

The Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution and Counterrevolution. An Archaeology that Has Never Occurred

Johannes Jungfleisch and Chiara Reali

Zitiervorschlag

Johannes Jungfleisch and Chiara Reali. 2023. The Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution and Counterrevolution. An Archaeology that Has Never Occurred. Forum Kritische Archäologie 12, Theme Issue: Archaeology as Empowerment: For Whom and How? Comments on Scholarly Activism: 30–35.

URL <https://www.kritischearchaeologie.de>
DOI <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/refubium-40261>
ISSN 2194-346X



Dieser Beitrag steht unter der Creative Commons Lizenz CC BY-NC-ND 4.0 (Namensnennung – Nicht kommerziell – Keine Bearbeitung) International. Sie erlaubt den Download und die Weiterverteilung des Werkes / Inhaltes unter Nennung des Namens des Autors, jedoch keinerlei Bearbeitung oder kommerzielle Nutzung.

Weitere Informationen zu der Lizenz finden Sie unter: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/deed.de>.

The Archaeology of the Egyptian Revolution and Counterrevolution. An Archaeology that Has Never Occurred

Johannes Jungfleisch

johannes.jungfleisch@rub.de

Chiara Reali

reali.chi@gmail.com

Introduction

At the beginning of 2011, thousands of demonstrators filled the streets in the cities and villages of different countries in North Africa and West Asia, demanding the demise of the ruling authoritarian regimes. In Egypt, people forced Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak to resign after 18 days of mass protests. Shortly after these events, many teams of foreign archaeologists were back in Egypt to continue their work on the distant past (el-Aref 2011). (Archaeological) Business as usual. This was also true for us: PhD students carrying out their research in the eastern Nile delta at that time. As archaeologists, we reflect in this essay on how we could have taken and still could take a stance in the political events that occurred in Egypt from the 2011 revolution onwards.

The Dig Must Go On

In late spring of 2011, a couple of months after the beginning of the Egyptian revolution, the first of the two annual excavations at an archaeological site in Egypt's eastern Nile delta was supposed to start. A little bit later than usual but still consistent with the regular archaeological calendar, the work in the field and on the materials in the excavation house continued – despite the unstable situation and an ongoing and already disappointed revolution heading in directions unknown. But the dig must go on. And it went on, regardless of whether small demonstrations, violent clashes, massacres of civilians, Egypt's first free elections, a *coup d'état* or bomb attacks and fighting occurred. During these troublesome times, we spent many months in Egypt, living and working in a parallel foreign country – the past. Lost in the material remains of pharaonic Egypt, we felt like the protagonist of Max Frisch's novel *Gantenbein* who reflects on his trivial inaction in the face of daily torture during the Algerian Revolution of the 1950s and 1960s: "If I can imagine it for a few moments, there is nothing else, and the idea is almost unbearable. And I am ready for any action. But I sit here, reading an outdated newspaper, enduring it. Doing nothing..."¹ (Frisch 1975: 21–22). On the weekends in Cairo, our eyes saw the revolutionary gatherings taking place in Tahrir Square, t-shirts with revolutionary slogans fluttering on the balustrade around the square, and people covering the walls of the American University in Cairo in Mohamed Mahmoud Street with graffiti. Still, we were sitting there, focusing on archaeology, while the Maspero Massacre² was taking place only a few hours away from where we worked. Our professional inaction was appalling, and more alarming is the fact that it was and is not an exception in archaeology.

1 "Wenn ich es mir einige Augenblicke lang vorstellen kann, gibt es nichts anderes, und die Vorstellung ist kaum auszuhalten. Und ich bin bereit zu jeder Tat. Aber ich sitze hier, eine veraltete Zeitung lesend, und halte es aus. Tatlos..."

2 On the 9th of October 2011, security forces and military personnel attacked peaceful Coptic demonstrators on their way to the Maspero television building on the eastern bank of the Nile in Cairo: between 24 and 27 protesters were killed, and more than 300 civilians were injured (Abd el-Fattah 2021: 66).

For the Sake of Archaeology

It may seem surprising that the history and material culture of ancient Egypt inflames archaeologists' scientific passion, while the current political events and their consequences for the people of Egypt remain mostly unnoticed or ignored. But on second sight, Egyptology's apparent neutrality, or, better, passivity, might result from its dependency on the need to keep "good relations" with the Egyptian authorities. After all, they are the ones who issue both the excavation and security permissions that are essential to any archaeological project (Jurman 2022: 14; see also von Rügen 2012: 53). Not taking a position in such an unstable political situation meant continuing our research on the Egyptian past almost undisturbed. Indeed, an exclusive interest in the distant past turns out to be an essential strategy for archaeologists working in regions of political unrest or ruled by authoritarian regimes. This seemingly neutral stance on current politics by foreign archaeologists in Egypt is by no means neutral. On the contrary: it is highly political and in a direction that sharply contrasts with the ethical ideals claimed by the West.

As Claus Jurman recently argued, Egypt's cultural heritage is the main attractor for tourism, and thus an important economic factor, creating employment opportunities and significantly contributing to the gross domestic product (Jurman 2022: 16–17). The touristic consumption of antiquities in Egypt, especially under the current global economic crisis, is therefore comprehensible. What is rarely grasped, though, is the ambiguous and underestimated role archaeology plays with its research in promoting tourism and thus economically supporting past and current regimes. Worse still, it provides insights into the past – especially the pharaonic one – which serves those in power very well for their propaganda (Jurman 2022: 17–18, 20–21).

We believe that there are good reasons for archaeologists working in Egypt to take off their blinkers of imagined neutrality, face up to our entanglement with current politics, and act accordingly. The Egyptian Revolution and its aftermath as well as our passivity in the wake of the events represent a turning point that forces us to reflect on how we, as archaeologists and heritage researchers, could and can engage in the political and social struggles of contemporary Egypt. It is necessary to question our exclusive occupational focus on the material remains of the Egyptian past and instead actively turn the archaeological gaze towards those of the present. Not for the sake of archaeology but for the Egyptian people.

An Archaeology That Has Never Occurred

Documenting the Materialities of the Revolution and Counterrevolution

During the Egyptian revolution, people physically appropriated public space by filling the streets with their bodies and boldly chanting their demands at the sight of police violence. With their protests, the demonstrators transformed the urban landscape of Cairo and other cities in a material way. From the beginning of the revolution, people started sit-ins in the square. For this purpose, they constructed makeshift tents in the open spaces using materials ready at hand. Their protest found many creative and spontaneous forms of expression: self-made posters, banners, stickers, flags, sculptures, puppets, installations, and the omnipresent graffiti formed a multi-faceted material culture (see, e.g., Hamdy and Karl 2014).

Violent clashes between the demonstrators on one side and police, paramilitary, and military units on the other also left material marks on the cityscape. Missing or replaced stones in the paving of Tahrir Square, the blackened concrete skeleton, previously the headquarters of Mubarak's National Democratic Party (NDP), and other signs of destruction remained from the clashes. On the other hand, barbed wire barriers, concrete walls, checkpoints, and tanks represented physical manifestations of the military regime's attempts to take back control of the public space. People responded to the buffer walls of concrete blocks with various practices of resistance, ranging from graffiti paintings to creative occupations and partial demolitions (see, e.g., Abaza 2013). These elements shaped together the materiality of Tahrir Square in the years between 2011 and 2015.

From the first days of the revolution, people took pictures and videos of both protest rallies and the state violence used to suppress the protests, to bear witness to the events and disseminate the images worldwide through social media. At a time when photography was in many areas prohibited, the act of making images was in and of itself revolutionary and political (Baladi 2016: 132). At the same time, people realised the need to collect footage and pictures to preserve a digital memory of the events (Mosireen Collective 2018). Similarly, there was a strong desire

to photographically document the emerging revolutionary street art, especially the ephemeral graffiti paintings with their versatile visual language (Abaza 2013: 125, 138).

Transient in nature, the material expressions of contestation and political struggle have mostly disappeared from Egypt's streets today. After Mubarak's resignation, the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF) started to whitewash the revolutionary graffiti from Cairo's urban fabric (Abaza 2013: 125). And soon after its takeover in 2013, the military regime initiated the extensive redesign of Tahrir Square and the renovation of other areas in downtown Cairo, erasing the material traces of the revolution (Abaza 2017a; 2017b). Transformed into images, the materiality of the revolution survived in publications about street art (see, e.g., Gröndahl 2012; Hamdy and Karl 2014) and virtual media archives created by Egyptian activists and foreign journalists and researchers (Egypt Revolution 2011; Morayef 2011–2015; Mosireen Collective 2018). Nonetheless, virtual archives are vulnerable since their visibility depends on the economic logic embedded in the search engines' algorithms (Baladi 2016: 135).

In our view, we should have offered our specific repertoire of recording methods to the people and activists in Egypt. Firstly, archaeologists could have helped with the systematic geo-referenced photogrammetric documentation of street art and its integration into a diachronic open map of protest. Putting ourselves into service, we would have assisted in preserving and transforming the material culture of the revolution into "a new kind of intangible heritage" some Egyptian researchers hoped for (Naguib 2016: 79). Secondly, we could have practised a form of counter-mapping, correlating roadblocks implemented by the security forces to disrupt the protests with the movements of demonstrators, as well as the number of casualties. Thirdly, the archaeological documentation of weapon fragments, for example, cartridge casings of ammunition and tear gas canisters, could have been the starting point for tracing the trajectories of weapon exports to Egypt. And finally, our continuous presence in Egypt would have enabled us to observe how the military regime seized the memory of Tahrir by whitewashing the façades of the surrounding buildings and erecting monuments with eclectic borrowings from ancient Egypt (Abaza 2017b: 185) or actual antiquities in the middle of the square (Jurman 2022: 17–18).

Collecting the Debris of a Not-bygone Past

The premises for the touristic "improvement" of Lower and Upper Egypt at the cost of both the Egyptian population and its non-pharaonic heritage had already been laid out under Mubarak (Hanna 2013: 372). However, after the *coup d'état*, a major emphasis placed on dynastic Egypt allowed for the normalisation and justification of the demolition of historic buildings, residential areas, and neighbourhoods throughout the country. In the case of the "Sphinx Avenue" in Luxor, the destruction of modern dwellings and the inhabitants' mass relocation took place to "preserve" the dynastic period remains and ensure access for tourists and income from ticket sales (Ayyad 2021; Jurman 2022: 18 and fn 113). In addition, the military regime continues to launch large infrastructure projects to the detriment of Egypt's non-pharaonic cultural heritage and the people residing close by. One notorious example is the City of the Dead in Cairo. This monumental historic cemetery, home to thousands of people, is currently being demolished to build flyovers that will connect Cairo to Egypt's New Administrative Capital (NAC) (El Sawy 2022; Yee 2022). Lucrative enterprises such as cafes and bistros are also "good reasons" to empty areas destined for gentrification. Authorities deprived the neighbourhood of Imbaba, Cairo of the iconic houseboats moored along the Nile Corniche by Kit Kat square, which were symbols of 20th-century Egyptian intellectual life (Gamal El-Gafrie 2022; Kotb and Omar 2022). This search for "modernisation" is being used together with Egypt's pharaonic splendour as a smokescreen to hide real life hardships, attract investments, and gain the support of the private sector. Destructions create discontent in local communities and mistrust of the government.

Egyptologists have already missed several opportunities to tell the unheard stories of these destructions over the last years. Exceptions among us (see, e.g., Sheikh Abd el-Qurna and el-Khokha in Upper Egypt: Strong 2016: 8; Strong and Bednarski 2016: 131–132, 141; Lemos et al. 2017) showed that simply doing our job, i.e. combining archaeological recording methods (3D laser scanner surveys of architectural remains, photogrammetry, inventory of finds) with interdisciplinary teamwork, would have allowed for the documentation of vanishing non-pharaonic cultural heritage and of people's memories. In this way, archaeological practice could offer a different perspective on these destructions and the ensuing conflicts and create an alternative to existing narratives.

Taking Apart the Pharaoh's Palace

Beyond the appropriation of Egyptian antiquities for majestic events with international media coverage and relocating monuments to resignify parts of the urban landscape like Tahrir Square (for examples, see Jurman 2022: 17–18 fn 107), al-Sisi's regime has been using Egypt's pharaonic legacy as architectural inspiration for the most famous of its infrastructure projects, the New Administrative Capital (Jurman 2022: 21). Even surpassing previous Egyptian presidents' ambitions,³ the NAC was presented as one of the largest mega-projects ever initiated in Egypt. Thus, it appears to be a "pharaonic" enterprise in itself. This city amid the desert 50 km east of Cairo is a showroom of absolute superlatives: tallest skyscraper in Africa, largest cathedral in North Africa and West Asia, biggest military headquarters in the world, largest park in the world. Not only the superlatives of the building activity but also the relocation of the capital to a previously undeveloped area far from the people are reminiscent of the strategies employed by rulers in ancient West Asia and pharaonic Egypt after they ascended the throne (cf. Sargon of Akkad and Sargon II of Assur: Heinz 2007; 2008: 141–158). Two pharaonic symbols are the landmarks of this city. The shape of the "Iconic Tower" was inspired by the crown of the god Amun, while the world's largest park named Green River Park mimics the Nile and resounds like the "Great Green" of the ancient Egyptians, a large body of water. A huge glass obelisk, meant to become the highest building in the world, is also in the works. Further pharaonic reminiscences are migdol-like gates evoking the entrance to the Medinet Habu Temple, scattered papyrus columns, ankh-shaped structures, obelisks, sphinxes, pyramids, and, of course, a presidential palace. The shining façade of the latter building nicknamed "Temple of Pharaoh" reproduces a winged sun disk (a symbol of kingship in ancient Egypt, where the king was also named "Son of Ra," nothing less than "son of the sun god") and is the emblem of the propagandistic use of pharaonic legacy in modern Egypt (for the NAC, see Menshawy 2021; Ebrahim 2022; Walsh and Yee 2022).

Allusions to the past in art and architecture are outward-directed messages stating legitimacy. Archaeologists are used to recording, analysing, and interpreting such anachronistic features at archaeological sites. Documenting these references to dynastic Egypt in the case of the NAC⁴ could reveal the strategies used by the current regime to legitimise its rule and erase the memories of the revolution.

Concluding Thoughts

Archaeology possesses an inescapable political dimension in the present. Despite its obviousness, we often ignore this simple fact and focus on an apolitical imagined past. In particular, archaeologies conducted in times and regions of conflict tend to separate the political dimension from the scientific one for several reasons. Such an oblivious attitude fails to recognise that our inaction is highly political. Concerning Egyptian archaeology, this implicitly means winking at an authoritative regime's repression, violence, and injustice.

In a context like the Egyptian revolution and counterrevolution, the concept of activist archaeology might appear not only ambitious, since most of us would never call ourselves activists, but also inappropriate with respect to the activists detained in the Egyptian prisons. Nonetheless, we believe that we need a responsible archaeology, aware of and interested in the social and political circumstances and struggles in which it operates. Individual responsibilities are crucial but not enough. Starting with these, we need to foster communal responsibility, which can only be reached by listening to local communities, cooperating with them, and cultivating a debate within archaeology that outreaches knowledge production about the past. From 2011 onwards, there were many situations in Egypt in which archaeologists could have engaged with current political and social issues. As we argued in this essay, we could have assisted as archaeologists working in Egypt in preserving heritage and producing evidence of the present through the practice of archaeology. An archaeology of the Egyptian revolution and counterrevolution has not occurred (yet). But the examples outlined above illustrate how we could have embarked (not without risks) on an archaeology that is responsible for both the past and the present. Some of these ideas might become projects to be carried out in the future, ideally in collaborative and polyphonic ways. And this time, it will not be for the sake of archaeology.

3 See the construction of Nasr City (currently the largest city district in Cairo but projected to be Egypt's new capital) by Gamal Abdel Nasser (Elshahed 2015) or New Cairo City, built under Mubarak to reduce the overcrowding of the capital city.

4 It might also be interesting to carry out comparative studies, considering the resort to ancient Egyptian elements in other ongoing architectural mega-projects, for example, in New Alamein, New Mansoura, and New Aswan City.

References

- Abaza, Mona. 2013. Walls, Segregating Downtown Cairo and the Mohammed Mahmud Street Graffiti. *Theory, Culture & Society* 30(1): 122–139. DOI: 10.1177/0263276412460062.
- Abaza, Mona. 2017a. Cairo. Restoration? And the Limits of Street Politics. *Space and Culture* 20(2): 170–190. DOI: 10.1177/1206331217697137.
- Abaza, Mona. 2017b. Repetitive Repertoires. How Writing about Cairene Graffiti Has Turned into a Serial Monotony. In Konstantinos Avramidis and Myrto Tsilimpounidi, eds.: *Graffiti and Street Art. Reading, Writing and Representing the City*, pp. 177–194. London: Routledge.
- Abd el-Fattah, Alaa. 2021. *You Have Not Yet Been Defeated. Selected Writings 2011–2021*. London: Fitzcarraldo Editions.
- El-Aref, Nevine. 2011. Excavation Works Resumed in Egypt. *Ahram Online*, September 4, 2011. <https://english.ahram.org.eg/News/20260.aspx>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Ayyad, Ibrahim. 2021. Destruction of 120-year-old Palace Sparks Anger in Egypt. *Al-Monitor*, September 6, 2021. <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/09/destruction-120-year-old-palace-sparks-anger-egypt>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Baladi, Laura. 2016. When Seeing Is Belonging. The Photography of Tahrir. In Artikişler Collective: Özge Çelikaşlan, Alper Sen and Pelin Tan, ed.: *Autonomous Archiving*, pp. 129–140. Barcelona: dpr-barcelona.
- Ebrahim, Nadeen. 2022. Egypt Faces an Acute Water Crisis, but It's Still Building a 'Green River' in the Desert. *CNN World*, November 8, 2022. <https://edition.cnn.com/2022/11/08/middleeast/egypt-water-scarcity-climate-cop27-intl-cmd/index.html>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Egypt Revolution 2011. Politics, Popular Culture and the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. An Archive of Multimedia Influenced by the 2011 Egyptian Revolution. <https://egyptrevolution2011.ac.uk/>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Elshahed, Mohamed. 2015. Nasr City Was Once Egypt's New Capital, but Things Went Wrong. *Cairo Observer*, March 23, 2015. <https://cairoobserver.com/post/114391196879/nasr-city-was-once-egypts-new-capital-but-things#.Y4HoJnbMK70>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Frisch, Max. 1975 [1964]. *Mein Name sei Gantenbein*. Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp.
- Gamal El-Gafrie, Asmaa. 2022. The Departure of Kit Kat's Houseboats. *Mada Masr*, July 7, 2022. <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2022/07/10/panorama/u/the-departure-of-kit-kats-houseboats/>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Gröndahl, Mia. 2012. *Revolution Graffiti. Street Art of the New Egypt*. London: Thames & Hudson.
- Hamdy, Basma and Don Karl, eds. 2014. *Walls of Freedom. Street Art of the Egyptian Revolution*. Berlin: From Here to Fame Publishing.
- Hanna, Monica. 2013. What Has Happened to Egyptian Heritage after the 2011 Unfinished Revolution? *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 1(4): 371–375. DOI: 10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.1.4.0371.
- Heinz, Marlies. 2007. Sargon of Akkad. Rebel and Usurper in Kish. In Marlies Heinz, ed.: *Representations of Political Power. Case Histories from Times of Change and Dissolving Order in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 67–86. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns.
- Heinz, Marlies. 2008. *Die Repräsentation der Macht und die Macht der Repräsentation in Zeiten des politischen Umbruchs. Rebellion in Mesopotamien*. München: Wilhelm Fink.
- Jurman, Claus. 2022. *Pharaoh's New Clothes. On (Post)colonial Egyptology, Hypocrisy, and the Elephant in the Room*. Heidelberg: Propylaeum. DOI: 10.11588/propylaeumdok.00005396.

- Kotb, Mohammed and Toka Omar. 2022. Demolition Deadline about to Pass for Cairo's Historic Houseboats. Egyptian Authorities Adamant that Nile Houseboats Will Be Destroyed or Towed, but Residents Are Hoping for a Miracle. *Aljazeera*, July 6, 2022. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2022/7/4/demolition-deadline-about-pass-cairos-historic-houseboats>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Lemos, Rennan, Pedro L. von Seehausen, Marialaura Di Giovanni, Marcella Giobbe, Oliva Menozzi and Antonio Brancaglione. 2017. Entangled Temporalities in the Theban Necropolis. A Materiality and Heritage Approach to the Excavation of Theban Tomb 187. *Journal of Eastern Mediterranean Archaeology and Heritage Studies* 5(2): 178–197. DOI: 10.5325/jeasmedarcherstu.5.2.0178.
- Menshaw, Mustafa. 2021. Why Is Egypt Building a New Capital? And Who Will this Multi-Billion Project Benefit the Most? *Aljazeera*, July 5, 2021. <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/7/5/why-is-egypt-building-a-new-capital>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Morayef, Soraya. 2011–2015. *Suzeeinthecity*. <https://suzeeinthecity.wordpress.com/>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Mosireen Collective. 2018. 858. An Archive of Resistance. <https://858.ma/>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Naguib, Saphinaz-Amal. 2016. Engaged Ephemeral Art: Street Art and the Egyptian Arab Spring. *Transcultural Studies* 7(2): 53–88. DOI: 10.17885/heiup.ts.2016.2.23590.
- von Rügen, Constance. 2012. Der Tigersprung ins Vergangene – ein Plädoyer für eine Kritische Archäologie. *Forum Kritische Archäologie* 1: 52–56. DOI: 10.6105/journal.fka.2012.1.8.
- El Sawy, Nada. 2022. Cairo's City of the Dead Faces Destruction to Ease Traffic Jams. Activists and Families Are Fighting to Save the UNESCO Heritage Site from a Roads Expansion Project. *The National, MENA*, January 19, 2022. <https://www.thenationalnews.com/mena/egypt/2022/01/19/cairos-city-of-the-dead-faces-destruction-to-ease-traffic-jams/>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Strong, Meghan E. 2016. In the Trenches. Introduction. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 31(1): 6–8.
- Strong, Meghan E. and Andrew Bednarski. 2016. Living in the Shadow of the Beautiful West. Contested Space in Sheikh Abd al-Qurna. *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 31(1): 125–143.
- Walsh, Declan and Vivian Yee. 2022. A New Capital Worthy of the Pharaohs Rises in Egypt, but at What Price? *The New York Times*, October 8, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/10/08/world/middleeast/egypt-new-administrative-capital.html>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.
- Yee, Vivian. 2022. Cairo Dispatch. Demolishing City of the Dead Will Displace a Lively Quarter of Cairo. *The New York Times*, April 24, 2022. <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/24/world/middleeast/cairo-city-of-dead-cemetery.html>. Last viewed 10.11.2022.