

Ethics of Egyptology and Collecting:

Who Needs the Past? National Values and Egyptology

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Egyptology is a political endeavor as well as a science. Research questions are born in a political context and sometimes funded according to political agendas. "Egyptology derives political clout from its ability to generate and legitimize myths about the human past that can ally people through investigates the range of ancient Egyptian culture, including the people, language, literature, history, religion, art, economics and architecture. In consequence of their power to create a bridge between the present and the past, Egyptologists are becoming increasingly aware of the ethical implications and consequences of their work. For many Egyptologists the history of this awareness begins with accusations by nationalism groups that a people's heritage is being stolen. While professional Egyptologists are forbidden by all recognized professional societies to dig up artifacts to sell, the discipline has a poor record of communicating either this fact or the results of research to the public. Consequently, public misapprehensions abound, leading with increasing frequency to national resistance to collect Egyptian artifacts abroad. In recent years, organizations like the International Association of Egyptology, Egyptology Institutes, and CIPEG-ICOM have concerned themselves increasingly with ethical issues. In this paper I'll focus on:

- The debates about ethical principles, which has always been on the relationship of professional Egyptologists to commercial interests and other non-Egyptological stakeholders. Miscasting the controversy as a dichotomy between "nationalist" and "internationalist" approaches to the protection of cultural heritage. The key issue is not whether all archaeological material should be kept in its country of origin; it is how to safeguard archaeological sites from looting and pillage.
- The condemnation of collaboration between professional Egyptologists and commercial treasure hunters, and the use of looted artifacts in research.

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- Ethical problems of balancing the Egyptologist's claim to knowledge of the past with the desires and needs of other interest groups, professions, and minorities which are more complex.
- A deaccession crisis which confronts the museum community. Deaccessioning of ancient Egyptian art occurs when a museum decides to sell or dispose of a work of art. The crisis stems not from the practice itself - though there are indications deaccession will occur with increasing regularity. Rather the curious mixture of trust and international conventions, estates law, state law, nonprofit governance, professional guidelines, and doctrines governing deaccession all combine to form a body of rules which lack clarity and often conflict.
- The need for CIPEG-ICOM to create a code of ethics for ancient Egyptian art collections.

Before addressing these confusions, however, let me say what in my view is the central issue. Whenever we Egyptologists speak to the general public, it is important for us to stress that the purpose of archaeology is not just to recover attractive objects from the ground; it is to reconstruct the history of the human past. Indeed, some of the most useful information for us comes from items that have no monetary or aesthetic value at all: pottery sherds, pieces of charcoal, human and animal bones, even seeds and pollen. All the information that could be obtained by scientific excavation is irreparably destroyed every time an archaeological site is plundered. At best we are left with a few objects, beautiful but silent.

We are all aware of the tragedy of the looting of the Cairo museum in January 2011; but what is even more disastrous is the ongoing pillage of major archaeological sites all over Egypt. In each site one can clearly see hundreds of holes, several meters deep, reflecting tens of man-hours of labor on the part of hundreds of well-organized looters. Why would anyone invest so much time and effort? Obviously because there is a lucrative market for looted archaeological objects. And the major source of demand in this market is from private collectors in the rich countries. In the past two decades, the looting of the human past has become a large-scale industry. Archaeological sites not only in Egypt but also in Peru, Guatemala, Mexico, Italy, China, Cambodia, Mali and many other countries are being stripped clean to feed the world market in antiquities. As journalist Roger Atwood (2004) documents in his recent book *Stealing History*, looters are well-organized and increasingly well-informed

about the tastes of collectors in rich countries. The pillage of archaeological sites, no less than the drug trade, is driven by demand from the market.

Unfortunately, many collectors and even some museums have taken a “Don’t ask, Don’t tell” approach to their purchases. A study by British archaeologists Christopher Chippindale and David Gill (1999) found that 75 percent of antiquities in a sample of major private and museum collections have no documented provenance. With these facts clearly in mind, we can now turn our attention to some of the confusions that plague this debate. One frequent misunderstanding arises from illegitimately linking two quite distinct issues: the debate between “nationalist” and “internationalist” approaches to cultural heritage, and the debate concerning the private collecting of antiquities. The nationalist-internationalist debate can be summarized briefly as follows: “nationalists” tend to stress the rights of the country of origin in safeguarding cultural property, including the right to prohibit export, while “internationalists” tend to stress the claims of humanity as a whole and to seek a wide circulation of cultural objects. Of course, many intermediate positions are also possible a “moderate nationalist”.

In practical terms, however, in order to guarantee protection and care of archaeological artifacts, there must be a state power capable of exercising its jurisdiction over all. Would rather want to view antiquities as part of ‘the common cultural heritage of mankind’ (UNESCO 1976: II.2), and the modern state in whose territory they are found as ‘morally responsible to the international community as a whole for [their] safeguarding’ (UNESCO 1978). And not just morally, I would hope, but legally as well. Governments should think of themselves as ‘trustees for humanity’. In exercising this trusteeship, governments should implement laws aimed at protecting the cultural heritage situated within their borders for the benefit of all people not just their own citizens and collaborate with other countries to ensure their circulation and accessibility. In particular, for antiquities, we need laws that protect not just what is already known, but also all that is still to be discovered. The need for preservation and access leads to another point, namely, the distinction between private collectors on the one hand and museums and other public institutions on the other. Private collecting, by definition, does not serve the interest of the general public.

Museums’ role, by contrast, is principally to educate the public and to serve as repositories of our shared historic and artistic patrimony. In this perspective, they are

the most natural and fitting institutions to serve the internationalist ideal. Ultimately, it isn't really relevant whether a find from Kerma, Sudan (especially if it is a duplicate) ends up in a museum in Boston, USA or in Warsaw, Poland, as long as the integrity of its context is maintained and the object is kept in the public domain.

Accessibility is indeed a key issue. Both scholars and lay people in different parts of the world should be given the opportunity to enjoy and share the knowledge of the 'the common cultural heritage of mankind'. Also, archaeological materials, possibly more than any other historical documents, often need to be re-examined and re-evaluated, for instance in the light of new dating techniques being developed, or for comparative or quantitative studies when new materials are discovered in the course of more recent excavations. Guaranteeing adequate access to private collections would be very difficult, if not impossible; indeed, in many countries it would require radical changes in the laws regulating private property. Bearing this in mind, museums have the responsibility to lead the way in setting the ethical standards in the art world. They should all adopt strict codes of ethics and careful acquisition policies, and where these are already in place, commit themselves to strengthen the often-too-vague guidelines and observe them consistently.

Unfortunately, however, since public funding is often inadequate, especially in the United States and Europe many museums are highly dependent on private sponsorship, much of which comes from collectors. This often creates inevitable, but in many cases detrimental, alliances. For instance, museum curators sometimes advise collectors on purchases even of non-provenance material with an eye toward possible future acquisitions of private collections on behalf of the museum. Confusion arises from the promiscuous use of the word "market" to denote a wide variety of transactions between different types of buyers and that need to be analyzed separately. For instance, one criticizes those (un-named) archaeologists who oppose all sales of antiquities, even between museums and governmental institutions, and approve only of loans or exchanges. Some agree that museum-to-museum exchanges of duplicate objects 'are valuable tools of museum collections management', but they observe that they are 'a form of barter, with all of barter's considerable limitations'. Suppose, for instance, that the National museum of Sudan has some objects that it is willing to offer to a museum in another country: are loan and exchange the only legitimate options? Perhaps Louvre museum in France would like to enlarge its collection of

ancient Nubian art but has no duplicate objects of interest to the Sudan museum; and perhaps, conversely, a museum in Boston has artifacts of interest to Sudan but no desire to build a collection of Nubian antiquities. Shouldn't the Sudan museum be permitted to *sell* its duplicate artifacts to the Louvre museum in France and then use the money to sponsor new excavations, to renovate the museum facilities, or to improve staff salaries? Indeed, doesn't the Sudanese government have the right to decide that the proceeds from the sale of duplicate antiquities are more urgently needed by the Health Ministry than the museum? In fact, though I did not notice it before, the 1976 UNESCO Recommendation concerning the International Exchange of Cultural Property explicitly recognizes sale as a legitimate means of inter-institutional transfer of cultural property. Indeed, immediately after pointing out the limitations of barter, the 1976 UNESCO Recommendation quotes:

"International exchange" shall be taken to mean any transfer of ownership, use or custody of cultural property between States or cultural institutions in different countries whether it takes the form of the loan, deposit, sale or donation of such property carried out under such conditions as may be agreed between the parties concerned.

(UNESCO 1976: I.1)

But none of this provides any reason to support a private market in antiquities, or private collecting. In an ideal world, I would like to see the complete disappearance of a private market in archaeological artifacts; but this is probably a utopian vision, or, more optimistically, a distant possibility. A more realistic goal would be national and international legislation demanding that each object have a documented provenance back to a specified cutoff date, and making the rebuttable presumption that objects without such documentation are illicit. However, we are at present very far from getting this kind of legislation in any of the major art-importing countries. It is therefore urgent to consider, simultaneously, measures that would reduce the total global demand for purchase of antiquities: first, by greatly reducing the appeal of private collecting, through campaigns aimed at raising public awareness about the problem of pillage; and second, by giving museums and educational institutions wider access to antiquities through means other than purchase on the private market. Among these are long-term loans, widely travelling exhibitions, and strictly controlled museum-to-museum exchanges of duplicate objects. Moreover, having eliminated the competitiveness of the open market which drives up prices, some of the vast resources currently invested by major museums in the purchase of antiquities could be

effectively channeled instead into sponsoring new research and excavations, conservation projects, educational and training programs for local populations in art-rich regions, construction of on-site museums, and the development of responsible cultural tourism all in order to help create, at least in part, a sustainable economy and real expertise for local peoples out of their cultural resources, while preserving their historical heritage. Today, collecting and profit go hand-in-hand; the unfortunate truth is that if collectors were not willing to pay exorbitant amounts for artifacts, destructive looting would not be so rampant. Nor would fraudulent archaeological materials so often be introduced into the marketplace. The argument that collecting “saves the past” only clouds the issue. A looter is not salvaging materials. He is only helping to destroy the past-for a profit. Most sites are not in danger from any other source but the looter’s pick. And untouched archaeological sites are rapidly becoming an endangered species. Private collecting simply encourages further looting, and from an archaeologist’s viewpoint it is wrong. Some would argue that the responsibility for curtailing looting lies not with the collectors but with government officials. But many countries are only now realizing the invaluable nature of their past. Most countries have solid laws against such activity, but not the manpower to enforce them. The responsibilities to curb looting, however, go beyond enforcement and educating the nation’s people. They also rest with the country to which the looted items ultimately go. Beyond this, curbing of looting requires an educated public unwilling to purchase items not rightfully for sale. The dispersal of looted artifacts into the world is a direct result of the existence of an artifact market to support such activity. Responsible museums and individuals have recognized that their obligation to the public precludes the ownership, authentication and valuation of such objects. It is now time for collectors, also to realize their responsibility to the cultural patrimony of the world.

To conclude, it seems to me that long-term task for all of us must be to sensitize both citizens and politicians to the immense loss to our historical patrimony that is being caused by the illicit trade in antiquities. With such awareness, it should be possible to devise effective measures to protect the world’s cultural heritage, and to make that heritage widely available to people around the world in a safe and democratic way.

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