

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

NAS-6

An Uneasy Inheritance

3 Yishay St.

Abu Tor

Jerusalem, Israel

April 10, 1985

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
4 West Wheelock St.
Hanover, New Hampshire, USA

Dear Peter,

Since most of my archaeological experience has been in Israel, where the political and religious significance of archaeology is taken for granted, I was interested to discover the different relationship that modern Egyptians have to their archaeological heritage. In Egypt, unlike Israel, religion separates rather than unites the modern nation with its past. And in conversations with several archaeologists working in Egypt, I became aware of the difficult, not always successful struggle now underway to reconcile inherited western understandings of Egypt's ancient history with modern culture and nationalism.

This struggle is going on all over Egypt, but I found that one of the best places to observe it is the modern town of Luxor. In the magnificence of its ancient monuments and the number of tourists who come to see them, Luxor is rivaled only by the Pyramids. Situated about 300 miles south of Cairo on the site of the ancient Egyptian capital and religious center of Thebes, Luxor has been the scene of continuous archaeological activity and the focus of intense scholarly interest since the early 19th century.

As modern scholars have discovered, Luxor's history stretches back more than 4000 years, to the time of the establishment of the first permanent settlement by the kings of the XIth Dynasty, around 2100 BC. For the succeeding two and a half millennia, the temples and tombs of the city continued to be embellished and honored in deference to its divine patron, the royal god Amun. But with the coming of Christianity in the 4th century AD and, 300 years later, with the coming of Islam, the ancient tradition was cut off. The population dwindled and the temples became huge quarries for building materials and convenient shelters in which much more modest structures were built. The former significance of the place was only vaguely remembered by the local inhabitants, who called the area al-Uqsur, "the palaces," a name slurred into "Luxor" by European explorers of the late 18th century whose peculiar fascination with antiquity led them to start digging and to resurrect the splendor of ancient Thebes.

The chain of religious tradition was not completely severed,

Neil Silberman is an Institute Fellow studying the political and cultural impact of current archaeological research in the Middle East.

but it was the European explorers, rather than the Egyptians themselves, who recognized the link. One of the clearest examples of religious continuity is right in the center of Luxor; it is the mosque and shrine of the medieval Muslim saint Yusuf Abu al-Haggag, nestled in the peristyle courtyard of the Luxor temple, a spot sanctified continuously since the 14th century BC. The practice of a yearly pilgrimage and procession is common to saints' shrines throughout the Muslim world, but here the procession takes an uncharacteristic form. The spirit of Abu al-Haggag is paraded around the town in a boat, just as his predecessor in the temple, Amun-Min, appeared to the public in his sacred barque.

Thousands of Upper Egyptians will participate in Abu al-Haggag's procession, which will be held on May 5th this year, but a patriotic pride in its direct connection to the ancient Festival of Opet will not be part of the festivities. The study of ancient Egyptian religious ritual is the preserve primarily of western archaeologists like Dr. William Murnane of the Epigraphic Survey of the University of Chicago, who has spent the last 13 years in Luxor trying to piece together the meaning of the ancient reliefs in the Luxor temple in the shadow of Abu al-Haggag's mosque.

When I spoke with Murnane in his office in "Chicago House," the headquarters of the American expeditions to Luxor for the last sixty years, he cautiously expressed his uneasiness living in a society that takes disappointingly little interest in its monuments, apart from their direct connection to the tourist trade. Murnane and his colleagues on the Epigraphic Survey are continuing a project begun in 1923 by Professor James Henry Breasted: the careful and systematic recording of the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the walls of the Luxor monuments, which are steadily deteriorating due to their exposure to the air, the salinity of the groundwater, and the damage caused by the constant flow of tourist groups.

Professor Breasted saw it to be an obligation of civilization to preserve the monuments of Egyptian antiquity for future generations and Bill Murnane has devoted his career to pursuing that ideal. His doctoral dissertation on the concept of Co-Regency in Ancient Egypt (a subject "very much in the Chicago tradition," Murnane proudly emphasized) has provided scholars with a new understanding of the development of Egyptian political thinking and his work on the reliefs of the Luxor temple has uncovered new evidence linking the Festival of Opet with the annual renewal of the power of the king. Despite these accomplishments, Murnane recognizes how wide an ideological gulf separates his academic work from the reality of Egypt today.

"Our relations with the Egyptian Antiquities Organization are good and they appreciate what we're doing," Murnane told me, "but

you have to remember that this is an Islamic country. A few months ago, I had an experience that really underscored that fact for me."

This was a story that Murnane had obviously told many times before, and he leaned back in his desk chair, happy to tell it again. He explained that he had decided to take a field trip to visit the ancient temple of Denderah, about an hour's drive to the north of Luxor, and as luck would have it, he shared the trip in a service taxi with a distinguished-looking gadi, a Muslim religious judge. The gadi took an interest in Murnane, whom he could tell was not an ordinary tourist. He was surprised at Murnane's fluent Arabic and he asked him how long he'd been in Egypt and what he did for a living.

When Murnane told the gadi that he was an archaeologist and that he'd been working in Luxor for 13 years, trying to understand and preserve the most important ancient monuments of the country, their conversation noticeably cooled. The judge was unimpressed with Murnane's devotion to his work and he said no more for the rest of the trip. But as Murnane was getting out of the taxi, the gadi turned to him, shook his head disapprovingly and said, "The pharaohs are in the fire, you know..."

That was an extreme example of modern antagonism toward the country's pre-Islamic heritage; according to Murnane, a more common attitude is ambivalence. In Sadat's time, he explained, the Egyptian government was anxious to promote the glory of the pharaonic past and when the mummified body of Ramesses II was flown to France a few years ago for some much-needed preservation work in the laboratories of the Louvre, Sadat insisted that it be treated like an arriving head-of-state and be greeted on arrival with a 21-gun salute. And yet, soon afterwards, all the other pharaohs' mummies were withdrawn from display in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, as the official explanation goes, to avoid offending religious sensibilities.

Even the symbol chosen to be painted on the jeeps of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization is a sign of the uneasy role of antiquity in the modern Egyptian state. Of the countless motifs of ancient Egypt, the sun disc of the heretic pharaoh Akhenaten was chosen, to establish what might be considered a philosophical, if not direct continuity. Akhenaten was a king of the 14th century BC who took the drastic step-- for reasons that are unknown-- of abolishing the cults of all gods except for Aten, depicted as the sun with its rays streaming down, ending in hands extended in blessing. Akhenaten's religious experiment was short-lived and his successors went to great lengths to destroy all his works. But he did, at least, provide a visible image that bridges the modern gap between Islam and antiquity.

In addition to supplying the EAO with a symbol, Akhenaten can

also be seen throughout the country on posters distributed by the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism. Their caption, "Egypt, the Cradle of Monotheism," is not entirely convincing, for Akhenaten's was an isolated moment in history, not the beginning of a permanent religious change. Akhenaten and Bill Murnane's qadi represent separate chains of tradition; I don't think they'd have much to talk about.

* * *

Maybe a major source of the tension between past and present is the fact that archaeology in Egypt has always been a foreigner's game. Unlike the situation in Greece, Italy, and Israel, for example, where the original European antiquarianism was eventually overwhelmed by a local, nationalistic archaeology, Egyptians have until recently been quite content to accept as definitive foreign scholars' interpretations of their country's monuments, inscriptions, and artifacts.

After all, Jean Francois Champollion, a Frenchman, was the first modern scholar to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphics and the French predominance in Egyptology led to the perennial appointment of a French director of the Service des Antiquites de l'Egypte (as it used to be called) until the 1952 Revolution.

That predominance, though, was not uncontested, for after the British conquered the country in 1882, they granted themselves the privilege of appointing the second-ranking member of the archaeological hierarchy, the Inspector-General of Antiquities. The most famous British scholar to fill that position was Howard Carter, the discoverer of King Tutankhamun's Tomb. And Carter, perhaps more than any other foreign explorer, has left a pith-helmeted tradition of "gentlemanly archaeology" that is as seductive to the general public as it is difficult for modern archaeologists to overcome.

At first, when I arrived to visit a new excavation in the village of Sheikh Abd al-Qurnah on the western edge of the Nile Valley opposite Luxor, it seemed that nothing had changed in Carter's old stomping grounds. I was greeted by a scene reminiscent of a faded turn-of-the-century photograph: a cloud of dust rose from the slope above the village as a gang of workers in long galabiyas and white turbans hacked away at the parched soil partially covering an ancient tomb facade. Sitting nearby in a camp chair, a young archaeologist was intently writing in a notebook, glancing up every now and then to check on his workers' progress. But the similarity to the early days of Egyptian archaeology was only superficial; the archaeologist in charge of this excavation was a 27 year old officer of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization named Rady Ali Muhammed.

This excavation is not likely to grab any headlines; the tomb's

contents were plundered long ago. But the goal of the digging, unlike that of Howard Carter's famous search in the nearby Valley of the Kings or the work of earlier expeditions in Qurnah itself, is not the hunt for spectacular museum objects, but a methodical attempt to explore and record the valuable historical information that the early archaeologists had ignored.

The tomb that Rady is excavating in conjunction with Dr. Karl Syfreed is one of nearly 300 rock-cut burial chambers dating from the New Kingdom Period (c.1567 - c.1085 BC) when the area served as a cemetery for the Theban aristocracy. All the tombs were opened and examined by a succession of foreign archaeologists throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries, and all valuable objects that remained inside them were removed. But that isn't to say that a great deal can't still be learned from the "Tombs of the Nobles;" up to the time of the renewed excavations, many of the vivid reliefs and hieroglyphic inscriptions on the walls of the tomb chambers had never been properly photographed or transcribed.

As Karl Syfreed arrived at the site from another tomb under investigation and he and Rady led me down into the darkness of Tomb #68, they pointed out the eerie processions of human and divine figures still clearly visible on the back wall of the entrance hall. To the left of the entrance, the deceased and his family presented offerings to Re-Harakhty, the enthroned, hawk-headed spirit of the rising sun. To the right, an identical procession offered their gifts to the pale god Osiris, guardian of the Afterworld. Howard Carter and the other British Egyptologists who explored the Tombs of the Nobles from 1903 to 1913 found many such scenes depicting the ancient Egyptian duality of life and death, but in this particular tomb-- as Rady and Syfreed have discovered-- they had mistaken the identity of the aristocrat for whom the religious scene was so carefully executed.

Here was a typical case of usurpation, the unabashed re-occupation of a monument that belonged to someone else. The British Egyptologist Alan Gardiner, who published a report about the tomb in 1913, believed that it had belonged to a chief scribe and prophet of Amun named Nesu-pa-nefer-hor who was buried here around 1085 BC. But when Rady and Syfreed closely examined the wall paintings, they discovered traces of earlier hieroglyphics beneath Nesu-pa-nefer-hor's name. The prophet of Amun, they now believe, was just a pre-sumptuous newcomer. Not having the wealth to build his own sepulcher, he took over the tomb from a true nobleman of the XXth Dynasty, Pa-ankh-enamu, who lived nearly a century before.

Unfortunately, the new excavation is being carried out on a shoestring; gone are the days when wealthy European aristocrats would lavish their fortunes on digging up ancient aristocrats' tombs.

When Alan Gardiner dug here, he was supported by the largess of the British art lover and financier Sir Robert Mond. Syfreed and Rady have no such enthusiastic patron. Their limited resources, just about exhausted, come from what the budget-strained University of Heidelberg Egyptology Department and Egyptian Antiquities Organization can spare.

Tomb #68 doubles as their excavation storeroom; at one side of the entrance hall, Syfreed and Rady have stacked boxes of pottery fragments recovered from the excavation of the courtyard. They don't have the budget to attempt a clearance of the inner chambers, whose floors are littered with modern artifacts-- empty cigarette packages, wrappers, and tin cans left by the modern villagers. In a dark corner, near the opening of one of the burial chambers, were the disarticulated remains of an ancient occupant, possibly Nesu-pa-nefer-hor but probably an even later usurper, whose mummified head, torso, and hands patiently await detailed anthropological study. Archaeology at Qurnah these days, I discovered, just isn't what it used to be. The excitement, mystery, and glamor of an earlier archaeological era are gone.

That transition, though natural enough, is not without its own irony. I was surprised to learn that Rady, in his position as EAO inspector for Qurnah, now lives in "Carter's House." The day before, on my way to visit the Valley of the Kings, I had admired the elegant, domed villa built by the Earl of Carnarvon for Howard Carter while he was unpacking the fabulous treasures from the Tomb of King Tutankhamun. In its heyday, Carter's House was an oasis of upper-class British gentility, fully equipped for formal dinner parties and fully staffed with suitably trained Egyptian waiters and maids. Of course, dinner jackets are no longer worn there and the waiters and maids are gone. But I expected that Rady, as Carter's successor in Qurnah, would at least acknowledge the romantic spirit of the place.

His response surprised me when I told him I thought that Carter's House was a prestigious address for any archaeologist. Rady apparently didn't see the attraction and he didn't find the surroundings exotic in the least. His education at the University of Cairo may have trained him to be an archaeologist, but his own cultural outlook has led him to reject the conventional stereotype. The image of the refined scholar living the life of a gentleman-explorer in the wilderness is, simply, a concept he is uncomfortable with.

"My life here is very lonely," he admitted with almost painful candor, "and I'd like to find a woman to share it with me. I come from a good family in Cairo, but since my career requires me to be out here in the middle of nowhere, I'm afraid that marriage is im-

NAS-6

possible right now." For Inspector Rady Ali Muhammed of the Egyptian Antiquities Organization, Carter's House and the Tombs of the Noble possess no charm, no romance.

"What kind of parents," he asked me as I walked slowly out of the tomb with him, "would allow their daughter to live in a place like this?"

Best Regards,

Neil

Received in Hanover 5/1/85