

The Imam and the Museum: An Islamic Provenance for Ancient Egypt at the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Wendy Doyon

(PLATES XVII–XIX)

This article proposes a moral provenance for an essential part of the Egyptian collection at the University of Pennsylvania Museum. From the Museum Archives, it presents « the case of Hajj Mohammed Dambougi Hashim, Imam of the village of Mit Rabineh », who, « by preaching a strong sermon against the destruction of property » during the Egyptian revolution of 1919, preserved a large collection of Egyptian antiquities, excavated for the Eckley B. Coxe, Jr. Egyptian Expedition at Memphis, 1915–1923, then awaiting shipment to the Museum, where they are housed to this day. An examination of the Imam's sermon, and his correspondence with the Museum many years later, suggests a kind of moral provenance for this material, based on modern Egyptian values of trust, protection, honor, and civility. Because it demonstrates various relationships of power that are embedded in archaeological institutions connecting Egypt and the West, this kind of historical provenance may also be considered an unacknowledged dimension of archaeological context that is created in the present, perhaps no less meaningful than the deposition of the past, and with implications for the discipline's moral legitimacy in Egypt today.

Introduction

Permit me to bring to your attention the case of Hajj Mohammed Damhougi Hashim, the Imam of the village of Mit Rahineh, Markaz Ayat, Gizeh Mudirieh.

So begins a letter, written from Mit Rahina, Egypt, February 26 1923, whose writing was among the last curatorial acts of American archaeologist Clarence Stanley Fisher.¹ The letter, addressed « To the Inspector General — Ministry of Interior — Cairo », was written on behalf of the Eckley Coxe, Jr. Egyptian Expedition at the University of Pennsylvania Museum,² led by Clarence Fisher

1. CLARENCE STANLEY FISHER (1876–1941), Sc.D. (Penn), architect and archaeologist, excavated in Egypt, Palestine, and Mesopotamia, Curator of the University of Pennsylvania Museum Egyptian Section and Director of the Coxe Egyptian Expedition to Giza, Memphis, Dendera, and Dra Abu al-Naga (1914–1925), Professor of Archaeology at the American School of Oriental Research in Jerusalem (1925–1941).
2. ECKLEY BRINTON COXE, JR. (1872–1916), President of the University of Pennsylvania Museum and Chairman of the Museum's Egyptian Section (1905–1916).