THE STORY OF THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM IN ASBAKEYA

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ABSTRACT
A major part of the collection of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo (EMC) was transported recently into a new home at Giza. The journey which is considered a birth of a new museum called the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM). It is important to draw on the multiple chapters of the museum’s story and its collection from Asbakeya to Boulaq and to Giza up to its current location in Tahrir Square. This paper sheds light on its first journey and the story of its birth in Asbakeya. Although retrieving the history of the Asbakeya Museum and its collection has not been possible due to the lack of documentation or any description of its arrangement, the scattered pieces of information help in illustrating it. This paper aims at illustrating the history of this museum and its collection as an important chapter in the history of the EMC and the story of Egypt’s museums.

KEYWORDS

Introduction:
The Egyptian Museum in Cairo (EMC), located in Tahrir Square, has been experimenting since the beginning of the Twenty-First century, a new chapter of its journey as a significant proportion of its collections moved to its new destiny at the Grand Egyptian Museum (GEM) in Giza. Since its birth, the Egyptian Museum has played the role of the...
national museum of Egypt representing the Egyptian identity and history.¹ This was the aim since its birth in Asbakeya, until the opening of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Foustat on April 3, 2021.² After the opening of the NMEC and the opening of the GEM expected by the end of 2022, the EMC considered a new plan for its future.³ The EMC has made its journey into multiple destinations through its birth in 1836. This paper explores the EMC first journey and its birth in Asbakeya.⁴ Retrieving the history of the Asbakeya Museum and its collection has been challenging due to the lack of documentation or any description of its arrangement.⁵ Nevertheless, this research aims at illustrating the history of this museum and its collection as an important chapter in the history of the EMC and Egypt’s museums.

**THE BIRTH OF THE MUSEUM IN THE MODERN HISTORY**

The history of the Egyptian Museum (EMC) and its birth in Dar El Athar at Asbakeya in 1836 goes back in time to the French Expedition in Egypt and the initiative of Rifaa’ Raf Al-Tahtawi. The French expedition in Egypt (1798-1801) brought the world’s attention to ancient Egyptian archaeology.⁶ The western markets of Egyptian antiquities became active enhancing digging in Egypt, following the new western obsession with pharaonic Egypt’s artefacts.⁷ Thousands of Egyptian artefacts made their ways to the European museums through international and local travellers, excavators, and treasure hunters.⁸ Thus, the birth of museums in Egypt was strongly influenced by the colonial greed for antiquities.⁹ This is seen in the story of the first Egyptian Museum, which was born into the 1830s. This

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² For the National Museum of Egyptian civilization, see: https://nmec.gov.eg/
⁴ Asbakeya is one of the old and central districts of Cairo which was built upon a place of an old Coptic village. It is situated nearby to El Rihany Kantara El Daka, and close to Orabi Al Tawfikeya. It contains many historically important establishments and building which highlight its distinguishing history.
Egyptian Museum, known as the Asbakeya Museum, was established by Rifā‘a Raḥmān Tahtawi (1801-1873),¹ and Mohamed Ali Pasha.²

**MOHAMED ALI’S DECREET AND THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE MUSEUM**

The Egyptian Museum at Asbakeya was decreed by Mohamed Ali Pasha in 1835 and 1836.³ Since its establishment in 1836,⁴ the museum and its collection faced huge struggles. Before the decree of Mohamed Ali Pasha to establish a museum, there was a great effort from Rifā‘a Raḥmān Tahtawi. He kept pushing the idea in his letters to Mohamed Ali since his return from France in 1831.⁵ Both Al-Tahtawi and Jean François Champollion sent several appeals to Mohamed Ali Pasha, asking him to take action to safeguard the Egyptian antiquities. Champollion accused the Egyptians, blaming them for using the archaeological sites as quarries. Champollion wrote to the Pasha stating: “all of Europe will take notice of the active measures which his Highness would want to take to assure the conservation of temples, palaces, tombs, and all kind of monuments which still attest to the power and grandeur of ancient Egypt, and which are at the same time the most beautiful ornaments of Modern Egypt.”⁶ On his side, Al-Tahtawi attributed the destruction of the archaeological sites, temples and tombs to the greed of the European diggers.

Al-Tahtawi played a crucial role in the establishment of the Asbakeya Museum. After studying in France, Al-Tahtawi was assigned a governmental office in 1831. He wrote several times to Mohamed Ali Pasha convincing him to safeguard the Egyptian antiquities and to establish a museum.⁷ He reported to the Pasha that: “It is well-known that Europeans have buildings for keeping antiquities – stones covered with paintings and inscriptions, and other such objects are carefully preserved there and shown to the inhabitants of the country, as well as to travellers ... Such institutions bring great renown to the countries that have

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³ The name of Asbakeya Museum or Rifā‘a Raḥmān Al-Tahtawi’s Museum was popular among the elite in Egypt in the 1830s and 1840s, Commins, D., ““Review of Arab Travelers and Western Civilization by Nazik Saba Yared,” International Journal of Middle East Studies, vol. 31, no. 4 (November 1999), 674-677.


⁷ Commins, ““Review of Arab Travelers and Western Civilization by Nazik Saba Yared,” 674-677.

¹ Commins, ““Review of Arab Travelers and Western Civilization by Nazik Saba Yared,” 674-677.


⁹ Mahmoud, The Development of Archaeological and Historical Museums in Egypt, 61; Commins, ““Review of Arab Travelers and Western Civilization by Nazik Saba Yared,” 674-677, available http://www.jstor.org/stable/176474
The insistence of Al-Tahtawi and his precious observations about the value of the Egyptian antiquities and the role of the French museums encouraged Mohamed Ali to create the museum.

The Pasha made public a decree on August 15, 1835, that he envisaged a museum in Cairo to house the finds of Egyptian antiquities under the supervision of Yusuf Dia Effendi. Mohamed Ali gave his attention to the museum, and thus he committed himself to its establishment. The Pasha was keen to follow the construction work of the museum. He also issued several consecutive orders to speed up the construction process. Therefore, he issued a direct order to Mokhtar Bik, the overseer of property, to speed up the museum’s construction. The Pasha issued two orders. The first was concerned with establishing the Dar al-Athar and Dar al-Kutub in 1835 (on Ramadan 12th, 1251 AH). The second order issued in 1835 (on the 19th of Ramadan 1251) was to speed up the completion of the Dar al-Athar building.

Mohamed Ali Pasha issued his second decree in 1836, establishing the Asbakeya Entkkhana (Asbakeya Museum). The location of the museum was chosen to be a site overlooking the banks of Birkat al-Azbakeya, attached to the school of Al-Alsun, of which Al-Tahtawi was the principal. This place used to be part of Sera el-Defterdar in Asbakeya. Al-Tahtawi was assigned to supervise the implementation of this project, and the Pasha supported him with whomever he appointed to carry out the task. Subsequently, the Pasha appointed the engineer Hakikan to design the museum building, while Yusuf Effendi was assigned to manage the museum, be its curator and care for its collection.

Yusuf Diaa Effendi became the first curator of an Egyptian museum and the first inspector of Egyptian Antiquities. He inspected the antiquities of Middle Egypt found by farmers in the archaeological mounds and sites bordering agricultural lands. He used his representatives in the local districts to follow up the sites and bring all the discovered antiquities. Under the direction of Mohamed Ali Pasha, Yusuf Effendi started to collect the antiquities and store them at Al-Alsun school, even before the completion of the museum building.

MIUSEUM CHALLENGES AND THE END OF A CHAPTER IN A STORY

The journey of the first Egyptian Museum in modern history faced difficulties and struggles because of the European greed for Egyptian antiquities. Effendi tried to protect the Egyptian antiquities, but the lack of available resources prohibited Egyptians from gaining the upper hand. The museum had also suffered from the same situation where the European powers tried to obstruct the establishment of the museum. On the other hand, foreign institutions, universities, religious organisations and wealthy businesspersons provided substantial financial support to foreign excavators and collectors. The unfair competition put a quick end to the plans of Al-Tahtawi and Effendi. This potential plan, to establish a museum comparable to the French museums and to protect the Egyptian
antiquities, had not worked according to the desire of Al-Tahtawi, and took a long time to become a reality.\(^1\)

The colonial powers saw themselves as guardians of the Egyptian civilisation. They refused and fought against establishing the Egyptian Museum, and forced the Pasha to allow the antiquities’ trade.\(^2\) They tried to solidify the fact that Egyptians were not yet aware nor qualified to safeguard antiquities.\(^3\) Thus, Europeans saw themselves as standing up for the safeguarding of the Egyptian monuments. The required measures included transferring antiquities from their original contexts to be exhibited in Western museums. Among them, the American Consul Gleidon fought against Mohamed Ali Pasha’s steps to safeguard the Egyptian antiquities and to increase the collection in the museum.\(^4\) He opposed the collecting and preserving of antiquities in an Egyptian museum stating that the Pasha must change his mind and he should leave the idea of establishing a museum reject his decision. He claimed to monopolise the antiquities’ trade.

The European attitude against the Egyptian Museum was apparent in the statements of many European scholars. In response to what Mohamed Ali Pasha’s announcement about the failure of the Egyptian Museum project, George Wilkinson stated in 1843: “Establishing a museum in Egypt is a purely fictional idea. While the ban on the export of antiquities from Egypt harms the world, Egypt does not win. The excavations are carried out without the need for knowledge or effort, and those who work on them deceive the Pasha and do not care about establishing the museum. After placing the ban as an obstacle to Europeans, the Pasha will not set up a museum”.\(^5\)

The European ambitions on Egypt was not only aimed at stealing Egyptian antiquities, but also eliminating steps that enabled Egypt to sustain its power and leadership once again. Thus, the national leadership could put an end to the colonial ambitions in Egypt, the Middle East and the Near East, and safeguard our heritage. The European situation against Mohamed Ali and his ambitious project in Egypt to establish an infrastructure in the country and achieve industrial, educational and military sectors was quite clear. This situation was also noticed in the European concern towards his successful plans to establish a modern and strong army to stand against and threaten Europe and the Ottoman Empire. Regarding the Egyptian antiquities and the museum collection status, Mohamed Ali and his successors implemented token measures to protect the archaeological sites. He assigned officers to observe and oversee the archaeological sites in Middle and Upper Egypt. He also made several orders to prevent infringement on the archaeological sites and antiquities.\(^6\)

Although the museum was built in Asbakeya and antiquities had been collected from all over Egypt, the museum was not accessible to the public, restricted to scholars and diplomatic visits. At the time, the museum was described in Mohamed Ali’s decree as a storage space for safeguarding antiquities rather than providing access to the public as

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\(^1\) Wood, “The Use of the Pharaonic Past in Modern Egyptian Nationalism,” 180; Mahmoud, The Development of Archaeological and Historical Museums in Egypt, 64

\(^2\) Based on the analysis of the correspondences of the European counsels in Egypt with their countries and Mohamed Ali Pasha.

\(^3\) Gleidon, G., An Appeal To The Antiquaries Of Europe On The Destruction Of The Monuments Of Egypt, (J. Madden,1841), 142-44.

\(^4\) Mahmoud, The Development of Archaeological and Historical Museums in Egypt, 64f.


initially planned. The image which was illustrated as early as 1830s illustrated the Egyptian prospective on museum concept. In 1848, Mohamed Ali assigned Linant de Bellefond to set plans for the safeguarding of the archaeological sites and transfer the movable objects into the museum; however, this plan was not successful. In 1851, the collection was moved from the Asbakeya Museum into the Citadel in search of a more suitable and bigger location to house the collection. In the 1850s, Abbas Helmy I and his successor Said Pasha distributed the collection as diplomatic gifts to Ottoman Sultan Abdel Aziz, the Archduke Maximilian of Austria and the Emperor of Mexico. The rest of the collection was given to Archduke Maximilian of Austria by the Egyptian government during his visit to Egypt in 1855. Maximilian’s collection consists of 713 artefacts, including coffins, sarcophagi, statues, canopic jars, shabti and amulets. After Maximilian’s death, his whole collection was moved to the Habsburg Imperial Collection in Vienna, and thus, the objects entered the inventory of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna (KHM) in 1878.

It was challenging to trace the documents relating to this collection in contemporary archives in Egypt and abroad. The only part of the collection that can be traced and restored is Maximilian’s collection, which has been kept in the KHM since 1878. The collection, made of 713 objects, is well documented, preserved and exhibited at the KHM. Within this collection, one can give few examples for this collection which is accessible at the museum:

1. E_INV_5149: An anthropoid coffin made of greywacke without inscriptions and dating to the Ptolemaic Period. From the Collection of Miramar, 1878 (Maximilian’s collection).
2. AE_INV_5151a: A mummy of a woman in the mummy wrapping and in excellent condition. The provenance is unknown but dates to the 25th Dynasty. From the Collection of Miramar, 1878 (Maximilian’s collection).
3. AE_INV_5153: The anthropoid coffin of Khonsu-en-dry with a female mummy inside. It is made of wood and cartonnage (L.187 – W. 57; Th. 45), and dates to the Third Intermediate Period. From the Collection of Miramar, 1878 (Maximilian’s collection).

THE BOULAQ MUSEUM AND THE REBIRTH OF THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM

The chapter of Asbakeya was over, and its collections were unfortunately wasted because of diplomatic gifts made by the Egyptian governors Helmy Abbas I and his successor Saied Pasha. The dream was almost lost before being revived when the Bulaq Museum was born in 1858 with the efforts of Auguste Mariette. He convinced Saied Pasha to establish a state department to manage excavations and Egyptian antiquities in the field, and create a new museum replacing the one demolished in Asbakeya. Mariette was opposed to excavations

1 Mahmoud, The Development of Archaeological and Historical Museums in Egypt, 64; Rashed, “The Museums of Egypt Speak for Whom?”. 2-3.
4 Thanks to the KHM and Dr Regina Hölzl, the curator of the Egyptian Collection in Vienna, for providing us with this information from the museum’s archive. The KHM website: https://www.khm.at/en/
5 According to the KHM database. Thanks to the KHM and to Dr Regina Hölzl.
6 According to the KHM database. Thanks to the KHM and to Dr Regina Hölzl.
that he could not control. Thus, he was convinced that the only way he could dominate excavations was to persuade the Pasha to establish the Egyptian Museum.\textsuperscript{1} After its journey at Asbakeya was ended, the Egyptian museum saw its second chapter through the birth of the Egyptian Museum in Boulaq in 1863 with artefacts collected by Mariette in Egypt.\textsuperscript{2} This collection made the EMC’s story and core up to present times.\textsuperscript{3} The EMC then made several journeys, being later moved to Giza (1890), before reaching its current location at Tahrir Square in 1902.\textsuperscript{4} The EMC’s collection continues its leading role in establishing new museums, such as the new NMEC and the upcoming GEM.\textsuperscript{5}

CONCLUSION
This article retrieves the short story of the first Egyptian Museum in modern history built in Asbakeya in Cairo in 1836 after a decree by Mohamed Ali Pasha and designed by Al-Tahtawi. It presents the journey of the museum from its difficult birth, and went throughout the challenges that obstructed its success. It also discusses the conflict between the potential of Egyptian leadership of Al-Tahtawi to establish a museum to safeguard the Egyptian monuments on one hand; and the European greed and the colonial power attempting to control the Egyptian antiquities and Egyptology and the European political ambitions behind this. It encourages scholars to document the collections, ensuring their preservation for the upcoming generations. Such information preserves its content in case of loss or damage. Taking in mind the destruction that happened to Malawi Museum in Egypt in 2013,\textsuperscript{6} and to the National Museum of Brazil in Rio du Janeiro in 2018.\textsuperscript{7}

\textsuperscript{1} Mahmoud, The Development of Archaeological and Historical Museums in Egypt, 65; Rashed, “Museology and Egypt: Museum Studies as a source of Inspiration for Real-Life Museum Developments”, (In print).


\textsuperscript{5} Rashed, “Ausblick Auf Eine Grosse Ära für Mussen in Ägypten: Das Grand Egyptian Museum”, 84-86.

\textsuperscript{6} Rashed, “The Museums in Egypt after the 2011 revolution,” 127f.

\textsuperscript{7} \url{https://www.museunacional.ufrj.br/}
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