Ancient Egyptian Collections in Portuguese Museums – Building an Image of Ancient Egypt

Ronaldo Gurgel Pereira[*]

Abstract

This work presents some partial reflections on a post-doctoral project aiming to study epigraphy from Egyptian collections in Portugal. A quick view of some catalogues and expositions combined help us to picture how museographic strategies in use in Portugal portrait Egypt to the non-academic public. As the main focus of this work lies in epigraphy, an especial approach to selected objects will be also part of the debate.

[*] CHAM, FCSH, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa. E-mail: ronaldo.gurgel@yahoo.de.

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On the Project

According to the ICON, a museum is "a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment"[1]. It is possible to trace a background of such institution towards Ancient Greece. However, a museum as we acknowledge it nowadays is, essentially, a modern invention, which started as a "cabinet of curiosities" during the Renaissance.

Since its start as a symbol of aristocratic fame and prestige, the museum assumed new educational purposes. As a useful resource for teaching about History, Sciences and Arts, museums are now also a useful "bridge" between academic discourses and civil society. Thanks to such kind of connection, academic knowledge is wider spread, not being reduced to the libraries and colleges.

For the non-academic public is able to interact with the museum collection actively, throughout personal interpretation, debates, and reflection. So, since museum collections are capable of producing subjects of debates in society, it also is liable of carry ideological messages (Vergo 1989; Andrew 2012). Such ideology is present directly or indirectly. It can be part of a political agenda concerning cultural identity, historical heritage, religious propaganda, etc. On the other hand, indirect messages can be interpreted after a study of museographic strategies, for instance.

Thus, here, the museum is dealt with not just as a place where collections are exposed, and people receive it passively feeding a mechanism of reproduction of information. It is rather a physical space where theory and praxis do a dialogue, and also as a place for the production of a new lore.

So, this work offers a short reflection on Egyptian collections hosted by Portuguese museums. It is integrated to a post-doctoral project in progress since 2012, under the support of FCT – Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia. The first triennial of activities has been dedicated to analyze Portuguese and Spanish museum collections of Late Period (664-332 BC) Egyptian artifacts. The first part of this project was concluded in 2014. Some entirely new objects and even a new collection have been published (Gurgel Pereira 2013, 105 – 116). However, the actual conditions of Egyptian epigraphy in Portuguese

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[1] Statute adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria on August 24th, 2007.

museums needed a close attention. In general, there is no transliteration in descriptive works of Portuguese collections. Transliterations demonstrate few to no acknowledgement of essential conventions. Transcription of hieroglyphs is also a problematic issue, since it obeys no convention either; and it frequently omits hieroglyphs, thus obliging the student to always double-check written information directly with the artifact.

Therefore, the main objective of this last part of the project is to promote a review of all Egyptian epigraphy in Portugal, correcting the many mistakes concerning transcription, transliteration and grammar. Another objective is to better understand the whole potential of Egyptian collections in the country and how to improve museographic strategies.

On the Study of the Documental Corpus

There are eleven museums in our selected corpus, covering a total of seven Portuguese cities. For this work, a number of them will be debated. The examples for epigraphic debates are from: Museu Nacional de Arqueologia (Lisbon) – home of the biggest collection of Egyptian artifacts in Portugal, and Museu de História Natural (Porto) – hosting the second biggest collection, and also owning a literary award for its catalogue for the Egyptian collection.[2] The last one is the Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa. Despite its tiny collection and absence of catalogue, it is interesting to include one artifact from that museum into debate. The idea is to present fresh examples from most diverse origins and promote comparative perspectives. A different set of artifacts has been analyzed and published by the Iberian Association of Egyptology (Gurgel Pereira 2016a, 519-528).

That choice obeys two simple parameters. Firstly, each one contributes in different aspects to picture the general view of Egypt via the glasses of Portuguese museums as a whole. Secondly, each one poses as emblematic examples of the general panorama of Egyptian collections in the country. In addition to those museums, the exhibits from Calouste Gulbenkian Museum and Marciano Azuaga Collection (Núcleo Museológico de Arqueologia – Vila Nova de Gaia) will also be presented in comparative comments in other topics of the debate.

The first impression of someone committed to deal with Portuguese collections is the huge amount of bibliography available. Virtually every collection had published catalogues or articles describing at least the majority of their respective objects. However, after a more detailed observation it is possible to observe some problems.
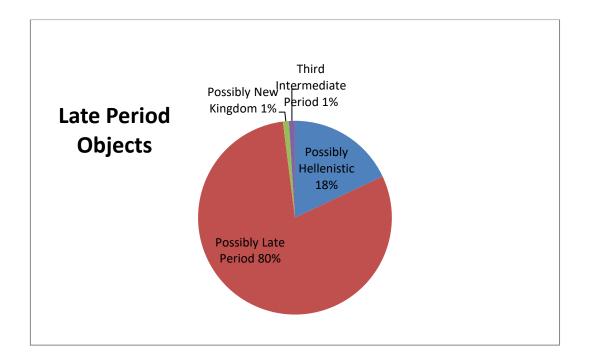
Portuguese collections, in general, have a very similar background. Some private collector – usually from aristocratic background[3] – donated to a museum his entire collection of art, which usually include some Egyptian artifacts. Normally the documentation on those objects is vague, if not entirely absent. In this category fits the Museum Nacional de

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[2] "Best Catalogue of 2012" according to APOM – Portuguese Association of Museology.

[3] Indeed, even the Portuguese Royal Family left some Egyptian artifacts to the Museum of Archaeology, Vila Viçosa.

Arqueologia, whose collection was also obtained from other smaller Portuguese museums. After the Carnation Revolution, in 1974, many documents vanished from that museum. So, if any inventory giving more accurate details to that collection was ever made, it is so far gone.

The task of creating such catalogue was a heroic effort based greatly in comparative analysis with similar objects, already studied in other museums worldwide. However, in many cases, it was simply impossible to establish chronologic and geographic contexts to such objects. Most of what could not be surely identified was put into a great category of "Late Period". Initially, a hundred objects have been selected as Late Period artifacts. After studying those objects and their available bibliography it was possible to establish some contestation on their chronologies, as follows:
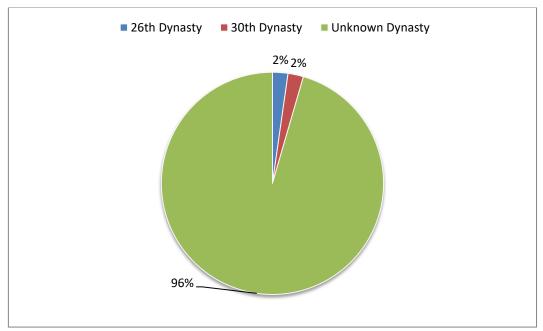

Much of Late Period objects are considered potentially Hellenistic actually. This is treated as a rule for all Bronze objects, which are systematically labeled as being from "Late Period or Hellenistic". Similar treatment is given to scarabs and faïence amulets. Back the time when Late Period was underestimated by Egyptologists as a decadent period, it was normal to classify any problematic objects as belonging this period.
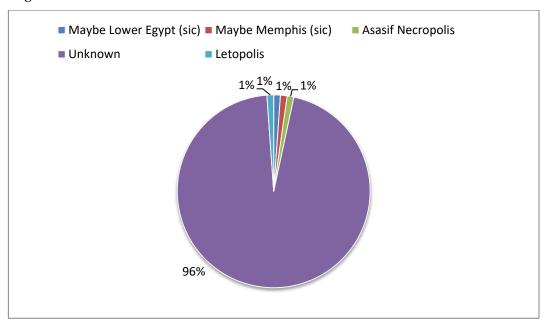
 The Saite renaissance actually promoted exceptional copies of objects from Egypt's past. The Saite canon also became strong enough to endure throughout the Ptolemaic rule as synonym of "Egyptian Art". Thus it was necessary to examine objects from other periods in order to verify if more chronology issues would appear.

Another issue is present, when the "Late Period" is analyzed. Most of those objects from unidentified dynasties lack inscriptions or special characteristics. Therefore, most of them remain unclassified on their dynastic background.

A special status is given to the mummy-case of Irtieru (MNAE 135), from the Third Intermediate Period, yet wrongly labeled as Late Period. It presents a typical example of rigid cartonnage fashion in use. Such example was first identified by Aidan Dodson and resulted in an article (Figueiredo 2005, 437 – 450). The exhibition, nonetheless, still tags the object as Late Period.

Another issue is to identify the geographical origin of those objects. It is most certainly that they have come from different Egyptian necropoleis. However, thanks only to the existence of inscriptions, two objects offer the identification of its respective necropolis of origin.

A good solution for that question would be to share the digital databank of objects with other museums worldwide. Teamwork would allow many gaps to be filled, and partnership with international specialists would enhance the international importance of that collection.
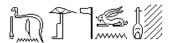
On the Problems found with Epigraphy

A particular issue is the quality of published catalogues and articles. They all can be resumed as a preliminary description of a given object, followed by a translation, which at sometimes is partial. The transcription of hieroglyphs can be also incomplete in some readings. The transliteration can be incomplete in some works as well. Mistakes have been found in elementary words and formulae such as translating nb.t-pr as "housewife" (Port. "dona de casa"). (Araujo 2006, 93; 2011, 116 and 213).

There was also a case of a wrongly recognized king, "Nebrepehtire (sic)", instead of Ahmose in which nṯr nfr is translated as "kind god", instead of "perfect god". (Araujo 2006, 80-81).

An example of the correction efforts made is the Bronze figurine of Osiris (Museu Nacional – MNAE 318). The statuette is 14.5 cm tall, and its square base has a small inscription in three of its sides.

FRONT SIDE

ḏd mdw jn Wsjr wnn-nfr
« Words to be spoken by Osiris Wenn-Nefer:

RIGHT SIDE

(r)dj(.w) ꜥnḫ Ḥr(w) s3
"May he give life to Horus, the son

BACK SIDE

n pfꜣ t3 mḥw
of Pefa-ta-Mehu" »

In fact, it was possible to transcribe a substantially different inscription, if compared to the catalogue's version.
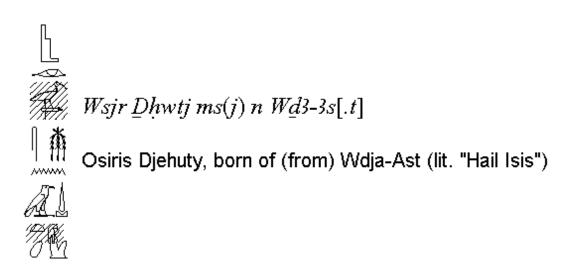
For comparison, here follows the catalogue's transcription (Araujo 1993, 342):

"Palavras ditas por Osíris Uen-Nefer, que possa ele dar a vida a Hor, filho de Paieftamehit (?) sic". Translation: "Words to be spoken by Osiris Wenn-Nefer, may he give life to Hor, son of Paieftamehit (?)"

The author did not mark properly the illegible portion on the text's first line. Instead, he 'covered' it by a speculative unmarked subjunctive (r)dj=f (he may give). However the author chooses (D36) ignoring the proper (D37). Besides, his intervention is followed by the imperfect passive participial formula $(r)dj(.w)$ $ʿnḫ$ "May he give life!" Therefore, his proposed translation is grammatically incorrect. It is also important to notice how the original hieroglyph (H8) was unexplainably replaced by (G39) in the catalogue.

Another example to be debated here is the shabti figurine from Lisbon National Library (inventory number 146). Its publication in an article (Araujo 1998, 166) did not manage to identify the name of its owner. However, after observation, it was quite possible to notice some mistakes in the transcription of hieroglyphs. Then it is possible to read the owner's name.
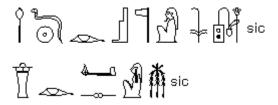
$Wsjr\ \underline{D}ḥwtj\ ms(j)\ n\ W\underline{d}3\text{-}3s[.t]$

Osiris Djehuty, born of (from) Wdja-Ast (lit. "Hail Isis")

On the other hand, here follows the article's version:

Wsir (...) [sic] *ms ms n wḏꜣ-ꜣst*

"Osíris –més (sic), filho de Udjais.t"

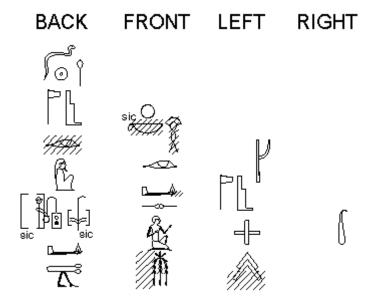(My) English translation: Osiris –mes (sic), son of Udjais.t

The last example of problematic epigraphy comes from the catalogue of Porto University (FCP: 41.01.007 – old 7487). It is a shabti figurine in faïence 6 cm tall, poorly finished and filled with random hieroglyphs, carved on all sides. However, the catalogue offers a partial transcription of its "text" and presents an actual reading out of fantasy. Here follows its transcription:

So, it was translated as (sic): "Que brilhe Osíris (?), escriba real (?), filho de Basterdis (?)" (It may be translated to English as: "May Osiris shine (?), royal scribe (?), son of Basterdis (?)". The proposed version is actually lacking of any actual grammatical sense whatsoever.

The catalogue declares (Araujo 2011, 146) it as an "uncommon organization of hieroglyphs", being its reading "doubtful". In fact, the only possibility of producing such transcription is by selecting some hieroglyphs and ignoring others. Hence, many hieroglyphs had been left out from the proposed transcription. The second line apparently tries to render a continuation for the front text, omitting some unknown hieroglyphs at the top.

Nothing is mentioned on the many other hieroglyphs present in the object. Thus, here follows my transcription:

BACK   FRONT   LEFT   RIGHT

Given the state of the shabti[4], the figurine was probably damaged during its confection process or even deliberately used for didactical purposes. It was most likely used by an apprentice to practice his incision skills. On its back side, there is a formula "May Osiris shine!"; then it follows a title: "royal scribe" (although its hieroglyphs are incomplete: [glyph] instead of [glyph]; and [glyph] instead of [glyph]); then it follows the verb (r)dj (to give), and finally the hieroglyph V15. On its front side, at the top, there is another pair of imperfect and incomplete hieroglyphs which I assume to be part of an attempt to carve correctly the name Sokar Osiris: [glyph] > [glyph] > [glyph]. Then, it follows the verb (r)dj, the word "man" and a damaged "ms(j)" (to be born). The left side starts with an Aa26, and then, part of the Osiris' name, then a cross, and it is finished by a damaged Aa5. On the right side there is a lonely U33.

On a General View of the Exhibitions

Usually, Egyptian collections put into display offers little contextualization. Small descriptive tags are the most normal support for the visiting public. Such tags occasionally contradict chronology given by the catalogue or the respective museum databank. Other materials such as maps and tables of chronology – when present – are not properly integrated to the collection. In other terms, the public is kept unaware of how to connect the objects to given maps and chronologies.

Sometimes Egyptian collections are kept in a shady atmosphere, even when there are no risks of damaging objects due to exposition to light. A short quiz has been made with visiting students and personal staff of the Calouste Gulbenkian Musem. They have been asked about the reasons for the lack of light in the room. The most regular answer was the relation between Egypt and underground tombs, pyramids and funerary milieu. When

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[4] See Appendix.

they have been asked to compare it with the neighboring Greco-roman room – perfectly illuminated – they understood how Egyptomania can be also present as an indirect discourse by a museum. Sometimes Egyptomania in museums can be more evident, such as the pyramid-shaped display case at Núcleo Museológico de Arqueologia – Colecção Marciano Azuaga, Vila Nova de Gaia, Portugal.

In general, Egypt brings out an idea of mystery and incomprehension. Many interviewed visitors commented they do not expect to understand ancient Egypt by visiting a museum. So, the idea of a museum having a limited mission of classification and conservation is still something to change in the imaginary of the visiting public.

Regarding forgeries, it is quite common that museums and private collectors gather fake objects, most of the time, accidentally. The fake Egyptian artifact is still a big taboo in Portuguese museums. Some few are still in exhibition as original objects, but most of them are actually hidden from public. The dominant opinion on fakes in Portuguese museums is that they expose to ridiculous the legacy of former private collectors or even current museums where the objects are to be kept. The most extreme case comes from a museum in Vila Nova de Gaia, northern Portugal, where fakes were kept careless in deliberated state of deterioration inside a box.

A different and relatively recent approach to fake objects is to consider them part of the very History of Egyptology (Brier 2013). The process of rehabilitation of fakes can be very fruitful, if focused on a context of debates concerning Egyptomania, the commerce of antiquities, the memory of the first Egyptologists, and early collectors and institutions – on one hand – and methodologies of testing antiquities – on the other.

In fact, they may become even a very interesting topic into display, as it was already made once by the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology.[5] There is an educative exhibition of combined forgeries and originals. Its main objective is to teach how museums acquired fake objects for their collections – and sometimes even deliberately. This is an emblematic example of how proactive can be the interaction between public and museum collections.

As a conclusion, it is fair to consider that published catalogues and articles must be urgently reviewed. Recently the first grammar of Middle Egyptian in Portuguese has been released[6] (Gurgel Pereira 2013a, 2016). This is an important tool to provide students and museum personal with proper rules and conventions for transliteration and translation. New publications must replace the older material in revised editions. As for the exhibitions, it would be a great achievement if the curators and museum directors across the country came into contact one to another in order to debate their collections and compare approaches and databanks.

The integration of smaller and bigger museums could give more visibility to Portugal in the international scenario. This would be very useful, especially when international

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[5] The Art of Fake – Egyptian Forgeries from the Kelsey Museum of Archaeology (digital gallery).

[6] This work received a revision and a preface from Prof. Pascal Vernus, (EPHE, Sorbonne). The grammar also offers a glossary with over 900 words, plus an appendix presenting ca. 700 Hieroglyphs, bibliographic references for over 500 hieroglyphic fragments under study, and a key for ca. 300 exercises.

cooperation could improve greatly the didactic usages of ancient Egyptian artifacts in the country, and even help to track down the lacking data on so many objects.

Museums can be a very important place in charge of connecting academic and civil communities. Thus, investing in new methods of presenting collections having in mind non-academic perceptions of the past could provide excellent opportunities to reach more effectively the public.

Appendix:

BACK (MHN 41.01.07 – 3 2007.07.19 ©)	FRONT (MHN 41.01.07 – 1 2007.07.19 8 ©)	LEFT (MHN 41.01.07 – 2 2007.07.19 ©)	RIGHT (MHN 41.01.07 – 4 2007.07.19 ©)

Shabti Figurine, Museu de História Natural, Universidade do Porto (FCP: 41.01.007 – old 7487), with kind permission.

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