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Preliminary remark

This essay[1] makes one overarching proposition:

While Egyptology is gradually trying to come to terms with its problematic past, it is in an almost reckless manner turning a blind eye to its problematic present, thereby risking forfeiting its future.

This problematic present entails upholding a hypocritical attitude when it comes to decry certain colonial legacies of Egyptology but ignoring the intrinsic colonialist structure of its current practice.[2] It also entails maintaining double standards and omertà-like taboos in respect to voicing any criticism of decisions by Egyptian authorities. Finally, it entails helping to provide international legitimacy to an autocratic military regime that spurns academic freedom and has a more than questionable human rights record.

It would be possible and perhaps even desirable to discuss this view within the scope of an entire book that provides ample space for comprehensive contextualisation and allows for a broad range of argumentative nuances. At this point, however, my main aim is merely to put my proposition on the table in order to create the preconditions for its reception and potential discussion. What will follow from there remains to be seen.

I shall present my arguments in three parts, starting with a brief comment on the epistemic framework of present-day Egyptology (Section 3.1). Part 2 (Section 3.2) will highlight problematic issues connected with daily Egyptological practice in Egypt and beyond, while the third part (Section 3.3) will focus on geopolitics, academic freedom, and human rights. Preceding these three parts, Section 2 will illustrate Egyptology's intrinsic political nature by discussing a few recent examples. Before I elaborate on my proposition, however, let me first set the scene in the following introduction.

1. Introduction

Can a 'wrong' life be lived 'rightly'?

This year academic Egyptology is celebrating the anniversaries of two events that have shaped the discipline in terms of its methodological footing, its self-conception, and the way it is perceived in the broader public. The first anniversary commemorates Jean François Champollion's breakthrough in the deciphering of the hieroglyphic script in 1822, the second one relates to the discovery of the tomb of Tutankhamun by Howard Carter in 1922. It may be no coincidence, therefore, that in the recent past there has been a growing number of attempts to reflect on what Egyptology was and currently is,

1 To be read as an opinion piece rather than as a classical research article. Accordingly, references are provided without any claim to comprehensiveness.

2 It needs to be stressed here that this text focusses on the traditional centres of Egyptology. If it is written from a decidedly European perspective then for the simple reason that it is the one with which I am most familiar.

what it can and should be.[3] 200 years after Champollion's decipherment of the Rosetta Stone, many would conceive of Egyptology as a generally renowned and publicly well-received humanities subject,[4] which has, over time, managed to cast off its conventional image as a catch basin for quirky scholars out of touch with the realities of everyday life. Instead, Egyptology is increasingly seen as reaching out to disciplines traditionally more attuned to questioning their theoretical and methodological prerequisites, among them the contemporary modes of enquiry of cultural studies and anthropologically oriented area studies. Despite the fact that Egyptology's theoretical discourses are usually derivative (in the sense of being based on the 'import' of theory from other subjects) and tend to lag behind when compared with many neighbouring disciplines,[5] one could draw a picture of contemporary Egyptology as a success story:[6] ever more diverse, ever more cognisant of Egyptology's inglorious colonial entanglements, ever more sensitive to burning issues of contemporary scholarship. This is also reflected in the focus on a host of (relatively) new research questions and areas of investigation, from gender theory to landscape archaeology, from climate change to community archaeology, from postcolonial deconstructions of the legacy of racial theories and racist scholarship to social networks and reception history. In the German-speaking world, numerous scholars have subscribed to tackle the long-neglected not-so-glorious past of the discipline by shedding light on Egyptology's entanglement with the Nazi regime and its ideological foundations. Despite all these ongoing efforts, however, it is unfortunate that the general willingness of practitioners of Egyptology to engage in debates about the identity and raison d'être of their discipline, its aims and its shortcomings has not quite reached the degree envisaged and promoted by the groups of progressive and 'rebellious' young Egyptologists of the 1970s, who were, among other things, responsible for the founding of the *Göttinger Miszellen* to serve as a handy medium for Egyptological debate.[7]

3 E.g. Baines 2020; Gertzen 2020; Moreno García 2020; Siesenop, Lincke & Seidlmayer 2021.

4 For the sake of convenience and in agreement with the self-conceptualisation of most Egyptologists, I refer to Egyptology in this article as a specific historically oriented discipline that is focussed on the people and culture(s) of the Lower Nile Valley and neighbouring regions in ancient (= pre-Islamic) times. Even if one may feel inclined to immediately deconstruct this makeshift characterisation and may also question whether Egyptology does indeed form a single discipline held together by a common theoretical framework (cf. Baines 2020; Gange 2015; Loprieno 2003; Junge 1972: 49), Egyptology's status as an academic subject cannot be denied from a purely sociological perspective. Those who publish in more or less explicitly labelled 'Egyptological' media and flock to 'Egyptological' conferences and comparable events usually share some kind of group identity irrespective of their concrete research interests and methodological specialisations (for example, I would not consider the ability to read hieroglyphic texts as a salient defining criterion; cf. also Bader 2021: 16; Gertzen 2020: 200–201; Lincke 2021: 23).

5 E.g. (prehistoric) archaeology.

6 As was indeed expressed in the First Circular for the 53rd *Ständige Ägyptologenkonferenz* of German-speaking Egyptologists, where Egyptology is referred to as 'diese[r] letzte[n] Königsdisziplin der Altertumswissenschaften'. Würzburg 2021.

7 Cf. Horn 1972; Junge 1972. Perhaps they would never have dreamt in 1972 that mainstream Egyptology in German-speaking countries could get away with largely avoiding to probe its epistemic, socio-economic and cultural foundations. Exceptions prove the rule, of course.

That notwithstanding, soul-searching of the field was recently given some prominence in the keynote lecture panel at the *Ständige Ägyptologenkonferenz* of German-speaking Egyptologists in July 2021,[8] where Stephan Seidlmayer, in his keynote lecture, recollected the ambitions of his generation to lead their seemingly fusty subject out of the ivory tower of philologically dominated, narrow-minded, a-theoretical traditionalism. During the 1980s, proponents of that generation were eager to tackle socially and politically relevant research questions with appropriate theories and break away from Egyptology's traditional focus on pharaohs and the elites.[9] At the end of his talk, Seidlmayer expressed his wish to see Egyptology become part of a broader academic framework, wherein the study of contemporary Egypt would constitute an integral component.[10] Thus, it would be possible to put moments of coherence ('Momente der Kohärenz') across millennia into perspective and develop innovative fields of research. The result would be the following:

> Sodann könnte die Ägyptologie dabei ein neues Gefühl ihrer „gesellschaftlichen Relevanz" (auch so ein altmodischer Ausdruck) gewinnen. Bei uns ist die Ägyptologie ja ein „Orchideenfach", ein „Hobby, das man zum Beruf macht". Eine auf Ägypten bezogene Ägyptologie ist nichts von alledem. Sie ist ein großes Fach, das die historische Identität einer großen Nation verhandelt (original emphasis).[11]

As I will try to demonstrate below, Egyptology **already *is*** a politically and socially highly relevant discipline actively engaging with modern-day Egypt. The only problem is that this happens hardly in a way to which most Egyptologists would officially subscribe. Standing in a tradition that goes back at least to Mariette,[12] a significant number of Egyptologists would probably not object to the notion that the whole of Egypt is one big open-air museum. However, this 'museum' also happens to be populated by more than 100 million people, of whom a substantial portion do not necessarily regard the promotion of the study of heritage sites as their top priority in life but are often directly or indirectly affected by archaeological and/or touristic interventions. While Egypt may appear as the natural, even irreplaceable, 'feeding

8 See Siesenop, Lincke & Seidlmayer 2021.

9 Seidlmayer 2021: 29–31. Already in 1972, Friedrich Junge addressed the 'Relevanzfrage der Ägyptologie' (Junge 1972: 49).

10 While the different Western traditions of Egyptology each have their own historical baggage and trajectory of discourses, they share the general outline of development. The constitution and justification of Egyptology's chronological scope is of course a complex issue. Cf., e.g., Junge 1972 vs. Gertzen 2020: 200–201.

11 'In doing so, Egyptology could develop a new sense of its own "social relevance" (another old-fashioned term). While in our current system, Egyptology is merely regarded as an "exotic" small discipline, a "hobby turned profession", an Egyptology that focusses on Egypt is completely different. It constitutes a large subject that negotiates the identity of a great nation [translation CJ]. Seidlmayer 2021: 32.

12 In a letter written in 1878 to an Egyptian Secretary of State, Mariette disapproved of the plan to grant the American ambassador the permission to export a standing Egyptian obelisk to the United States. He justified his stance with the explanation that Egypt's antiquities along the Nile Valley were for him like a museum, and museums would never give away their possessions: '*Il y a en Égypte deux musées. L'un est le Musée de Boulaq. L'autre est l'Égypte entière qui, par les ruines répandues sur les deux bords du Nil, de la Méditerranée à la deuxième Cataracte, forme le plus beau Musée qui existe au monde* [original emphasis].' Cited after Khater 1960: 62. See also Lebée 2013: 8–9.

ground' for Egyptologists intending to conduct archaeological research on ancient Egyptian material contexts (and in turn provide philologists with new sources),[13] this epistemic dependency has implications beyond the field of scholarly discourse. In the past it was closely associated with colonial structural suppression and the humiliation of the dominated society, serving also as a pretext to appropriate and translocate cultural heritage beyond Egyptian borders. But Egyptology's natural dependency on Egypt as the primary arena of its *Erkenntnisinteresse* (epistemic interest) has not ceased to exert an influence on the power differentials between Egyptian and foreign players, even though some of the roles have partly reversed since the 19th century. As conducting Egyptological research in Egypt requires the approval of Egyptian national authorities, Egyptology regards it as its duty (and a question of its own survival) to remain on excellent terms with these authorities. In order to do so, Egyptologists need to succeed in delivering two seemingly contradictory messages: firstly, that Egyptology practiced in the country by foreigners is highly political in the positive sense that it helps to promote the image of a state where ancient civilisation and modern high-tech research amalgamate in a cosmopolitan environment. It will thus increase the country's international standing and its appeal to global tourism and investment. The Egyptian collections outside of Egypt, which were amassed before the prohibition to export antiquities came into force, figure according to this view as the material 'ambassadors' (a term quite often used in this regard) of the Egyptian nation and its world heritage.

The second message maintains that Egyptology is as non-interfering and as apolitical as can be. This message is usually not communicated explicitly but is implied in many Egyptological practices in Egypt and abroad. As it appears, Egyptologists have been particularly successful in delivering the second message, for they are usually not stopped and interrogated at Cairo Airport because they have just discovered a new *sḏm=f* form, identified remnants of opium in Base-Ring ware imports, or studied the social networks of organised workmen having gone on strike 3200 years ago. If they had shifted their focus of research a few millennia towards the present, the chances are high that things would turn out a bit differently (see Section 3.3). Notwithstanding academic debates on attributing and interpreting ancient ethnic identities,[14] the study of Egypt's pharaonic and, to a lesser degree, its early post-pharaonic history forms sort of a 'safe space', where no side feels officially offended or pressed to take any risks. Of course, in recent years academia (primarily but not exclusively Western, Anglo-American) has seen a marked increase in the number of debates on colonial legacies,[15] lingering scientific biases,[16] the problem of organised looting of archaeological sites,[17] the restitution of artefacts,[18] or the shortcomings in Egyptological engagement with local communities.[19] In German-speaking

13 Working with/in the next-best alternative, which is unquestionably modern Sudan, comes with problems of its own. See below, p. 20.

14 E.g. Smith, S.T. 2014; Moreno García 2018; Matić 2020; Souza 2021; Bader 2021.

15 E.g. Reid 1985; Reid 2002; Meskell & Pels 2005; Colla 2007; Riggs 2013; Reid 2015; Carruthers 2016; Langer 2017a; Gertzen 2020.

16 E.g. Trigger 2006: 195–207; Roy 2011: 7–12; Challis 2013; Matić 2018; Köhler 2020.

17 E.g. Ikram & Hanna 2013; Hanna 2020.

18 E.g. Savoy 2011; El Saddik 2017: 196–197; Geismar 2018: 110–113; Bond 2021.

19 E.g. Quirke 2010; Strong & Bednarski 2016; Beck 2016; Wendrich 2018; Näser 2019; Abd

countries, on the other hand, Egyptologists have been focussing more on confronting Egyptology's history during the Nazi era when wanting to showcase political awareness and raise problematic issues related to their subject.[20] Even though this kind of confrontation was unquestionably long overdue,[21] one may ask whether the still increasing interest in the topic may also stem from another motivation. Certainly, it presents a convenient research opportunity to demonstrate that one stands on the right side of history while at the same time knowing that one is pushing through open doors, because the academic *Zeitgeist* is in line and nearly all the protagonists who could take issue are dead.[22] Few are the cases where unwelcome political relevance of present-day Egyptology is actually felt 'on the ground' (see below).

2. Egyptology beyond its solipsistic comfort zone

Sous le sable, la plage ?

No academic discipline becomes established, functions, and evolves within a social or political vacuum. And no academic discipline can keep its object of research free from explicit or implicit socio-political discourses and influences, as the very constitution and definition of the object of research is itself a political act (even if often an unconscious one). This is no less true for Egyptology, as a number of scholars have already pointed out.[23] What is perhaps less well reflected in the discipline is the fact that political considerations have a very tangible effect on the creation, dissemination, and reception of scholarship in the present and are affecting not only people and practices but also content.[24] One such political issue is the rather complex (to put it mildly) **relationship between Egypt and Israel** and its effects not only on Israeli Egyptology.[25] It is received wisdom that the hosts of the three last *International Congresses of Egyptologists* (ICE) held in Cairo, those of 1988, 2000, and 2019 respectively, did not welcome Israeli scholars to participate in the events, offering a different pretext each time.[26] As far as I am aware, there are no officially communicated protests by the *International Association of Egyptologists* (IAE) on record, even though it is one of the IAE's major objectives to oversee the proper organisation of the ICE and to live up to its self-declared role as a champion of global academic

el-Gawad & Stevenson 2021a; Fushiya 2021.

20 The relevant literature is too numerous to be referenced comprehensively here. For a convenient and relatively recent overview see Gertzen 2017.

21 After all, I have myself engaged repeatedly in such research and continue to be convinced that there is still much work to be done in this direction.

22 On a more general societal level, however, discourses on Nazi crimes and the Holocaust, and those on postcolonial questions are increasingly coming into conflict. For the debate in Germany see most recently Sznaider 2022.

23 Meskell 2000; Meskell 2002; Gertzen 2017: 144–149; Gertzen 2020: 198–199; Winnerman 2021: esp. 184–185. Cf. also Smith, C. 2017 for archaeology in general.

24 A pertinent example is provided by Gertzen 2020: 199.

25 Reflections on the situation during Gamal Abdel Nasser and Anwar Sadat can be found in Silberman 1989: 169–185.

26 While I did not participate in any of these conferences myself and can only draw on oral history as well as personal written correspondence, I consider my sources fully reliable. It goes without saying that the measures were never openly communicated, which especially in 2000 led to the absurd situation that Israeli scholars who had registered for the congress and had already arrived in Egypt were not allowed to present their papers.

freedom and inclusivity.[27] Those acts, which aim at the discrimination on political grounds, involve contemporary protagonists and are a clear example of the fact that in a complex postcolonial world power differentials and asymmetries may occur in more than one direction (see also Section 3.2).[28] The 'cancelling' of scholars is only a particularly tangible manifestation of the Egyptian self-assertion towards modern Israel and occurs against a backdrop of more general negotiations of national identity, in which antiquity may serve as a convenient object of projection. In this respect one is reminded of the role accorded to Kamose's and Ahmose's 'liberation war'[29] in certain contemporary Egyptian discourses on identity and patriotism.[30] A case in point is the recent Egyptian TV series *The King/El-Malek* (الملك), loosely based on Naguib Mahfouz's novel *Thebes at War* (كفاح طيبة). The costly and elaborately produced historical epic, starring Amr Youssef as Ahmose, was meant to relate the battles of the 17th and 18th Dynasties to an audience of millions during Ramadan 2021. However, a trailer released slightly before the start of the show sparked considerable controversies. In the eyes of many it demonstrated that the production team had taken too much artistic licence and, by providing an overall inaccurate depiction of pharaonic culture, had compromised Egyptian identity. The outcry on social media and in public statements (also voiced by archaeologists such as Zahi Hawass[31]) was so strong that the production company decided to halt the production altogether and postpone its broadcast.[32] One should note at this point that the production company responsible for *El-Malek* is a subsidiary of the government-backed *United Media Services Group* (UMS), which represents not only the biggest media conglomerate in the MENA region[33] but also happens to hold close ties with a branch of Egyptian General Intelligence.[34] Certainly, it would be naive to think that the West has the prerogative of using historical narratives of Egypt's ancient past for commercial as well as ideological purposes.[35] However, it almost seems as if

27 To quote from the organisation's Statutes (last revised in February 2019), Annex 2.1: 'The Association is an equal opportunities organisation. Members must not practice discrimination or harassment based on age, sex, religion, colour, national origin, disability or sexual preference.' Annex 2.2: 'All members must adhere to the highest standards of ethical and responsible behaviour in their Egyptological activities, and shall conduct themselves in a manner that will not bring Egyptology into disrepute.' See IAE 2022.

28 That holds true even for a colonial world.

29 For this term cf., e.g., al-Ayedi 2008. Quite fittingly, his book is dedicated 'To the soul of every martyr who defended the land of Egypt throughout history | لقة أهدى هذا الى روح كل شهيد دافع عن أرض مصر عبر التاريخ.'

30 For the time of Gamal Abdel Nasser see Reid 2015: 363 w. Fig. 80.

31 Unfortunately, the respective video statement by Zahi Hawass (زاهي حواس: ملابس مسلسل «الملك» سيئة ولحية عمرو يوسف مش موجودة في التاريخ (فيديو)) is no longer available on the entertainment news website FilFan.com (https://www.filfan.com/news/131353, last accessed on 24 August 2022).

32 Al-Monitor 2021; Omar 2021; Abd el-Hady 2021. Note that social media sources, although relevant to this and other topics here discussed, could not be taken into account for this essay.

33 Cf. POD 2022. See also https://www.ums-eg.com, last accessed on 24 August 2022.

34 Reuters 2019; Mada Masr 2020b.

35 Quite fittingly, representatives of the UMS Group declared at a press conference in May 2021 that two major challenges they had been facing in past years were 'reforming the Egyptian media system, and dealing with the content that is not in line with national interests.'

those currents within Egyptology that are trying hard to challenge traditional biases and to counter the political instrumentalisation of the discipline are markedly less outspoken when it comes to facing undesirable developments from the 'other side of the equation'.[36] One could, of course, argue that similar phenomena of frictions between national political agendas and lofty academic aspirations are found all over the world, including Europe and the US, and that serious scholars are best advised to simply ignore them since their research output is in no way affected by such matters. But one may wonder whether that is actually true. Some time ago I had the chance to take a closer look at the new edited volume 'History of World Egyptology', published two years ago with the highly renowned Cambridge University Press. According to the blurb on its half-title page it aims to provide a 'ground-breaking reference work that traces the study of ancient Egypt over the past 150 years' and is '[g]lobal in purview'.[37] Given this promising characterisation, I could not help but be taken by surprise that the regional traditions covered in the volume include those of Egypt, the usual European and American suspects, Russia, Australasia, and even Japan, but conspicuously lack those of Israel, even though one could have easily thought of such scholars as Hans Jakob Polotsky, Miriam Lichtheim, Sarah Israelit-Groll, or Irene Shirun-Grumach.[38] In the absence of information on the precise circumstances leading to this omission readers are of course free to consider a whole range of potential reasons (among other things a possible lack of commitment by volunteering authors). The editors themselves rightly stress that a book of such a scope cannot possible hope to achieve completeness.[39] But whatever the editors' and publisher's original rationale, it will be difficult to deny that their selection of case studies could be read as a conscious political choice addressing concerns of the powers that be rather than scholarly logic.

These remarks have highlighted just some examples of the political dimension involved in practicing the academic discipline of Egyptology in the contemporary world. But as will hopefully become apparent in the following sections, the issue is more complex than that and has many more dimensions.

3. Postcolonial Egyptology: reality, vision, or *contradictio in adiecto*?

Taking into view Egyptology's current epistemic, institutional, and social framework, one can choose one's perspective from a wide range of options, which are basically situated between two opposing poles.[40] According to the one pole, Egyptology has indeed become a global[41] set of roughly aligning disciplines, and these Egyptologies embrace multiple perspectives expressed by scholars representing very different academic traditions.[42] For some, this also correlates with the notion that the culture of ancient Egypt epitomises world heritage belonging to a global community and

36 This is not to say that the 'equation' of power dynamics has but two sides. See section 3.2.

37 Bednarski et al. 2020a: blurb on the half-title page.

38 To be fair, one has to state that the effects of the Arab-Israeli wars on the German Archaeological Institute at Cairo are well-represented in the volume. Cf. Voss 2020: 242–243.

39 Bednarski et al. 2020b: xviii.

40 Naturally, there are also many other, less contrastive, ways to frame the topic.

41 With all the ambivalence associated with the originally imperial concept of globality. See, e.g., Hulme 2005.

42 Cf., e.g., the discussion of Christian Langer in his introduction to the edited volume *Global Egyptology*. Langer 2017c: esp. xiii. See also Bednarski et al. 2020c.

as such has finally broken free from the imperialist and nationalist discourses of the past. In contrast, the position at the other pole maintains that Egyptology has been and always will be a colonial enterprise, a 'Western invention' that is unable to let go of the problematic baggage inherent in Egyptologists' daily practices. As Thomas Gertzen has rightly remarked, according to such an understanding, 'decolonising' the discipline would amount to dismantling it,[43] since it would undermine Egyptology's legitimacy as an academic subject ethically and responsibly pursued in a global, postcolonial world.

What happens, however, if both views are not mutually incompatible but each appropriately characterise crucial aspects of the discipline's identity and knowledge production within a given academic tradition? Certainly, no one would deny that contemporary Egyptological practice is often marked by striking contrasts (sometimes, but not always, related to the proponents' age). At one end of the spectrum there are those who simply ignore Egyptology's colonial legacy and still go about their business as if books such as Reid's *Whose Pharaohs?* (2002) or El Daly's *Egyptology: The Missing Millennium* (2005) had never been written, or as if already the application of the most basic anthropological terminology would constitute a direct, anti-Western attack on the values of traditional Egyptological scholarship. Situated at the other end of the spectrum are those who see in Egyptology's colonial past an indelible stain on the discipline that demands continuous atonement from the present generation of Western researchers. Accordingly, they try to steer the 'oil tanker' Egyptology into a direction that is more compatible with the 'postcolonial turn' that has partly reshaped many other humanist disciplines. Could we then speak of multiple, even hybrid, identities of Egyptology already at the regional or local level, in the sense of a Blochian *'Gleichzeitigkeit des Ungleichzeitigen'*? Or would this introduce the inappropriate concept of a hierarchy of academic progress? The theoretical question whether contemporary Western[44] Egyptology is in essence hopelessly colonialist, colonial – yet with a prospect to becoming decolonised –, or (already) on the path towards postcolonialism is perhaps only one among several controversial issues to be tackled by the scholarly community. But it is a question that has so far received considerable attention and assumes a particular topicality linked with the current political debates on postcolonial theory and social justice.[45]

3.1. Epistemics and knowledge production

If we're through with the past, is the past also through with us?

Perhaps one part of the problem relates to what is precisely understood by the term **'postcolonial'** in the Egyptological discourse and beyond. While this essay is not the place to dwell on this topic at length, and there are certainly scholars more competent and entitled to do so than I am, I would still like to raise some points relevant for the subsequent sections.

While the different meanings of 'postcolonial' cannot be neatly separated from one another,[46] concrete usage is marked by differing nuances. From a purely political point of view, 'postcolonial' simply means that Egyptology operates in a postcolonial

43 Gertzen 2020: 193

44 See n. 2.

45 For the context of these debates see Matić 2018; Matić 2020; Souza 2021; Abd el-Gawad & Stevenson 2021a; Abd el-Gawad & Stevenson 2021b.

46 Cf. Loomba 2015: 28–29.

world, i.e. a world in which formal Western colonies have by and large ceased to exist,[47] while forms of neo-colonialism may persist. Although Egypt was never an official British colony, it may be fair to state that Nasser's Free Officers Revolution of 1952 and its immediate aftermath, at which point the former Service des Antiquités together with all other Egyptian administrative institutions were finally put exclusively in Egyptian hands, marked Egyptology's transition to the postcolonial era.[48] In this sense, 'postcolonial' serves primarily as a historical/chronological marker and an indicator of structural changes in the dynamics of official sovereignty. But as has been remarked before, this chronological usage is not without its problems, since it seems to presuppose that the appearance of 'postcoloniality' is linked to post-war modernity, which is itself a Western historical construct.[49]

In a different understanding, 'postcolonial' refers to the application of postcolonial theory and whether or not current Egyptological scholarship is informed by this theory, or rather, set of theories that have become institutionalised in (predominantly Anglo-American) academia within the context of Postcolonial Studies.[50] This view focusses on the interpretation of ancient culture, and aims at overcoming the often simplistic and particularly Eurocentric biases of past scholarship. In order to adequately reflect the complexities of ancient transcultural interactions, the application of a broad scope of progressive theoretical scholarship is called for. Unsurprisingly, the topics where postcolonial scholarship has left a mark are often concerned with questions of ethnic identities, and the political and cultural entanglements of ancient Egypt in Nubia and the Levant.[51]

The third use of 'postcolonial' within Egyptology may be written 'Postcolonial' with a capital 'P' to mark its inherent claim to contributing to social, political, and epistemic change. This kind of postcolonial approach, instead of focussing on the interpretation of the ancient past, entails a normative agenda targeted at the current social and epistemic contexts in which the profession is practiced. It is often associated with the aim of 'decolonisation'[52], thus the active 'unmasking' and disposal of epistemic and behavioural baggage that has been inherited from Egyptology's colonial history and is carried on without due reflection.[53] Through decolonisation, it is hoped, (Western) Egyptology will eventually be able to eschew the Eurocentric epistemes that have been characterising the discipline for the past 200 years, ditch the 'expedition' and 'mission[54] mindset' inherited from colo-

47 With some exceptions and grey areas such as Puerto Rico.

48 Cf. Ikram & Omar 2020: 58–59; Reid 2015: 352–366; Roussillon 1998: 338–340. One should also bear in mind that it was Nasser who renamed Cairo's central Ismailiya Square (named after the Khedive Ismail Pasha) in front of the Egyptian Museum 'Liberation Square' (Midan el-Tahrir, ميدان التحرير) to mark the end of monarchy and quasi-colonial rule.

49 Cf. Shohat 1993; Hall 1996; Hulme 2005.

50 For the history and institutionalisation of postcolonial theory as well as its critique see the handy introduction in Castro Varela & Dhawan 2020.

51 For recent overviews see Matić 2017a; Matić 2020; Smith, S.T. 2020; Bader 2021.

52 A recent attempt to review the current theoretical approaches to decolonisation and decoloniality – sometimes even pitted against postcolonial theory – is found in Colpani et al. 2022.

53 On these legacies and their continuing impact on the archaeology of ancient Nubia see Näser 2020: 39–43.

54 For the deep history of the usage of the word 'mission' in archaeological contexts see Riggs 2017: 221–222.

nial mentalities and enter a path towards enlightened irreproachability (I am slightly exaggerating here, of course).

As good as its intentions may be, the 'Postcolonial' project begs the question of what it really means to fully decolonise a discipline that grew out of a European *Erkenntnisinteresse* to become – in Western contexts at least – an academically buffered and partially state-sanctioned manifestation of the more general bourgeois reception of ancient Egypt.[55] While the discipline has in many respects moved away from its origins, and the role of modern Egyptians in the advancement of its knowledge production is increasingly receiving due acknowledgment,[56] some dilemmata are still difficult to circumvent. One dilemma is connected with the form in which Egyptology recruits its next generations. On a personal, 'ontogenetic', level, reception of ancient Egypt informed by popular culture and its representation in the media will almost always come before one acquires scholarly knowledge about it. The long-lasting legacy of the Western (some would say, Orientalist) *Erkenntnisinteresse* is particularly well reflected in what draws people towards becoming Egyptologists in the first place.[57] Although this truism does not imply any form of epistemic determinism, one should not underestimate its momentous, if somewhat elusive, consequences for the long-term conception of the object of study and the definition of research agendas.[58] This also applies to the relative attractiveness of Egyptology as a discipline. Looked at from a distance, it appears by no means as self-explanatory why someone should want to know everything about how people lived in an Egyptian village 3000 years ago while not caring all that much about how people live in a contemporary one. My point is not that Egyptologists have chosen the wrong subject, but that the choice of their subject also has a deep history, which is more often than not connected to 19th century European intellectual history[59] and partly transcends personal agency. This epistemic framework[60] is still engrained in the discipline's core (as I experience it[61]), and it does not make a large difference for that matter whether the framework is perpetuated by Egyptologists born in the West or elsewhere.

Part of this framework is constituted by the languages in which Egyptological knowledge production manifests itself. While Egyptology may have entered a global phase, it still has three[62] dominant languages, namely English, French, and German.[63] Of these, English has naturally become the *lingua franca* of 'globalised Egyptology', as is the case with most contemporary

55 In this regard I slightly disagree with Gertzen's (2020: 190) insisting on the clear distinction between reception/perception and study.

56 See Reid 1985 and most recently Haikal & Omar 2021.

57 Cf. Cooney 2021.

58 Cf. Moreno García 2020.

59 For the milieus in which academic Egyptology emerged, with a focus on the German tradition, see Gertzen 2017: 22–56 with further references.

60 Certainly, Egyptology is *not* simply *any* attitude towards the cultural legacy on the territory of the current Arabic Republic of Egypt and its neighbouring states that is identified as ancient and considered worthy of interest.

61 I fully acknowledge that others may have different perceptions.

62 Which is at least three times the number of many other Humanities subjects these days.

63 An examination of the OEB data from 2021 (about 2,800 entries) produces the following distribution: contributions in English: 66.1%, contributions in French: 18.1%, contributions in German: 11%, contributions in Spanish and Italian: 1% respectively. The remaining 2.8% are distributed over six further European languages. Cf. OEB 2022.

knowledge production in academic contexts. Spanish has recently been growing in relative importance, as a look at OEB entries of the last 20 years demonstrates, but still does not come near the first three languages in quantitative distribution. A special case is Arabic, since its limited use by practitioners of Egyptology[64] reflects the well-known postcolonial dilemma that the Western, erstwhile colonial, discourse has to be adopted in order to voice opposition and generate international attention.[65] This is not limited to language, but extends to institutions and centres of knowledge production.[66] In the wake of changing attitudes, however, Egyptian authorities and academics are increasingly self-confident in demanding the recognition of Arabic as one of the main languages of Egyptology. In this vein, the organisers of the upcoming *13th International Congress of Egyptology* in Leiden have chosen to treat Arabic on a par with English.[67] The provision of Arabic abstracts and translations has now become quite common in English and French academic journals and online resources[68] (less so in German-speaking publications). It is not always clear, however, whether the added value goes beyond that of symbolic politics, since the main content, accessible through Western academic publishers, is usually still provided in English, French, or German only.[69] In any case, I cannot think of many area studies where fewer scholars are able to properly communicate in written and spoken form in their host country's native tongue and are willing to take into account publications in that language.[70] A similar situation in Roman, Mesoamerican, or Chinese archaeology would surely be unthinkable.[71] On the other hand, an increased use of Arabic within the Egyptological discourse may not be suited to address underlying epistemic quandaries. For example, it remains the question whether basic Arabic terminological categorisations provide a different perspective on ancient Egyptian culture or rather tend to reproduce Western academic ontologies.[72] Perhaps, non-Western Egyptologies will in the midterm be both willing and able to shake up the conventional terminological and con-

64 One has to note as a caveat that publications in Arabic have not regularly been added to the OEB data in recent years for technical reasons.

65 For this dilemma – often referred to as 'Chakrabarty's' – see Chakrabarty 1992: esp. 19–23. Discussions within Egyptology can be found in Langer 2017a: 191–193 and Gertzen 2020: 202.

66 It also reflects some of the internal contradictions of postcolonialism, which is itself often perceived as speaking with a 'Western' tongue out of Western institutions. For this kind of critique as well as counter-critique see, e.g., Ahmad 1992: 73–94; Castro Varela & Dhawan 2020: 301–308.

67 To be more precise, the congress' official languages will be English, Arabic, French, and German, whereas abstracts are accepted in English or Arabic only. See ICE13 2022: 5.

68 The most prominent example being the entries in the *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*. See UEE 2022.

69 Removing language barriers and increasing outreach in Egypt beyond the academic community can thus not be the main motivation.

70 I do not exclude myself from this.

71 As a colleague once remarked at a conference dinner.

72 Cf. also Gertzen 2020: 191. While the international standardisation of terminologies beyond single languages is a prerequisite for meaningful exchange within a global academic discipline (cf. the currently established multilingual Egyptological Thesauri and Ontology of Thot 2022), in the humanities it often comes with the price of potentially homogenising a wealth of different epistemic avenues.

ceptual framework that gets transmitted without much scrutiny in Egyptology's traditional centres. But even relative 'newcomers' to the Egyptological stage will have to take *Egypto*-logy as their point of departure. A look at the cover illustration of the 2017 edited volume *Global Egyptology*[73], which shows a satellite image of the globe surrounded by representations of the term 'Egyptology' in 34 different languages, leads to an interesting, if not completely surprising, observation: In the overwhelming majority of cases – including Hebrew, Korean, Japanese, and Chinese[74] – the respective term comprises a component etymologically derived from Greek Αἴγυπτος.[75] The concept of (ancient) Egypt as an object of epistemic interest is thus marked as an import from the European intellectual tradition and reflects the transregional networks through which hegemonial knowledge was transferred during the 19th and 20th centuries.[76] This is neither a good nor a bad thing, and one should surely not overrate the explanatory power of etymology for the assessment of contemporary usage. The distribution may, however, be taken as a symbol of the fact that epistemic decolonisation of an originally colonial academic enterprise has its intrinsic limitations.[77]

3.2. Practices

The good, the bad, and the ugly?

Moving from theoretical issues to the domain of lived practice 'on the ground', the internal contradictions between aspirations and reality become even more apparent. Unlike theory, however, the concrete social practice of Egyptologists in Egypt is hardly ever made the topic of publicised scholarly debates. It is what one talks about among colleagues from time to time but does not usually publish on.[78]

For (under)graduate students taking classes in Egyptology or related disciplines it is not always easy to understand that archaeological practice is as much a matter of applying skills in appropriate intercultural communication as it is a matter of identifying the right excavation technique or adopting an adequate theoretical framework. The parameters within which foreigners conduct archaeological work in Egypt are complex and multifaceted, encompassing formal and informal requirements, legal and behavioural norms, societal and personal sensitivities. A major factor within the tasks not directly related to archaeological work on site are the administrative procedures in order to obtain a concession for an archaeological project as well as those before, during, and after carrying out the actual research. In the course of these procedures every foreign mission, including the increasing number of Egyptian–foreign joint missions, deals with a number of Egyptian administrative bodies, first and foremost with the Ministry of

73 Langer 2017b.

74 Noteworthy exceptions are Hindi, Turkish, and Uzbek, where the geographical component of the term is derived from the well-known Semitic root *mṣr*. In modern Hebrew, there is a striking contrast between the name of the Humanities subject, היגולוטפיגא, which is solely derived from ancient Greek roots, and the name for the country of Egypt, מירצמ, derived from the Semitic root.

75 The terms *égyptologie/Egyptology/Aegyptologie* are attested from around 1840 onwards. *Égyptologue* is slightly older. For the discussions around the presumptive ancient Egyptian origin of Αἴγυπτος see Engsheden 2018.

76 See also Langer 2017c: xv–xvi.

77 Cf. also Gertzen 2020: 202.

78 For the precariousness of archaeological practice in the Middle East and in Western Asia in general see the reflections of Meskell 1998, Steele 2005, and Pollock 2016.

Tourism and Antiquities (MTA), which also manages the applications for the security clearance of each team member (granted or denied by state security in a process lacking transparency). In order to ensure maximum success for the concession within the legal, administrative, and informal parameters, the executive members of a mission have to carefully calibrate their agenda with the respective means at their disposal and with what is expected of them by the Egyptian authorities. Such deliberations involve questions of how to behave towards officials,[79] which and whose norms to adhere to, and which aims to prioritise. That this does not always come without internal or external conflicts, or clashes of interests is not surprising, even though the protagonists involved usually do their best not to make them too apparent.[80]

It is clear that neither the members of foreign missions working in Egypt nor their Egyptian counterparts form a homogenous group. Attitudes towards each other vary greatly among the members of either category, and different attitudes may even be found within the context of an individual mission. In certain cases the arbitrary line drawn between those who belong to the 'in-group' and those situated outside at different levels of distance reflects a hierarchical way of thinking which seems like a reflection of the colonial mindsets associated with past centuries. Never has this become more obvious than during the early phases of the **Corona pandemic**, when the commitment towards equality and solidarity among all the team members (usually expressed through the obligatory group photo of the season's team) was in many cases counterbalanced by the 'reality of difference': different access to vaccination, different entitlement to regular Covid testing, different means – if not always in practice, at least in theory – to receive high-standard healthcare, including the possibility to be flown out of the country should things get really rough.[81] Of course, the reasons for these differences are largely structural (also partly determined by legal obligations from funding bodies and host institutions) and not always a matter of personal choice. But it seems fair to say that Egyptology as it is practiced today by foreigners in Egypt involves a significant degree of 'discriminatory capability' and of adjusting one's behaviour accordingly.

Thus, expediency and utilitarian rationale demand different attitudes towards local excavation workers, Egyptian inspectors of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA), Egyptian members of the archaeological team, local staff of the MTA, high officials of the MTA, and other state officials respectively. While pointing out the phenomenon as such is trite, I cannot help but be sometimes astonished at the great diversity of behaviours encountered, which range from almost unbearable degrees of sycophancy in and outside of Egypt towards people in a position to approve or not approve a mission in the first place, to unabashed disregard or even colonialist disrespect towards the labourers working at the opposite end of the hierarchy, or the local population directly (and often negatively) affected by many archaeological/touristic projects.[82]

79 Time and again one is reminded of the related passages in the *Instructions of Ptahhotep*, Maxims 2–4.

80 Some – arguably, very subjective – insights can be gleaned from Sanders Wilson 2010 and Hessler 2019.

81 For the challenges that the COVID-19 pandemic has posed and continues to pose for Egypt cf. Gomard 2020: 31; Jefferson et al. 2021: 151–152.

82 As colleagues have pointed out repeatedly in discussions at conferences and elsewhere, many foreign missions show little to no engagement with local communities and outreach activities that would raise the

In many cases the apparent conflicts between scholars' lofty ideals of their own uncompromising ethical behaviour and the conviction of what it takes to get things done on site remain unacknowledged. But this does not mean that they are unproblematic. First and foremost, one has to refer to the almost ubiquitous cases of 'keeping particularly good relations' with people from whom one wishes to obtain permissions, general favours, or simply the prevention of troubles.[83] That back home the respect expressed towards Egyptian officials and colleagues quite often turns into its opposite will sound familiar to everyone who has ever experienced post-excavation chats over tea or coffee at conference venues and elsewhere. Direct[84] and indirect bribing are not unheard of either. Many would maintain that such things are unfortunate but happen to belong to the toolkit indispensable for getting things done in Egypt and elsewhere in the MENA region. Some would probably also point to an allegedly common Egyptian (by which they mean 'Oriental') mindset and the pathetic wages of many state employees (the latter being definitely true). At the other end of the range of opinions, a decidedly postcolonial stance could voice criticism of arrogant colonialist and paternalistic attitudes, which impose axiomatised Western moral values[85] on a society that has so long been subjected to Western domination.[86] But such an argument would raise the question whether the continuation of practices that are frowned upon at home is really the way towards leaving colonialism behind and not itself a manifestation of the continued allure of neo-colonialism.

While it is true of many social constellations that the interaction with 'the other' is guided by sets of rules quite different from what one would find in domestic contexts, the differences within Egyptological practice retain in many cases a colonialist flavour,[87] even if unintendedly so. I still remember very well the incredulous looks of my fellow students from the departments of Prehistoric and Classical Archaeology when I explained to them that on archaeological digs in Egypt Westerners are almost never engaged in removing stones, earth, or sand themselves. Instead, they quite often look from the top of the trenches down on the local workforce to direct them. While this image may be an exaggeration and a simplification of the actual division of labour,[88] it nevertheless captures the power differentials inherited from the colonial era, which are reproduced in modern, very physical and literal "top-down" hierarchies.[89]

awareness among the local population of the type of questions asked by archaeologists.

83 The means through which favours are sought from officials range from remunerated invitations and 'special treatment' at conferences to the bestowal of civil decorations.

84 I am not referring to the odd baksheesh tipping of guards in order so see a closed tomb or take a picture of a monument.

85 Cf. Radhakrishnan 2003: 72–75.

86 See Said 1978: 38–43 for a *locus classicus*.

87 For a related discussion see Blouin et al. 2020, although theirs is a quite narrow and personal focus.

88 First of all, almost all members of archaeological teams working on site get their fair share of dirt, dust, sunburns, and physical exhaustion during the season. Secondly, there are very good reasons relating to budget and quality management why most foreign teams in Egypt rely on highly specialised and experienced Egyptian workers, whose endurance and skills in feature recognition quite often outmatch those of the 'foreign specialists'.

89 While the social fabric connecting the different participants may be a very complex one (cf. Doyon 2015: 153), in many cases the constellation between foreign archaeologists and local Egyptian workmen can be easily matched to Mathias Enard's (2015: 64–67)

A much more concerning aspect of this traditional division of labour, however, is the phenomenon of **child labour** (i.e. intense physical labour done by pre-adolescents in certain cases hardly over 10 years old),[90] which can still be encountered at excavation sites in Egypt until this very day.[91] As far as antiquity is concerned, the study of practices that would now be classified as child labour and physical abuse of minors has been receiving growing attention in the Egyptological community and beyond,[92] but the same cannot be said regarding occurrences in the present. At least, the interest as such does not seem to have translated into a general awareness of the problematic issue and potential ways to deal with it on site. I do by no means want to insinuate that child labour is a common or widespread phenomenon at excavation sites of foreign missions, but the mere fact that it still occurs with the knowledge of Western concession holders should give rise for concern. The domestic workforce of larger excavations is usually not chosen by the project's director but by the *rais*, or labour foreman, who forms part of complex social networks at a local as well as trans-local level (cf. the famous Qufti workers from the Southern Egyptian town of Qift).[93] He is usually very experienced in assembling a team that is both fit for purpose and responsive to informal local hierarchies. This is not the place to discuss the complex social and economic reasons why children and young adolescents in Egypt are still being sent to perform heavy physical work instead of (or in addition to) attending school.[94] While Egypt, like most Western countries, has signed all relevant conventions on child labour, the tackling of this and related issues is anything but easy or straightforward. It lies ultimately in the responsibility of Egyptian civil society and not in that of foreign 'guests'. From a purely Western perspective, however, the pertinent question seems to me whether one should indeed maintain or at least tolerate such significant differences concerning health and safety provisions for 'team members'. In that respect the cases of child labour at excavations are only the most extreme example of Western double standards when working in Egypt. Given that most foreign missions are funded by academic institutions that keep assuring the public of applying the highest ethical standards in their global endeavours, the lack of open discussions on these things makes such assurances sound hollow. But none of this should distract from the fact that there are many foreign teams working in Egypt who are fully aware of the social fault lines between which they have to operate and for whom applied social responsibility is anything but a lip service.

After having touched upon a few problematic aspects (many more could be added) of current Western archaeological practice in Egypt, I would now like to consider some issues relating to **the Egyptian side**. Does it, in contrast, represent a shining beacon of the progressive, participatory and

pointed portrayal of Syrian archaeology in his novel *Boussole*.

90 In accordance with the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (CRC), 'child labour' is here understood as 'any work that is likely to be hazardous or to interfere with the child's education, or to be harmful to the child's health or physical, mental, spiritual, moral or social development.' UN 1989.

91 One such case involving heavy physical labour of pre-adolescents I saw with my own eyes.

92 E.g. Wheeler et al. 2013; Shepperson 2017; Matić 2017b; Stevens & Dabbs 2017: 148–149; Dabbs 2019.

93 For the origins and evolution of the *rais* system at archaeological excavations in Egypt see Doyon 2015; Doyon 2021. Cf. also Rowland 2013.

94 See IPEC & CAPMAS 2012 with slightly outdated data.

genuinely postcolonial future of Egyptian archaeology? As legitimate as this question may seem in the given context, the way it is phrased comes with a caveat. For it suggests a dichotomous distinction between foreign researchers on the one hand, and their Egyptian counterparts on the other hand. But as has already been pointed out and is quite easy to see, both groups are far from representing a unified body deploying collective agency. Rather, each group is diverse and consists of many agents situated at different hierarchical levels, whose agendas and visions for Egyptian/Egyptological archaeology and heritage management do not necessarily align. In the following paragraphs I shall concentrate only on policies devised at the highest hierarchical levels of Egyptian administration and thus affecting Egyptological research as a whole.

In the resource-intensive management of Egyptian antiquities, archaeological sites, and museums, different interests intersect at state level. Apart from the commitment towards protecting, preserving, and exploring Egypt's cultural heritage, state officials are well aware that Egypt's pharaonic past is a major factor in drawing millions of tourists to the Nile Valley every year, thus contributing a substantial amount to the national GDP and providing employment for a significant portion of the Egyptian labour force.[95] Given that the tax revenues from **tourism** used to be partly fed back into the budget of the Ministry of State for Antiquities and its predecessor organisations, the link between the tourism industry and the management of Egypt's ancient heritage found its administrative equivalent at the end of 2019 in the formation of the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities[96] (وزارة السياحة والآثار in that order!).[97] After a recent cabinet reshuffle the ministry is currently headed by former banker Ahmed Eissa Taha.[98] Tourism seems also to have been one of the major factors why in the recent two decades there have been created a host of new archaeological museums across the country.[99] While some of these museums have a connection to a local archaeological site (such as the Imhotep Museum at Saqqara) and/or provide a diachronic view of a particular aspect of Egyptian cultural heritage (such as the recently opened National Museum of Egyptian Civilisation, short NMEC, in southern Cairo/al-Fusṭaṭ or the museum on Egyptian capital cities[100] in the New Administrative Capital currently under construction), the exhibitions of many others (typified by those at Cairo International Airport or in the Red Sea resorts of Sharm

95 For 2019 the statistics indicate a figure of slightly above 13 m touristic arrivals. The Travel & Tourism sector as a whole contributed an estimated 8.8% or $32 b to the Egyptian GDP and was linked with around 3.1 m jobs equivaling 9.5% of the total workforce. See UNWTO 2021; WTTC 2021; OECD 2020.

96 Originally, archaeological agendas beyond the Service des Antiquités were closely associated with the Ministry of Public Works. See Doyon 2021: 215–227. From 1994 until 2011, when the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) became part of the newly created Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA), it formed a division of the Ministry of Culture (see SCA 2016), similar to the current situation in Tunisia. In present-day Turkey, on the other hand, the responsibilities of the Ministry of Culture and Tourism (Kültür ve Turizm Bakanlığı) include safeguarding Turkey's archaeological heritage.

97 See MSA 2019: 4. Interestingly, the Ministry's website has recently changed its URL from http://www.antiquities.gov.eg/ to https://egymonuments.gov.eg/# (last accessed on 12 September 2022).

98 See SIS 2022.

99 For the general picture see Eissa & el-Senussi 2020; Stevenson 2022: 49–51.

100 Marie 2019; Egypt Independent 2019.

el-Sheikh[101] and Hurghada) consist to a significant degree of decontextualised artefacts transferred from other museums (mainly the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir Square[102]) or regional archaeological storage facilities.[103] They are thus not only offering reduced local significance and complicate the academic study of contexts but turn the cultural artefacts presented there into mere 'chess pieces', which are moved around to serve primarily economic and ideological purposes aimed at an international audience.[104] As has been pointed out before,[105] the current policy followed by state authorities regarding local archaeological resources shows many similarities with Western colonial practices that have led to the dispersal of Egyptian heritage across the globe.

A particularly striking example for the use of ancient Egyptian artefacts in order to assert governmental authority is the recent redesign of **Tahrir Square** in central Cairo. Opposite the iconic Egyptian Museum the Egyptian authorities re-erected in 2020 an obelisk of Ramesses II retrieved from Tanis/San el-Hagar. The monument is now flanked by four ram sphinxes of sandstone, which were transferred from the Sphinx Avenue in Luxor for this particular purpose. Viewed from a diachronic perspective, this whole endeavour stands in the age-old Egyptian tradition[106] of relocating monuments of one's predecessors in order to put their awe-inspiring materiality to new political uses.[107] Despite the fact that this 'archaeological capriccio' succeeds in dominating Tahrir Square, the project was met with criticism by Egyptian Egyptologists and public figures, who pointed out that the sphinxes would inevitably suffer from the impact of Cairo's air pollution.[108] As a 'coincidence', the monument handily obscures the site where in 2011 thousands of Egyptians took to the

101 Cf. Hassanein & Kamal 2021. In their published introduction the curators stress the wide thematic and chronological range of Sharm el-Sheikh Museum, which is not restricted to pharaonic culture. They also highlight their efforts to maintain a close dialogue with the local communities in Sinai. At the same time, however, they leave no doubt that the museum owes its existence to President el-Sisi's agenda to attract international tourists visiting the resort town.

102 Cf. Eissa & el-Senussi 2020: 1194; Tabikha 2021.

103 The Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) is a case of its own and shall not be discussed here. See Elshahed 2015: 263–265; Carruthers 2019: iv–vi; xv–xvi.

104 To a certain degree, such museums are the stationary equivalent of the many exhibitions of ancient Egyptian artefacts touring the world. But of course, a museum without an ideological agenda does not exist.

105 Abd el-Gawad & Stevenson 2021b.

106 This phenomenon is certainly no Egyptian peculiarity and far from manifesting the essentialist notion of 'Eternal Egypt'. It simply happens that Egypt's history offers particularly illustrative examples of such practices.

107 Ironically, the Tahrir location only adds to the obelisk's complex history, since it had originally been erected under Ramesses II at his residence city of Piramesse/Qantir, only to be translocated to nearby Tanis some two- to three-hundred years later. Another case in point is the 1955 re-erection of a colossal statue of Ramesses II from Memphis/Mit Rahina in front of Cairo's main railway station – originally a colonial project, which was taken up by Gamal Abdel Nasser with an anti-colonial twist (Reid 2015: 361–362 w. Fig. 78). Under Mubarak in 2006, the statue was transferred yet again to the Memphite area, this time to be re-erected at the entrance area of the new Grand Egyptian Museum in Gisa. For a thorough discussion of this case and the entanglements between heritage and decolonisation see Carruthers 2019: iii–vi.

108 Michaelson 2020.

streets in order to protest against the regime of Hosni Mubarak. *Honi soit qui mal y pense*…

On 3 April 2021, Tahrir Square was also the starting point of the *Pharaohs' Golden Parade*[109], a televised state-of-the-art spectacle commemorating the transferral of the royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum in central Cairo to the already mentioned NMEC in el-Fusṭaṭ. A similar event on an even grander scale took place on 25 November 2021 in order to celebrate the opening of the **Sphinx Avenue** connecting Karnak with Luxor Temple.[110] This gigantesque performance inspired by the ancient Opet festival focussed the attention of millions of viewers behind their screens on creative re-interpretations of rituals at ancient sites and on the streets of Luxor, which were as good as purged of the local population. It is true that broadcasting such special events attracts an audience of millions both in Egypt and abroad, and showcases Egypt's incredibly rich pharaonic heritage. What did not become visible on the screen, however, were the immense material and immaterial costs a project such as the recreation of the Sphinx Avenue entails. In order to excavate the ancient processional way and re-establish it as a touristic thoroughfare, entire local neighbourhoods had to be destroyed, thousands of people displaced, plots appropriated without proper compensation.[111] Accordingly, it does not come as a surprise that the population of Luxor continues to have some reservations about the MTA's new 'milestone' project, which had already been championed by Mubarak's local stakeholders.[112] Privileging pharaonic heritage over that from later periods or over the needs of local communities is a reoccurring trait of many governmental policies aiming at the maximisation of touristic intake. Whatever the motives[113] behind the SCA's decision to demolish the partly derelict early 20th century Palace of Tawfiq Pasha Andraos close to Luxor's Sphinx Avenue, the case symbolises to many a misbalance in governmental efforts to safeguard and preserve the whole chronological range of Egypt's cultural heritage.[114]

As far as pharaonic heritage is concerned, however, MTA/SCA press releases over the last few years go a long way towards convincing the public that we are definitely living in the golden age of Egyptian archaeology. Hardly a week goes by without the announcement of a new great discovery. Whether it is the 'Valley of the Golden Mummies' in al-Bahriya Oasis, the 'Lost Golden City' of Amenhotep III in Western Thebes or another cache of coffins from the Saqqara necropolis, the pattern asked for by the administration seems to be always the same: quickly produce results that are presentable at a press conference, create a PR stir, lose no time to put the 'treasures' on display at a museum and relegate careful documentation, interpretation, and comprehensive publication of the contexts to the bottom of your wish list. This attitude may seem like a justifiable way of 'selling' scholarship to the larger public, but it has significant consequences for the implemen-

109 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bnlXW7KZl0c, last accessed on 24 August 2022.

110 See https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sL36V1FFhhU, last accessed on 24 August 2022.

111 The decision taken by the Egyptian authorities in 2010 to raze the modern hamlets of Sheikh Abd el-Qurna, because they were partly built over the Tombs of the Nobles in Western Thebes, demonstrates a similar attitude. See Bednarski 2013.

112 See El Saddik 2017: 9.

113 For the interesting prehistory of the building's demolition see El Saddik 2017: xiii.

114 Ayad 2021; Masr360 2021.

tation of archaeological research and helps to uphold a picture of Egyptology where it is all about spectacular treasures and the total number of finds, and nothing about contexts and interpretations.[115] Not necessarily in terms of applied methodologies but in terms of output this kind of archaeology – often backed up by Western media coverage and even sponsoring – betrays a mentality surprisingly close to the treasure hunting of the colonial past. To prevent misunderstandings I should point out that I do not hold this to be a matter of lacking competence or understanding on behalf of the Egyptian archaeologists working on those projects but one of policy. In any case, there are voices in Egypt who maintain that these missions are precisely the way forward for domestic Egyptian archaeology and are well-suited to put an end to the foreign domination of the field.[116] That said, however, it would be more than unfair to single out particular Egyptian missions for seeking sensationalist media coverage, choosing sites that appeal to funders, or for not publishing the results of their projects in a comprehensive and timely fashion. Despite increasing attempts by the SCA to curb the 'all-you-can-excavate' enthusiasm of many foreign missions,[117] the tendency to spend as much time as possible on site is still widespread (partly fed by the worry for next year's security permission) and usually comes at the expense of time devoted to the analysis of the finds in the dig house or storage facility, and the preparation of publications. The problem is exacerbated by funding bodies' 'allergic' reaction to long-term commitments. Accordingly, they prioritise the allocation of their resources towards short-term results. What is to happen with the archaeological data after spades and shovels have been put away again is often not adequately represented in funding agreements, and it is unfortunate that not more is being done to challenge this development.

But even unlimited resources of time and money cannot compensate for limitations of a different kind. It is an open secret that for several reasons (e.g. the complete ban on the temporary exportation of samples, the lack of enough high-tech testing capabilities etc.), the application of archaeometry in Egypt, on average, does not represent the current technical state-of-the-art and lags significantly behind neighbouring regions. While the present situation can only be understood in light of the long and complex negotiations of power relations within the process of decolonisation, its practical impact is negatively felt by many archaeological missions. For some, the increasing discrepancy between sophisticated research questions and the limited possibilities to conduct adequate scientific analyses have even become a motivation[118] to move their entire

115 Not that this approach would be unfamiliar among foreign missions. For the widespread focus on easily sellable 'monumental' archaeology and its consequences for the discipline see Moreno García 2015: 51.

116 Cf. Abu Dashish 2022.

117 Cf. Ragab 2017.

118 Certainly, one among several. It would not be the first time, however, that practical and political considerations have had an impact on the direction of archaeological research in Egypt. Leaving aside the temporary cessation of concessions for foreign missions and the sequestration of the IFAO under Gamal Abdel Nasser (cf., e.g., Leclant 1953: 83; 87; Mainterot 2020: 84; Badel 2011: 254, n. 58), one needs only to be reminded that in the wake of the Arab–Israeli Wars of the 1960s and 70s some archaeological teams working in different parts of Egypt applied for concessions in Luxor in order to conduct archaeological research away from potential warzones and without risking the project's shutdown. See Bietak 1972: 5; Thausing 1989: 113; Leclant 1971: 240.

archaeological target region southward to Sudan, where it is currently possible to export scientific samples. But this comes at a price, for current Sudan is not exactly what one would call a stable country (see also the following section).

3.3. The elephant in the room – geopolitics, academic freedom, and human rights

'Where's my favorite dictator?' [119]

I admit that it is the topic raised in the following part that I feel most strongly about and that originally triggered me to write this essay at all. Here I will address what appear to me particularly pressing and at the same time overlooked or tabooed issues relating to our discipline: the famous 'elephant in the room', so to speak.

As I will try to demonstrate, present-day Egyptology is outrightly political, no matter whether it is practiced on site in Egypt or conducted from the philologist's stereotypical armchair at a foreign institution.[120] Egyptologists cannot simply assert that they are only interested in ancient heritage and have no significant points of contact with modern-day Egypt, let alone with Western or Egyptian politics. Since most of Egyptological research is directly connected with Egyptian governmental agencies for obtaining concessions, permits for study or publication, etc., the majority of Egyptologists have in one way or another to deal with the current political system in Egypt. And many are willing, for the glory of scholarship or more personal concerns, to put up with whatever that system demands of them. In this regard, social relations with official stakeholders are often turned into tools to achieve an academic goal that can be taken home as a trophy. While the colonial games have never ended, the 'spoils of war' have changed compared with the last two centuries. What used to be material 'treasures' taken home or shipped to museums across the globe are now archaeological concessions, projects, and research data to be presented on websites of academic institutions, in turn leading to prestigious publications and international scholarly renown. These are the assets that one strives for today. But it would be naïve to take for granted that the mid-term political and social development in Egypt will be conducive to the continuation of the status quo. Nationalist tendencies are definitely on the rise in Egyptian administrative policies, and 'stability' tends to be a very unstable category in a country where political freedoms are being cut down, while social and economic inequality have seen a sharp rise in recent years.[121] The sad truth is that ancient Egypt – and inextricably linked with it, Egyptology – serve to 'put a nice face' on the autocratic[122] military[123] regime[124] under

119 Expression by the former President of the United States, Donald B. Trump, awaiting a meeting with the President of the Arabic Republic of Egypt, Abdel Faṭṭah el-Sisi, at the G7 summit in Biarritz in August 2019. Youssef et al. 2019.

120 For the wider context cf. Hutchings & Dent 2017; Carruthers 2019.

121 Cf. El-Gawhary 2020: 35–44; 136–158; Dunne 2020; El-Ghobashy 2021. That is not to say that Europe or the United States have in turn become more stable or equal societies during the past decade.

122 Cf. Torres-Van Antwerp 2022: 262–264.

123 Cf. Sayigh 2019.

124 The classification of Egypt's current political system varies in (Western) political science, but there is a broad consensus that the country has seen a marked decrease in political freedoms and freedom of press in recent years. According to the current Democracy Report of the Swedish V-Dem Institute, Egypt constitutes an Electoral Autocracy on the verge of being a Closed Autocracy such as Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates (Boese et al.

president Abdel Faṭṭah el-Sisi, which uses Western and domestic engagement with its past to accumulate prestige and legitimacy, increase its international standing, and ensure the constant influx of foreign exchange via tourism. This does not mean, however, that Egyptology is simply at the mercy of politics and has to make the best of it in order to survive. Quite in contrast, *it is itself politics*, even if certain of its aspects assume a more political dimension than others. But it is not all about the instrumentalisation of an academic discipline and its subject of study for outward-oriented PR. One should be in no doubt that ancient Egypt plays a considerable role in the ideological underpinning and self-stylisation of the present Egyptian leadership.[125] Perhaps the most striking example for this represents the architectural design of the Presidential Palace in Egypt's New Administrative Capital (NAC), which is currently being constructed in the desert c. 50 km to the east of Cairo.[126] The gigantesque complex[127] features several large-scale references to the ancient Egyptian architectural and ornamental vocabulary, among them a huge ankh-shaped open-air structure. The palace's main façade resembles the winged sun disc familiar from the cavetto cornices of Egyptian temples,[128] while an impressive pyramid crowning the centre of the main building is complemented by several smaller pyramids over lateral wings and ancillary buildings as if the whole structure was meant to resemble an Old Kingdom pyramid complex. One can rightly state that the palace amounts to **'pharaonic' architecture fit for a Pharaoh**. This is also borne out by the way the Chinese planners promoted their designs in meetings with Egyptian officials. With a clear reference to awe-inspiring monumental architecture of ancient times they nicknamed the presidential complex 'Temple of Pharaoh'.[129] It can be taken as a sign of the ties between autocratic Egypt and China becoming closer that in the crucial development phase between autumn 2015 and February 2017 the entire planning of NAC's governmental district, including the Presidential Palace, was managed by the Chinese State Construction Engineering Corporation (CSCEC).[130] Such shared interests[131] and China's wish to increase its global soft power may also provide some of the reasons why Chinese engagement in Egyptology and archaeological fieldwork in

2022: 45). In V-Dem's Liberal Democracy Index (LDI) Egypt is ranked 144th out of 179 countries (Boese et al. 2022: 47). As regards freedom of press, the picture is even gloomier. Reporters without Borders (RSF) consider Egypt to be 'one of the world's biggest prisons for journalists', achieving RSF freedom-of-press index rank 168 out of 180 countries in 2022 (RSF 2022).

125 For informal colonialism in Egyptological contexts see also Langer 2017a. In this respect the present shows some similarities with the implementation of 'pharaonism' under King Faruq and in the early years of Gamal Abdel Nasser's presidency. Cf. Reid 2015: 346–352; 360–364. For the role of 'pharaonic' cultural vocabulary during the Khedival period see Colla 2007: esp. 167–172.

126 For the project and its background see Loewert 2020.

127 Visible in satellite imagery accessible via Google Earth or Google Maps. See 30°01'51.2"N 31°45'18.1"E.

128 Several renderings of it can be seen in YouTube videos about the New Administrative Capital. Although it is impossible to verify whether any of these represent the actually built final design, the basic features of the structure can be made out in the satellite image.

129 Loewert 2020: 29 (n.b.: Loewert writes 'temple of Pharao'.)

130 Loewert 2020: 29; 32.

131 Cf. Dunne 2020: 2.

Egypt is growing.[132] Following an agreement of cooperation between the Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities and the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, a team of Chinese archaeologists obtained in 2017 the permission to work together with Egyptian colleagues in the precinct of Montu at the prestigious site of North Karnak, thus establishing the first Egyptian–Chinese archaeological mission to date.[133]

It would be naïve, however, to assume that present-day Western archaeological organisations would operate completely outside the **geopolitical framework** in Egypt. Even non-governmental institutions such as the American University in Cairo (AUC),[134] the American Research Center in Egypt (ARCE) or the Epigraphic Survey (ES) of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute are part of the American soft power in the region and closely cooperate with US governmental institutions such as USAID or the Department of State[135] in order to 'strengthen American–Egyptian cultural collaboration'.[136] In Europe, the link between foreign policy and extra-territorial archaeology is even more direct. The German Archaeological Institute with its Cairo branch (Deutsches Archäologisches Institut, Abteilung Kairo, DAI) forms part of the German Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt) and has as such an obligation to conduct projects that are also in the interest of the Federal Republic of Germany. The mission statement on the DAI's website states explicitly that '[a]s such the Institute's work [i.e. in relation to ancient heritage of host countries] makes a substantial contribution to stable political and cultural ties.'[137] While administratively assigned to the French Ministry of Higher Education, Research, and Innovation (Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation), the Institut français d'archéologie orientale (IFAO) in Cairo serves a similar purpose.[138] Accordingly, their activities (alongside those of much smaller foreign archaeological institutes) are also to be considered under the aspects of informal diplomacy and the application of soft power for non-archaeological goals. As foreign research activities in Egypt are usually conducted under the (in)formal aegis of the respective diplomatic mission, i.e. a country's Foreign Ministry, there is a common understanding that archaeological projects belong to the general diplomatic toolkit. The world of directors of archaeological projects and institutions is therefore also a world of diplomats and diplomatic exchanges via culture. As one can easily see, the establishment of close cultural ties forms an efficient way to increase mutual trust and understanding, which may in turn lead to more substantial bilateral agreements. The most significant of these are probably the French,[139] American, and German arms deals with Egypt, which according to SIPRI amounted in the past ten years (2012–2021)

132 Tian Tian 2017: 191. A detailed discussion of Chinese archaeological activities in Egypt will soon be published by Christian Langer.

133 Fouly 2017; Xinhua 2020.

134 Chougule 2022: 62–85.

135 See Luke & Kersel 2012: 30–31; Rafaat 2021.

136 See https://www.arce.org/mission-and-vision, last accessed on 24 August 2022. Cf. also Luke & Kersel 2012: 31.

137 See https://www.dainst.org/en/dai/portraet/aufgaben-und-strukturen, last accessed on 24 August 2022.

138 The IFAO is part of the Réseau des écoles françaises à l'étranger (ResEFE), itself an institutional network under the aegis of the Ministère de l'Enseignement supérieur, de la Recherche et de l'Innovation (MESRI).

139 In this respect one can also refer to the sales of French military technology to Egypt that can be used for domestic repression, and the alleged involvement of French personnel in secret military operations in Egypt. See AI 2021b; Disclose 2021.

to the record sums of $3.3 bn, $1.27 bn[140] and $1.17 bn respectively.[141] By coincidence, France, Germany, and the United States are also among the countries with the largest number of archaeological concessions in Egypt.[142] Of course, relative correspondence does in no way imply connection or even causation,[143] but it demonstrates that there is much to lose in both arenas. Western governments' underlying rationale for supporting el-Sisi's regime seems not only to relate to substantial short- and mid-term economic gains. It is equally motivated by genuine political considerations. Especially Western European states have an interest in supporting an autocratic strongman in Egypt. Through this, they hope, the MENA region's most populous country will continue to remain what in Western eyes appears to be a stable and predictable partner. 'Stability' and 'partnership' are of course not sought for the benefit of Egypt's population of 100 million but for that of Western democracies, which would like to rely on Egypt as a bastion against African and Western Asian migration into Europe.[144] What methods are used to keep refugees away from European borders is less of a concern to Western governments. The current energy crisis in the wake of the war on Ukraine is poised to even strengthen Europe's support for autocratic leaders in North Africa and the Middle East, since European countries are desperately searching for additional sources of natural gas in the region and cannot afford to upset potential future suppliers.[145] This also means not to let **human rights** issues get in the way of maintaining good relations with Egypt. Stakeholders of cultural ties such as the foreign archaeological institutes in Egypt are thus well-advised to follow the path of least resistance and generally remain silent about any cases of human rights abuse or the curtailment of academic freedom.

But sometimes things get 'too hot to handle' even for Egyptology. In 2016 **Giulio Regeni**, an Italian postgraduate student at the University of Cambridge, was found dead in a ditch alongside the Alexandria–Cairo desert highway after having been abducted, tortured and murdered. Although Egyptian authorities soon claimed to have caught and shot a gang of criminals as the perpetrators, it transpired that the alleged true culprits were to be identified with Egyptian National Security Agency officers, who had presumably acted on higher orders to take revenge for Regeni's field research on independent Egyptian trade unions.[146] As Italy withdrew its ambassador to Egypt and halted an arms deal, Italian–Egyptian relations were temporarily in crisis mode. Even the Egyptian Museum in Turin took a stand by pledging to dedicate its Deir el-

140 N.b.: This sum is less than the total US Foreign Military Aid received by Egypt every year to finance the purchase of US military equipment and training.

141 SIPRI 2022.

142 Cf. Ragab 2017.

143 For example, Russia – the biggest supplier of weapons to Egypt with an estimated $3.58 bn worth of sales between 2012 and 2021 – is currently engaged in only few archaeological projects in Egypt.

144 Cf. El-Gawhary 2021: 120–126. It is no coincidence that a recent Austrian state visit to Egypt and Turkey involved meetings between the respective ministers of the interior alongside the foreign ministers. In the talks, northward migration via the Mediterranean featured high on the agenda. Der Standard 2022a.

145 In June 2022 representatives of Egypt, Israel, and the European Union signed an agreement according to which natural gas extracted in Israeli waters will be transported to liquefaction facilities on Egypt's Mediterranean coast before it will be shipped to Europe. See Hosny 2022.

146 See AI 2016: 48–49 and the comprehensive references on Wikipedia 2022. Cf. also Stork 2020.

Medina gallery to the memory of Giulio Regeni.[147] The museum's participation in the Dutch–Italian archaeological mission at the New Kingdom necropolis of Saqqara was suspended for one season.[148] But despite the fact that Regeni's case threw a shadow on official Italian–Egyptian relations for several years, it did not have a lasting effect on Italy's realpolitik with Egypt. After resuming its negotiations over a comprehensive weapons deal, Italy sold in 2020 and 2021 arms with a combined value of at least $1.1 bn to Egypt[149] and is currently in the course of finalising a further $ 3 bn deal over 24 Eurofighter Typhoon aircraft.[150] The successful conclusion of this deal might be helped by the fact that last July an Italian court stopped the in-absentia prosecution of Regeni's presumptive murderers for lack of cooperation from the Egyptian side,[151] thus removing one of the last major points of friction between the two countries. Italian missions had resumed their archaeological projects in Egypt already years before or had not even paused their activities.

Although Giulio Regeni's murder provides undoubtedly the most extreme example for the systematic state-sponsored attack on the freedom of academic research in Egypt, there are many more cases on record. In February 2020 the Egyptian postgraduate student and human rights researcher Patrick Zaki George was arbitrarily detained and tortured at Cairo International Airport upon his return from his Erasmus semester at the University of Bologna.[152] The charges against him included 'dissemination of false news', 'incitement to protest', and 'incitement to violence and terrorist crimes'. After 22 months in remand at the Tora detention centre south of Cairo he was temporarily released in December 2021 without the charges against him being dropped. Another recent example, which was the actual trigger for writing this essay, is the case of **Ahmed Samir Santawy**, an Egyptian PhD-student at the Central European University (CEU) in Vienna.[153] When in February 2021 Santawy returned to Egypt in order to visit his family, he was ordered to the offices of the National Security Agency in New Cairo and underwent torture while being interrogated for five days without official warrant or access to outside support. Subsequently he was charged with 'belonging to a terrorist organisation' as well as with 'disseminating false news through social media', and was finally transferred to the high-security Tora Liman detention centre. Without doubt the real reason for Santawy's detention relates to his research on women's rights and abortion laws in contemporary Egypt.[154] Despite protests by *Amnesty International* and other human rights organisations, Santawy was sentenced by an Emergency State Security Court in June 2021 to four years in prison for the dissemination of false news. While

147 La Repubblica 2016. I frankly do not know whether this plan has ever been implemented. In any case, Giulio Regeni's name is lacking from the museum's website.

148 Of the two preliminary reports on the 2017 season, one does not comment on the events of 2016 at all (cf. Weiss 2017: 35), whereas the other simply states: 'During the 2017 season, the work of the joint Leiden-Turin Expedition was resumed after an interruption in 2016 due to various reasons' (Raven et al. 2018–2019: 129). The year 2016 is not mentioned on the website of the mission's supporting society *Friends of Saqqara* (https://www.saqqara.nl, last accessed on 24 August 2022), nor is the digging diary of 2017 accessible there anymore.

149 Mada Masr 2020a; SIPRI 2022.

150 Middle East Eye 2022.

151 Mada Masr 2022.

152 AI 2022a.

153 AI 2021a.

154 See also Harrer 2021; Lau 2022.

the verdict was set aside at the beginning of 2022, Santawy remained in detention, and a re-trial ended on 4 July with yet another three year sentence on similar charges.[155] It was only after intense diplomatic efforts by European countries including Austria that Santawy finally went free on 30 July via presidential decree.[156] Thus, his release was not the logical consequence of due legal process but the result of a political barter with yet undisclosed 'offset costs'.

Some might now ask what this has to do with Egyptology. I would argue that it could be taken as a sign of unacknowledged complicity that the biggest community of foreign academics in Egypt does not find appropriate ways to express its concern over the current state of academic freedom and human rights more generally in their host country. While it is clear that single foreign individuals speaking out in public would risk more than just losing their working permit, one should expect slightly more involvement from institutions and organisations that have identified social justice, academic diversity and equality as major goals of their professional endeavours. Whether out of ignorance, disregard, fear, or outright hypocrisy, I can to the best of my knowledge not think of any statement by a professional Egyptological institution that would ever have touched upon such issues. It remains, of course, at everyone's discretion how to characterise this sort of silence and explain its reasons. From personal experience I have got the impression that the degree of rudimentary awareness is substantially larger than what might be gauged from publicised opinion. Yet, for most Egyptologists this awareness seems to be disjunct from any potential instigations to act. 'Risking not to excavate in Egypt as usual is *no* option' could be the motto of this group. But who could blame them? When long-term projects, entire careers, or family income are at stake, it is quite natural to intuitively follow the beaten track, keep on doing what one has always been doing, and generally hope for the best. This way, however, Egyptology's state of structural dependency outlined above (p. 4) gets prolonged. There are certainly also those who, far from living in a state of denial, are under no illusion about the social and political contexts in which they conduct their studies but simply cannot be bothered to care all that much as long as they are able to continue with doing their thing. At least one has to give them the credit of being earnest in non-official communication. Finally, there might be those who like to play the devil's advocate and call for total non-interference, decrying human rights activism as a form of Western proselytising that perpetuates hypocritical colonialist paternalism. Indeed, it is true that there have been lengthy debates about the claimed universality of human rights in a postcolonial world[157] and the instrumentalisation of human rights by the Western liberal discourse.[158] And it is also true that most of the NGOs trying to assess the status of human rights around the world are based in Western countries. But it would be erroneous to assume that the general concept of human rights and the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (UDHR) are simply the products of a Western post-war hegemony.[159] Quite apart from the substantial non-Western contributions to the UDHR, one should bear in mind that certain forms of fundamentalist cultural relativism are themselves ethically highly problematic concepts that verge on being nothing but racism in disguise. To believe,

155 AI 2022b; Der Standard 2022b.

156 AI 2022c; Maan 2022.

157 See the comprehensive discussion in Pollmann 2022: 131–177.

158 Nair 2002: 254–261.

159 See Staub-Bernasconi 2019: 101–170.

however, that the people of the Middle East and elsewhere are equally entitled to enjoy comprehensive political, social, and cultural freedoms is not the same as to speak in favour of interventionism or to advocate Western hubris. The point is not to tell members of non-Western societies what to do or how to behave, but to be clear about one's own position,[160] act accordingly and assume responsibility for those actions. This includes acknowledging that the West is far from being the unchallenged global champion of human rights and political honesty. As the case of Julian Assange testifies, politically motivated detention and torture are not unheard of in Western European countries either.[161] Liberal democracy is under immediate threat in certain EU-member states, and the level of hypocrisy when Western leaders roll out the red carpet to autocrats and dictators around the world for economic and political gains is hard to match.

4. Where to go from here?

As will have become clear in the preceding sections, the problems of current Egyptology abound. But they are neither new nor surprising to the initiated. What I have merely touched upon is simply part and parcel of what it means to do Egyptology, be it field archaeology, philology or some other specialisation. Due to the ethical as well as the pragmatical complexity of the issues one cannot hope to find the magic solution that would immediately remove all the discipline's internal contradictions. To engage in outright confrontation with the political system of Egyptology's host country will for the majority of Egyptologists be out of the question and might even do damage to the very causes one wishes to promote. On the other hand, it may be important simply to acknowledge that it is indeed a viable option to say thank you and leave well alone. This would not necessarily mean to actually go down that route but would widen the perspective and make it possible to look at familiar things from a completely new angle. Of course, Egypt continues to be Egyptology's primary 'feeding ground'. This has been the case from the very beginning of the discipline and it will remain to be the case, no matter how much Egyptology strives to become postcolonial or truly decolonised. Cutting Western Egyptology off from Egypt would leave the discipline a mutilated torso, even if this might represent quite an attractive scenario for certain Egyptian policy makers. It would certainly cause 'epistemic distress' and undermine Egyptologists' self-conception as scholars devoted to a subject that is held together first and foremost by its primary 'area of operation'. For some, the most viable option would probably be to 'go local'[162] and focus on the integration of archaeological work and small-scale community engagement while at the same time avoid any actions that could be perceived as being in the slightest sense political. Even though this strategy may appear as an elegant way around present Egyptological quandaries and constitute in certain cases an honest and more or less 'authentic' personal practice, it remains strangely at odds with the structural conditions in which it is practised.[163]

160 Bearing in mind that in the age of hybrid identities and global mobility the *us–them* dichotomy that positions a homogenously thought West or Global North against everyone else on the planet is an equally problematic frame. Cf. Vieira 2019.

161 Cf. Melzer 2022; Hogan et al. 2020.

162 For the intersection of transnational and local levels of agency see Hönke & Müller 2012.

163 It does involve some cognitive dissonance to imagine community involvement at

But where to draw the line? If it is deemed problematic for Western missions to continue their current activities in Egypt, wouldn't it be as problematic to maintain the status quo regarding Turkey, where academic and political freedoms are equally under threat? Should one refrain from working on Lesbos and Chios because of the Greek government's constant violation of human rights in respect to refugees? Should one even stop cooperating with one's own government because of policies that lead to the 'outsourcing' of migrant push-backs to countries such as Turkey or Egypt?[164] When trying to address these difficult questions, one needs to bear in mind as well that while researchers are unquestionably actors, they are also being acted upon. The temporary shutdown of the long-standing Austrian mission at Ephesus in 2016, which was the result of a political tit-for-tat exchange between the Austrian and the Turkish governments,[165] demonstrates that archaeological missions can quickly become a pawn in political games beyond the control of academics. Egyptology itself has been living with the assumption that the geopolitical environment, by-and-large, has worked in its favour in the past and will do so in the future. But this could be a miscalculation. The very structures Egyptology helps to uphold in the present might sooner or later prove significantly less stable or benign than commonly expected.[166] Then, at the latest, our discipline will find itself in the position to have to account for its decisions and confront what may well be characterised as a 'pre-postcolonial' *Lebenslüge*. Under the present circumstances, however, I do not believe that a truly decolonised Egyptology (in the sense of not infringed by informal colonialist structures, epistemes, and power relationships) is possible, neither for Western, nor for Egyptian Egyptologists. In the wake of Egyptology's ongoing globalisation, non-Western countries may delineate a path beyond old dichotomies and contradictions, while possibly creating new ones along the way.[167] Sometime, Egyptology might become (or merge with) a completely different discipline. At the moment, however, this is not foreseeable and quite likely still some way off. What therefore remains the most pertinent question for Western Egyptologists is to decide what kind of 'colonialist' Egyptology we can possibly justify to practice. Admittedly, I am unable to suggest a definite answer.

Concluding remarks

While the views presented here may to some appear nothing but provocation for its own sake, the only thing I have had in mind is to provoke a debate. To that end I have tried to raise some pressing questions in the hope that they will resonate with

certain archaeological sites in Egypt that are located in close proximity to military installations or security complexes with potential political detainees.

164 In 2016 the then Austrian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sebastian Kurz remarked in an interview that it would be necessary not to leave the dirty job of 'securing' Europe's borders to Turkey ('Es ist nachvollziehbar, dass viele Politiker Angst vor hässlichen Bildern bei der Grenzsicherung haben. Es kann aber nicht sein, dass wir diesen Job an die Türkei übertragen, weil wir uns die Hände nicht schmutzig machen wollen. Es wird nicht ohne hässliche Bilder gehen.'; Mülherr 2016). Even so, the deal of March 2016 between Turkey and the EU, which was to curb migratory movements into Europe via Turkey, went a long way towards 'outsourcing ugly pictures'.

165 Cf. Shaw 2016.

166 Cf. Frehse 2021.

167 For perspectives on Egyptology's future see Langer 2017c: xvi–xviii; Moreno García 2020: 6–8.

readers. Yet, I fully realise that any genuine discussion of the topics raised would already result in leaving the status quo behind and would thus have immediate consequences for daily Egyptological practice as well as the discipline's political, ideological and epistemic framework. For this reason it remains to be seen whether an instigation such as this with its intentionally polemic discourse strategy can have any real effect. Such discussions would crucially need the participation of a large number of Egyptian colleagues speaking their minds freely, which under the given political circumstances cannot be taken for granted. Having spent more than twenty years in Egyptology, I can only hope that my pessimism is proved wrong, for a discipline whose social and ideological impact cannot even be addressed within the scholarly discourse will find it hard to be taken seriously by people outside its academic bubble. It runs the risk of failing by its own standards, Western or not. That said, however, I definitely did not have in mind to argue on a moral high ground when conceiving this essay. I too have made mistakes and have taken professional decisions that I now regret. But the important thing is to look at what can be changed in the present. This essay does not provide any concrete suggestions as to how precisely change can come about. It merely points at areas where I believe that change is due. In doing so, I do not claim to dispense the ultimate truth. As is commonly known, there are no ultimate truths in this world, and certainly not in the case of highly complex social and intercultural relations, where everyone feels entitled to have their own perspective on the/a truth. What is usually easier to spot are cracks in the scaffolding erected around half-truths. If this essay helps to put pertinent issues on the table and trigger the sort of open debate that seems to me long overdue, then it will have served its intended purpose. If, however, such a debate does not take place in earnest, we might well end up in a situation reminiscent of a scene from *Lawrence of Arabia*, probably the most postcolonial of all colonialist film epics (or the other way round, depending on your perspective[168]). In this scene, T. E. Lawrence, played by Peter O'Toole, is confronted by the British political figure Mr. Dryden, played by Claude Rains, with the fact that the Sykes–Picot Agreement has basically thwarted Arabian aspirations to create a truly independent pan-Arabian state. Lawrence pretension not to have known is countered by Dryden with the following words:

> If we've told lies, you've told half-lies. And a man who tells lies, like me, merely hides the truth. But a man who tells half-lies has forgotten where he put it.[169]

Are these the two souls of contemporary Western Egyptology, the cynic and the hypocrite? I should hope not.

Postscript

As will hopefully have become clear while reading this article, it is not my intention to put blame on specific individuals or to discuss at length specific incidents. Rather, I am aiming at the general picture. This does not mean, however, that the issues raised are figments of my imagination or known only from rumours. Where my discussions do not concern publicly accessible information or my personal experience they are based on trustworthy sources, whose identity cannot be disclosed for obvious reasons. It goes without saying, however, that the responsibility for this text remains entirely my own.

168 Cf. Dawson 1996.

169 See https://youtu.be/fBrw53I8QU0?t=113 (last accessed on 24 August 2022).

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170 The problem of correctly referencing and alphabetically listing Arabic personal names that have been Romanised with different intentions in different contexts by different agents (including both Westerners and Arabic speaking academics) is a good illustration of the ongoing 'epistemic frictions' within scholarly practice.

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