

An archivist in Egypt

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Thursday: Cairo

The Pyramids of Giza loom out of the murk of suburban Cairo. And 'loom' is the operative word as they are near the same colour as the combined dust, haze and smog. More words – or images for that matter – can hardly add to the uncounted descriptions by travellers of these three structures, starting with Herodotus in the fifth century BC. But striking to me is how the pyramids sit on the very edge of Cairo (over the back fence in our parlance): the city's boundaries end quite abruptly and equally the desert begins. And I do mean desert: no tree, shrub, or blade of grass.

If anything, the pyramids strike one as an unfinished – or failed – amusement park, unfinished because there is no green landscaping and the construction seems incomplete because of the overall unevenness of the stones. However, the incompleteness is due to the original fine white polished limestone covering (which must have been blinding) having been quarried long ago for building work in Cairo, along with the gold-covered pyramidion (the bit that sits on the top). But even if it is a 'failure', it is still a 'park' attracting 100,000 visitors and more a day and with perhaps a ratio of aggressive tout (that is, 'guides' or 'vendors') to visitor approaching something like 1:1.

Despite the attempts of people and time to the contrary, the pyramids do exert a passive magic on the visitor if not an active allure. The nature of this attraction is perhaps beyond any simple or single explanation. However, any explanation would need to involve a discussion of how the pyramids are one of, if not the first, things to come to mind when

'Egypt' is mentioned – for example, their construction by hand 4,500+ years ago, the last of the Seven Wonders, all this effort for the tomb of one man (or, rather, pharaoh).

Why the pyramids were built (for example, as tombs, as a means for immortality), the construction methods, how long it all took, and just how many people were involved are largely all great unknowns. Questions such as these are for many people a large part of the impact of the pyramids, and they resonate long after the visitor has left Giza. Perhaps it is the unanswered questions or the story that hold our attention – it is the mystery. But more on that later.

The fundamental reasons there are no final solutions are that there are no records in the conventional (that is, written) sense concerning the construction process or indeed the motivation. For example, there are no lists of workers, or details of how they were enlisted, trained or supervised. Similarly, there is no information on construction methods such as how the workers moved the stones and how they stacked them – was it by one large ramp, several ramps, or by more sophisticated means?

As for pictorial evidence of Egyptian construction methods, these date from long after the Pyramid Age. What evidence there is available about pyramid building is primarily from archaeological sources: *here* is the village of the workers, *this* is what they ate, *there* is the quarry for the core stone, and so on. As ever occurs with a gap (or lack) in the records, the gap is filled with guesswork and elaborate theories. In the case of the construction of the pyramids, these theories range from the magical to the manic. Perhaps the two best, in my view, are (1) the pyramids were the work of extraterrestrials, and (2) the pyramids were built by Moses as granaries for pharaoh. This is not to forget other pyramid benefits, such as the claim that by careful measurement of the dimensions of the Great Pyramid (but not excluding a floating fudge factor) the history of the world can be deduced, at least according to Joseph Piazzi Smith, a librarian at the British Museum.

On the other hand, the more scientific take the little that is known and extrapolate from that a version of what was *possibly* the construction process. These versions will indeed be more scientific though often involving a pet theory as to the starting points of the how or why. These

theories often demonstrate best 'efficiency' and 'cost-effectiveness' and assert that these factors must have been primary drivers in choice of actual methods. But the problem is that just because, for instance, one possible means is the most cost-effective or quickest way to build a pyramid, it does not prove that any such method was in fact used or that any such considerations were in play.

The lack of records as mentioned – a construction archive – is what encourages speculation and the proliferation of many wild theories. But paradoxically it is the engagement or argument with the gaps in the record which helps to keep the past alive and interesting. For if we had written records which explain in great detail (or step-by-step) just how the pyramids were built, would the aura or romance of the Pyramids of Giza largely vanish? Would the pyramids metamorphose into just another large-scale engineering project albeit one built by hand? Would they be no different then from a large dam or tall building in terms of their romance or impact on us?

To turn it around: if you did happen in the desert to stumble across the 'archives' for the pyramids (and assuming for the sake of argument you knew what they were) would it be best to keep quiet about it?¹ Would the romantic in you triumph over the archivist?

Saturday: Alexandria

While the name Alexandria may conjure up an image of the exotic, if not the ancient, the city which gained this place its fame has now, except for a few pockets, been flattened by a history of earthquakes, land subsidence, modern apartment blocks and casual destruction. The Alexandria of Alexander the Great, Cleopatra and Julius Caesar is now under water and it is debated in the tour group whether the current city is really worth the journey (like Canberra, says someone).

But we are here to see the new Library of Alexandria. This library (or bibliotheque) was built under the aegis of UNESCO at a cost difficult to establish with any confidence as there seem to be many different estimates. The many roles of the library include the promotion and preservation of learning and it – of course – commemorates its famous predecessor, the Great Library established by the Ptolemaic rulers.

That old library is used as a potent marketing tool – the new library could not have been established or the funding sourced without a memory of the earlier.

The new library is in a very modern building and the interior is laid out in ascending steps with an open-plan layout, all under a high roof which spans the entire open area. This is where images from Google are worth a thousand words of straight description. But the library as such functions like any other large library (excluding the presence of the many tourists) – local students are the main users and act like students anywhere, though the flirting is far more discrete than elsewhere. This is understandable given local religious and social norms.

There is no agreement as to what happened to the original library built by the Ptolemies, that is, how, when, and just why it vanished. What there is in the way of theory is at best informed speculation. *Wikipedia* is useful here.² The new library is situated on the seafront, and nearby under the water – as mentioned – lies the original Alexandria. And from the library you can see the site of one of the Seven Wonders of the ancient world: the Great Pharos Lighthouse. It was levelled by an earthquake in the fourteenth century and the base turned into a fortress. I cannot look at the new library without thinking it, too, will vanish into the sea after the inevitable earthquake and likely subsidence. The question is whether, after such an event, would a new (third) library be built, or would they just give up and go for a virtual one next time?

While the current library trades on the name of the old, the building's striking presence does bring tens of thousands of visitors to Alexandria, largely foreign tourists such as us. They can get an idea of what a library is all about and how it functions from the pictorial displays, books on the shelves, Internet and catalogue terminals, and the like. But underpinning this appreciation is the physical structure or presence of the library – the library surrounds you physically if not intellectually. And this is not only the case in Alexandria in Egypt but also, for example, with a public library in Alexandria in Sydney – or anywhere else for that matter. To go further: I suggest a reasonable person will have some vague idea what a librarian does, because no-one asks a librarian what a librarian does – unlike the archivist. The underlying question is just how much the recognition or appreciation of libraries

and librarians is due to people having been in an actual library at some time? We overlook or underestimate the impact the tangible has on those 'outside'. But fortunate libraries; fortunate Alexandria.

In Australia, we have few purpose-built archival buildings – Commonwealth or state – to display, promote and access records. And none of these are 'edifices' – buildings in a prominent position purpose-built as a display of civic grandeur, pride, or even as a tourist attraction. This is not the case for the various state and the national libraries. If one of these purpose-built library buildings in their prominent civic positions collapsed, I believe there would be sufficient public recognition of the consequences of the event and public support to ensure that government rebuilt it. However, if a state archive were to be closed, how loud and how effective would be the outcry? I suggest the lack of dedicated public archival buildings is part of the long-term risk for the survival of prominent state archives as institutions.

To go further, every 'success' for an archive in its mission can increase the level of risk to it as an institution: the fact is that for every record digitised and made available online there is one less reason for that archive as a physical institution. For, in effect, the general treatment by a government of its records can be likened to that of stateless persons or refugees – it is acknowledged they have a right to exist but providing them with a proper home is quite another matter. And if the records went away (so to speak), who in government would run after them crying 'Come back, come back! We've found the money!'

Sunday

Still in Alexandria. And the poet in the tour group wants to see the home of the poet CP Cavafy (1863–1933). Cavafy's Alexandria of Greek and other expatriates was a city where their political and economic importance was significant to the extent that you did not need to know Arabic in order to get a government job (as it was for Cavafy). This city disappeared a long, long time ago.

Cavafy was what in my youth was termed a 'confirmed bachelor' and the recurring subjects of his poetry were loss, longing, and lust – usually in the same poem. As a poet, he is better known to other poets

than to the general public outside Greece. However, Jackie Kennedy had his poem 'Ithaka' read at her funeral service and this did excite some interest by the general public in the poet and his works. (And who is Jackie Kennedy, I can hear someone ask.) But not in Alexandria: it was difficult to track down Cavafy's apartment in the back streets even when we were on the right street.

Cavafy's apartment on the top floor is spacious, multi-roomed, with high ceilings and windows designed to catch the sea breeze. The apartment functions as a shrine to Cavafy through its display cases of fading documents and publications by and about the poet. A shrine of the type beloved by politicians: a photo opportunity on its opening but no thought as to paying for maintenance. So now the atmosphere is one of quiet resignation if not mild despair, as, of course, has happened with many an archival collection.

In this apartment one can put one's archival experience to good use, the significance of provenance being the starting point to determining the true importance or value, for instance. Thus you know to question assertions, to be wary of making assumptions, and not to take things at face value. For example, with the furniture: what was really Cavafy's? This point is difficult to establish with the caretaker but it seems only one or two pieces may indeed have belonged to Cavafy. Numerous portraits and drawings of Cavafy hang on the walls, creating the impression, well described by one guide book, that such a display '... only the most vain of men could have hung in his own apartment'. But it could not be established whether these had been owned by the poet or were donated after his death. The one genuine record of the poet in the flat was undoubtedly his death mask. However, although it was of Cavafy, it, by definition, could never be said to have *belonged* to Cavafy.

While such thoughts can be entertaining, there are deeper issues and issues difficult to convey to the non-archivist in any quick, let alone meaningful, way. For instance, how do we convey the notion that the historical 'record' is in most instances incomplete and what there is remains open to interpretation and ambiguity? But perhaps the hardest concept is: that what is found via the Internet represents only a minute fraction of the historical record. Not to forget that the archivist

has no idea just what is this fraction. I would argue that archivists take little interest in the broader archives-related environmental issues, especially those matters concerning how and why records are being made and are likely to be made. If this assertion is indeed true then why is this so?

Monday: Karnak

Today we are far up the Nile at Karnak, along it seems with every tourist in Egypt – except for those at the pyramids. Karnak is the modern name for the collection of temples near Luxor (ancient Thebes) and which are primarily dedicated to the god Amon-Ra. The site was developed over some 1,300 years with something like 40 pharaohs adding, extending and modifying the structures. The best known or featured part of Karnak is the 124-column Hypostyle Hall of Ramesses II covering some 5,000 square metres. Much of the site is closed to the public and what is open is more than enough for a tourist on a hot day.

A kingdom the size of Egypt – let alone the construction of elaborate tombs and temples – could not have been administered without effective bureaucracy: tax collectors, architects and clerks. Where there is a bureaucracy there are records and archives. The administrative records were largely on papyrus, a thick paper-like material made from local plants, but to all intents and purposes the records of Egypt have gone and the exceptions have survived by sheer accident – often discovered as re-used materials in mummy wrappings. Thus most of Egyptian history is a blank, and even more so the history of its ordinary people.

Much of what we do know about ancient Egypt comes from the temples and tombs. As occurs at Karnak, the pharaoh would cover the walls and columns with images of himself and the gods. The hieroglyphs show the name of the pharaoh and these are always enclosed by a cartouche ('oval'). The message is largely that pharaoh X is strong, just, pious, virtuous – has god-like qualities in fact. Originally, the 'message' stood out in relief ('proud') on a wall or pillar. But things became difficult with the habit of later pharaohs appropriating the work of earlier ones by imposing their names on the structures of their predecessors.

To prevent this rewriting of history, the hieroglyphs of later pharaohs were incised or carved *into* the stone thus making appropriation more difficult. This carving was to a depth that made the removal of an earlier cartouche likely to completely disfigure the stonework. Effectively, appropriation happens by overwriting the original record and certainly the pharaohs paid little regard to the integrity of the record. The Egyptians were, however, in a sense better or more effective than us with records and recordkeeping in at least two ways.

First, the Egyptian concept of the after-life was that it mirrored this one: what you were here on Earth in terms of possessions or significance is what you would have or would be in the after-life. Hence the emphasis by the ancient Egyptians on the construction of a tomb and the careful preservation of the corpse. To ensure the continuance of life, it was necessary to record (or depict) on tomb walls the owner's possessions such as land holdings, servants, domestic animals, and so on. But the owner could go one better and effectively place an order for something better through the record on the wall of the tomb. One could depict extra servants (that is, additional to what you had in life) and the like to be waiting for you on the other side (certainly a step-up in class from what you get at McDonald's hamburgers: you place your order and proceed to the next window where your Big Mac awaits).

Second, the most that modern records – paper or electronic – can do to you in this life is to damn you legally or domestically. The Egyptians could go one better: by removing you – your name or image – by chisel from the record on the wall, it was possible to remove you from the after-life as well. For the Egyptians, this was particularly disturbing: the Egyptians were not so much obsessed by the fact of death but with ensuring after death the continuation of the enjoyment of *this* life. Death posed risks but was not the end.

Wednesday: Abu Simbel

Today we are at Abu Simbel. This is a temple complex in the south of Egypt near the border with Nubia. The temples overlook Lake Nasser which is the enormous body of water backed up behind the Aswan High Dam. The temples were carved 3,200 years ago deep into the cliff facing the then Nile. The entrance is straddled by four enormous

20-metre statues of Pharaoh Ramesses II. The suggested major purpose of the temple complex was basically to tell the world that Ramesses was a god and equal in importance to the other gods. Given that he died in his 90s – an age equivalent to that of three or four generations of ordinary Egyptians – the concept of his godhood may to many have been very convincing.

Following construction of the dam in the 1960s, had the temples been left where they stood they would now be deep under water, as indeed are the homes, lands and remains of all those who lived along the river since antiquity. A controversial decision was made by UNESCO to move the temples to higher ground and the process was funded by many countries. This move was achieved rather spectacularly by sawing the temples and surrounds into enormous sandstone blocks and reconstructing them in an artificial hillside high above the Nile. So well was it all done that in the main it may not occur to the unknowing viewer that the structure was not originally built in its current location.

One of the most noticeable things inside temples and monuments – and especially Abu Simbel – is the amount of what we would call graffiti. The term *graffiti* is used here in the sense of people writing their name or other information in locations not appropriate, or over some original sign or object. The polite term here – as the graffiti is usually carved – is ‘making an inscription’. The inscription is noticeable not only because of size but also because usually it is very high up – sometimes as high as 10 metres or more above the floor. This latter feature is readily explicable because many of the temples filled with drift sand until the late nineteenth century when they were cleared for the archaeologists and tourists. It was the drift sand that preserved the temples from weathering, and kept them safe from organised or casual depredation. The irony is that we expose the record in order to understand but then destroy it more effectively through neglect, the failure to adequately or actively conserve, as is happening today with Pompeii.

The idle question that keeps occurring to me is when or at what point the graffiti or inscriptions should be considered ‘part of the record’ and preserved along with it equally, rather than be removed or filled in as

with the instances of inscription. By way of example, an inscription reading 'C Smith 2009' should undoubtedly be removed or covered if at all possible. But what about 'F Nightingale 1849' and similar? What values would you apply in a decision for preservation of an inscription made post-construction – its age, a famous name, ease of removal perhaps? Does archival literature provide any guidance on these issues?

Harriet Martineau, famous in her day as a journalist and writer but now completely obscure, visited the temples in the 1840s. She wrote concerning some graffiti she saw made by travellers in Ramesses' temple at Abu Simbel:

... [we are grateful] to 'Damearchon, the son of Ambichus, and Pelepheus, the son of Udamus,' for leaving, in any kind of scrawl, a record ... One of the strangest sensations to the traveller in Egypt, is finding such traces as these of persons who were in their day modern travellers seeing the antiquities of the country, but who take their place now among the ancients, and have become subjects of Egyptian history.³

But the travellers Damearchon and Pelepheus in a search for army deserters passed by Abu Simbel in the sixth century BC. No doubt their graffiti should remain part of the archive if only because of elapsed time. And it is salutary to consider that their inscription left untouched is likely to last longer than any of the electronic records of the past decade. I mean, what record of ours will survive for 2,600 years – never mind two decades?

Endnotes

¹ Donald Duck and Uncle Scrooge did find records relating to the construction of a pyramid but the circumstances in which this event occurred are (unfortunately) off-topic.

² See the heading under 'Destruction' in the article which is available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Alexandria>, accessed 20 March 2011.

³ See Deborah Manley and Sahar Abdel-Hakim, *Travelling through Egypt: from 450 B.C. to the twentieth century*, The American University in Cairo Press, 2008, p. 190.