

SAQQARA AND THE MUSEUM NETWORK

By **MAARTEN J. RAVEN**

The Saqqara New Kingdom necropolis as a cultural landscape

The theme of the 2016 General Conference of ICOM in Milan was ‘Museums and cultural landscapes’. This theme was set out as early as 2014 in the Siena charter,¹ and some of its definitions will first be set out here before I shall deal with the very special landscape of Saqqara in Egypt and its significance for the international network of museums.

A landscape can be said to exist only in the eye of the beholder. Without human interaction, there are just territories with a specific natural character. It is human perception of the area in question that results in action or interaction. Usually, a landscape is not just perceived, but also transformed and adapted to human interests and needs. It thus acquires cultural values alongside its original natural values, and it is usually the interaction between these two aspects which makes landscapes truly interesting for human beings: as a suitable place to live or work, an area to obtain economic resources or relaxation, or a territory of historical interest and cultural heritage.

It is the last aspect (but not only that one) that defines the involvement of museums with landscapes. And I do not mean here the depiction of the perceived reality in a painted or engraved ‘landscape’, though this is of course one of the cultural phenomena preserved by museums. What I mean here is much wider: museums share a responsibility towards landscapes, to which they bring their own specific knowledge and skills. The main mission of museums is to oversee the safekeeping and protection of heritage in general, whether it is situated within or outside their walls, both tangible and intangible. Museums should not restrict the care for natural or cultural heritage to their collections only, but have the task to promote the awareness of the significance of such heritage. Landscapes are continually changing, and urban or industrial development may endanger their intrinsic values.

Museums are not only centres of interpretation, encouraging other parties to take proper action for the protection of the heritage in question. Numerous museums all over the world undertake expeditions that take an active role in safeguarding world heritage, ranging from the exploration of natural habitats or isolated indigenous cultures, to the foundation of local heritage centres or the organisation of archaeological missions. It is on the latter aspect that I would like to focus here, taking as an example the desert plateau of Saqqara in Egypt. This place is a good example of a landscape created by successive ‘use-lives’ as a cemetery, and later becoming a source of treasure or a place of scientific research.² The recollection of these various phases is kept in museums all over the world, in particular through preserving the outcomes of a period of plunder of the area during the first half of the 19th century. At the time, hardly any notes were made regarding the archaeological context of the statues, reliefs, and inscriptions in question. Egyptology has thus long struggled with the reconstruction of their original provenance and the assessment of their proper date, function, and significance.

The New Kingdom cemetery of Saqqara is a place where the Leiden museum has been excavating for over forty years, motivated by the fact that a large part of its collections was acquired there (Fig. 1).³ This exploration has greatly contributed to a better understanding of not only objects in Leiden, but also numerous other art works now dispersed in museums all over the globe. At the same time, the expedition has always profited from the generous collaboration of the manifold museums involved, which have provided information, images, or replicas of the objects kept in their custody, or allowed members of the expedition to study and record these items on their premises. Thus the landscape of Saqqara has become closely connected with a global network of museum professionals, and the expedition has provided the opportunity to realize one of the ideals of ICOM: that of sharing information.⁴



Fig. 1. Overview of the site of the Leiden-Turin excavations at Saqqara (2010).

Moreover, the Leiden museum and its various partners have taken on the responsibility to preserve what is left of the cultural heritage in situ, undertaking large-scale consolidation and reconstruction of the preserved remains, and promoting cultural tourism in order to raise the awareness of this unique cultural landscape and of the need to protect it. This involves both foreign visitors who can potentially be motivated to fund future work in the area, and the local community, which can benefit economically from the raised interest of the landscape in question. Because this is the new responsibility of present-day museums, which can no longer solely focus on their local communities, but must assume a global perspective, acting for the safeguarding of the heritage of mankind as a whole. Since 2011, the site of the Leiden Expedition (once the Anglo-Dutch excavations, and since 2015 the Leiden-Turin Expedition) has been opened for visitors, following a decision of the Supreme Council of Antiquities of Egypt.

The tomb of Horemheb

The excavations in question started in 1975 as a co-operation between the Leiden Museum of Antiquities and the Egypt Exploration Society (which is based in London). Using a map published by Richard Lepsius and showing the position of the tomb of Maya, Tutankhamun's Treasurer,⁵ the objective was to locate that splendid monument – a find that would be very important for the Leiden museum, which had acquired three statues of Maya and his wife in 1828 (Fig. 2). Within a week, however, another monument rose from the desert sand: the tomb of Tutankhamun's General and Regent, Horemheb. This discovery proved that the long-lost cemetery of the highest Memphite officials of the New Kingdom, from which so many art treasures now in international museums had been taken by art dealers in the 19th and early 20th centuries, and which had been forgotten and covered by wind-blown sand since then, had been located. It also proved that Lepsius's surveyor had made a mistake in producing his plan of Saqqara, but since it was likely that the tomb of Maya might be close to that of his contemporary Horemheb, it was also likely that it could be found later on.



Fig. 2. Overview of the new installation of the Egyptian sculpture gallery in the National Museum of Antiquities in Leiden, opened in 2016. On the right may be seen the three statues of Maya and his wife Meryt. (Photo: Rob Overmeer.)

The tomb of Horemheb, at 65 metres in length, probably the largest monument of the whole cemetery, was cleared from 1975–79 and from 2004–6 (Fig. 3). This enabled the expedition to determine the original position of numerous museum objects: not only the major reliefs now in the Leiden Museum but also various smaller pieces in Baltimore, Berlin, Bologna, Cairo, Chicago, Florence, London, Munich, New York, Paris, St. Petersburg and Vienna.⁶ Recently, three more statues have also been identified as originally coming from the general's tomb.⁷



Fig. 3. The tomb of Horemheb as restored by the expedition (2010).

The tomb was immediately restored and consolidated in order to provide a safe environment for the surviving reliefs, which could thus be left on the walls of the monument and displayed to visitors of the site. As early as 1986, a whole number of replicas taken from the originals in several museums could be put back in their original locations on the walls of Horemheb's monumental tomb, thereby considerably improving the aesthetic effect of the wall decoration as a whole (Fig. 4). Various smaller pieces have been added over the years, most recently in 2013 when a replica of a block now in Bologna could be made by digitally scanning the original (Fig. 5).⁸ Thereby the tomb of Horemheb has acquired the appearance of a site museum, and serves as a focus for visitors of the New Kingdom site.

The tomb of Maya

In 1986, the expedition finally managed to locate the tomb of Maya, the original objective of the mission. This proved to be situated about 20 metres further north than indicated on Lepsius's map. The excavations lasted until 1991 and brought to light a tomb only minimally smaller than that of Horemheb and in quite good condition. Here as well a considerable number of wall reliefs were still extant, providing information about the provenance of other reliefs now in Baltimore, Berlin, Cairo, Hamburg, Rochester and Toronto.⁹ Among the finds were also a number of statue bases, doubtless of the three statues now in Leiden. Like the

tomb of Horemheb, that of Maya was consolidated by the expedition, and parts of it set up as an open-air museum with proper information panels in English and Arabic for the visitors. The most spectacular part of the exhibit is constituted by the underground tomb-chambers of Maya and his wife Meryt, decorated with brightly painted limestone relief panels and now reconstituted in a modern concrete basement under the outer courtyard of the tomb.



Fig. 4. West wall of the inner courtyard of the tomb of Horemheb, just after the installation of some replicas of the reliefs in Leiden, Vienna and Berlin (1985).



Fig. 5. Insertion of a replica of a relief block in Bologna in the east wall of Horemheb's inner courtyard (2013).

The tomb of Tia

Between the tombs of Horemheb and Maya lay yet another large monument, belonging to the Treasurer of Ramesses II, Tia, who had married the King's sister who was also called Tia. This tomb was excavated between 1982–84, its forecourt during 2005–7. Here as well documentation could be gathered about some objects that had left the site at the beginning of the 19th century and can today be found in various museums.¹⁰ These include stelae now in Durham and Florence, and a fragment of a stone sarcophagus in Copenhagen. Tia's tomb was also consolidated and partly rebuilt: this reconstruction includes special niches for the display of sculpture fragments from the tomb.

Various smaller mortuary chapels surrounded the tomb of the Tias. Among them was the chapel of the 'Troop-commander of Traders', Pabes, found in 1986. A statue of the tomb-owner and his wife with the cow-goddess Hathor, doubtless from here, has been in the Leiden Museum since 1828.¹¹



Fig. 6. View of the protective shelter erected over the tomb of Meryneith (2013).

The tomb of Meryneith

A major discovery was the tomb of the High Priest of the Aten Meryneith in 2001. This was the first monument discovered in the New Kingdom cemetery to date to the Amarna period. Its discovery provided the opportunity to obtain first-hand information about the influence of the religious revolution of King Akhenaten in the Memphite region; moreover, several reliefs from the tomb could be located in a number of museums all over the world.¹² Whereas fragments in Berlin, Chicago and a private collection had been inscribed with

Meryneith's name and titles, and had accordingly already been connected with the 'dossier' of the tomb-owner, this was not the case with yet another piece from the Berlin Museum and a splendid relief in the Metropolitan Museum at New York that proved to join to the wall-reliefs still extant in the Saqqara tomb. The preservation of Meryneith's tomb presented a special challenge because of the presence of numerous original reliefs and of four chapels with painted decoration on mud-plaster. Therefore, it was decided to envelop the whole tomb in a modern construction of baked bricks, steel and concrete, which serves as an impressive site museum (Fig. 6). Special care was taken not to disturb the enjoyment of the open landscape of the Saqqara necropolis; the new shelter is not only plastered in a desert colour but is also situated in a fold in the hilly landscape that practically hides it from view.

The tomb of Ptahemwia

A comparable tomb of the Amarna period was found immediately to the east of that of Meryneith. This proved to belong to the Royal Butler Ptahemwia and was excavated during 2007–8. Two objects in museums were already known to stem from this 'lost' tomb: a pilaster in Bologna and a door-jamb in Cairo.¹³ A replica of the Bologna pilaster could be put back on the walls of the Saqqara tomb in 2013. This was not made with the ordinary technique of making a plaster cast but instead used modern digital scanning techniques.¹⁴ Otherwise, the tomb was again consolidated by constructing a concrete roof over the chapel area and over a wall with extant relief decoration.

Conclusion

The Saqqara project of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities, together with the Museo Egizio in Turin, is a good example of the role present-day museums can play in the preservation of ancient cultural landscapes and in raising the public awareness of this precious heritage. Moreover, it has provided a great opportunity for co-operation between a large number of museums with Egyptian collections worldwide. On the one hand, the excavations have provided fresh information on items which have been on display for almost two centuries, but for which practically nothing had been known about their original provenance or function. On the other, the expedition has profited from the generosity of these numerous institutions and their willingness to share all available documentation on the treasures kept in their custody. Thus, 'sharing information' has been truly invaluable for both parties concerned and has helped to evaluate an aspect of ancient heritage that has suffered too long from the neglect of earlier discoverers and art dealers. At the same time, the country of origin of all these art treasures, Egypt, has profited by the increase of interest in one of its ancient landscapes and the touristic development of the area in question. Hopefully, this will stimulate the awareness that the country's heritage from the past is one of its greatest economic assets for the future, and will thereby ensure the lasting preservation of a unique cultural landscape.

¹ See http://icom.museum/uploads/media/Carta_di_Siena_EN_final.pdf

² The notion of 'use-lives' of a site or landscape is explained for Saqqara in the analysis of the tomb of Meryneith in: M.J. Raven and R. van Walsem, *The Tomb of Meryneith at Saqqara*. Papers on Archaeology of the Leiden Museum of Antiquities (PALMA) 10 (Turnhout, 2014), 323–28. This analysis is based on the principle of 'pragmatics'.

³ For a pictorial record of the excavation history, see V. Oeters *Images of Saqqara, Thirty-Eight Years of (Anglo-) Dutch Excavations* (Leiden, 2012). See also M.J. Raven, *Hakken in het zand, 50 jaar opgraven in Egypte door het*

Rijksmuseum van Oudheden (Leiden, 2007); M.J. Raven, The Saqqara excavations, in: P. Giovetti/D. Picchi, *Egypt, millenary splendour: the Leiden collection in Bologna* (Bologna, 2016), 216-221. More information can be found on the excavation website at www.saqqara.nl.

⁴ See the ICOM Code of Ethics, especially §§ 3.9 and 6.1 (<http://archives.icom.museum/ethics.html#intro>).

⁵ K.R. Lepsius, *Denkmäler aus Ägypten und Äthiopien*, I (Berlin, 1849), pl. 33.

⁶ See <http://www.saqqara.nl/excavations/tombs/horemheb/museum-objects>.

⁷ M.J. Raven, V. Verschoor, M. Vugts and R. van Walsem), *The Memphite tomb of Horemheb, commander in chief of Tutankhamun, V: the forecourt and the area south of the tomb, with some notes on the tomb of Tia* (PALMA 6, Turnhout, 2011), 375-380.

⁸ D. Picchi, The 'Horemheb & Saqqara' project: the new technologies at the service of archaeology, in: P. Giovetti/D. Picchi, *Egypt, millenary splendour: the Leiden collection in Bologna* (Bologna, 2016), 222-227.

⁹ See <http://www.saqqara.nl/excavations/tombs/maya--merit/museum-objects>.

¹⁰ <http://www.saqqara.nl/excavations/tombs/tia--tia/museum-objects>.

¹¹ <http://www.saqqara.nl/excavations/tombs/pabes/museum-objects>.

¹² <http://www.saqqara.nl/excavations/tombs/meryneithmeryre/museum-objects>.

¹³ <http://www.saqqara.nl/excavations/tombs/ptahemwia/museum-objects>.

¹⁴ Cf. n. 8, above.