



PANEL DISCUSSIONS (INVITED)

Interconnected Worlds: Ancient Egypt and its Neighbours

Moderator: Maria Carmela Gatto; Panellists: Ossama Abdel Mequid, Felix Höflmayer, Ezra S. Marcus, Elizabeth Minor

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Abstract

This panel discussed how Egyptology addresses ancient Egyptian interconnections; how interconnectedness is shared with and conveyed to modern Egyptians, their neighbours and the general audience; how it is delivered and displayed in museums and included in academic teaching; and how Egyptology interacts with other disciplines. Many issues have been raised during the discussion, and they mostly derive from the Egyptocentric, and self-centring views applied by Egyptology. There is a great need for decentering the discipline and interconnecting both ancient Egypt and Egyptology. And this must be done in a more inclusive and balanced way, one that really considers other cultures and other disciplines on equal standing with ancient and modern Egypt and Egyptology.

Keywords: interconnections, Egypt, Nubia, Levant

العولم المترابطة: مصر القديمة والشعوب المجاورة

الملخص

قامت هذه الجلسة علي تداول كيف يعمل علم المصريات علي تناول أوجه الترابط الخاصة بمصر القديمة: كما تطرقت الجلسة إلي كيف يتم توصيل ونقل هذا الترابط إلي المصريين المعاصرين والشعوب المجاورة وعامة الجمهور: وبالإضافة إلي مناقشة كيف يتم تقديم وعرض هذا الترابط في صلات المتاحف وكيف يتم إدراجه في مناهج التدريس الأكاديمي وتم الخوض أيضا في كيف يتفاعل علم المصريات مع التخصصات الأخرى. كما أثبت العديد من القضايا خلال المناقشة، والتي ترجع نشأة أغلبهم إلي وجهات النظر المتمحورة والمتركة حول مصر التي يتبناها علم المصريات. لذا يوجد حاجة ماسة لتفكيك مركزية التخصص وخلق روابط بين كل من مصر القديمة وعلم المصريات. وهذا يجب ان يتم من خلال طرق أكثر شمولاً وإتزاناً، أي بطريقة قادرة علي مراعاة الثقافات الأخرى و التخصصات الأخرى علي قدم المساواة مع مصر القديمة والحديثة وعلم المصريات.

الكلمات الدالة الترابط، مصر، النوبة، بلاد الشام

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1 Introduction

Interconnected Worlds: Ancient Egypt and its Neighbours was the ninth session in IntEg's inaugural panel discussion series. The panellists invited to the discussion are specialists in ancient Egyptian interconnections with the Eastern Mediterranean, the Levant and Nubia. Ezra Marcus is a maritime archaeologist who applies archaeometry and radiocarbon dating to the study of Egyptian-Levantine relations in the Middle Bronze Age. Felix Höflmayer is an Egyptologist and uses radiometric dating and Bayesian modelling to synchronise Eastern Mediterranean chronologies of the Bronze and Iron Ages. Ossama Abdel Meguid, an Egyptian Nubian, is a heritage and museum expert with extensive experience engaging with local communities, particularly of Nubian descent. Elizabeth Minor is an archaeologist interested in ancient Egypt and Nubia relations. She has brought to the debate the perspective of a scholar working in Sudan with Nubian communities. As a moderator, I contributed my expertise in interconnecting Egypt with Nubia and Africa, and the Egypto-Nubian historical narrative with its prehistoric roots. The discussion centred on addressing interconnectedness both in the study of ancient Egypt and in Egyptology as a discipline. Why does this matter? Why is there an urgency to address such a topic?

2 Discussion

Ancient Egypt was the product of an entangled system of interactions with its neighbours and through them with the wider world. While Egypt was at the centre of one of those systems, it also was at the periphery of many others. Perceiving Egypt as an island surrounded by the emptiness of the sea, as envisioned by ancient Egyptian mythology, or as a gift of the Nile only, as suggested by Herodotus, is therefore prescriptive and limited. Yet, such bounding and self-centring visions have had a great impact on the development of our discipline and in how we approach the interconnected world ancient Egypt existed in. We tend to have an imbalanced vision of the nature of these interactions. A top-down/centre-periphery one, with ancient Egypt being the giver/provider of civilization and its neighbours the receivers of it. Exceptions are made for the Near East, another cradle of civilization in the western mind, but not for Africa. Nubia is a case of its own; too close to be ignored but also not properly acknowledged. There is indeed a great need for decentring and interconnecting Egyptology, and, in the past years, efforts to do so have increased. For instance, in 2009 the Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections was established, and now there is our Interdisciplinary Egyptology journal. These journals provide a stage for talking about interconnectedness both in ancient Egypt and within Egyptology.

The session's conversation developed around several topics that we as panellists and moderator thought were critical to debate. The first dealt with how Egyptology addresses the interconnection between Egypt and the 'others', inside and outside of the ancient Egyptian territory (whatever that was throughout the millennia). Our perspective on the matter varied considerably. For Marcus and Höflmayer, there is a big difference in how interactions between ancient Egypt and the Levant on the one hand, and with Nubia on the other hand, are handled within the discipline. In their opinion, the Levant has always been seen as a distinct place with its own history, and Egyptology never strove to find common ground with Biblical Archaeology. More to the point, scholars working in the Levant have always used data from Egypt as an integral part of their research, but this rarely happens in Egyptology. There is a clear divide from an academic perspective, which is counterproductive when searching for interconnectedness. Höflmayer and Marcus perceives the attitude toward Nubian archaeology to be the reverse, with the study of ancient Nubia being an integral part of Egyptology. Abdel Meguid, Minor and I have remarked that, sadly, the 'Nubia' Egyptology is so keen to include is only that directly or indirectly related to Egypt (e.g., the study of Egyptian fortresses in Lower Nubia, but not of the indigenous settlements around them). The archaeology of Nubian communities, either in Nubia or in Egypt, has little to no place in Egyptology. In some ways, Nubia is facing a new wave of academic colonisation, with dramatic repercussions for current and

future scholarship. As stressed by Abdel Meguid, for this reason the study of ancient Nubia is not included in African Studies programmes. Instead, it is incorporated in Near Eastern Studies departments, out of its natural geographical and cultural context. Nubian Archaeology needs to be decolonised from Egyptology. Minor's experience working in Sudan is different from Abdel Meguid and mine, who work in Egypt: many of the American scholars working in Sudan are based in Anthropology departments, with no association to Egyptology. In the US, a very slow shift toward an academic decolonisation of Nubia from Egyptology has already been set in place. It is a pity though that to do so more and more of those scholars are using the term Sudanese Archaeology even when referring to the northern part of the Sudan, which in fact is Upper Nubia; perhaps we need also be aware of counter-colonisation as much as decolonisation. The panellists all agreed that a more balanced way of including the study of the ancient Levant and Nubia within Egyptology is needed. One that really considers the others' culture on equal standing and in a reciprocal manner. From my perspective, I commented on the fact that ancient Egypt also interacted with other neighbours, not only with the Levant and Nubia. Although the north-south axis of interaction is the most favoured in scholarship today, including in this session, there is an east-west axis that was equally important. Most recent scholarship in Saharan Studies, like the ERC Trans-SAHARA Project ¹ and its publication series, has tried to include the Nile Valley in a wider trans-Saharan narrative.

An issue related to this first topic that we all strongly felt needed to be addressed was the inability of using ancient Egyptian datasets for comparative analysis, despite both Levantine and Nubian studies relying heavily on Egyptian evidence for chronology. This is mainly owing to Egyptian law restricting the export of archaeological material and the difficulties facing in-country analysis. The most obvious impact in scholarship today is seen in the difficulty of building a chronological framework based on chronometric dating that could be comparable with those already established in surrounding regions, particularly the eastern Mediterranean and the Near East. To overcome such problem, a radiocarbon lab was set up almost two decades ago at the French Institute for Oriental Archaeology in Cairo (IFAO). However, only traditional beta counting methods are available, as opposed to accelerator mass spectrometry (AMS) radiocarbon dating. As for other scientific labs, there is an effort by the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities to establish these in Cairo; although at an early stage, such plans should be supported and assisted by the international Egyptology community. Marcus has commented that Egyptology is losing the chance of being at the forefront of comparative archaeological scholarship and expressed the hope that IntEg would serve as a vector for speeding up the growth of capacity building in Egypt.

A second theme of discussion focused on how ancient Egyptian interconnectedness is shared with and conveyed to modern Egyptians, their neighbours and the international public. Abdel Meguid explained how the difficulty in connecting modern communities with their past mainly derives from the fact that the knowledge we want to convey is deeply rooted into colonialist and nationalist views, both alien to the local people. Their history should be told in their own terms and stripped out of those imposed layers, particularly when it comes to minority communities such as the Nubians. Minor reminded us of the many successful examples of community archaeology currently active in Sudan, including her own, and how they are improving knowledge sharing and the involvement of local people with the protection of their own heritage. Abdel Meguid and I had to report, regrettably, that such activities are not easy to implement in Egypt. The Egyptocentric way ancient Egypt is often presented to modern Egyptians and the international public hinders attempts to address themes such as interconnectedness. This is also evident in museums displays. Ancient Egyptian and Levantine/Near Eastern objects are commonly exhibited separately. The Egyptian presence in the Levant and in Nubia is usually incorporated in the Egyptian display. Galleries dedicated to ancient Nubia are rare occurrences, and even when a museum is dedicated to the subject, like the Nubia Museum in Aswan, most of the objects on display are of Egyptian manufacture, just found in Nubia.

¹Project Website: Trans-SAHARA: State Formation, Migration and Trade in the Central Sahara (1000 BC - AD 1500)

3 Conclusion

Egyptology has a tendency of interacting with other disciplines in an oppressive, exclusive, and unbalanced manner—an approach that is also applied when sharing, conveying and displaying interconnectedness in ancient Egypt. As a prehistorian, I also feel a duty to stress the importance of interconnecting Egypt with its deep history, because the processes that made possible the rise of the ancient Egyptian civilisation go way back into the past and they must be acknowledged. Therefore, Prehistory is also a discipline Egyptology should aim to interact with. During our discussion it emerged many times how one of the core issues is the academic teaching of Egyptology and related disciplines. The traditional association of Egyptology with Near Eastern Studies and not African Studies prevent any form of interconnection with Egypt's African neighbours and geographical context. We have already established how the study of ancient Nubia is mostly overlooked. But there are few exceptions; for instance, in Poland and Italy the study of ancient Nubia is a discipline of its own (Nubiology). The change we aim to see in our discipline, a new way of interconnecting ancient Egypt and Egyptology, should in our opinion start by changing academic teaching. We sincerely hope the new generations of Egyptology students will fight for this achievement

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