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Towards Interdisciplinarity in Egyptology

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Abstract

This paper serves as an introductory remark to the proceeding Special Issue of *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*. It sets out the ideas and concepts behind interdisciplinarity in Egyptology, and defines what the journal's Editorial Board considers interdisciplinary to mean with regard to 21st century Egyptology. While setting out a definition of 'interdisciplinary' in Egyptology, we simultaneously define the terms intra-, multi-, cross- and transdisciplinary to avoid miscommunication.

Keywords: interdisciplinary, intradisciplinary, crossdisciplinary, multidisciplinary, transdisciplinary

نحو تعدد التخصصات في علم المصريات

الملخص

هذه الورقة البحثية بمثابة تمهيد لإجراء إصدار خاص من علم المصريات متعدد التخصصات. إنها تحدد الأفكار والمفاهيم الكامنة وراء تعددية التخصصات في علم المصريات ، وتعرف ما يعتبره مجلس تحرير المجلة متعدد التخصصات فيما يتعلق بعلم المصريات في القرن الحادي والعشرين. أثناء وضع تعريف متعدد التخصصات في علم المصريات ، نقوم في نفس الوقت بتعريف المصطلحات داخل ، ومتعدد ، وعبر ، وعابر التخصصات لتجنب سوء الفهم.

الكلمات الدالة داخل التخصصات، متعدد التخصصات، عبر التخصصات، عابر التخصصات، بين التخصصات

1 Introduction

Upon naming this new journal *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*, it felt necessary to take the time to set out in writing what exactly was meant by 'interdisciplinary'. According to Joe Moran (in his aptly titled book *Interdisciplinarity*) 'Interdisciplinarity has become a buzzword across many different academic subjects in recent years, but it is rarely interrogated in any great detail.' (MORAN, 2010: 1). Not only is it not often interrogated, it is a word that is used frequently, both academically and colloquially, without much precision. But words have meanings for a reason,

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and interdisciplinarity is something that can bring about significant rewards to the field of Egyptology; and it is true interdisciplinary research that this journal sets out to publish.

The term interdisciplinary is unfortunately entangled with similar terms that are often conflated with it ('multidisciplinary' being the first example that springs to mind, and perhaps the most prolific). Indeed, there are five prefixes that can be attached to '-disciplinary' that are relevant to this discussion: intra-, multi-, inter-, cross- and trans-. Confusion can often arise because these five terms, closely related but subtly different, still remain fairly new in the English language, and as a result, are frequently used with little precision.

It is thus essential to define these five words clearly; doing so helps to place the subject that is being addressed within its methodological and theoretical frameworks, and to better understand the perspectives, limitations and benefits that have directed that research.

2 The Five Definitions

With this in mind, we seek to define these five words for Egyptology. To achieve this, it must first be acknowledged that we are starting from the assumption that Egyptology is a discipline in its own right. The five definitions we put forward for clarity here (and what we will use for the purpose of publishing in *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*) are based on the prior work of Stember, who has arguably provided one of the most concise and informative discussions of these five terms, and has provided concise intellectual, practical, and pedagogical arguments for what constitutes interdisciplinary research by offering a clear definition of it (STEMBER, 1991). Her success lies in defining interdisciplinary within what she considers a typological structure that includes all five terms. By defining it in this way she also illustrates what it is not, thus making a clear conceptual framework for what interdisciplinary research involves and how it can be achieved. Stember also considers evocative discussions of interdisciplinarity as a concept, examining Margaret Mead's presentation of her husband Luther's thoughts ((STEMBER, 1991: 1–2) cf. (MEAD, 1972: 289–290)) which in turn is brought about by reflection upon Robert Oppenheimer's 'house called science' metaphor (OPPENHEIMER, 1954). Stember's work was further expanded on by Jensenius in a short blog post that has provided a visualisation which is particularly useful for conceptualising the five terms (JENSENIUS, 2012). It is that visualization upon which Figure 1 is based. In turn, Jensenius was guided by the work of ZEIGLER (1990), and this visual concept has been used in other discussions on interdisciplinarity too (e.g. COOKE et al., 2020).

Intradisciplinary

Intradisciplinary is the first definition in Stember's typology, and the first circle on the far left of Figure 1, pertaining to research that works within a single discipline. Egyptology largely remains intradisciplinary at present (although see the discussion on multidisciplinary below). The way Egyptology is taught, discussed, debated and researched is primarily (although certainly not exclusively) centered upon the four foundations of traditional Egyptology: Egyptian archaeology, art history, philology, and history, which could reasonably be called sub-disciplines. Indeed, one could argue that the four Egyptological sub-disciplines are diverse enough in themselves to be considered interdisciplinary, but a counterargument would be that these are the very cornerstones of the modern Egyptological discipline, all usually interwoven within first-stage Egyptological training. To move towards interdisciplinarity, Egyptology as a whole must reach beyond these four foundations. To consider this more fully, we must move on to discussing the other four -disciplinaries.

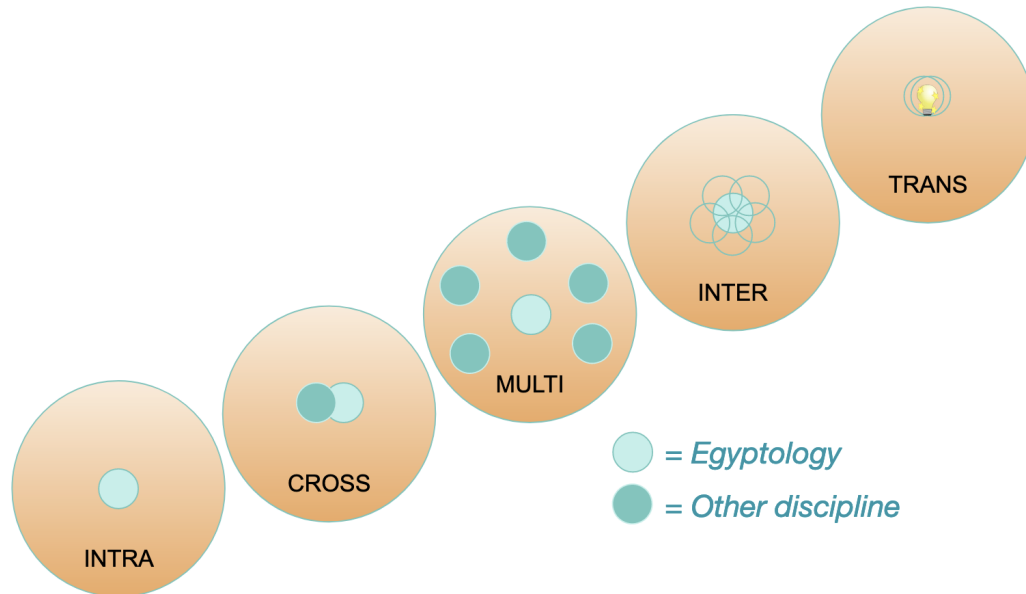


Fig. 1: Visualisation of the five ‘-disciplinaries’.

Crossdisciplinary

Crossdisciplinarity is where a discipline is viewed from the perspective of others, outsiders to the central discipline. The second circle from the left in Figure 1 illustrates how Egyptology is being looked at (perhaps even cross-examined) by the other disciplines in dark blue. An example would be a modern medical doctor analyzing an ancient Egyptian medical text. This doctor is in all likelihood not an Egyptologist in the strict sense; they are unlikely to have undergone extensive Egyptological training. Therefore, while they may be able to comment on the medicinal knowledge of the ancient Egyptians based on a text, thus certainly adding to the knowledge of Egyptology, they may not be able to read the text in its original script.

Multidisciplinary

Multidisciplinary is our central circle in Figure 1. The term multidisciplinary is of course the one that is most often conflated with interdisciplinary, and many people use them interchangeably. Colloquially they can of course still be used interchangeably—we are all of us perhaps guilty of this! But in its true sense, multidisciplinary means the joint collaboration of researchers from multiple disciplines, who each bring something unique to the research table. In Egyptology, many digs are of course multidisciplinary: you have physical anthropologists working alongside archaeobotanists, working alongside traditional field archaeologists, working alongside geoarchaeologists. Figure 1 illustrates how other disciplines tightly surround Egyptology in a multidisciplinary approach. I am of the opinion that Egyptology at present is almost equal parts intra- and multidisciplinary in nature. Increasingly, more Egyptologists are engaging in a multidisciplinary approach, reaching out to colleagues from other disciplines who are able to offer something new to the study of ancient Egypt. Stember rightfully identifies how many people who consider their work to be interdisciplinary are in fact more likely to be engaged in multidis-

ciplinary research ((STEMBER, 1991: 4–5) cf. (JENSENIUS, 2012)). Jensenius likewise reflects on this sentiment through his own research, a discussion that we should all consider. He writes: “For myself, I think I work on the edge between multidisciplinary and interdisciplinarity. I do most certainly integrate knowledge and methods from different disciplines (mainly music, informatics, psychology, movement science), and try to create a holistic perspective based on this. However, I often feel that I have to choose an approach when presenting my work for different (disciplinary) groups. Then I feel like a music researcher when talking to technologists, and as a technologist when talking to music people. This could mean that I have not been able to develop my ideas into a truly interdisciplinary approach, yet.” (JENSENIUS, 2012).

Interdisciplinary

Interdisciplinary goes one step further than a multidisciplinary approach: it pertains to the integration of a multidisciplinary approach in a single form. Indeed, according to Stember, “in interdisciplinary efforts, participants must have an eye towards the holistic complex of interrelationships and take into account the contributions of others in making their contributions” (STEMBER, 1991: 5). In our dig analogy, interdisciplinarity might be in the form of a dig director who brings all the multidisciplinary research and researchers together into a coherent whole. The dig director weaves all the information together to create a more complex, detailed and nuanced understanding of their subject by collaborating with others to help them achieve that cohesion. In doing so, they have offered an interdisciplinary interpretation of a whole, rather than disparate discussions of related but not necessarily linked concepts. In Figure 1, interdisciplinary is illustrated as a central discipline with many overlapping, intertwining and once separate disciplines that together make up a true interdisciplinary approach.

Transdisciplinary

Transdisciplinary is the final term in Stember’s typology and is perhaps the most complex. It is when we transcend and go beyond known disciplinary frameworks to the point that in some, more extreme cases, a whole new discipline is formed. For a non-Egyptological explanation of transdisciplinary, we can look to an example in the sciences; biochemistry is, at its most basic, a merger of biology and chemistry to the extent that they have formed a new discipline. It could be argued that in the past, within archaeology, some of the archaeological applications of physical phenomena, for example radiocarbon dating, have resulted in transdisciplinary fields.

I would consider the possibility that in the very beginning, Egyptology was in fact transdisciplinary. Egyptology took archaeology, art history, philology and made them its own, applying them to ancient Egypt to form Egyptology and, in turn, a framework within which to discuss the society, culture and history of such a fascinating civilization. In this respect, is it possible that once we achieve transdisciplinarity we go back to the start again, and once more become intradisciplinary? It is for this reason that it is important to reflect on how Stember illustrated the five terms as a typology, not a linear hierarchy; it would appear that we might be best to think about disciplinarity as a non-linear trajectory, perhaps a cycle or spiral. Indeed, visualizing in this way does better reflect the equality, relevance and importance of all types of research within Egyptology.

3 Where we go from here

The five definitions above are of course open to debate and discussion, but they are, at least for now, those that *Interdisciplinary Egyptology* will adhere to. Having now established this terminology, it seems prudent to discuss how they will be applied to publishing as we move together towards an interdisciplinary future for Egyptology.

A primary aim for the Editorial Board is to encourage new dialogue and to spark new ideas throughout the Egyptology community. The journal will focus on publishing research that is multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, cross disciplinary, and, when possible, transdisciplinary. Intradisciplinary research is of course the very foundation of Egyptology, but that is not our focus here. We want to be a home for those publications where more traditional Egyptology journals have felt the research lay outside their scope. At *Interdisciplinary Egyptology*, we pride ourselves on our broad scope and we are firmly committed to bringing multi-faceted research to Egyptology, while upholding the most rigorous academic and scientific standards.

At the most basic level, *Interdisciplinary Egyptology* will publish research that meaningfully incorporates two or more disciplines. We will endeavour to avoid what Stember identifies as a problem with interdisciplinarity: it is about avoiding a situation where colleagues from different disciplines talk *at* each other, instead of *with* each other, and where journals claiming to be interdisciplinary are in fact simply collating multidisciplinary studies under a single banner (STEMBER, 1991: 3). *Interdisciplinary Egyptology* prizes integrative research that goes beyond the traditional bounds of Egyptology as a discipline. We will champion new connections and collaborations, and work together towards Egyptology's interdisciplinary future.

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