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"WHO OWNS THE PAST?"
OWNERSHIP OF CULTURE AND CONTESTED HERITAGE

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

Framing the conversation

In October 2022, I was in Rome for a conference on colonial studies and cultural heritage. Held at the Roman Swiss Institute, the event was focused on colonial legacies and their widespread presence throughout the Italian country[1]. Lecturers spoke about monuments and statues, but also about street names, city squares, and architecture. All of the above are public or easily accessible spaces which carry material and visible memories from the past. They refer to battles, geographical places or individuals that had been remembered or celebrated through public or collective initiatives.

While often overlooked by passers-by, some of those material memories evoke episodes, mentalities, and actions that today would be condemned. Despite that, they populate our cities in a variety of places and ways.

The conference was actually broader in its scope, and it dealt with other spaces, such as museums. With their storages and galleries, museums are indeed quintessential places for tangible memory. Among their many different purposes, they aim at preserving fragments of the past, interpreting and communicating their stories.

Besides artefacts, however, museums also have their own individual story, made of purchases, gifts, and collecting endeavors. Entangled with political events, military actions, intellectual positions and cultural phenomena, museums are both results and mirrors of the historical contexts in which they have developed. While their stories are made of acquisitions, their identities have grown out of ownership. Reading museums from a critical perspective is therefore a necessary task for those who deal with history of culture, reception studies, knowledge production, and cultural representation.

Today, a good amount of that analytical work deals with museum institutions and the power dynamics at work during their birth, evolution, and expansion. Special attention is given to the colonial framework which shaped collecting institutions, no matter their precise specialization. Similarly to monuments and squares, museums can be tangible legacies of colonial times and practices; from a certain point of view, they could even be considered celebrations of those times.

[1] The conference was titled "*Intrecci globali e retaggi coloniali in Italia. Strategie di public history tra università, musei e movimenti*". It took place on October 20th and 21st 2022.

Being living institutions, however, they are subject to continuing change and therefore are able to overtake their past[2].

The emergence of the discipline of museum studies and the arrival of the so-called "new museology" both contributed to a strong scholarly interest towards museums and colonialism[3]. Investigations and reflections were rooted in historical, social, and anthropological studies, including groundbreaking publications such as Edward Said's *Orientalism* and David Lowenthal's *The Past is a Foreign Country* [4].

Scholars like Tony Bennett and Moira G. Simpson therefore explored the essence of museum institutions and their Western model, laying the foundations for an increasingly vibrant field of study[5]. Indeed, a critical and multidisciplinary approach to heritage studies continued to be developed throughout the 2000s and the 2010s, reflecting on both the colonial history of museums and the permanence of colonial mindsets in today's institutions. From Rodney Harrison to Robert Aldrich, from Laurajane Smith to Mary Bouquet, scholars have applied the approaches of post-colonial studies to the analysis of collections and exhibitions[6].

In Italy, the very discipline of museum studies and its entanglement with post-colonial analyses arrived quite later. Historical research on Italian colonial past mingled with critical heritage studies and with museological reflections only occasionally throughout the 1990s and the beginning of the 21st century[7]. In the last years, however, scholars have developed more and more interest in the use of museums within post-colonial studies. Historians and anthropologists have been especially engaged in such research, with relevant literature growing during the 2010s[8]. A real turning point, however, happened in the years around 2020, when the Italian academic environment saw a strong growth in publications concerning coloniality and cultural heritage[9]. The colonial legacy of museums has therefore been increasingly acknowledged, being analyzed through different perspectives. That growing attention and awareness has been accompanied by a will to discuss the

[2] McCarthy 2020, pp. 95-98.
[3] See Barringer & Flynn 1998, pp. 1-8.
[4] Said 1978; Lowenthal 1985, *passim*.
[5] Bennett 1995; Simpson 1997. Applying sociological reflections to the field and practices of cultural heritage turned out to be particularly useful. See, for instance, Hall 1999.
[6] Smith 2004; Harrison 2006, pp. 63-88; Smith 2006; Aldrich 2010, pp. 12-31; Bouquet 2012.
[7] Labanca 1992; De Palma 2004, pp. 627-632; Clemente 2006, pp. 155-173.
[8] Porciani 2010, pp. 109-132; Gandolfo 2014; Zavattaro 2014, pp. 56-66.
[9] Grasso & Mangiapane 2018, pp. 39-43; Falcucci 2020, pp. 421-437; Falcucci 2021, pp. 676-722; Bigoni et al. 2023, pp. 136-161; Pennacini 2023, pp. 74-78.

role and the future of museums in a post-colonial world. Authors like Giulia Grechi and Maria Pia Guermandi have addressed those questions, opening the discussion even more deeply[10].

The growing interest in these topics is also reflected in events organized within the academic environment: PhD conferences, conventions, and seminars have increasingly emphasized similar themes[11].

Museums themselves have recently paid much more attention to the topics at issue, both with events and different kinds of initiatives. More broadly, the Italian museum field has gradually tried to address ethical questions related to colonial legacies, for instance by joining forces on a national level. Within the ICOM system, much work has been done by the working group on provenance research, established in 2023[12]. Moreover, in July 2025, a new museum network (MIPAM) was created, grouping more than twenty-five Italian institutions which preserve artefacts of non-European origin[13]. Their objective is to create connections, offer mutual support, and develop best practices.

While ethnographic and anthropological collections play a major role in this discourse, archaeological museums are equally part of post-colonial debates, both in Italy and abroad. The very discipline of archaeology might be seen as a detached field of study, focused on the past and with little connections with the present. Nothing could be further from the truth, given that archaeology is an act about the past which is performed in the present. The international literature I have mentioned above has acknowledged that strongly, recognizing the contextual nature of archaeology[14]. Studying the history of the discipline – the history of scholarship – thus allows one to better understand that context. It reveals much about society, power relations, and cultural ambitions, both in archaeology conducted at home and abroad.

In Italy, historians like Marta Petricioli and Simona Troilo have investigated the relationship between archaeological work and colonial domination, tracing a fertile field of research.

[10] Grechi 2021; Guermandi 2021.

[11] Conferences or workshops on the above-mentioned topics happened, for instance, in Rome in October 2022, in L'Aquila and in Siena in November 2022, in Lucca in July 2023, in Venice in April 2024, in Siena in October 2024, in Padova in November 2024, in Bologna in April 2025, in Siena in May 2025.

[12] See ICOM Italy website.

[13] See MIPAM press release.

[14] For instance, see Greenberg & Hamilakis 2022.

Among archaeologists – especially those active also abroad – the topic has been deepened as well, with research on Italian archaeological missions during colonial times[15].

A critical historical approach has been applied not only to the broader discipline of archaeology, but also to the more circumscribed field of Egyptology[16].
Leaving praising tones behind, historians working on Egyptological discoveries, collecting, and studies have become more and more focused on the political, administrative, and social context in which the discipline has taken place. Comprehensive works such as Jason Thompson's *Wonderful Things* truly show that shift[17].
Historical narratives about Egyptology, moreover, have been traditionally conducted from a Western point of view, providing Euro-centric and US-centric perspectives on the discipline, its purposes, and achievements. In the last decades, however, academic literature has paid much more attention to Egyptian and local perspectives. Scholars like Donald Malcolm Reid and Elliot Colla have explored the role, meaning, and use of antiquities within local communities and by the Egyptian State[18]. In a field largely dominated by European languages, Arabic sources have been increasingly examined, leading to important insights. An example could be the Abydos Temple Paper Archive Project, which has been working on archival documents written in Arabic by Egyptian employees of the Antiquities Service, from as early as the 1850s[19]. Discovered inside the slaughterhouse of the Temple of Seti I, the archive casts light on the management, discovery, and study of antiquities performed by Egyptians. It therefore represents an opportunity to emphasize the Egyptian perspective of archaeological practices, giving less attention to the work of foreign missions.

Today, Western museums with Egyptological collections have to take all the above-mentioned transformations into account. As discussed by Alice Stevenson in her book *Egyptian Archaeology and the Twenty-First Century Museum*, Western museums need to constantly reflect on what they are displaying, in which way, and for whom[20]. Part of their responsibility is to become able to

[15] Musso 2022, pp. 23-28; Anastasio 2024, pp. 31-38.
[16] See for instance Hanna 2025, *passim*.
[17] Thompson 2015a; Thompson 2015b; Thompson 2018.
[18] Reid 2002; Colla 2007; Reid 2015.
[19] See the Abydos Temple Paper Archive website.
[20] Stevenson 2022, pp. 1-6.

transparently communicate their own history to visitors, explaining their own transformations, contradictions, and challenges. This necessity is even truer when single artefacts or monuments are taken into account. Today's visitors expect to get to know why an object is in front of them and how it reached that venue. While such questions naturally come to mind, their significance and importance grows out of contemporary debates on where artefacts should be preserved and whom should be in charge of them. I refer to debates that are frequently covered by mass media and in which public opinion tends to engage. Objects, especially iconic ones, are indeed visual and mental points of reference for people's claims and statements.

Aims, structure, and methodology

My research was deeply influenced by the above-mentioned questions and by the academic frameworks I have previously described. With a historical and comparative approach, my thesis explores the relationship between Western collecting institutions and Egyptian antiquities. It is rooted in the field of critical heritage studies, and it is framed within the post-colonial debate on archaeology, knowledge-production, and cultural management.

My aim is to investigate how that relationship has changed through time, both on the archaeological field and especially within museums. Focusing on two specific cultural institutions, I will analyze collecting practices and interpretative approaches, looking at transformations from the so-called Enlightenment to recent times. I will show how the history of archaeology – together with the museums' pasts – has a strong impact on today's debate over the role of cultural institutions.

Indeed, exploring previous trends and mindsets in the history of Egyptology allows one to understand today's claims and challenges. Framing the museological debate in a reparative discourse, I highlight needs and issues that museums have to deeply consider if they hope to remain relevant to a diverse and global public.

The institutions taken into account are the Museo Egizio of Turin and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (hereafter simply called Penn Museum). Throughout this three years' PhD program I have had the chance to closely collaborate with these institutions, establishing a tight relationship with museum staff and getting to know their

departments and activities. This tight connection – which has been accompanied by actual involvement in projects and initiatives – helped strongly in my research and reflections[21].

Besides the introduction and the conclusions, my thesis is organized in five chapters. It starts with a history of Western collecting practices in Egypt. I linger on both structural and episodic aspects of Western archaeology in Egypt, considering the two museums mentioned above. Their establishment and development are taken as points of reference, while I focus on characters or practices relevant to their collections.

As far as Museo Egizio in concerned, I pay special attention to Vitaliano Donati, Bernardino Drovetti, and Ernesto Schiaparelli, who epitomize some of the most representative phases of collecting.

As regards the Penn Museum, emphasis is given to characters such as Sara Yorke Stevenson, Eckley Brinton Coxe Jr, up to Rudolf Anthes.

Dealing with those topics has required careful study of edited literature, including key publications on the history of both institutions[22].

That study, however, was enriched by archival documents, such as official texts and private letters. I was especially interested in the foundational stages of both museums: archival research was therefore primarily dedicated to the Turin University museum context and to Penn's first collecting ambitions[23].

The first chapter also focuses on Egyptian antiquities laws and their evolution through time. Relevant seminal works, such as Antoine Khater's *Le Régime Juridique des Fouilles et des Antiquités en Égypt*, helped me navigate that topic[24]. However – moving closer to the present day – I also consider later developments, and I include international law and agreements between countries.

The second chapter takes some legal aspects into account, as well, especially in the Italian context. Considering antiquities laws and administrative structures, I will try to reflect on the meaning

[21] I am grateful for the support I received at both institutions. In particular, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to the Penn Cultural Heritage Center's staff, who generously hosted me in Philadelphia. I am especially thankful for everything they taught me during my stay.
[22] Madeira 1964; Curto 1990; Winegrad 1993; Moiso 2022.
[23] Huge thanks go to archivists and archival staff in both Turin and Philadelphia.
[24] Khater 1960.

given to cultural properties before and after the unification process. I focus on that topic in order to examine the role of foreign artefacts within national conceptions of cultural heritage. I seek to explore how national cultural properties laws present some contradictions, defending domestic interests, but also emphasizing the universal historical or artistic value of manufacts. This chapter is indeed particularly focused on the different ideas and definitions which culture heritage assume. Touching upon national, universal, and local perspectives, I reflect on both cultural affiliation and identity values attributed to artefacts and monuments.
While most observations are based on the Italian context, I also draw some comparisons with US regulations I had the chance to explore and deepen.
The entire chapter arises from the need of investigating categorizations and conceptualizations that are crucial in the management of cultural heritage today. Reflecting on them seemed necessary in order to subsequently deal with topics such as the decolonization of museums.
The pages addressing those themes were based on a variety of publications, ranging from the history of collections to anthropology and cultural law. They have also benefited from classes on cultural heritage which I was lucky enough to attend during this path, especially at the University of Pennsylvania.

While the first two chapters provide historical and intellectual context, the third one addresses contemporary questions in a more direct way. The topic of ownership is explored together with practices and concepts such as alienability and deaccessioning. Much attention is paid to restitution and repatriation, which are crucial processes in the contemporary debate on ethical museology. I will cover both law-enforced and voluntary actions, lingering on different purposes and subjects involved. During my research I dealt with these topics in quite a wide way, trying to detect initiatives and trends in the broader museums professional field. Writing this chapter, however, I will focus on Egypt, analyzing claims and actions concerning Egyptian antiquities and remains.
A variety of sources have been used to work on the above-mentioned theme, including broad publications on the return of cultural properties. Police reports, museums annual reports, newspaper articles, and official statements have been especially useful. Attending online and in-class lectures and seminars has also provided me with a deeper understanding of provenance research and restitution policies, both in the US and in Italy.

In the fourth chapter I will not dwell on physical materials and on the ownership of Egyptian antiquities. I will focus, however, on how ancient Egypt itself has been understood and perceived in modern times by the West. Indeed, I would like to explore some of the reasons why Europe and then the US felt such a strong attachment with the ancient Egyptian civilization, incorporating it in their own cultural identity. I will address these topics by taking the classical and the biblical traditions into account, looking at their role in the process at issue. By lingering on a few modern European intellectuals, I will analyze how their understanding of the roots of their own civilization has usually given much space to ancient Egypt.

While the chapter starts with antiquarianism and history of art, it later lingers on newer academic approaches to ancient past, including early physical anthropology and comparative anatomy. The development of similar disciplines, especially from the 19th century onwards, was accompanied by stronger and stronger interest in racial discourses on world's civilizations. I will consider the impact of scientific racism on the Western interpretation of ancient Egypt, which led to a white appropriation of Egyptian past.

While brief in its final scope, this chapter emerged from wide studies on history of culture. It also relies on research on the methods of reception studies and on transfer of culture.

As regards the entanglement between ancient Egypt and racial lines, Scott Trafton's book on American Egyptomania was an eye-opening and useful starting point for further study[25].

The fifth and final chapter of this thesis will investigate what Western museums are doing today in order to narrate Egyptian past in a broader and more inclusive way. I will consider recent renovations of permanent galleries and the curation of temporary exhibitions, especially in the US. I will reflect on reasons, purposes, and consequences of similar initiatives, showing that the interpretative work on ancient Egypt is animated and even conflicted. I will conclude this dissertation with further reflections on decolonial practices within Western museum institutions, trying to problematize their essence and purposes.

Research on museological trends and gallery transformations was deeply enhanced by my study period abroad, which allowed me to visit institutions firsthand and analyze both displays and labels. Conversations with curators and public engagement experts – both in Italy and in the US – also provided me with support on how to structure my analysis.

[25] Trafton 2004.

Direct involvement in museum projects, moreover, strongly impacted on this final chapter. As a matter of fact, it helped me gain familiarity with aims, challenges and approaches. Meeting different kinds of audiences was particularly meaningful and gave me the chance to develop questions and reflections on the very role of museum institutions.

As seen above, the present dissertation is organized in chapters that differ significantly from one another. Through this diverse and multi-disciplinary approach, I seek to offer a broad and clear perspective on sensitive and complex topics.

My hope is to provide tools, ideas, and provocations which could be useful on both the curatorial and the public-engagement level.

I would like to conclude this introduction with a necessary acknowledgment.

I am strongly aware that I write from a privileged position, coming from a part of the world where access to "culture" – and cultures – is given for granted.

My educational background, moreover, is rooted in Western traditions and institutions, the same ones I attempt to critically analyze throughout this work.

I acknowledge I cannot divest myself of a cultural and educational framework that has accompanied my personal and professional growth. At the same time, however, I tried to develop tools that could help me analyze processes of knowledge-production and cultural representation in a correct and productive way.

I hope that continued work on similar topics, along with ongoing and constant dialogue, will further equip me to study and address museums' challenges.

CHAPTER 1. COLLECTING ANCIENT EGYPT

This chapter will focus on Western practices concerning the collecting of Egyptian antiquities and the enrichment of foreign archaeological museums. I will analyze those phenomena by paying attention to the approach and methods employed through the history of modern Egyptology, starting from mid 1700s and ending up with the first decades of the 21st century.
I will consider the historical and normative context that made the discovery, purchase, and transfer of Egyptian antiquities a common practice for Western individuals and cultural institutions. While keeping an eye on the broader historical context, I am going to take two specific institutions into account: Fondazione Museo delle Antichità Egizie in Turin (better known as Museo Egizio) and the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology in Philadelphia (usually called Penn Museum). The history of these institutions can indeed mirror, on a small and limited scale, the history of Western interest in Egypt, in its antiquities, and in its cultural heritage.

In general, strong attention will be paid to legal aspects and to the development of a normative framework concerning ancient Egyptian past, analyzing Egyptian laws regarding archaeological research, and ownership of cultural heritage.

This chapter is structured in three sections, organized in a diachronic way. The first one is focused on 18th century explorations of Egypt and especially on Vitaliano Donati, who collected artefacts and materials for the Turin University Museum. It carries on with the so-called consuls'era and the protagonism of Bernardino Drovetti in the first decades of the 19th century. First, it analyzes the earliest law on the protection of Egyptian antiquities, published in 1835. Secondly, it considers Auguste Mariette's work and the establishment of the *Conservation des Antiquités de l'Égypte* in 1858.

The second section moves from 1874's antiquities law, which envisioned a division of finds among three different stakeholders. It then lingers on the idea of *partage* and on the creation of the Egyptian Exploration Fund. Its success and development in the US are then taken into account, together with the founding of new American museums, such as the Free Museum of Science and

Art at the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia. Special attention is paid to the early growth of its Egyptian section, thanks to Sara Yorke Stevenson and Flinders Petrie.
The evolution of Egyptian antiquities laws is then examined, focusing on the end of the 19th century and on the first decades of the 20th century. At the same time, field-work conducted by Museo Egizio and Penn Museum is considered, deeming the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb as an important watershed.

The third section focuses on the transformation of archaeology in the second half of the 20th century. Egyptian reappropriation of its cultural heritage went hand in hand with international collaboration projects and Western desire for on-site work.
While main antiquities laws are mentioned, the international legal framework is briefly taken into account, focusing on US' and Italy's role.

This chapter is the result of broad reading of edited bibliography on the history of Egyptology and on the development of Western archaeology museums. It is also the outcome of archival research conducted in both Turin and Philadelphia. Most of that research has been conducted at the Archivio di Stato di Torino (Turin State Archive) and at the Penn Museum Archives. To a lesser extent, the Archivio Storico dell'Università di Torino (The Turin University Historical Archive) has also been utilized.

1.1. COLLECTING EGYPTIAN ANTIQUITIES BEFORE 1874

On the 15th of August 1835 an ordinance was issued by the Council of the Egyptian Government and by pasha Mohamed Ali[26]. That ordinance is considered the very first Egyptian law concerning Egyptian Antiquities and it is therefore a crucial point of reference in my analysis. It was published in Turkish and in Egyptian and it was promptly translated into French[27]. At the time of that ordinance, Egypt was formally part of the Ottoman Empire, and it was ruled by a viceroy, represented by Mohamed Ali.

[26] For the entire text, translated into French, see Khater 1960, pp. 271-273.
[27] Khater 1960, p. 40, n. 1.

The 1835 ordinance came as an answer to previous decades' indiscriminate removal of antiquities. The document addresses a series of different issues, pointing at both Europeans' and locals' responsibilities in damaging Egyptian monuments. Most attention, however, is rightly given to the transfer of large numbers of artefacts from Egypt to Europe. A vivid and worrying image is evoked, prefiguring an Egypt land completely emptied of its ancient monuments and materials, if regulations were not to be set.

Such worries are no surprise, if we consider the impact that European explorers and collectors had on Egyptian antiquities in the 18th century and – most of all – in the first decades of the 19th century. In this section I am going to look back at those times, focusing on specific characters, events, and practices.

1.1.1. Vitaliano Donati and the Turin University Museum (1759 – 1814)

The first character I am going to linger on is Vitaliano Donati, a botanist and naturalist from Padua who lived from 1717 to 1762. King Charles Emmanuel III appointed him as professor of botany and natural history at the University of Turin in 1750 and later entrusted him with a series of tasks[28]. In particular, he was asked to conduct a long trip through Egypt, the Middle East, and India. During this trip he had to explore territories, study stones and plants, reflect on agricultural practices and trading opportunities[29]. Moreover, he was encouraged to gather specimens, materials, manuscripts, and antiquities to be sent back to Turin. His mission was therefore a quintessential "illuminist" endeavor, in which natural science mingled with ancient history, aiming at an encyclopedic understanding of the world. It had a double purpose: on one hand to grasp and understand the past, on the other to look for innovations and progress[30].

The main features and purposes of his journey are described in an official document now preserved at the State Archive of Turin, which worked as a memorandum of understanding between King Charles Emmanuel III and Vitaliano Donati[31]. As stated at the very beginning of that document, Donati had to focus on two main objectives: to collect natural history specimens, and to conduct research on agriculture and commerce.

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[28] Scalva 2000, pp. 365-397.
[29] Scalva & Caramiello 2017, p. 93.
[30] On intellectual trends during Enlightenment see MacGregor 2003, pp. 6-7.
[31] *Memoria Istruttiva*, AST, Corte, *Istruzione Pubblica, Regia Università,* mazzo 8, 1759. (Hereafter quoted as *Memoria Istruttiva*)

The memorandum also provides a summary of Donati's expected itinerary, with instructions about areas and places he should have visited. Egypt immediately appears as a very important destination: his movements around that area are planned in detail, which does not happen when more distant destinations are mentioned. The Nile and its annual floods are mentioned and Donati was expected to travel along its course, in order to observe that country and collect materials. The Nile valley was probably considered as a crucial region for research on soils and agricultural productivity and Charles Emmanuel's main desire was indeed to discover how to make Piedmont's and Sardinia's lands more productive, with new and imported crops. Among Donati's long list of destinations, fertile Egypt must have appeared as an important target.

Donati arrived in Egypt in July 1759, starting his research in January 1760 and carrying it on till April 1761. His travel journal, which today survives only through later copies, recounts his activities and movements, letting us understand which villages and towns he had the chance to visit[32]. According to the above-mentioned memorandum, Donati was also expected to write specific reports concerning the regions he was travelling through. Unfortunately, most of those reports are currently lost, but we do know that Donati wrote observations and made drawings specifically about Egypt[33].

In his travel journal Donati frequently mentions ancient ruins and archaeological remains that he managed to visit and document in Egypt. He often stops at similar sites to draw buildings and monuments or to record ancient inscriptions. Donati's journal therefore shows his deep interest in ancient Egyptian history, even if research into those topics had not been presented as a priority in the memorandum. In his documentation effort, Vitaliano Donati was influenced by earlier travelers, like Pietro della Valle and Richard Pococke[34]. It is likely, however, that his journal and reports were also inspired by the literary genre of epigraphical and antiquarian collections, which had a long and rich tradition in European and Italian scholarly elite[35]. In the Veneto area, a 19th century influential work has certainly been the *Verona Illustrata*, published by Scipione Maffei between 1731 and 1732[36].

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[32] *Giornale del viaggio fatto in Levante nell'anno 1759 d'ordine di Sua Maestà dal medico Vitaliano Donati di Padova Professore di Botanica nella R.a Università di Torino*, Biblioteca Reale. (hereafter quoted as *Giornale*)
[33] Scattolin Morecroft 2018, p. 59.
[34] Rubiés 2023, pp. 221-250; Finnegan 2015, pp. 33-48.
[35] On printed epigraphical collections and their impact on European culture see Carbonell Manils & González Germain 2020, pp. 7-9.
[36] On the influence of Maffei's work see Romagnani 1998.

As stated in the memorandum, Donati was expected to collect a diverse and large number of natural specimens, from corals to plants, from precious stones to animals. The document, however, invites Donati to take advantage of his journey and collect antiquities, as well. The text generically refers to antiquities and rare manuscripts, adding that mummies and ancient coins would be particularly appreciated. The allusion to mummies and to "Syrian, Phoenician, and Egyptian coins" shows a specific interest towards Near Eastern antiquities, and especially Egyptian ones. It is worth noting that antiquities from the Far East are not mentioned, as if research in those regions should have only focused on the natural world and not on human history. After all, that attitude is not surprising: the Egyptian and Near Eastern past were considered by Christian countries as part of a shared, common history that needed to be explored and unveiled.

Donati's journal does not provide many details about his efforts in obtaining or acquiring Egyptian antiquities; a limited number of relevant episodes, however, are described. In two cases Donati explicitly writes that he had purchased antiquities from local people. In the area of Qurna and Medinet Habu some local people brought antiquities and mummies of animals to Donati, who promptly purchased them[37]. In Koptos, instead, he apparently bought a larger number of antiquities, especially ancient lamps and statuettes. On that occasion he also purchased a bust made of granite, which according to Donati represented the goddess Isis[38].

In both cases, the acquisition of those antiquities did not imply any kind of excavation or archaeological research. It shows, however, that a trade in small and movable antiquities was emerging.

A quite different episode happened in Karnak, where Donati made efforts to excavate and remove ancient statues. After noticing the upper part of a buried sculpture, Donati left the site and visited Sheikh Ismail, the local official, to ask him for permission to excavate it and remove it. Sheik Ismail granted permission and provided his help and support. Unfortunately, we do not have any official documents testifying Ismail's permission granted to Donati. This episode, however, is particularly telling because it clearly shows that title to antiquities was somehow controlled by local authorities. It therefore seems that in Ottoman Egypt, around the middle of the 18th century, customary practices used to define how to engage with research for antiquities. This statement goes against the general conception that no protection of local antiquities was put in place in

[37] *Giornale*, p. 335.
[38] *Giornale*, p. 377.

Ottoman Egypt before 1835. Access to antiquities was not regulated by laws but was frequently controlled and taken into account by local authorities.

Donati's journal clearly shows that letters of recommendation were constantly necessary to travel from one area to the other. During his trip he frequently had to meet local officials, judges, and governors, introducing himself and explaining the reasons of his trip. By presenting his references and paying homage, Donati would get permission to proceed on his journey and to visit specific sites.

In a letter from Naqada, dated to October 10th 1760, Donati explains that once arrived in Farshut he paid visit to Hammam Ibn Youssef, a Bedouin official who had control of a large area of Upper Egypt[39]. Donati showed him two letters of recommendations and a *firman*. Hammam granted him hospitality and support, providing him with ten letters of recommendations that he could have used to travel through Egypt.

Even if equipped with so many letters, Donati soon realized that access to certain areas, especially archaeologically rich ones, was not always given for granted. When Donati explained to Sheikh Issa – an official in Naqada – his intentions to visit the Valley of the Kings, Sheikh Issa did not support Donati's desire and strongly tried to dissuade him. His main official reason was that the area was not safe enough, because of bandits. Donati did not listen to those warnings and decided to head towards that area anyways, showing his documents to relevant local authorities. Once there, he realized that Sheikh Issa had even sent a messenger to warn local leaders not to conduct him to the ancient ruins. Ignoring those orders, locals accompanied Donati anyways, hoping for a reward[40]. This episode shows that access to archaeologically rich areas was a matter of interest for local authorities; their will, however, was not always respected and control on those areas was not easily retained.

Returning to Donati's collecting practices, the cases described above show that both excavation and purchase were employed to acquire Egyptian antiquities. While the first method required a certain level of authorization, we do not have many hints about the second one. We might wonder, however, if the transportation and export of artefacts implied any kind of restrictions or control. From this point of view, Donati's account mentions only one aspect: custom duties or

[39] *Letter dating to 10th of October 1760, from Donati to Internal Secreteriat of State*, AST, Corte, *Istruzione Pubblica, Regia Università,* mazzo 8.
[40] As stated by Donati in his *Giornale*, pp. 331-332.

similar taxes. According to his journal, he frequently had to deal with tax collectors. At El-Minya, for instance, tax collectors asked him to pay money in order to retain some of the antiquities he had collected[41].

Custom duties aside, a good amount of antiquities gathered by Donati were eventually shipped from Egypt. Once in Turin, they were placed in the University building, in order to enrich some rooms and galleries that had already been designed as an academic museum[42]. Scholars have tried to identify the artefacts that Donati collected and which were sent to Turin, calculating the precise number of objects. Angela Scattolin Morecroft has recently worked on those questions, relying on a document written by Donati, containing a list of all artefacts he had collected in Egypt[43]. Without lingering on this complex topic, we know that the above-mentioned statues that Donati excavated in Karnak were eventually located in the courtyard of the University building, on via Verdi.

The removal and transfer of those statues was granted by local authorities. First of all, Sheikh Ismail provided logistic support for those operations. Once removed, the statues were sent to Farshut, under the temporary custody of Hammam Ibn Youssef. While officials were happy to meet Donati's desire to acquire ancient sculptures, local people had a very different attitude. According to Donati, locals were generally quite worried that foreign people could exploit their own territory by extracting resources or artefacts[44]. In Karnak, locals showed a strong aversion towards Donati's removal of sculptures. A group of women stopped at the excavation area and strongly complained about the transfer of one of those statues, showing an intimate connection with ancient artefacts buried or partially buried in the area. They were even calling that statue with a specific nickname, referring to her as the "black slave"[45]. It represented the goddess Sekhmet and it was made of a dark granite-type stone, just as many similar ones found on the same site. Another statue, instead, was nicknamed "the mistress", given its bigger size. This episode, as it has been recounted in Donati's journal, shows that local people in the area of Karnak had strong familiarity with nearby antiquities, projecting meaning, affection, and deference on them. Despite the above-described situation, Donati received large support from local authorities in order to excavate and transfer the statues. It is clear that officials were happy to meet Donati's collecting desires, at least in that

[41] *Giornale*, p. 364. See also *Giornale*, p. 94.
[42] On the early life of the Turin University Museum see Di Macco 2003, pp. 29-52.
[43] Scattolin Morecroft 2006, pp. 278-282.
[44] *Giornale*, p. 6.
[45] *Giornale*, pp. 335 and onwards.

specific case. That diplomatic attitude was not shared by local people, who did not approve the removal of large and remarkable artefacts from their territory, especially when they had always characterized their landscape, and they had been charged with meaning and power. Indeed, the examples provided so far show that access and title to local antiquities were important and contested topics in 18th century's Egypt, entangled with exercise of power and political fragmentation.

In the above-mentioned letter dating to the 10th of October 1760, Donati describes and recounts his efforts in finding and acquiring many Egyptian antiquities. That intention, as I already stressed, was not highlighted too much in the memorandum written before his departure. In this letter, instead, Donati explained that one main reason for collecting antiquities was to gather tools and sources that one day could help understanding the *Mensa Isiaca*, an ancient bronze tablet with Egyptianizing decorations, which was part of Savoy's collections. For that purpose, as he stated, he had collected statuettes, amulets, ancient vases, lamps, and animal mummies.

In another letter, dating to the 10th of June 1761, Donati also talked about two human mummies that he had managed to obtain[46]. He did not provide any details about them, but he explained that he encountered remarkable difficulties in obtaining and keeping them. Unfortunately, we do not have any details that can clarify his words. We have to imagine, however, that those difficulties might have been related to religious and ethical concerns regarding the treatment of human remains.

As I have discussed, Donati is sometimes interested in showing local reactions to excavations and removal of artefacts. Despite this attention – which can probably be ascribed to ethnographic interest – in his journal he never actually reflects on title to antiquities, ownership of cultural heritage, or cultural affiliation. His attitude was based on the idea that collecting and displaying natural and historical specimens from around the world could foster an encyclopedic understanding of nature and human life, with Europe and its values at its center. From this point of view, his main reference in Turin was probably the University Museum itself, together with similar scholarly institutions[47].

[46] *Letter dating to 10th of June 1761, from Donati*, AST, Corte, *Istruzione Pubblica, Regia Università,* mazzo 8.
[47] Think of the Turin Botanical Garden, opened in 1729, and the *Società Scientifica Privata Torinese* (opened in 1757).

The University Museum was created as a hub for academic knowledge, to support students interested in different fields. It was organized in five sections, ranging from physics and medicine to natural science and antiquities[48]. According to Bartoli – the first director of the museum – a collection of antiquities would have been useful to students from all disciplines: not only men of letters, but also jurists, physicians, and naturalists. Even Egyptian antiquities could have played a multidisciplinary role and been used by botanists or biologists to study plants or animals represented on them[49].

Promoted by the royal family, the museum was first and foremost a tool for academic teaching. Both the Royal University and its museum, however, were also spaces for political and ideological messages, showing Savoy's attention to cultural policies. The museum and its antiquities could become a stage for political power, showing remarkable objects with a direct connection to Savoy dynasty, Turin, and the Kingdom of Sardinia. As far as we can understand, Donati was expected to play a remarkable role in this cultural and political plan, first of all with his journey through the East. His journey to Egypt probably had to be just one step in that process. Once back to Italy, he was expected to travel through Sardinia to explore agricultural and industrial potentialities of that land. Once again, he would have also had a chance to study local ancient history and collect antiquities[50]. Charles Emmanuel III was not underestimating the value of story-telling and ancient origins, especially through the ownership and display of artefacts.

The political value of antiquities and cultural heritage reached a new level between the end of the 18th century and the beginning of the 19th, with Napoleonic campaigns in Italy and the widespread looting of artefacts. Revolutionary and post-revolutionary France aimed to become the universal home of arts, gathering artefacts from all over Europe. Napoleon's project of an imperial museum showed how galleries of art could become a political stage with clear ideological messages[51].

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[48] *Progetto Regio Museo Università*, AST, *Sezione Corte, Scritture attinenti alla Regia Università ed al Real Collegio delle provincie e de' Nobili ed alla Reale Accademia in Materie economiche [Inventario n. 75], Regia Università*, Mazzo 5, Fascicolo 17, 2nd April 1739.

[49] *Memoria di Bartoli per il Magistrato della Riforma, riguardante lo studio delle belle lettere nella Regia Università*, AST, *Sezione Corte, Scritture attinenti alla Regia Università ed al Real Collegio delle provincie e de' Nobili ed alla Reale Accademia in Materie economiche [Inventario n. 75], Regia Università*, Mazzo 5, Fascicolo 36, 1748.

[50] *Memoria Istruttiva.*

[51] Wescher 2022, pp. 3-15.

Napoleonic looting also happened in Turin, when Royal palaces and institutions were severely targeted. The Turin University Museum suffered greatly from those events, when several manufacts were transferred to Paris[52]. Given their value and rarity, Donati's Egyptian antiquities were also looted, including the above-mentioned statues from Karnak.

Between 1814 and 1818 a good amount of looted objects were recovered and shipped back to Turin, thanks to Giovanni Francesco Simondi and Ludovico Costa, both sent to Paris for that purpose[53].

The looting of Italian works of art had a huge impact on European sensitivity towards ownership of works of art. That period is widely recognized as a watershed in the modern elaboration of the conception of cultural heritage[54]. Those events, indeed, fostered pride about ownership of cultural objects, leading to a deeper awareness of the role that arts and antiquities can play in shaping political and civic identity.

It is very surprising, however, that this sensitivity and awareness did not impact European attitudes towards extra-European countries and their archaeological materials. While Ludovico Costa was trying to get artefacts back, Bernardino Drovetti – the next figure I will linger on – started collecting a huge number of Egyptian antiquities, conceiving this activity as a remunerative business.

1.1.2. From Mohammed Ali to Aguste Mariette: the consuls' era and the development of antiquities laws (1802 – 1874)

The second character I would like to focus on is Bernardino Drovetti (1776-1852), who spent most of his political career in Egypt, at the service of the French government. In 1802 he was appointed sub-commissioner for commercial relations in Alexandria and, a few years later, he managed to obtain important diplomatic offices, becoming vice-consul in 1806 and consul general in 1811[55]. Thanks to those appointments, Drovetti became a very influential figure, with strong connections in the Egyptian political context. His position allowed him to conduct and promote excavations,

[52] See relevant documents in AST, *Sezione Corte, Regi Archivi*, cat. 5, mazzo 9 bis, *Commissione di Parigi, Oggetti d'arte e Scienze di Torino*.
[53] Gabbrielli 2009, pp. 45-74.
[54] See Gerstenblith 2023, pp. 36-37.
[55] Seita & Giacoletto Papas 2007, pp. 63-64.

acquiring antiquities and building large collections. One of them was sold to Piedmont and led to the creation of today's Museo Egizio[56].

Drovetti built his collections through different means, by both purchasing antiquities and conducting excavations. He took an active part in the search for artefacts, especially when he lost his office role in 1814. Despite his direct involvement, that was not a single-man business: several agents worked under him, taking care of trading, networking, and digging. Among them, the main ones were: Antonio Lebolo, Joseph Rosignana, Jean-Jacques Rifaud, and Frederic Cailliaud[57].

Bernardino Drovetti is a key figure in the so-called "consuls' era", when European consuls in Egypt played crucial roles in promoting excavations, Egyptological studies, and research of antiquities[58]. This period also coincides with the rise to power of Mohammed Ali Pasha, a military man from Albania who ruled over Egypt from 1805 to 1848[59].

After Napoleon's expedition to Egypt and France's capitulation, Egypt was experiencing a difficult transition phase, with terrible political instability. The Ottoman Empire was trying to rebuild its direct control over the Country, while the British were interested in imposing more and more control on Egyptian politics and the Mameluks were fighting for their own power[60].

Mohammed Ali skillfully managed to acquire power and prestige, becoming the *de-facto* ruler of Egypt. On one hand he managed to work closely with the Sublime Porte, on the other, he established himself as an independent and ambitious ruler.

Drovetti promptly understood that Mohammed Ali could have become a strong figure in the Egyptian political scene and did not hinder his rise to power. He rooted for him, seeing his ascent as a positive element against the British and the Mameluks and considering him a promising ally to France[61]. In some cases, he even supported him, laying the foundations for a long-term friendship[62].

According to letters, Drovetti's interest in collecting Egyptian artefacts started at least since 1807[63]. His antiquities business, however, grew to a different level about seven years later, when Drovetti was dismissed from his consulate office. Waiting for his successor to arrive and take his office,

[56] On the birth of the Egyptian Museum see Moiso 2022, pp. 38-57.
[57] Seita & Giacoletto Papas 2007, pp. 67-90.
[58] Guichard 2005, pp. 82-98.
[59] Al-Sayyid Marsot 1984, pp. 24-35.
[60] Campanini 2017, pp. 135-140.
[61] Ridley 1998, pp. 39-44.
[62] Ridley 1998, pp. 40-48.
[63] Guichard 2005, pp. 84-85.

Drovetti pondered whether to leave Egypt and go back to France. His final decision was to stay in Egypt, focusing on business opportunities. As stated by Drovetti himself, his good relationship with Mohammed Ali would have allowed him to stand in the most favorable position, giving him hope for success in different profitable activities[64]. This is especially true as far as antiquities are concerned: Mohammed Ali could indeed strongly support Drovetti's search for antiquities, providing necessary *firmans* and permits.

Indeed, collecting antiquities was – for Drovetti – a very utilitarian activity. He saw it as a promising way to stockpile precious resources and eventually make a profit by selling them. His letters do not show a personal passion towards his own collections, depicting them as assets and investments[65]. It is worth noting that Drovetti's collection included many objects of ordinary life. This approach to collecting is usually seen as Drovetti's scientific attention towards all aspects of archaeology[66]. My understanding, however, is that Drovetti simply wanted to stockpile all types of objects that could have been of interest for European collectors. He was aware of European interest towards curiosities from the ancient world and realized he had all the tools necessary to meet the demand.

Besides daily-life artefacts, Drovetti obviously collected many objects that could easily fall in the modern day's category of art. As far as Turin is concerned, it would be impossible not to mention the large size statues coming from Thebes. Karnak and its temples were again points of reference for recovery and extraction of artefacts. As we have seen, Donati had found and transported a Sekhmet statue. Drovetti focused his attention on those objects as well, through his agent Jean-Jacques Rifaud[67]. The difference in logistics is quite striking: while Donati struggled to move a couple of statues, Rifaud had all the means and tools to transfer many sculptures, which testifies to the well-grounded network he could rely on.

Besides Drovetti, many other foreign diplomats became involved in the excavation and trade of antiquities. The main one was probably Henry Salt, the British consul in Egypt from 1816 to 1827[68].

[64] Guichard 2005, pp. 50-52.
[65] Guichard 2005, p. 89. See letter number 88, trasncribed on pages 338-344.
[66] Curto 1990, pp. 44-45
[67] Cincotti 2013, pp. 279-285
[68] Mahmoud 2016, pp. 30-32.

Among others, we could also count Giuseppe Acerbi (the consul of Austria) and Giovanni Anastasi (the consul of Sweden and Norway)[69].

Consuls and diplomats took advantage of their office and easily managed to obtain excavation permits: *firmans* granting access to antiquities became symbols of European crave for Egyptian antiquities[70].

Firmans are mentioned in letters, journals, and publications written by Europeans involved in the race for ancient artefacts. Giovanni Battista Belzoni, for instance, mentions *firmans* and permissions several times in his book titled *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries in Egypt and Nubia.* Those documents regard travelling through Egypt, hiring of workmen, purchase of antiquities, and removal of artefacts[71]. For example, Belzoni boasted a very powerful *firman*, offered by Mohammed Ali, which allowed him unlimited access to antiquities of all kinds[72]. According to Belzoni's account, gifts exchange or even bribery was sometimes necessary in order to obtain some of those documents. Details about the acquisition of some of those documents is provided, as well: in a couple of cases, Belzoni recalls that *firmans* were eventually obtained only in return for precious British pistols[73].

Another example is provided by the French Egyptologist Jean Francois Champollion. While preparing his franco-tuscan expedition, Champollion mentions his struggles in obtaining *firmans* for his excavations. In a letter dating to 1828 he complains about relevant authorities and points to a series of explorers who, before him, had easy access to similar permits[74].

One main issue concerning above-mentioned documents, however, is that *firmans* of that kind are not frequently available[75]. Oftentimes scholars have to rely on explorers' and archaeologists' notices, without direct access to the original texts.

The age of Mohammed Ali, Drovetti, and Salt truly shaped the relationship between Westerners and Egyptian heritage. On one hand, Westerners did not hide their interest towards Egyptian antiquities, urging for research, excavations, and artefacts trade. On the other hand, Mohammed

[69] Moiso 2022, p. 36.
[70] Maspero 1914, p. iv; Fagan 1975, pp. 90-91.
[71] Concerning hiring of workforce for excavations, see Belzoni 1820, p. 221. For examples of *firmans* regarding the removal of antiquities, see pp. 105, 258, 287. Purchases are also mentioned on p. 197.
[72] Belzoni 1820, pp. 105, 207.
[73] Belzoni 1820, p. 49, 205.
[74] Hartleben 1909, pp. 43-46.
[75] Greenhalgh 2019, pp. 65-85.

Ali was willing to please those requests, hoping for help and support in return. He realized Europeans could help him modernize and westernize Egypt and therefore tried to maintain good relations with them, looking for knowledge and technology exchange[76]. Within this approach, archaeology played a role in diplomacy, working as the perfect bargaining chip.

In his political and economic project, Mohammed Ali did not pursue a strong cultural policy. He rarely referred to the ancient Egyptian past and did not use it to foster the emergence of a strong national identity. One main reason is that Mohammed Ali was not from Egypt.

The creation of a stronger and more stable Egypt under Mohammed Ali, however, produced the conditions for local intellectuals to reflect more deeply on Egyptian ancient history. Rifaa al-Tahtawi, for instance, analyzed and celebrated the role of pharaonic Egypt in the context of world history. By studying abroad, in Paris, he observed European attitude towards ancient artefacts and therefore paid much attention towards Mohammed Ali's policies towards antiquities. Commenting on the transportation of an obelisk to Paris, he reflected on the necessity of keeping heritage where ancestors had left it[77].

Among Europeans, Jean-François Champollion was one of the first scholars to claim for the preservation of Egyptian monuments and sites. He urged Mohammed Ali to take measures on the spoliation of Egypt, exhorting him to draft regulations on the topic. The Pasha eventually agreed, and an ordinance was promulgated in 1835[78]. Once again, Europeans had a direct impact on the control of antiquities in Egypt.

The ordinance is considered the first piece of Egyptian archaeological regulation[79]. Its text immediately deals with European interest and crave for Egyptian antiquities, explaining that archaeological research and transfer of artefacts has caused destruction and exhaustion. It also draws attention to Europeans' hypocrisy in their attitude towards antiquities. As briefly stated in the ordinance, Europeans did not allow the exportation of their own antiquities, trying to keep them in their countries. The same attitude was not applied to foreign antiquities, which Europeans hoped to find, possess, and take home. That duality needed to be overcome and the 1835's ordinance aimed to address those challenges from an Egyptian perspective.

[76] Ridley 1998, pp. 202-243.
[77] Reid 2003, p. 54.
[78] Khater 1960, pp. 29-34.
[79] Osman 1999, p. 978.

Another interesting point is raised at the beginning of the ordinance: in very few words, the essence of 19th century's Western museums is presented. Museums are described as splendid buildings appositely designed to contain antiquities. The possession of those artefacts and their public display contribute to the owner's glory. In those words, the museum is presented as a typically Western institution, and its value is recognized by Mohammed Ali. Indeed, the ordinance later prescribes that a museum had to be created in Egypt as well, similar to European ones.

The museum was seen as a crucial and necessary step to implement the new cultural heritage policy and its instructions. A storage space was needed, for both the management and the protection of antiquities. Personnel were equally required and therefore promptly selected: while Yousouf zia-Effendi was appointed inspector of antiquities, Rifaa al-Tahtawi was seen as the main person who was to be in charge of those new antiquities policies.

Besides additional items, the ordinance contained three main prescriptions. First of all, the exportation of antiquities had to be prohibited; secondly, antiquities had to be deposited in a museum-like structure. Lastly, the government had to assure the conservation of ancient monuments. Moreover, on-going archaeological excavations needed to be suspended, even with the help of armed forces.

At first glance, the 1835 ordinance might seem very strict. Scholars, however, have pointed out several limits that hindered its efficacy. First of all, no definition of antiquities is provided in the text, leaving some materials and remains in a possibly gray area[80]. More broadly, the complexity of the topic and the absence of previous legislation would have required the enrichment of such a short ordinance with additional notes and comments[81]. While exportation was discussed and prohibited, no attention was given to the idea of ownership and state ownership[82]. Indeed, the ordinance contained no explicit attempt to claim that newly discovered antiquities belonged to the State.

As far as archaeological excavations are concerned, the ordinance does not show a very clear direction to follow. According to the text, on-going excavations had to be suspended, but no instructions are given about the future of archaeological research in the country, with very limited discussion about permits and authorizations. In Kather's opinion, Mohammed Ali appositely kept

[80] Khater 1960, p. 45.
[81] Khater 1960, p. 46.
[82] Osman 1999, p. 978.

things unclear in order to have flexibility and grant authorizations on a case-by-case basis[83]. Indeed, the Pasha kept granting *firmans* to European explorers and the excavations did not come to an end. For instance, colonel Campbel and Sir Frank Henkins were authorized to explore a pyramid at Saqqara[84]. More famously, a very generous *firman* was granted to Richard Lepsius in 1842, allowing him to conduct excavations without any limits[85].

At the end of the day, Mohammed Ali was still willing to use antiquities as a tool for diplomacy and dialogue towards Europe. The newly envisioned museum had to play a similar role, offering Western travelers the highly desired opportunity to encounter and study Egyptian antiquities. Without excluding local people, the museum had to be a point of reference – above all – for foreign travelers and tourists[86].

As shown above, the 1835 ordinance represents one first step in the direction of a more articulated system for the management and preservation of Egyptian antiquities. A more stable structure – however – appeared in 1858, when the *Conservation des Antiquités de l'Égypte* was created. The French archaeologist Auguste Mariette was appointed director-general of the newly established Antiquities Service, becoming responsible for the protection of Egyptian antiquities and monuments[87]. That office, later known as *Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte* (in Arabic *Maslahat Antikhana*), will remain open till 1952. Mariette's authority and firmness largely influenced the management of archaeological excavations and the preservation of monuments in Egypt. His activity as an employee of the khedivial government fostered the protection of Egyptian ancient heritage in many senses. For instance, he strongly fought against the removal and exportation of large monuments such as obelisks, imposing the idea that Egyptian landscape and its ancient ruins had to be protected just as objects in a museum[88]. He also promoted the creation of a new archaeological museum, which replaced the first Cairo museum originally conceived by Mohammed Ali. According to viceroy Ismail Pasha, this new institution had to address, first of all, a local audience of Egyptians[89].

[83] Khater 1960, pp. 47-51.
[84] Khater 1960, p. 47.
[85] Thompson 2015a, p. 220.
[86] As stated in 1835's ordinance.
[87] Magee 2012, pp. 70-86.
[88] Leclant 1981, pp. 492-493.
[89] Reid 2003, p. 106.

Through his work and initiatives, however, Mariette took possession of ancient Egyptian culture, building a monopoly in archaeological research and antiquities management. Supported by khedivial authorities, the French archaeologist became the main authority in the field, imposing his Western view on Egyptology and Egyptian history. For instance, he oversaw the new Boulaq museum, designing arrangements and displays according to his own vision and hopes. As shown by Reid, he tried to engage locals with a paternalistic attitude, hoping to impress and engage them with aesthetic arrangements of artefacts[90].

His monopoly was even more explicit as far as archaeological excavations were concerned: his role allowed him to dig throughout most of the country, without competition of any kind. Excavation permits were not granted to other Europeans who wanted to dig independently of the Antiquities Service[91]. His privileges, moreover, included the *corvée* system, which means he could rely on unpaid local labor to conduct his excavations[92]. Under Mariette's monopoly, archaeological research in Egypt became more centralized, overseen by the khedivial office of the Antiquities Service. In that context, Western diplomats, explorers, and scholars could not compete anymore in the hectic race for artefacts that had characterized the first half of the 19th century. Mariette, however, kept archaeological research at a frenzied pace. His predominance in excavations showed how Europe (and especially France) was keeping a firm grasp on ancient Egyptian heritage and on the discipline of Egyptology.

While 1835's ordinance did not linger on the concept of ownership, relevant Ottoman laws dating to 1869 and 1874 had a different attitude on that topic. In March 1869 a by-law was issued to address antiquities and excavations, providing ownership regulations in article 3[93]. According to it, the ownership of antiquities depended on the land where excavations had happened, and where artefacts had been discovered: antiquities dug out of private property would have belonged to the owner of that land. On one hand, the state had strong control on the management of excavations, providing necessary authorizations; on the other, it had no title to finds coming from private soil, conferring all of them to the owner of the land.

[90] Reid 2003, pp. 106-107.
[91] Thompson 2015a, pp. 274-275.
[92] Thompson 2015a, p. 228.
[93] Khater, p. 274. See also Çelik 2022, pp. 168-188.

In March 1874 a new by-law was promulgated, providing a very different approach to ownership, characterized by a prominent role of the state[94]. For the first time, state ownership was explicitly declared, establishing that every antiquity yet to be discovered belonged to the government. Once dug out, artefacts should have been distributed among different actors: the state itself, the excavator, and the owner of the land. More precisely, each of those actors had a right to one third of the finds. It was the beginning of a system of antiquities division that shaped the history of Egyptology and the growth of archaeological museums.

The above-mentioned by-laws had very different stances on exportation, as well. Indeed, the 1869's by-law banned the exportation of newly discovered antiquities, stating that only internal trade was allowed[95]. In 1874, however, antiquities exportation was admitted and regulated in a more detailed way, providing practical instructions. A list of artefacts destined to foreign countries had to be examined by the Ministry of Public Education, which could either authorize their export or purchase them for the Ottoman Imperial Museum[96].

As shown so far, the 19th century was packed with events and transformations concerning the collecting of Egyptian antiquities and its regulation. While the consuls' era had led to a hectic race for artefacts, Mariette's monopoly centralized archaeological research without slowing down its pace.

In Turin, in the meantime, the Museo Egizio gradually established itself as a point of reference for history, art, and culture. The large collection that Charles Felix of Sardinia had bought in 1824 from Bernardino Drovetti became a useful academic resource, which needed to be organized, managed, and studied[97]. Moreover, during the rest of the 19th century most energies were spent to consolidate its role and status within the Turin cultural environment. The institution did not focus on building direct relationships with Egypt, but rooted itself in the civic life of Turin, with its political and cultural powers. The collection could indeed grow thanks to several donations, granted not only by private citizens, but also by the University and, above all, by the Crown[98].

[94] Khater, pp. 275-277.
[95] Ancient coins had a different status, and their exportation was not prohibited.
[96] For reflections on the Ottoman Imperial Museum and on the role of antiquities in the Ottoman political context, see Bahrani et al. 2011, pp. 13-43. See also Çelik 2011, pp. 443-477.
[97] Romagnani 1985, pp. 1-6; Einaudi 2019, pp. v-xiii.
[98] See Curto 1979, pp. 48-50.

Charles Albert, for instance, showed his interest in supporting the museum by purchasing the Sossio's collection, including over a thousand items.

Today, the Egyptian Museum counts a much higher number of artefacts, which have been acquired through archaeological excavations in the first decades of the 20th century. That phase of frenzied acquisitions was inaugurated by Ernesto Schiaparelli, who became director in 1894. The protagonism of Italy and Turin in Egyptian archaeological research would happen in competition with other Western powers, especially the UK and the United States. In the next section, I will look at those events, focusing on acquisition processes and legal aspects.

1.2. PARTAGE AND WESTERN MUSEUMS (from 1874's by-law to the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb)

1.2.1. The Egyptian Exploration Fund: from its British birth to its American development (1882-1912)

The above-mentioned by-law dating to 1874 represents a turning point in the management of Egyptian antiquities. On one hand it introduces the concept of state ownership, on the other one it envisions a system of finds division which took hold in the following years. By granting a share of finds to those who conduct excavations, the by-law affirmed the notion that archaeological missions needed to have their efforts rewarded. That idea, however, clashed with new restrictions on antiquities exportation, which were established in 1880 with a law promulgated by Khedive Tawfik[99].

Meeting those two opposite stances therefore became an almost impossible balance to find and keep together. At least two main factors, however, made that balance possible: the British political takeover and the creation of the Egyptian Exploration Fund.

As a matter of fact, in 1882 the United Kingdom eventually took control of Egypt, after several years of stronger and stronger British influence in both Egyptian politics and business. The newly established political situation had consequences on Egyptology as well: for instance, the Antiquities Service ceased to be under direct control of the Khedivial court and became an office of the Ministry of Public Works[100]. Thanks to diplomatic agreements with the UK, the Antiquities

[99] Khater 1960, p. 280; Elkashef & Zaki 2022, p. 65.
[100] Thompson 2015b, p. 4.

Service remained a French stronghold, represented by French directors such as Gaston Maspero, Eugène Grébault and others. The British, however, slowly entered the office and gradually influenced its decisions[101].

Gaston Maspero, director of the Antiquities Service after Auguste Mariette, understood that collaboration with the UK and other Western powers was inevitable, especially as far as archaeological excavations were concerned. He therefore welcomed Amelia Edwards' project of an English society aimed at supporting Western archaeological research in Egypt[102]. Created in March 1882, the Egyptian Exploration Fund promptly looked for a European archaeologist to be sent in Egypt. In agreement with Maspero, the Swiss scholar Édouard Naville was chosen and excavations in the Eastern Delta were authorized[103]. The following season, Naville was replaced by Flinders Petrie, a young British archaeologist who would have changed practices in both archaeology and antiquities collecting.

Officially, the EEF's purpose was to promote, support, and organize scientific research in the Delta region, wishing to expand historical and archaeological knowledge in an area of outstanding biblical relevance. Unofficially, the society also hoped to obtain some of the finds discovered during their excavations and then distribute them to subscribers and supporters. On that regard, Maspero was very clear from the beginning and explained to Reginald Stuart Poole that exportation of those objects would have not been allowed by Egyptian law[104]. He assured him, however, that a limited number of artefacts could have been eventually donated to the EEF, as diplomatic gifts[105]. That solution finally worked out and, at the end of the first campaign, two sculptures were presented as *dons gracieux* by the Khedive. Donated to Erasmus Wilson, the artefacts were sent to the British Museum, the main institution involved in EEF's early stages.

When engaged as Naville's successor, Petrie discussed with Maspero his ideas about acquiring artefacts from EEF's excavations. Petrie knew that workers employed in authorized excavations frequently kept small artefacts and sold them to antiquities dealers. He therefore asked Maspero's permission to directly buy similar artefacts from his workers, in order to prevent their dispersal on the art market[106]. At the end of each season, he would have presented all those objects to Maspero,

[101] Thompson 2015b, p. 4; See also Gady 2011, pp. 47-50.
[102] James 1982, pp. 9-14.
[103] James 1982, pp. 15-18.
[104] Drower 1982, p. 306.
[105] Drower 1982, p. 306.
[106] Drower 1982, p. 315.

who would have examined them and decided whether some of them were important enough to be stored at the Bulaq Museum. Petrie could have kept all the other objects, with authorization to export them[107]. Maspero accepted this practice and the EEF's system of finds distribution gradually took shape. The above-mentioned system consisted in providing all subscribed institutions, such as minor and municipal museums, with a satisfying amount of small Egyptian antiquities.

As pointed out by Alice Stevenson, Petrie valued duplicates and minor objects in a dual way, according to the context. On one hand, he stressed their little value in comparison to similar or better artefacts already preserved in Egypt and at the Bulaq museum; on the other one he highlighted the archaeological relevance of every fragment and material trace coming from well-conducted excavations[108]. In this way, he managed to present objects such as beads, amulets, pendants, etc., as relevant sources for historical enquiries and therefore precious materials for Western museums' collections. The very science of archaeology, which relies so much on fragments' contribution to historical knowledge, somehow owes its development also to commercial and promotional interests.

The EEF met the needs of many British institutions and subscribers, especially in Great Britain. Museums in colonial countries were eventually involved as well, including institutions in Australia and – later on – India and South Africa[109].

The United States soon became an incredibly important horizon for the Egyptian Exploration Fund. An American branch of the EEF was created in 1883 by William Copley Winslow, a priest from Massachusetts who was very interested in promoting culture in the Boston area[110]. The Boston Museum of Fine Arts was indeed the main American museum to be engaged with the EEF during the 1880s.

On the turn between 1880s and 1890s, however, many other American museums started approaching the Fund, hoping to have their share of finds. That was the case for both city or public museums and for academic museums within universities[111].

[107] Drower 1982, p. 316
[108] Stevenson 2014, p. 91; Stevenson 2019, p. 33.
[109] See Stevenson 2019, pp. 105-144.
[110] James 1982, pp. 22-23.
[111] Stevenson 2019, pp. 69-100.

In the US the late 19th century was a time of growth and development for museums, which played a role in showing the economic power of urban elites and the cultural wealth of city-centres[112]. Moreover, museums had to be places for knowledge production, fostered by their collections and their ambitious acquisition processes. In this sense, academic institutions were particularly eager to create collections useful for both teaching and research.

That happened with prestigious colleges such as John Hopkins, Princeton, and Berkeley, but also with teaching institutions of different kinds, for instance seminaries and religious schools[113].

During this process of collections building and college growing, scholars were especially interested in ancient civilizations from the so-called ancient Near East[114]. Through both material and written sources, they hoped to better understand the ancient history of biblical lands such Mesopotamia, Palestine, and Egypt. Their skills in semitic languages were crucial and large attention was especially paid on clay tablets and cuneiform texts[115]. Archaeology itself was a discipline strongly entangled with US religious background, providing tools (and answers) for biblical-related research.

Ancient Egypt also had a part in those scholarly conversations, given its prominence in the biblical tradition. Its role in American society was however very complex and hard to confine: ancient Egypt was ubiquitous in Victorian age, with a strong presence in architecture, literature, and graves sculptures[116].

In Philadelphia, the physician and professor William Pepper became provost of the University of Pennsylvania in 1881. Thanks to his efforts, the college rapidly became an academic point of reference, with the foundation of new programs and the construction of modern facilities. In 1887 the University was involved in the Babylonian Exploration Fund, envisioned by Edward White Clark – a Philadelphian tycoon – and John Punnett Peters, professor of Old Testament languages at the Philadelphia Divinity School[117]. Subscribers' money could support an excavation in Mesopotamia, to foster research in biblical lands and acquire antiquities. According to their

[112] Conn 1998, pp. 6-13. For reflections on the "democratic" and educational aims of newly-established American museums at that time, see also Çelik 2016, pp. 22-26.
[113] In that regard the religious dimension had a prominent role, as stated in Stevenson 2019, p. 74.
[114] Boher 1998, pp. 336-346; Boher 2003, pp. 1-9.
[115] Kuklick 1996, pp. 3-9.
[116] Fritze 2016, pp. 185-188; Fazzini & McKercher 2011, pp. 135-144.
[117] Kuklick 1996, p. 27.

agreements, all archaeological finds would have been preserved at the University of Pennsylvania, on the condition that a suitable building was at disposal. The first archaeological campaign took place in January 1889, when the appointed research group arrived in Nippur. Once objects had arrived in Philadelphia, a first exhibition was promptly organized to show archaeological results and further promote the Babylonian Exploration Fund. Interestingly, on the opening day another event was happening in the city, concerning funds for archaeological exploration abroad. As a matter of fact, Amelia Edwards was in Philadelphia to speak about ancient Egypt, archaeology, and the Egyptian Exploration Fund[118].

Indeed, the Free Museum of Science and Art – this was its name when the institution was founded – also developed a strong interest in collecting ancient Egyptian items. The museum's Egyptian section was formally created in 1890, when Sara Yorke Stevenson was appointed as its first curator[119]. Through that position, the brilliant and talented scholar worked relentlessly to provide the museum with a remarkable collection of Egyptian artefacts. Her hope was mainly to have the University of Pennsylvania active on the field, conducting excavations in Egypt for the Egyptian Exploration Fund. Despite her efforts, which included a trip to Egypt in 1898, she never achieved that specific goal. Nevertheless, she managed to have large number of items sent to Philadelphia, with the first ones arriving already in 1890[120]. By relying on the EEF and providing generous support to it, the museum obtained remarkable shares of finds after each season.

Sara Stevenson was also in very good terms with the archaeologist Flinders Petrie and built a fruitful professional collaboration with him. When Petrie created his own archaeological society (the Egyptian Research Account), the museum immediately supported his campaigns and received artefacts from his excavations.

The Penn Museum's Archives contain several letters that Stevenson and Petrie sent each other; some of them are eye-opening and show Stevenson's expectations and ambitions for the Egyptian collection she was trying to build.

In a letter dating to December 1894, Stevenson claimed to be "hungry of artefacts" and hoped to receive as much as possible from Petrie's excavations[121]. When asked about preferred categories

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[118] Pezzati et al. 2012, p. 6.

[119] Lingelbach 1942, pp. 234-236. For important female archaeologists in Philadelphia see Pezzati et al. 2012, pp. 8-9.

[120] O'Connor & Silverman 1979, p. 7.

[121] *Letter 4th of December 1894, from Stevenson to Petrie*, Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1.

of artefacts, Stevenson was always very open to Petrie's suggestions and stated that every material could have been of use for the collection. Petrie was careful about the museum's acquisitions necessities and knew that a university collection needed artefacts from different ages, complete sets of objects, and historical series. He made efforts to provide the museum with a diverse range of manufacts and with other tools useful for academic teaching[122].

While Stevenson strongly appreciated Petrie's efforts, she was also extremely interested in more impactful remains. She asked several times for two types of finds: monumental artefacts and human remains[123].

She hoped for large statues, monuments, and architectural pieces, which could impress both the public and their supporters. In a letter dating to August 1894, Petrie explained his view about large artefacts, claiming that shipping heavy objects to the US was an expensive endevour. In his opinion, the same amount of money could have had better use if destined to archaeological excavations and therefore to research[124].

This statement is coherent with Petrie's approach towards antiquities, which had both scientific and utilitarian foundations. On one hand, it shows his attention to on-site research, archaeological context, and seriation analysis. On the other one, it gives value to small and minor objects, presenting them as valuable artefacts for museums across the world and justifying EEF's sharing system.

On a similar note, Petrie had a materialistic view on institutions' direct involvement with excavations. While Stevenson wanted the Penn Museum to support excavations at just one archaeological site, Petrie did not meet halfway. In his opinion the museum had to keep on with its broad support to the EEF or the ERA, receiving a diverse set of objects from many different sites. By supporting research at only one specific site the museum would have obtained a very homogeneous share of finds, with too many duplicates or artefacts with similar features[125].

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[122] From books to photographs and latern slides. See *Letter 20th of August 1894, from Petrie to Stevenson*, Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1.

[123] On large artefacts see *Letter 20th of August 1894* (see note above); *Letter 19th of December 1896, from Stevenson to Petrie*, Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1. On human remains see *Letter 3rd of July 1892, from Stevenson to Petrie,* Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1; and *Letter March 1896, from Stevenson to Petrie*, Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1.

[124] *Letter 20th of August 1894.* See note above.

[125] *Letter 12th of October 1896, from Petrie to Stevenson*, Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1.

Again, Petrie wanted to manage finds' distribution as he preferred, finding the perfect balance between objects' value and subscribers' support. In addition, he believed that his system was the most favorable one for new institutions which wanted to build collections as large and diverse as possible. Behind those ideas lay Petrie's conviction that academic institutions needed chronologically and geographically complete collections, useful for diachronic and comprehensive study of ancient civilizations. Diversity was therefore preferred over homogeneity.

In any case, American museums like Penn managed to obtain remarkable remains through societies like EEF and ERA. As seen above, Gaston Maspero was open to Petrie's proposals and helped the EEF establish a system of finds' exportation and distribution. While initially cautious, he gradually became more confident and liberal in the interpretation of antiquities laws[126].

His successor, Eugène Grébault, is sometimes considered less flexible in those regards[127]. In November 1891, however, he released a decree on excavations and antiquities, which regulated *partage* in an explicit and direct way[128]. According to that law, every object discovered through authorized excavation belonged to the state and had to be deposited in the museum at Giza[129]. The excavator, however, needed to be compensated for his expenses. For that reason, part of the finds had to be donated to those in charge of the excavation. Article 4 follows up with more detailed instructions: the antiquities service and the excavator had to divide all finds in two parts of equal value, assigning them either by drawing lots or through a *à l'amiable* assignation[130].

This practice is confirmed, for instance, by Petrie's letters to Stevenson. In a letter dating to July 1900, Petrie reassured Stevenson about his efforts in guaranteeing good finds for the museum; he also explained his difficulties, stating that – according to laws – half of the finds had to remain in Egypt, making finds distribution a game of balance[131].

Interestingly, article 7 of the 1891's decree stated that all previous instructions concerning antiquities would not be valid anymore if considered contradictory with the new regulations. The

[126] Drower 1982, p. 316.
[127] Reid 2002, pp. 179-181.
[128] Khater 1960, pp. 282-283.
[129] The Egyptian museum had been recently moved to Giza. See Jarsaillon & Del Vesco 2017, p. 123.
[130] Khater 1960, p. 168.
[131] *Letter 29th of July 1900, from Petrie to Stevenson*, Penn Museum Archives, Sara Yorke Stevenson Egyptian Section records, box 1.

decree dating to 1891 was therefore seen as a new starting point for the management and control over excavations and antiquities.

The *partage* system described in the 1891's decree was confirmed in a longer and more detailed law promulgated in 1912[132]. Behind that regulation laid Gaston Maspero, who was appointed director of the Antiquities Service for a second turn in 1899. Again, according to the new law, all finds had to be divided in two equal lots. This time, however, the Antiquities Service was the only body in charge of the division procedure. The excavator, instead, had right of choice over which lot they preferred to get.

While the 1891's decree did not explicitly mention exportation rules, the 1912's law lingered on the topic. Exportation of artefacts was allowed through special authorizations granted by the Antiquities Service. As with previous regulations, the Antiquities Service, directed by Western scholars and influenced by Western powers, was the final decision maker on antiquities exportation.

1.2.2. Turin's and Philadelphia's excavations in Egypt, between G. Maspero and P. Lacau (1902-1926)

As discussed above, the normative and political context at the end of the 19th century fostered archaeological exploration in Egypt, with prominent actors such as the EEF, the ERA, and the BSAE. With the turn of the 20th century, more and more museums, universities, and research institutions managed to be directly active on the field. Their aim was to build on-site expertise, increase their prestige, and acquire new artefacts.

Even old, established institutions felt the urge to enrich their collections, making them as diverse and up to date as possible. Back in Italy, the director Ernesto Schiaparelli wanted to acquire new artefacts for the Egyptian Museum in Turin, hoping to fill gaps in its collection[133]. On that regard, Schiaparelli's concerns were similar to Stevenson's and Petrie's. Both Turin and Penn felt the need for a comprehensive collection, which could epitomize all phases and aspects of ancient Egyptian history.

Schiaparelli's goals were reached through the creation of the so-called *Missione Archeologica Italiana* (Italian Archaeological Mission), a financially independent body supported by the King,

[132] The law was followed by a series of annexed regulations. For the whole series, see Khater 1960, pp. 286-299.
[133] Curto 1979, pp. 51-52; Moiso 2022, p. 62; Moiso, Guidotti, et al. 2017, pp. 45-48.

the Ministry of Public Education, and various academic institutions[134]. Through this organization, established between 1902 and 1903, the Turin Museum conducted several campaigns in Egypt and obtained large number of artefacts. As shown above, the 1891's decree had explicitly envisaged a *partage* system and allowed excavators to receive finds from their own excavations. Every partition was different and depended on the site of investigation, on the value of finds and – most importantly – on the Antiquities Service's inspector who oversaw that specific area of Egypt. In his letters, Schiaparelli sometimes mentioned those inspectors and commented whether they had been generous in their partition choices[135]. Besides inspectors, Schiaparelli was in very good terms with Gaston Maspero, who had been his teacher in Paris. Through that friendship, the Italian archaeologist obtained remarkable digging permits and could even negotiate finds distribution[136]. For instance, almost all grave goods from the tomb of Kha and Merit – discovered by the Italian team in 1906 in the area of Deir el-Medina – could take its way to Turin[137].

As described above, the Museo Egizio managed to start excavations through royal munificence and governmental support, giving birth to a national, Italian archaeological mission. The Turin Museum was owned by the State and, for this reason, its prestige mirrored Italy's political power. In the US, archaeological patronage was growing at a rapid pace and in a more local, municipal, way. Tycoons and entrepreneurs had enough economic power to support cultural institutions in their own cities, funding universities, museums, and their archaeological endeavors[138]. In Philadelphia, Eckley Brinton Coxe Jr. was a huge patron of the University of Pennsylvania Museum[139]. His family was from Pennsylvania and their fortune came from coal mining, a remarkable economic resource in the area. Passionate about ancient Egypt, he sponsored archaeological expeditions and museum renovations.

Indeed, thanks to Coxe's economic means and Maspero's availability towards US institutions, the University Museum eventually reached its goal to have its own direct excavation in Egypt. In 1907, the archaeologist David Randall-MacIver was sent to Nubia – between today's Egypt and Sudan – where he spent several fieldwork seasons[140]. Other areas of Egypt were later explored, especially

[134] Moiso & Lovera 2017, pp. 149-152.
[135] See Moiso 2008, pp. 206-207. Schiaparelli, for instance, mentions H. Carter and J. Quibell.
[136] Jarsaillon 2017, pp. 1-21.
[137] Ferraris 2018, p. 24
[138] Conn 1998, p. 30.
[139] Madeira 1964, pp. 28-29; Winegrad 1993, p. 23.
[140] Woolley & Randall-MacIver 1910, pp. vii-viii; Randall-MacIver & Woolley 1911, pp. vii-viii.

when Clarence Stanley Fisher was appointed curator of the Egyptian section in 1914. He conducted excavations between 1915 and 1923, investigating sites at Memphis, Dendereh, Giza, and Dra Abu el-Naga[141].

Thanks to MacIver's and Fisher's excavations, the University Museum managed to acquire many new artefacts for its collection in Philadelphia. The 1891's decree and the 1912's antiquities law were again the main legal points of reference for finds distribution and exportation. The Antiquities Service, as seen above, was in charge of dividing and allotting newly discovered artefacts. In 1914, when Maspero retired and Pierre Lacau took over, the *partage* system kept working at the same pace[142]. In Egypt, however, things were starting to gradually change, especially in the aftermath of WWI. In November 1918 Egyptian leaders started urging for independence, asking for the end of the British protectorate on the country. UK's unwillingness led to demonstrations and crisis in Spring 1919. Tension remained strong till the 18th of February 1922, when a British declaration abrogated the protectorate on Egypt. According to that document, however, the UK kept control on several aspects of Egyptian politics, including defense, communication, and foreign interests[143]. In the end, those events represented just one small step towards Egyptian actual independence.

From a cultural point of view, Egyptian nationalism during the first decades of the 20th century had relied much on Egypt's ancient past and the Pharaonic era. Intellectuals, schools, and Egyptian Egyptologists (such as Ahmad Kamal) fostered pride in Egyptian ancient glories, providing ideas of strength and unity[144]. Political parties and newspapers largely adopted those messages and popular pride in Egyptian antiquity gradually emerged, leading to what is usually referred to as "pharaonism"[145].

In this context of rising nationalism, the Antiquities Service and his director realized that foreign control over Egyptian archaeology had to be gradually loosen up. This new direction became clear in June 1922, when Laucau sent a letter to all archaeologists active in Egypt, reminding them that – according to 1912's law – authorized researchers had serious duties to comply with. In particular, at the end of each season, they had to provide to the Antiquities Service a full list of all finds.

[141] O'Connor & Silverman 1979, pp. 22-26.
[142] Thompson 2018, pp. 14-15. See also Montserrat 2020.
[143] Daly 1998, p. 250. Other crucial events concerning the relationships between UK and Egypt happened in 1936, when the Anglo-Egyptian treaty signed on the 26th of August.
[144] Reid 2015, pp. 29-37. On Ahmad Kamal see pp. 29-31.
[145] Reid 2015, pp. 42-50. A definition of pharaonism is provided on page 109.

Ignoring similar obligations was not feasible anymore and would have led to the removal of excavation permits[146].

Another letter was circulated in October 1922, in which the Antiquities Service revealed its intentions for an amendment of 1912's law[147]. The prospected amendment meant to completely abolish the mandatory fifty percent division of finds, starting from season 1923-1924.

Lacau's intentions, however, clashed with English and American protests, which became very heated after the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb in November 1922[148]. Hectic months followed one another, with tensions between the Antiquities Service and Anglo-Saxon Egyptologists, museums, and sponsors[149].

In the end an amendment of the 1912's law did not happen, but Lacau's ideas were eventually employed anyways, through different means. In July 1924 a new excavation permit was sent to every archaeological mission active in Egypt[150]. To have their authorizations renewed, excavators had to agree with a detailed list of conditions, concerning many different topics. Article 10 eventually prescribed that all archaeological finds had to be consigned to the Antiquities Service, which could discretionarily decide to donate some of them to the excavator. American and British archaeologists protested against those provisions and eventually managed to reach an agreement with the Antiquities Service. In 1926 a note was added to article 10 of the excavation permit, assuring foreign archaeological missions that the Antiquities Service would still generously offer artefacts. Archaeological finds had to be retained if deemed useful for Egyptian museums, both in Cairo and elsewhere in the country. Other objects could instead be sent to foreign nations and museums. In coherence with those years' political and cultural context, the role of museums in Egypt needed to be strengthened. Local collections had to be prioritized, both for their educational role and their identitarian value.

Lacau's policy and his 1922's letters had immediate consequences on foreign archaeological involvement in Egypt. The University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, for instance, stopped its presence on the field soon after Lacau's communications. The Museum was conducting excavations at Dra abu el Naga, in the Theban necropolis, under the direction of Clarence Fisher.

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[146] Stevenson 2019, p. 145; Jarsaillon & Del Vesco 2017, p. 127.
[147] Jarsaillon & Del Vesco 2017, p. 128, fig. 9; Moiso & Lovera 2017, p. 138, cat. 121.
[148] Thompson 2018, pp. 79-80.
[149] Thompson 2018, pp. 81-82.
[150] Elkashef & Zaki 2022, p. 68; Khater 1960, pp. 326-330.

That mission, which had only started in 1921, ended just before season 1923-1924, when prospected amendments were likely to enter into force.

As far as Turin is concerned, Schiaparelli's latest excavation had happened in 1920, taking advantage of all remaining funds at his disposal. Archaeological finds from that season had remained in Egypt, waiting for the best moment and for availability of means. Once informed about Lacau's intentions, Schiaparelli decided to take action and retrieved those objects in 1923[151]. Only later, in 1930, the Museo Egizio would be back on the site, under the directorship of Giulio Farina. In a similar way, the Penn Museum resumed excavations in 1929, when Alan Rowe started to explore the area of Meydum.

The 1926's agreement between the Antiquities Service and Western archaeologists showed that US and Britain could still influence Egyptian choices in the management of local antiquities. Egypt however was clearly going towards a direction of growing intransigence, laying claim to pharaonic heritage.

1.3. POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL COLLABORATION (from 1951 to the 21st century)

As seen above, the introduction of a new excavation permit for all archaeological missions established stricter rules about the division of finds. The 1926's permit managed to get around the fifty per cent *partage* system developed between 1891 and 1922, but it did not completely abolish its legal ground. The 1912's law was indeed still valid and remained so till the 1950s[152]. The main step forward in Egyptian antiquities law happened in 1951, when law 215 was promulgated.

In the meantime, Egypt had been an important theater of war during WWII, and – in the aftermath of the conflict – decolonization was definitely in the air in the country. In July 1952 a coup removed Faruq I from power and overthrew the Kingdom of Egypt. Those events led to the establishment of the Republic of Egypt in 1953[153].

Few months before 1952's revolution, a new antiquities law was launched. It addressed, in a quite lengthy and detailed way, aspects such as private ownership of ancient artefacts and legal trade in antiquities. It also included a comprehensive and precise list of penalties prescribed for acts against

[151] Moiso & Lovera 2017, p. 174.
[152] In 1927 a Committee of Egyptology was created within the Antiquities Service. The decree concerning those decisions kept referring to the 1912's law. See Khater 1960, pp. 302-304.
[153] Poljarevic 2009, pp. 1076-1079.

archaeological heritage. Promulgated in October 1951, law 215 was enriched by a series of decrees published in Spring 1952; two of them provided more concrete regulations on trade and on antiquities exportation[154].

Law 215 and its follow-up decrees were incorporated in a new law promulgated by Mohamed Naguib, the first president of the newly established Republic of Egypt. Dating to November 1953, that new law (n° 529) reviewed the whole structure of antiquities management, specifying tasks and responsibilities of different offices and bodies[155]. The Antiquities Service (now called Antiquities Administration) had several responsibilities concerning the protection of antiquities and the promotion of archaeological research. It comprised three directions and three museums, representing Egyptian, Copt, and Islamic materials.

Law 529 also prescribed the establishment of a High Council of Antiquities. Among its several duties, it could suggest amendments to antiquities laws and recommend the creation of new museums. It also had to approve transfers of antiquities, such as donations, sales, or loans.

Legal documents aside, the Antiquities Administration's staff was also drastically changing. In 1953 Mustafa Amer became its first Egyptian director-general, putting an end to foreign directorship of that office[156].

In the aftermath of those events, foreign archaeological institutions tried at least two strategies to maintain their role in Egyptian research. One option was to focus energy and resources on documentation, excluding actual digging and hunt for new artefacts. The Oriental Institute of Chicago, for instance, managed to keep its involvement on the field, carrying on its long-term epigraphic survey[157].

The other solution was to promote collaboration with Egyptian archaeologists, providing foreign support and skills to the Antiquities Service and their employees. The University of Pennsylvania adopted this strategy and proposed a collaborative project between the Penn Museum and the Antiquities Service, highlighting mutual interest and constructive relationships[158]. Froelich Rainey and Rudolf Anthes – respectively director of the Penn Museum and curator of its Egyptian section – envisioned a project based on concepts like development, modernization, and training. In their

[154] For law number 215 see Khater 1960, pp. 308-315. For its additional regulations see pp. 316-321.
[155] Khater 1960, pp. 84-90.
[156] Thompson 2018, p. 235.
[157] Thompson 2018, p. 264.
[158] Carruthers 2016, p. 40. On the Mit Rahina project see the following archival section: Penn Museum Archives, Expedition Records: Egypt, Box 38.

mind, Egyptian employees and archaeologists could take advantage of American skills and experience. The University of Pennsylvania could therefore provide training to Egyptians and, at the same time, keep an active and prestigious role on the field. That way, Penn's preeminence in knowledge production would have been preserved.

The project's goals and conditions were defined together by the Egyptian office and the American University, leaving room to mutual listening. While the Penn Museum would have covered most costs, control over the research project would have been equally divided. Indeed, publication would have been produced jointly, and directorship would have been shared between Egypt and the US. Even though excavation, study, and analysis had to be important goals, the training of Egyptian workforce was deemed crucial.

This collaborative excavation eventually took place at Mit Rahina, in the area of Memphis. It started in 1954 and was cancelled in 1957, for both archaeological and political reasons. The excavation site was especially complex, with several issues linked to waterlogging[159]. Moreover, in 1956 the Suez Crisis made international relationships even harder. Despite its short duration, the Mit Rahina archaeological project represents a precedent of collaborative approach, starting a new trend for relationships between foreign institutions and Egyptian cultural heritage. It also paved the way to subsequent initiatives, especially the UNESCO campaign in Nubia.

The early years of the Republic of Egypt represent a complex and hectic period for Egyptian history. Gamal Abd el-Nasser took power in 1956, taking Egypt into an era of ambitious projects and international protagonism. An era which was also characterized by very strong tensions with other countries. A critical example of that was the Suez Crisis which happened in summer and fall 1956. The nationalization of the channel triggered French and British reactions, which even decided to invade Egypt and react in a military way, together with Israel[160]. While Egypt resisted bravely, international opinion took its side. The United States eventually managed to stop the invasion, exerting pressure especially on the UK.

All those events had consequences on foreign archaeological missions in Egypt, especially French and British ones. Archaeologists from those countries were forced to halt their work or even

[159] Carruthers 2016, p. 44.
[160] Varble 2009, pp. 5-6

leave[161]. All things considered, American archaeologists received a better treatment, being able to carry on research or start new projects[162].

Nasser's ambitions also included the Aswan High Dam, a gigantic project concerning the regulation of Nile's water. It came after other similar initiatives, such as the Aswan Dam, which was built between 1898 and 1902 and later heightened twice during the first half of the 20th century[163]. Nasser's project envisaged the creation of a huge water reservoir, which would have flooded a large area in Egyptian and Sudanese Nubia. The creation of the reservoir had an immediate impact on people living in the region: several communities were forced to leave their villages and houses, with terrible effects on their economy, lives, and cultural identity.

On an archaeological level, the flooding process would have cancelled a large amount of archaeological data: both visibly remarkable monuments and less known ancient traces.

For this reason, a series of documentation campaigns were launched by different bodies, focusing on both anthropological and archaeological research. The most famous one was the grand archaeological campaign launched by UNESCO, following requests from Egyptian and Sudanese governments[164]. Started in March 1960, the campaign kept on for several years, carrying on till 1980. What is interesting to me about those events is the give-and-take approach that occurred between Egypt and foreign institutions. In exchange for their documentation efforts, many foreign institutes were promised excavation permits once the campaign was over[165]. That was a remarkable incentive for international collaboration in the field of archaeology.

The UNESCO campaign in Nubia also led to the transfer of Egyptian monuments, such as temples and votive chapels, which eventually ended in Europe and in North America. In an era of growing strictness concerning exportation of Egyptian heritage, it is surprising that entire monuments could be sent out of Egypt, ending up in Western institutions. Those unusual events could happen only due to the very specific circumstances of water flooding, which required a race against time and hurried solutions. Anyways, once landed in foreign museums, those Egyptian buildings started playing an interesting symbolic role and became icons of international archaeological collaboration.

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[161] Thompson 2018, pp. 263-264.
[162] Thompson 2018, p. 264.
[163] Carruthers 2022, p. 7.
[164] For a critical overview see Meskell 2018, pp. 28-58; Carruthers 2022.
[165] O'Connor 1967, p. 10.

In exchange for their work in Nubia, Italians were allowed to cut and transfer a rock temple they had been documenting. The temple of Ellesiya was indeed sawed in movable blocks and eventually brought to Turin, at the Egyptian Museum[166]. Its gallery has been renewed in Fall 2024 and current interpretative projects aim at emphasizing its diplomatic and political role.

The role of UNESCO in fostering international archaeological collaboration is also shown by the 1970 Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property. Ratified by Egypt in April 1973, it could potentially strengthen Egyptian national efforts in protecting the ownership of its cultural heritage.

Both Italy and the US took longer than Egypt to ratify the convention. While Italy waited till 1978, the US implemented it in 1983, with the Convention on Cultural Property Implementation Act[167].

In 1983 Egypt itself issued a new important antiquity law, that tightened up principles and measures coming from 1951's law[168]. It also worked as the Egyptian implementation of the 1970's Unesco convention[169]. Law 117 of 1983 banished previously government-authorized dealers of Egyptian antiquities, trying to almost completely erase that kind of trade[170]. Foreign archaeological missions, however, could still hope for some kind of reward, as stated in articles 35 and 35. Indeed, they could obtain a small number of movable artefacts (up to 10 per cent of their finds) and donate it to museums out of Egypt[171]. This provision shows that museums were still valued as useful and necessary institutions, recognizing their scientific and cultural role on an international level.

Law 117 was amended in 2010, introducing even stricter regulations. The 10 per cent provision, for instance, was completely removed and foreign archaeological missions could not be granted any antiquities they discovered[172].

Subsequent amendments were adopted in 2018 (law no. 91) and 2020 (law no. 20)[173]. Those laws focused especially on illegal traffic of antiquities, enhancing penalties for smugglers.

As I mentioned above, the 1970's UNESCO convention had also targeted the illicit traffic of cultural heritage. Its implementation led to bilateral agreements between countries, creating tools for international collaboration. According to the Cultural Property Implementation Act, for

[166] Curto 1999, pp. 25-29.
[167] Gerstenblith 2017, pp. 70-88.
[168] For the complete text of the law see Official Gazette, August 11th 1983. See also Ikram 2011, pp. 143-144.
[169] Shyllon 2014, p. 25.
[170] Ikram 2011, pp. 146-147.
[171] Stevenson 2019, appendix A.
[172] Hawass 2010, pp. 613-637.
[173] Michail 2022, p. 28.

instance, the United States can cooperate with other countries through bilateral agreements such as memoranda of understanding[174]. The United States and Egypt reached this kind of agreement for the first time in 2016 and renovated it in 2021[175]. Both documents focused on the import of Egyptian antiquities in the United States, compelling the latter country to impose restrictions on certain types of archaeological materials.

In the last decades Italy has reached similar bilateral agreement with Egypt, as well. In June 2008, for instance, a cooperation agreement was signed in order to foster the fight against antiquities smuggling and in order to face illegal import of archaeological materials[176].

Today, excavations in Egypt are first-of-all conducted by the Supreme Council of Archaeology. Foreign missions, however, are still remarkably active in the Country and need to abide by strict rules. According to 2010's amendments, those missions have no rights to any of their finds and cannot expect to receive objects as donations to foreign museums.

Foreign archaeological excavations in today's Egypt are therefore very focused on scientific research, without any kind of collecting ambitions. It is a very different approach if compared with the history of Western explorations in Egypt that I have provided in this chapter.

Archaeological fieldwork today is firstly a tool of knowledge production, in which foreign universities, research institutes, and museums are still highly interested. As far as collections are concerned, new excavations can cast light on artefacts that museums already own, even if further collecting is off the table.

This is the kind of approach that Philadelphia's Penn Museum and Turin's Museo Egizio still have today, with their excavations respectively in South Abydos and Saqqara. In 2015, for instance, the Turin Egyptian Museum joined the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden of Leiden in its archaeological campaigns in Saqqara. Their main purpose has been to recontextualize archaeological artefacts that arrived in European museums in the 19th century[177].

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[174] Briggs 2007, p. 632.

[175] For the 2016's MOU see: US Department of State, Treaties and Agreements 2016, *Egypt (16-1130) – Memorandum of Understanding Concerning the Imposition of Import Restrictions on Categories of Archaeological Material*. For the 2021's MOU see: US Department of State, Treaties and Agreements 2021, *Egypt (21-1130) – Memorandum of Understanding on Import Restrictions*.

[176] See Gazzetta Ufficiale 20-5-2010. The agreement was signed on June 4th 2008.

[177] Greco 2017, p. 13. See also Sky Tg24 2023; Zoppi 2023.

As shown so far, recent antiquities laws have changed foreign access to Egyptian ancient artefacts, letting museums “survive” with the collections they had managed to previously build. While new acquisitions should not be a priority to museum institutions, today, many questions arise around the very role of historically built collections and their legacies. In the next chapters we will focus on similar questions, analyzing the concept of ownership of cultural heritage in the Italian and American cultural heritage field.

CHAPTER 2. CULTURAL PROPERTIES: USES, APPROACHES AND TRANSFORMATIONS

2.1. THE ROLE OF ANTIQUITIES: FROM RESTORATION TO THE 20TH CENTURY

2.1.1. Academic And Political Uses

In the previous chapter I illustrated how antiquities were moved from their Egyptian context to very distant countries, especially to the Western world. The transfer of those artefacts produced several transformations on them, concerning their own value and meaning.

Objects which originally had completely different purposes ended up sharing the same destiny: to be displayed as historical and aesthetic representatives of a hardly graspable ancient past.

When the Egyptian Museum was created, in 1824, the artefacts collected by Bernardino Drovetti were charged with at least three levels of meaning. Antiquities had first of all a historical value and could be seen as practical tools for discovering the ancient past[178]. On a second level, Egyptian artefacts had their own aesthetic relevance, which was deemed inferior to classical art, but still of great interest[179].

Thirdly, their rarity, remote origin, and antiquity produced a sense of reverence, which emphasized their preciousness[180].

Of all those levels, the scientific one has always played an important role in the Turin context. First of all, the artefacts collected by Donati were destined to the University of Turin and its antiquities cabinet, which had a didactic and scholarly purpose.

Almost 60 years later, the Drovetti's collection was officially purchased for similar reasons, in order to enlarge the University Museum and increase the University's prestige[181]. Administratively, those new artefacts were therefore put under the Turin University and its provost. For logistical reasons, however, the collection was not located within the main University building. It was destined to a building called "*Palazzo dei Nobili*", which already hosted the *Accademia delle Scienze*, an institution devoted to research, science, and progress[182]. Members of that academy

[178] Signorelli 1987, pp. 437-444.
[179] Grim & Zeni 2004, *passim*. This topic will be deepened later in this dissertation.
[180] Castelnuovo & Rosci 1980.
[181] Romagnani 1990, p. 598 and following.
[182] Romagnani 1990, chapter II, subchapter I.

immediately realized the potential of Drovetti's Egyptian collection and stressed that advancement of knowledge could be achieved by studying those artefacts and reading those new written sources. Eminent figures like Costanzo Gazzera, Prospero Balbo, Giovanni Plana, Giorgio Bidone, and Amedeo Peyron published Egyptological studies on the *Accademia*'s memoirs, focusing on varied topics such as Egyptian units of measure, chemical analyses of artefacts, translations of papyri and stelae[183].

Besides its tight connection with the academic world, the University Museum was also a mirror of royal munificence and a symbol of Savoy's prestige.

The antiquities museum, after all, was created through donations of artefacts which had been part, for centuries, of Savoy's private collections. Later on, it was enriched through royal patronage of scholars – such as Vitaliano Donati. Eventually, it was enlarged through direct acquisitions, as shown by Charles Felix's purchase of Drovetti's collection.

Even if museum collections were administratively controlled by the University, their very existence and accessibility had only been possible thanks to the Crown and to kings' decisions. Once moved into academic museums, artefacts like the *Mensa Isiaca* could be seen as tools for knowledge, projected towards future, education, and progress. However, they were also symbols of long-term opulence and enduring dominion, testifying to Savoy's house and its long aristocratic history.

These aspects are relevant if we consider Napoleon's looting of artefacts in Piedmont and the subsequent retrieve of most significant cultural properties. The diplomatic mission for their restitution was supported by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs Alessandro di Vallesa, who appointed Giovanni Francesco Galeani Napione as his main contact person. Galeani Napione, in his turn, instructed Giovanni Francesco Simondi and then Ludovico Costa, who both visited Paris for negotiations[184].

The retrieve was first of all an act of restoration. After the French revolution and Napoleon's downfall, many European royal houses were back to power. Obviously, they felt an urge to re-establish their authority and emphasize their long tradition of richness and relevance. The return

[183] Romagnani 1988, pp. 56-57.
[184] Fabretti 1872, pp. 9-13; Gabbrielli 2009, pp. 34-35.

of artefacts from France was a clear way to achieve this purpose, by showing that Savoy's prestige was still strong.

The retrieve of cultural items was also important from an identity point of view: ancient books, archival documents, and portraits were all pieces of a large and rich puzzle representing the history, identity, and traditions of Savoy's Piedmont. Scholars and intellectuals were equally interested in those issues, and their attention was addressed to archaeology, as well. The archaeological understanding of Turin had obviously been rooted in the glory of ancient Rome, testified by several remains, including written artefacts such as latin inscriptions[185]. Piedmont's archaeological past was also represented by a remarkable Roman site, located 40 km north-east of Turin. Placed at today's Monteu da Po, the ancient site of Industria used to be a rich hub for trade and worship. Since 1743, when Giovanni Paolo Ricolvi started his research in the area, Industria became a symbol of Piedmont's richness during ancient Roman times[186]. Artefacts from the site, such as a richly decorated bronze tripod, became clear proofs of the beauty of roman-time Piedmont and were displayed at the University Museum in Turin[187].

Objects from Industria, like the bronze tripod, were taken to France during Napoleonic campaigns and eventually returned, taking on even more importance as testimonies of Piedmont's past and glory.

Egyptianizing objects (such as the *Mensa Isiaca*) and actual Egyptian artefacts (such as the ones brought by Donati) were also looted and eventually retrieved. Similar materials did not testify to Italian or Piedmont civilizations; repossessing them, however, was equally important for local prestige. As discussed above, it was a matter of rebuilding previous collections. Through this process, the artefacts at issue not only gained more value but, most importantly, acquired new layers of meaning.

The retrieve of cultural properties was therefore a restoration process. At the same time, however, it shaped new ideas in the discourse around cultural heritage, planting seeds for future actions. In other words, those events drew attention to the idea of ownership of art and showed that the meaning of ancient artefacts is influenced by current owners and holders.

[185] Promis 1869, pp. iv-xix; Momigliano 1987, pp. 29-63; Panero 2022, pp. 394-399.
[186] On the history of excavations at Industria, see Ricolvi & Rivautella 1745; Fabretti 1880a; Mercando 1998, pp. 31-44.
[187] Barucchi 1829; Vallauri 1846, pp 154-156.

In the wake of those phenomena, attempts were made to provide better legal tools towards the management of cultural treasures, especially from a national and statal perspective.

2.1.2 Antiquities Laws Before And After Unified Italy: A Brief Overview

After Napoleonic looting, the protection of artistic and historical heritage became a priority for some Italian States. In the Papal State, archbishop Bartolomeo Pacca promulgated an edict in 1820, providing a milestone for cultural heritage legislation in modern Europe. The Pacca Edict is indeed considered the first organic regulation concerning cultural heritage: it provided a comprehensive and holistic approach, focusing on conservation, excavation, circulation, and management of cultural properties[188].

That law strongly influenced other Italian pre-unitarian states, especially the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, which had control on most Southern Italy[189].

In the Kingdom of Sardinia, instead, little attention was paid to new legislation concerning archaeological, historical, and artistic heritage. This approach is usually explained with the fact that Savoy had a lot of interest in protecting private ownership and relevant rights. Protecting cultural properties could interfere with that kind of freedom[190].

While not interested in the elaboration of an organic law concerning all aspects of cultural heritage, the Savoy family showed – during the years of the Restoration – attention towards the enlargement of museum collections and the reorganization of cultural institutions[191]. Indeed, in the aftermath of the Vienna Congress, Turin's museum landscape could grow. Both Victor Emmanuel I and Charles Felix showed interest in the Drovetti's collection, which was eventually purchased in 1824. Charles Felix, moreover, bought Moschini's collection in 1827-28, enriching the antiquities museum with Greek and Italian ancient vases[192].

His successor, Charles Albert, established the *Galleria Sabauda* in 1832 and, in the same year, opened to the public the *Armeria Reale*, in the Royal Palace[193]. He also purchased the Sossio collection in 1833, enlarging the Egyptian collection within the Museum of Antiquities[194].

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[188] Granara 2020, pp. 1172-1174.
[189] Emiliani 2010, pp. 1-7.
[190] Mabellini 2021, pp. 10-12. Intellectuals and scholars, however, were deeply interested in the topic. See Momigliano 1987, pp. 29-63. See also Fubini Leuzzi 1983, pp. 113-192.
[191] Signorelli 1987, pp. 437-444;
[192] Lanza 2004, pp. 21-52.
[193] Astrua 1982, pp. 53-54; Panero 2021, p. 18.
[194] As seen in the previous chapter.

The regulation and protection of cultural items needed to be addressed again when the Italian peninsula was unified under the Savoy dynasty in 1861. The first and easiest solution was to temporarily maintain pre-unitarian laws, as stated by law 286, promulgated in June 1871[195]. A new organic law for the entire Kingdom of Italy was implemented only in 1902, with the so-called Nasi law[196]. In 1860s and 1870s, however, drafts and projects had been presented by several politicians: the ministry of public education Cesare Correnti, for instance, hoped to organize and regulate archaeological excavation and antiquities export[197]. In his view, the young Italian nation needed to pay strong attention to the Etruscan, Roman and Italic civilizations, fostering archaeological research and establishing control over newly discovered antiquities[198]. It seemed useful, fruitful, and obvious to build the new national identity on archaeological past, as well[199].

Even though a unified and organic legislation on antiquities and arts was not existent yet, an administrative system was gradually built, in order to slowly address all aspects concerning the safeguard and conservation of cultural items. In 1875 Ruggiero Bonghi, the ministry of public education, established the General Direction of Excavations and Museums, which became the first national authority in the field and was organized in five special offices, according to a geographical division[200].

A real step forward in the construction of Italian cultural heritage administration happened in 1907, when *soprintendenze* were eventually established[201]. Designed by Ministry of Public Education Luigi Rava, the creation of *soprintendenze* laid the ground for a new and groundbreaking antiquities law, which was promulgated in 1909[202].

In Piedmont, the superintendency for excavations and archaeological museums was based in Turin and had control over Novara, Alessandria and Cuneo. Ernesto Schiaparelli, already director of the

[195] Law 28th June 1871, n. 286 "Che estende alla provincia di Roma gli articoli 24 e 25 delle disposizioni transitorie per l'attuazione del codice civile".
[196] Law 12th June 1902, n. 185 "Portante disposizioni circa la tutela e la conservazione dei monumenti ed oggetti aventi pregio d'arte o di antichità".
[197] Guzzo 2001, p. 539.
[198] Soresina 2006, pp. 720-722.
[199] Fabretti 1880b, p. 27. For a deep analysis of archaeological discourses during the Italian unification process, see Barsotti 2021, pp. 1-19, 117-150.
[200] Nardi 2001, pp. 657-658.
[201] Law 27th June 1907, n.386 "Sul consiglio superiore, uffici e personale delle antichità e belle arti"; See Dalla Negra 1986, pp. 199-210; Verrastro 2007, pp. 135-157.
[202] Law 20th June 1909, n. 364 "Le antichità e le belle arti"

Antiquities Museum of Turin, was appointed as its first superintendent. As stated by Filippo Maria Gambari, the appointment of an Egyptologist was quite anomalous and had some direct consequences. During his office, which he maintained till 1927, local and territorial archaeology were not put into the foreground[203]. Special attention was instead given to antiquities coming from outside, especially from Egypt. Afterall, the Italian Archaeological Mission had begun its work just few years earlier, paving the way to a remarkable flux of new Egyptian materials discovered through excavations.

The management of similar artefacts, which came from abroad and were not part of Italian tradition and history, needed to be assessed[204].

As stated by law n. 364, items of archaeological and artistic interest needed to be protected, preserved and secured, applying to public collections the concept of inalienability. Article 2 and 7 highlighted the idea of public entitlement, stressing that cultural items could be of interest and utility for the public and the country. It is interesting, however, that this view did not only apply to items with a strong national relevance, and with ties to the Italian national identity. In an era of nationalism and nation building, artefacts coming from abroad, which represented different countries or civilizations, were equally deemed essential to the cultural assemblages of Italian institutions. New national cultural heritage laws therefore legitimated the development of extremely diverse collections, which could foster research and funnel education. Moreover, a universalistic approach to cultural heritage could show Italian influence and prestige in other parts of the world, such as in Egypt[205].

At the beginning of the 20th century, Italy was indeed moving along two different directions concerning the management of archaeology and art: on one hand, archaeological protagonism in foreign countries was plauded, and acquisitions of remains was strongly encouraged[206]. On the other one, Italy was implementing strict control over its own archaeological heritage, banning exportation of newly discovered artefacts[207].

Eager to demonstrate its scientifical prestige, Italy would conduct excavations in other parts of the Mediterranean, but also in its own colonies, and in other areas under Western colonial control. By

[203] Gambari 2008, pp. 56-63.
[204] Failla 2010, pp. 23-31.
[205] Consider, for instance, the Italian archaeological supremacy in Alexandria. See Kenawi & Marchiori 2018.
[206] Troilo 2017, pp. 413-442.
[207] Ragusa 2011, pp. 51-74.

extending its archaeological influence in Crete, Rhodes, Lybia, Jordan, and Egypt, Italy was playing a role very similar to Britain, US, France, Germany, etc[208].

On the other hand, Italy needed to stand still against the archaeological appetite of other Western powers, which were interested in conducting archaeological excavations in the peninsula and hoped to acquire many antiquities on the market[209].

Italy has therefore played a peculiar role, characterized by ambivalence and duality, in the archaeological battlefield. As a *Ianus Bifrons*, Italy has been a champion of cultural heritage protectionism, while being, at the same time, directly involved in the race for antiquities and archaeological prestige.

Already at that time, a clash between different visions was slowly developing. On one hand the idea that antiquities and arts are essential to the tradition and history of one nation or community, on the other one the strong assumption that cultural items should circulate easily and access to them should not be denied.

This clash is still relevant today and represents the very basis of debates around ownership and management of collections of cultural properties.

2.2. GIVING SENSE(S) TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

2.2.1. National Identities And The Concept Of "Civilization Value"

In today's Italy, the management of cultural heritage relies on a set of rules promulgated in 2004, the so-called *Codice dei Beni Culturali e del Paesaggio*[210].

Inheriting from previous regulations, the entire *Codice* is based on the concept of "cultural interest", which can be attributed to antiquities, arts, and many other materials[211]. The cultural interest is assigned through specific rules and procedures: it depends on the typology of materials, but also on ownership and belonging[212]. In many cases, the cultural interest needs to be verified or declared, through a specific administrative process. Other objects (and groups of objects) are

[208] Troilo 2021, *passim*.
[209] D'Alconzo 2001, pp. 507-537.
[210] Legislative Decree 22nd January 2004, n. 42 "Codice dei beni culturali e del paesaggio, ai sensi dell'articolo 10 della legge 6 luglio 2002, n. 137". From now on "*Codice dei Beni Culturali*".
[211] See Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 12. Moreover, see Cogliandro 2018, pp. 9-41; Mastropietro 2025, pp. 860-888.
[212] Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 2.

instead considered "of cultural interest" by law, because of their nature and features. Museums and galleries fall into this category, as far as they are owned by public authorities or private non-profits[213]. According to article 54, museums are also part of the so-called *demanio culturale*, which means they are inalienable public cultural assets[214].

A remarkable step before *Codice dei Beni Culturali* was represented by the work conducted in the 1960s by the Franceschini's Committee[215]. This committee provided a series of principles which future laws should have tried to follow. Its main purpose was to overcome the so-called Bottai's law, which dated to 1939 and put a lot of emphasis on works of art and on the esthetical value of cultural properties. In an attempt to define cultural items and the scope of cultural heritage protection, the committee employed a very broad expression: items that are material evidence of civilization value ("*testimonianze materiali aventi valore di civiltà"*)[216]. The idea of "civilization value" immediately shows how the committee's members wanted to highlight the stratification of different traditions and civilizations, which characterize the cultural heritage of every country and, of course, of Italy as well. Moreover, it was an extremely broad and generic expression, which could help overcome rigid categories of cultural items, which had become obsolete and not useful enough[217]. The above-mentioned definition also implied that cultural items from abroad needed to be stewarded, as testimonies to world civilizations and populations.

The expression "civilization value" had some success and indeed re-emerged in decree law 112/1998 and even in today's *Codice dei Beni Culturali*[218]. More precisely, Article 2 of the *Codice* mentions it, while providing a definition of cultural and natural heritage.

I am especially interested in the above-mentioned expression because it encapsulates some concepts of universalism and some interesting contradictions. First of all, "civilization" is a concept closely related to the public sphere, as shown by its etymological root, linked to the latin word *civis*, meaning citizen. The application of this concept to cultural heritage entails the idea that culture is useful for the education of society, fostering civic awareness and a sense of solidarity.

[213] Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 10.
[214] Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 54.
[215] Tamiozzo 2007, pp. 77-92.
[216] Cortese 2017, pp. 11-12.
[217] Chiti 1998.
[218] Legislative decree 31st March 1998, n. 112 "Conferimento di funzioni e compiti amministrativi dello Stato alle regioni ed agli enti locali, in attuazione del capo I della legge 15 marzo 1997, n. 59". See, in particular, article 148.

The expression "civilization value" can be read in opposing ways, showing a certain level of duality. On one hand, the term can refer to national civilization, represented by centuries of Italian history and long superimposition of cultural phenomena. On the other one, the same expression can refer to universality, promoting the universal value of art, across national and geographical borders. This view implies that a shared universal history of mankind exists, and that it is possible to agree upon which testimonies of the past should be preserved and valued.

I believe that these two interpretations co-existed and overlapped in the development of Italian cultural heritage laws, testifying a duality that is typical of modern cultural heritage discourses. On one hand there has been obvious attention towards the protection of national arts, antiquities and culture[219]. Indeed, political efforts concerning cultural heritage can hardly be separated from narratives about national pride and identity.

On the other one, a universal approach to culture heritage has generally been promoted, stating that items from different civilizations and geographical areas needed to be preserved and studied, for their inherent historical, artistic, scientific values[220]. This stance is coherent with scholarly purposes and academic institutions, which have traditionally pushed for wide access to global cultural properties.

The above-mentioned duality is quintessentially encapsulated by institutions such as museums and galleries. Museums often represent the collecting history of an individual, of a city, and even of an entire country[221]. They put on stage collecting interests and research initiatives, opening a window onto cultural history. They frequently have a national specificity, showing collecting efforts made by a specific country in certain times. Moreover, main national artists are often exhibited and important national historical events are narrated. In this way, large museums sometimes even

[219] Italian laws currently provide some tools to protect places, monuments or artefacts with a special national significance. The topic was partially addressed by Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 10 and then deepened by law 12th October 2017, n. 153 "Disposizioni per la celebrazione dei 500 anni dalla morte di Leonardo da Vinci e Raffaello Sanzio e dei 700 anni dalla morte di Dante Alighieri". The latter explains that cultural items can be declared "national monuments" when they have an exceptional identity and civic value. The legal concept of national monuments has a long history, dating back to the second half of the 19th century and then re-asserted in the first decades of the 20th century. See Astorri 1999.

[220] This double approach is synthetized, for instance, by the evolution of Italian *musei civici* (museums owned by the local municipality). See Cardone 2013, pp. 41-120.

[221] Schulz 1994, pp. 175-187.

become cultural symbols of a country and its cultural identity[222]. They convey an image of national prestige and, often times, of political power, as well[223].

Museums, however, frequently steward artefacts from all over the word, providing insights into cultures and civilizations which might have no close connection with the local and national identity. The stewardship of items from other cultures is seen as a way to provide education about all different types of human arts and traditions[224]. It is considered crucial from a scholarly and scientific point of view, and necessary in order to safeguard and pass knowledge to future generations. As discussed above, this approach is coherent with the idea that all materials testifying cultures and civilizations are of interest for Italy and for its cultural heritage field. It contradicts, however, the concept of national cultural heritage as based, first of all, on items and evidence that are relevant to that very country and its national identity.

Foreign cultural properties obviously arrived in Italy through myriads of different ways and museums often help us understand those stories and dynamics[225]. Cultural items from certain areas of the world, however, frequently left their land through colonial domination, war, and oppression. Their presence in Italian museums is therefore not neutral and light but carries messages of political imbalance and Western prominence. Their preservation and display in Italian museums guarantee that access to cultures and civilizations is provided, in an intellectual framework of universal access to culture. Their provenance history, however, hardly conveys messages of universality, cooperation, and solidarity. In those cases, the cultural connection with national Italian identity and its civilization is indeed a problematic one.

Museums, after all, face with a perennial dilemma: should they change or stay as they are?

The very historical value of collections is given by the context that made their creation possible – as stated by one main mantra of museology[226]. Their ability to transform, however, is what keeps them relevant through time.

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[222] Scholars have strongly focused on the relationship between culture and nation-building, highlighting how the shared idea of a nation is strengthened by meanings and values attached to cultural products. Sociologist Stuart Hall has analyzed these very topics by reflecting on the British context. He stated that cultural heritage practices play a crucial role in the ways a nation presents and represents itself. See Hall 1999, pp. 3-5.

[223] See Elgenius 2014, pp. 145-166.

[224] See for instance Cuno 2011, pp. 1-10.

[225] Falcucci 2025, pp. 20-43.

[226] Robbins 2020, pp. 183-192.

2.2.2. From National Significance To Cultural Affiliation

In the United States, cultural heritage preservation and museum institutions face challenges which are similar to the ones mentioned so far. The very history of this country, however, has produced a very keen sensitivity towards some cultural aspects and, precisely, towards the concept of identity[227]. Colonial settlers from all Europe have led to cultural mosaic characterized by diversity in traditions, language, and faith. Subsequent and recurrent waves of migration have later emphasized this trait, creating communities with strong identity awareness.
I believe that such multicultural awareness speaks a lot to the differences between cultural heritage policies in European countries (like Italy) and in the United States. In Italy the necessity for antiquities protection emerged from the very presence of artefacts and architectures, seen as material evidence of a shared and admired past. An admiration that has its root in Humanism and Renaissance, and an approach that was also influenced by Christianity and Catholicism. Within that context, the archaeological and artistic value of artefacts have played the most important role, with relatively little attention towards their identity value for people and communities. Only recent developments have led to a radical shift in this perception[228].
In the United States, instead, the identity value of arts and archaeology have played a remarkable role, charging symbols and material memories with more meaning than elsewhere[229].

This aspect is especially relevant when Native American material culture is taken into account. Indeed, in the US a view has emerged that is completely different from the cultural heritage approach provided by the Italian *Codice dei Beni Culturali*. I refer to the idea that artefacts do not necessarily have to be accessible to everyone, but that title to them sometimes lies into cultural affiliation. In the US this view is represented by the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA), a federal law passed in 1990[230]. While limited by many restrictions, NAGPRA opens up to a very different perception of cultural heritage policies, if compared with countries like Italy or Egypt[231].

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[227] Behdad 2005, *passim*.
[228] Cossu 2005, pp. 41-56.
[229] Stratton & Ang 2009, pp. 124-158.
[230] Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act, Public Law No. 101-601, 104 Stat. 3048.
[231] For broader differences between US and Italian cultural heritage field, see Klamer, Mignosa, Petrova 2013, pp. 37-53; Landriani & Pozzoli 2014, pp. 13-17.

Italian legislation focuses on the idea that cultural items of archaeological, historical, ethnographical or artistic interest should be preserved, as part of a public and shared heritage. While conservation is a priority, public access and fruition is described, by the law, as a crucial responsibility and a goal to be eventually achieved[232]. This vision clashes with a narrower access to cultural heritage, as it is today advocated by groups that have been frequently deprived of control over their own cultural heritage[233].

NAGPRA uses the concept of cultural affiliation to establish whether there should be title to cultural heritage. As stated by Karolina Kuprecht, the adoption of that concept was a revolutionary step and provided a new approach that stood out of traditional property law[234]. While NAGPRA is first focused on human remains, it also addresses funerary objects, sacred objects, and objects of cultural patrimony. For this reason, it had impact on all branches of archaeological field, beyond the discipline of anthropology[235].

By law, American museums and federal agencies must comply with NAGPRA regulations, devoting resources, time, and efforts to research and consultation concerning Native American human remains, associated funerary objects, and cultural properties. Museums should therefore build a deep and shared knowledge of their own Native American collections. Thanks to provenance research and direct consultations with tribal representatives, a list of items subject to potential repatriation should be eventually produced.

The legal framework provided by NAGPRA therefore shaped the US museum field in a strong way. Importantly, however, it also influenced academic reflections on an international level and opened debates on museum practices across different countries[236]. While restitution and repatriation were not new concepts and practices when NAGPRA was promulgated, their resonance has radically grown since 1990. Indeed, in 1998 restitution practices were discussed in the Washington Conference on Holocaust-Era Assets, showing more and more interest to an ethical and dynamic approach to museum collections[237].

Attention towards voluntary repatriation has therefore gradually risen, as testified by guidelines and codes of ethics in the US and internationally. For instance, the American Alliance of

[232] Legislative Decree 42/2004, articles 111 and 112.
[233] Noyes 2006, pp. 27-56; Hauser-Schäublin & Prott 2016, pp. 1-20.
[234] Kuprecht 2012, pp. 33-38.
[235] Field 2018, pp. 747-766.
[236] Breske 2018, pp. 347-373.
[237] Bindenagel 1999, pp. 411-420.

Museums produced a Code of Ethics and Professional Practices for Collections Professionals in 2021. According to that document, museums should have collection management policies in order to navigate deaccessioning and disposal of items. Moreover, voluntary restitution and repatriation are mentioned as actions which may be conducted by museums to uphold to ethical standards[238].

Countries like Italy, however, have frequently shown some coolness towards the above-mentioned voluntary practices. Even today, when the debate about ownership of cultural heritage is livelier than ever, the topic is often let aside. A reason to that lies in national cultural heritage laws and on relevant practices within museum institutions. As shown by Dieuwertje Wijsmuller, many European countries have very rigid regulations concerning the deaccession of cultural properties. In France, Greece, Italy, Spain, and Romania museum objects are in theory not removable, besides very limited and strict exceptions[239]. Italian museum collections – when owned by the State – are collectively considered inalienable assemblages of items[240]. The same inalienability applies to items that are not part of state-owned collections, but which still might have cultural value[241]. This strong emphasis on inalienability therefore hinders all attempts to think of repatriation and restitution as common practices in the Italian cultural heritage field. Cases of repatriation from Italy to other countries have happened in recent decades, but they are seen as exceptional events[242].

For a cultural item to be repatriated, its status of inalienability needs to be removed. This could happen, for instance, when the Ministry of Culture (through its local offices) recognizes that the item at issue does not have cultural interest[243]. In other words, the office in charge should state that the item does not have "civilization value". This way, the item would cease to be a cultural one and, from that point on, cultural heritage law would not be applicable anymore. Its transfer would therefore become possible and subject to civil law.

Another option for potential repatriation is described by article 56 and consists of a quite different procedure. In this case, the cultural items would not lose their cultural prerogative, but

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[238] AAM 2021. See relevant document on the American Alliance of Museums' website.
[239] Wijsmuller 2017, pp. 24-25.
[240] The Italian Civil Code addresses this topic, mentioning State-owned properties (*beni demaniali*) in article 822. See Royal Decree 16th March 1942, n. 262 "Approvazione del testo del Codice Civile". The inalienability of those collections is stated and detailed in the Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 54, clause 1.
[241] As stated in Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 54, clause 2.
[242] See for instance Scovazzi 2009, pp. 555-566.
[243] Visconti 2024, pp. 46-51.

they would become alienable through a specific authorization, granted by the Ministry of Culture. The above-mentioned authorization, however, can be accorded only if the item does not carry relevance for public collections and if its alienation is not going to cause damages to conservation and public fruition[244].

All these legal procedures provide more obstacles than facilitation to Italian cultural institutions which are interested in repatriation processes. The whole legal framework does not really take into account the post-colonial approach to cultural heritage that has developed in the last decades. Rules about alienation show that legislators' attention has been focused on different issues, which concern economic and commercial aspects. Cultural heritage is seen as a crucial public and national resource which needs to be accessible to everyone in the Country; for this reason, laws determined that museums and other institutions should not be able to deaccession items from their collections in an easy and light way. Their priority has been mainly to avoid commercialization of cultural properties: in a field that tends to lack economic resources, the deaccessioning and disposal of minor or duplicate items could have been seen as a way for institutions to raise money for their general functioning. Legislators have therefore built a system that prevents that approach, consistently with the traditional attitude of Italian cultural heritage management, which has frequently been cautious towards the relationships between public heritage and art sales[245].

The Italian emphasis on cultural heritage protection and public fruition has internationally shaped the cultural heritage field and has historically been plauded and taken as a model. Such system is based on the idea that cultural heritage should be accessible to everyone, as far as national control over it is not challenged. Moreover, an assumption is made that cultural materials from different cultures (but with Italian ownership) should be equally protected and promoted, even if they do not have specific connections with national identity.

This universalistic intellectual framework, however, does not take into account the fact that culture is, first of all, a product of a specific community, which might have claims on it.

The concept of cultural affiliation, as it has been developed within NAGPRA legislation, significantly tries to recognize that issue. While US museums have educational and scientific missions related to cultural items, legal priority is given to source communities, which should

[244] Legislative Decree 42/2004, article 56.
[245] Stabile 2008, pp.179-183.

have title to sacred and funerary items, and even objects that have cultural significance. NAGPRA cases are indeed rooted in the necessity to find proofs of affiliation between cultural items and today's native American communities. Complex research is employed to verify the geographical provenience of items, and the connection between certain geographical areas and today's federal tribes. The entire process is based on communication with today's tribal communities and on the idea that cultural items should still play an active role in today's world. Leaving the walls of a museum, they could go back at the center of a community's life[246].

When cultural affiliation is discussed, however, a point is usually raised that archaeological artefacts – such as ancient Egyptian materials – are not comparable to cultural properties from tribal communities, like native American ones[247]. While tribal communities are alive and federal tribes are administrative and political entities, "ancient Egyptians" are just a conceptual label in the big picture of the discipline of archaeology.

Indeed, ancient Egyptians are not an interlocutor for anyone, and cultural items could not regain the active role they might have had in the past. As true as this statement can be, other stances are equally undeniable and important. For instance, it is hard to deny that an incredibly tight connection links today's Egyptian identity to its archaeological past[248]. Indeed, today's Arab Republic of Egypt is the result of a long history of transformations which also entangled, one way or the other, with local material evidence of the ancient past[249]. It is an entanglement that regards both the national and the community level, reaching the personal sphere, as well. It is based on historical processes, but also on social, spiritual and emotional links. The nuances at issue are complicated and overlapping, but they are at the root of what we understand and define as "cultural heritage". Moreover, they apply to any contexts, from Egypt to Italy and beyond. The main question, however, is whether the above-mentioned connections should impact on traditional ownership.

Answer to these doubts should obviously rely on a case-by-case approach, there are however some general reflections which can be done. NAGPRA legislation shows that reparative justice

[246] See, for instance, Krmpotich 2010, pp. 166-176.
[247] For an overview on the issues, see Dongoske, Yeatts, Anyon, Ferguson 1997, pp 600-608 and Meskell 2002, pp. 279-301.
[248] Winegar 2006, *passim*.
[249] Colla 2007, pp. 72-115.

can go beyond standard conservation practices, giving cultural properties a role in solidarity efforts. In Italy, attention to decolonization and reparative justice is slowly emerging in cultural institutions, rising questions about the relationship between Italian museum institutions and foreign cultures[250]. If wrongs are recognized and acknowledged, Italian cultural institutions should have tools to act accordingly. Given that cultural heritage law tends to be very protectionist, especially in Italy, reparative justice has more chances to happen through high-level international relations, where solidarity and cooperation are put at front stage. One example could be the treaty signed by Italy and Libya in August 2008, which included the repatriation of cultural properties[251].

2.2.3. Politics And Cultural Heritage: Nationalism, Internationalism, and beyond

When ownership of cultural heritage is discussed, it is useful to keep in mind some concepts and categories, which summarize and describe trends and positionalities within the field.
The role of encyclopedic museums, for instance, has been defended by scholars and professionals who see cultural heritage as a universally relevant phenomenon, that should not be defined by political borders or national claims[252]. According to them, cultural affiliation has no relevance to the preservation and enjoyment of cultural properties, which should be assured by specialized institutions (like museums) that have international prominence. This universal approach is known as cultural internationalism and has been emphasized by renown museum directors[253]. These ideas have also been presented in 2002, when a group of nineteen North American and European museums signed a declaration on the importance and value of universal museums[254].
Cultural internationalism frequently gets along with liberalism and with the idea that art should circulate in a regulated but free way, without the restrictions imposed by several national and international cultural heritage laws. According to that vision, cultural properties do not have one single home and there is no need for them to indefinitely return to their place of origin[255].

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[250] Ponzanesi 2012, pp. 51-69; Di Mauro 2024, pp. 27-30.
[251] De Cesari 2012, pp. 320-322.
[252] Merryman 2005, pp. 11-39; Appiah 2009, pp. 71-86.
[253] Cuno 2008, pp. 146-162.
[254] Curtis 2006, pp. 117-127.
[255] Ortiz 2003, pp. 15-32.

On the opposite side there are those who think that national identity and national relevance should be prioritized over universal access. While art and material culture can obviously convey universal messages, their cultural affiliation to a specific nation and people should be put into the foreground. This positionality is usually described as cultural nationalism, and it is well represented in international law and conventions[256]. It is especially relevant to countries that have been subject to intense archaeological extraction and exportation, such as Italy, Greece, and Egypt. The same stance is shared by countries that have started their nation-building process quite recently, when they eventually reached independence. In those cases, cultural properties should play a crucial role in communicating and emphasizing cultural identity and national pride. Cultural nationalism sees with favor the movement of cultural properties, but in terms of return home and restoration to the *status quo ante*.

Someone might wonder how these conceptualizations – which are relevant to the cultural heritage field – relate with wider political positionalities, like nationalism and sovereigntism or internationalism and globalism. The question is an important one, in order to understand what we can expect from politicians and governments when cultural properties and international relations are taken into account.

What should we expect from political parties that stress sovereigntism and focus on national identities? And what about political groups which are rooted in globalism and internationalism? Today's European society is characterized by strong needs for identity and, at the same time, by a desire for international collaboration. These opposing trends are mirrored in political movements and phenomena, throughout the entire European Union. While sovereigntism has rapidly grown in most European countries, there is also awareness that today's challenges are hard to solve without trans-national cooperation.

Political groups rooted in sovereigntism are obviously interested in obtaining cultural properties previously taken away; they therefore defend cultural nationalism and the idea that identitarian cultural properties should reside in their original home.

Such positionality, however, should imply that other countries have similar rights. It therefore means that universal encyclopedic museums are not promoted and defended. Given that

[256] For instance in the 1970's Unesco Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transport of Ownership of Cultural Property.

universal museums – such as the Louvre or the British Museum – are often seen as national symbols, it is very hard for Western sovereigntists to totally embrace cultural nationalism.
Vice versa, more liberal political groups might be interested in listening to restitution claims by other countries and could be open to actions of reparative justice. Again, however, they can hardly go against universal museums, because those institutions can be seen as places for cross-cultural solidarity, inclusion, and openness.
The political reality is therefore more nuanced than academic categorizations concerning cultural heritage.
My stance here is that the political debate on the ownership of cultural properties is fluid and manifold. While "identity" is a crucial topic for sovereigntism and right-wing populism, "culture" is a buzz-word for more progressive and inclusive groups. Neither cultural nationalism nor cultural internationalism, however, provide totally suitable answers to either of these positions.

CHAPTER 3. THE OWNERSHIP OF CULTURAL PROPERTIES: PRACTICES, CHALLENGES, PERSPECTIVES

3.1. RESTITUTIONS AND REPATRIATIONS

3.1.1. Restitutions and repatriations through law enforcement

Restitution and repatriation are today common practices in the field of cultural heritage. International conventions, national laws, and bilateral agreements provide standards and tools against the illegal traffic of cultural properties, making restitutions of illegally exported items possible[257].

Investigations and procedures are usually carried out by special units, that are often renowned and esteemed on a national and international level. In Italy, this work is mainly conducted by *Arma dei Carabinieri*, one of the national armed and police forces. A special unit within the Carabinieri corps works precisely on crimes against cultural properties: its name is *Comando Carabinieri Tutela Patrimonio Culturale*, which can be translated as Carabinieri Command for the Protection of Cultural Heritage. Its attention is firstly paid to archaeological looting in Italy and to art thefts on Italian territory. Part of its job, however, is also to detect the presence of cultural goods illegally imported into Italy, whether items are merely in transit or have reached their destination. Smuggled Egyptian antiquities, for instance, have been often intercepted in the last years, with several cases across Italy. These interceptions eventually led to the restitution of smuggled antiquities, thanks to collaboration with Egyptian experts and authorities. In June 2018, for instance, thousands of ancient coins and almost two hundred ancient artefacts were returned to Egypt[258]. As is common practice, the objects were restituted to the Egyptian ambassador in Italy, who acts as an intermediary.

More recent cases can also be mentioned, regarding smaller groups of objects: bronze statuettes were delivered to embassy officials in December 2023[259], while a Predynastic artefact was consigned to the Egyptian Consul General in Milan in October 2023[260].

[257] See previous chapters of this dissertation. As an agile and up-to-date reading, see Gerstenblith 2025, pp. 1-14.
[258] See Carabinieri's report 2018.
[259] See Repatriation of antiquities to Bulgary and Egypt 2023.
[260] See Carabinieri's report 2023.

As seen above, smuggling of Egyptian artefacts to Italy is not that rare. In the United States, however, similar cases are much more frequent and common. This is no surprise, if we consider that the US have traditionally been one of the main destination markets for the antiquities trade[261]. In the United States the fight against illicit trafficking of cultural properties is carried out by several bodies, on both federal and state level. The Cultural Heritage Coordinating Committee, for instance, coordinates diplomatic and law-enforcement efforts to combat antiquities trafficking, collaborating with the Department of Homeland Security and the Immigration and Customs Enforcement.

Other crucial protagonists in this work are specialized units devoted to investigations on crimes against art. The most prominent ones are the FBI Art Crime Team and the Antiquities Trafficking Unit at the Manhattan District Attorney's Office. The latter was created in 2017, when a need was felt for a multidisciplinary task force, which could employ criminological methods to the world of antiquities and art[262].

All these bodies and agencies have frequently intercepted Egyptian smuggled antiquities and eventually performed repatriations of those items. In May 2025 for instance – just to mention a very recent case – twenty-five remarkable artefacts were returned, including a golden funerary mask and a Fayoum portrait[263]. In August 2023, instead, the stone lid of a canopic jar was intercepted by the US Customs and Border Protection officers at the entrance port of Memphis (Tennessee)[264]. It had been shipped from Europe to a private buyer, accompanied by vague and misleading documentation.

Confiscations have frequently happened at ports of entrance or in relation with private buyers. Museum institutions, however, can also contain smuggled antiquities, as discovered by several investigations. The Houston Museum of Natural Sciences, for instance, has unwittingly displayed a looted Egyptian coffin since 2013, on loan from a private owner. Investigators discovered that the item had been looted from Abusir al-Malaq, smuggled through Switzerland and Germany, and eventually purchased in the US[265]. The coffin was trafficked by Roben Dib and Serop Simonian, the same dealers who were involved in other high-profile criminal episodes. Indeed, the same

[261] Mackenzie et al. 2019, pp. 21-39.
[262] Interview with Matthew Bogdanos about the Antiquities Trafficking Unit, October 22nd 2023.
[263] Sarnoff, May 14, 2025; CBS News, May 13, 2025.
[264] Feldman, August 31, 2022.
[265] McLaren, March 2023.

network was implicated in the trafficking of a gilded coffin, which was looted in 2011 and unwittingly purchased by the Metropolitan Museum in July 2017[266]. Both artefacts were eventually returned to Egypt, respectively in 2023 and 2019.

The seriousness and volume of antiquities trafficking in the US is also shown by episodes related to the Museum of the Bible, an institution established in 2017 in Washington, DC. The American institution has frequently been found to be in possession of unprovenanced or looted antiquities. Over time, investigations led to the return of artefacts to several countries[267]. In January 2021, about five thousand ancient papyri were returned to Egypt; once there, they were entrusted to the Coptic Museum in Cairo[268].

Many of the above-mentioned antiquities were looted or even stolen during 2011's turmoil. Egypt, however, still suffers from a widespread network of looting activities[269].

As seen in the first chapter, Egypt has tried to fight against the global trade in Egyptian antiquities through international bilateral agreements. Indeed, the return of the above-mentioned artefacts has been possible thanks to a Memorandum of Understanding signed by the American and Egyptian governments[270].

The efforts made by Egyptian authorities are rightly promoted and emphasized, as suggested by the memorandum itself. The repatriation of smuggled antiquities has also been celebrated through exhibitions, held at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. Exhibitions of that kind have been organized in 2010, 2011, 2014, and 2015[271]. In January 2016, a quite large exhibition was opened in hall 44 of Tahrir Square Museum, showing more than 220 artefacts[272].

These initiatives might be compared with the rich series of similar events organized in Italy by the Carabinieri, in order to show the result of their actions. Exhibitions have been organized in different parts of Italy to display artefacts that have been intercepted and then rescued. Those temporary exhibitions sometimes include returned objects, recovered from foreign museums, institutions or privates. The most relevant initiative of that kind has probably been the *Museo dell' Arte Salvata* (Museum of Rescued Art), opened in Rome in 2022[273]. Set up in a large circular room

[266] The Metropolitan Museum of Art Returns Coffin to Egypt, February 15, 2019.
[267] Mazza 2024, pp. 172-185.
[268] Finestre sull'Arte, January 30, 2021.
[269] For a critical reflection on looting in certain parts of Egypt and especially in Nubia, see Vigar 2024, pp. 175-215.
[270] See chapter one of this dissertation.
[271] Youm7, January 13, 2016.
[272] Sky News Arabia, January 2016.
[273] Maida, June 15, 2022.

in the Baths of Diocletian, that museum was imagined as a space to showcase Italian efforts and brilliant results in retrieving its cultural properties. In Fall 2022 the entire gallery was centred on the return of a beautiful, sculpted group made of clay, smuggled out of Puglia in the 1970s and eventually purchased by the Getty Museum. The sculptures – which depict Orpheus and the Mermaids – were staged in Rome only for some months and then were finally brought back to Taranto, as close as possible to their original context. The aim of the exhibition was, therefore, to show such a high-profile repatriation case in a suitable venue, reaching the widest possible audience in the national capital[274]. The Museum of Rescued Art – which had been closed for renovation works for several months – has reopened on the 26th of June 2025, displaying more than a hundred objects recovered between 2022 and 2025[275]. During its closure, however, exhibitions on similar topics have been frequently organized in several parts of Italy, at both big and small institutions[276]. Their purpose has been to celebrate the efforts made by the *Carabinieri*, to educate people about legality, and – last but not least – to highlight the national, public value of archaeological finds.

These initiatives are especially interesting from a museological point of view. Indeed, such exhibitions do more than present archaeological contexts and ancient artefacts – they also tell stories that transcend the discipline of archaeology, focusing on the role which antiquity plays today. They also provide a thrilling way to talk about archaeology, engaging visitors with stories about police investigations and crimes. On top of all that, they might also build up narratives concerning national pride and a sense of belonging. The latter aspect is especially true when repatriation of cultural properties is showcased and celebrated, depicting Italy as a great cultural nation and a victim of foreign wealthy institutions.

3.1.2. Voluntary restitutions and repatriations

In the previous section I lingered on restitutions and repatriations of cultural properties which resulted from law-enforcement processes. These are incredibly important actions and – nowadays – represent a specific branch of cultural heritage protection.

[274] Antoniutti, September 20, 2022.
[275] Giardini, June 29, 2025.
[276] The Journal of Cultural Heritage Crime usually provides pieces of information about those initiatives. The Italian ICOM group on Museums and Legality – with which I collaborate – is also listing them.

In my thesis, however, I am even more interested in repatriations and restitutions that happen on a voluntary basis, not dictated by legal obligations.

Those voluntary actions are indeed rarer than law-enforced ones, for many different reasons. First of all, restitutions are usually seen as damaging to museum collections, causing an economic loss to the deaccessioning institution[277]. Besides economic factors, museums often think that repatriations can lead to reputational damage, endangering the institution's positionality and bringing its very mission into question[278].

The reality, however, can sometimes be very different: positive reputation can actually be gained when museums recognize their contradictions and try to take action[279]. This positionality has gradually and slowly emerged in recent years, encouraging museums to start fruitful dialogues and take voluntary restitutions into account. As shown in the previous chapter, this approach is much more frequent in countries – like the US – where deaccessioning from museum collections is regulated in a decently flexible way.

Voluntary repatriations and restitutions usually happen when museum staff realize that certain items in their collection should be owned or stewarded by someone else – being it and individual, a community, a nation.

The acknowledgment that one or more items should have different owners is the result of internal museum practices, including curatorial and conservation activities. A specific professional figure, however, has recently become more and more popular in the cultural heritage field – and especially in the Anglo-Saxon world. I refer to provenance researchers, whose goal is precisely to conduct research on the provenance of their collections, reconstructing how single items arrived at the museum, both by purchase and donation[280]. Few museums have a provenance researcher in their staff and even fewer have an actual team or department devoted to such work[281]. Provenance researchers are especially useful in collecting institutions, which are active in purchasing and acquiring new objects for their collections. In those cases, provenance researchers help ensure that upcoming acquisitions meet legal and ethical standards. Provenance researchers, however, can also

[277] Labadie 2021, p. 134.
[278] Thompson 2010, pp. 418-427.
[279] Makinster 2020, *passim*; Bienkowski 2015, pp. 446-449.
[280] Tompkins 2020, pp. 16-24; Mattez 2023, pp. 165-180; Schuhmacher 2024, pp. 64-81.
[281] In the United States, we could count the Art Institute of Chicago, the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, the Denver Art Museum, and the Metropolitan Museum. In the UK, a provenance research team is found for instance at the Victoria & Albert Museum.

focus on items that have long been part of the museum's collection, going back decades, fifty years, or even centuries. For instance, they usually investigate the provenance of objects which changed ownership during Nazi era and Nazi occupations, when several requisitions and forced sales happened to Jewish individuals or political opponents[282]. Objects with such histories may have been acquired by German or European dealers and then sold to several different buyers, eventually ending up in museum institutions across the globe. Relying on the Washington principles, museums (and provenance researchers) try to make sure their collection does not include objects coming from such unethical transfers of ownership.

The same approach can be applied to artefacts coming from Indigenous groups (for instance in North America) and taken either by force or secretly, without the permission of the relevant community[283]. Provenance research methodologies can help cast light on the circumstances in which the items were removed, providing details on individual responsibilities and on colonial practices.

As far as colonial looting is concerned, provenance research can definitely help understand how artefacts were looted, taken, or forcibly purchased during colonial dominations or war circumstances. Similar investigations are indeed fueling the discourse on the decolonization of museums and on the ethical responsibilities cultural institutions have today. Dan Hicks' book on Benin bronzes, for instance, has spread knowledge and awareness on wartime looting in Western Africa during British occupation, highlighting all the issues and shadows of African collections stewarded and displayed in the Western world[284].

Historical research can therefore focus on colonial occupation and colonial relationships, casting light on practices concerning archaeology and ethnographical materials. As shown in the first chapter, archival documents, legal references, and private correspondences can help understand how archaeological investigations took place in Egypt and how artefacts were discovered, selected, and transferred. Diaries and letters may inform about illicit exportations made in bad faith, showing attempts to avoid customs controls or to prevent an equal distribution of excavations' finds[285]. At the same time, information might be gained about Western corrupt practices, addressing both higher officials and local workers, in order to acquire more materials or obtain

[282] Schuhmacher 2024, pp. 7-45.
[283] Ferguson et al. 1996, pp. 251-257.
[284] Hicks 2020, *passim*.
[285] See first chapter in this dissertation.

additional permissions. Similar events might have happened hundreds of years ago and therefore have no connection at all with 20th centuries' legal standards, such as international conventions on the export of cultural properties. Provenance research, however, can provide museums with as much awareness as possible, giving them the opportunity to take decisions on items they own and steward. Museums might indeed realize that the stewardship of certain materials might not align with their ethical principles – even if a legal case about them has not been opened. Today, the very idea of owning and "using" artefacts that are iconic or meaningful for certain nations or communities is sometimes seen as a delicate issue, which needs to be addressed with sensitivity. Such feelings are most likely not enough to lead to voluntary repatriations; they sometimes become more relevant, however, when they overlap with deeper ethical aspects, such as the treatment of sacred materials or the stewardship of human remains. As far as Egyptian antiquities are concerned, the list of voluntary repatriations performed by foreign or western museum institutions is indeed very short. Among those few cases, it is very clear that special attention has been given to human remains and not to other types of materials. Indeed, news have reported voluntary repatriation of Egyptian mummies by American, European, and New Zealand museums.

In October 2003 the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University (Atlanta, GA) returned to Egypt a royal mummy[286]. The body had been preserved in a collection at Niagara Falls from 1860s to 1999, when the Atlanta museum bought it[287]. Scholars analyzed the body and realized that its posture was typical of mummified New Kingdom's pharaohs. Further investigations showed that the mummy was probably smuggled out of Tomb TT320, where several royal bodies had been gathered at the beginning of the Third Intermediate Period, to hid and safeguard them[288]. The smuggling event probably happened around 1860, with the implication of Abd al-Rassul family[289]. Soon after, the looters sold it to people related to Thomas Barnett, who was building a collection in Niagara Falls. Tomb TT320 was officially and legally excavated only in 1881, discovering several royal mummies. An empty coffin was found as well, bearing the name of Ramses I.

The Carlos Museum therefore found itself in the remarkable position of owning a royal mummy and, potentially, that of a highly significant figure: Ramses I. In face of that situation, the museum decided to repatriate the mummy to the Arab Republic of Egypt. Their decision was grounded in

[286] Nasrawi, October 27, 2003.
[287] Thompson 2015b, p. 210.
[288] See Bickerstaffe 2010, pp. 13-36.
[289] Thompson 2015b, pp. 8-9.

two main reasons: firstly, the fact that the mummy had most likely been looted; and secondly, that the human remains belonged to such an important historical figure. The second reason was crucial in the decision-making process: the museum acknowledged that it had no rights to steward the human remains of such an iconic individual, deeply representative of ancient Egyptian civilization[290]. The recent identification of the mummy with Ramses I was not seen by the Carlos Museum as a surprising upgrade for its collection; on the contrary, it was considered a big and delicate responsibility towards the Egyptian nation.

More recently, other museum institutions took similar decisions, returning human remains to Egypt, even if they did not belong to iconic historical characters. Those choices have been based on a new sensibility towards the stewardship and display of human remains. Moreover, they were influenced by today's debate on the role of museums and encyclopedic collections, which might exercise unfair control over certain cultures.

In November 2023, for instance, two museums in New Zealand returned Egyptian human remains from their collection. The Southland Museum and the Whanganui Regional Museum were indeed in possession of parts of Egyptian mummies, including a head, hands, and feet[291]. They also owned funerary associated materials, such as mummy cloth and cartonnage. Those institutions had broadly been concerned about stewarding human remains and had already taken efforts to return human bodies of Māori individuals[292]. The repatriation of Egyptian remains was therefore rooted in those ethical standards; it was also explained, however, in terms of cultural and museological significance. As stated by staff from the Southland Museum, ancient Egypt and its funerary practices are not very relevant to the stories their museum wants to share and tell[293]. For that reason, the presence of Egyptian human remains seemed even less justifiable.

In December 2023 another set of Egyptian materials, including funerary remains and a mummy, were returned to Cairo[294]. Those items belonged to University College Cork, an academic institution which has had archaeological and paleopathological teaching collections[295]. Almost no

[290] Germaneso Dixon, July 8, 2002. See also Michael C. Carlos Museum's website, in particular 2003 Repatriations to the Arab Republic of Egypt.
[291] See Mayron, January 13, 2024. Very little information was available about those nameless remains. Some of them had been in the Whanganui Museum since late 19th century.
[292] Stowell, January 31, 2016.
[293] Mayron, January 13, 2024.
[294] O' Sullivan Vallig, December 17, 2024.
[295] Davis 1990, pp. 145-146.

provenance is available for the mummy, which was gifted to the University in 1928[296]. The mummy had been displayed in a wooden coffin, which was discovered in 1903-4 by Ernesto Schiaparelli[297]. That coffin did not arrive to Turin, remaining in Egypt as part of the Egyptian share of finds from that year's excavation. The coffin is therefore considered not related with the mummy, which must have been inserted later on[298]. Besides the mummy and the coffin, University College Cork also owned cartonnage materials (with no provenance information) and canopic jars (which were acquired in 1911-12 through Yorkshire's antiquities dealers)[299]. A conversation about those items had been ongoing for some years, with enquiries from the Egyptian embassy in Dublin[300]. An additional push towards the final decision to repatriate came from artist Dorothy Cross, who was especially interested in the mummy's return. Eventually, all the items were sent back, even if some of them (like the canopic jars) had provenance information that other institutions might have considered sufficient and satisfactory for their presence in a foreign collection. Most items came from different archaeological contexts and from different collecting episodes; despite that, they were all somehow considered part of the same ethical mission. This is at least how news tended to present the repatriation event and how Dorothy Cross shaped its narrative. In her opinion, the return of Cork's mummy was an opportunity to speak about the movement of people between the Global South and Northern Europe, reflecting on the transfer of ancient remains and on today's migrations[301].

The repatriation of the above-mentioned coffin, canopic jars, and cartonnage materials brings me to another topic: how to ethically treat associated funerary materials. With that expression I refer to artefacts or materials that played a special role in funerary rituals, decorating or containing human remains. Those items were tightly and intimately in association with the deceased body and, for this reason, they are almost as delicate and sensitive materials as actual human remains. This is why both the New Zealand and the Irish museums felt those items should have not belonged to them anymore. As shown by the previous cases, the voluntary repatriation of Egyptian items tends to be highly connected with broader ethical responsibilities concerning human remains. The

[296] O' Riordan, December 8, 2022.
[297] To know more about coffins excavated by Schiaparelli in the Valley of the Queens, see Guzzon 2017, pp. 191-197.
[298] Davis 1990, pp. 151-152.
[299] For a detailed description, see Davis 1990, pp. 145-152.
[300] See news on University College Cork website, UCC to repatriate ancient Egyptian objects, December 8, 2022.
[301] O' Sullivan Vallig, March 11th 2025. But see also Cross 2025, *passim*.

way we perceive artefacts from funerary contexts, however, might change our standards towards stewardship and repatriation of objects, as well. Canopic jars were used to literally contain parts of human bodies, and this makes them subject to feelings and consideration comparable to those applied to actual human remains. Even the category of grave goods is an ethically delicate one, as clearly demonstrated by NAGPRA regulations concerning associated funerary artefacts. Given the huge amount of information we know about ancient Egyptians' funerary practices and religious beliefs, we are extremely aware of the sacredness and deepness attributed to grave goods[302]. Indeed, it might be stated that the more visitors know about the meaning of displayed grave goods, the more doubts they might have about their rightful presence in museum galleries or storages. At the same time, however, the display of grave goods and associated funerary remains is very informative for visitors and is seen as an important part of the educational mission conducted by certain museums. The Penn Museum, for instance, has stated this in a recent human remains policy. In its section about display of remains, a different approach is applied to human remains with associated materials attached. In other words, closed coffins with mummies inside are admitted for display[303]. In this way – according to the policy – the human body is not exposed to showcase, and its dignity is partially preserved; at the same time, however, the funerary and artistic practices of ancient Egyptians are accessible to visitors. This solution represents a compromise, and it clearly fails to fully satisfy either side of the debate.

In the last lines I have mentioned ethical concerns about human remains and funerary artefacts in museums. That topic represents a large part of museum ethics, which has emerged as a new and important branch of museology[304]. There are however many other ethical questions which sprout from museum institutions and practices.

Going back to stewardship and ownership of cultural properties, we might actually question whether museums are entitled to steward and display other cultures, through their ownership of cultural properties. This question may appear senseless if we consider museums as institutions made for educating everyone about all cultures. Today, however, museums have a deep luggage of self-reflexivity and critical thinking which challenged the idea of modern and contemporary

[302] For a reflection on sacredness and restitution efforts, see Roodt 2025, chapter 3.3.
[303] See the Penn Museum website and its section about statements and policies. Penn Museum Human Remains Policy, September 20, 2023.
[304] Murphy 2016, pp. 19-42.

museums as perfect places characterized by neutrality and objectivity. Post-colonial studies on disciplines like history, anthropology, and archaeology have shown how knowledge production is so distant from being neutral[305]. Such studies have paved the way to reflections on the role of museums in the production of knowledge and in the representation of cultural identities[306]. A deep need for multivocality has been claimed for, in all branches of museum practices: from conservation to curation and interpretation[307]. Stewarding artefacts is indeed a form of power: it means you have control over how cultures and civilizations are presented and perceived. You can choose which stories to tell and what aspects to highlight, shaping narratives and building connections according to your own point of view. The point here is that behind artefacts lie stories, and behind those stories lie people. Dealing with people, however, requires sensitivity and opens to ethical questions concerning respect, balance of power, and inclusion. This is why stewarding and displaying cultural properties can become almost as delicate of an issue as the stewardship of human remains.

Western museums have traditionally had a huge amount of power over foreign cultural properties, over stories concerning other cultures and – at the end of the day – over foreign people and communities. Just think about Africa: according to a recent report, 90 to 95 percent of Africa's cultural heritage is held by major museums outside the continent[308]. Such figures are astonishing and show why a reaction is felt as very much needed, in order to repair the imbalance previously created.

The concepts of reparation and reparative justice indeed play a significant role in this debate. In a wave of ethical and judicial renovation, they have strongly emerged in the mid 1980s, providing new approaches to justice[309]. With huge variety and heterogeneity, they have been applied both to domestic justice (especially in common law countries) and in international law[310]. They reached several fields of studies and have been applied to anthropological, historical, and political discourses, becoming crucial in post-colonial, African American, Indigenous, and feminist

[305] Cooper 2005, pp. 401-422; Kennedy 2013, pp. 467-488.
[306] Thomas 2010, pp. 1-11; De Angelis et al. 2014, pp. 1-24.
[307] That kind of reflections have been even more relevant in large academic museums, where academic research and classroom teaching go hand in hand with public engagement and galleries' dissemination. Kozak 2016, pp. 1-13; Plaza 2022, pp. 74-85.
[308] I refer to the report conducted by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy in 2018, driven by French president Emmanuel Macron. See Nayeri, November 21, 2018. See also Sarr & Savoy 2018, avant-propos.
[309] Daily & Proietti-Scifoni 2011, p. 210.
[310] Daily & Proietti-Scifoni 2011, p. 207.

studies[311]. In the field of museum studies, a reparative approach can be employed in at least two ways, according to which focus is taken into account. On one hand reparation can concern the narratives and stories built around artefacts and materials; on the other one, it can regard access to artefacts and even ownership.

Post-colonial studies applied to museums' collections have analyzed Western museums' narratives concerning cultural properties from other parts of the world, especially from ex-colonies. Scholars have noticed how anthropological, archaeological, and ethnographical galleries have usually played a role in providing Western visitors with someone "other" to observe and to compare with[312]. Showcasing others has been a way to recognize themselves as unique and different, in a collective ritual based on ideas of inferiority and superiority[313]. At the same time, mainstream historical narratives in museums have frequently hidden contributions from other cultures or from local minorities, denying their relevance or even their existence.

A reparative approach to museology can tackle such issues, providing that multi-vocality is performed in museums, giving voice to those who had been denied one in the past. In order to do so, knowledge-production processes need to be renovated, opening up to collaboration and cooperation on the curatorial and research level[314].

Acknowledging that there is no single story but a multiplicity of voices, a reparative approach should not attempt to construct a new definitive history. Rather, it is about redistributing voice and power, providing a counterbalance to what has been previously said and done.

Reparation can therefore be performed within the very galleries and exhibits of Western museums, working on narratives and museum interpretation. As mentioned above, however, reparation also regards the very access to cultural materials and historical evidence, on an international level. Studies and task forces have tried to estimate the volume of colonial collections in European countries' museums, showing that huge amounts of materials are preserved in European institutions. As shown by Felwine Sarr and Bénédicte Savoy, colonial era acquisitions had created an imbalance between African and Western countries in the access to cultural artefacts, which are

[311] Wenar 2006, p. 396.
[312] Grechi 2021a, pp. 113-148.
[313] Grechi 2021b, chapter 1.
[314] Multi-vocality and new perspectives have been promoted, for instance, through the involvement of contemporary artists. In Italy the Museo delle Civiltà in Rome employed that approach in a large way, hosting several artists and offering residencies. The same strategy was adopted by the Egyptian Museum of Turin, especially for its two hundred years' anniversary.

now surprisingly more accessible in Western institutions than in Africa itself[315]. The return of cultural properties is therefore a way to restore balance and give communities the opportunity to manage, use, and steward cultural properties extremely significant for their history and identity. While repatriation is especially suitable to tackle illegal, unjust, and unethical acquisition episodes, a wider discourse on the global distribution of cultural properties is relevant, as well. Such complex concerns are entangled with questions regarding cultural affiliation, identity construction, and community development. In the next section I will try to linger on these aspects, focusing on archaeological materials and collections.

3.2. OPENING THE DISCUSSION

3.2.1. The Egyptian case: between claims, efforts, and views

As I have stressed in the previous chapter, colonial collecting practices have led to disparity between access to cultural properties in different countries, with Western encyclopedic museums owning artefacts from all over the world. This is the case for anthropological and ethnographical items, but also for archaeological finds excavated by European or American enterprises.

Western archaeological research in Egypt between 18th and 20th century has indeed procured tons of items to collections in several continents, making the ancient Egyptian civilization one of the most widely represented in museums across the world.

Despite these practices, Egypt has not been emptied out and still has an incredible number of archaeological artefacts and evidence in its territory and in its museums[316]. An amount which is still growing, because new archaeological research is going on.

The Arab Republic of Egypt has therefore large access to evidence of its history and cultures, which can be used for tourism, research, and education. This does not mean, however, that Egypt has not suffered from hunt, extraction, and appropriation of its cultural heritage.

[315] Savoy & Meyer-Abich 2022, pp. 1-3.

[316] It is important to highlight that Egypt has had a long museum tradition, which started in conjunction with European hunt for antiquities and was influenced by the Western concept of museum. The musealization of ancient Egypt, both within museum buildings and throughout Egyptian landscape, had obviously a huge impact on the management of antiquities in the country.

Indeed, Egypt is working strongly and broadly in order to affirm and reaffirm its control over antiquities and over relevant knowledge production. First of all, it is deeply involved in the fight against illicit traffic, which keeps happening today, despite strict national and international legal framework[317]. Secondly, Egypt has also imposed firm rules and prohibitions concerning excavations, on-site research, and scientific analyses on artefacts and remains[318]. By taking such a hard line, Egypt aims at reconquering the very discipline of Egyptology, which in the last centuries has been widely controlled and performed by foreign institutions and scholars[319].

Egypt has also been vocal in commenting exhibits, initiatives and temporary exhibitions produced by Western museums. Topics such as ethnic identity and cultural reception have been put at the center of attention, criticizing views and narratives that present ancient Egyptian culture through new lenses[320]. In other words, Egyptian archaeologists and antiquities officials have shown a strong international activism, in order to secure today's Egypt a firm grasp on the ancient Egyptian civilization. Such activism is particularly evident if we take repatriation efforts into account, with several claims addressed to European museum institutions. Sticking to recent times, online petitions have been launched by Egyptian archaeologists to mobilize people and ask the Egyptian government to make official restitution requests. In 2022 a petition was indeed launched by a team of Egyptian archaeologists, including scholar Monica Hanna. Opened to the general public, the petition was described and promoted through a *ad hoc* website, which aims at explaining colonial acquisition practices and the relevance of repatriations within museum ethics[321]. The website and petition are called "Repatriate Rashid", after the name of a city in the Nile Delta, which is more famously known as Rosetta. Indeed, the petition focuses on the repatriation to Egypt of the Rosetta Stone (*Hajar Rashid*), which has been stewarded and displayed by the British Museum for more than two centuries. The claim is based on an analysis of the Capitulation of Alexandria, negotiated and signed after British intervention in Egypt against France and Napoleon's army. Moreover, a comparison is made with the restitution of artefacts looted by Napoleon's forces during the occupation of Italy. As I also stated in previous chapters, double standards were applied to the plundering of European artefacts and the looting of Egyptian ones.

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[317] Fouad 2019, pp. 149-165.
[318] See Hawass 2010, pp. 613-637.
[319] On the very category of Egyptology, as a discipline, and for a critical analysis on its foundations and aims see Carruthers 2015, pp. 1-15; Elshakry 2015, pp. 185-197.
[320] I will discuss this aspect later, lingering on some episodes and exhibitions.
[321] See their website: Repatriate Rashid.

A return of the stone to its original place is considered important and meaningful for Rashid's communities, providing access to historical evidence and opportunities for tourism development[322]. The Rosetta stone is famously considered a key manufact in the decipherment of Egyptian hieroglyphs and can therefore be viewed as a physical symbol of European prominence in the field of Egyptological studies. Its permanence at the British Museum is often justified for that very reason: its presence helps narrating the story of English and European contributions to the study of ancient Egypt[323].

The team of archaeologists behind Repatriate Rashid, however, see it in an opposite way: the Rosetta Stone left Egypt as a spoil of war, in an unethical and unacceptable way; its importance for Egyptological studies and its popularity as a symbol of Western scholarly achievements make its return to Egypt even more significant.

Other petitions have been recently promoted by Zahi Hawass, the internationally renowned archaeologist who has hold high-profile offices at the Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities. On Hawass' official website a webpage is dedicated to repatriation and two different petitions are presented, concerning three objects[324]. One of them is again the Rosetta Stone, which is described as an icon of Egyptian identity and a symbol of colonial past. The same petition also regards the Dendera Zodiac, brutally removed from an Egyptian temple and illicitly brought to Paris and the Louvre Museum[325]. The third artefact mentioned by Hawass is another iconic piece, owned by the Neues Museum of Berlin and known as the Bust of Nefertiti[326]. Hawass especially focuses on this object, which has been clearly exported in bad faith and without actual permission. Its importance as a popular symbol of the ancient Egyptian civilization is undeniable, being almost as famous and recognizable as the mask of Tutankhamun.

Hawass recognizes that many Egyptian antiquities have become part of Western and foreign museums through licit acquisitions and, in some of his statements, he carefully tries to reassure the general public that he does not advocate for the return of such objects. He is interested, however, in the repatriation of artefacts which present two overlapping features: they have been exported in an unethical and illicit way, and they have become world-wide symbols of ancient

[322] For a reflection on the role of repatriated artefacts after their return, see Hausler & Selter 2025, *passim*.
[323] Robertson 2019, pp. 114-115.
[324] See relevant webpage: Dr Zahi Hawass, Repatriation.
[325]Buchwald & Josefowicz 2021, pp. 9-27.
[326] Ikram 2011, pp. 145-149.

Egypt. Their permanence in foreign museums is seen as a reiteration of their original unethical acquisition. Their value, importance, and popularity even amplify the fact they had been removed in an unethical way.

As stressed by Hawass and by other Egyptian officials, the presence of legitimately acquired artefacts in museums across the world is sometimes considered positive and useful. Those artefacts (if not remains) can indeed be described as ambassadors of the ancient Egyptian civilization and, consequently, as ambassadors of today's Egypt[327]. They can indeed play a role in fostering world-wide interest in ancient Egypt and promote international tourism.

There is therefore a widespread idea that very iconic Egyptian antiquities should return to Egypt, while other artefacts could play a meaningful role remaining out of Egypt. Emphasis on iconic artefacts was stressed by Sarr and Savoy as well, in their report concerning sub-Saharan cultural properties[328]. In their implementation schedule they suggest that returning iconic artefacts could be a first and preliminary step, useful in order to start a trustful conversation between international institutions.

Many scholars, however, think it is still very unlikely that museums will return objects that have become so iconic and identitarian for their own business and brand. Aysha Y. Salem, for instance, is skeptical about the British Museum ever returning the Rosetta Stone to Egypt. In her opinion, a solution could come from a redistribution of ownership and possession: Egypt should be recognized as the owner of the Rosetta Stone, while British Museum could be its steward and possessor[329].

Similar solutions are now frequently found, especially when individual museums make efforts to build a trustful relationship with other institutions or countries. The Worcester Museum, for instance, has reached agreements with the Italian Ministry of Culture, working on both repatriation of objects to Italy and long-term loans to the museum in Massachusetts[330]. The Archaeological Museum of Palermo, instead, has repatriated a small fragment of the Parthenon Marbles, framing it as a long-term loan to Greece and its Akropolis Museum[331]. Some scholars have also suggested

[327] This positionality has been stated for instance by Ali Abdelhalim, director general of the Egyptian Museum Cairo. See his conversation at the Egyptian Museum of Turin, in dialogue with Christian Greco. What is a Museum?, November 22, 2024.
[328] Sarr & Savoy 2018, chapter 3.
[329] Salem 2005, pp. 192-193.
[330] Grant, January 31, 2025.
[331] Maida, January 5, 2022.

that co-ownership could be a solution, displaying contested cultural properties in rotation in different countries[332]. A ton of different questions and positions emerge from similar ideas, including conservation issues and economic concerns[333]. One main aspect remains, however: transnational cooperation can be performed if trust is on the table.

In the framework of a postcolonial world and postcolonial museums field, reparation is frequently seen as a way to make trust germinate and new relationships bloom. I believe this must remain in sight.

I mentioned trust as an important concept in transnational cultural relationships, but I think it is really a keyword in the museums field in general. It is not by chance that in 2024 the CoMuseum conference revolved around the relationship between museums and trust; one year later, the same topic was at the centre of 2025's American Alliance of Museums annual meeting, in Los Angeles. While studies state that Western museums are trusted institutions[334], I think this is especially true for privileged people in those Western societies.

The vary nature of museums can easily sow doubt and mistrust, because cultures are aestheticized and artefacts are charged with emotions, which are mirrored onto visitors. In this polyphony of emotions, fragilities are laid bare, especially those ones related to identity and social status[335]. Those who recognize themselves as related to the Global South, easily see museums as institutions which fetishize stories, artefacts and – after all – other cultures[336]. How to deal with history and cultures is a wider issue, rooted in the very processes of knowledge production and communication; museums, however, are prime players in this discourse, both for their status and for their mediatic nature. Indeed, museums are today performative and aesthetic media[337].

Given that Egypt is so commonly displayed and worshipped in Global North museums, the ancient Egyptian civilization has become an especially contested topic, with claims that are not necessarily about today's Republic of Egypt. Indeed they frequently regard the very right of Western institutions to tell their own story about one of the most important civilizations of the African

[332] Renold 2015, pp. 163-176.
[333] Onciul 2017, pp. 1-8.
[334] See for instance the resources and materials published on the website of Wilkening Consulting, which conducts research on museums audiences. See Wilkening Consulting.
[335] In July 2025 an international conference at the Amsterdam School of Heritage, Memory, and Material Culture has explored some of those aspects.
[336] Naguib 2018, pp. 45-46.
[337] Even museums which focus on the contextual and archaeological dimensions of artefacts still rely on an aestheticizing approach, especially in today's Instagram era.

continent. As we will deepen later in this dissertation, Egypt has become a symbol of Africa itself and an icon of Afrocentrism.

3.2.2. Western museums and foreign collections: which role in a post-colonial world?

Western museums with foreign archaeological collections are complex machines, which are made of superimposing stories and different overlapping collecting practices. As seen above, provenance research and new studies can cast light on how artefacts ended up within museum walls, whether through purchase, gifts, arranged partition, looting, confiscation, and many other circumstances[338]. Contemporary ethics applied to the museum field urge institutions to examine whether remains arrived through legal ways to their galleries or storages. While assessing the legality of collections is a first step in self-criticism, one huge second step concerns legitimate possession.

The Penn Museum stewards a huge and iconic sphynx from Egypt, now welcoming visitors at the very entrance of the building. Its arrival was organized by archaeologist Flinders Petrie and it was possible through the partage system typical of the time. Although its transfer to the US was legal at the time, we might ask whether today we would lightheartedly replicate a similar action.

The colossus of Seti II was retrieved by Bernardino Drovetti and his team through excavation permission. While its removal was not against specific laws, today we might question whether moving and exporting such a remarkable artefact was fair and respectful.

Vitaliano Donati could transfer sculptures with authorization and supervision of local officials. Despite so, would not we empathize with local communities seeing eternal parts of their historical landscape being taken away?

While ownership is a legal institution of great importance, morality is another side of the same coin, bearing enormous importance for our society and its future.

As I talked about reparation, I believe museums should take a reparative approach and employ it in a comprehensive way. Indeed, I think that reparation is a conceptual framework which needs to be applied, today, to the very role of museum institutions.

Considering Egyptian collections – such as the ones in Turin and the Philadelphia – I wonder whether they can be useful and meaningful for Egypt and Nubia, nowadays. Moreover, could they

[338] For an overview of Italian colonial collections, see Beatrice Falcucci's wide research. For a useful introduction consider Falcucci 2025, pp. 9-39.

perform their educational mission in a way that is meaningful for people who look at that heritage as an affiliated one?

As we mentioned above, foreign collections can be seen as ambassadors. They can represent the territory they come from, with relevant traditions, languages, identities. In the Western world, they can be ambassadors for immigrant communities, looking for roots and cultural identity[339]. Their very presence in Western museums, however, should be an obvious opportunity to talk, teach, and learn about colonization.

Everybody agrees that archaeological museums are entangled with today's society, being legacy of modern historical events and being places of current knowledge production[340]. This is why archaeological collections should be transdisciplinary and diachronic labs for historical education and historiographical research. Information and interpretation about artefacts should obviously be an important part of galleries interpretations. I believe, however, that an equal amount of attention should be paid to history and histories surrounding the arrival and permanence of artefacts abroad. A socially responsible museum cannot run away from wider topics, including historical processes and geo-politics, even if doing so averts attention from the very objects in possession or on display. At the Penn Museum, the gallery about Native Americans and Canadian First Nations precisely does so, focusing very little on objects and providing one main message of decolonization – giving today's indigenous communities an opportunity to have their voice heard[341].

Dealing with colonization (and decolonization) as a topic of historical education is not easy stuff[342]. It is a complex issue for schools, universities, and cultural institutions, as it is showed by several conferences regarding that subject[343]. Museums are no exception, and they are actually badly equipped for such a complex and dynamic challenge. Museums are trying to find answers by collaborating with contemporary artists, inserting thought-provoking intrusions within permanent collections. This is what the Penn Museum has done with his African Galleries, displaying a work entitled "Presence of a Fundamental Absence"[344]. The same concept was

[339] Appiah 2006, pp. 130-134.
[340] For a deeper glaze on similar themes see Hicks & Ladewig 2025, pp. 58-72.
[341] The gallery is called Native American Voices: the People – Here and Now.
[342] Azoulay 2019, *passim*.
[343] In Italy, I have in mind an international conference organized by the Università per Stranieri di Siena, in May 2025.
[344] The work was created by artists Muhsana Ali and Amadou Kane Sy, who have both worked in Senegal.

implemented at the Egyptian Museum of Turin, where works by Ali Cherri and Sarah Sallam have been inaugurated in November 2024. Although these intrusions are powerful and effective, it is hard to integrate them in the general permanent collection, making them fundamental parts of the museum narrative and not just isolated breaches in a traditional discourse.

Both museums I have just mentioned are now making efforts to renovate their spaces and galleries: more precisely, the Penn Museum is redesigning its Ancient Egypt and Nubia Galleries, reconstructing the tomb chapel of Kaipure and the palace of Pharaoh Meremptah. The Turin museum has instead undertaken a wider renovation, concerning many areas of its building.

I think the Turin renovation is especially interesting, because it envisions free access to part of the museum, making it as open to the public as it is economically possible. The gallery which narrates the history of the museum is among the rooms which will be accessible for free; the underlying idea is to provide everyone with an explanation about why an Egyptian museum exists in Turin. While that question is a crucial and fundamental one, I believe that the answer will need to be an inclusive and multi-vocal one.

CHAPTER 4. APPROPRIATING ANCIENT EGYPT

4.1. From Athanasius Kircher to Carlo Vidua: ancient Egypt as part of European identity

Today's reflection on the decolonization of ancient Egypt is grounded on the awareness that the Western world has for several decades appropriated the ancient Egyptian civilization, both from a disciplinary point of view and from a material, object-based perspective.

Such appropriation mainly happened since Napoleon's expedition to Egypt, when European access to Egyptian ruins gradually became easier and more common. This process was characterized by the growing number of archaeological excavations, aimed at finding new artefacts. The exportation of those materials experienced a pronounced increase in growth, contributing to the large-scale arrival of antiquities to Europe.

The European social and political context at the beginning of the 19th century led to the purchase of big Egyptian collections, which led to the creation of remarkable galleries and sections within already-existing museums, especially public ones[345].

These events could happen only because Egypt was strongly influenced by foreign powers, both politically and economically. For Europeans, as we have seen, the search for antiquities became a possible endeavor and a profitable one.

Studying the entanglement between coloniality and Egyptology therefore implies that attention is paid to the above-mentioned period, when European interference in Egypt started growing, through diplomatic networks and ambassadors' prominence. Later on, especially in the last part of the 19th century, a direct control over Egypt was installed by European powers, and precisely by the British Empire, at the expense of the Ottoman one. This political situation led to transformations in the management of Egyptian antiquities and in the Western access to them.

While in the first chapter I tried to retrace the above-mentioned events, in this fourth chapter I would like to pose a different question, which is more about the cultural connection that Westerners had felt towards Egypt. In other terms, why did modern Europeans feel the need to search Egypt, document its ruins, and export antiquities?

[345] Maget 2009, pp. 17-62.

My view on this topic is certainly shared by several scholars, but I think that emphasis on similar themes often emerges in history of Egyptology contexts, rather than in cultural heritage reflections[346]. In modern age Europe, especially between the 17th century and the beginning of the 19th one, Western interest towards Egypt was strongly based on a shared intellectual framework rooted on classics and biblical traditions. The classics-based intellectual framework had emerged from humanism onwards and it was characterized by Latin and Greek sources, which had shaped European understanding of the ancient world, its inhabitants and its civilizations. Latin and Greek sources provided information about different parts of the world, thanks to ancient connections between several Mediterranean areas. The importance of the ancient Egyptian civilization was indeed received and filtered through the Greek and Roman textual traditions. Ancient literary works retold about admiration towards ancient Egypt, but also provided precise details on the Egyptian country, its recognized wisdom and celebrated monuments. From Herodotus to Plato, from Manetho to Pliny, many different texts offered to modern Europeans a vivid vision of ancient Egypt[347]. Egypt was a recurrent topic in classical literature and therefore was not entirely seen as a distant, remote world. On the contrary, the Hellenization of Egypt since 223 BCE and its subsequent Romanization from 31 BCE had transformed that land into part of the Greek and Roman worlds, entangling the Greco-Roman culture with the Egyptian context. Not only entanglement, but also appropriation happened during that process, especially in Roman times, when Egyptian monuments were transferred to Italy and Egyptian motifs were imitated[348]. Their presence outside of Egypt remained for centuries, becoming material evidence of tight connection with the ancient Egyptian world[349].

These material testimonies fostered special interest in modern scholars, especially from the 17th century, when scholars like Athanasius Kircher tried to use them to reveal mysteries of the ancient Egyptian languages and myths[350]. His efforts were published in several publications, and his wide work is testified by his collecting activity[351]. His importance in the study of ancient history is at least double: on one hand he showed a strong focus on decodifying hieroglyphs, aiming at giving meaning to texts otherwise inaccessible. On the other hand, he had a deep desire for collecting,

[346] See for instance Versluys 2020, pp. 15-22.
[347] Lloyd 2010, pp. 1067-1085.
[348] Pollini 2018, pp. 211-217.
[349] Versluys 2018, pp. 230-236.
[350] Stolzenberg 2013, pp. 36-70.
[351] The Museo Egizio itself owns artefacts originally from the *Museo Kircheriano*. See Leospo 2001, pp. 125-132.

deemed necessary for grasping the materiality and visuality of the ancient world. Kircher's work relied on items and texts available in Europe, including newly discovered artefacts (especially from Rome) and recently re-emerged manuscripts containing ancient texts[352].

A partially similar approach was employed by Johann Joachim Winckelmann, who studied Egyptian antiquities and Egyptianizing artefacts at his disposal in Europe, especially in Germany and in Italy. Winckelmann can be seen as a bridge figure in the modern European understanding of ancient Egypt. On one hand he was still attached to the traditional Western reception of ancient Egypt through classical and biblical sources; on the other one, he opened new perspectives on the study of Egyptian antiquities, adopting more independent methodologies and ultimately giving them a new role[353]. He applied his methodology and stylistic analysis to Egyptian and Egyptianizing artefacts, laying the foundations for a history of Egyptian art[354]. Working on sculptures preserved in Rome, especially at Villa Albani, he was able to discern older and later phases of Egyptian art, recognizing older pharaonic objects and later Egyptianizing works produced in Roman times[355]. He therefore gave new grounds and autonomy to the study of Egyptian art, placing it in a new perspective.

Thanks to his studies, Winckelmann managed to incorporate the Egyptian art in his imposing stylistic analysis, tracing a general evolution of arts in the ancient world[356]. As discussed by Parker, Winckelmann did not develop a history of art based on individual artists: on the contrary, he built a more abstract vision of artistic development, focusing on entire cultures and civilizations[357]. This view is coherent with an Enlightenment approach to the world and its global phenomena. According to Winckelmann, each civilization had its own independent artistic development[358]. However, his narrative system linked all different civilizations in a bigger picture, making different populations and territories part of the same big story that, from the ancient Mediterranean, paved the way to modern Europe[359]. Such view had been influenced by the shared cultural and intellectual

[352] Donadoni 2001, pp. 101-112.
[353] On Winckelmann's impact, and especially on the Italian *transfert* of his theories, see Ferrari 2017, pp. 23-35; Ferrari 2018, pp. 13-28.
[354] Kunze 2004b, pp. 140-158.
[355] Kunze 2004a, pp. 125-128; Meyer 2010, p. 8.
[356] On Winckelmann's approach to the historiography of art, see Potts 1994, pp. 23-46. More recently, see Décultot 2019, pp. 85-109.
[357] Parker 1992, p. 526.
[358] Kunze 2004a, pp. 125-139.
[359] On Winckelmann as both an historian and a mythmaker, see Flavell 1979, pp. 79-96.

framework I was describing above, typical of modern age's Europe. A framework according to which Europe had inherited cultural elements of the ancient Mediterranean world.

The idea of a shared Western identity rooted in a common Mediterranean past was based, as I said, on the filter of ancient Greek and Latin textual sources. This view, however, was built on the entanglement of several traditions and legacies. The other main one was the biblical tradition, which incorporated stories about ancient civilizations, groups, and populations. The biblical text, with its immense authority and relevance, provided a graspable and clear understanding of the ancient world, including Egypt and the Near East[360]. Indeed, Westerners had for centuries encountered Egypt through biblical accounts, which frequently mention both the Egyptian landscape and its ancient political system[361].

Modern European traders, explorers, and scholars obviously encountered Egypt during actual trips to the country, providing accounts of their travels and experience[362]. From Pietro della Valle to Vitaliano Donati, from Richard Pococke to Frederick Norder, encounters with modern and ancient Egypt were after all not so rare. During those trips, Europeans carried with them a strong cultural baggage rooted in classical and biblical traditions, looking at modern Egypt through that lens.

An example could be provided by Carlo Vidua's trips in the Mediterranean. Carlo Vidua di Conzano was born in Casale Monferrato in 1785 from a wealthy family[363]. He was offered a good, individualized instruction, learning about literature, music, architecture and military aspects. He also acquired some legal competences attending the *Società dei Concordi*, where he met Cesare Balbo, son of Prospero Balbo[364].

He collected many books, showing strong interest for ancient and contemporary literature, but also for history and philosophy. He wrote an essay about the cultural role and international prestige of the Italian states; he also had plans to write a history of Florence and a history of French revolution[365].

Influenced by Romantic ideals, he devoted many years to traveling across the world. In 1818 he began his first big trip out of Europe, visiting north countries such as Lapland and then travelling southward to several parts of the Ottoman empire. He reached Egypt in 1819, where he met

[360] See for instance Kuklick 2018, pp. 3-9.
[361] Premnath 2023, pp. 25-48.
[362] Hofstetter 2004, pp. 13-17.
[363] Coaloa 2003, pp. 39-71.
[364] Romagnani 1987, pp. 11-26.
[365] Romagnani 1987, pp. 11-26; Coaloa 2003, pp. 72-74, 78-89.

Drovetti and other prominent figures[366]. He made his way through the country thanks to firmans and letters of recommendation signed by Mohammed Ali[367].

His manuscript documents, especially his travel notes, provide many details about his readings and cultural interests. Vidua used to carry with him several volumes, including travellers' accounts and scholarly texts concerning ancient history or archaeology. Once in Egypt, for instance, he reads Etienne Jean Monchablon's dictionary of ancient history and Athanasius Kircher's *Prodromus Coptus sive Aegyptiacus*[368]. Moreover, he frequently mentions recent descriptions of Egypt, such as Frederik Ludwig Norden's *Voyage d'Egypte et de Nubie*, Dominique Vivant Denon's *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Égypte*, and William Richard Hamilton's *Aegyptiaca*[369].

What strikes today's reader the most, however, is Vidua's constant reference to classical and biblical texts. While sailing from Izmir to Alexandria, he devoted himself to reading, focusing on such an evocative sailing adventure as the Odyssey[370]. In early January 1820 he reaches the area of Cairo and he starts leafing through the biblical Book of Exodus, looking for information about Egypt and the Sinai Peninsula. He also reads Manetho, through a recent edition by Jan Potocki, and frequently mentions Herodotus[371].

Between January 22nd and February 9th, while he is travelling from Cairo to Asyut, he reads several biblical texts: the Pentateuch (Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy), several Historical Books (Joshua, Judges, Ruth, Samuel, Kings, Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther), many Wisdom and Poetic Books (Job, Psalms, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs), a number of Prophetic Books (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and others)[372].

As far as the New Testament is concerned, he reads Matthews', Mark's, and Luke's Gospels. He also lingers on Pauline Epistles (to Romans, Corinthians, Ephesians, and Philippians).

While recent maps and travel accounts are certainly Vidua's logistical points of reference in his trip through Egypt, his imagination and cultural background seem to be filled with the biblical tradition. For Vidua, biblical narratives are obvious and useful tools to interpret that land and its mysteries. For instance, when he hears about periodical Nile floods and resulting seven years of

[366] For Drovetti, see Roccati 2019, p. 44. See also Roccati 2013, pp. 211-214.
[367] Invernizzi 2019, pp. 286-295.
[368] Roccati 2019, p. 112.
[369] For Norden see Roccati 2019, p. 12; for Denon see Roccati 2019, p. 88; for Hamilton see Roccati 2019, p. 108.
[370] Roccati 2019, p. 24.
[371] Roccati 2019, p. 44.
[372] For all these references, see Roccati 2019, pp. 94-108.

abundance, he immediately thinks about the biblical story of Joseph, with his dreams and prophecies[373].

This little dive into the mind of a Piedmonts' traveler shows some of the most evident cultural references of that time. In front of those references, Egypt seemed both like a remote, unexplored land and – at the same time – like a close, familiar neighbor. On one hand, Egypt represented an oriental fabled image; on the other one, it was a crucial part of Europeans' cultural system, rooted in well-known and familiar stories[374].

The decipherment of hieroglyphs would change all this, but still in a slow and gradual way. Jean-François Champollion himself was of course influenced by the cultural background described so far[375].

The European gaze on ancient Egypt, filtered through Greece and Rome and read against biblical Christian traditions, was just one of many possible points of view. While Western historiography was so focused on the above-mentioned references, the Arab, Muslim, and Coptic worlds had their own views, projections, and traditions concerning the ancient Egyptian civilization[376]. Only recently, Western scholar attention turned to these alternative approaches, highlighting local interpretations and projections on historical and archaeological heritage[377]. A complete history of Egyptology certainly needs to put those different points of view together, so that a wide and varied image of modern reception of ancient Egypt can be presented.

4.2. Western and white appropriations of ancient Egypt: medical science, anthropology, and racial debates

The Western academic study of ancient Egypt strongly accelerated after Napoleon's expedition, with the savants' documentation and publication of ruins and monuments. A further burst was

[373] Roccati 2019, p. 86.
[374] On this duality, see Said 1978, pp. 1-30. On the concepts of orientalism and exoticism, with reference to archaeology and the so-called Near East, see also Boher 1998, pp. 336-356; Boher 2003, pp. 42-65.
[375] For recent reflections on Champollion and his Western perspective on Egyptian heritage, see Brindisi 2024.
[376] As far as Arabic texts are concerned, see El Daly 2005, *passim*. Very recently, attention has also been paid to local people who have been directly and actively involved in Western archaeological missions, through their physical and manual labor. I refer to local workforce, strongly employed in the excavation of archaeological sites. As far as Egypt is concerned, see Quirke 2010, *passim*. For a broader picture on local archaeological workforce in the Near-East, see Çelik 2016, pp. 135-174.
[377] See Reid 2002, *passim*; Colla 2008, *passim*.

granted by Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs, which opened new scenarios in the understanding of ancient Egyptian sources.

Scholarly investigations went hands in hands with a general public's interest towards ancient Egypt, which became a popular subject in a range of Western leisurely products: from books to panoramas, from public lectures to open demonstrations[378].

Between the 18th and 20th century, several waves of Egyptomania and Egyptophilia happened both in Europe and in the US, concerning both aesthetics and symbolism[379].

Egyptian symbols became part of the Western visual world, creating a specific taste[380]. In 1830-40, for instance, a peak in Egyptian architectural revival happened across the United States[381]. More broadly, symbols from ancient Egypt seemed suitable in order to convey certain messages, adopting them as part of a shared and understandable visual language.

In the first half of the 19th century, however, the understanding and study of the ancient world was changing rapidly. Western sciences were developing new approaches and creating new disciplines, including historical linguistics, ethnology, and comparative anatomy[382].

All these methodologies were applied, together or independently, in order to analyze the history of humankind, with its transformations and developments. There were fundamental questions on the table, including the geographical and chronological origin of humankind.

The linguistic, ethnic, and racial variety of humankind raised questions about differences: some scholars, for instance, thought that different races had been created at different times[383]. Others, instead, believed in a single creation of humanity and a later subdivision in races[384].

Traces from ancient civilizations could be studied in order to try and find answers to similar questions. Ancient Egypt, with its large amount of remains – including human ones – became an important field of investigation on similar topics. Given its prestige as the earliest great civilization in humankind, scholars started wondering to which racial groups ancient Egyptian belonged.

[378] Fritze 2016, pp. 181-222.
[379] For instance, see Actis Caporale 2004, pp. 67-98.
[380] Bussels & Oostveldt 2020, pp. 219-224.
[381] Fazzini & McKercher 2011, pp. 135-159.
[382] Champion 2003, pp. 162-163.
[383] Keel 2013, pp. 3-32; Knapman 2016, pp. 909-923.
[384] Alexander 2019, pp. 835-861.

Till the first part of the 19th century, most scholars used to give for granted that ancient Egyptians were black, relying on classical sources such as Herodotus[385]. That assumption started to be challenged especially during the 1810s and 1820s, when European travelers, naturalists and historians suggested different views[386].

Denying the blackness of ancient Egypt did not immediately mean that scholars believed ancient Egyptians were white. Other theories were indeed proposed, including an Asian origin of Egyptians[387]. The idea of white ancient Egyptians, however, gradually emerged, for instance through statements by Julien Joseph Virey, a French physician and pharmacist[388].

That view got stronger and stronger in the US, in a political and social context where racial questions were extremely relevant. On the eve of American Civil War, ancient Egypt became a theoretical laboratory on which debates about race could be developed. The past could even become a means to justify the contemporary social status of black individuals in the US and especially in the South of the country.

Samuel George Morton, George R. Gliddon, and Josiah C. Nott were some of the main propagators of that view[389]. Morton, a physician from Philadelphia, conducted craniometric analyses on human skulls, focusing on remains from north America, but also on many other areas of the world[390]. His special interest in ancient Egypt is demonstrated by *Crania Aegyptiaca*, an essay published in 1844. According to his view, ancient Egypt could absolutely not be seen as a black civilization. In Morton's opinion, Blacks were indeed part of the ancient Egyptian society, but their role was an inferior one, characterized by subservience. In his words, black individuals in ancient Egypt used to play the same social role attributed to black individuals at Morton's time in the US[391].

Morton's ideas were celebrated and propagated by George R. Gliddon, and Josiah C. Nott, who published a large work entitled *Types of Mankind* in 1854[392]. Dedicated to Morton, that book

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[385] On Herodotus and the category of blackness see Samuels 2015, pp. 723-741.
[386] See Bernasconi 2007, pp. 9-13. As illustrated by Bernasconi, consider – for instance – authors such Georges Cuvier, Giovanni Battista Belzoni, Arnold H. L. Heeren.
[387] Bernasconi 2007, pp. 8-9.
[388] Bernasconi 2007, pp. 12-13.
[389] Champion 2003, pp. 168-175; Bernasconi 2007, p. 16.
[390] The Morton cranial collection is today preserved at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. See Renschler & Monge 2008, pp. 30-38. For a critical reflection on the role of this collection today, see Geller 2024, pp. 1-19.
[391] Morton 1844, pp. 65-67.
[392] Nott & Gliddon 1854, pp. ix-xii. See Bernasconi 2007, p. 15. On the reception of Morton see also Michael 2020, pp. 279-312.

argued for polygenetic theories and for the "permanence of racial difference". A dive into the authors' biographies immediately shows how their theories were closely tied with their own life and customs: Nott, for instance, strongly defended slavery and its role in the economy of Southern states[393].

As shown by the examples provided and by the scholars involved in those debates, it is clear that the questions being discussed were concerned less with the past and far more with the present.

Comparative anatomy and physical anthropology grew abruptly in Europe and Italy as well, especially in the second half of the 1800[394]. High-profile scholars at that time were Paolo Mantegazza, Cesare Lombroso, Giuseppe Sergi and Enrico Morselli[395]. Some of them were engaged in disciplinary debates, concerning the most reliable methods for the analysis of human remains and especially human skulls[396].

This type of studies led, also in the Italian context, to the development of narratives concerning human races, ancient civilizations, and contemporary populations. In the 1890s, for instance, Giuseppe Sergi proposed the so-called theory of the Mediterranean race. It is also known as the Euro-African theory and it was based, again, on comparative analysis of cranial features[397]. In Sergi's opinion, European peoples belonged to a single racial group, which settled in the Mediterranean area starting from Neolithic times[398]. The Mediterranean shores, and therefore also Europe, had been inhabited by a coherent group of people, which originally came from the same territory: the horn of Africa. Those people had migrated north, reaching north Africa and then Europe. This migration paved the way to the great Mediterranean civilizations, including ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome[399].

[393] Reginald 1987, pp. 1-3; Bernasconi 2007, p. 15.
[394] On the emergence and development of Italian anthropology, see Roselli 2016, pp. 601-655.
[395] Volpone 2011, pp. 59-61.
[396] Cerro 2015, pp. 29-52; Cerro 2017, pp. 227-230.
[397] Cerro 2017, p. 231.
[398] Sergi 1895, p. 76.
[399] About Sergi's theory of a Mediterranean race, see Sergi 1897, *passim*. For a more specific analysis on the origins of ancient Egyptians, see Sergi 1900, pp. 133-152. In that analysis Sergi does not accept the idea of Asian origins of ancient Egyptian: he advocates, instead, for a strong African root, coherently with his broader Euro-African theory.

At a time of nation building, this theory was appreciated and impactful[400]. It resurfaced in scholarly and political discussion around 1937, when fascist Italy was strongly debating on races, ancient glory, and Arjan or Mediterranean origins[401]. At that time, those who supported Sergi's idea partially modified it, keeping the idea of a Mediterranean origin of Europe, but erasing the assumption that northern Africa and southern Europe shared the same origin.

Support to Sergi's theory was not unanimous and many alternative racist theories existed in fascist Italy[402]. Giovanni Marro, anthropologist and physician, was a strong detractor. He could not accept, for instance, that Europeans came from Africa[403]. His view also included a strong antisemitism and a defense of Arjan contributions to European civilization. All of this was very coherent with fascist ideology and its political alliance with Germany.

Marro's view on the topic is very important for our discussion, given his role in the anthropological, archaeological, and museum fields. In 1926 he founded the Turin Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, which was opened within Palazzo Carignano[404]. The collection included human remains from Egypt, recovered during archaeological excavations directed by Ernesto Schiaparelli and Giulio Farina, directors of the Egyptian Museum of Turin. Marro was directly involved in the expeditions organized by the *Missione Archeologica Italiana* and his presence was impactful on the site, bridging field archaeology and anthropological methods[405]. Marro's collaboration with the Egyptian Museum produced results also beyond his interest in anthropology. For instance, he focused on the figure of Drovetti and managed to recover private letters and documents[406].

Academic merits aside, he was a fervent supporter of fascism and its politics, including the racial laws. These aspects are especially evident in his work at the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography, where he designed a section on Italian race, having Mussolini as a guest visitor[407]. From Marro's works – conducted especially on human remains retrieved from excavations – it is

[400] Pizzato 2015, pp. 25-52. According to Edoardo Marcello Barsotti, the entanglement between archaeology and race studies played a role even earlier, throughout the whole process of Italian *Risorgimento*. See Barsotti 2021, pp. 1-19, 46-80.
[401] Cerro 2017, pp. 223-224.
[402] Piasere 2021, pp. 441-446.
[403] Cerro 2017, p. 254.
[404] Mangiapane & Grasso 2019a, p. 3.
[405] Boano et al. 2017, pp. 307-329.
[406] Donatelli 2013, pp. 93-94.
[407] Mangiapane & Grasso 2019b, pp. 37-38.

possible to recognize his attempt to define and describe what he believed to be an "egyptian race"[408]. Besides the disputed topic of the origins of ancient Egyptians, he was also interested in attributing psychological and moral features to ancient and modern Egyptians, adding ethnography and photographic analysis to anatomical and anthropological methods[409].

The obsession for racial debates and its insertion in archaeological and historical studies has characterized several scholarly works between the second half of 1800 and the first decades of the 20th century. Racist assumptions and prejudices were applied to archaeology and to human ancient civilizations, including Egypt and its glorious past.

Besides Marro, we could mention other authors who focused on the Egyptian civilization and its racial roots. Giuseppe Galassi was a painter, art historian, and art critic, who largely worked as a journalist both in Italy and abroad[410]. In 1930 he was sent to Egypt, in order to merge two pre-existing journals and create a new one: Il *Giornale d'Oriente*[411]. He left Egypt ten years later and in 1942 he published *Tehenu: le origini mediterranee della civiltà egizia*. In that work he focused on ancient populations of north Africa, and especially Lybia, lingering on their connections with ancient Egypt and the area of the Nile Delta. In his opinion, prehistoric populations from the Lybian region moved to the Nilotic delta in prehistoric times and became the very first inhabitants of that area[412]. They then descended southward, together with the predynastic mythical rulers of Egypt[413]. At the beginning of the first dynasty, when the Egyptian country was unified under Menes, the Tehenu people eventually became part of the emerging Egyptian population. These people, according to Galassi, were white and kept having a certain prestige throughout the entire Egyptian dynastic history. Even if the Egyptian civilization was described as a racially mixed society, Galassi's theory explained that ancient Egyptians did not have their roots in Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, but in an imagined white north Africa.

This view and this emphasis on Lybia might have depended on the relationship between Italy and its north African colony[414]. The political appropriation of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica, indeed, went

[408] Mangiapane & Boano 2024, p. 133.
[409] Mangiapane et al. 2020, pp. 363-364.
[410] Ciancabilla 2022, pp. 326-329.
[411] Ciancabilla 2022, p. 327.
[412] Galassi 1942, pp. 7-8.
[413] Galassi 1942, p. 45.
[414] This idea is suggested in Biga 2022, p. 404.

hands in hands with the construction of a myth which depicted Lybia as tightly connected with Italy since ancient times[415].

Alongside such historical narratives, Italians built images of the colonial world through several different media. Lybia and its inhabitants, for instance, have been depicted through books and stories that are typically labelled under the category of "colonial novel"[416]. Born at least after the Italo-Ottoman war, that literary genre was aimed at spreading knowledge on colonies and also at depicting them as positive and welcoming territories. From this point of view, ancient history and archaeology could sometimes play a role, as shown in both adults and children's novels that evoke the ancient Roman presence in Northern Africa[417]. In the book titled "*La Sperduta di Allah*", the ancient Roman ruins of Leptis Magna are presented as a safe space where the Italian protagonist finds not only comfort, but also his identity and roots[418]. Those stories could therefore foster a discourse about legitimation and Italian rights over certain territories.

4.3. Other appropriations: the response of American Afrocentrism

In the 19th century the discipline of Egyptology was hit by a strong racial debate, especially in the United States. As discussed above, white supremacist stances were justified also through ancient history, archeology, and anthropology. Ancient societies, such as the ancient Egyptian one, were used to state a supposed inferiority of black people. Influenced by racist prejudices and by their contemporaneity, several scholars tended to attribute to black individuals living in Pharaonic Egypt an inevitable and immutable subdued role. In this way, the social history of ancient Egypt was interpreted with thick and misleading lenses.

Those abominable racist theories were contested by white abolitionists, both in the US and abroad[419]. African American intellectuals, however, also entered the conversation, responding strongly to the above-mentioned statements. Often times, the most vocal intellectuals were members of the clergy, who used to have more access to education[420]. Not surprisingly, one first

[415] Troilo 2021, pp. 198-211.
[416] See Tomasello 2004, *passim*; Casales 2023, pp. 1-16.
[417] Consider, for instance, the children book titled "*Le strepitose avventure di Pistacchio alla guerra di Libia*", where the protagonist claims Lybia should be back under Roman and Italian control. See Casales 2023, pp. 205-210.
[418] See Casales 2023, pp. 147-157.
[419] Examples are Abbé Henri-Baptiste Grégoire and Alexander Hill Everett. See Fritze 2016, pp. 304-305.
[420] Fritze 2016, p. 306.

point of reference was again the Bible, as shown by quotes and analyses of biblical passages. Noah's account, for instance, was seen as a useful source to understand human history: Noah's three sons (Shem, Ham and Japheth) could be considered at the origins of different human races[421]. The role of Africa in the overall development of humankind was emphasized, tracing its relevance and contribution back to remote ancient times. Magazine articles, essays, and novels were produced by African American people of culture, mentioning Egypt and its African root as a crucial brick in their counter-narrative. Similar arguments were presented, for instance, in the Freedom's Journal, the first US newspaper to be owned and operated by African Americans[422].

David Walker, an African American abolitionist living in Boston, was one of the authors working for that journal. In 1829 he published a pamphlet titled *Walker's Appeal, in Four Articles; Together with a Preamble, to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America*. His Appeal was full of quotes and references to ancient Greece and Rome: one of his aims was to show his acquaintance with the classical tradition, so frequently exploited by white supremacists[423]. Interesting, his view of ancient Mediterranean history included a new reading of Hannibal, seen as an African hero[424]. Egypt was also taken into account: described as a colored civilization, it was celebrated as the origin of human knowledge[425]. According to Walker's view, Greek and Roman civilizations could later flourish and prosper only thanks to their debt toward African Egypt[426]. Similar ideas were put forth by other black abolitionists, who presented both Egypt and Ethiopia as the earliest advanced civilizations[427]. Frederick Douglass, founder of the journal North Star, strongly promoted those ideas, claiming a clear link between African Americans, Ethiopians, and Egyptians[428]. His speeches and publications were often directed against white scientists, such as Samuel G. Morton, and their racial classifications[429]. The debate on racial sciences was entered also by African American scholars with a training in medical science: James McCune Smith and Martin R. Delany were both

[421] Trafton 2004, pp 59-77. Among others, consider authors such as Edward Wilmot Blyden.
[422] On this newspaper see Bacon 2007, *passim*.
[423] Machado 2024, pp. 356-357.
[424] Machado 2024, pp. 356-358.
[425] Fritze 2016, p. 305.
[426] Walker 1829, p. 22.
[427] I refer to authors such as Herny Garnet or Frederick Douglass.
[428] Quarles 1979, p. 102.
[429] Quarles 1979, p. 102; Rusert 2017, pp. 125-126.

physicians and they developed reflections and theories concerning craniology, phrenology, and the genesis of human races[430].

Medical science aside, in 1879 Delany published *Principia of Ethnology: The Origin of Races and Color, with an Archaeological Compendium of Ethiopian and Egyptian Civilization, from Years of Careful Examination and Enquiry*[431]. In this work Delany emphasized the role of blacks in ancient history, focusing on biblical accounts, tracing the importance of Ethiopia and highlighting its connections with ancient Egypt. The above-mentioned topics were popularized also in novels and magazine articles, as showed by works written by Pauline Hopkins. Hopkins was a black writer who worked frequently for the Colored American Magazine, a journal based in Boston and then in New York[432].

Her novel *Of One Blood* – published between 1902 and 1903 – showed a direct link between contemporary African Americans and the glorious past of ancient Egypt and Nubia[433]. This work managed, once again, to show how Africans had been crucial in the history of humanity. It also promoted the idea that contemporary African Americans were the descendants of a shared legacy, destined to a bright common future. These ideas would become the seeds of late 1960's American Afrocentric movement[434]. Among the precursors of those movements one main character was certainly William Edward Burghardt Du Bois. Du Bois earned his PhD at Harvard in 1895 and wrote extensively on the history of Africa, tracing connections between several African communities and cultures[435]. He saw Ethiopia as one cradle of civilization, considering it the core from which many developments originated[436]. Egypt was described as the most learned civilization, and its origins were linked back to Ethiopians and black individuals[437]. Du Bois reflected deeply on those topics and contested white approaches to archaeology and Egyptology.

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[430] Quarles 1979, p. 102; Trafton 2004, pp 63-69, 79-80, 84; Patterson 2013, pp. 459-484; Rusert 2017, pp. 113-148. Fisher 2021, p. 467.
[431] Fritze 2016, p. 307.
[432] Allen 1998, pp. 7-9.
[433] Gillman 1996, pp. 61, 66, 74.
[434] Bay 2000, pp. 502-503; Khokholkova 2016, pp. 11-125.
[435] Fritze 2016, p. 314. Du Bois was also founder of a magazine called The Crisis. He was in contact with many scholars and intellectuals, from different parts of the world. For instance, he exchanged letters with archaeologist Flinders Petrie. See Du Bois & Petrie 1912, pp. 34-37.
[436] Fritze 2016, p. 314.
[437] Fritze 2016, p. 312, 314.

For instance, in his work *Black Folk: Then and Now* – published in 1939 – he depicted Egyptology as a discipline made by white scholars, in a colonial and imperialistic context[438].

In the last section of this chapter I meant to provide an overview of African American responses to mainstream Western Egyptology. Those responses were especially triggered by scientific racism, and by the analysis of human races conducted by scholars such as Morton, Gliddon, and Nott. Ancient history was deemed as a crucial ground on which human equality could be stated. Their main attempt was to show that blacks and Africans have had a fundamental role in the history of mankind, and that Western civilization had grown out of African roots.
Studies on African archaeology were however extremely limited and knowledge about certain areas of the continent was extremely low. African American responses were therefore still based, first of all, on biblical accounts and classical sources, with a special attention towards Egypt, Nubia, and Ethiopia. Western Africa, from which the slave trade used to depart, was not at center stage: the Eastern part of the continent, with the Nile valley and its evocative power, was the hinge of black-centered historical narratives[439]. Interestingly, very similar sources (such as the Bible) led to completely opposing results.
Faced with the Western appropriation of ancient Egypt, which had even been transformed in a completely white and European civilization, the African American world tried to answer with its own counter appropriation. The intellectual trajectories presented so far really show how knowledge production – especially as far as history is regarded – can be a deeply disputed field. Strikingly enough, those controversies happened away from the actual Egyptian country and far from local Egyptian perspectives. The Western world, and especially the US, used the Egyptian past for their internal issues and debates, projecting on the Nile valley their own social, political, and ethical questions.

[438] Du Bois 1939, p. 25.
[439] Quarles 1979, p. 101.

CHAPTER 5. LOOKING FOR A BALANCE: MUSEUMS' RESPONSES AND INITIATIVES

5.1. Recent trends in displaying ancient Egypt: permanent collections and temporary exhibitions

As discussed in the previous chapter, the fields of archaeology, history, and Egyptology had been strongly rooted in racist discourses, providing intellectual grounds for debates about human races, whiteness, and alterity. Archeology, which might be perceived as a discipline detached from politics, had instead become fertile land to develop views concerning supposed superiority and inferiority of human groups[440]. This is especially true if we take into account the relationship between archaeology and coloniality, which has been analyzed more deeply in recent years. In Italy, for instance, recent studies have focused on the use of archaeology in Italian colonial contexts, especially in Lybia[441]. Simona Troilo, who has also analyzed Italian archaeological efforts in Crete and Rhodes, has showed how archaeological missions in different parts of the Mediterranean have helped shaping the modern identity of European powers[442]. More concretely, the archaeological past has been used and exploited to justify military occupation and colonial domination. In this sense, one strategy has been to create or emphasize supposed links between colonial rulers and ancient civilizations. In Lybia, the above-described aim was achieved by building upon the roman past of that country: Italians presented themselves as the legitimate heirs of Lybian Roman legacy[443]. As shown previously, there were even attempts to present northern Africa, from Lybia to Egyptian delta, as a land originally inhabited by white populations, directly connected with Europe.

As seen in the previous chapter, racial aspects were protagonists in historical and archaeological reflections between 1800s and the first part of the 20th century[444]. Ideas and hypotheses concerning ethnicity in the ancient world have deeply overlapped with modern and contemporary issues, entangling historical questions with social and political debates.

[440] See for instance Dodd & Boytner 2010, pp. 1-4.
[441] Troilo 2021, pp. 77-127.
[442] Petricioli 1990, *passim*; Troilo 2021, pp. 14-76.
[443] Zerbini 2024, pp. 131-146. For the permanence of those ideas even after fascism, see Munzi 2004, pp. 77-81.
[444] See, in general, Díaz-Andreu 2007, pp. 278-316. On the first decades of 20th century, see Siapkas 2016, pp. 1-9. On today's entanglement of archaeology and racism, see Schumann 2019, pp. 252-272.

From today's point of view, that racial obsession seems almost unbelievable. At first glance, one would say that archaeology used to be a completely different discipline than it is nowadays, with peculiar aims, ambitions, and goals.

As discussed above, the discipline of Egyptology was not exempt from racial debates; as a matter of fact, those topics were at center stage in the study of ancient Egypt and of the ancient Mediterranean[445]. In the United States, Egyptology played a role in the racial debate, becoming a battleground for suprematism and abolitionism, at the dawn of American civil war.

As we will see in this chapter, museums are nowadays acknowledging parts of that story, recognizing faults or responsibilities.

Besides racial appropriations of ancient Egypt, there have been many reflections on how ancient Egypt has been positioned geographically and culturally within galleries and museums. For instance, Western museums have often presented the ancient Egyptian civilization as a separate cultural phenomenon, detaching it from its African context[446]. Indeed, the relationship between Egypt and Africa has been watered down, especially if we consider museums' displays, galleries' arrangement, and the organization of curatorial departments. At the same time, for disciplinary reasons, Egypt has frequently been included in antiquity departments, with little connection with the later developments of the Egyptian territory[447]. The late antique, byzantine, and Arab phases have been often overshadowed by earlier periods of Egyptian history. One result is that ancient Egypt has been explained and understood as detached and unique, fostering once again a general obsession for pharaonic Egypt and a widespread need for consuming that civilization[448].

Going back to the relationship between ancient Egypt and Africa, the museum field has lately felt the need to linger on that topic, trying to reconfigure the positioning of ancient Egypt in galleries and beyond. This has been the case especially in archaeological and arts museums in the United States, where attempts to deepen that relationship have happened already in the 1990s[449]. Indeed, in the second half of that decade curators of African departments have organized some temporary exhibitions on that very theme. The Indianapolis Museum of Art designed a small exhibition in

[445] Sedra 2004, pp. 249-259.
[446] Moreno García 2015, pp. 55-60.
[447] Gange 2015, pp. 64-80.
[448] Rice & MacDonald 2003, pp. 1-22.
[449] Purdy & Arico 2024, p. 6.

1996, with the title "Egypt in Africa". The show was accompanied by a book edited by Theodore Celenko, who promoted and led the exhibition[450].In a similar way, the Seattle Art Museum posed similar questions with a temporary exhibition titled "Is Egyptian Art African?", organized in 1998 and curated by Pamela McClusky.

More recently, however, museums' actions on that topic have become more common and more widespread in the US. On one hand, prominent museums have paved the way and influenced other institutions; on the other one, social factors have pushed for more attention on topics concerning Africa. The killing of George Floyd in May 2020 and the subsequent protests across the country have urged museums to play a more active role and provide more attention towards African cultures and American citizens of African descent[451].

In 2019 the Penn Museum of Philadelphia opened its renewed Africa Galleries. Curated by Tukufu Zuberi – who is professor of sociology and Africana studies – the reopening was the result of several years' work and reflections[452]. The revisited Africa Galleries touch upon several topics which are crucial to today's museum field, including decolonization, artefacts provenance, and repatriation. As mentioned in the third chapter of this dissertation, some of those themes have been dealt with through arts installations and collaboration with contemporary artists. In general, according to the curator's words, the new gallery has aimed not only at displaying artefacts from African cultures, but also at showcasing the strong impact of African symbols, objects, and traditions on the contemporary world, both globally and in the US[453]. It therefore provides a very lively and dynamic view of African cultures, getting along with some local American communities and their need to explore identity and connections.

With that being said, Egypt played a small but significant role in the renovation of Penn Museum's Africa Galleries. An Egyptian statue has been placed at one of the entrances to the gallery: more precisely, it is a colossal head made of granite, representing a pharaoh[454]. Its presence at the entrance of the gallery works as a material and visual bridge with the Egypt and Nubia gallery, which is currently under renovation. Without lingering too much on the connection between Egypt and Africa, the sculpture acknowledges that ancient Egypt and Africa should not be seen as two

[450] Celenko 1996.
[451] On the story of those movements, see Chambers 2021, *passim*.
[452] Connell Haslam & Hickman 2019, pp. 40-43.
[453] García, December 11, 2019.
[454] Little information is known about the recently restored artefact. On the gallery see Shepard, November 14, 2019.

completely different words. More details on the topic are provided through guided tours, especially through those ones designed for schools[455].

In a few years, when the Egypt and Nubia galleries will be open again, the ancient Nile civilizations will be mainly presented and explained within those rooms. Interestingly, however, other museum galleries will keep displaying some Egyptian artefacts, creating connections and bridges through galleries and disciplines. That will be the case as far as the Africa galleries are concerned, but also in regards of the Eastern Mediterranean gallery, which showcases the so-called Levant and its relationship with many different civilizations, including ancient Egypt[456].

The Penn Museum Africa Galleries renovations happened in 2019; in the meantime, however, other museum institutions have carried out reflections and initiatives on the same topic. An example is provided by the Art Institute of Chicago, where curatorial departments have been reorganized in summer of 2020. The ancient Egyptian collection, which used to be part of the Ancient and Byzantine Art curatorial department, was entrusted to the Department of Arts of Africa, making a choice mostly based on geographical aspects[457]. It has been an administrative and structural change, with a strong impact on the future of the institution[458]. The idea was therefore to move beyond the view of ancient Egypt as isolated from its geographical and cultural context – a perspective traditionally upheld by Western museums. As stated by the curators of the Egyptian, Classical, and African collections, this new approach will lead to interesting innovations and new opportunities for dialogue[459]. As discussed by Christina Riggs, Egypt has been positioned and construed in different ways through the history of Western museology[460]. The treatment of ancient Egypt in museums has been influenced by the creation of an independent profession and discipline: Egyptology, focused on specific aspects of Egyptian past. The existence of such isolated discipline has gone hands in hands with the self-containment of ancient Egypt in museums galleries. That containment produced several effects: for instance, it allowed Egyptian past to be twisted and perceived in different ways, depending on the hosting institution and its context[461].

[455] The Penn Museum offers free tours to local schools, providing free transportation. This means that public access to the museum is very open and wide.
[456] Crimmins, November 20, 2022.
[457] Purdy & Arico 2024
[458] Indeed, in 2022 a renewed Egyptian gallery opened at the Art Institute of Chicago. It was entitled "Life and Afterlife in Ancient Egypt".
[459] See Boshell Foundation Virtual Lecture, February 18, 2021.
[460] Riggs 2010, pp. 1129-53.
[461] Riggs 2010, p. 1145.

Depicted as either familiar or remotely distant, Egypt has been placed in a detached, isolated, but elevated position.

Similarly to what happened at the Penn Museum, small changes to the permanent galleries have also taken place in Baltimore, specifically at the Baltimore Museum of Art. In 2021 several rooms have been re-opened on the first floor, introducing novelties, updates, and changes[462]. A geographical approach was employed, focusing each time on different parts of the world: for the first time, separated galleries have been dedicated to Oceanian art and Ancient Americas. Every gallery is introduced by maps and cartographic representations, highlighting the geographical perspective in a clear way. The African section was renovated, providing new museum interpretation to another large African collection within the United States. Curated by Kevin Tervala, the gallery is described as running from ancient Egypt to contemporary Nigeria[463]. Indeed, the exhibition opens with ancient Egyptian artefacts, such as a granite relief fragment depicting Ramses II[464]. Subsequently, it presents artefacts originating from other regions of the African continent, exploring African cultures through different ages. The idea is again to create a direct link between Africa and ancient Egypt, without detaching the Egyptian land from its geographical context. In this case, however, the museum does not have a huge ancient Egyptian collection and, in general, it is not too focused on the disciplines of archaeology and ancient history. The impact on the collection and its narratives was therefore a bit different in comparison with what happened at the Penn Museum and at the Art Institute of Chicago; the message, however, was a very similar one.

The above-mentioned interventions – especially the Philadelphia and Baltimore ones – can be described as small intrusions, with the Egyptian past entering African galleries. The reason, as previously discussed, was to provide a more up-to-date understanding of ancient Egypt, acknowledging that the relationship between Egypt and African cultures have been frequently overlooked by Western museums.

In 2021 the Metropolitan Museum has tried to explore that relationship in a stronger way, recognizing that American arts and archaeological museums should have focused more on that

[462] BMA Press Release, June 29, 2021.
[463] BMA Press Release, October 7, 2021.
[464] In the museum catalogue, that object is registered as: BMA 1931.4.1.

topic. A temporary exhibition – which remained visible till October 2024 – opened within the Metropolitan's Egyptian gallery[465]. Set half-way through the visit route, the temporary exhibition was staged in a dark and elegant room, featuring an aesthetic distinctively divergent from the rest of the Egyptian section. Titled "The African Origin of Civilization", it brought the visitor into a quite unexpected discourse, which aimed at showing similarities between ancient Egypt and sub-Saharan African cultures, especially from central and western Africa. Showcasing twenty-one pairings of works, the exhibition compared ancient Egyptian artefacts with objects dating between the 16th and 20th centuries[466]. Juxtaposition was the media device employed in that room: couples of very different artefacts were juxtaposed, in order to highlight certain similarities and points of convergence[467]. Based first of all on visual and iconographic elements, it was an effective strategy, which conveyed specific messages in a fast and clear way. In such a game of contrasts and affinities, the visitor is initially presented with a lack of depth; however, labels provide information about the pairing, and room texts offer the necessary conceptual framework. That comparative and visual approach is adopted by the museum in an informed and reasoned way; interestingly, however, the same approach is used in informal and non-institutional situations, when debates about identity are raised. For instance, there is a number of Facebook groups which are deeply focused on showing a tight relationship between ancient Egypt and African cultures. That relationship is almost always evoked through the juxtaposition of objects, traditions, and images, using a simple and visual strategy, but without providing an historical and archaeological framework. The Metropolitan Museum has used a similar powerful and winning communication technique; obviously, however, it also added the interpretative apparatus necessary to support an understanding of the theme under discussion and its various nuances[468]. In my opinion, what I have just mentioned really embodies the role of museum institutions in our society: indeed, it is precisely with an open but rigorous attitude that museums can build trust and relevance. The quite aesthetic design of the room at issue also helped elevating the narrative, making it stronger and more effective.

[465] The African Origin of Civilization, MET website.
[466] Wilkin 2022, p. 44.
[467] About the method of juxtaposition in visual arts and communication, see Sørensen 2013, pp. 46-63.
[468] Some reviewers, however, stated that more interpretation was needed, both on the works themselves and on the pairing operation. See for instance Glama, 30 March, 2022.

This exhibit was organized during the temporary closure of the MET's permanent African gallery. It was imagined as a celebration of Senegalese scholar Cheikh Anta Diop, of his scholarly work, and his activism. Diop was a historian, egyptologist, and activist, who claimed that a better understanding of African cultures was needed[469]. On that regard, he had been a member of the scientific committee which worked for the publication of UNESCO General History of Africa, an eight volumes corpus covering the history of the entire continent. In many of his texts, Diop has emphasized the connection between ancient Egypt and other African cultures, opening the debate with scholars of several disciplines[470].

The gallery "The African Origin of Civilization" shows that it is possible to find new ways of interpreting collections, sparking inspiration and challenging old ways of thinking. In my view, these curatorial and interpretive efforts can be read on multiple levels. On the one hand, museums aim at providing education on certain themes, positioning themselves as reliable and informative institutions on a series of topics. On the other hand, museums reflect on their past practices and on issues concerning the scholarly disciplines they embrace; doing so, they sometimes try to provide visitors with a refreshed point of view, recognizing that certain points of view have been completely overlooked. Rebalancing voices, stories, and perspectives can be seen as a reparative act. In the context we have been discussing so far, the reparative gesture is mainly addressed to people of African descent, and especially African American communities living in urban environments.

The reparative approach is particularly clear if we take the Brooklyn Museum into account and the work it has been conducting in recent years. Founded in the first half of the 19th century, the Brooklyn Museum became New York City's second largest art museum, with a collection spanning from ancient Egypt to contemporary art. In 2022 the permanent Egyptian gallery was enriched by some displays and exhibits; all together, those components formed a temporary exhibition which is still ongoing, and which works as a museum spotlight[471]. Curated by Yekaterina Barbash and Kathy Zurek-Doule, who both work in the department of Egyptian, Classical, and Ancient Near Eastern Art, the exhibition is titled "African Ancestors of Egypt and Nubia: From the Green Sahara to the Nile". The curatorial process involved consultation with research groups, scholars, and

[469] Craig Patch & LaGamma 2022, pp. 6-7.
[470] Barbosa 2012, pp. 195-214.
[471] African ancestors of Egypt and Nubia, Brooklyn Museum website.

experts – mainly from the US but also from Egypt[472]. The interpretative apparatus highlights the common origin of Egyptian and Nubian cultures, focusing on predynastic objects and materials. Interestingly, however, it also lingers on the history of Egyptology, on reception of ancient Egypt and on the history of studies. The exhibition is very clear in explaining that most early Western archaeologists used to underestimate the relations between Egypt and Nubia, overlooking theories concerning Nubian origins and refusing to analyze ancient Egypt within an African ethnic and cultural framework. In contrast to those viewpoints, the studies and works of African American authors are presented and given emphasis. An effort is thus made to shed light on a chapter of archaeology and cultural reception that is often neglected. Besides a brief reference to visual artist Aaron Douglas, the exhibition presents the scholarly and literary work conducted by W. E. B. Du Bois, William Leo Hansberry, and Pauline Hopkins. In a simple but detailed way, their reflections, activism, and impact are recounted and explained, opening a window onto a topic that the average Egyptian museum gallery would not treat.

An interest in telling similar stories, however, has gradually grown, both in the US and abroad. At the Metropolitan Museum an exhibition has been on display from November 2024 to February 2025, addressing some of the themes mentioned above. It was entitled "Flight into Egypt: Black Artists and Ancient Egypt, 1876–Now" and was curated by Akili Tommasino, curator in the Department of Modern and Contemporary Art at The Met[473]. The aim of the exhibition was mainly to explore how modern and contemporary black artists have engaged with ancient Egypt[474]. Visual arts (including painting and sculpting) and performative arts (such as music and dancing) have been at center stage[475]. Several artists were considered or involved, giving space also to modern and contemporary artists from Egypt. Part of the exhibition was also dedicated to those African American intellectuals who have first claimed that a white appropriation of ancient Egypt was happening. References to Frederick Douglass are offered and several magazine issues are displayed, including pages from the African American journal "The Crisis", which I had mentioned above.

All of the initiatives seen so far were different one to the other but shared a set of common purposes. One of them was to provide education about the reception of ancient Egypt, showing

[472] *Id*.
[473] Flight into Egypt, MET website.
[474] Streams, November 21, 2024.
[475] Kennicott, November 28, 2024.

how fertile and inspiring the ancient world can be in the modern arts scene. Another purpose was to show that museums can be multivocal, leaving Western-centric approaches behind. Doing so is perceived as an educational, engaging, and reparative action, offering remedy to past practices and previous ideologies.

While the above-mentioned efforts might be seen as admirable and commendable, they ultimately sparked significant controversy, especially from the Egyptian point of view.
The emphasis on Pan-Africanism has indeed worried some Egyptians, including officials and archaeological experts. There is a fear that a new cultural appropriation might happen, once again at detriment of Egypt and its cultural heritage. That topic is a raw nerve, which apparently can generate a lot of heated discussion, as demonstrated by events surrounding a museum exhibition organized in the Netherlands.
The Rijksmuseum van Oudheden – a leading archaeological institution located in Leiden – opened the much-discussed exhibition in April 2023. Entitled "Kemet: Egypt in Hip-Hop, Jazz, Soul & Funk", it was primarily dedicated to the modern reception of ancient Egypt, particularly within the Black music scene[476]. Its premises and purposes were therefore similar to the above-described exhibition organized by the Metropolitan Museum in 2024, but with a focus on music. The Dutch exhibition also included pieces of information concerning history and archaeology, with recent studies concerning the relationship between ancient Egypt and ancient Nubia[477]. "Kemet" was strongly criticized on social media, where numerous negative comments were left below contents posted by the museum[478]. Critiques were mainly about the Afrocentric approach to ancient Egypt and a supposed African appropriation of the ancient Egyptian civilization. Many of those comments were posted by Egyptians, meaning ordinary citizens; Egyptian authorities, however, also took part in the dispute. Sometime after the opening of the exhibition, its main curator received an email from the head of foreign missions of the Egyptian Antiquities Service, saying that the Leiden museum was falsifying history[479]. The reaction by Egyptian authorities had a very tangible effect: the Egyptian Antiquities Service denied excavation permit to the Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, which had been excavating in Saqqara since 1975.

[476] Kemet, Rijksmuseum website.
[477] About the reactions, Rijksmuseum website.
[478] The Arab Weekly, July 22, 2023.
[479] Ebrahim, June 7, 2023.

The Leiden exhibition was after all about the evergreen concept of Egyptomania. Of course, however, it concerned a less traditionally discussed kind of Egyptomania, different from the typical Western, Eurocentric, and white adoption of ancient Egyptian motifs[480]. Building an exhibition around black-centered Egyptomania, with a focus on music, was a good way to cover popular phenomena and engage with new publics. It was an opportunity for the museum to create new connections and engagement with communities and tourists. I believe that the exhibition was also a grand celebration of ancient Egypt, seen as a perennial source of inspiration for people, artists, and cultures. While the primary aim was to investigate and explore a modern and contemporary artistic phenomenon, it also worked as a chance to provide a less Eurocentric point of view. Detractors, however, did not perceive that process as a decolonial one; on the contrary, they saw it as just another cultural appropriation. Their critique is two-fold: not only Western museums take advantage of their status and their control over cultural artefacts originally from Egypt, but they also use their position to give voice to alternative claims on Egyptian past.

While shocking and surprising, that strong reaction against the Leiden exhibition can provide some food for thought concerning the post-colonial cultural field and the decolonization of museums. Indeed, it raises one fundamental question about museums practices: who is decolonization made for?

European and US museums are broadly making attempts and efforts to transform part of their work and provide a decolonial approach. One could wonder, however, if their agenda is compatible with needs and claims coming from countries which have suffered colonial domination and from which museum objects originated. While Western institutions are interested in reparative actions, they might be focused on specific decolonial aspects that are more relevant to internal policies and national society. This small but deep discrepancy is very visible when Egyptian cultural heritage is taken into account, given the number of claims and perspectives surrounding it.

5.2. Decolonization for whom? Community engagement on many levels

Starting from the reflections and issues discussed in the previous section, I will now try to explore some of those topics, taking into account also other concepts and aspects. For instance, I will linger on a very strong buzzword in today's museum professional field: community and derivative terms.

[480] Tommasino 2024, 16-33.

Moreover, I will consider educational activities and outreach events, showing how those museum practices relate with the decolonial debate.

Every museum institution is situated within a specific social, political and cultural context, which is obviously considered, analyzed, and respected.
In the US, as we have seen, archaeological and art museums have been trying to engage deeply with black communities, especially on a local scale. Leaving white-centered perspectives behind, they have been trying to give remedy to previous monolithic approaches and therefore build trust in groups which have frequently felt distanced from institutions of that kind. As laudable as it could be, this approach might end up prioritizing diasporic points of view, reducing attention to others. For example, less attention might be paid towards Egypt itself, which however should be at center stage when displaying Egyptian antiquities and when the history of collections is taken into account.
Addressing these issues certainly requires a search for correct and delicate balance. For instance, the Penn Museum has not only reflected on the relationship between Egypt and Africa (in its Africa galleries), but it is also collaborating with Egyptian artists for the renovation of the Egypt and Nubia section. There is therefore an attempt to have a diverse set of points of reference, on different topics and from more geographical areas.

There is no doubt that museums are faced with a complex, heterogeneous and varied public, especially in our globalized era. The communities and audiences which could be engaged are numerous; one could therefore wonder which ones should be preferred and heard the most. When telling stories about ancient Egypt and about excavations which happened in modern-age Egypt, curators might have in mind – as a first interlocutor – people living in Egypt today[481]. More precisely, attention could even be paid to communities which live near the several archaeological sites represented within the museum collection[482]. While heterogeneity is huge and generalizations are almost inevitable, devoting attention towards the places of origin of museums artefacts seems important and fruitful, especially when archaeological fieldwork is still on-going or sought after.

[481] Salem 2005, pp. 174-180; Hanna 2022, pp. 87-102.
[482] Tully 2011, pp. 137-152. More broadly, see Jameson & Baugher 2007, pp. 3-17.

It is obvious, however, that museums are placed in their very specific geographical context and that they need to engage, primarily, with people that might visit the museum in person with ease. From this point of view, museums could still have a privileged dialogue with people of Egyptian identity, focusing on local immigrants from that area[483]. Interlocutors could be both recent immigrants and descendants of immigrants; in both cases – which are very different from each other – there might be an interest towards museum collections and what they could offer them from an educational, emotional, and personal point of view[484].

Today's museum field, especially in the Anglo-Saxon world, is very focused on how people engage with material culture and how objects, stories, and images resonate with one's perceived identity[485]. These are complex topics, which form the foundation of contemporary cultural heritage studies, seen as the analysis of how the past is perceived in the present. From this point of view, people's perspective on the past are considered greatly enriching[486].

All of this is coherent with today's attention towards community archaeology, which is really based on the idea that archaeology is not detached from the present and from living communities, but it is intrinsically connected to people's lives[487]. This applies to the archaeology that Western institutions continue to promote abroad – for example, in Egypt – but it also holds true for the archaeology conducted in the areas surrounding the museum itself. Museums can indeed put their professional skills at the service of their city or even their neighborhood, offering meaningful archaeological research. The Penn Museum has been doing so with its project called "Heritage West", devoted to modern and contemporary archaeology. Active since September 2021, the project aims at exploring the transformations of a historically black neighborhood which has endured strong urban renewal plans and gentrification, at the detriment of many residents[488]. From 1950s onwards, the neighborhood has been widely modified in order to expand industries and academic institutions, such as the University of Pennsylvania. Penn Museum's research therefore

[483] Exell 2013, pp. 130-142.
[484] Studies have been conducted about new relationships between museums and refugees. In this sense, see for instance Zakaria & Alders 2025, pp. 1-23. Their analysis focuses on museums in Egypt and outreach towards refugees living in that country.
[485] Karp et al. 1992, *passim*; Watson 2007, *passim*.
[486] According to Laurajane Smith's definition, heritage can be described as a cultural process, performed and built by peoples and communities. Drawing on those reflections, museums are nowadays more and more interested in communities' participation and feedback. See Smith 2006, pp. 44-84.
[487] Thomas 2017, pp. 14-30.
[488] Evans et al. 2021, pp. 50-51

tries to recover lost stories combining its own archaeological methods and locals' contributions, including oral and archival sources. It is also a reparative program, because it tries to give something back to a dispersed community, which has been impacted by the academic institution the museum is part of.

In general, Penn Museum's attention to specific communities is quite strong, as shown by several initiatives which are usually organized throughout the year. For instance, large celebrations happen in order to mark holidays, festivities, or traditions relevant primarily to certain groups. Examples can be the events organized during the holiday of Juneteenth, when special attention is given to black communities from the city, involving small local businesses and artisans[489]. The same can be said about central American communities – especially Mexican ones – which are directly involved by the museum during the celebration of the *Día de los Muertos*[490]. Similarly, all-day events are organized to mark the beginning of the Lunar New Year, in collaboration with Asian cultural groups and associations, especially from China, Vietnam and Korea[491].

The Penn Museum holds a global collection, with artifacts originating from every part of the world. This situation creates countless opportunities for community engagement, particularly in a multi-ethnic city such as Philadelphia. One significant challenge, however, is building the trust necessary to be seen as a positive point of reference by all the different groups mentioned above.

Moving back to Italy, the Egyptian Museum of Turin provides a very different example. Its non-global collection does not mirror the cultural diversity and multi-ethnic character of the city of Turin. Despite that, the museum is still able to engage with local people and communities originally from other countries, trying to offer them a space for cultural and personal sharing. An example of this approach can be found in the activities organized during the World Refugee Day, featuring educational workshops, artistic performances, and cultural sharing led by associations primarily composed of individuals with migrant backgrounds[492].

[489] Juneteenth, Penn Museum website.
[490] Day of the Dead, Penn Museum website.
[491] Lunar New Year, Penn Museum website.
[492] Io sono Benvenuto, Museo Egizio website.

Attention towards people with migrant background is especially strong if we consider educational programs the museum organizes in collaboration with other institutions[493]. The program titled "*Tante Voci al Museo*" (Many Voices at the Museum), for instance, provides classes and workshops to young immigrants who are learning Italian at provincial didactic centres[494]. Boys and girls from several different countries come to the museum in order to practice Italian through artefacts and storytelling. This program is particularly interesting because those students have the opportunity to bridge cultures and countries: for example, they can use museum artefacts to point at similarities with the history and the traditions typical of their own homeland[495].

While the above-mentioned projects do not speak of the relationship between the Museum and Egypt, there are actually many collaborations and initiatives that foster contact with people from that country. From the scientific point of view, studies and analyses are frequently conducted in collaboration with Egyptian scholars. The museum's direct involvement in Egypt through its archaeological excavations at Saqqara obviously implies that a series of connections are established and cultivated, with scholars, locals, and authorities. Sticking to research and scholarly aspects, the museum operates an academic journal about Egyptology and similar topics. While essays are written in Italian, English, French, and German, abstracts are provided in both English and Arabic; the aim is of course to make scientific research a bit more easily accessible to scholars or people who are not Western based and, especially, to those from Egypt[496].
From this point of view, the language barrier is considered by the museum as a very serious issue; indeed, since 2015, several solutions have been designed to provide Egyptian people with an easy access to the galleries and their contents. Not only audio guide, but also introductory and interpretative labels have been translated into Arabic.
The linguistic issue has actually opened marketing opportunities, with the possibility to encourage Arabic-speaking individuals to visit the museum. It happened with the initiative "Fortunato chi parla arabo" ("Lucky those who speak Arabic"), which extended the engagement to several

[493] Measuring the impact of similar initiatives is never easy. As discussed in Jacobsen 2016, it is crucial to analyze audience and targets, gathering data about their perceived benefits. Impacts produced by museums and benefits received by the audience are indeed key factors to understand whether initiatives are effective.
[494] I refer to *Centri Provinciali per l'Istruzione degli Adulti* (CPIA) which, for instance, provide official education to adults.
[495] Community projects, Museo Egizio website.
[496] Editorial guidelines, Rivista Museo Egizio website.

immigrant communities, without focusing only on Egyptians. This choice has been coherent with some of the topics explained within the museum, which is obviously interested in the evolution of languages between North Africa and the Near East. This has become even truer since the opening of the "Galleria della Scrittura" ("Gallery of Writing"), which explores ancient Egyptian languages and writing systems.

While the Museo Egizio is a source of pride for Italians and especially people from Piedmont and Turin, it would be valuable if it could produce similar feelings on people and communities with immigrant backgrounds. While the Western museum model is full of flaws and issues, it is still true that it is well-equipped to help visitors get in contact with one's origins and cultural roots. If similar processes happen with an inclusive and multivocal approach, I believe they can be important, enriching, and fruitful.

A recent conference held at the Amsterdam School for Heritage Memory and Material Culture raised some questions which I think are relevant to this discourse. It explored the "polyphony of emotions", both positive and negative, that museums generate in their visitors[497]. Considering the programs I just mentioned, museums can produce deep emotions, for instance when artefacts, images, and stories resonate with people's personal experience. Those encounters might produce joy, sadness, and nostalgia, but also rage, frustration, or hope. Museums can indeed be described as whirlwinds of emotions, especially when museum institutions are read from a critical perspective and through different layers.

On the emotional, but also educational and transgenerational role of museum artefacts for people of certain communities, I think it could be useful to mention a project and working group born in 2000. The Restitution Study Group is a non-profit based in the metropolitan area of New York. It was founded by Deadria Farmer-Paellmann, an American legal strategist and activist of Nigerian descent[498]. For most of her career she has worked on reparatory justice towards the descendants of enslaved Africans. For years, she has conducted research and work on the Benin bronzes, reflecting on the social, economic, material context of their production. Those artefacts – which have become famous both inside and outside the cultural heritage field – used to be preserved in the City of Benin, when they were looted by British troops in 1897, later ending up in several Western

[497] Conference, AHM website.
[498] Restitution Study Group, About page.

collections[499]. Through the Restitution Study Group, Farmer-Paellmann has been vocal in explaining how and why the Benin bronzes were created. The Obas were the rulers of the Kingdom of Benin, and they used to maintain commercial relationships with Portuguese traders, including slave trade. They used to capture local enemies and enslave them, selling people to the above-mentioned Europeans and making remarkable profits. Metal was the main currency of exchange: they would trade enslaved people in return for copper or bronze bracelet-shaped objects, called *manillas*[500]. The Restitution Study Grous has highlighted how the Benin Bronzes (at least those ones produced from the 16th century onwards) were created by melting *manillas* down or even by incorporating the *manillas* in the artefacts.

The point made by the Restitution Study Group is that those bronze artefacts were created at the expense of enslaved people: each object therefore symbolizes and embodies people that have been captured, enslaved, and forcibly brought to the Americas. This is the reason why, in Farmer-Paellmann's opinion, there is an incredibly tight relationship between the Benin bronzes and African Americans of Nigerian descent[501]. Those people, according to the Restitution Study Group, should be considered as stakeholders and should therefore have a say in the management of the Benin bronzes preserved in the United States. Indeed, the Study Group has protested against the Smithsonian Museum's decision to return the Benin Bronzes, which was taken in 2022[502]. The group claimed that it is right and important that the descendants of those enslaved people – whose capture basically led to the production of metal artefacts – have access to those objects and to the stories they encapsulate.

Despite acknowledging the importance of restitution and repatriation practices in the museum field, the Restitution Study Group argued that the return of those artefacts was questionable. In their opinion, a real ethical action would have been to keep those objects in the US, to tell all the stories about their production, and make it accessible to relevant descendants[503]. That perspective clashes strongly with other views, which obviously consider the restitution of looted artefacts the main ethical and reparative response. The above-described debate – which has even been taken before the courts – gives rise to a sort of competition over who has suffered more and who is more

[499] On the Benin Bronzes and their permanence in Western museums, see Hicks 2020, *passim*.
[500] Skowronek et al. 2023, pp. 1-16.
[501] BBC on Benin Bronzes, November 7, 2022.
[502] Cultural Property News, October 14, 2024.
[503] Restitution Study Group, History Reclaimed website.

in need of restorative justice. Besides its complexity, intricacy and sensitivity, I think this case clearly highlights how difficult it is to really have a reparative approach when several and opposing points of view are on the table. In my opinion, it demonstrates that decolonial and reparative actions can have different targets and therefore be very different one to the other. From this point of view, the "decolonization" of museums should be considered as a broad umbrella term, acknowledging that it can have different impacts on communities and individuals. Going back to the Smithsonian, an agreement was eventually found when the US museum returned several of the Benin Bronzes it preserved, transferring ownership to representatives of Nigeria's National Commission for Museums and Monuments. Part of the agreement stated that some of the artefacts at object could have remained in Washington DC, specifically at the National Museum of African Art[504]. It was a compromise which allowed to meet both the international and domestic reparative needs which I explained above. The issues discussed so far demonstrates that decolonization should happen on different levels, which makes it a complex and stratified process. Finding the perfect balance between all claims on the table is a quite impossible task, which might also change according to several external factors. In my opinion, one useful approach is to establish sincere connections with many possible stakeholders, building a network based on listening, sharing, and attempts of mutual understanding. I believe this approach can be fruitful also when Western collections of Egyptian antiquities are taken into account. In such a conflicted field as Egyptian cultural heritage, it is important to engage with several points of view, both within Egypt and outside. As mentioned above, Egyptian immigrants in Western countries should be at center stage and might have specific interests which are different from those of people living in Egypt. In this sense, an increasing interest towards later phases of ancient Egypt could be enriching, focusing more on late-antiquity transformations, especially after the end of Roman domination[505].

Going back to international connections, relations with Egypt itself could be complex and nuanced, as well: inner disputes, political claims, and social contrasts can indeed play a quite critical role. As far as cultural heritage is concerned, while top-down mainstream narratives are promoted in the country, there are several local perspectives that are frequently left behind. This is especially true if we consider Nubian communities and their detached or dispersed cultural heritage[506]. The

[504] Benin Bronzes, on Smithsonian website.
[505] The museum, for instance, is devoting more and more attention towards Coptic and Arabic papyri held in its collection.
[506] Vigar 2024, pp. 87-128.

Museo Egizio preserves a Nubian temple from the site of Ellesiya. It was removed from its original site during the UNESCO Nubia campaign, and it was gifted to Italy by the Egyptian government as an acknowledgement of Italian efforts in documenting and preserving archaeological heritage from southern Egypt. Today, the monument plays an important role within the Turin collection, given that it embodies the historically positive relationships between Egypt and Italy, being a material representation of cultural cooperation and diplomacy[507]. However, it is also a symbol of Egyptian governmental choices taken at detriment of local populations, which lost their homes, land, and material identity. Recognizing both sides of this story is museum's responsibility, and it can be done by weaving relationships with the stakeholders at issue.

I believe one responsibility museums have is indeed to educate people about the contested role of cultural heritage. It is especially important today, in a world that increasingly uses cultural identity in conflicts and wars[508]. Dealing with that topic can be done by transparent exhibit communication, for instance through texts, images, or videos. Oftentimes, however, it is done through contemporary art, which frequently provides more effective results.

As mentioned in the third chapter, contemporary art is becoming a protagonist in archaeological and historical museums, providing new strategies to communicate difficult stories or deal with complex topics[509].

From an aesthetic standpoint, there is a widespread interest in blending and contrasting ancient and contemporary worlds, with the juxtaposition of archaeological subjects and modern imagination[510]. Aesthetics aside, the entrance of contemporary art in archaeological museums can be useful for one main reason: because it is able to problematize the museum institution and provide visitors with a new glaze on the collection. Contemporary artists are indeed frequently interested in exploring these topics, as they tend to both admire museum galleries and critically reflect on the flaws and biases of the Western museum model. Enriching as it is, it can be one more layer in the wide and stratified process of decolonization attempts.

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[507] Curto 1999, pp. 43-50.

[508] Today, the first and unfortunate example that comes to mind is the fight over Ukrainian identity, and the role of cultural heritage in such conflict. Widely on this topic, see Négri & Saint-Raymond 2025, *passim*.

[509] Stevenson 2025, pp. 15-38.

[510] An Italian example of this trend could be the artistic residency program organized by Associazione Archeofuturo and titled "In-ruins. Contemporary art and archaeology". See In-ruins website.

CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I sought to explore several topics which are connected by an overarching theme: the role of antiquities in Western collections.

With an emphasis on Egyptian antiquities, I have tried to focus on Western museums and their relationship with artefacts and remains coming from foreign countries, specifically from the Nile Valley.

As discussed in the introduction, this thesis has developed within the academic framework of colonial studies, and it has been rooted in the disciplinary fields of history, cultural anthropology, and critical heritage studies. My approach has been diachronic, surveying subsequent steps in the history of Western attitude towards ancient Egyptian heritage. In the first chapter I attempted to trace this evolution, starting from the 18th century and continuing up to recent years. By lingering on specific characters and institutions, I focused on collecting practices and the transfer of Egyptian antiquities to Italy and to the US. This history of collecting took into account the political and intellectual contexts of Turin and Philadelphia, two cities with a long tradition in acquiring and studying ancient Egyptian artefacts. The political and legal framework of modern Egypt were considered as well, in order to understand important transformations in the management of archaeology and archaeological remains. Reviewing changes in laws and administrative structures resulted very useful, helping me define and conceptualize some periodizations.

Deeply influenced by foreign powers (in particular France and Britain), Egyptian antiquities laws frequently swung between formal strictness and openness to compromise. One important aspect, in any case, is that sources of different kinds (from travelers' journals to legal documents) show that the transfer of antiquities was oftentimes deplored, criticized, or opposed, much earlier than 20th century anti-colonial movements.

The first part of the 19th century was a watershed in the conceptualization of cultural heritage, with growing awareness about the national relevance of archaeological, artistic, and historical treasures. Triggered by Napoleonic spoliations and subsequent returns, European countries developed attention towards the protection of cultural properties. The same approach, however, was rarely employed by European powers towards non-Western countries, to which title to antiquities was rarely recognized at that time.

While Egypt suffered from that hypocrisy, it was still able to provide reactions, as shown by the decree promulgated in 1835. That legal text not only criticizes European crave for Egyptian antiquities but also makes comparisons between the management of artefacts in Egypt and in European countries, representing an interesting point of view, especially on the role of museum institutions.

In Italy, museums have played an educational and political role, as demonstrated by collections in Turin, which have been largely promoted by the Savoy dynasty, especially after Restauration. Important laws concerning archaeology and monuments had been promulgated throughout the peninsula before the Italian unification. That transformation created needs and prerequisites for a national approach to cultural heritage management. In the second chapter I looked at the evolution of antiquities laws in Italy, in order to understand what kind of conceptualization and value was given to cultural properties and historical heritage. This helped me reflect on the ideas surrounding heritage, which evolved throughout the 20th century and led to the cultural heritage field we know today. Comparing Italy and the US was useful to see how those contexts incorporated Egyptian antiquities in their approach to collecting, preserving, and displaying cultural heritage. I therefore tried to reflect on the national relevance frequently attributed to historical artefacts, showing how cultural heritage laws often emphasize that role. By comparing that view with other approaches, such as universal and local perspectives over cultural heritage, I opened the conversation on current hot topics concerning the world of museums and cultural heritage.

The ownership of cultural heritage has been central to this dissertation, together with tightly connected themes such as the use, control, and appropriation of history and archaeology. By focusing on the concepts of alienability and deaccessioning, in the third chapter I dealt with restitution and repatriations, which are crucial issues in the conversation on the decolonization of museums.

I wanted to show that several countries, including Italy, have laws that hinder the alienation and voluntary restitution of artefacts or remains. While voluntary repatriations do happen, they are exceptions in a system that defends national ownership. I lingered on both law-enforced and voluntary repatriations, showing how those practices – which might seem very similar – are in reality very different and based on contrasting premises and aims.

I did not expect to dissect the topic of restitutions and repatriation, which is usually dealt from a very wide perspective. I tried however to analyze them from a quite circumscribed point of view, taking Egyptian antiquities into account and considering museums – such as US ones – which can perform voluntary restitutions and repatriations. While law-enforced repatriations have frequently regarded Egyptian artefacts, I noticed that voluntary ones have rarely concerned objects, but almost always human remains. An ethical attention which includes provenance and decolonial perspectives, but which puts the aspect of human dignity at the forefront.
While Egypt has appreciated those efforts and initiatives, many Egyptian scholars and professionals also point attention towards artefacts preserved abroad, especially iconic ones, which embody not only beauty and identity, but also the history of archaeological exploitation of ancient Egypt. As contested and nuanced as those topics can be, I tried to show that in several cases compromise and middle ground can be found, if conversations and trust are built. The ability to converge on a balance might depend on whether involved parties have a shared point of view on what museums should be and what role they should play.

As seen above, archaeological remains often become disputed materials, and it has often been the case with Egyptian antiquities. As shown in the fourth chapter, however, the very understanding, interpretation, and narration of ancient Egypt have frequently been conflicted and debated. Western museums have not only owned and controlled artefacts, but they have also interpreted them through a very specific perspective. Modern European scholars often represented ancient Egypt as somehow part of European identity, incorporating it in the classical and biblical traditions which are typically seen as the fundamentals of the West. From Renaissance to Enlightenment and Romanticism, the West frequently saw ancient Egypt as a distant but close-by world, in a deep and oxymoronic relationship. In order to introduce those topics, I paid attention to modern European scholars, such as Kircher and Winckelmann, who had been interested in the historical, philologic, and artistic legacy of ancient Egypt. By focusing on Carlo Vidua, however, I could see how classical and biblical sources really shaped the Western reception of the ancient Nile Valley. Entangled with the birth of Turin Egyptian Museum, Carlo Vidua's life and travels have been studied and analyzed, with recent publications on his travel notes. A reception-studies approach, however, was still missing.

The Western identification with ancient Egypt has taken on new meaning during the 19th century and the first decades of the 1900s. When scientific racism permeated universities and cultural institutions, its influence extended to fields such as archaeology and Egyptology. I explored those topics, taking both the US and Italy into account, in the context of physical anthropology and comparative anatomy. Starting from Philadelphian physician S.G. Morton, I showed how pre-civil war America often dealt with ancient history on racial lines. The same approach however was employed in Europe and Italy, where nationalism and then totalitarianism impacted on a racialized view of both the present and the past. In the US, that racist approach to archaeology and ancient history produced a counter-narrative carried out by abolitionists and African American intellectuals, who asserted the African identity of the ancient Egyptian civilization and the role of African cultures in the World history.

The dispute on how to tell the history of ancient Egypt is today as lively as in previous decades. In the last chapter I focused on that topic, showing trends in today's museology. By analyzing permanent galleries and temporary exhibitions, especially in the US, I showed how more narratives are now taken into account, providing new insights on the collections.

Attention to several perspectives and engagement of several communities is indeed considered crucial in today's museum practices. I concluded my dissertation by providing examples of relationships between archaeological museums and communities, lingering on questions of identity, migration, and memory.

Doing so, I wanted to highlight the social role museums can play today, between reparation of the past and construction of the future.

After providing a summary of my dissertation, I would like to leave some comments on the limitations or weaknesses of this research. The questions I decided to investigate are certainly wide ones and therefore presented some difficulties. In order to tackle them, it has been necessary to analyze several topics, employing approaches and sources typical of different disciplines. From traditional historical research, to focus on legal sources, from museology to critical heritage studies. While this diversity should be engaging from the reader's point of view, I hope it has not felt too heterogeneous or unconnected.

Moving from one disciplinary area to the other has been truly enriching on both an academic and personal level. I must say, however, that familiarizing myself with each topic has been a gradual

and slow process. This is the main reason why some issues and sub-questions have not been explored further – due to time constraints.

Many of the themes I have been dealing with required attention, reflection, and sensitivity, given that identity issues, colonial and post-colonial phenomena, historical damages, and reparations had been at center stage. I often wondered whether my positionality was a suitable and useful one to analyze the topics I care about. While my voice cannot be neutral and deprived of a specific cultural, academic, and professional context, I have made all efforts to take different perspectives into account.

I think one precious aspect of this work has been the rare chance of interrogating museums from two very different points of view: Turin and Philadelphia. Looking from both sides of the Atlantic gave me the chance to analyze the questions at object more thoroughly. Moreover, being actively involved in daily museum activities has allowed me to understand those kinds of institutions with a depth that I previously lacked. I am grateful to that, because it helped me shape my dissertation, by identifying both problems and potentials firsthand. My hope is to continue working in that sense, mingling active involvement in museum practices and critical reflection on museology.

In terms of research, this thesis contributes to the lively debate on the decolonization of museums, providing a perspective rooted in archaeological disciplines. It also grows out of my Italian cultural context, where paradoxes on museums and cultural heritage can be found. A context in which Italy fiercely defends its national cultural assets yet shows only a faint willingness to confront its colonial past. I therefore tried to help overcome such paradoxes, giving my contribution in terms of reflections, comparisons, and inputs.

Despite current findings, numerous other questions arose in the process of conducting this research. Being faced with that has been exciting and stimulating. While many sparks of thought have emerged, I do not think it is necessary to dwell on all of them. One topic, however, stands out as especially important to explore further.

In this thesis I have often spoken about Western identity and Western museum institutions, taking into account a European country (Italy) and the United States. For future examinations, I think it would be interesting and useful to analyze the role of European Union and its institutions in the practices of cultural heritage decolonization. In other words, I believe attention should be paid to European offices, projects, and forums which work on cultural traditions, arts and history, trying

to understand how the diverse European identity is narrated and built today. Are decolonization and reparation part of current conversations carried out by those entities?

I believe there is ample room for analyzing current practices. Moreover, it seems to me that critical reflection on those topics is greatly needed. Indeed, in an era of transformation (if not crisis) for the European Union and its identity, museums and cultural institutions could represent an insightful perspective through which to interpret those changes.

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