

THREE MOMENTS OF EGYPTOLOGY IN BRAZIL

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The main purpose of this paper is to focus on three different moments of significance for Egyptology in Brazil. The first moment came in 1824, with the formation of a collection of Egyptians antiquities by Dom Pedro I, the Emperor of Brazil, who was very fond of Egyptian Culture and history. It is then possible to point to a second moment for Egyptology in Brazil at the beginning of the twentieth century: from the “Art Nouveau” Artistic period to the “Art Deco”. In this country, as observed in Europe, the influence of oriental art started to appear, mainly in architecture and sculpture. Several obelisks were built in this period; part of the decoration of public and private buildings was derived from Egyptian subjects, as is the case of the Public Library of Porto Alegre, in the far south of Brazil, which show nice details of Egyptian inspiration. A third moment can be seen with the beginning of post-graduate courses on Ancient History in some Brazilian universities, in the late seventies, namely in the Fluminense Federal University, in the state of Rio de Janeiro.

Before commenting the History of Egyptology, perhaps it would be important to present some aspects of teaching of Egyptology in the country. Brazil is a huge country with distinct cultural, economical and racial characteristics, and with large distances separating the most important cities. The state of Rio Grande do Sul and the city of Porto Alegre, where I work, is very distant from Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, the only cities that have museums with Egyptian collections, making it difficult for students to see personally what they are studying. Furthermore, due to striking economical and social differences in Brazil, the middle class is suffering impoverishment, and university students more and more lack the financial support to make advanced studies in more specialized centers. Very few academics of History have the opportunity of traveling abroad, either to Europe or North America to visit fine Egyptian collections available there. To overcome this problem in part, we hold annual symposia on Ancient History, sometimes inviting experts from abroad. The subjects are more frequently related to aspects of their society, being by that means more understandable and attractive for them.

Regarding the History of Egyptology, the first moment is the formation of the Brazilian Collection of Egyptian antiquities. There are two main collections in Brazil: the Egyptian collection in São Paulo, which is very small and not yet completely studied, and the Egyptian collection of the National Museum in Rio de Janeiro. The latter is described by Kenneth Kitchen, who recently published a superb study on this, the most important collection in South America.

This collection was formed before the Republic. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Portuguese royal family stimulated in Brazil – the same as happened in the Old World – the diffusion of knowledge acquired on the Egyptian civilization. The Napoleonic expedition to Egypt, at the end of the eighteenth century and the acquisition of the Egyptian antiquities by Dom Pedro I in 1824, are respectively the landmarks of the most important European and Brazilian periods in Egyptology. As we know, the interest of the Old Continent in Egyptian culture increased after the decipherment of the hieroglyphs by Champollion and the birth of Egyptology. Following this, a strong tendency to rescue and to give value to Egyptian culture started in Europe. This fashionable trend extended to America, receiving in Brazil the sponsorship of two Portuguese kings: Dom Pedro I and

after him his son Dom Pedro II. The latter visited Egypt in 1871 and 1876. This is the reason why we consider that the first moment of the History of Egyptology in this country started with the formation of the collection of Egyptian antiquities by Dom Pedro I.

The largest part of the Egyptian collection of the National Museum of Rio de Janeiro was bought in public auction in 1824 by His Majesty from the Italian merchant Nicolao Fiengo, whose original plans were to sell the merchandise in Argentina, but could not succeed. According to Kitchen, he seems to have traded pieces brought from Egypt by Belzoni. In 1876 Dom Pedro II, on one of his visits to Egypt, received as a gift from the Khedive Ismail a coffin of the Saite period. Many other objects came from donations or exchanges by a number of people at the end of the last century. Since then, unfortunately, the collection has ceased to increase.

The National Museum of Rio de Janeiro is situated in a place historically known as *Paço de São Cristóvão*. The building, built by a rich Portuguese merchant at the end of the eighteenth century, was given as a gift to the Portuguese king Dom João VI, in March, 1808, during his voluntary exile in Brazil, while Portugal was invaded by Napoleon. Until 1889 *The Paço* sheltered the Imperial Family. With the Republic, in 1889, it became the House of Assembly, and since 1892, the National Museum. The transformation of the palace, house of the Portuguese royal family in Brazil, into a National Museum during the republic, was an eternal link between Royalty and culture.

Nowadays, the National Museum is divided into several sections, exhibiting different collections, from fossils, Brazilian exotic fishes and butterflies, to archaeology. In the latter, several valuable pieces are displayed, especially Egyptian and Graeco-Roman objects. The author of the first catalogue on this collection was Albert Childe, born in Petrograd and deceased in Rio de Janeiro. He was the curator of the Museum for 20 years, having restored the mummies and rescued the historical origins of the collection. At the moment out of print, his *Guide of the collections of classical archaeology of National Museum of Rio de Janeiro* was published in 1919, but rarely encountered even in specialized libraries.

After this guide, very little was written regarding the collection. Visiting Brazil in 1985, Kenneth Kitchen had the opportunity to examine the collection, and was quite surprised with its quality and extent. In 1988, together with the Director of the Museum, Maria Beatriz Beltrão, he started a work covering the entire Egyptian collection. Thanks to his exhaustive research, in two further trips to the country, the first comprehensive catalogue of the National Museum in Rio was published. In this way, British and Brazilian Egyptology are linked forever.

The collection is now partially displayed in three rooms, with a further part of it in a storage room, not available to the public. According to Childe's guide and the Kitchen/Beltrão catalogue, the collection consists of 55 stelae and bas reliefs, 15 coffins or fragments, 81 votive and funerary statues, 216 ushabtis, 29 mummies or fragments of it, 54 amulets, symbols and scarabs, 5 papyri, 169 miscellaneous objects and funerary goods. All these pieces are excellent primary sources to stimulate our students in understanding the cosmopolitanism of Ancient History.

One of the finest coffins in the collection is that of Sha-Amun-Em-Su. It is made of wood, plastered and painted. It comes from the Twenty-Third Dynasty, probably from western Thebes. It belonged to the collection of the Emperor Dom Pedro II and was a gift received from the Khedive Ismail, in 1876. At the end of this century some had condemned

this coffin as a fake, but its modern history refutes this claim. The coffin is to be re-studied by a Brazilian scholar, Cláudio Prado de Mello.

Another interesting piece worth commenting on is a female mummy from the Roman period, a gift from Dom Pedro I, formerly from the Fiengo Collection. Her peculiarity is having her limbs separately wrapped. This type of mummy, according to Kitchen, is somewhat rare: only eight examples are known so far.

In conclusion, the Egyptian collection at the National Museum contains much of interest, and reveals even in the smaller pieces the essence of Egyptian civilization. No doubt, this collection is very helpful for Brazilian scholars and students in the study of ancient history in their modern universities. As we will see in the end, it is very urgent to take more care of this collection, otherwise the best Egyptian antiquities in Brazil will not survive the inadequate situation some of them have at the National Museum in Rio.

The second moment of Egyptology in Brazil started after 189, when the Suez Canal was opened. The event aroused new interest all around the world, even in Brazil, giving birth to Egyptomania. In the first half of this century museums were frequently decorated in the Egyptian style – in spectacular manner – with columns and painted murals, intended to give the visitor an idea of ancient Egyptian architecture.

Several public and private buildings, all over the country, show this influence in Brazil. In Porto Alegre the Public Library is the best example. The building was projected in 1911 by Afonso Herbert, a German architect, and opened in 1914. It is interesting to note that in Rio Grande do Sul the influence of Positivism was very strong at that time, well shown by the decoration of the front of the building with images of Augusto Comte's calendar.

Due to its cultural importance, the building needed to be expanded in 1919. At the end of 1922 the refurbishing was completed and the main hall was decorated in an architectural style worth of the Egyptian models drawn upon by Fernando Schlatter. There we can see starry skies, winged vultures, winged disks, and ram's heads surrounded by multicoloured lotus flowers. The painting shows how traditional forms of decoration continued to be incorporated in all types of architecture giving proof of the unlimited adaptability of ancient Egyptian art, with the inclusion of painting of palm-shaped columns with lotiform bases. The ceiling of the room was decorated with a frieze representing Egyptian gods and symbols. A sphinx with female breasts complete the atmosphere.

Throughout the entire second half of the nineteenth century, the number of everyday decorative objects in Egyptian style grew widely in Brazil. Egyptomania could even be found blended with Classical, Neo-Gothic, and Empire Styles of decoration. The impact of the discovery of the Tutankhamun's tomb in November 1922 on the visual arts is difficult to assess outside a very broad social context. By that date, the repertoire of Egyptian manifestations in Western culture was so vast as to blur the distinction between what occurred before and after the key event.

The obelisk is an outstanding and influential monumental form. Antique originals transplanted to other countries may be seen throughout the world. Located generally in urban sites, erected in isolation and not in pairs, the obelisks have, as in Antiquity, either a purely decorative or a commemorative function. Therefore, it is not surprising that an obelisk was erected in Porto Alegre as a tribute to the myth of the *gaucho* leadership in Brazil in the nineteenth century.

Finally, a third moment in the presence of Egyptology in Brazil can be determined with the beginning of postgraduate courses on Ancient History in some Brazilian

Universities, in the late seventies. In spite of having universities since the late nineteenth century, academic Brazil never paid great importance to the teaching of Egyptology. Only recently have two courses of further studies on Ancient History been created in Rio de Janeiro and São Paulo, featuring some disciplines on Ancient Egypt.

The Postgraduate course on Ancient History at the Fluminense Federal University, in state of Rio de Janeiro, started in 1988, and is the only one that offers courses on hieroglyphs and Egyptian art.

I am reading a research project involving the most important teaching of Ancient Egypt in Brazil, with the purpose of rescuing all the evidence for the influence of Egyptian culture in architecture, art, literature, religion, music and exoteric activities in the country. Finally, studying the history of Egyptology in Brazil, we are trying in the first place to give adequate importance to the knowledge of Ancient History specially to students, who generally show a preference for contemporary subjects.

Secondly, but not less important, we are trying to call the attention of the authorities to the precious Egyptian collections we have, the best in South America, to avoid the deterioration of the precious antiquities. Recently, a leak during a rainstorm, while the roofs of the Museum was being fixed, provided to the Egyptian priest Hori, in the words of the Brazilian journalist Elio Gaspari, *his last shower after three thousands years from his death*.

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