

Decolonizing the Narrative: Egyptian Antiquities Between Western Display and Local Voice

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Abstract

This research examines how colonial legacies continue to shape the interpretation and presentation of ancient Egyptian antiquities in Western museums. Despite the global turn toward restitution and decolonization, curatorial practices often remain bound by frameworks that privilege Western discovery and aestheticization over Egyptian cultural context. Using a comparative approach, this paper explores how institutions such as the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Neues Museum construct narratives of universal heritage that obscure Egyptian ownership and meaning. It also incorporates the author's field experience as an antiquities inspector in the Central Delta region, particularly at Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub'a, to highlight the disconnection between international museology and local heritage realities. By integrating theoretical insights from decolonial and postcolonial scholarship with field-based observations, the study argues for a rebalanced epistemology that centers Egyptian voices, promotes digital restitution, and supports shared stewardship between global and local institutions.

Keywords: Decolonization, Egyptology, Museum Representation, Behbeit el-Hagar, Local Heritage.

1- مفتش الآثار المصرية بوزارة السياحة والآثار - دكتورة في علم المصريات

2- دكتورة في الذكاء الاصطناعي - باحث مستقل في علم المصريات

1. Introduction: Rethinking Colonial Roots in Egyptology

Egyptology developed in the nineteenth century within a broader imperial project that defined the ancient world through Western eyes. European scholars and explorers—working under colonial administrations and supported by imperial museums—framed Egypt not as a living culture but as a monumental archive awaiting discovery. Publications such as *Description de l'Égypte* and expeditions funded by Britain, France, and Germany helped institutionalize the idea that Egypt's past could be understood and preserved only through European expertise (Riggs, 2020; Jeffreys, 2022).

By the late nineteenth century, vast collections of Egyptian artifacts had been removed from their contexts and installed in Western capitals. Within these spaces, objects were reframed as “art” or “universal heritage,” reinforcing the notion that beauty and civilization were confirmed through Western interpretation. The act of display itself became a form of epistemic control—dictating what counted as knowledge and who was authorized to produce it (Mignolo, 2009; Hicks, 2020). Even in the twenty-first century, many museums continue to employ exhibition narratives that celebrate the “discovery” of ancient Egypt, while silencing Egyptian perspectives on ownership, symbolism, and identity (Savoy, 2021; Riggs, 2023). This research emerges from a concern that, although restitution debates have gained momentum, they often fail to address the deeper issue of *epistemic restitution*—the right to interpret and narrate one's own heritage. The study seeks to bridge the gap between the global and the local by situating field-based Egyptian perspectives within the broader discourse of decolonizing Egyptology.

2. Theoretical Framework: Decolonial and Postcolonial Museology

The study is grounded in decolonial and postcolonial theories that question how knowledge, authority, and representation have historically been produced within museum spaces. Decolonial thought, as developed by Walter Mignolo (2009) and further elaborated by Catherine Walsh (2018), calls for *epistemic disobedience*—a refusal to accept Eurocentric models as the universal framework for understanding human history. In the case of Egyptology, this involves re-centering Egyptian scholars, languages, and spiritual worldviews in the interpretation of antiquities.

Postcolonial museology expands this idea by examining the institutional mechanisms that sustain colonial hierarchies. Recent scholarship by Hicks (2020), Savoy (2021), and Jordanova (2022) highlights how museum displays still operate as “technologies of empire,” celebrating extraction and possession under the guise of preservation. Within galleries dedicated to ancient Egypt, curatorial language frequently emphasizes discovery and aesthetic mastery while neglecting the ethical histories of removal and the living cultural connections these artifacts maintain with Egypt’s communities (Stevenson, 2019; Riggs, 2020).

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2019) argues that decolonizing research requires not only critical reflection but also the reorientation of methodology toward inclusivity and respect for local epistemologies. Applying this principle to Egyptology means developing participatory models in which Egyptian archaeologists, conservators, and students become active co-curators rather than peripheral contributors. Recent projects in Egypt, including community-led documentation of Delta sites and digital 3D scanning of temple reliefs, reflect this shift toward localized authorship and collaborative interpretation (Ikram, 2022; Hassan, 2023).

By integrating these perspectives, the paper adopts a dual approach: theoretical critique of Western museological discourse and empirical reflection from Egyptian fieldwork. This combination enables a nuanced understanding of how decolonial strategies can be grounded in actual archaeological and museological practice rather than remaining confined to abstract theory.

3. Case Studies: Western Museums and the Construction of the Egyptian Past

3.1 The British Museum: The Universalist Paradigm

The British Museum remains one of the most visible examples of how colonial ideologies continue to define the representation of Egypt in the West. Established during the height of the British Empire, its Egyptian galleries still echo the logic of imperial ownership—objects are displayed as trophies of discovery and symbols of Western scholarship (Reid, 2015; Hicks, 2020). The Rosetta Stone, for instance, is presented as a triumph of linguistic decipherment rather than as a fragment of Egyptian cultural heritage that embodies the country’s long history of written communication and spiritual power.

The museum's curatorial texts often prioritize narratives of "archaeological discovery," emphasizing European figures such as Champollion, Petrie, or Budge, while omitting the roles of Egyptian excavators and communities who made those discoveries possible. Even recent digital initiatives, such as virtual tours and online catalogues, tend to reinforce this same one-directional gaze. They rarely include Arabic-language resources or Egyptian commentary, thereby maintaining a subtle hierarchy of authority over Egypt's material culture (Riggs, 2023).

What makes this case particularly complex is that the British Museum continues to present itself as a "universal museum," claiming to preserve human heritage for all humanity. Yet, as Bénédicte Savoy (2021) notes, this argument obscures the asymmetry of power and access that defines such institutions. Egyptians cannot freely experience their own cultural heritage within these walls; they encounter it instead as displaced objects interpreted through foreign narratives.

3.2 The Louvre Museum: Aestheticizing the Ancient Other

The Louvre's Department of Egyptian Antiquities provides another illuminating example of colonial continuity disguised as artistic appreciation. The design of the galleries, with their dim lighting and monumental sculptures, constructs a vision of Egypt as a timeless, mysterious civilization—majestic yet silent. This aestheticization transforms religious or domestic artifacts into works of "art" severed from their ritual meanings.

The museum's interpretive labels frequently emphasize stylistic beauty and craftsmanship, describing statues in terms of proportion, symmetry, and elegance, while neglecting their theological or funerary functions (Jordanova, 2022). In doing so, the Louvre reinforces a Eurocentric hierarchy of value, where form is prioritized over function, and where Egypt's living traditions are replaced by an abstract ideal of antiquity.

However, the museum has begun experimenting with limited decolonial practices, such as including Arabic text in select exhibitions and collaborating with Egyptian scholars on artifact provenance studies. These initiatives, while modest, signal a gradual shift toward shared authorship in interpretation. Yet they remain overshadowed by the museum's grand narrative of France's "universal mission" in

preserving world heritage—a concept deeply rooted in the ideology of cultural paternalism (Savoy, 2021).

3.3 The Neues Museum, Berlin: The Case of Nefertiti

Perhaps no object better exemplifies the politics of possession than the bust of **Queen Nefertiti** at Berlin's Neues Museum. Since its discovery in 1912 at Tell el-Amarna, the bust has become a focal point of dispute between Egypt and Germany. The museum's display of Nefertiti is theatrical: she stands alone, illuminated under a protective glass dome, surrounded by silence. This staging elevates her from a cultural artifact into a global icon—yet one divorced from her homeland and stripped of her spiritual context (Hicks, 2020; Riggs, 2023).

The museum's refusal to repatriate the sculpture reflects the persistence of colonial reasoning: the claim that the artifact's preservation and global accessibility outweigh Egypt's moral and cultural rights. This reasoning, as Mignolo (2009) argues, exemplifies epistemic dominance—the ability of Western institutions to define ethical legitimacy through their own frameworks. While Berlin promotes Nefertiti as a symbol of “shared world heritage,” the absence of Egyptian interpretive presence transforms the exhibit into a monologue rather than a dialogue.

3.4 Contrasting Realities: Field Perspectives from Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub'a

In contrast to these metropolitan institutions, the archaeological sites of **Behbeit el-Hagar** and **Tell el-Rub'a** in Egypt's Central Delta offer a vivid illustration of how local heritage is lived, preserved, and narrated differently. Having served as an antiquities inspector in this region since 2011, I have observed how the material remains of Egypt's past continue to shape local identity and collective memory. Behbeit el-Hagar, the site of the ancient Temple of Isis, is not perceived by villagers merely as a ruin but as a sacred landscape that connects their community to the divine femininity of ancient Egypt. Similarly, Tell el-Rub'a—ancient Mendes—embodies layers of history where daily life, agricultural activity, and archaeology intersect.

The Central Delta region, encompassing Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub'a, represents one of Egypt's most archaeologically rich yet underrepresented areas (see Fig. 1).

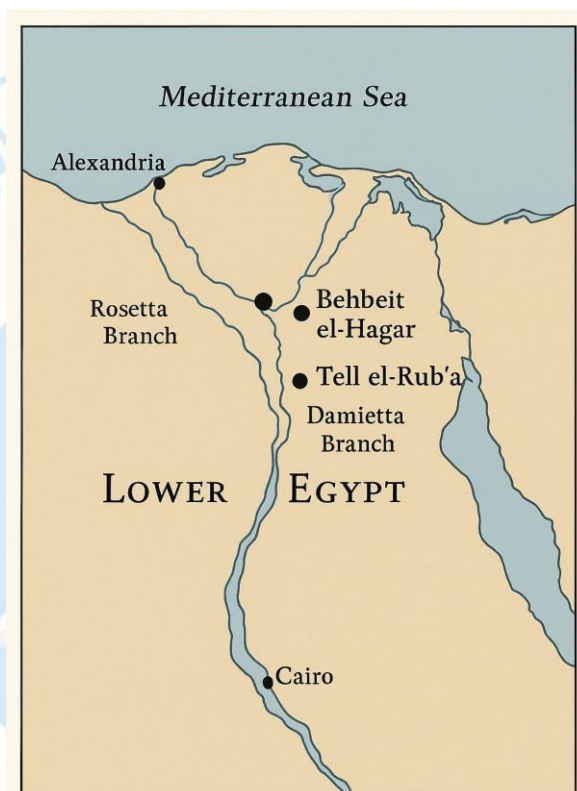
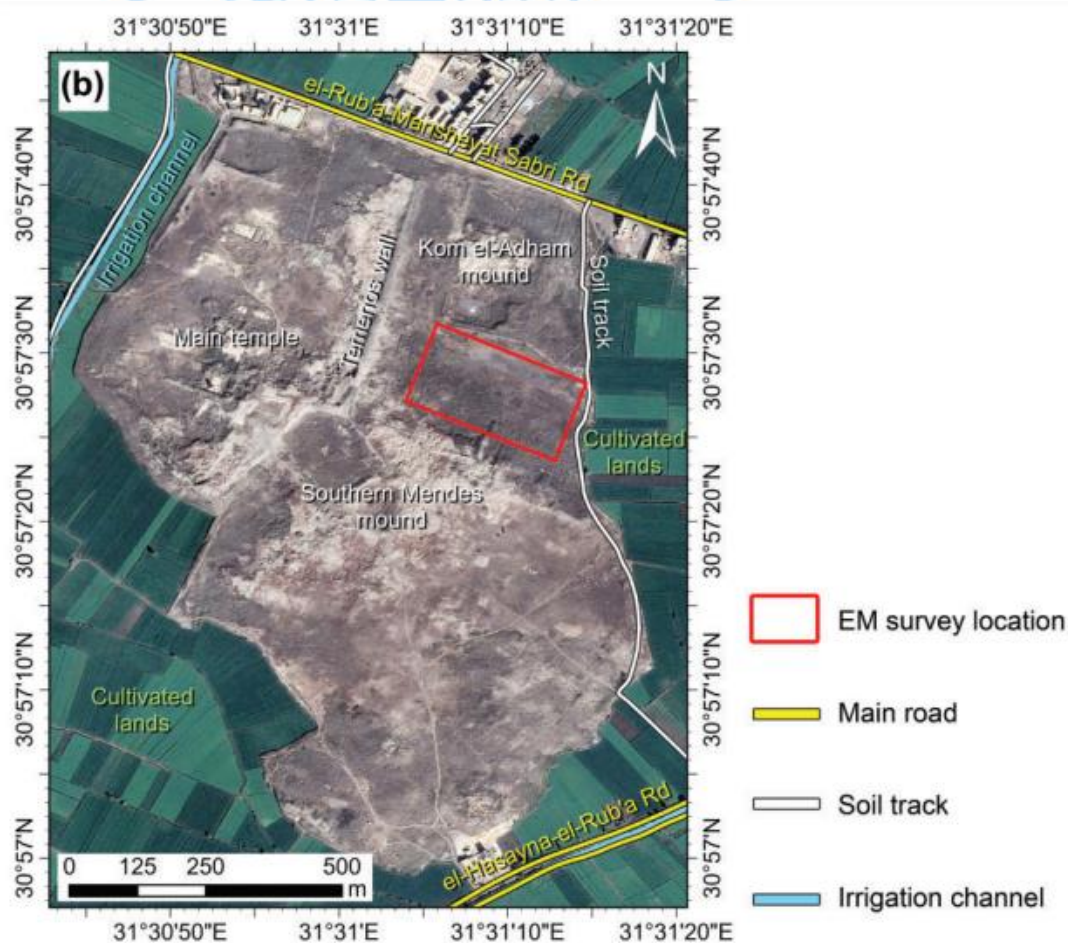


Figure 1. Map of the Central Delta showing the archaeological sites of Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub'a.

(Base map adapted from the Geological Survey of Egypt, 2022; modified by the author, 2025.)

The excavation zones at Tell el-Rub'a demonstrate the coexistence of domestic and ritual spaces, highlighting how ancient settlement patterns still influence modern land use (Fig. 2).



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Figure 2. Archaeological landscape of Tell el-Rub 'a (ancient Mendes), showing main excavation zones, cultivated areas, and the EM survey location (red square). (Map adapted from Mohamed, Beshir, Xue & El-Qady, 2023, p. 345, *Journal of Geophysics and Engineering*, Oxford University Press; annotated and contextualized by the author.)

Source: Mohamed, A. K., Beshir, A. M., Xue, G., & El-Qady, G. (2023).

Integration of EM techniques for mapping buried historical harbours: a case study from the archaeological site of Tell el-Rub 'a, Egypt. Journal of Geophysics and Engineering, 20(3), 343–360. <https://doi.org/10.1093/jge/gxad016>

Unlike the polished narratives of Western museums, the local engagement with these sites is dynamic and participatory. Residents frequently assist archaeological missions, protect unearthed materials, and share oral histories linking their families to ancient myths. These interactions reveal an *intimate continuity* between past and present, one that Western curatorial frameworks rarely acknowledge (Hassan, 2023; Ikram, 2022).

However, fieldwork also exposes the structural inequalities that persist within global heritage management. Limited funding, bureaucratic constraints, and the dominance of foreign missions in directing research priorities often restrict Egyptian agency in decision-making (Jeffreys, 2022). Digital technologies, such as 3D scanning and GIS-based documentation, are beginning to shift this balance by allowing Egyptian archaeologists to create open-access digital archives of their own heritage (Ikram, 2022). These initiatives represent a new form of *digital restitution*—one that reclaims narrative control even when physical repatriation remains unattainable.

The lessons from Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub 'a demonstrate that decolonization cannot be achieved solely in museum galleries abroad. It must begin at home—by empowering local voices, supporting sustainable site management, and ensuring that Egypt's heritage is not only studied but also *spoken* by Egyptians themselves.

4. Analysis and Discussion: Rebalancing Knowledge and Representation

The case studies above demonstrate that the display of Egyptian antiquities in Western museums remains fundamentally shaped by colonial ideologies of ownership, knowledge, and authority. Despite ongoing calls for restitution and

collaborative projects, most museums continue to privilege Western epistemologies—the frameworks through which knowledge about Egypt is constructed and legitimized (Mignolo, 2009; Hicks, 2020). This section examines the epistemological and ethical dimensions of this imbalance, and how Egyptian-led practices can redefine the narrative both inside and outside the museum.

4.1 The Persistence of Colonial Aesthetics

The persistence of colonial aesthetics is evident not only in how Egyptian objects are displayed but also in how they are *interpreted*. Western museums frequently rely on a visual rhetoric of monumentality and timelessness, which transforms Egyptian culture into an abstract symbol of ancient wisdom rather than a living heritage (Savoy, 2021). The subdued lighting, monumental architecture, and isolated object placement found in institutions such as the British Museum and the Louvre are not neutral design choices—they reproduce the power dynamic of the imperial gaze, in which Egypt is seen rather than heard.

Furthermore, interpretive labels often employ a language of admiration that masks the violence of acquisition. Terms like “masterpiece,” “discovery,” or “collection” obscure the material realities of removal and the silencing of Egyptian voices. The notion of *universal heritage*—frequently invoked to justify the continued possession of artifacts—serves as a moral camouflage for what Dan Hicks (2020) calls “curated colonialism,” where the past is sanitized and aestheticized to preserve institutional prestige.

4.2 Silenced Voices and Epistemic Injustice

This aesthetic and linguistic framework contributes to what Miranda Fricker (2007) defines as *epistemic injustice*—the systematic exclusion of certain groups from participating in the production of knowledge. Within Egyptology, this manifests in two ways: first, through the historical marginalization of Egyptian scholars in global research networks; and second, through the absence of Egyptian language and perspective in museum interpretation. As a result, visitors encounter ancient Egypt primarily through Western imagination rather than through authentic Egyptian scholarship or spirituality (Riggs, 2023).

The problem is not merely representational but structural. Western institutions continue to dominate publication platforms, funding networks, and digital archives. Although many museums now include Egyptian archaeologists as collaborators,

their contributions are often limited to technical or logistical roles rather than interpretive leadership (Jeffreys, 2022). This dynamic reinforces a long-standing epistemic hierarchy—one that privileges those who speak *about* Egypt over those who speak *from* Egypt.

4.3 Field-Based Counter-Narratives: The Local Voice

The inclusion of local Egyptian perspectives, as observed in fieldwork at Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub'a, demonstrates the potential to transform this imbalance. Local communities engage with heritage not as static monuments but as living environments infused with meaning. Oral traditions, place names, and seasonal rituals often reflect an unbroken connection between modern Egyptians and their ancient past (Hassan, 2023). These cultural continuities provide a powerful counter-narrative to the detached museological voice.

The remains of the Temple of Isis at Behbeit el-Hagar illustrate how religious memory persists in local consciousness, where the site is regarded as a sacred landscape tied to fertility traditions (see Fig. 3).



Figure 3. *Remains of the Temple of Isis at Behbeit el-Hagar, showing granite column fragments and foundation blocks.*

(Originally published in “Summary Report on the Temple of Isis at Behbeit el-Hagar: A Field Archaeological Study,” by Ihab Mohamed Abdel Zaher et al., p. 69, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, 2015. Verified and rephotographed by the author during fieldwork, 2023.)

Source: Abdel Zaher, I. M., et al. (2015). *Summary Report on the Temple of Isis at Behbeit el-Hagar: A Field Archaeological Study*. Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, p. 69; Author’s field documentation, 2023.

In addition to these cultural connections, the author has organized numerous heritage awareness lectures and educational workshops in Behbeit el-Hagar and neighboring villages over the past decade. These activities, conducted under the supervision of the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, aimed to foster local understanding of archaeological heritage and strengthen the sense of community stewardship toward the site. Residents were encouraged to view the temple remains not merely as ancient ruins but as part of their living cultural identity. Such outreach efforts demonstrate how community engagement and heritage education can serve as decolonial practices that reconnect archaeology with the people whose history it represents (see Figs. 4a–4c).



Figures 4a–4c. *Scenes from heritage awareness lectures and workshops conducted by the author in Behbeit el-Hagar and neighboring villages, including a lecture at a local Azhar institute attended by students from the community. The sessions illustrate active participation of local residents in archaeological education and*

heritage protection initiatives.

(Photographs taken by the author, 2022–2024.)

Source: Author's field documentation, Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities, Central Delta Region (2024).

For instance, in Behbeit el-Hagar, villagers maintain a collective memory of the Temple of Isis as a space of fertility and protection, blending Pharaonic symbolism with Islamic and Coptic traditions. Such syncretic interpretations reveal that heritage is never frozen—it evolves through cultural adaptation and emotional attachment. By incorporating these perspectives into museum interpretation, curators could move beyond the binaries of “ancient” and “modern,” “sacred” and “scientific,” creating instead a narrative of *continuity through transformation* (Ikram, 2022; Stevenson, 2019).

4.4 Toward Ethical Collaboration and Shared Stewardship

The decolonization of Egyptology cannot be achieved through repatriation alone; it requires structural reform in how knowledge is produced, shared, and validated. Museums must transition from being custodians of foreign heritage to being partners in shared stewardship. This involves three interrelated actions:

1. **Bilingual Interpretation** – Providing interpretive labels and digital platforms in both English and Arabic ensures accessibility and acknowledges linguistic equality (Riggs, 2020).
2. **Digital Restitution** – Collaborative 3D documentation projects allow Egyptians to reclaim digital ownership of displaced objects, reuniting material and narrative contexts (Ikram, 2022).
3. **Community-Centered Curation** – Empowering local archaeologists, students, and residents to contribute to exhibition design and storytelling bridges the gap between scholarship and lived experience (Hassan, 2023).

Such strategies align with broader global movements toward decolonial museology, as reflected in initiatives by UNESCO and ICOM that emphasize inclusivity, equity, and transparency in heritage governance (UNESCO, 2022). Implementing these principles within Egyptology would not only democratize access to heritage but also reaffirm Egypt's rightful place as an active producer of archaeological knowledge rather than a passive subject of Western fascination.

4.5 Reframing Egyptology for the Twenty-First Century

Ultimately, the challenge for contemporary Egyptology is epistemological rather than logistical. The field must reframe itself from a colonial discipline rooted in extraction to a dialogical practice grounded in respect and reciprocity. The future of Egyptology lies in building bridges—between museums and archaeological sites, between European archives and Egyptian universities, and between the global audience and the people whose ancestors created the very objects that inspire wonder today (Jeffreys, 2022; Hassan, 2023).

Such a reorientation does not diminish the role of Western institutions; rather, it expands their moral responsibility. By sharing authority, knowledge, and interpretation, museums can transform from monuments of empire into spaces of ethical encounter. The decolonization of the Egyptian narrative, therefore, is not an act of separation but one of reconnection—restoring to Egypt the right to tell its own story in its own voice.

5. Conclusion and Future Directions

The decolonization of Egyptology is not a slogan—it is an ethical and intellectual necessity. The historical entanglement of Egypt's material culture with European imperialism has produced enduring asymmetries in ownership, interpretation, and access. Western museums, while often presenting themselves as global stewards of culture, continue to narrate Egypt's past through lenses shaped by colonial curiosity and aesthetic detachment. As this paper has demonstrated through critical analysis of the British Museum, the Louvre, and the Neues Museum, these institutions sustain a rhetoric of universality that masks the moral and epistemic inequalities embedded in their collections (Hicks, 2020; Savoy, 2021).

Yet the process of decolonizing the Egyptian narrative must go beyond critique. It requires the creation of *new epistemic spaces*—places where Egyptian scholars, conservators, and communities actively shape the meanings of their heritage. The author's field experiences at Behbeit el-Hagar and Tell el-Rub'a reveal how local voices offer alternative frameworks for understanding the ancient past. These perspectives are grounded not in distant observation but in lived experience, emotional connection, and cultural continuity (Hassan, 2023). When incorporated

into museum interpretation, such insights challenge the hegemony of the Western gaze and expand the possibilities of knowledge production in Egyptology.

5.1 From Ownership to Collaboration

The path forward lies in transforming relationships of possession into relationships of partnership. Western museums must acknowledge that the knowledge they preserve is not neutral—it is shaped by power. Adopting *shared stewardship* models, as recommended by UNESCO (2022), can establish new protocols for co-curation, joint research, and equitable access to archives. Digital restitution, in particular, offers a practical avenue for this shift. By digitizing and sharing high-resolution 3D scans of Egyptian artifacts with Egyptian institutions, museums can facilitate both educational outreach and heritage empowerment without dismantling collections (Ikram, 2022).

Collaborative exhibitions are another promising avenue. Joint curatorial teams—including Egyptian and international specialists—can co-design bilingual exhibitions that reframe artifacts within their cultural and religious contexts. Such partnerships embody the decolonial principle of *knowledge reciprocity*—a mutual exchange that replaces the hierarchy of giver and receiver with that of co-authors of heritage (Stevenson, 2019; Riggs, 2023).

5.2 Reimagining Egyptology

To achieve true epistemic balance, Egyptology itself must be reimagined. The discipline can no longer operate as a unidirectional flow of knowledge from “discoverer” to “discovered.” Instead, it must function as a dialogue between perspectives—Western and Egyptian, academic and community-based, historical and contemporary. Egyptian universities and cultural centers are already playing a vital role in this transformation through the establishment of heritage documentation programs, interdisciplinary research on ancient technologies, and collaborations with local artisans to preserve traditional crafts rooted in Pharaonic techniques (Jeffreys, 2022).

This paradigm shift will require humility from the global Egyptological community and confidence from Egyptian scholars. By combining critical self-reflection with technological innovation, Egyptology can evolve from a colonial legacy into a collaborative science of memory—one that honors the diversity of ways in which human beings engage with their past.

5.3 The Ethical Imperative

Ultimately, decolonizing the narrative of Egyptian antiquities is about justice—not only historical justice for the displaced objects, but epistemic justice for the people whose ancestors created them. It is about acknowledging that Egypt’s past cannot be fully understood without Egyptian participation in every level of interpretation. To decolonize Egyptology is to listen—to the language of the Nile, to the memory of the stones, and to the voices of those who continue to live among them.

The future of Egyptology will depend on whether the discipline can embrace this moral challenge. If museums and scholars can commit to equality, transparency, and shared authorship, the study of Egypt’s past will not lose its universality; it will gain its humanity.

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