The planned past: policy and (ancient) Egypt *

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In the context of Forming Material Egypt’s call for practical policy outcomes, this paper addresses the recent historical ramifications of that call. How has policy relating to Egypt’s material past been made, and what have been its results? What is the meaning of policy in this context, and what are its connotations? In the light of recent discussions about the reform of Egypt’s political institutions, this paper suggests that it is necessary to answer these questions before formulating policy options for the future. Concentrating on the period from c. 1925 until 1960, this paper suggests that, when recent policy-like statements have been made and decrees issued, they have invariably been linked to elite and technocratic tenets of (high) modernism as practised in Egypt and elsewhere. They have been a means of ordering the country and its population, whether past or present, in which both Egyptians and their foreign compatriots within archaeology/Egyptology have been involved. This involvement often occurred in the belief that a better, more progressive future would be the result. In practice, however — and as in many other agencies of the Egyptian state — the creation of a particular strand of authoritarianism seems to have been closer to eventual reality. The work of Colla provides a foundation for this interpretation. However, switching chronological frames, this paper argues that it is the period from 1925 until 1960 in particular that is vital. As contemporary legislation and educational reforms relating to Egypt’s past began to be put into place, what work did these practices and representations do, and why? What sort of past did they plan, what sort of citizen was linked to it, and what was the result? The planning of Egypt’s past contributed to the construction of an authoritarian state. Can a different sort of policy be realised?

Introduction

The Forming Material Egypt conference asked for « practical policy outcomes » relating to the future of Egypt’s ancient material past.¹ Yet how has policy relating to this past previously been made, and what have been its results? It seems essential to answer these questions before any future policy can be formulated. Bearing in mind that the term “policy” is an anachronism, and

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