
What Has Happened to Egyptian Heritage after the 2011 Unfinished Revolution?

Author(s): Monica Hanna

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People who do not live immediately next to archaeological sites, the urban Egyptians, have had differing responses. Some register sadness about the loss of heritage, but wish to focus more on the pressing concerns of survival of the living and the political situation. However, a significant number of people have become more sensitized and articulate about heritage. This is manifested by the huge amount of activity in social media, initially Facebook, and subsequently Twitter, that focuses on heritage and heritage protection. Young Egyptian archaeologists are also speaking up in the media against looting and urging the government to protect archaeological sites. Facebook groups have been founded both by Egyptians and by non-Egyptians and include professionals in the field as well as concerned citizens or aficionados of Egypt, ancient and modern. They are a constant presence and have an increasingly strong voice that is accessed by the media at times. These groups will probably have a significant impact in how heritage is perceived, and ultimately, protected. Their activities are also raising awareness and national pride rooted in the richness of Egypt's heritage amongst Egyptians who, prior to 2011, had given little thought to their past.

Of course, it is easy to point fingers and criticize the lack of protection of archaeological sites. However, the practicalities involved with this cannot be ignored. The majority of Egypt's archaeological sites are not small, contained spaces that are easily policed. Rather, they encompass large tracts of land: the distance from Giza to Dahshur is about 23 km, with the width of the site varying from five to 14 km, all of this in the desert. It is physically difficult to protect such a vast area, even with walls being constructed to separate the archaeological zone from the settlement, as is the case at Saqqara and parts of Giza. Sites in the oases of Kharga and Baharia as well as areas in the Western Desert are far in the desert and difficult to secure, as are many other cemetery sites located in the margins of the Nile Valley. Furthermore, the security officers attached to the Ministry of Antiquities are less well equipped with automatic weapons than the looters. Previously, with omnipresent security and the fear of reprisals, the destruction of heritage occurred, but was limited. Now, until the rule of law has been re-established, sufficient security personnel are freed from other duties and can be deployed at archaeological sites, and looters are publicly and actively punished, Egypt's heritage will continue to be lost. This is tragic for the whole world, but most of all for the Egyptians as it affects their identity and

economy. Help from the international community is best given by placing sanctions on antiquities' dealers, alerting customs officials and border guards to the traffic of objects, and cooperating with Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities in an effort to regain objects lost as a result of looting. We are hoping that as the government stabilizes in Egypt the sites can be secured and we can also move toward a better method of protecting Egypt's antiquities for the future.

Notes

1. All of this is ongoing with an overwhelming amount of documentation of political events; for references, readers should look at a diverse selection of archived online articles from different countries to get a sense of events (e.g., Al-Ahram, BBC, Al-Jazeera, *The New York Times*, CNN, *Le Monde*, *Spiegel Online*, etc.). For articles on Egyptian artifacts, Nevine el-Aref's pieces at Al-Ahram Online can be consulted, among others, including special reports on *National Geographic Online*.
2. Sa el-Hagar, Abusir, Dahshur, el-Hibeh, Abu Sir el-Meleq, and several sites in Middle Egypt have been thus targeted. New tombs were discovered by robbers in Aswan and due to their superior firepower, antiquities' officials could not enter the area—a situation that has since been rectified. For an overview of the situation, see the *American Research Center in Egypt Bulletin* 202 (2013).
3. This does not include the theft at the Cairo Museum in January 2011.

RESPONSE

What Has Happened to Egyptian Heritage after the 2011 Unfinished Revolution?

MONICA HANNA

Ex-Junior Post-Doctoral Fellow, Topoi Cluster of Excellence,
Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin

monica.hanna@gmail.com

After decades of dictatorship, Egypt entered a new political phase on January 25, 2011. The first 16 months of transition were managed directly by the armed forces, followed by a year of presidency in the hands of Muhammad Morsi, a leading figure in the Muslim Brotherhood. The two post-revolution periods were marked by civil unrest and a general lack of security, with the withdrawal of police from their posts. In particular, during the last 12 months, security forces have been conspicuously absent from the busy streets of Cairo and

the provinces, not responding to ordinary crime, and leaving the country with a growing sense of insecurity. The abandonment of the police has obviously affected the numerous archaeological sites in the country and this vacuum has allowed for the systematic looting and destruction of many sites of historic and artistic interest. The first 16 months were marked with excessive looting and a lack of coordinated efforts to stop it. However, under the Morsi administration and its Islamist allies, the country has suffered from a systematic lack of interest towards the archaeological and cultural heritage of Egypt, the total lack of political will to protect and enhance the archaeological areas, and even an ideological tendency to de-legitimize the pre-Islamic past as an essential component of national identity.

Land Mafia and Tomb Robbers

One of the most striking heritage threats is the illegal occupation of archaeological areas. Construction contractors in particular have taken over large portions of land in different governorates, divided them, and then resold them to a third party. This type of activity is not an exclusive monopoly of these contractors, but to a lesser extent, also done by the villagers and the poor. Land is occupied for the construction of homes and businesses, cemeteries, or for agricultural purposes. This phenomenon is not new, but it has not ever happened before with so much violence and on such a large scale. Prior to 2011, the greatest threat to archaeological sites consisted of government development plans: mega-state projects that rarely took into account the fact that the archaeological sites could be negatively affected. Illegal land occupation is also very lucrative; a site is usually thoroughly dug for all archaeological items, which are sold before building begins on the site.

As outlined in the above essay by Salima Ikram, armed looting gangs take advantage of the current high unemployment rate and poverty. These gangs, who excavate illegally, are usually accompanied by high-tech machine guns that entered Egypt via Libya. However, at several other sites, less violent looters are made up of local inhabitants, particularly the youth, who often have a clear knowledge of the archaeological site (Ikram and Hanna 2013). An increasing number of reports reveal

the use of geo-magnetic soundings, which requires training, for the illicit discovery of sites. There is no doubt that these looters have full access to pertinent archaeological publications in order to identify potentially rich areas. Looted items are left in certain areas on site: in some cases the antiquities dealers directly choose what they want, then other people organize the removal and delivery to other dealers in Egypt or abroad. Many of the objects, which were shipped abroad, passed through the port of 'Ain Sokhna', which had no antiquities control unit until November 2012.

The second type of looters, also the less violent, is composed of a rich leader in a village who controls teams formed by villagers, especially children, and sends them to dig sites. He compensates them with money for found items such as reliefs, statuary, and jewelry. On a smaller scale, the locals dig for their own benefit. Sometimes they have contacts with lower-level antiquities dealers, but most of the time they do not have such access.

The unexplored archaeological areas are not the only goal of the grave robbers; urban sites such as the districts of medieval Cairo are also under attack. Several *manābir* (pulpits), inlays from *mahārīb* (prayer niches indicating the direction of Mecca), lanterns, lamps, incense burners, carved wooden ceilings, metal gates, embroidered fabrics, and other decorations are disappearing at an alarming rate. In addition to the destruction of medieval Cairo, contemporary architecture all over Egypt is suffering as well; entire buildings are dismantled and sold, or simply destroyed to create space for new buildings. This illegal process is done in the absence of security, where the price of such chunks of land is high as their location provides the construction contractors a lucrative opportunity to erect very high buildings and sell them immediately. The destruction of these buildings from the eighteenth–twentieth centuries is in defiance of numerous laws that protect architectural heritage. Despite the strength of these laws, they are impotent when there is no one to enforce them. In May 2013, the destruction of an elegant portal from the nineteenth century in the neighborhood of Bab el-Wazir has raised a lot of criticism from heritage specialists and architects. It is a sort of non-violent urbicide within all of its historical periods.

The Risk Map of Looted Sites

Archaeological sites throughout Egypt have been affected by the looting.

- In the Delta, at San el-Hagar (Tanis), the site's southern sector remained unexplored until recently when it has been pillaged daily by people from other governorates. The locals, for their part, tried to stop them, but without the support of security forces, every attempt was in vain.
- At Zaqaq (Tell Basta), part of the wall that protects the area was torn down and a road now passes through the site, accompanied by small-scale looting.
- At Sa el-Hagar (Sais), people from different socio-economic backgrounds have joined the looting because it is more lucrative than any legal work. In addition, the search for gold still has a certain allure.
- In the area of ancient Memphis, south of Cairo, the villagers are digging unexplored areas of the necropolis, especially in Abu Rawash. In the Memphite necropolis, storehouses containing antiquities have been attacked, despite the wall around the site protecting it from illegal occupation.
- Abusir was looted systematically and continuously by mafia groups and local looters. Right after the events of January 2011, the local sheikh incited people to destroy and loot the site of the ancient infidels. New tombs have been discovered, but archaeologists have not able to access them; thus, looters have destroyed most of the archaeological record. Ushabti (funerary statuettes), amulets from torn mummies, statues of the Old Kingdom (2584–2117 BCE), and Late Period objects (664–332 BCE) are among the most common finds.
- Large portions of land subjected to World Heritage site protection were occupied on several occasions at Dahshur (Fig. 1), Saqqara, and Lisht, and reused for constructing modern cemeteries, which are a cover for looting.

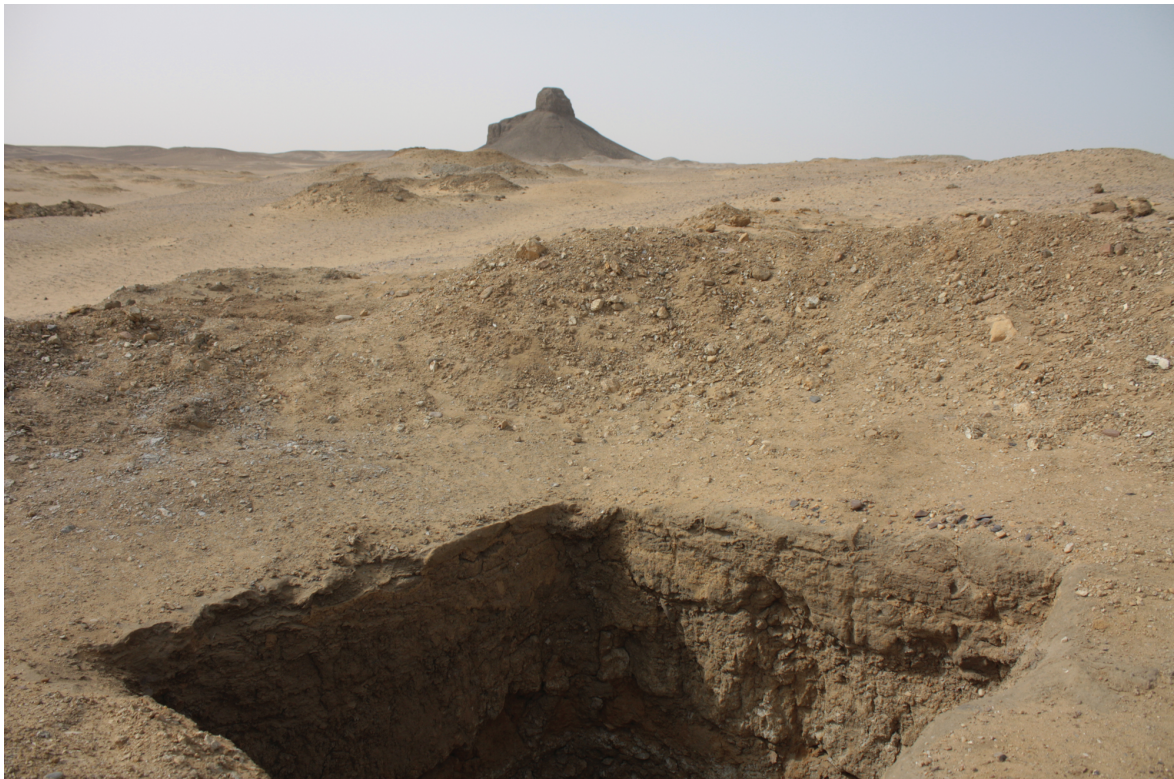


FIG. 1
A precisely dug looting pit in Dahshur. (Photo by M. Hanna.)

- In Heliopolis (Ancient Iunu) now the district to the northeast of Cairo, the site of the Ramesside temple of Ra has been flooded with tons of solid waste and covered with vegetation growing from the mudbrick of the 19th–20th Dynasties (1298–1069 BCE) structures. The site was set on fire several times by land mafia thugs to hide the archaeological features of the site.
- The site of Tell al-Hibeh was the victim of massive looting and destruction. As the news reached the international scientific community, it was learned that many other sites in the Fayum have been victims of the lack of state supervision.
- At Abusir el-Malaq, a site notorious for repeated theft, looters have created impressive heaps of human bones, fragments of mummies, and broken sarcophagi (Fig. 2).
- The Italian archaeological mission of Florence to Antinoupolis, one of the few Roman towns in Upper Egypt, recently reported that modern cemeteries, urban sprawl, and agricultural exploitation have devoured large parts of the site.
- In the hills near Deir Abu Hinnis in Middle Egypt, a thriving necropolis of the 3rd Dynasty (2584–2520 BCE) was sadly swept away by a bulldozer to create space for pilgrims visiting the nearby church. Farmers occupied other areas of the cemetery.
- In Amarna (Akhetaten) (1360–1343 BCE), which hosts archaeologists for most of the year, the north, middle, and south sections have suffered a progressive and alarming phenomenon of land grabbing and reuse for agriculture reclamation.
- Ansina, a Coptic site where villagers believe the rock-cut monastic settlement houses gold treasures, has been heavily looted using dynamite.

There is not a single site in Egypt that has not suffered the attack of the land mafia and looters, from the necropolis of the New Kingdom at Aswan to areas of the Eastern Desert along the Red Sea, including the oases of the Libyan Desert of Kharga, Dakhla, and Farafra Bahareya.



FIG. 2
Damaged artifacts stick out of a looting pit in Abu Sir el-Maleq. (Photo by M. Hanna.)

The Question of Identity

As previously mentioned, looting and illegal occupation of archaeological sites are not new phenomena: both happened in Egypt for decades, but never in such devastating proportions. In a sense, however, the blame is not only on the looters. The huge growth of the Egyptian population continues to pose serious problems with urban expansion and the food supply. In many areas, particularly in contrast to popular sites such as Luxor, antiquities and tourism do not have a direct impact on communities and therefore there is no economic benefit that may motivate the locals to protect the sites (as was the case in January and February 2011 in the necropolis on the west bank of Thebes). The economic crisis, which intensified after 2011, has done its part; high unemployment and the collapse of tourism have led many to believe that the digging and selling of antiquities are valuable livelihoods.

At a higher level, it is also a question of identity; there is now a faint connection between ancient heritage and modern Egyptians. The fault is certainly that of an education system that for decades, particularly under the regime of Mubarak, portrayed Egyptian history as fragmented with no context or relations to archaeological sites. Egyptology and related disciplines were born as Orientalist disciplines, with all the implications of colonial terminology. Egyptian-born specialists have always struggled to get into the field. Academic resources, which are still primarily written in foreign languages, are difficult to access. The communities living closest to these sites or buildings can hardly find useful information because nothing was ever written for them as an audience and users of the heritage space.

Moreover, the local communities were seen as enemies of cultural heritage; local people had to be kept out of the sites and were always considered a nuisance to the tourists. The explanatory signs in the famous Valley of the Kings are written only in English. The Giza plateau was closed to Egyptians during the national holiday of Sham el-Nessim (Easter Monday, celebrated with a picnic by Christians and Muslims together), because locals were considered a nuisance to the foreign visitors. Museums

intimidated the Egyptian public and very rarely were programs made to attract them. For decades, Egyptians have believed that their cultural heritage belongs to the state and it is for the exclusive use of tourists and foreign archaeological missions.

Mallawi Museum Looting: A Case Study for Future CPP

After the events of June 30, 2013 and the ousting of Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood, Egyptian cultural heritage is facing serious challenges. One of the sad events of such turmoil was the raiding of the Mallawi Museum in Minya. The museum housed a beautiful collection from different sites in Middle Egypt and had around 1,089 objects out of which 1,050 were looted or destroyed. Around 500 have been returned to date and conservation work is still ongoing for those damaged.

Resolution

The only guardians of such cultural heritage are the different groups of heritage activists who have formed to fight for the protection of these sites.¹ Most of these initiatives have encouraged community watchdogs over Egyptian heritage and created media campaigns that bring ample attention to the sites at risk, forcing decision makers to take quick action and implement strategies to protect them. Recently, these private initiatives also took part in the writing of the new Egyptian constitution and presented a re-draft of the articles to ensure better protection for Egyptian heritage in the future.

Note

1. The Twitter hashtags for these groups include #Save_Portsaid, #Save_Mansura #Save_Alexandria, #Save_Historic_Cairo, and #Heliopolis_Heritage_Initiative and Egypt's_Heritage_Task Force.

Reference

- Ikram, S., and M. Hanna. 2013. Looting and Land Grabbing: The Current Situation in Egypt. *Bulletin of the American Research Center in Egypt* 202:34–39.