

Introduction

Four museums founded in Egypt in the half century between 1858 and 1908 each represented a vital segment of the country's past and an emerging field of scholarly specialization: the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities, the Graeco-Roman Museum, the Museum of Arab Art, and the Coptic Museum (see figs. 1–4).¹

During this same half century, Western imperialism peaked worldwide and Europeans fastened imperial control over Egypt. It was no coincidence that both the founding directors and their immediate successors at three of the four museums were Europeans, the Coptic Museum being the only exception. This was colonial museology, and it grew up in tandem with colonial archaeology.

As European nation-states came of age in the nineteenth century, museums and archaeology played critical roles in constructing each nation's ideas of its distinctive heritage and identity. Throughout the century, European empires old and new also enlisted archaeology and museums in the service of defining, legitimating, and projecting imperial claims. Meanwhile, museums, universities, and learned societies—building on Enlightenment ideals of rationally and empirically based universal knowledge, or 'science'—were constructing modern academic disciplines. Dedication to universal knowledge was potentially at odds with allegiance to particular nations and empires, but many scholars found ways to rationalize commitment to science, nationalism, and imperialism all at once. For example, Auguste Mariette and Gaston Maspero, who dominated Egypt's pre-1914 Antiquities Service and Egyptian Museum, simultaneously labored on behalf of Egyptological 'science,' French nationalism, and French imperialism.

Where did this leave modern Egyptians? Like Europeans, they had their own traditions, both scholarly and folk, surrounding Egypt's

pre-Islamic and pre-Christian antiquities. This inheritance ranged from fascination with pharaonic antiquities to revulsion at their paganism. Throughout the long nineteenth century stretching from 1798 to 1914, Egyptians struggled to come to grips with both the shock of European conquest and colonization and the challenge presented by Europe's emerging new forms of knowledge. Political and economic colonization provoked resistance and a long struggle for independence. Meanwhile, Napoleon Bonaparte's military expedition to Egypt in 1798 had unearthed the Rosetta Stone, and in 1822 Jean-François Champollion's decipherment of its hieroglyphic text laid the foundation for modern Egyptology. Cultural colonization—as in Egypt's antiquities museums—elicited a dual response. One was a struggle to educate Egyptian Egyptologists who could compete as equals with Western specialists and hope eventually to replace them. In the other struggle, Egyptians impressed with pharaonic achievements tried to persuade their countrymen that museums and archaeology could make inspiring contributions to the causes of national revival and independence. The present author's *Whose Pharaohs? Archaeology, Museums, and Egyptian National Identity from Napoleon to World War I* treats these themes over the long century from 1798 to 1914.²

Contesting Antiquity in Egypt picks up the story in 1914 and carries it forward to the 1952 revolution. By 1914, colonial control—locked in



1 The Egyptian Museum (Museum of Egyptian Antiquities), Cairo. Photo: D. Reid.



2 The Greco-Roman Museum, Alexandria. *Photo: D. Reid.*

by British military occupation in 1882—was coming under increasing challenge. Repression under martial law during World War I fueled the national uprising of 1919. In reaction, the British tried to protect their strategic interests by unilaterally declaring Egypt independent, but with major restrictions. The ensuing ‘semicolonial’ era lasted until the 1952 revolution of Nasser’s Free Officers. These three semicolonial decades of partial and fitful imperial retreat and intermittent nationalist advance proved immensely frustrating to Europeans and Egyptians alike.

During this semicolonial era, Egyptians had won enough autonomy to establish university programs in archaeology and challenge slowly receding colonial control over their academic and cultural institutions. The Egyptianization of archaeological and museum posts proceeded only unevenly, however, and the colonizers clung to some key posts into the 1950s. This study highlights the still often neglected careers of several generations of Egyptians in the archaeologies represented by the four museums. It examines their views in relation to both the international



3 The Museum of Arab Art, Cairo (since 1952, Museum of Islamic Art). *Photo: D. Reid.*



4 The Coptic Museum, Cairo. *Photo: D. Reid.*

scholarly communities to which they belonged and their roles in critical internal debates among Egyptians over heritage and identity.

Egyptian archaeological and museological development were part of a global process in which states and peoples struggled to transform themselves into modern nation-states and empires. In the first half of the twentieth century, imperial nations—Britain, France, Germany, Russia, Italy, the United States, and Japan—were caught up in a global contest for political, economic, and cultural influence. In colonized lands such as Egypt and India, museums and archaeology became significant arenas in the struggle for independence. In independent but semiperipheral countries such as Greece, Mexico, and post-World War I Turkey and Iran, efforts to harness the study and display of the past to nationalist agendas variously reflected features of archaeology characteristic of both colonizing and colonized countries.

Each of the antiquities museums inherited by semicolonial Egypt from the prewar colonial era evolved with its own idiosyncratic timing, motivation, and mission. Together, however, the four institutions had by 1914 cobbled together a four-museum paradigm for parceling out Egypt's antiquities, archaeology, and premodern history. The Egyptian Museum and Egyptology emphasized the pharaonic era, the Greco-Roman Museum and classical studies centered on the Ptolemaic and Roman-Byzantine age, the Coptic Museum and Coptic studies stressed Christian aspects of both the Roman-Byzantine and Islamic eras, and the Museum of Arab Art and Islamic studies treated the Islamic age. In this book, “archaeology” and “archaeologist” are sometimes used in a loose sense for the four fields and their practitioners.

In 1992, an Egyptian intellectual attending a conference in France identified himself as coming “from Arab-Afro-Asian Egypt with its four civilizations, Pharaonic, Graeco-Roman, Coptic, and Islamic.”³ Clearly, the four-museum paradigm had taken hold. There are other possible chronological and thematic ways of dividing up Egypt's long past, but the four-museum paradigm has not lost its power and offers a convenient way of organizing this study.⁴

The Egyptian Museum—with its pharaonic concentration—was first on the scene and remains by far the largest, most famous, and most visited museum in Egypt.⁵ Founded in Cairo in 1858 along with the Egyptian Antiquities Service, it opened to the public in 1863. The Museum of Arab Art came next, opening in 1884. It was a creation of the Committee for the Conservation of Monuments of Arab Art (the Comité), which had been established three years earlier.⁶ The Greco-Roman Museum was founded third, in 1892. Appropriately, it was not located in Cairo but in Alexandria.

The seaport city named for its founder, Alexander the Great, had served as Egypt's capital throughout its millennium of Greek and Roman rule.

Great Britain's military occupation in 1882 gave it the strongest hand during the colonial age, but citizens of other European powers also joined in, giving imperialism on the Nile a European transnational flavor. This was reflected formally in such institutions as the Mixed Courts and *Caisse de la dette publique* and informally in the mix of Europeans holding posts in the Antiquities Service, the *Comité*, and Egyptian state schools. Although the parceling out was never formally negotiated, the European founding directors of three museums and the Khedival Library (now the National Library, *Dar al-Kutub al-Misriya*) turned them into spheres of influence for four different countries. From Mariette through Maspero and beyond, French directors made the Antiquities Service and Egyptian Museum primarily a French archaeological protectorate. The Khedival Library became the domain of German Orientalist directors—five in a row from 1873 to 1914. Three successive Italians directed the Greco–Roman Museum from its inception to 1952, except for a break forced by World War II. Austro–Hungarian influence made itself felt at the *Comité* and Museum of Arab Art. Although Julius Franz, architect in chief of the *Comité* and founding curator of the Museum of Arab Art, was German born, he had studied architecture in Vienna, as had his hand-picked Hungarian successor, Max Herz. The British lacked a comparable specific enclave of cultural influence but had the satisfaction of running the whole country.

The Coptic Museum, founded in 1908, was unique in having an Egyptian founding director—Murqus (Marcus) Simaika—and in not falling into the cultural orbit of any particular European power. It benefited from a specific Egyptian constituency—Coptic Christians. Nevertheless, it too was a product of the colonial age and owed much to European inspiration.

Each of the four museums was eventually enshrined in a landmark building reflecting both architectural fashions and the parameters of the collections within. The Egyptian Museum (1902), designed by French architect Marcel Dourgnon (1858–1911)⁷, was Beaux Arts neoclassical in style, with a pharaonic flourish or two (see fig. 1). The edifice exuded European imperial dominance. The inscriptions on its façade were in Latin and celebrated famous pharaohs and the European founding fathers of Egyptology (see figs. 5 and 6).⁸

The Greco–Roman Museum had the façade of a Doric temple, with *ΜΟΥΣΕΙΟΝ* (“MUSEUM”) in Greek over its entrance (see fig. 2). The Museum of Arab Art was in Islamic revival style, more specifically neo-Mamluk (see fig. 3). The building's upper floor, which had a separate entrance, housed the Khedival Library. At first glance, the architectural



5 Imperial Latin. Dedicatory inscription, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. *Photo: D. Reid.*



6 Imperial Latin. European founders of Egyptology, Egyptian Museum, Cairo. *Photo: D. Reid.*