Shape Shifting Lizard People, Israelite Slaves, and Other Theories of Pyramid Building: Notes on Labor, Nationalism, and Archaeology in Egypt

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Shape shifting lizard people, Israelite slaves, and other theories of pyramid building

Notes on labor, nationalism, and archaeology in Egypt

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ABSTRACT

At the turn of the millennium, Egypt prepared for a vast New Year celebration on the Giza Plateau, amidst rumors about the Masonic symbolism of the planned party. At the same time, Egyptologists were excavating the tombs of the pyramid builders of Giza and billing these as proof that the pyramids were built by Egyptian nationals, not Israelite slaves. Both were topics of fierce local political debate about the external appropriation of Egypt's national monuments. Based on ethnographic research in Giza and Cairo and analysis of popular publications by and about Egyptologists, this article explores the links between Egyptology, Egyptian nationalism, and theories about the labor force that built the pyramids. It shows how debates over pyramid building and conspiracy theories about the millennium celebrations resonate in both the historical context of European imperialism in Egypt and current international political tensions. It examines archaeological accounts of the relationship between the pyramid builders and ancient state building, and the parallels between such accounts and the discipline's contemporary relationship with

archaeological labor. It concludes by asking whether Egyptologists, both Egyptian and foreign, have not only a nationalist but also a disciplinary interest in particular narratives of the labor that built the pyramids.

KEYWORDS
conspiracy theories ● Egyptology ● Freemasonry ● Giza ● labor ● nationalism ● politics of archaeology ● pyramid builders ● pyramids

INTRODUCTION

In 1990, a horse carrying an American tourist on Egypt's Giza Plateau next to the pyramids stumbled over some mud-bricks that would eventually be revealed as the remains of a large cemetery for the workers and artisans who labored on the pyramids (Hawass, 1997: 39). The discovery was an important one in the history of Egyptology, which had long sought archaeological evidence of the Giza pyramid builders. In 1883, Petrie had claimed to have found part of the barracks of the laborers (David, 1986: 59; Petrie, 1883: 101–3); in the 1930s, Selim Hassan explored what he considered to be the remains of the workmen's village (Hawass, 1987: 402), and during excavations from 1971 to 1975, Karl Kromer discovered what seemed to be settlement debris in a different location (Hawass, 1987; Kromer, 1978), but none of these sites had been fully excavated or verified as the remains of a workers' settlement. Little was known about the labor force that built the pyramids beyond Herodotus' somewhat dubious claims – that 100,000 men built them, and the outsides of the pyramids were inscribed with a tally of the number of onions and radishes used to feed the labor force (Fagan, 1975) – and what could be extrapolated or inferred from a few other excavations of ancient Egyptian monument-builder workforces (at Kahun in Fayoum, at Deir el Medina, and at Tell el-Amarna; see David, 1986: 58 and Hawass, 1987: 403). The tourist's accident was reported to the antiquities inspectorate on the Giza Plateau, and shortly after the tourist's accidental find, excavations began, with Egyptian Egyptologist and Director of the Giza and Saqqara antiquities Zahi Hawass overseeing the excavations of the tombs of the pyramid builders,[1] while the nearby excavation of a workshop, bakery and brewery for the workers was headed up by Hawass' American colleague, Mark Lehner.[2]

But well before – and even after – excavations began, the composition of the workforce of pyramid builders and the sort of social organization that made ancient Egyptian monumental building possible has been a screen on which many have projected their speculations of the past and

imagined contemporary links to ancient civilizations. Egyptologists have debated whether conscripted labor was the equivalent of slavery and what brought foreign workers to ancient Egyptian workforces. Cinematic portrayals of ancient Israelite slave labor have sparked boycotts. And for more than a century and a half, bestselling books have purveyed outlandish mystical imaginations of the pyramid builders, from colonies of Atlantis to aliens from outer space. (In 1975, Paula Lutz concluded a witty review of one such publication prophetically: 'To paraphrase King Solomon, there seems to be no end to the making of such books.')

In this article, I present two vignettes from my anthropological research on the Giza Plateau that portray some of the contemporary politics involved in imagining the labor forces of the past. The first explores conspiracy theories that circulated in cyberspace and in the local Egyptian media in 1999, as Egypt prepared for a grand millennium celebration on the Giza Plateau. The second looks at Egyptological interpretations of the ongoing excavations of the tombs of the Giza pyramid builders in light of contemporary Egyptian–Israeli political tensions. I then analyze what Menachem Begin's beliefs about who built the pyramids have in common with Illuminati theorists, exploring the interrelation between Egyptian nationalism and accounts of the labor force that built the pyramids. I build on a body of literature that explores the interconnections between archaeological theory and practice, links between archaeology and nationalism, and the appropriation of the archaeological project to serve political ends.[3] In this article, I want to focus in particular on the politics of interpretations of monumental labor. Somewhat more provocatively, I also query Egyptology's disciplinary interest in a nationalist interpretation of the labor of both pyramid builders and pyramid excavators.

VIGNETTE 1: REPTILIAN SHAPE SHIFTERS, FREEMASONRY, AND MILLENNIUM CELEBRATIONS

On the eve of the millennium, cities around the world competed to have the grandest New Year's Eve party. It was a guaranteed bonanza for the tourism industry. Cairo offered a 12-hour concert by Jean-Michel Jarre at the Giza pyramids from sunset to sunrise. The concert was to reach its climax at midnight when, accompanied by Jarre's music and a light image of the Eye of Horus projected onto the side of the pyramid, a helicopter would lower a light-emitting gilded pyramidion (a pyramid capstone) onto the Great Pyramid (Cheops or Khufu), which would shine light onto all of the revelers (*Al-Akhbār*, 1999).

However, the widely advertised midnight capstone ritual was cancelled shortly before the event amidst a series of local press attacks on the concert

organizers, the Ministry of Culture, and Dr Zahi Hawass, then Director General of the Giza Plateau (and currently Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, SCA). The local press was preceded in its attack on the symbolism of the capstone ritual by various obscure conspiracy theorists, whose websites started prophesying messianic or apocalyptic events that were to culminate in 1999 and 2000 with dark forces using the pyramids as a focal point for nebulous rituals of evil. People such as Texe Marrs and David Icke elaborated dark theories about an 'Illuminati elite' out to rule the world through secret millennial rites linked to ancient Egypt.

The Illuminati, in conspiracy theorese, are a secret elite group who trace their ancestry to the Bavarian Illuminati, an eighteenth-century secret society, and infiltrate and manipulate global institutions in their efforts to control world government(s) (Barkun, 2006). David Icke's version of the Illuminati theory, c.1999, connected the pyramids with a race of human-reptilian hybrid shape shifters (including former US presidents George Bush and Bill Clinton, the British royal family, Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, and other world leaders) who inbreed to maintain their bloodlines and rule the world through brainwashing mind control, human sacrifice, and ritual child abuse (Icke, 1999). These Illuminati, Icke argues, project the appearance of a human form, but their true form is reptilian, and they must drink human blood to maintain their ability to shift between human and reptilian forms at will. The metaphorical appeal of a theory that describes politicians as inbreeding reptilian shape shifters whose global domination is founded on the blood of innocents is perhaps obvious, but Icke, a well-known British conspiracy theorist, insists in the literal truth of his theory (see Barkun, 2006, for an academic treatment of Icke and other conspiracy theorists).

On the eve of the turn of the millennium, Icke elaborated a variant of his general theory that focused on the upcoming millennium celebrations in Egypt. Icke argued that the planned capstone ritual at the Giza pyramids was the symbolic culmination of an evil Masonic conspiracy to usher in a new age of heavy solar activity that would drive the shape shifting reptilian mind control over the planet. On his website in 1999, Icke reminded his readers that the pyramid topped by a glowing capstone with an eye in it (which he identified as the Eye of Horus that would be projected on the side of the pyramid while the capstone was lowered) was an important element of Masonic symbolism that was associated with political power in the USA, as seen by its adoption as one of the symbols on the US dollar bill. (Several of the designers of the US currency were Freemasons.) According to Icke, Masonic symbolism equated with 'Illuminati symbolism which spans the ages of the pyramid with the capstone missing . . . The pyramid and all seeing eye – the shining capstone and eye which represents the force which controls the world' (www.davidicke.com, consulted December 1999).

Icke also referred readers to Texe Marrs' website, 'Power of Prophecy', which sells Illuminati conspiracy theories with a fundamentalist Christian, anti-Semitic twist. Marrs, too, foresaw a millennial conspiracy at the pyramids, but without the lizard people. For only $19.95, Marrs offered readers an 'insight-filled video' that contained information about 'the Illuminati's dark plan to usher in the new millennium by conducting a Luciferian "black mass" deep inside the bowels of the Great Pyramid in Egypt' (Marrs, 1999).

The local Egyptian press ignored the reptilian shape shifter theories, but seized on the Masonic symbolism of the planned capstone event. In particular, a journalist from the opposition newspaper *al-Shaab* announced that Jarre's concert and the capstone ceremony were aspects of a Zionist–Masonic plot to infiltrate Egypt. Journalist Ali al-Qumahi was joined by more authoritative voices, including two Egyptian Egyptologists, Dr Ali Radwan and Dr Abdelhalim Nour el-Din, who both spoke out against the project.. They offered two reasons for objecting to the capstone ritual. One was the concern about the risk of damage to the Great Pyramid if a large object were to be lowered onto the monument at night by helicopter. But these two respected Egyptologists – Radwan was a professor of Egyptology at the University of Cairo and Nour el-Din was a former General Secretary of the Supreme Council of Antiquities and subsequently the Chair of the Department of Archaeology at Cairo University – also cited the Masonic symbolism of the pyramid's capstone in their objections to the ceremony. Amidst such criticism, the capstone ritual was shelved, though the rest of the millennium celebrations took place as planned.

From 1999 to 2001, I conducted ethnographic fieldwork in Egypt on the topic of travel and transnational meeting-grounds (including Western and Gulf tourism, Egyptology, and belly dance). One of my key field sites was the offices of the archaeology inspectorate at the Giza pyramids complex, overseen by Dr Zahi Hawass. Inside the cool, somewhat dusty offices of the inspectorate and out in the sun on the pyramids plateau, a contingent of Egyptian archaeologists and students supported Hawass' research or worked on their own projects. I volunteered my services in these offices, typing and copyediting Hawass' popular archaeology column for the English-language *al-Ahram* newspaper from hand-written drafts he jotted on yellow legal pads. In exchange, Hawass permitted me to conduct my ethnographic research at the site.

When I started my research and volunteer work on the Giza Plateau in January 2000, Dr Hawass was still talking about the negative attention he had recently received in the press over the planned capstone ritual. He was not one of the organizers of the millennium celebrations, but was attacked, apparently because of his connection with the Giza monuments. It was the latest in a string of conspiracy theories centering around the Giza pyramids and the Sphinx with which Hawass had contended. Such theories circulate

regularly on the internet and seem to come in waves, reaching crescendo point before ebbing for a time. The cyber-conspiracy theories reached one such climax in 1997 and 1998, because Edgar Cayce had predicted that the Atlantean Hall of Records would be found in a secret chamber under the paws of the Sphinx in the year 1998. When it became apparent that the discovery was not forthcoming, internet rumors sprang up about an Egyptian plot to block excavations, with some speculating that a secret chamber was already known to the Egyptian government and Zahi Hawass, who were hiding its existence from the rest of the world (Wynn, 2007). The rumors peaked again in the months prior to the millennium celebration.

As my research on the Plateau progressed, it soon became apparent that Hawass and many of the other Egyptologists – of all nationalities – who intersected at the site were fully aware of the multiple imaginations of the pyramids, from conspiracy theories circulating in cyberspace to theories about ancient labor with poignant political resonance. Some of the Egyptologists laughed at the popular theories; others ignored or professed exasperation with them. Hawass, though, was fiercely engaged in a project to convert a popular audience over to the orthodox Egyptological narrative of the past. For example, he described to me how in the late 1990s he had appeared on the paranormal-themed radio show of Art Bell to dispute theories about aliens building the pyramids. Another time, he staged a savvy public relations stunt to debunk the idea that the geometrical shape of the pyramid naturally preserves life: he put one chunk of raw meat inside his office and another inside one of the Giza pyramids and, after several days, compared them both in the presence of journalists to show that the meat left in the pyramid had rotted as much or more than the piece left in his office (Wynn, 2007). In slide show talks he gave before tourist audiences, he took to showing a slide of his office's neat, pink-tiled bathroom to make the humorous point that there was no secret tunnel running from his bathroom to a secret chamber below the pyramids, as some conspiracy theorist had claimed. Hawass' bookshelves were stocked with books by alternative pyramid theorists, and during my year of fieldwork on the Giza Plateau, he often lectured for tourist audiences and for journalists (both Egyptians and foreigners), frequently framing his remarks as the debunking of the theories of 'pyramidiots', as he liked to call them.

When I asked him about the capstone ritual and why it had not been carried out, Hawass was indignant, blasting the Masonic and Illuminati conspiracy theories. He defended the lowering of the capstone onto the Great Pyramid not as a Masonic rite but as a 'pharaonic national ritual'. Marshalling the evidence of archaeological finds, he pointed out that capstones had been found in Dahshour and next to the Pyramid of Khufu. Old Kingdom decorations from the Tomb of Sahure depicted a golden capstone being dragged towards the pyramid while in neighboring registers groups of male and female dancers perform, presumably as part of the

celebrations for completing the pyramid (Hawass and Verner, 1996: 181). This proved, Hawass argued, that topping the pyramid with a gold pyramidion was a time for the nation to celebrate the completion of their national project (Ghīsh, 1999). It was no Masonic–Zionist infiltration, but a pharaonic ritual of national unity. 'The pyramidion is a 100% Egyptian idea,' proclaimed a newspaper headline in the state-controlled Arabic press. Hawass was quoted as saying to a journalist (Mūsā, 1999):

> The idea of placing a pyramidion atop the Pyramid of Khufu for the celebration of the world's third millennium and Egypt's seventh has no connection with any foreign groups, and the drawing on the American dollar is a false representation of the pyramidions which were placed atop pyramids during the Middle Kingdom.

Hawass' arguments echoed the Egyptian public relations campaign for the millennium event, which held that, while the rest of the world was celebrating the beginning of the third millennium, Egypt was entering its seventh millennium of civilization. Deliberate parallels between the pharaonic state and the contemporary Egyptian state (by repeatedly referring to the building of the pyramid as a 'project of national unity' and likening it to the contemporary military draft) emphasized the pyramidion project as a national(ist) ceremony, while downplaying any possible hint of pagan pharaonic ritual.

Despite these arguments, the force of the negative media made the Ministry of Culture (which subsumes the Supreme Council of Antiquities) sufficiently nervous that the capstone ritual was cancelled in December 1999. When I asked Hawass about these events, he justified the cancellation in terms of the risk of error and potential threat to the monuments if the capstone were lowered by helicopter at night. But he also conceded that the journalists had created enough of a conspiracy theory atmosphere that the cancellation was at least partly a response to their brouhaha. What can explain the sensitivity of the Egyptologists and the Egyptian government to a Masonic-themed ritual centering on the pharaonic monuments?

CONSPIRACY THEORISTS, MYSTICISM, AND THE HISTORY OF FREEMASONRY IN EGYPT

Since Napoleon's conquest of Egypt in 1798, mysticism has flourished alongside archaeology as two occasionally intertwined aspects of the European fascination with ancient Egypt. The first Masonic Lodge in Egypt, the Lodge of Isis, was established by General Kleber, one of the top military figures in the French occupation, and subsequently lodges with names like 'Kawkab al-Sharq' (Star of the Orient), 'Sphinx', 'Pyramids', 'Cheops', and 'New

Memphis' were established by the French throughout Alexandria and, later, Cairo (Raafat, 1999; Wissa, 1989). Freemasonry is fascinated with ancient Egyptian architecture, and Egyptian symbolism is prevalent in Masonic temples. (In one branch of Freemasonry, the Shriners, the men wear red fezzes and the women are called 'daughters of Isis'.) At least two of the obelisks removed from Egypt under the British occupation were done so by Freemasons or amidst Masonic rites, pointing to a link between the mystical order and European despoliation of the ancient Egyptian sites during the early years of Egyptology (Fagan, 1975; Noakes, 1962).

Freemasonry soon became a vehicle for political activity in colonial Egypt. A number of Egyptian nationalists joined various liberal French Masonic lodges, apparently in an attempt to penetrate the ruling classes of foreigners and the Ottoman elite (Wissa, 1989). Jamal el-Din al-Afghani and Mohammed Abdou, the famous Egyptian Azharite philosophers, were early members of the first Arabic-speaking lodge that was established in Egypt, and al-Afghani encouraged his disciples to become members likewise (Scholch, 1981: 106). Ahmed Orabi's uprising against the imperialist khedival system of rule was associated with Freemasonry (Orabi was not a Freemason but many of his supporters were), and Mohammed Farid and Saad Zaghloul, the heads of the National and Wafd parties, respectively, both of whom called for nationalist self-rule and expulsion of the British colonial rulers, were Freemasons (Raafat, 1999).

Members of the Masonic lodges came from all faiths – Muslims, Christians and Jews – and from all social classes, though it was dominated by elites. It was this ecumenical aspect of Freemasonry that was attacked in Egypt as the Zionist movement grew. Many Jews held prominent positions in Freemasonry, and Freemasonry draws on Hebraic-Egyptian symbols – most famously, the Temple of Solomon. Following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, Masonic lodges increasingly came under attack in Egypt, and, according to Raafat, 'anti-Freemason articles cropped up in the post-1948 Arab world "proving" the connection between Zionism and Freemasonry' (1999: 4). There was a steady decline in membership after that, hastened by the 1952 revolution when the European elite, which had provided much of Freemasonry's most affluent supporters, started to leave Egypt in droves. In 1964, the Ministry of Social Affairs closed down the largest and most famous Masonic temple in Alexandria, stating that 'associations with undeclared agendas were incompatible with rules covering non-profit organizations' (Raafat, 1999: 7). It was part of government attempts to control the workings of civil society, particularly organizations that could lend themselves to political organizing (a policy which continues today in Egypt).

This history helps to contextualize the reactions of Egyptologists and the Egyptian press to the Masonic symbolism of the planned millennium celebrations at the pyramids. Ultimately, the millennium party was a success, even without the capstone ritual. Laborers toiled to construct a vast

wooden platform that gracefully climbed the slope of a hill in the desert and could accommodate an audience of 50,000. General admissions tickets were sold for LE 50 (at that time, about $14) to the hoi polloi, both Egyptians and tourists. On top of the hill, the five-star Cairo hotels built special tents and sold tickets for about LE 400 (about $120) to the elite for a catered dinner and champagne at midnight. The Jarre concert ran from dusk to dawn, accompanied by a midnight fireworks display and an all-night light show, including, as planned, a stylized Eye of Horus projected onto the side of a pyramid. The night of the concert, the weather provided a victory to the masses, because a rare cloud of fog rolled in and covered the high areas of the Plateau, blocking the view of the elite spectators in the tents but allowing the general admission crowd to enjoy most of the concert. None of the tourists whom I interviewed seemed to care about the lack of the midnight capstone ritual. Evidently it was of greater import to the Egyptian government and press than to the European and American tourists who attended the celebrations.

VIGNETTE 2: PYRAMID BUILDING AND ISRAELITE SLAVES

According to Hawass, when Menachem Begin visited the Giza pyramids in Egypt in 1978 with President Anwar Sadat, he commented that it was his ancestors, the enslaved Jewish nation, who had built the pyramids (see Hawass, 2000a, for a discussion; notably, the English-language version of this work, Hawass, 2000b, omits a discussion of Begin's comment). Begin's comment angered Egyptians, as do similar claims by some New Age groups that the pyramids were built by Atlanteans, or by aliens from outer space.

A common misconception among many Israelis, Europeans, and even some Egyptians holds that the pyramids were built using Jewish slave labor. The popular animated film *The Prince of Egypt* (Dreamworks SKG, 1998) recently perpetuated this idea, portraying Jewish slaves laboring on a colossal statue that resembles the Sphinx, supposedly at just around the time that Moses, the eponymous Prince of Egypt, liberated the Israelites from captivity. The movie was banned in Egypt; journalist Mona Eltahawy (1999) wrote that the movie sparked outrage among Egyptians who called the film 'a work of Jewish revisionist history that distorts the golden age of ancient Egypt'. For Egyptians, claims that it was Jews and not ancient Egyptians who built their country's most famous monuments is an insult that can only be understood in light of current political tensions and economic disparities in the region.

During my fieldwork, the notion that the pyramids were built by Israelite slaves was another of the popular theories that Hawass was determined to

debunk in his columns in the local press and in his appearances on Egyptian television. One day in October 2000, I was typing up an article in a back room of the inspectorate offices when Dr Hawass summoned me to his office. He asked me if I wanted to go with him to see the tombs of the pyramid builders (*maqāber al-ᶜommāl* in Arabic). I jumped at the opportunity to see the ongoing excavation, which was closed to the public, and together we climbed into his government-issued car. His driver drove through the sand to reach the workers' tombs where Dr Hawass was to be filmed by Egyptian television for an archaeology program. Parking the car near the wall that separates the village of Nazlet el-Semman from the Giza site, we went the rest of the way on foot. When we reached the wood ramp leading to the site, he pointed out the graves downhill and explained to me that they were the crudely built tombs of the common workers, formed using leftover chips and pieces of limestone from the pyramids, with mud-brick over them. The engineers and artisans had their tombs up higher on the hill, with ramps and causeways leading up to them, and their tombs were more elaborate with sophisticated inscriptions, much like the tombs of higher officials but on a smaller scale.

I told Hawass that I had been talking to a friend who had insisted on the story that the pyramids were built by Jewish slaves. I had recently typed up one of his articles on the subject, and I told her that Hawass said that they were not built with slave labor, but she had insisted that even if the artisans and engineers were Egyptian, the basic manual labor must have been slave labor. He said, 'Your friend is American?'

'No, she's Egyptian.'

He looked irritated. 'Well your friend must be ignorant because I've written about this discovery in Arabic all over the Egyptian newspapers. The pyramids were a national project, and they were sacred. Only Egyptians could work on them; slave labor was not used. It was like the army,' he explained. 'Families from all over Egypt had to contribute individuals to work on the pyramids in the service of their pharaoh, and the families sent supplies of food and beer and clothing.'

I asked him how he was sure that all the workers were Egyptians; he said that the titles in the tombs showed clearly whether they were engineers or artists or workers. For both the skilled technicians and the manual laborers, he said, it was very clear from the hieroglyphs and religious inscriptions that the tombs were all of Egyptians, not foreign slaves. Again he made the analogy with the contemporary Egyptian draft into the armed forces.

The topic that I was asking about emerged as the very topic of his monologue for the Egyptian television cameras. Hawass was contributing to a piece that would be shown the following week on *Ākher Sā`a*. Standing in front of the camera, with the excavation site behind him and a hat (which his friends jokingly refer to as his 'Indiana Jones hat') on his head to shield him from the bright sun, he described the discovery much as he had just done with me, adding:

> It is one of the most important archaeological discoveries because it proves definitively for everyone in the world to see that it was Egyptians who built the pyramids, not slaves and not Jews and not Israelis. We can recall not many years ago when the Israeli Prime Minister came to visit Egypt, he commented to the Egyptian president excitedly, 'We built those!' It is believed among the Israelis that their ancestors built the pyramids, and this archaeological discovery proves them wrong. The builders of the pyramids were not slaves, and they were not Jews. They were Egyptians.

Hawass went on to talk about how the work was divided up. Skilled engineers, artists, carpenters, and stonecutters were employed at the site year round. Then unskilled laborers from villages all over Egypt rotated in and out of the workforce during the year. They were divided into competing work groups or teams, each with names such as 'Friends of Khufu' (Cheops) or 'the Drunkards of Menkaure' (Mycerinus). He showed how the architects, engineers and artists had their own temples and tombs that mimicked the royal temples on a smaller scale. The average age of death for workers was 30 to 35 years old. Their average height was between 175 and 185 cm. Some had syphilis. There were doctors on site to treat the workmen, since they have found evidence of broken hands in splints, successful amputations, and a man with a broken leg who lived some 14 years after the break. Both men and women's skeletons were found, and both showed signs in the bones of heavy labor.

'The pyramids united the nation,' he said. 'When the pyramid was completed, it was a cause for national rejoicing.'

Hawass finished filming and told the cameraman to finish getting shots of the hieroglyphs and the tomb, then to meet him at the Sphinx enclosure, where they'd film some more. He walked back down to the car with Mansour Boriak, who was overseeing these excavations, discussing with him the workers' progress and some new discoveries.

PYRAMIDS AS 'NATIONAL PROJECT'

Educating the public about the national origins of the pyramid builders is an ongoing mission for Hawass. In February 2007, Hawass reportedly 'filed an official complaint to the Egyptian attorney general of Egypt against a Cairo high school for teaching the students that it was the Israelites who built the pyramids' (Perry, 2007). In print as well as in front of the Egyptian television cameras, Hawass has repeatedly argued that the pyramids were 'the Egyptian national project' requiring tremendous organization of labor, resources, engineering, and artistry in one common goal that elevated not only the pharaoh himself but all his subjects (*Al-Akhbār*, 1999). 'It was the pyramids that built Egypt rather than vice versa,' he has argued, 'since they

unified the nation in the service of one great and monumental achievement' (Hawass, 2000b). In support of this theory, Hawass points to wall reliefs that, he says, show that when a pyramid was completed, a gilded pyramidion, or capstone, was raised amidst popular dancing and celebrations (Hawass and Verner, 1996). (Note that the arguments in support of the pyramids-as-national-unification theory are the same that were used to defend the planned millennial capstone ritual.) In the first page of their popular *Archaeology* magazine article, 'Builders of the Pyramids' (1997), Hawass and Lehner speculate:

> The pyramid projects must have been a tremendous socializing force in the early Egyptian kingdom – young conscripts from hamlets and villages far and wide departing for Giza where they entered their respective gangs, phyles, and divisions in scenes reminiscent of the most dramatic cinema spectacles of Cecil B. de Mille.

And yet, after invoking de Mille, Hawass ultimately repudiates him.

> We should contrast the evidence of the tombs and of medical treatment with the notion that pharaohs used slave labor to build the giant pyramids, an idea as old as Herodotus. The scenarios of whip-driven slaves received support from the biblical account of Moses and the Exodus and the first-century A.D. historian Josephus. In our era, Cecil B. de Mille's galvanizing screen images reinforced this popular misconception. The pyramid builders were not slaves but peasants conscripted on a rotating part-time basis, working under the supervision of skilled artisans and craftsmen who not only built the pyramid complexes for kings and nobility, but also designed and constructed their own, more modest tombs. (1997)

The issue is treated more forcefully in Hawass' Arabic-language publications and interviews with the Egyptian press, in which he has accused Israelis of 'stealing the pyramids' by claiming to have built them. '[They] are thieves of history and civilization,' he was quoted as saying to reporter Mushīra Mūsā (Mūsā, 1999; see also Hawass, 2002).

The interpretation of the monuments as not being built by slave labor is far from radical by the standards of contemporary Egyptological theory. Before the tombs of the pyramid builders were found and excavated, there was no evidence of slave labor being used for monumental building projects until the New Kingdom (David, 1988: 104–8). Even work on Deir el Medina, a New Kingdom pyramid town, has largely produced interpretations that the labor force consisted of 'salaried state employees' who were paid wages and went on strike when not paid (L.H. Lesko, 1994: 7), and what is chiefly debated is the question of the workers' freedom of movement, their 'civil liberties,' and how well they were paid (B.S. Lesko, 1994).[4] As William Ward puts it, 'slavery has been vastly overrated as a component in Egyptian society' (1994: 61).

So what gives Hawass' discovery such poignancy and resonance in the media can only be understood in its historical and political context. The fieldwork described in the above vignette took place at the time of the second Palestinian *intifāda* (uprising), at the same time that Egyptians felt extraordinary anger towards Israel, particularly after Egyptian television stations repeatedly broadcast images of Mohammed Durra, the Palestinian child who in September 2000 was filmed cowering in his father's arms during an Israeli attack and then was shot in his father's arms. The devastating image of his glassy-eyed father, slumped down, holding the limp body of his murdered son, was seared onto the national consciousness. Israeli archaeologists were thus quietly excluded from the 8th International Congress of Egyptologists, held in Cairo, by Congress organizers. Likewise, the excavation of the workers' tombs was publicly celebrated, because proving that the pyramids were the product of Egyptian and not Jewish slave labor was thus a way of defiantly thumbing an Egyptian nose at Israeli pretensions towards civilizational greatness.

Reclaiming ancient Egyptian history for the modern state of Egypt is not solely an Egyptian project. Lehner, an American, has written (in rebutting another theory that challenges the orthodox Egyptological chronology of pyramid building):

> I believe we have a professional responsibility to respond to notions – like those of Cayce and West – that would rob the Egyptians of their own heritage by assigning the origins and genius of Nile Valley civilization to some long-lost agent like Atlantis. (1994)

In print and in interviews with journalists, Lehner has also sought to debunk the Israelite slavery theory by emphasizing the nation-building theory and even by likening pyramid building to Amish barn raising.

By now it should be obvious what Menachem Begin and millennial conspiracy theorists have in common. Both posit a story of Egyptian monumental greatness that is not an Egyptian one. (It should also be obvious that the injection of Egyptian nationalism into debates over pyramid building is not confined to Egyptians, and below I address the significance of non-Egyptians adopting nationalist positions in these debates.) The discovery of the tombs of the workmen who built the pyramids is significant to nationalists because it proves that the greatness of Egypt was a project of both Egyptian genius and Egyptian labor. It is especially important vis-a-vis Israeli claims that it was their slave ancestors who built the pyramids, but also vis-a-vis theorists who would have that the pyramids were built by Atlanteans or aliens, or that they are today used by Illuminati, Masons, or Satanists for whatever nefarious purpose.

The elisions that take place in these stories are telling. Icke and Marrs took the obvious Masonic symbolism of the planned millennium party, with the capstone and the shining eye on the pyramid, and translated 'Masonic'

into 'Illuminati'. Marrs went further and elided Masonic with Satanic. In contrast, the Egyptian journalist al-Qumahi and the Egyptologists who objected to the capstone ceremony translated 'Masonic' into 'Zionist'. In each case, the different underlying ideas about which forces were responsible for oppression determined which elisions occurred. In this fashion, the obscure theories of conspiracy theorists in cyberspace were linked to more localized politics of determining who could claim their ancestors as the genesis of civilization, through the unifying symbol of the Giza pyramids.

The excavations of the tombs and workshops of the pyramid builders by Hawass, Lehner, and others are part of a trend in Egyptology that breaks from the traditional focus on monumental and precious objects. They reformulate their mundane subject by elevating the tombs in disciplinary and political status, by arguing that these were not slaves forced to toil on the monument of a tyrannical and oppressive pharaoh, but rather valued Egyptian workers whose labor was willingly contributed to the creation of state glory. In Hawass' account, the entire country pitched in to create a state monument, celebrating afterwards the glorious achievement. Lehner goes a step further: by likening pyramid building to Amish barn raising, he writes the state and pharaoh out of the story entirely, leaving us with an analogy of pyramid labor as a collective, communal ritual.

In Hawass' accounts, parallels are repeatedly made between the builders' service to the Pharaoh and the army service required of all male Egyptians; both are described as a 'socializing force' that engendered a sense of national identity (see also Hawass, 1996, n.d.). Archaeology is used to shore up contemporary Egyptian nationalism by drawing parallels between the modern nation-state and the glorious pharaonic past. Does Hawass' analogy with the modern-day army draft legitimize the pyramids project, or vice versa? It is hard to determine. Perhaps Hawass' account legitimizes *both* pyramid building and army service by describing these as aspects of state-building and civilizational labor, neatly eliding over both ancient and modern methods of extracting labor from lower classes of society.

The descriptions that archaeology constructs of the past are inevitably influenced by the perspective of the archaeologist. Imagine how differently Hawass' story might have been told if the excavator were a different nationality, less vested in structures of power in the contemporary Egyptian state (Hawass' rank as head of the SCA is one step below a minister) and less acutely attuned to the regional conflict between the Arab states and Israel. Would the story then be so concerned with deconstructing popular Israeli myths about slave labor in Egypt? Would it bother to draw analogies with the modern Egyptian state's use of Egyptian labor for state goals?

Perhaps. Egyptian nationalism in Egyptology is not solely the territory of Egyptians, or even of Egyptologists. For Lehner, it is a position taken with the explicit goal of counteracting Egyptology's historical link with European imperialism. When I spoke with Lehner on the Giza Plateau

during my fieldwork, he told me that he assigns Donald Reid's 1985 article, 'Indigenous Egyptology: The Decolonization of a Profession,' to his students at the University of Chicago to alert them to the discipline's colonialist legacy. Reid, a historian, has recently published what amounts to the seminal (in English) nationalist history of Egyptian archaeology; *Whose Pharaohs?* (2002) not only explores the links between Egyptology and Egyptian nationalism, but rewrites the discipline's history to include the many Egyptian archaeologists who have been neglected in most accounts of Egyptology. These trends in Egyptology and the historiography of Egyptology are parallel, not just because both reject the storyline that celebrates the glory of kingly objects and tombs, but because they are both profoundly nationalistic, even when they are written by Americans (such as Lehner and Reid). Reid's account, for example, argues that all of the history that can be excavated in the geographical boundaries of contemporary Egypt is relevant, not just some golden pharaonic era that Imperial Europeans identified as the 'cradle of civilization', and so he includes accounts of archaeologists who have studied Coptic and Islamic remains, usually considered distinct from the domain of pharaonic Egyptology (Reid, 2002; see also Reid, 1997).

Some proponents of the scientific discipline of archaeology decry the nationalistic biases that are often found in historical accounts. Redford, for example, writes it off as a rather pesky nuisance to be excised from the literature: '. . . when bias appears in the writings of scholars who have adopted a certain discipline co-extensive with an historical culture, and unconsciously construe themselves as "nationals" at a remove of several centuries, their championing of their adopted culture becomes tiresome' (1979: 9–10; see also Hassan, 1997, for a similar argument). Others have taken a more subtle view, pointing out the virtual inevitability of archaeology's intersection with contemporary nationalism, given the context of colonialism and imperialism which is the legacy of the discipline (Hodder, 2003; Meskell, 2001, 2002, 2005; Mitchell, 2002; Trigger, 1984). For Hawass, Lehner, and Reid, the linking between archaeology and Egyptian nationalism is not merely an inevitable link that must be grappled with; it is a matter of ethics. Embedding their work in the framework of a nationalist narrative is their strategically ethical reaction to Egyptology's historical embeddedness in imperial politics and colonial practice.

THE LABOR OF PYRAMID BUILDERS AND THE LABOR OF PYRAMID EXCAVATORS

Hawass' and Lehner's archaeological interpretations of the labor of the pyramid builders as conscripted but not slave labor is not a shocking

one that overturns established Egyptological interpretation. While the excavations of the tombs of the pyramid builders is a recent event, Egyptologically speaking, Hawass' and Lehner's findings are in line with scholarly interpretation of other pyramid towns of other eras, previously excavated. The refutation of the slavery theory of pyramid building only appears radical from the perspective of popular ideas about ancient Egypt, and attains its political salience in the context of the ongoing Arab–Israeli conflict.

The crafting of the identity of the pyramid builders in these accounts does more than just appeal to current anti-Israel sentiment, however. The nationalist interpretation of the excavation of the pyramid builders' tombs casts archaeological research in terms more palatable to modern Egyptians conscious of the colonial legacy of Egyptology, which despoiled Egypt of some of its finest pharaonic treasures to stock the museums of empire. The nationalist account of the pyramid builders is also sensitive to the multivalent symbolism of pharaoh for contemporary Egyptians, whose national pride in the pharaonic past is tempered by the religious connotations of Pharaoh, who appears in the Qur'an as a symbol of despotism, idolatry, and ultimately futile opposition to God's prophets. The tombs of the pyramid builders represent working-class men and women, instead of a pharaoh or member of the priestly caste, so even Egyptians who feel ambivalent towards an idolatrous pharaoh and pre-Christian, pre-Islamic religion can identify with this aspect of the Egyptian past. But instead of turning them into a toiling, exploited workforce, their labor directed towards a religious goal of building a temple for the pharaoh-god, the pyramid builders are cast in a secular, nationalist light, projecting modern Egyptian nationalism on the ancient past: the pyramid builders were engaged in a 'project of national unity', and the entire 'nation' celebrated their accomplishments when the pyramid was complete.

But here I want to tentatively question whether such accounts of ancient labor are more than just a nationalist position, but also a disciplinary one. What does archaeology have vested in particular narratives of labor past?

The modern history of archaeological discoveries in Egypt is one in which the state has served Egyptologists by occasionally conscripting peasant labor to dig monuments out from tons of desert sands, perhaps like the ancient Egyptian states conscripted peasant labor to build the monuments now being excavated. Egyptologists are thus heirs to a disciplinary legacy under which powerful state authority has levied the labor of Egyptian peasants not only for the building of monumental state projects (such as the Suez canal) but also for their excavation. (In his dissertation, Hawass explicitly likens the labor force of contemporary excavations with the labor force used to build the pyramids: Hawass, 1987: 402 and n13). Yet accounts of the history of Egyptology slide easily and negligently over the role of the Egyptian peasants who were forced to work under the direction

of the Egyptologists, to whom the glory of discoveries accrue. The same system of corvée labor that was used to build the Suez Canal was also appropriated for Egyptological excavations by at least one European Egyptologist, Auguste Mariette (Reid, 2002: 100–1), and perhaps by others (e.g. Belzoni, 1820/1971), but while historians have explored the use of corvée labor for the digging of the Suez Canal and other public works, to date I know of no history that has been devoted to understanding the use of conscripted labor used in archaeological digs, from the perspective of those laboring, and indeed there has been no comprehensive study of the historical labor relations between Egyptologists and local workmen (but see Van der Spek, 2004, for a recent study of archaeological laborers from Qurna, the village on the west bank at Luxor, including labor relations with the SCA and foreign archaeological missions).

In contemporary times, of course, corvée labor is no longer used in excavations. Instead, workers are drawn from local villages and paid generally low wages. Many are economically dependent on the wages earned from the archaeological landscape, though working directly in tourism pays more (but can be somewhat less reliable) than work on archaeological digs. As in accounts of the nationality of the pyramid builders, the nationality of the pyramid excavators remains politically charged: unlike archaeological excavations in some other parts of the world, where amateurs volunteer to work on excavations as a kind of working tourism, the Egyptian government's strict rules about who may work on excavations generally restricts the labor force to local Egyptian workers. Yet this labor is primarily absent in Egyptological field reports, other than brief expressions of gratitude towards the inspectors and local workers that participate in a given dig, and it is largely absent in the media accounts of new archaeological finds, which focus on the famous archaeologists who formally lead expeditions and publish on them, but who sometimes do very little of the physical labor of excavating.

Portraying the labor of pyramid building as a ritual of nation building is not simply a secularizing move that seeks to distance the monuments from their religious significance; it is also a perspective on class relations that celebrates the appropriation of labor from the poorest segments of society to build elite monuments for the glory of the state. This is a recurring theme in Egyptological discussions of the organization of labor towards monumental building in ancient Egypt. Barry Kemp, for example, describes public expenditure on labor-intensive projects as 'the great engine of growth' of civilization that he likens to 'welfare (as yet innocent of social ideology)' (1988: 136), while Mark Lehner, like Hawass, argues that 'the pyramids helped to build Egypt' (1997: 228). Revisionist histories (like those of Fagan, France, Greener, and Reid) that describe the accomplishments of great Egyptologists, whether Egyptian or European, but ignore the experiences of the laborers who worked on the excavations, parallel the perspectives of Egyptologists themselves by implicitly celebrating the appropriation of

lower class labor to excavate the monuments for the glory of the discipline. These accounts leave out an important story about the ways that Egyptology was and is founded on the labor of Egyptian peasants, digging vast quantities of sand for little and sometimes no remuneration and rarely any recognition. Is that why some Egyptologists' accounts of pyramid building portray that labor as a service to the nation that glorifies all of Egypt?

Egyptology has largely been a story about elite pasts. This was shaped by the discipline's origins as a nationalist treasure hunt, a largely European race to collect the most spectacular relics of the past and harness them to imperial glories (Fagan, 1975; France, 1991; Greener, 1966; Trigger, 1984). Ironically, histories of Egyptology have recapitulated this disciplinary trend by recounting the history of famous excavators and their famous finds; even nationalist accounts that bring Egyptians more prominently into the picture are still a celebration of elite academic accomplishments (see also Hertzfeld, 1996, for a related critique). To paraphrase Michael Rowland's (1997) analysis of war memorials, we might thus consider the pyramids in these accounts as monuments that simultaneously glorify the idea of sacrifice while suppressing the reality and brutality of the labor, through constructions of labor as national (therefore, on some level, egalitarian) acts (see also Meskell, 2002).

CONCLUSIONS

It is important to not simply write off nationalism in archaeology as the troublesome interjection of contemporary politics into the pure domain of science, and to recognize and appreciate how nationalists, Egyptian and otherwise, are working to liberate the discipline from the colonialist and imperialist structures of Egyptology past. Such structures harmed the discipline, both by excluding Egyptian scholars from Egyptology and by encouraging destructive research practices that produced short-term spectacular finds at the expense of knowledge of ancient societies and preservation of their remains. National control over ancient monuments not only reasserts control vis-a-vis past transnational treasure-hunting traditions but also provides a mechanism (however sieve-like) for directing some of the large profits to be made from international enthusiasm for ancient Egypt back to the entity responsible for preserving the remnants of the past: the Egyptian government. Nationalist interpretations of recent archaeological finds can be read as not simply the interjection of contemporary politics into a scientific discipline but deliberate ethical responses to the discipline's colonialist legacy that position themselves at the interface between Egyptology and the media, tourism, and popular interpretation of the pharaonic past.

Yet nationalist Egyptology is tied to other structures of power, even as it dismantles old ones and keeps at bay new ones. In the case of narratives

of the labor force that built the pyramids, we see how lauding such labor as patriotism effectively disguises the forms of political or economic violence that compel one class of society to labor for the glory of the state. There are uncanny parallels between such enthusiastic descriptions of the conscripted labor that built the pyramids and the ways that contemporary Egyptology relies on the stratification of Egyptian society to produce labor forces that work to excavate such monuments at low wages for the glory of Egyptology.

A telling little article was published in the *New York Times* on 3 April 2007 that vividly illuminates some of these issues (Slackman, 2007). Published on what Michael Slackman describes as 'the eve of Passover', the author describes joining a 'bus full of journalists' led by Dr Zahi Hawass into the Northern Sinai to promote some of the latest archaeological finds. The find is unspectacular to a public jaded by recent discoveries of spectacular mummies and such (e.g. Hawass, 2000c), so, casting about for a way to make this story relevant to international readers, one journalist asks whether these Sinai excavations have any link to the Biblical tale of Moses leading the ancient Israelites out of Egypt. Hawass dismisses the Exodus story as 'a myth' and says that no archaeological evidence has been found to support it. Then, in an awkward aside, Slackman describes how, in the midst of the press junket, a 'barefoot worker in a track suit tried to press through the crowd to get the officials leading the tour to give him his pay, and tramped off angrily when he was rebuffed'. Having been tantalizingly introduced, the figure of the unpaid laborer disappears just as abruptly, and the rest of the article deals with how belief in the historical reality of Biblical accounts might or might not be reconciled with the archaeological record in Egypt, punctuated by quotes from Hawass who breezily dismisses those who seek proof for biblical stories.

The article is telling in the way that it captures the dynamics between the politics of Egyptology, the enduring appeal of Biblical reference points, Hawass' success in mobilizing the international media to draw attention to archaeological finds in Egypt, and his knowing engagement with the historical imaginations of his audience. Yet it is also striking in the way that it shows how archaeological labor is (not quite successfully) excluded from this picture.

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Notes

1 According to Hawass (1997: 43), members of the Egyptian Giza excavation included Mansour Boriak (who, at the time of my own fieldwork, largely supervised the day-to-day excavation work of the tombs of the pyramid builders), as well as Mohsen Kamal, Mohamadouh Taha, Ashref Abdel-Aziz, Noha Abdel-Hafiz, Amani Abdel-Hamied, Abdel-Hamied Kotb, Adel Kamel, Mohamed Salah, and Hasaballa el-Tieb.

2 In fact, while Hawass implies that the tourist's stumbling was what launched the excavations (Hawass, 1997), Hawass and Lehner had already been searching in the area for the remains of the pyramid builders; indeed, Hawass had speculated in his dissertation (Hawass, 1987) about where on the Plateau these tombs might be found. Thus the story about the tourist's fall from her horse should probably be regarded as one of Hawass' standard narrative techniques: his popular archaeology writings are full of stories of people and especially animals (horses and donkeys) falling into holes that turn out to be important archaeological sites (e.g. Hawass, 2000c). It is an effective way of encouraging popular interest in the archaeological record of Egypt, and Hawass is a master at using the media to raise awareness of archaeology issues.

3 The literature is extensive. On the political economy of archaeology in the Middle East, see Meskell (2001, 2005), Mitchell (2002), and the edited volumes by Meskell (1998) and Pollock and Bernbeck (2004). Neil Asher Silberman (e.g. 1989) and Abu El-Haj (e.g. 2001) have written extensively on archaeology and nationalism in the Middle East. Key works and edited volumes on the relationship between archaeology and nationalism include Hodder (2003), Trigger (1984), Kohl and Fawcett (1995), Díaz-Andreu and Champion (1996), and Meskell (1998); and Hamilakis (1996) and Kohl (1998) provide reviews of the literature. On the politics of archaeology and heritage more generally, there are many resources but a few key works include Bond and Gilliam (1994), Breglia (2006), Castañeda (1996), Tunbridge and Ashworth (1996), and the contributions to the volumes edited by McBryde (1985) and by Gathercole and Lowenthal (1989).

4 See also MacDowell (1994) and David (1986: 58, 190); but for another perspective, see James (1985: 118–19), who points out that there was not much difference in treatment between conscripted freemen and prisoner-slaves.

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