Egyptology in the shadow of class

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This paper identifies some of the key structural issues built into the historical foundations of Egyptology, which have limited the depth and scope of what we recognize as material Egypt. It focuses particularly on the construction of class difference in Egyptian archaeology, first as a result of Egypt’s institutional transformation under Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha, and the birth of the scientific era of archaeology sponsored by European museums, during the first part of the 19th Century, and later through the competing class interests of Egyptology during the French period, the rise of Egyptian nationalism, the British colonial period, and the age of American expansionism. It emphasizes the growth and increasingly specialized interests of archaeological foremen, particularly the Quftis, by the turn of the 20th Century, and argues that the importance of this new class of power brokers in the formation of material Egypt lies in its unacknowledged relationship to shifting scientific values at the turn of the century. It suggests that both the alienation of land and property rights from lower-class Egyptians in the interests of science, and the exclusion of many Egyptians from the circulation of scientific knowledge, represent a class barrier that has limited the public sphere of Egyptology, and thus some part of its moral legitimacy in Egypt, perhaps also limiting its material interests in mostly elite cultures of ancient Egypt.

Introduction

The social construction of Egyptology as an institutional reality in Egypt and the West — here, the formation of material Egypt — is rooted in two crucial outcomes of Napoleon's invasion of the Ottoman province of Egypt in 1798, which brought Muhammad ‘Ali Pasha to power as governor in 1805. The first relates to the rights and status of collectors in the context of Muhammad ‘Ali’s institutional reforms in the first half of the nineteenth century, and the second relates to the development of “scientific” archaeology, following the publication of the Description de l’Égypte and the scramble for antiquities by European museum agents at the same time. Both of these events represent a crucial period of institutional transformation between c.1810 and 1850, and both are also crucial for understanding how Egyptology, as an institutional system, came to claim moral authority over the material remains of specially designated antiquities lands in Egypt. Egyptology’s claim to moral authority was based on