Using the Ptolemaic period as a case study, this paper throws light on the interrelation between authority and the production of knowledge of the past. It aims to highlight the impact of modern disciplines and institutions, who act as authorities over the past, on the production, presentation, perception and reception of certain time periods by both the public and wider fields of knowledge. “Highly authoritative” interpretations, in the form of academic publications and museum display of royal Ptolemaic objects, are used to assess how the Ptolemaic period is produced and communicated to the lay and expert public. The paper sheds light on the role that modern authoritative interpretations have played in the isolation of the Ptolemaic period from ancient Egyptian history and wider knowledge. It argues the case of the relevance of the Ptolemaic period to modern academic debates, a case that has been long lost in academic courts.

1. Authority and the production of the ancient past

Today, the ancient past is defined, managed and advanced primarily by the academic communities. The entire process of producing knowledge of the past depends mainly on professional practitioners and institutions. Knowledge is powerful capital, and those who produce it gain authority. In this sense, modern professionals involved in the production of the past act as authorities, who by virtue of their role, offer interpretations which have fidelity to how ancient societies worked and why they worked the way they did. These interpretations could be defined as the final “front stage” product of the multi-layered process of excavating, translating, analysing, deconstructing and reconstructing the textual and material culture. Interpretative accounts are final in terms of being stabilised explanations taking a final form and designed for public consumption. The public, in this definition, refers to those who receive

2. J. Gaventa, The Powerful, the Powerless and the Expert: Knowledge struggles in an Information Age, in P. Park - B. Hall - T. Jackson (eds), Participatory Research in North America, South Hadley (MA) 1993, pp. 21-40.