Forming and performing material Egypt: archaeological knowledge production and presentation

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Egyptology, as a Western cultural product of the 19th century, has been shaped through an intense archaeological exploration of Egypt and an impressive flow of artefacts towards hundreds of collections around the world. Flinders Petrie played a central role not only in the development and professionalization of the discipline but also in its representation to the general public through the presentation of his excavations and of the relative finds. It has been argued that the artefacts retrieved in an excavation are at the same time the product of the culture that originally created them, as well as the product of the excavator who restores, inscribes, classifies and stores them. The double or multi-sided nature of material culture invites us to devote more attention to the operational chain of the excavation and to the processes of knowledge production and presentation as were established within Egyptian archaeology in its formative phase. All these elements heavily contributed to shape the discipline as we know it today. It is argued that the materiality of ancient Egypt has progressively obliterated the humanity populating the archaeological landscapes, and that the only possible way to exit this trend would be an increasing involvement of the local communities and of Egyptian society as a whole in the processes of archaeological knowledge production and presentation.

Forming a material Orient

Colonial control typically produced unequal relationships based on attitudes of domination and/or exploitation. According to Said, it expressed itself as « oppression of peasants » or as « manipulation or management of native societies for imperial purposes ».1 The development of archaeology and anthropology has often intersected with the histories of imperialism and colonialism. Scholars have contextualised the recovery of the ancient civilizations of Assyria and Mesopotamia, in particular, as coinciding, from the mid-19th century, with the process of « colonial appropriation of the Ottoman Empire ».2 Archaeological campaigns and ethnographical missions were often used to facilitate the political control and economic exploitation of the territory, just as the gradual European intrusion was presented as a moral imperative under the “civilizing