

RESTITUTION AND RECENT UPHEAVALS IN EGYPT

“I believe that people who use the revolution as an argument for not returning artifacts do not even deserve to be taken into consideration. These people are taking advantage of a dramatic situation to justify their point of view, a fact that is unethical and better ignored”.

Fayza Haika (1)

Images of recent disturbances from Tahir Square, Cairo, in January and February 2011, will make anybody who intends to send anything, including cultural artefacts, to Egypt, very hesitant. (2) Also, the looting of artefacts from the Egyptian Museum, Cairo and elsewhere in Egypt makes those interested in the preservation of cultural treasures extremely worried. But the disorder, revolt or revolution in Egypt does not change the nature of the debate on restitution nor does it provide any convincing excuse for the retentionists in the Western world. The determination not to return the Rosetta stone to Egypt has never been based on the security or insecurity in Egypt. Those who are against restitution will use the present situation as an excuse for rejecting the restitution of the bust of Nefertiti to Cairo. Dr. Christina Riggs has correctly remarked:

“Egyptology websites, discussion lists, even Facebook groups have circulated updates about suspected looting, and several organisations have issued statements calling for the protection of Egypt’s antiquities. Ironically, such statements come on the heels of vigorous US and European rejections of Egyptian requests to repatriate objects, including some granted to foreign excavators before the 1920s”. (3)

But what happened in all the previous thirty years in which Hosni Mubarak ruled Egypt? There were no reported major disturbances in this long reign but still the retentionists refused to return some of the Egyptian artefacts as requested by Zahi Hawass. However, many other artefacts were returned to Egypt from France and even from Great Britain. (4)

If we look at the other cases of restitution, for example, the Benin bronzes, we note that there is no revolution in Nigeria and yet for more than hundred years, including the period when Nigeria was a British colony, the British Museum refused to return the bronzes though



*Tanks in front of the Egyptian Museum of Antiquities, Cairo.
Photo from Bikyamasr.*



Khaled Desouki/AFP/Getty Images Egyptians make a human chain in Tahrir Square on Jan. 29 as they help protect Cairo's Egyptian Museum during demonstrations demanding the ouster of President Hosni Mubarak.
<http://www.npr.org/2011/03/22/134763378/egypts-antiquities-still-at-risk-experts-warn>

the venerable museum has at times been very willing to sell these objects even to Nigeria. (5) Similarly, the British have been unwilling to return the golden Asante regalia they looted from Asante (Ghana) in 1874 even though the country which was British colony until 1957 has been peaceful without any major civil unrest. (6) Again, if we consider the Parthenon/Elgin Marbles, there is no disorder in Athens but the British Museum is not considering the return of the marbles to Athens.

Clearly, those who argue against returning artefacts to Egypt are using a very convenient but unconvincing argument. They will not convince anyone who has carefully followed the debates on the issue in the last years.

Many Western museum directors may be rejoicing at the resignation and departure of Zahi Hawass from the position of the Secretary-General of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities. Let them rejoice for the period of respite they have unexpectedly gained will be shorter than they wish. The question of restitution was there before Hawass came and will remain after his departure and after all of us are gone if attitudes in the West do not change.

Whatever happens to Hawass in the post Mubarak period, one must acknowledge that the celebrated archaeologist has rendered to Egypt and to Africa immense services which many others envy. He has made the issue of restitution known to a broader public in the world. Which other archaeologist is as well-known as the famous Egyptian archaeologist? He has made archaeology a lively subject for many persons. He has restored to Egypt, Egyptology, a science dominated for too long by Westerners. Westerners can no longer go to Egypt as if they were going to an archaeological supermarket to take whatever they want. They have to seek permission which may be refused and they may be asked to leave the country. One may not always like his style and tactics but there is no gainsaying that Hawass has been more successful with his approach than many others. The dedication and enthusiasm he brought to the issue of restitution deserve the admiration of all honest people. (7) How many people can bring such energy and dedication to their work? We wish other countries had such worthy and energetic representatives who speak out clearly in the cultural field. The West, of course, has never liked intellectuals and representatives of non-Western peoples who know their work and articulate their positions boldly. A man like Hawass who mastered modern media and used them effectively was a thorn in the flesh of many. Vernon Silver has rightly stated "*Western collectors and curators may gain further advantage with the departure of Hawass, who cemented his celebrity by hounding museums for artefacts.*" He also quotes Zahi Hawass as saying; "*I did fight antiquities robbery everywhere...I'm sure all museums will be happy now that I'm stepping down.*" (8)

Hawass may have made mistakes in his work but that is for the Egyptian authorities and people to decide. (9) Many were surprised however that he resigned at the time he did for Egyptian antiquities were in a bad situation: looting of artefacts from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, more than 20 archaeological sites invaded by robbers, tombs in Saqqara and Abusir, near Cairo, were visited by looters. Was this the right time for the man who has devoted much of his energy and time to preserving Egyptian antiquities to leave? No doubt Hawass knew that some were calling for his resignation as a minister of the former President, Hosni Mubarak whose regime was ousted by popular revolt of January 2011. (10) He probably did not want to wait for a dismissal. Hawass has given the reasons for his resignation largely based on the fact that the Egyptian police were no longer guarding the museums and archaeological sites. (11)

One undoubted achievement of Zahi Hawass was his success in bringing together States with restitution claims in April 2010 to the Cairo Conference on restitution - *Conference on International Cooperation for the Protection and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage* - in Cairo, on April 7 and 8, 2010. For the first time, States with restitution claims met for two days to discuss common problems and to develop strategies for recovering/stolen/looted cultural artefacts. In addition to emphasizing that “*Ownership of cultural heritage by the country of origin does not expire, nor does it face prescription*”, the communiqué issued at the end of the conference added that “*The efforts initiated in Cairo should be pursued and expanded upon and there should be continued consultations among the participants as well as with other countries and institutions*”. (12) The host of the conference, the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) was to liaise with other delegations for the preparation of the next meeting and outlining the future activities of the Conference. The question that is posed now is whether with the departure of Zahi Hawass from the SCA the next conference would take place. Since the conference was not a private matter for the former Secretary-General but an international effort, we assume and hope that his successor and the other participants would continue the useful work started in 2010.

The recent events in Egypt may be analysed and assessed differently but it would clearly be illegitimate to argue that the temporary disorder in that country offers a valid reason for not returning artefacts illegally taken from Egypt. Certainly, we do not expect anybody to return artefacts in the midst of revolts and public disorder. This situation however will improve soon and the retentionists in the West will be exposed for their dishonest arguments which are based on grounds other than the present disorder.

Kwame Opoku, 23 March, 2011.



Quartzite Head of an Amarna Princess Description and image from list of missing items issued by Supreme Council of Antiquities

<http://www.npr.org>

NOTES

1. Egypt's Museums: 'our open-air museum', Interview with Faysa Haikal, Almasryalyoum, 17 March 2011. <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/360092>
2. Egyptian antiquities attacked and under threat, <http://english.ahram>, <http://www.toncremers>
3. Christina Riggs, "Calls to save Egyptian cultural heritage ring hollow when those making them are blind to the past, argues Christina Riggs", *Times Higher education* <http://www.timeshighereducation> In this connection, it is interesting to note the view of Prof. Barry Kemp, an archaeologist working at Amarna;
"The most useful thing the international community can do about this is to examine its conscience. The looting of sites is done to satisfy the market in antiquities, which continues to flourish in Europe and the US. It is now a reasonable assumption that any Egyptian piece that is for sale is either fake or was looted."
<http://www.newscientist.com>
4. Kwame Opoku, "Egyptian Season of Artefacts Returns: Hopeful Sign to be Followed by others?" <http://www.modernghana.com>
5. Martin Bailey, British Museum Sold Benin Bronzes , <http://www.forbes.com>
BBC News, Benin Bronzes Sold to Nigeria, <http://news.bbc.co.uk>
Crown Fraud, <http://www.modernghana>
British Museum sold precious bronzes, <http://www.guardian.co.uk>
6. K. Opoku, "When Will Britain Return Looted Golden Ghanaian Artefacts? A History of British Looting of more than 100 Objects", <http://www.museum-security.org>
7. K. Opoku, "Shall we learn from Zahi Hawass on How to Recover Stolen/ Looted Cultural Objects?" <http://www.afrikanet>
"Zahi Hawass in His Element: Is it Possible Not to Admire this Man for his Efforts on behalf of Egypt?" <http://www.modernghana>
8. Vernon Silver, "Egypt Is Looted, and Curators Balk", <http://www.businessweek.com>
9. "Former Minister Hawass denies having covered up antiquities theft" <http://www.almasryalyoum.com/en/node/351660> for allegations made against Zahi Hawass and his response thereto.
10. *Bikyamasr*, Egypt's Zahi Hawass and a dark past, <http://bikyamasr.com/wordpress/?p=27371>
The Assemblage, "Will Hawass follow Mubarak?", <http://politicalarchaeology>
<http://www.godlikeproductions.com>
11. See Annex. See also, Paul Barford, Where do You Stand on the Issue of Looting? <http://paul-barford.blogspot.com/>
12. Cairo Communiqué on International Cooperation for the Protection and Repatriation of Cultural Heritage, http://www.sca-egypt.org/eng/RST_ICHC.htm
K. Opoku, "Reflections on the Cairo conference on restitution", <http://www.afrikanet>