

CHAPTER 48

The Reception of Pharaonic Egypt in Islamic Egypt

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I Introduction

During the summer of 1987 I made my first trip to the Giza plateau. I had gone to Egypt to study at the Center for Arabic Study Abroad, a yearlong program based at the American University in Cairo. Soon after our arrival, my fellow students and I followed Shahinda Karim, an art historian, on a tour of Giza. When we reached Cheops, she pointed out the roughhewn entrance where streams of tourists were pouring in and out of the pyramid. This opening, she said, was not the original entrance, which had been covered over by the original builders. Rather, it was the work of a ninth-century visitor, the caliph al-Mamūn. I had heard of him: he was a member of the Abbasid dynasty, which had dominated Southwest Asia from 750 until the mid-tenth century and come to symbolize the so-called golden age of Islamic civilization. Though not as famous as his father Harūn al-Rashīd, the high-living caliph of the *Thousand and One Nights*, he was known for his interest in science and his sponsorship of translations from ancient Greek into Arabic. But what was he doing in Egypt, so far from his capital of Baghdad? And why did he make an opening in the Great Pyramid?

When I asked Prof. Karim these questions, she referred me to the *Khitat* (Topography), by the 15th-century Muslim scholar al-Maqrīzī. Al-Maqrīzī turned out to be a figure of interest in his own right. Born in Cairo, he served as a Friday preacher at two of the city's major institutions: the mosque of 'Amr, the oldest in Egypt, and the *madrasah* (law school) of al-Ḥasan, which still stands at the base of the Citadel. He went on to serve as chief administrator of the mosque of al-Ḥākim, which stood then as it stands now at the end of Shāri' al-Mu'izz. At the *madrasah* of al-Mu'ayyad, he taught Hadith: the reports of the Prophet's words and deeds, and the criteria for judging whether particular reports had been accurately transmitted. After working for a time in Damascus, he returned to Cairo and devoted himself to writing history until his death in 1442. Besides the *Topography*, which describes the major monuments of Egypt, he wrote treatises on the history of the world and the life of

the Prophet, as well as essays on famines, price inflation, minerals, honeybees, and coins (Rosenthal 1991 and 2008; Rabbat 2003).

According to al-Maqrīzī's sources, the Giza pyramids were built by one Sūrīd, a king of Egypt, who foresaw in a dream that the earth would be destroyed by flood and fire:

He ordered that the pyramids be built and filled with figures and wonders and treasures and statues and the bodies of their kings. He commanded the priests to inscribe everything the sages had said, so they recorded on the ceilings, walls, and columns all of the occult sciences claimed by the people of Egypt, including pictures of all the stars and planets, the names of drugs along with their beneficial and harmful effects, and the arts of spell-casting, arithmetic, geometry, and the other sciences, explained for anyone who could read their script and understand their language. (Maqrīzī 1970: 112; cf. Suyūṭī 1939: 21–2)

Many years later, the pyramids attracted the attention of the caliph al-Ma'mūn, who "decided to demolish one to find out what was inside it." Told this was impossible, he insisted on breaking into a pyramid, evidently Cheops. "So fire was lit, and vinegar was sprayed, and crowbars were applied, and blacksmiths set to work, and the fissure was created that remains open today." After "breaking through the wall," the workers stumbled across a precious vessel whose market value turned out to be exactly the amount spent on the excavation up to that point. Apparently, the pyramid builders had planted the vessel as an incentive to stop the demolition. Realizing that he could never prevail against a civilization capable of such accurate predictions, the caliph stopped work on the pyramid (Maqrīzī 1970: 113; cf. Suyūṭī 1939: 24). But some of al-Maqrīzī's sources tell a different story. One claims that the caliph's workmen succeeded in reaching the interior of the pyramid. There they found a sarcophagus containing a figure wearing golden armor and a green gemstone the size of a chicken's egg (Maqrīzī 1970: 116; cf. Suyūṭī 1939: 24). Another source offers more detail and a different ending:

In [the pyramid] were passages going down and others going up, all of them frightening and difficult to move through. At the top was a square chamber some eight cubits on each side. In the middle of it was a closed marble basin. When the cover was removed, it was found to contained nothing but decayed remains. Al-Ma'mūn then put a stop to further excavations. (Maqrīzī 1970: 118; cf. Suyūṭī 1939: 28–9, 30)

What is one to make of this account? For many European readers, al-Maqrīzī's inclusion of mutually contradictory and often bizarre reports created the impression that his account – and by extension all Arabic accounts of ancient Egypt – are largely fanciful. To correct this impression, it is useful to recall that al-Maqrīzī was trained as a Hadith scholar. In the field of Hadith, a transmitter is bound to convey reports verbatim and to attribute them to their sources without concerning himself with contradictions, absurdities, or questions left unanswered. True to this standard, al-Maqrīzī includes one report that says that the caliph succeeded in breaking into the pyramid and another that says he failed, but offers no explanation for the discrepancy. Even in the case of patent absurdities, such as the story of the buried vessel, "responsibility lies with the source,"

as the Arabic saying has it. As it happens, al-Maqrīzī did not necessarily believe everything he reports: the first thing he says about the pyramids is that the structures have inspired many stories, “most of them false” (Maqrīzī 1970: 111).

Al-Maqrīzī’s account of the pyramids was known in Europe as early as 1801, when it was picked apart by the French Orientalist Silvestre de Sacy (d. 1838; on him see further Irwin 2006: 141–50). In his article, de Sacy points out that the caliph cannot have entered the pyramid by the original entrance since the latter had been deliberately concealed by the builders. Nor could he have made the tunnel that leads to the ascending corridor: ignorant as he must have been of the internal structure of the pyramid, he is hardly likely to have struck upon the corridor merely by removing blocks at random from the outside. De Sacy thus concludes that the expedition never happened. To support his conclusion, he adds that the Syriac chronicle of Denis of Tell Mahre, a Jacobite clergyman who accompanied al-Ma’mūn to Egypt, mentions the pyramids but says nothing to indicate that the caliph tried to break into one (de Sacy 1801: 498).

Given the information available at the time, de Sacy’s arguments against al-Maqrīzī are quite cogent. But they have been allowed to stand largely unchallenged for some two centuries (see, e.g., Graefe and Plessner 1965 and 2008) despite the discovery of new evidence, both archaeological and literary, about the nature of the caliph’s project. A modern Egyptologist, Rainer Stadelmann, has proposed what in retrospect seems an obvious solution: al-Ma’mūn entered the pyramid by clearing out a tunnel originally torn out by someone else (Stadelmann 1991: 110 ff., a solution actually suggested in passing by de Sacy himself; see ‘Abd al-Latīf 1810: 220). But Stadelmann gives the caliph no credit for curiosity, calling him a plunderer and a treasure hunter (Stadelmann 1991: 264–66). References by other scholars, who usually have no access to Arabic sources, are often equally dismissive and condescending (see, e.g., Lepre 1990: 71). Worst of all are the amateur accounts, which favor garbled versions of al-Maqrīzī’s reports retold in high Orientalist baroque. One particularly imaginative website describes the caliph as “struggling up the Grand Gallery, his men cautiously pushing his bulk from behind,” “sweating and cursing” as he crawls into the burial chamber, and “absolutely livid” when he finds the sarcophagus empty (Ellis 2008). All of this, of course, is nonsense.

The idea that Arabic sources have nothing of interest to say about ancient Egypt may well go back to de Sacy, who complained about the many authors who provide nothing but “childish fables, ridiculous stories, and traditions apparently devoid of any basis in historical truth.” Yet de Sacy himself went on to acknowledge that some Arabic authors “have added to the mythological history of the country a large number of useful facts and observations” (‘Abd al-Latīf 1810: ix–x). Modern scholars, unfortunately, have often proven less perceptive. In their approaches to the tradition, they have made a number of unwarranted assumptions. They assume, for example, that a fantastic story is somehow less of a historical document – that is, a piece of evidence for what people believed to be true – than an archaeological report. They assume that any interest Muslims might have taken in the ancient monuments was confined to robbery and plunder. Most oddly, they often seem to assume that there existed an obvious alternative to fantasy and tomb robbery – namely, modern science – that medieval Muslims perversely declined to pursue. Such a claim does an

injustice both to the integrity of classical Arabic responses to ancient history and to the uniquely modern nature of scientific Egyptology.

To assess al-Maqrīzī's reports about the caliph and the pyramids – or indeed any reports from the Arabic sources – we can examine them as both as records of the collective imagination and as potential sources of new facts about events in the past. In what follows, we will return to the example of al-Ma'mūn both to establish what he was really doing in Egypt and to speculate about the significance his activities might have had. To do so, we must venture beyond the reports compiled by al-Maqrīzī, who is far from being the only Arabic author to write about Egyptian antiquities. A recent survey by El-Daly lists 26 Arab writers" (an inaccurate term, as will be seen) on the subject, ranging from Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, who died in 871, to Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, who died in 1505 (El-Daly 2005: 161–82). Various studies by Haarmann add the names of several later authors who wrote about Egypt in Ottoman Turkish (Haarmann 1996 and further references cited). Of the Arabic authors, three – al-Mas'ūdī (d. 956), 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī (d. 1231 or 32), and al-Idrīsī (d. 1251) – have especially interesting things to say about the reception of Pharaonic Egypt in later times. Before looking at their work, however, it will be useful to address a few matters of historical background.

2 Parameters

The title of this chapter, "The Reception of Pharaonic Egypt in Islamic Egypt," raises two problems of definition. The first is that of chronology. By historiographic convention, Egypt becomes Islamic in AD 640, when the Arab Muslim commander 'Amr ibn al-ʿĀṣ seized Alexandria and put an end to Byzantine rule. (In Arabic names, *al-* means "the," *ibn* means "son of," and *Abū* "father of"; the latter two elements in particular cannot be omitted without causing confusion.) For centuries, however, Arabic-speaking Muslims remained a decided minority: the great majority of Egyptians were Coptic-speaking Christians. (It should also be noted in passing that at the time of the conquests "Muslim" probably did not mean exactly what it does today, since many of the beliefs and practices now considered inseparable from Islam appear to have crystallized at a later date.) As the Arabic sources make clear, the Christians – not only in Egypt but also in Syria and Iraq – had a rich tradition of stories about ancient Egypt. Clearly, then, the term "Islamic Egypt" should not be taken to imply that Muslims were the only people with something to say about Pharaonic history during this period.

If the so-called Islamic period began in AD 640, when did it end? There is no obvious answer. If the mere presence of Muslims suffices as a condition, then Egypt is decidedly still "Islamic." Historians who require more precision speak instead of "pre-modern" and "modern" eras. In the pre-modern era, Egypt was subject to the caliphs of Medina (632–661), to the Umayyad dynasty of Damascus (661–750), and then to the Abbasid dynasty of (mostly) Baghdad. Al-Ma'mūn, the alleged pyramid-breaker, was the seventh Abbasid caliph; he ruled from 813 to 833. Soon after his death, Egypt became virtually independent under a series of

dynasties: the Tulunids (868–905), the Ikhshidids (935–968), and most notably the Shiite Fatimids (969–1171), who founded Cairo. The Fatimids were ousted by Saladin's Ayyubid dynasty, which held power until 1250, when Shajarat al-Durr, the first woman to rule Egypt since Cleopatra, was toppled by the Mamluks. The Mamluks, originally slave soldiers from Central Asia, ruled not only Egypt but also Syria and parts of Arabia, and they continued to govern Egypt even after it fell to the Ottoman Turks in 1517. In 1798, Napoleon briefly seized control of the country. Nominal Ottoman rule was restored by a viceroy, Muḥammad 'Alī, whose accession in 1805 marks for some historians the beginning of the modern period. But there is no sense in which Egyptian Muslims stopped being Muslim in 1805 or any other year. Since the nineteenth century, Muslims have frequently been compelled to reflect on their religion in ways that their predecessors were not. But to declare that twentieth- or twenty-first century Egypt is no longer "Islamic" is in effect to decide the outcome of those deliberations on behalf of all Egyptian Muslims, some of whom, at least, would find such a declaration bizarre if not offensive.

At the end of this essay, I will return briefly to the question of when (or if) the so-called Islamic period can be said to have ended. For now, let us turn to the second problem raised by the title: the implication that the Arabic literature of Egypt can be studied on its own. In modern times, it doubtless can. In pre-modern times, however, Arabic literature was a trans-regional phenomenon. In the wake of the conquests, the Arabic language was adopted by members of different ethnic groups, at first as a means of communicating with their new rulers and later as a liturgical language by converts to Islam. Until the tenth century, Muslims everywhere wrote almost exclusively in Arabic, regardless of what their mother tongue may have been. Eventually, many non-Muslims, too, found it easier to write in Arabic than in their traditional Hebrew, Aramaic, Pahlavi, Greek, or Syriac. In modern scholarship, "Arabic literature" covers all of this material: that is, works written in Arabic regardless of the ethnicity or religion of their authors. (It is therefore distinct from "Islamic literature," which properly refers to writings of a religious nature, not to writings by anyone who happens to be Muslim.)

With so many people contributing to it, it is hardly surprising that Arabic literature should include a great deal of material from other cultural traditions. Particularly important are the scientific, historical, and literary works translated into Arabic from Sanskrit, Middle Persian, Syriac, and Greek during the eighth and ninth centuries. Among the patrons of the so-called translation movement was the caliph al-Ma'mūn, who hired Christian experts in Syriac and Greek to put the works of Aristotle, Euclid, Galen, and others into Arabic for him (see further Cooperson 2005). Muslim scholars interested in the history of the ancient world had also recorded the oral traditions of many peoples, including Jews, Greeks, "Nabateans" (meaning, in this case, Christian speakers of Aramaic), Yemenis, Persians, and Copts. All of this material circulated freely wherever Arabic was used: that is, across a region that in the fifteenth century extended from Tabriz to Timbuktu. Thus it is that any survey of the Muslim reception of ancient Egypt must consider all of Arabic literature, not simply the part of it that happens to have been written in Cairo or Fustat. For example, the legend of Sūrīd, the king who built the pyramids, is not an Egyptian story at all but rather an Iraqi one (Fodor 1970; Cook 1983). And two

of the most famous Islamic-period writers on Egypt, al-Mas'ūdī and 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, were both from Baghdad.

3 al-Mas'ūdī

The writings of al-Mas'ūdī, who was a historian and a geographer, tell us a great deal about how educated Arabic-speaking visitors viewed Egypt in the early Islamic period. Al-Mas'ūdī was extraordinarily well traveled, even by the peripatetic standards of the day. Born in Baghdad, he had visited Persia, the Indus Valley, the Deccan, Oman, East Africa, Yemen, the eastern Mediterranean coast, northern Syria, Iraq, the Caspian Sea region, and the Caucasus before settling in Egypt. From approximately 940 until his death in 956, he lived in Fustat. There he worked on a series of books about:

the configuration of the earth, its cities and its marvelous places, its oceans, valleys, mountains, and rivers; its unusual minerals, its variety of watercourses, the story of its great forests and jungles and islands and lakes, and the tales of its sacred buildings and noble habitations; as well as the story of creation, the origin of the human race, and the diversity of nations . . . as far back as the division of peoples from the beginning in India; the varieties of unbelievers; and what can be learned about these matters from the traditions of those who accept divine law, from books, and from the revelations vouchsafed to adherents of deistic faiths. (Mas'ūdī 1966: §1 [text and translation] = 1:9 [Arabic text])

Retold four different ways, this information filled four separate works, of which only two – the shortest, unfortunately – have survived. These works tell us not only what Islamic-period observers knew (or thought they knew) about the world in general and ancient Egypt in particular, but also what they wanted to learn and why.

According to al-Mas'ūdī, human beings can acquire many kinds of knowledge on their own. The quest for the best possible form of political organization had begun in India and reached its pre-Islamic apogee in Iran. Even relatively primitive societies, such as those he had heard of in East Africa, have well-defined notions of just kingship. To reach perfection man nevertheless needed divine assistance. God thus sent the Prophet, the Qur'an, and the Imams to help mankind establish a community that would ensure justice in this world and salvation in the next. All communities, Muslim or otherwise, collapse into anarchy unless they are justly ruled. Such a collapse occurred, he says, after the death of Alexander the Great, and another is occurring during his own time because of the weakness of the Abbasid caliphate (Khalidi 1975).

To flesh out his vision of universal history, al-Mas'ūdī draws on a good deal of (mostly) accurate information about the world and its peoples. He has a rough idea of how big the earth is, and he is aware of places as distant as Korea and Britain. He can correlate the ancient Iranian, Hellenistic, Christian, and Muslim calendars. He quotes the Hebrew Bible, the Greek Gospels, and the epic histories of ancient Iran, all in Arabic translation. He is familiar with the cosmological theories of the Indians and

the Zoroastrians, as well as the Indian practice of ritual suicide. He knows when and where the Christians held their ecumenical councils and what they discussed; he also knows about the division of Jews into Karaite and Rabbanite sects. He can name all the Sasanian emperors and Byzantine emperors down to his own day, and he even has a list of the kings of France (see further Shboul 1979).

Imagine, then, al-Mas'ūdī's frustration when it came time for him to describe Egypt's place in world history (Mas'ūdī 1966: §773–843 = 2: 65–109). Everywhere around him were monuments attesting to the existence of a great civilization. Everywhere, too, were examples of ancient writing. But no one could tell him what the monuments were for or what the writing said. In Persia, he had visited Persepolis, and although he did not know exactly what the ruins represented, he had some notion that they had been built by the so-called first dynasty of Persian kings, about whom he was able to collect information from the oral-epic tradition. Moreover, he had access to the written literature of the Sasanian period, which had been translated into Arabic. In Egypt, however, he could not read anything the ancient Egyptians had written, either in the original or in Arabic translation. The case was not unique: Arabic historians could not read cuneiform either. But then the ancient Mesopotamian civilizations had not left such well-preserved monuments as the Egyptians had. Built of stone rather than perishable mud brick, the latter seem to have demanded attention in a way the former did not.

Difficult though the task was, al-Mas'ūdī did his best. In the larger of his surviving histories, he reports – on the authority of “experts” he does not name – that the first to settle in Egypt was Miṣr, a grandson of Ham, one of the three sons of Noah. The annual flooding of the Nile attracted people “so that the whole country was filled with towns and settlements.” The settlers, he says, “channeled the water, dug canals, and set up waterwheels,” adding that “all of this took place so long ago that no one can remember how it happened” (§785 = 2:73) Miṣr's son Qibṭ, the eponymous ancestor of the Copts, succeeded his father as Pharaoh. Several generations later, the Egypt was conquered by the Amalekites. One Amalekite king, al-Rayyān ibn al-Walīd, is the Pharaoh mentioned in the Qur'anic story of Joseph. Three generations later came al-Walīd ibn Muṣ'ab, the Pharaoh who was challenged by Moses. After his death, the Egyptians appointed a queen, Dalūkā, who is credited with building many monuments, including temples containing depictions of her enemies, along with their ships and beasts. If attacked, the Egyptians would put the pictures underwater and their enemies, wherever they were, would drown. (As if to confirm this account, al-Mas'ūdī notes that the temples are in fact covered with pictures and that certain natural forces such as magnetism do work at a distance.)

At some point in their history, al-Mas'ūdī reports, the Egyptians built temples to preserve their knowledge from a catastrophe that they had foreseen with the help of astrological calculations. It was unclear what the catastrophe would be, so they built two kinds of structures: some of clay to withstand fire and others of stone to withstand a flood. In the event, the disaster may have been a plague, as he deduces from “the mounds made up of people, young and old, men and women, piled high as mountains, in the region of Tinnīs” and “the bodies stacked in caves, caverns, temples, and other parts of Upper and Lower Egypt . . . still dressed in their

clothes” (§813 = 2:89–90). He adds that Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike have no idea who the bodies belong to, suggesting that they must be the corpses of the ancients.

Al-Mas‘ūdī then brings the history of Egypt up to the present. After Dalūkā came a long line of Pharaohs, including Balūnā ibn Mīnākīl, who attacked the Children of Israel and destroyed the Temple. Egypt later fell to Nebuchadnezzar, who taxed the country on behalf of the Persians, and then to the Romans, who brought Christianity, which remained the dominant faith until the coming of Islam. Al-Mas‘ūdī concludes his chronological survey by reporting that his sources agree on the following:

There were 32 Pharaohs, five kings who ruled Egypt from Babylon, four Moabite – that is, Amalekite – kings who invaded Egypt from Syria, seven Roman rulers, and ten Greek ones, all before Christ, along with some governors who ruled on behalf of the Persian emperors. All together, the reigns of the Pharaohs, Persians, Romans, Amalekites, and Greeks add up to 1300 years. (§821 = 2:95).

Al-Mas‘ūdī does not reveal where his king-lists come from, but the form of some of the names suggests a Greek source translated into Arabic (Shboul 1979: 122).

Turning to the monuments, al-Mas‘ūdī draws on a relatively recent source: the testimony of an aged Copt who in 873 or thereabouts had visited the court of the Muslim viceroy Aḥmad ibn Ṭūlūn. In response to questions posed by the viceroy and his courtiers, the old man discussed such matters as the source of the Nile, the kings of Nubia, and the grounds for his belief in Christianity (whose doctrines, he says, are so absurd that they must be true). Asked about the pyramids, he explained that they were built to enclose the tombs of kings. The ancients first built up the foundation; then, placing the sarcophagus in the center, they built the rest of the pyramid up around it. Finally, they smoothed the faces of the pyramid by working from the top down.

Of particular interest for al-Mas‘ūdī and his sources were “those pictures of camels and the like that appear in the temples” (Mas‘ūdī 1966: §810 = 2:87–88), a description that suggests that writing and pictures were not clearly distinguished. Al-Mas‘ūdī reports that the well-known Muslim mystic Dhū al-Nūn claimed to be able to read Hieroglyphic inscriptions by staring at them. Not surprisingly, the resulting translations bear a striking resemblance to Arabic aphorisms. “Beware of manumitted slaves, arrogant young men, unruly soldiers, and Arabized Copts,” says one. “Man proposes, but God disposes,” says another (§812 = 2:88–89). A more modest response comes from the aged Copt, who when asked about “the unreadable writing on the pyramids and the temples,” replied as follows:

The learned men who lived at the time when people used that script are all dead now. As one nation after another came to Egypt, the people took up the Greek script and the Greek forms of the letters. The Copts can read [Coptic] to the extent that they have learned the Greek letters and supplemented them with letters of their own based on something between Greek and ancient Coptic. In the end they forgot the writing used by their ancestors. (§793 = 2:78)

Characteristically, al-Mas‘ūdī wanted to see for himself whether the Copts had preserved any memory of their ancestral language:

I asked a number of well-informed Copts from Upper Egypt and elsewhere about the meaning of the word “pharaoh.” They could not answer, and evinced no knowledge of their language. It may be that the word was a title for the king of the region and that the language subsequently changed, just as Pahlavi – that is, ancient Persian – changed into modern Persian, and ancient Greek into Byzantine, as Himyarite and other languages have changed. (§822 = 2:95)

Of all the reports in al-Mas‘ūdī’s account of Egypt, only two refer to tomb robbery. The first is a legend about an expedition that reportedly took place during the caliphate of ‘Abd al-Malik (65–86/685–705). Told that a particular underground chamber is full of treasure, the governor of Egypt, ‘Abd al-‘Azīz ibn Marwān, sends an expedition to dig it out. His men uncover a paved floor and then steps leading down to a pedestal topped by the statue of a rooster. When one of the workmen places his foot on the step, two swords pop out of the ground and cut him in half, and the rooster crows and flaps his wings. The work continues, but the curse cannot be beaten: “Of the thousand men involved in digging, working, hauling earth, surveying the ground, and issuing orders, all died. Terrified, ‘Abd al-Malik said: ‘This is a strange ruin, and an unbreachable one; let us take refuge in God!’ ” (§823–24 = 2: 95–96).

More typical of al-Mas‘ūdī’s general approach is the second account, which describes the opening of a tomb by treasure hunters during the reign of al-Ikhshīd ibn Ṭughj (r. 935–946):

After a great deal of digging, they reached a vaulted passage and a room hollowed out of the rock. Inside it were statues made of wood coated in a protective varnish, representing standing figures. They were of varied appearance: some were old men, while others were young men, women, or children. Their eyes were made of different gems, including rubies, emeralds, turquoise, and peridot (or topaz). Some had faces made of silver and gold. Some of the figures were broken open. Inside them were the decayed remains of human bodies. Next to each figure were containers like amphorae and other vessels made of marble and alabaster. Inside them was the remainder of the varnish that had been used to coat the body inside the statue. The varnish itself consisted of medicinal powder and mixed ingredients that had no odor. When a flame was applied to it, it gave off various fragrances that could not be identified with any known perfume. Each of the wooden figures had been made to match the appearance of the person inside it, with the differences in features and their ages represented. Across from each figure was an idol made of green marble and alabaster, in keeping with their worship of figures. The figures displayed various inscriptions that no member of any religious community could decipher. Some knowledgeable [Egyptian] people claimed that the script had been forgotten four thousand years ago. This account serves as evidence that these people were neither Jews nor Christians. (§825 = 2: 97–8 reading *ḥujrah* for *ḥajārah*).

Though the excavators were searching only for treasure, al-Mas‘ūdī is interested in what the objects that they found might reveal about the ancient Egyptians. His conclusion that the ancients were idolaters, not Jews or Christians, would have helped him find a place for them within his scheme of universal history (see further El-Daly 2005: 75–94). But as he seems to acknowledge, it was difficult to say more without being able to read Egyptian writing. The treasure hunters apparently thought so too,

as is evident from their search for a Jew or Christian who could decipher the mysterious ancient writing.

4 al-Ma'mūn and the Great Pyramid

Having looked at what tenth-century observers knew – and wanted to know – about Egypt's ancient history, we may return to al-Ma'mūn and his reported attempt to break into the pyramid of Cheops. As it turns out, the caliph's activities in Egypt were not limited to pyramid breaking. According to a recently published Arabic source, he also tried to decipher the hieroglyphs. Our source for this information is a book about pyramids by one Abū Ja'far Muḥammad 'Abd al-'Azīz al-Idrīsī, who again is a figure of interest in his own right.

Al-Idrīsī was born in 1173 to an Upper Egyptian family of Moroccan origin that traced its ancestry back to the Prophet. As a boy, he once went with his father to see the temple of Karnak. Noticing that people had been removing blocks to use for building, his father exclaimed that the temple should be left undisturbed to serve as a reminder of the transitory character of human glory. In his pyramid book, al-Idrīsī describes the scene in the rhymed prose typical of Arabic writing during this period:

Among the events of bygone days and the scenes of life now passed away is a visit I paid to the temple of Karnak with my father, may God rest his soul . . . At that time, the hand of ruin had not yet struck the halls, nor effaced the writing that adorned the walls. It was a spacious temple and wide, with lofty walls on every side. Yet the marks of crowbars marred its stones, which seemed to feel the scars and moan. My father said: "Behold, my son, a temple raised by Pharaoh's might, toppled now by foolish spite. Yet such temples, if allowed to stand, serve to chasten mortal man!" (Idrīsī 1991: Arabic text 45–6)

Al-Idrīsī's one surviving work on Egypt is *Anwār 'ulwiyy al-ajrām fī l-kashf 'an asrār al-ahrām* ("Lights of the translunar bodies: on uncovering the secrets of the pyramids"). Despite its unusual subject matter, the book, like al-Maqrīzī's *Topography*, bears the hallmarks of being written by a Hadith scholar. It consists largely of citations, which are (usually) traced back to their sources; and its author does not seem to mind that some of his accounts are contradictory. The book was also transmitted in the traditional way: that is, by being read aloud to his students in the author's house. Beyond the names of his teachers and students, and the few autobiographical remarks he makes in his book, little more is known of al-Idrīsī's life. He lived to see Louis IX's crusade against Egypt and the overthrow of Shajarat al-Durr by the Mamluks, and died in 1251 at the age of 78 (introduction, 42–66; Haarmann 1996: 605–6).

In a chapter on the Muslim rulers who had visited the pyramids, al-Idrīsī combines reports from at least five different Arabic sources to provide an account of al-Ma'mūn's expedition. The caliph, according to the sources, had long been interested in Greek learning and had commissioned scholars to translate philosophical books from Greek into Arabic. When he arrived in Egypt, he was "moved by his lofty ambition and noble spirit to expose the secrets concealed by the pyramids and to learn

their true meaning” (Arabic text, 33–35). The first step was to decipher the writing on the ancient monuments. This was a daunting prospect: the Great Pyramid alone was covered with writing in no less than ten different scripts. Asked to help, the sages of Egypt directed the caliph to one Ayyūb ibn Maslamah, a sage who supposedly could read *al-qalam al-birbāwī*, “temple writing.” Unfortunately, he could read only four of the ten scripts: “The reason,” al-Idrīsī quotes him as saying, “is that the wise men of Egypt . . . used depictions of the stars and planets to cast [their writing] in riddles, symbols, and obscurities, such that no one has been able to figure it out.” Even so, Ayyūb “translated for al-Ma’mūn what was written on the Pyramids, the two obelisks of Heliopolis, a stela found in a village stable near Memphis, another stela from Memphis itself, [as well as writings found] in Busir and Sammanud.” The translations were copied into a book called *The Book of Priestly Talismans*, of which al-Idrīsī claims to have seen a few damaged pages (Arabic text, 60–62).

As we have seen, interest in Hieroglyphic writing was hardly unusual (for more examples see El-Daly 2005: 57–73). Moreover, as al-Idrīsī points out, al-Ma’mūn had a proven record of interest in the ancient sciences. There is, therefore, nothing unlikely in the claim that he sought an expert to translate Egyptian for him. Also reassuring is how honest the expert turns out to be: like al-Mas’ūdī’s Coptic sage, Ayyūb admits that he cannot read hieroglyphs. As for the writing “in ten different scripts,” al-Idrīsī’s sources make it clear that much of it consisted of graffiti in various languages. Of these, Ayyūb may have been able to read Coptic and possibly also Greek. Admittedly, it is suspicious that he could also “translate” texts from stelae and obelisks. Perhaps here, too, he worked only on non-Egyptian graffiti. Assuming, in any case, that he did produce translations – honest or otherwise – there is nothing unlikely in his having written them down. Several Arabic works contain purported translations of Egyptian inscriptions, and a few even contain copies of Hieroglyphic signs (Blochet 1914–15: 6: 49–67; El-Daly 2006: Figures 12, 14–32). Viewed as part of the tradition of curiosity about pre-Islamic civilizations, al-Ma’mūn’s attempt to decipher the hieroglyphs is perfectly plausible (see further Cooperson 2008).

What about the caliph’s alleged attempt to break into the pyramid? If he was interested only in texts, there was no need to go to the trouble of breaking into a pyramid to find them: there were plenty of them lying about outside. But his insistence seems strange only because we already know that the pyramid contained no texts for him to find. He, of course, cannot have known this. Moreover, given the information he did have available, he is likely to have thought that the pyramids *did* contain texts – possibly very important ones.

According to the Arabic chroniclers, al-Ma’mūn had gone to Egypt in 832 to put down a rebellion against Abbasid rule. Because many of the rebels were Copts, the caliph decided to bring a Christian clergyman along to help persuade the rebels to desist. The clergyman was Denis of Tell Mahre, the Jacobite archbishop of Antioch. According to J. M. F. van Reeth, Denis is likely to have been familiar with the legend of the Cave of Treasures, a place that according to Syriac tradition contained the body of Adam as well as the riches he had brought with him from Paradise. At some point, elements of the Cave-of-Treasures story appear to have been transferred to the pyramids: the story of Sūrīd contains several odd words that only make sense if read as translations from the Syriac. Informed of this tradition by Denis, al-Ma’mūn may

thus have expected to find the pyramid full of treasures dropped from Heaven (van Reeth 1994).

As far as I know, van Reeth is the first to propose a real explanation for the caliph's interest in Cheops – that is, an explanation based on the likely interests of the people involved. Unfortunately, there is no direct evidence for his proposal. Moreover, there is one major piece of evidence against it. Denis's Syriac chronicle offers us two theories – including his own – of what the pyramids were, and neither mentions the Cave. His account (as cited in the chronicle of his successor Michael the Syrian) runs as follows:

In Egypt we also beheld those edifices mentioned by the Theologian [= St. Gregory of Nazianze] in one of his discourses. They are not, as some believe, the granaries of Joseph. Rather, they are marvelous shrines built over the tombs of ancient kings, and in any event oblique [= consisting of inclined planes] and solid, not hollow and empty. They have no interior, and none has a door. We noticed a fissure in one of them and ascertained that is approximately 50 cubits [= c 33 m] deep. Evidently the stones [in this place] had been solidly packed before being broken by people who wanted to see whether the pyramids were solid. (Michel 1905:82)

Given this account, it is difficult to insist that Denis thought of the Great Pyramid as the Cave of Treasures.

Nevertheless, van Reeth is correct, I think, in seeking to explain the caliph's behavior by looking at the interests he shared with those around him. In addition to the story of the Cave of Treasures, there were legends that associated the pyramids with Hermes Trismegistus, the demigod whom Greek tradition credits with knowing the secrets of various arts and sciences (e.g. Idrīsī 1991: Arabic text, 22, 96–7, and index; Suyūṭī 1939: 27). Certain other reports claimed that the pyramids played a role in the Hellenistic astral cult of the Sabaeans, a community then (and now) still active in northern Syria (Idrīsī 1991: Arabic text, 12 and index; Suyūṭī 1939: 29). If the caliph knew of these legends, or of others like them, he may well have imagined that the pyramid contained the key to all knowledge: perhaps the Tablet of Hermes, or some other book or inscription.

But did he really get in? In the passage cited above, Denis reports visiting the pyramids, guessing correctly what they were, and founding a passage that led part of the way into one of them. Yet he says nothing to suggest that al-Ma'mūn tried to break into one, leading de Sacy to conclude that he cannot have tried (de Sacy 1801: 498). Here too van Reeth has proposed a solution, one that *is* convincing. As he points out, Denis had visited Egypt on his own five years before. His description of the pyramids may therefore refer to a visit he undertook on his first trip, not his second, when the caliph's pyramid-expedition would have taken place. Why, in that case, does Denis say nothing about a pyramid-expedition in his account of the second trip? Perhaps because he left Egypt before the caliph did: according to his own account, he failed to win over the rebels and was given permission to return to Syria. If al-Ma'mūn tried to break into the pyramid later, Denis would never have known (van Reeth 1994: 232). Still, the caliph would have had to work quickly: the Arabic sources report that he spent only 47 days in Egypt.

As it happens, Denis's account, along with testimony collected by the Egyptian pyramid-scholar al-Idrīsī, allows us to confirm Stadelmann's hypothesis that the caliph broke into the pyramid by using someone else's tunnel. Denis reports finding a fissure that extended some 50 cubits (approximately 33 m) into the pyramid. Clearly, then, there was already some sort of passage – albeit a blocked one – leading into the pyramid even before al-Ma'mūn arrived. The existence of this passage is confirmed by an Arabic account, that of al-As'ad ibn Mammātī (d. 1209), which as quoted by al-Idrīsī runs as follows:

Among the marvelous tales of the pyramids is that when al-Ma'mūn entered Egypt and saw them, he wanted to demolish one and see what was inside. He was told that this was impossible. He said: "I must open one of them." So excavations were carried out, at great expense, *on the existing breach*. Fires were lit and ballistas were used to hurl projectiles at it. It was thus discovered that the wall was nearly twenty cubits thick.

(Idrisi 1991: 34–5; my emphasis)

From this account, it seems that al-Ma'mūn, like the visitors mentioned by Denis, imagined at first that the pyramid was hollow. After failing to knock it down, he decided to take advantage of the fact that someone had already tried to get inside. Whoever it was created a "breach," which is evidently the same as the "fissure" earlier explored by Denis. As the report explains, the passage into the pyramid was blocked at a certain point by a wall, which the caliph's workmen proceeded to demolish.

The work of modern Egyptologists makes it clear that this reconstruction is plausible. According to Stadelmann, there was indeed a tunnel leading into the pyramid: namely, the tunnel opened by tomb robbers during the First Intermediate Period (2081–2055 BC). The robbers had made a breach below and to the west of the original entrance, which had been blocked over on the outside. They then excavated a tunnel into the corridor that ascends from the original entrance. This corridor had been sealed with three granite plugs. After digging around the last of the plugs, the robbers followed the ascending corridor up to the gallery and the burial chamber. There they broke open the sarcophagus of Cheops and removed the grave goods placed around it (Stadelmann 1991: 110 ff. For a helpful illustration of the robbers' tunnel – not the same as the so-called *Grabräubergang*, a misnomer for the well shaft [idem: 116–18] – see Lehner 1997: 40). Then, at some point during the Ramesside period (1295–1069 BC), the desecrated burial chamber was restored. After the restoration was finished, the tunnel was re-blocked to prevent further violations of the tomb. This blockage – what Ibn Mammātī calls the "wall" – stood for some two millennia, at which point the caliph knocked it down. The description of what his party found on the other side – the "passages going up and others going down," the "cubical room," the "closed basin of marble" containing "nothing but decayed remains" – leaves little doubt that they did get through.

To some modern readers, the account of al-Ma'mūn's pyramid-expedition appears to be a patchwork of legendary elements familiar from other sources: the inquisitive ruler, the "native informant," the triumph of ancient wisdom over modern imperitence. But a closer reading reveals that none of the seemingly legendary elements behaves the way it is supposed to. If the account were pure fantasy, we would expect

the caliph's informant to produce reminders of the vanity of human endeavor, like Dhū al-Nūn's mystical "translations" of ancient writing. As for the pyramid break-in, the Arabic sources claim only that the caliph entered the pyramid and found nothing there of interest. Legendary treatments of similar episodes – such as, for example, al-Mas'ūdī's story about the tomb guarded by sword-wielding automata – have it the other way around: the pyramid or temple is full of treasure but no one can get in. If al-Idrīsī's account is a barefaced lie, it is surely one of the most timid lies in the history of Arabic letters. None of this means, of course, that al-Ma'mūn was practicing Egyptology in the modern sense of the word. Rather, it seems, he was seeking to satisfy his curiosity about the occult sciences of the ancients, precisely as he had done with the works of Aristotle. Our modern awareness that his efforts cannot have succeeded makes it no less likely that they did take place.

5 'Abd al-Laṭīf

Al-Idrīsī's veracity on the matter of the pyramids notwithstanding, much of the material on ancient Egypt preserved in the works of Arabic authors is clearly legendary. Many of the legends come from Greek, Syriac, and Coptic sources, meaning that the Arabic authors can hardly be accused of having especially lively imaginations. As we have seen in the case of al-Mas'ūdī, the recourse to legend seems often to have been a response to the lack of genuine historical information. One author, 'Abd al-Laṭīf al-Baghdādī, is noteworthy for a different reason: he was able – in one book at least – to eschew legends almost completely. Instead of telling stories about the objects he sees, he describes them in great detail. This response is hardly typical, but it certainly merits our attention.

Like al-Ma'mūn and al-Mas'ūdī, 'Abd al-Laṭīf came to Egypt from Baghdad. Born in 1162, he received an education in Hadith, grammar, and the other religious sciences. He then traveled to Jerusalem to meet Saladin, who was fighting the Crusaders in Palestine. Having obtained the patronage of Saladin's secretary, he went to Egypt to meet fellow scholars, among them the famous Jewish thinker Moses Maimonides. After studying the ancient philosophers, taking up medicine, and renouncing alchemy, he went on to teach the religious and philosophical sciences in Damascus, Cairo, Jerusalem, and elsewhere. He wrote extensively on medicine and produced an autobiography that has been partially preserved. He eventually returned to Baghdad, where he died in 1231 or 1232 (Stern 1960; Toorawa 2001). The only work of his to have survived in its entirety is a description of Egypt, ancient and modern, called *al-Ifādah wa l-i'tibār* (Information and contemplation). Along with al-Maqrīzī's *Topography*, it was one of the first Arabic accounts of Egypt to become known to European scholars. The pioneering Orientalist Edward Pococke (d. 1691) helped his son translate some of it into Latin, though the complete work was not published until 1800 (de Sacy 1801: xii–xv). It was also translated into German in 1790; into French (by de Sacy) in 1801; and into English in 1965 by translators who claimed to have received supernatural communications from the author but whose rendering is nevertheless riddled with errors (see the review by Serjeant 1966).

In his description of Memphis, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf says that the monuments, despite the ravages of four thousand years, “contain wonders that overwhelm the observer and stymie the eloquent.” The more one looks, the more astonishing the place seems, “and no matter how many insights come to mind as you contemplate it, beyond them lie glimpses of something greater still” (‘Abd al-Laṭīf 1983: 54). Yet does not try to explain what he sees by repeating legends, which he calls *al-manqūl*, “transmitted material,” and which he claims to have recorded in another book. Here he describes and analyzes only *al-mushāhad*, “the observable” (p. 48). Accordingly, the book contains many precise descriptions of ancient artifacts. Describing the obelisks he saw in Heliopolis, he writes:

A base measuring ten spans by ten spans by ten spans is planted firmly in the earth. On top of it is placed a tapered rectangular solid some one hundred spans in height. Its radius at the base seems to be about five spans, and it ends in a point. The peak is covered with a cap of brass, like a funnel, to a length of some three spans. Because of rain and age, the brass is covered in verdigris, which has run down onto the sides of the obelisk. (51)

As this passage indicates, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf was intent on taking measurements whenever he could. In his account of Alexandria, he gives estimates for the height of Pompey’s Pillar and the dimensions of the lighthouse (pp. 51, 53). In Giza, he tried to calculate the length of the buried body of the Sphinx based on the proportions of the head. He also sent a man to the top of the Great Pyramid to measure the flat space at the peak using his turban-cloth. His remarks about the pyramid support Stadelmann’s reconstruction of its history: the interior, he says, is fully accessible, not by the original entrance but through “a tunnel discovered by chance” by the caliph al-Ma’mūn. Hoping to see the interior for himself, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf went some distance down the tunnel but then “fainted at the terrifying prospect of the ascent” and “barely made it out alive” (p. 47).

On the basis of his observations, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf tries to guess the thinking behind the objects he sees. For example, he points out that the shape of the pyramids distributes weight evenly and makes the structure more stable, while the orientation of the edges lessens the impact of the wind. In Memphis, he noticed that one of the building stones had split, revealing a sort of drill-hole surrounded by rust and verdigris; this, he reasons, must be where the builders poured molten metal to hold the stones together (p. 55). Even when he cannot make sense of what he sees, he has no doubt that every object has a purpose. In Heliopolis, for example, he saw “images of planets and celestial spheres and people and animals in all sorts of positions, some standing, some walking, some with their legs outstretched and others with their feet together, some with their sleeves rolled up for work, and others carrying tools, some using them to point.” These images, he says, cannot have been put there for mere decoration. Rather, they must have been intended to depict “matters of grave importance,” although he cannot guess what they may have been (pp. 54–5).

As we have seen, it is common for Islamic-period observers to make sense of the monuments by imposing interpretations derived from the rich body of legend

about the ancient world. ‘Abd al-Laṭīf does the opposite: that is, he uses his observations of the monuments to help explain features of the narrative tradition. So impressive are the Egyptian “idols,” he says, that it is little wonder that the Children of Israel, who lived in Egypt for a long time, should have wanted one of their own. He even tries to explain contemporary religious practices by reference to the supposed beliefs of the ancients. The Coptic practice of “using images in their churches,” he says, including images of “their god with the angels around him,” can be traced back to “the practice of their forefathers.” Strikingly, he defends the ancient Egyptians against the charge of idolatry: regardless of what their descendants may think, the ancients cannot have been so ignorant as to imagine that God could be reduced to material form (pp. 60–1).

Several remarks that ‘Abd al-Laṭīf makes in passing reveal aspects of popular attitudes toward ancient Egypt and its monuments. So marvelous are some of the ancient constructions that “a discerning observer might well forgive the common people for thinking that the ancients were long-lived men of gigantic proportions who could make stones fly wherever they wanted by striking them with sticks” (p. 57). Unfortunately, the rulers of his day have not maintained the custom of preserving the monuments as testaments to the truth of scripture and as evidence for the genius of the ancients. Instead, when they see a magnificent building, people’s minds “turn first to what they love most, namely the dirham and the dinar.” In their search for hidden treasures, they have toppled statues, drilled through stone walls, and dug their way into hillsides, often wasting all of their own money in the process. Treasure hunters are encouraged by the discovery of mummies, which are sometimes covered partially or completely in gold leaf. Usually, though, the tomb robbers are disappointed. In one case, a large jar turned out to contain nothing but tiny mummified fish, each of which turned to dust on being opened (pp. 61, 65; see further El-Daly 2005: 95–107).

Eager though he is to understand and explain what he sees, ‘Abd al-Laṭīf is also capable of responding to works of ancient Egyptian art as objects of aesthetic interest in themselves. Commenting on the lifelike symmetry of the ancient statues, he writes:

When you look at a graven image, you notice how the chest separates from the neck at the collarbone with extraordinary symmetry. The chest then rises, with the breasts extending outwards in marvelous proportion and projecting outward to the nipples, which are depicted on a scale appropriate to the enormous size of the figure. The breasts slope inward to the sternum, to where the heart and the cleft of the throat are, then down to the place where the flanks are ribbed and curved, exactly as they are on a living creature. (‘Abd al-Laṭīf 1983: 56)

With his physician’s eye, he goes on to describe the rest of the figure, adding that “some images are depicted with hands grasping a cylinder . . . apparently representing a scroll, with indications of the folds and wrinkles that appear on the palm of the hand near the little finger when a person closes his fist” (p. 57). It is not clear why ‘Abd al-Laṭīf’s sober reflections on Egyptian antiquities, though available to Orientalists from an early date, should have been overshadowed by the more fanciful account of al-Maqrīzī.

6 Islamic Egypt and Modern Egypt

One of the places where conventional labels fail us is the borderland between “Islamic Egypt” and “Modern Egypt.” Taken literally, the labels imply that Islam has no place – or no legitimate place – in the modern world. Yet the Muslim population of Egypt, both in absolute terms and as a proportion of the total population, is greater than at any time during the so-called “Islamic period.” More to the point, perhaps, many Egyptian thinkers have expended a good deal of energy trying to reconcile Islam and modernity, making it difficult to declare the problem solved by terminological fiat. To address this difficulty, we might decide to place the beginning of the modern period at the moment when the harmonization of Islam and modernity first presents itself as a problem. Even then, however, no single date presents itself as the obvious candidate. In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, Egypt developed the institutions characteristic of the modern nation-state. Today, the courts apply traditional Islamic law only in cases dealing with marriage, divorce, and the like. Even so, Egypt has never ceased to be a Muslim country, if by that one means that the majority of citizens profess Islam and consider it normative in the public sphere as well as in private life. The upshot of all this is that the modern period began some time ago without the Islamic period ever having ended. To live up to its title, then, this essay must offer an account – if necessarily a sketchy one – of the image of ancient Egypt in the modern as well as the pre-modern period.

The last author cited in El-Daly’s recent survey of classical Arabic writings on ancient Egypt is Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. 1505), who wrote a short essay consisting of old reports and poems about the pyramids (Suyūṭī 1939). Over the next three centuries, other treatises on Egyptian history and antiquities were doubtless written in Arabic. If al-Suyūṭī’s little essay is any guide, such works may well have included citations from earlier works now lost. Unfortunately, these three centuries fall into a period called the “decline” or the “decadence” (*al-inḥitāt*), which for ideological reasons has until recently been neglected by Arab and Western scholarship alike (Fieni 2005; Bauer 2007). As a result, there is little if any published evidence for the period between 1500 and 1800, at least not in Arabic. (For a discussion of Ottoman materials, and of Arabic sources in manuscript, see Haarmann 1996 and further references cited.)

The author most commonly associated with the Egyptian transition to modernity is ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Jabartī (d. 1822), who witnessed and wrote about the French occupation. In one of his chronicles, he mentions a group of Englishmen who explored the pyramids and sent home the head of a large statue found in Upper Egypt (Reid 2002: 36–37, 39–40). After al-Jabartī, classical Arabic images of ancient Egypt came to be supplemented and eventually replaced – at least among the literate – by ideas derived from European scholarship. A pioneer in this process was Rifā‘ah al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, a traditionally trained Muslim who studied in France from 1826 to 1831. (While in Paris, he met Silvestre de Sacy, whom he describes as wonderfully adept at reading and writing Arabic but “unable to speak it unless he has a book in his hands.” After returning home, al-Ṭaḥṭāwī founded an official School of Languages and translated – or supervised the translation of – scientific works, including a history of

ancient Egypt. In 1868, he published his own history of the country. Although it drew heavily on current European Egyptology, the *Anwār tawfiq al-jalīl* (Lights of divine guidance) nevertheless attempted to salvage some elements of the classical Arabic tradition, including the designation of the ancient Egyptians as Sabians (Reid 2002: 108–112).

In the course of the nineteenth century, Egypt's rulers began to adopt Pharaonic images as official tokens, and to sponsor or sanction the foundation of Egyptological institutions. In 1829, the government journal *al-Waqā'i' al-miṣriyyah* (Egyptian events) placed a drawing of a pyramid on its masthead. In 1835, Muhammad 'Alī issued a decree banning the export of antiquities and calling for them to be sent to al-Ṭaḥṭāwī, who was to display them in Cairo (Reid 2002: 54–56). Even so, a permanent museum was not built until 1863. Founded by Auguste Mariette (d. 1881), it was intended not only for European visitors but also for Egyptians seeking to learn about “the history of their country.” The museum's guidebook, originally written in French by Mariette, was translated by one of al-Ṭaḥṭāwī's students into Arabic (pp. 103–7). From 1867 to 1914, Egyptian postage stamps featured an image of the Sphinx with a pyramid in the background. In 1876, the Sphinx along with two pyramids appeared on the masthead of *al-Abrām*, now Egypt's semi-official daily newspaper. The “garbled history of the pyramids of Giza” that appeared in the first issues included “speculations that the pyramids were built to preserve knowledge before the Flood, to store grain, or to observe the stars” (p. 118), indicating that some elements of the classical tradition still survived.

In his monograph on Egyptology and national identity, Donald Malcolm Reid has traced the careers of several indigenous scholars who joined their European counterparts in the scientific study of the past. These include Joseph Hekekyan (d. 1875), an Armenian who carried out archaeological excavations in Heliopolis and Memphis; Maḥmud al-Falakī (d. 1885), an astronomer who reconstructed the topography of ancient Alexandria; Ali Mubārak (d. 1893), the author of a massive topographical study modeled on the work of al-Maqrīzī; and Aḥmad Nagīb (d. 1910), translator of the first Hieroglyphic textbook in Arabic. The most prominent figure is Aḥmad Kamāl (d. 1923), who studied Egyptology at the school founded by Mariette but had to earn a living as a translator until, with the help of the French scholar Gaston Maspéro (d. 1916), he was able to found an institute of his own. Although the institute was short-lived, Kamāl went on to publish numerous site reports, translations, and works of original research, and to lecture in ancient history at the newly founded Egyptian University. Even so, in an era when Lord Cromer, the British Consul-General, could declare that “the Egyptians are as yet [not] civilized enough to care about the preservation of their ancient monuments,” Kamāl rarely received the recognition he deserved (pp. 172–212).

In the course of the twentieth century, the Pharaonic past – filtered largely though not exclusively through the work of Egyptologists – became an inseparable part of the nation's image of itself. Egypt achieved formal independence from Britain the same year that Tutankhamun's tomb was brought to light, a coincidence that “linked archaeology and politics as never before” (p. 293). The monumental Pharaonic-themed sculptures of Mahmud Mukhtar (d. 1934), including the famous *Nahḍat Miṣr* (The Awakening of Egypt), which features a woman lifting her veil beside the

Sphinx, have become iconic symbols of continuity with the past. The first three books published by the Nobel-Prize winning author Nagīb Maḥfūz (often spelled Naguib Mahfouz, d. 2006) were historical novels set in ancient Egypt. After the revolution of 1952, Egyptians assumed full control of its museums and archaeological sites, and soon after began making findings of their own, including a ceremonial boat in Giza. “Today, the busts of Aḥmad Kamāl and several other Egyptian Egyptologists have joined the once exclusively European gallery of scholars that frame the Mariette monument in the Garden of the Egyptian Museum” (p. 294).

Now re-indigenized, the symbols of the past have become commonplace: Cairo’s central train station is called Ramses, Egypt Air’s fleet features a depiction of Horus, and the local brand of cigarettes is called Cleopatra. Beyond these ubiquitous symbols, there survives what seems to be a genuinely popular tradition of superstitious reverence for certain monuments. In *The Collar and the Bracelet* (1977), a novel by Yaḥyā al-Ṭāhir ‘Abd Allāh (d. 1981), a rural woman who cannot have children is depicted as spending the night in an ancient temple, where she is impregnated, presumably by one of the guards. If at all true to life, this depiction suggests that the temple provided a socially sanctioned venue for working around the problem of male infertility. Even among educated urban Muslims, it is not uncommon to hear about remote villages “where they still speak Coptic.” In reality, relatively few Coptic words survive in modern spoken Arabic (Bishai 1959; Hinds and Badawi 1986).

To some extent, the notion of proud continuity from ancient times is counterbalanced by reservations about the blatantly polytheistic and idolatrous character of ancient Egyptian religion. In the Qur’ān, Pharaoh is a tyrant, and in Islamic tradition a symbol of oppression and injustice. When the jihadist Khālīd al-Islāmbūlī assassinated President Anwar al-Sadat in 1981, he reportedly called out: “I have killed the Pharaoh!” Conversely, some Egyptians take comfort in arguing that Ikhnaton was a monotheist prophet, like Abraham. But the ambivalence remains. It is perhaps most concisely symbolized by the banknotes, which display a Pharaonic monument on one side and an Islamic one on the other. In this respect, Egypt is hardly unique: both modern Greece and modern Iran, to take only two examples, have witnessed lively and often acrimonious debates over the relationship between past and present. Whether Egypt will follow Greece, which has largely embraced its ancient heritage, or Iran, which under the current regime has rejected significant parts of it, remains to be seen.

FURTHER READING

Few of the original Arabic sources on ancient Egypt are available in English, and even fewer are well translated. An exception is Suyūṭī (1939), although it offers only a glimpse of the tradition. Many sources – including Mas‘ūdī (1966) – have been translated into French, but most of the editions are old and hard to find. The most efficient way to consult the Arabic authors is, therefore, through El-Daly 2005, which brings together citations from a wide range of sources in summary or in translation. As a work of criticism and analysis, it is hardly exemplary: it takes the Arabic sources as representing some abstract field called “Egyptology,” which seems to have the same goals and methods no matter where or when it is practiced. Specialists will also

find the arbitrary transliterations of Arabic irritating. Even so, El-Daly offers an excellent starting point for further research, not least because of the ample bibliography. Another good overview is Haarmann (1996), which is less a survey than a catalogue of the attitudes and approaches evident in the work of Arabic (and a few Ottoman Turkish) writers on ancient Egypt. It also contains many references to further studies, including others by Haarmann in English. Like El-Daly's, Haarmann's work might be criticized for paying little attention to the literary and historical context of the works it surveys. Nevertheless, any such study would have to take Haarmann and El-Daly as starting points, if only for the sheer volume of material they have unearthed. The period from roughly 1800 to the early twentieth century is covered in exhaustive detail in Reid (2002), which treats the European and Egyptian discourses in tandem.