



PROJECT MUSE®

The Antiqakhana

Published by

Colla, Elliott.

Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity.

Duke University Press, 2008.

Project MUSE. <https://dx.doi.org/10.1353/book.65105>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/65105>



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

[172.70.100.181] Project MUSE (2025-04-04 23:07 GMT)

The Antiqakhana (1835–55)

The relics of the past, the dignity of the present.

—EDMÉ JOMARD, commenting on the *Antiqakhana*,
in *Coup-d'oeil impartial sur l'état présent de l'Égypte*

While Europeans interpreted hieroglyphs and claimed a superior knowledge of Egypt, past and present, a new generation of Egyptian intellectuals was becoming aware of the analytical and moral power of Egyptology. For nineteenth-century Egyptians, knowledge of ancient Egypt was part of a science that was European not just in its method and practice, but also in its cultural orientation. At the same time, the first generation of Egyptians to study in Europe was exposed there to the new science of Egyptology and began to adopt the concepts and practices of the European institutions. This development was not linear but rather one of fits and starts. No wonder, for the cultural field in which it took place was characterized by irresolvable conflicts and ongoing struggles: from tensions *within* traditions (as in the ambivalent image of Pharaonic antiquity within classical Arabic literature) to ones *between* discourses (such as that between Islamic traditions concerning ancient Egypt and the new Egyptology); from conflicts between particular institutional actors (such as foreign museums and Egyptian government agencies) to the deeper, agonistic structures engendered by European colonial encroachment across North Africa.

Nothing better exemplifies the tensions and uncertainties of these forces than the legacy of the 1835 ordinance. For all its shortcomings, the document attempted to establish new ways of relating to Egyptian antiquities. Part of the address of the ordinance was explicitly negative, prohibiting and restricting certain kinds of activities, from unauthorized

excavation, sales, and transportation of antiquities to the inhabitation of monuments and their use as sources of building material. The decree also attempted to invent a productive relationship between modern Egyptians and Pharaonic artifacts by creating new institutions (such as the museum), new governmental positions (such as those of the antiquities inspectors), and new modes of appreciation (such as tourism). These two tendencies—the prohibitory and the productive—appear clearly in the language of the ordinance:

Considering then the importance that the Europeans attach to the ancient monuments and the advantages that the study of antiquity brings them, considering further the abundant riches which Egypt, that marvel of the centuries, contains in its breast, the Counsel of the Egyptian Government has thought it proper to decree:

1. That the future export of antiquities of all kinds be strictly prohibited.

2. That all such objects which the government possesses or shall come to possess through future excavations and exploration, be deposited in a special place in Cairo where they can be preserved and conveniently arranged for public exhibition, particularly for travelers and foreigners who arrive daily to view them throughout the country.

3. That not only is it expressly forbidden to destroy the ancient monuments of Upper Egypt but the government should take measures to insure their preservation everywhere.

This wise measure would have the double effect of forever preserving the integrity of the monuments for travelers and insure, at all times and in the heart of Egypt itself, the permanent existence of a rich collection of antiquities, truly meriting attention.¹

Although the ordinance should not be confused with policy (much less implementation), it did establish a new kind of language, one based in preservationist principles, that much later became official law and common practice. Part of the cause of the delay between decree and policy is signaled in the language of the ordinance itself and how it acknowledges that the value of preserving the artifacts has to do with foreign, not local, Egyptian, interest.

With respect to the productive aspects of Egyptian antiquities directives, the museum had an especially privileged place and thus provides a view into the scope, the conflicts, and the limitations of the new state attitude toward antiquities management. The ordinance formally established a special space for the storage and exhibition of antiquities (*al-Antiqakhana*) in the School of Translation (*Madrasat al-alsun*), located in the Western-oriented quarter of Ezbekiyya. The Antiqakhana could not have asked for a director who was abler, or who enjoyed more state support, than Rifa'ā Rafī' al-Tahtawi (1801–73). As a member of the first Egyptian educational mission to France (1826–31), Tahtawi was a natural choice for the job and had studied under the orientalist de Sacy and other scholars of ancient languages and cultures. Though the two may not have met, at one point, Champollion wrote one of the reports on Tahtawi's progress that were sent to Mehmed 'Ali.² As we shall see, in the course of his career, Tahtawi developed an innovative, complex understanding of ancient Egypt, much of it stemming from his studies in Paris.

As Donald Malcolm Reid has pointed out, the life of Tahtawi's museum was short and obscure. Only a few years after its establishment, Gliddon visited the place. His evaluation of the museum was typically harsh:

A National Museum of Egyptian Antiquities. Sublime and felicitous conception! Echoed by the *Semaphor de Marseilles*, as a new evidence, “que ce sublime Vieillard ne rêve qu'à la prospérité, et à la régénération de l'Égypte”—re-echoed by Societies in Europe, as another proof of the progress of science under the enlightened Mohammed Ali! But with respect to the Museum, seeing that it was a subject exciting too general an interest to be accepted on the mere faith of a promise, some steps were required to make the seriousness of the intention apparent. In consequence, an old Lumberroom, or Gallery, in the palace situated in the Esbekeyyah . . . was swept out, and whitewashed; and its Key, with the protection of this so-called Museum, was placed under the guardianship of the “Ministère d'Instruction Publique” [Tahtawi]. . . . Years have rolled away, and there is no museum, but that identical empty corridor at Cairo, for I cannot regard the half-dozen valueless stones there placed as even the nucleus of a collection.³

It is tempting to discount Gliddon's description of the museum in light of his dismissive attitude toward all the projects undertaken by Mehmed 'Ali.

Yet his description confirms the account of another traveler, the noted Egyptologist John Gardner Wilkinson, who was (in contrast to Gliddon) enthusiastic about the pasha's endeavors.⁴ Wilkinson describes first the private collection of antiquities in the palace of the pasha's son:

Ibrahim Pasha has also begun a collection of Egyptian antiquities; and a veto being put to the removal of antiquities from Egypt, great hopes have been entertained of the success of his museum. It is now about ten or eleven years since this collection has been commenced, and in 1831 a Turk was employed at Thebes in excavating, and preventing all access to the underground treasures not sanctioned by government authority. I therefore expected, on my return to Egypt in 1841, to find many objects of interest at the palace, where they are now deposited. My surprise and disappointment were therefore great, when on entering the passage and room where they are kept, I found nothing but a confused mass of broken mummies and cases, some imperfect tablets, and various fragments, which, had they been capable of being spoilt, would have been rendered valueless by the damp of the place; and I can safely say that there was nothing which, had it been given me, I should have thought worth the trouble of taking back to Cairo.⁵

Ironically, only a few years before one might have lodged the same complaint of neglect against the British Museum's treatment of its basement of Egyptian antiquities. But Wilkinson's bleakest assessment of Egyptian antiquarianism is reserved for the official Antiquakhana:

There is also a collection of antiquities belonging to Mohammed Ali, which is occasionally increased by those seized at the Custom-house, in the possession of persons unauthorised by special favour to take them out of the country. It was to have formed part of a museum to be erected in the Uzbekeeh; but the formation of a museum in Egypt is purely Utopian; and while the impediments raised against the removal of antiquities from Egypt does an injury to the world, Egypt is not a gainer. The excavations are made without knowledge or energy, the Pasha is cheated by those who work, and no one there takes any interest in a museum; and it would not be too much to predict that, after all the vexatious impediments thrown in the way of Europeans, no such institution will ever be formed by the Pasha of Egypt.⁶

From here, the Antiquakhana seems to have only deteriorated. As Donald Reid has pointed out,

After Muhammad Ali, Abbas I paid sporadic attention to antiquities, ordering two engineers to inspect Upper Egypt and the director of education to report on sites near Cairo. According to Gaston Maspero, Abbas moved the Ezbekiyya collection to the citadel in 1851, but another source asserts that in October 1849 Abbas ordered the School of Languages transferred to Nasriyya. . . . For want of space there, the antiquities were moved to the School of Engineering in Bulaq. In any case, Abbas drew on the collection for a gift to Sultan Abdulaziz, and Said [his successor] presented the remainder to Archduke Maximilian in 1855.⁷

The short, ignominious history of the Antiquakhana illustrates the degree to which formal declarations, like the 1835 ordinance, might remain mere words on the page. So too might the ideas behind them—like preservationism or national patrimony—exist only on the level of concept. By 1855, the collection of Egypt's first indigenous antiquities museum had dissolved. It would be some time before there would be serious state investment to regulate the continuing commercial traffic of antiquities. Effective laws governing the use of antiquities would come even later.

Nonetheless, the false start of the Egyptian state museum is a salient event because it illustrates the real ambiguity toward antiquities among mid-nineteenth-century Egyptians and the ruling Ottoman-Egyptian elite. It is not the case that Egyptians were indifferent toward Pharaonic artifacts, or that they were slow to take up the new science concerning ancient Egypt. Indeed, the Egyptian state's initial formulation of antiquities norms and its movement to form a museum dedicated to the collection and preservation of artifacts express a scholarly attitude toward Pharaonic antiquities that in some ways was ahead of that of some curators at the British Museum. At the same time, whatever new ideas were forming about the ancient past would have little if any life without public institutions to nurture them. For this reason, the example of the Antiquakhana indicates both how quickly a new discourse on Egyptian artifacts might emerge in Cairo and what work would need to be done if it was to take hold.