axumè, until he spreads,
Like a calm flock of silver-fleecèd sheep,
His waters on the plain: and crested heads
Of cities and proud temples gleam amid,
And many a vapour-belted pyramid. (2002, p. 382-383)

The iconic pyramids of Egypt are described as "vapour-belted," which evokes a sense of enigmatic mystery and ethereality and suggests a certain aura of mysticism surrounding them. The poet's choice of words conveys a sense of awe and reverence for the Nile's historical and cultural legacy.

The Witch can be identified with the Nile, as both possess transformative powers. In the poem, the Witch navigates through different realms and shapes the landscapes according to her will; similarly, the Nile undergoes seasonal transformations, with its floodwaters altering the topography of the surrounding land. The magical abilities of the Witch echo the dynamic nature of the Nile's influence on the Egyptian landscape. Drawing inspiration from the mystique of ancient Egypt, Shelley weaves those elements that align the Witch with the river such as fertility, transformative powers, divine connections, and the geographical journey, to create a poetic resonance with the cultural and natural significance of the Nile. According to Colwell, the Nile becomes the Witch's avatar or embodiment. "It is likely that Shelley identifies her with the annual Nile flood and its gift of life. Her presence, like the river, suggests a watery glass in which human foibles and institutions are reflected in mocking clarity (1978, p. 88). The poem describes the reflections of humans' material institutions - "massy temples" - lying on the surface of the river. These reflections endure permanently, "never erased," yet they also quiver continually, implying a sense of instability or uncertainty. This symbolism reflects the transitory nature of human creations, such as the temples, in contrast to the enduring power of nature represented by the river:

And where within the surface of the river

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The shadows of the massy temples lie,
And never are erased - but tremble ever
Like things which every cloud can doom to die,
Through lotus-pav'n canals, and wheresoever
The works of man pierced that serenest sky
With tombs, and towers, and fane, 'twas her delight
To wander in the shadow of the night. (p. 383)

The Witch finds delight in wandering “in the shadow of the night” among the man-made structures like tombs, towers, and temples. This suggests a fascination with the past, even though these structures are now mere shadows. Along its path, the river reflects the material world, and the reflection is that of something timeless and everlasting. Unlike their counterparts in *Queen Mab*, the pyramids are said to be unchangeable and permanently trapped on the Nile's surface. However, it is not the thing reflected; the mirror itself is immortal: The pyramids will eventually crumble, while nature endures forever in the stream's reflected characteristics. The Nile is endowed with a dual natural/preternatural character, being the only eternal element in the Egyptian landscape.

As part of his political campaign against war, monarchy and religion, Shelley then indulges in a political satire that involves criticism of Egypt's governmental and religious establishments. Shelley uses satire to critique religious dogma, the manipulation of religious symbols, and the unquestioning obedience to authority. A series of comic scenes reflect Shelley's broader themes of challenging societal norms and exposing the absurdities inherent in power structures. The Witch works her magic on priests, kings, and warriors to confess and correct their ill-practices. The “lying scribe,” an image of the bureaucratic system of ancient Egypt, is made to confess his lies. The priests confess their fraudulent fabrications and are depicted as translating hieroglyphics into Greek, attempting to explain the true significance of the god Apis as being a mere bull. The translation of the sacred hieroglyphic symbols into a more accessible language, demystifies and rationalizes religious mysteries. Religious freedom is granted to the populace, who are now admitted, by means of official injunctions, to speak up with impunity against all the false idols imposed on them for long:

The priests would write an explanation full,
Translating hieroglyphics into Greek,
How the God Apis really was a bull,

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And nothing more; and bid the herald stick
The same against the temple doors, and pull
The old cant down; they licensed all to speak
Whate'er they thought of hawks, and cats, and geese,
By pastoral letters to each diocese. (p. 386)

The dream the Witch imposes on the king mocks the absurdity of monarchy. Both the king and his courtiers are shown the vanity of their pursuits. The king engages in a farcical display of power and grandiosity, dressing an ape in royal regalia and placing a colorful mock-bird next to him. This absurd spectacle symbolizes the superficiality and ridiculousness of courtly ceremonies and displays of authority. The courtiers are described as crawling to kiss the feet of the king in the morning, a display of subservience and blind obedience to authority:

The king would dress an ape up in his crown
And robes, and seat him on his glorious seat,
And on the right hand of the sunlike throne
Would place a gaudy mock-bird to repeat
The chatterings of the monkey. - Every one
Of the prone courtiers crawled to kiss the feet
Of their great Emperor, when the morning came,
And kissed—alas, how many kiss the same! (p. 387)

Finally, the soldiers experience a profound transformation in their dreams; instead of retaining their military identities, they imagine themselves as blacksmiths, engaged in the act of forging. This dream-state reflects a departure from the usual martial role of the soldiers, suggesting a subconscious desire for a more constructive and peaceful role. The imagery of beating swords into ploughshares is symbolic and carries a pacifist message, signaling a shift from conflict and war to a more peaceful and productive existence. As such, the poem is a powerful and scathing satire, critiquing religious hypocrisy, militarism and authoritarian rule through the use of Egyptian motifs.

Shelley's poem "Ozymandias," a classic example of a "ruins poem," powerfully criticizes tyranny through the image of a decaying statue of a once mighty ruler. Written in 1817 as part of a literary competition with his friend Horace Smith, this sonnet is Shelley's most condensed poem of his anti-tyranny works. It was inspired by the imminent arrival at the British Museum of a colossal statue recently unearthed at the West Bank in Thebes by Giovanni Belzoni, the Italian explorer and excavator

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of Egyptian archaeological sites. The statue that was erroneously called the “Younger Memnon” actually represented Ramses II. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian, had previously referred to Ramses II as “Ozymandias,” a distortion of one of his names, “User-maat-Re.” Shelley drew upon Diodorus’s account of the statue and his rendering of the inscription on the pedestal boasting, “King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If any would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works” (1814, p.53). Shelley paraphrased Diodorus in recounting the inscription: “My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings. / Look on my works ye Mighty, and despair!” (2012, p. 326). In addition to Diodorus, Shelly could have also depended on Richard Pococke’s *A Description of the East and Some Other Countries*, whose author could be “an ideal candidate for the role of the ‘traveler’” in Shelley’s poem (Richmond, 1962, p.69), Denon’s *Travels in Upper and Lower Egypt* (Everest, 2021), and Sir Walter Raleigh’s *History of the World*, a widely-read book during that period that included a translation of the above inscription evidently borrowed from Diodorus (Parr, 1951). Notably, the Egyptian hieroglyphic script was not deciphered until 1822; therefore, the translation of the inscription as described by Diodorus and paraphrased by Shelley is questionable at best.

The poem narrates the speaker’s encounter with “a traveller from an antique land,” who describes the ruins of a statue in the Egyptian desert. The use of the word “antique” is significant, reflecting the prevalent Orientalist discourse of Shelley’s time. Nigel Leask points out the association of the word with a sense of exoticism, fitting into the Romantic “fashion for literary exoticism” (2004, p. 103). The term highlights the temporal and cultural gap between Egypt and Shelley’s England, framing Egypt as a relic of the past and an “other” to the contemporary West and reflecting the Orientalist view of the dichotomy between a progressive West and a stagnant East. Additionally, labeling Egypt as “antique” contributes an extra layer of mystery, aligning with romanticized depictions of the East as a realm of concealed knowledge and veiled truths.

The inscription on the pedestal boasts of Ozymandias’s greatness, proclaiming, “Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!” However, the surrounding landscape is barren, devoid of any evidence of the once-mighty civilization:

No thing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that Colossal Wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away. (2012, p. 326)

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The poem highlights the irony of the inscription, as there is nothing left to admire, and the ruler's works have crumbled into ruins. The crumbling statue of the pharaoh is a stark reminder of the impermanence of empires built on pride and oppression. The inscription mocks the pharaoh's hubris, offering a cautionary tale of inevitable decay for those who seek domination. Shelley's portrayal of Egypt in "Ozymandias" aligns with the Romantic tradition of ruins as symbolic markers of the passage of time and the transience of human endeavors. By situating the ruins in Egypt, a land associated with ancient despotic rule, Shelley connects the theme of decay with the consequences of tyrannical leadership.

The poem reflects Shelley's complex representation of Egypt in his works. While he admired its ancient civilization and perceived it as a repository of lost wisdom, he was not immune to the Orientalist perspective of his time. Egypt often functioned as a symbol of the exotic and mysterious, a stark contrast to the perceived rationality of the West. Furthermore, by situating the ruins in Egypt, Shelley endorses the Orientalist discourse's association of it with ancient despotic rule. The shattered visage of Ozymandias becomes a powerful metaphor for the inevitable decline of tyranny.

In conclusion, Shelley's depiction of Egypt in his poetry reveals the intricate interplay of Egyptomania, Shelley's preoccupation with the occult, the Orientalist discourse prevalent in his era, and the Romantic fascination with ruins. These multiple influences converge to shape Shelley's poetic vision, where he engages profoundly and extensively with the cultural legacy of Egypt. His fascination with Egypt both reflects his interest in the Romantic obsession with ruins and draws upon the Orientalist discourse of his time. Egypt's iconic pyramids, sphinxes, colossal statues and monumental temples assume a multifaceted role in Shelley's poetry, serving as metaphors for the ephemeral nature of human accomplishments, symbols of Oriental despotism, and repositories of hidden truth. Shelley manipulates Egyptian metaphors and motifs to further his thematic preoccupations, expressing his disdain for warfare, his vehement opposition of religious dogma, and his scathing critiques against tyranny. While employing Egypt as a symbol of political and religious tyranny, Shelley's poetry paradoxically conveys a profound admiration for the Egyptian civilization. To him, Egypt was not just a vast exhibit of ancient ruins but the source of all human knowledge. In this multifaceted portrayal, Shelley's poetic representation of Egypt stands as an evidence of his complex relationship with

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the land's history, fusing disdain and aversion with fascination and a profound admiration for its ancient legacy.

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الهوس بالمصريات والإستشراق والباطنية الغربية في تمثيل شيلي لأطلال مصر القديمة

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المستخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة أثر كل من الخطاب الاستشراقي و تيار الهوس بالمصريات و التقليد الباطنى الغربى على تمثيل شيلي لأثار و معالم مصر القديمة في شعره. كما تظهر الدراسة أيضا إعتقاد شيلي على تقليد الأطلال الذى شاع في كتابات القرنين الثامن عشر والتاسع عشر و في شعر الحركة الرومانتيكية بصفة خاصة. و تبرز الدراسة إستخدام شيلي للرموز المصرية في التعبير عن اهتماماته الموضوعية ، معربا عن ازدرائه للحرب، ومعارضته للعقيدة الدينية ، وانتقاداته اللاذعة لكل أشكال الاستبداد و الطغيان. و كما يتضح من هذا البحث، تلعب أطلال الحضارة المصرية و أهراماتها الشهيرة وأبو الهول و معابد مصر الضخمة دورا مزدوجا في شعر شيلي ، حيث يستخدمها تارة كرمز للطبيعة الفانية لكل الإنجازات البشرية تحت وطئة الزمن وتارة أخرى كرمز للإستبداد الشرقى الذى شاع في الخطاب الاستشراقى. و بينما يوظف شعر شيلي رموز مصر و معالمها للهجوم على المأسى الإنسانية من حروب و مظالم و قمع التي هي من صنع الطغاة في الماضى و الحاضر بما فيهم فراعنة مصر و قادة العالم الأوروبى المعاصرله فى سعيهم نحو مجد شخصى زائل، فإن شعره ينم في الوقت نفسه عن الإعجاب العميق بعراقة و أثر الحضارة المصرية القديمة على العالم.

الكلمات المفتاحية: شيلي، الهوس بالمصريات، الإستشراق، الباطنية الغربية، الأطلال، مصر القديمة