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Prelude to the Pearl: Sweeping Events Leading To The Discovery of the Book of Abraham

Kerry Muhlestein

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In a general conference, Elder John A. Widtsoe of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles taught that “throughout all the ages of history the hand of God has overruled the actions of mankind, that nothing is done except as the Lord may use it for the accomplishment of his mighty purposes. . . . The things accomplished by humanity become in the end God’s accomplishments, as he makes use of them in working out his infinite purposes.”^[1] Even the great movements of nations and armies often serve to accomplish the workings of the Lord, such as when the empire of Assyria rose to great heights in order that the Lord could “send him against an hypocritical nation [Israel]” (Isaiah 10:6). While Isaiah prophetically informed us of such divine involvement, we are frequently unable to see how the Lord has shaped human affairs to further His work until sufficient time has passed to give us a more keen hindsight. Such retrospection seems to indicate that a series of large and sweeping events opened a window of time in which conditions were most suitable for the discovery and transport of the papyri that contained the book of Abraham, and thus the wonderful flood of light which its doctrine cast upon the gospel. In much the same way that the Lord prepared the New World so a freedom of religious expression allowed for the Restoration, He also prepared other countries and peoples so the book of Abraham could further the restoration of gospel principles.

It is indisputable that the book of Abraham and its attendant doctrines proved to be a great boon to the fledgling Church and served to deepen our early leaders’ understanding of the gospel. Of the acquisition of the papyri, the Prophet Joseph wrote that “much to our joy [we] found that one of the rolls contained the writings of Abraham, another the writings of Joseph of Egypt, etc.—a more full account of which will appear in its place, as I proceed to examine or unfold them. Truly we can say, the Lord is beginning to reveal the abundance of peace and truth.”^[2] While the book’s value to the Saints is well known, what is not as clear is that just a short time before Joseph’s reception of the papyri it would have been extremely unlikely that such a find would be available. Furthermore, not long after the purchase of the papyri, conditions in Egypt changed such as to make circumstances less favorable for them to wend their way out of Egypt and into the American frontier. In the large scheme of things, there was only a small window of time in which an environment was fostered that lent itself to a set of papyri from Thebes making its way into the hands of a small group of people in Ohio.

Early Excavations

The papyri that Joseph Smith purchased seem to have come from a tomb near Thebes, deep in southern, or Upper, Egypt,^[3] and most likely started their journey from Egypt to America in the early to mid-1820s.^[4] The exportation of goods from Thebes had, until just before this time, been a rare event. After the conquest of Egypt by Muslims in the mid-seventh century, access to the country by non-Muslims was restricted to Cairo and Alexandria. While the addition of Egypt to the Ottoman Empire in the early sixteenth century eventually made entrance to the southern portions of the country theoretically possible, in reality no one dared venture south of Giza.^[5] Because of a belief in the medicinal qualities of mummies, or at least parts of them, they were regularly exported from at least the

thirteenth century onward;^[6] but access to Upper Egypt was limited. It was not until 1589 that a record was made of a European traveling to Upper Egypt.^[7] From this point onward, a slow trickle of European explorers made their way into Egypt while a similarly minuscule rivulet of Egyptian artifacts made their way to Europe. Pietro de Valle brought back a few intact mummies for display in the early 1600s.^[8] The beginnings of small collections of artifacts appeared in the early 1700s. Between 1717 and 1738, men such as Lucas, Pococke, and Norden explored Egypt, brought back some meager antiquities, and published maps and other accounts of their findings.^[9] Whole mummies for display also began to make appearances after this. The site of these mummies' excavation is now unknown, but it seems very unlikely that they came from Upper Egypt. Although the intellectual involvement with Egypt and her past increased dramatically during the eighteenth century, the number of expeditions that brought antiquities into Europe before 1790 was still negligible. Certainly, European elite had been prying into Egypt's past for some time via a variety of academic exercises, yet Europe's increasing fascination with and musing about Egypt's ancient intellectual and spiritual culture had not yet brought in a sizeable amount of her material culture.^[10]

Napoleon's Invasion of Egypt

The watershed event that turned the trickle of antiquities into a surging flood was Napoleon's invasion of Egypt in 1798, just years before the First Vision. Egypt's history and Europe's involvement with Egypt were dramatically and unalterably changed by the Napoleonic naval landing. Napoleon's motivations for his invasion of Egypt were both bold and complicated. Certainly he meant to strike at British dominance in access to the exotic. Egypt controlled the way to India, the jewelstone of Britain's far-flung empire.^[11] Additionally, Napoleon had reportedly become intrigued with pharaonic culture, a near-passion that intertwined itself with a desire to offset a perceived British superiority in the study of Egypt.^[12] This influenced Napoleon's decision to make the expedition a scientific exploration as well as a military mission. It also seems certain that part of his aim was to bring Egyptian artifacts back to France, probably as a show of cultural acumen.^[13] Moreover, the able general seems to have been partially modeling himself after Alexander the Great, who "liberated" Egypt from foreign rule.^[14]

Under the influence of these motivations, Napoleon mounted not only a military force but also an army of intellectual elites, known as the savants, to accompany him on his expedition to Egypt. Thirty-eight thousand men were transported to the coasts of Egypt in 328 ships. Among these were 150 members of the Commission on Arts and Sciences, consisting of civil engineers, mining engineers, physicians, cartographers, zoologists, mathematicians, chemists, botanists, astronomers, archaeologists, artists, printers, geologists, and ancient historians. Most of these did not know of their destination until they were well out to sea.^[15]

Napoleon's army easily defeated the adversaries they encountered, and they marched to Thebes and beyond. They fought battles within view of the pyramids, while the ever-dramatic Bonaparte reminded them that forty centuries of history looked down upon them.^[16] Upon first beholding the temples of Karnak and Luxor, his soldiers were so impressed that they spontaneously burst into applause and then presented arms to the ancient buildings. Napoleon's savants experienced no lack of material to study. As they traveled up and down the Nile, they busied themselves in both acquiring and copying Egyptian inscriptions and other artifacts. Chief among these inscriptions was the Rosetta stone, an inscription in Greek and two phases of the Egyptian language which would eventually prove to be the key in cracking hieroglyphs and unlocking the voluminous texts of ancient Egypt.

However, not all was fortuitous for this expedition. Exactly a month after the arrival of the French in Egypt, the British located the French fleet of ships and destroyed them. Meanwhile, British diplomats quickly opened communication with the Ottomans, reminding them that Egypt was part of the Ottoman Empire, and volunteering to

help wrest it back from French control. A year after his arrival in Egypt, Napoleon abandoned his men and fled from the country. The French force remained for some time, during which the savants continued their frenzied study. Eventually the Ottoman sultan sent a military force, which was accompanied by an eager British expedition, to oust the French. Nearly three years after their arrival, the French army surrendered in 1801.

The disposition of gathered antiquities became an important part of the terms of surrender. Article 16 of the formal capitulation agreement dictated that all artifacts collected by the French would become the property of the combined armies of the Ottomans and the British. A few antiquities were allowed to return to France, along with the drawings and papers of the savants.^[17] The Ottoman Turks seemed to have had no interest in the larger Egyptian artifacts and were apparently surprised that possession of such was the only demand of the British for their part in the conflict. And so, the great prizes were claimed by the British, who seemed to want them as much to demonstrate that they had taken France's goods as for their own sake.^[18] The Rosetta stone was apparently recognized for its value and was sent to England on a ship of its own.

The three years of study did not prove to be a complete disappointment to the French intellectuals. A member of the commission was soon able to publish an account of the expedition. Some time thereafter the official publication of the Commission on Arts and Sciences was made available. It was called *Description de l'Égypte* and consisted of several volumes. One volume contained giant-sized folio pages with drawings of Egypt and her architecture and artifacts. An atlas also accompanied the publication, and all these works received a wide circulation. With the release of the maps, stories, and images, public interest in Egypt exploded. European imagination was caught up in the seeming romance and mystery of such an ancient and splendor-filled culture. Soon many of the European countries were involved in frenzied efforts to satisfy the intellectual demand for knowledge of Egypt. The information about Egypt that was made available via the publications of the French expedition made such efforts all the more possible.

Muhammad Ali's Influence

The increased knowledge of Egypt and incessant curiosity about it were not the only outcomes of Napoleon's infiltration that fostered an environment of artifact export and exploitation. "It happened that in the expeditionary force sent by the sultan to Egypt was a young man, Muhammad Ali, who changed the history of Egypt. Napoleon's expedition revealed the might of Europe, but Muhammad Ali was one of the few who understood the source of that might and attempted to bring Egypt into the modern world by borrowing from the West."^[19] Ali was an Albanian with an acumen for political maneuvering who, shortly after serving as an important officer in the force that expelled the French, became de facto ruler of Egypt; within four years he managed to get himself appointed pasha, or high official, of Egypt. Ali wanted very much to modernize Egypt, and he engaged in a game of playing countries against each other. He was largely successful in this endeavor because the contest for Egypt between France and Britain continued, but the battlefield had shifted to artifact acquisition—and Ali held all the currency for the contest. It was to Ali that Champollion—the man who eventually deciphered hieroglyphs—went for permission to study inscriptions in Egypt. It was through Ali that permission was obtained to bring major monuments out of Egypt and into France and England. For example, in exchange for help in modernizing his country, Ali negotiated the acquisition of several obelisks by these two countries, who engaged in a number of dealings with the Egyptian leader in an effort to obtain whatever obelisk the other country had desired.^[20] As the fascination with Egyptian antiquities increased, Ali, who was puzzled over interest in such ancient pieces, was liberal in granting requests for artifacts, since these Europeans "were thereby indebted, at no perceived cost, to Mohammed Ali and his government."^[21]

The desire for Egyptian collections was not restricted to competition between France and Britain, though they were often the major players. Many other countries, most notably Austria and Italy, also vied for pieces of Egyptian history. Most modern European countries sent a consul to Egypt, and these consuls competed so fiercely in collecting Egyptian antiquities that the period came to be known as the War of the Consuls.^[22] "The Consuls and their collections

began the process that would culminate in the Egyptian Museum and the Egyptian Antiquities Service in the second half of the century, but Egypt in the early 1800s was regarded as a source of antiquities for European (and later American) national museums whose displays would reflect the prestige of the home state, not of Egypt.”^[23] The widespread, frantic, and unrestrained deportation of artifacts that ensued was closer to wholesale looting than to excavation.

Excavators of Artifacts

Napoleon’s military expeditions had another curious effect that contributed to the climate of the War of the Consuls. Because of the reaction in France against men who were seen as loyal to Napoleon—the so-called Bonapartists—a great many men who had served with Napoleon were unable to return to their home countries. For example, Bernardino Drovetti, who was appointed by Napoleon as the French consul to Egypt, decided to remain in Egypt due to his fear of the French royal family after the French government changed hands. He became a trusted adviser to Ali. Another Bonapartist refugee was Antonio Lebolo, the man who would exhume the papyri that later came into the possession of Joseph Smith.

Drovetti proved to be one of the most energetic of Egyptian exporters. He competed first and foremost with Henry Salt, the consul for Britain. These two men employed a number of people in their efforts to obtain Egyptian artifacts. The competition between them and other consuls gave rise to some of the most colorful characters of Egyptology and an era of uncontrolled and chaotic extraction and exchange of Egyptian goods. Between the two of them, Salt and Drovetti acquired enough artifacts to create the foundation of the Egyptian collection in the British Museum, the Louvre, the Turin Museum, and countless “curiosity cabinets” and private collections.^[24] This was a period of excavation by explosion and coat-closet conservation.

Inexplicably, many of the most famous and successful of these hired “excavators” were Italians. Salt hired Giovanni Battista Caviglia, a Genoan who spent a great deal of time exploring the pyramids and Sphinx of Giza.^[25] Salt later hired a man who would become the most famous of these maverick explorer-excavators: Giovanni Belzoni. This Italian giant had served as a strongman in a circus before embarking on one of the most successful careers of Egyptian treasure hunting that the world has known.

More apropos to our subject was Drovetti’s hiring of the Italian Antonio Lebolo, who was also a political refugee.^[26] Lebolo directed excavations under Drovetti’s behest for a number of years. As Drovetti turned his attention towards helping Ali in his role as adviser to the pasha, he left much of the acquisition of Egyptian antiquities to Lebolo. It was Lebolo who played official host to visitors in Upper Egypt, and in his work he sometimes oversaw hundreds of men. Lebolo became so ensconced in this role, especially in Thebes, that he was even referred to by some as the new king of Thebes.^[27] Apparently wanting to leave his mark behind, Lebolo went so far as to carve his name into one of the pillars of Karnak, much as ancient Egyptian kings had done. While thus employed, Lebolo was able to send off a host of goods to European countries.

Lebolo’s fortunes took something of a downturn when Drovetti lost his post as consul due to the political reversals in France. While Drovetti continued as an adviser to Pasha Ali, he could no longer afford to pay Lebolo. Since both men were aware that the antiquities business was lucrative and a viable option for political refugees such as themselves, Lebolo agreed to continue working for Drovetti under the conditions that after meeting quotas of goods which were under Drovetti’s control, Lebolo could then extricate as many goods as he could for personal profit.^[28] Thus, the pace of chaotic excavation increased.

The sheer quantity of goods available made a great many of them commonplace among such excavators as Lebolo. He reportedly lived in a tomb that was filled with mummies, statues, and papyri, and used a bas-relief stone for his door. He burned ancient coffins for his firewood and bought goods that local Arabs sold willy-nilly.^[29] He was not

alone in this type of behavior. We know of other excavators who destroyed anything similar to the antiquities they were trying to sell, in order to increase their value.^[30] Almost certainly it was during these days as “king of Thebes” that Lebolo exhumed the mummies in which the papyri containing the book of Abraham were found.

The fascination with Egyptian things that held sway in Europe also captured the American imagination. With fewer antiquities entering the New World than Europe, those that did come drew considerable public attention. It was just such circumstances that prompted a later owner of the papyri, Michael Chandler, to purchase the mummies and scrolls in America in an attempt to earn a living off of them. Chandler traveled with his mummies and papyri throughout the countryside, charging admission to any who would come to see them. After some time he tired of the lifestyle this produced and determined to sell them. While exhibiting the collection in Ohio, Chandler came into contact with the Prophet Joseph Smith, who felt inspired to purchase the collection, and soon thereafter made the happy discovery outlined above—the Lord had brought another prophetic record to the Church. Thus the demand for Egyptian antiquities had drawn the book of Abraham out of Egypt, into Europe, through the United States, and into the Prophet’s keeping, for the purpose of enlightening the Lord’s covenant people.

Fortunately for the field of Egyptology, the heyday of chaotic excavation and exchange was short-lived. While the battle for museum prestige pieces continued, some control was brought to the deportation of antiquities. In the mid-nineteenth century, the pasha created a National Antiquities Service, and soon Auguste Mariette was put in charge. About this same time the Egyptian Museum was founded, and Mariette ensured that most of Egypt’s finds thenceforth remained in Egypt. To be sure, black-market antiquities have never been completely curtailed; but the War of the Consuls was over, and the flood of exiting artifacts began to be dammed.

Implications

During the roughly fifty years we have just examined, conditions in Egypt were such that scores of mummies, papyri, and other artifacts flowed almost completely uninhibited from Egypt to Europe and America. This small window of time was concurrent with the infant days of the Church. Undoubtedly, had the Lord intended to bring the book of Abraham to the Prophet Joseph in other circumstances, He could have. Yet it seems that the swirling movements of the nations swept that which was much needed by the Church into the hands of the Prophet at a crucial time. As Elder Widtsoe said, “The hand of God has overruled the actions of mankind. . . . Nothing is done except as the Lord may use it for the accomplishment of his mighty purposes.”^[31]

We cannot assume that as the Lord accomplishes His work, all the specific actions of individuals involved in that work are thus justified. Even as the Lord said He used the king of Assyria in order to punish Israel, He also stipulated that the king did not have righteous intentions nor did he give credit to the Lord (Isaiah 10:7–15). As a result, this instrument of the Lord was punished, even for actions that fulfilled the Lord’s will. In a similar manner, we are not safe in construing that Napoleon, Lebolo, Drovetti, or Ali, though they all played some role in the appearance of the book of Abraham, were doing so with righteous intent nor that all their actions were acceptable. Certainly, much of the climate that allowed Lebolo to extricate and export mummies and papyri was full of self-serving and ignoble acts. As Latter-day Saints we need not condone any of the actions that led to the discovery of the book of Abraham by our beloved Prophet. Yet, equally certainly, the large events and chaotic circumstances of the time made it possible for such a blessing to take place. For this, we are grateful.

[1] John A. Widtsoe, in Conference Report, October 1927, 25.

[2] Joseph Smith, *History of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*, ed. B. H. Roberts, 2d ed. rev., 7 vols. (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1932–51), 2:236.

[3] For information about the original location of the mummies and papyri, see H. Donl Peterson, *The Story of the Book*

of Abraham: Mummies, Manuscripts, and Mormonism (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 1995), 53–62.

[4] See Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 70.

[5] See Giovanni Belzoni, *Belzoni's Travels: Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries in Egypt and Nubia*, ed. Alberto Siliotti, trans. Richard Pierce (London: The British Museum Press, 2001), 13.

[6] See Kerry Muhlestein, "European Views of Egyptian Magic and Mystery," *BYU Studies* (forthcoming).

[7] See Anonimo Veneziano (Anonymous Venetian), *Viaggio Che O Fato L'anno 1589, dal Caiero in Ebrin navigando su per el nilo* (n.p., 1589).

[8] See John Baines and Jaromir Malek, *Cultural Atlas of Ancient Egypt*, rev. ed. (New York: Checkmark Books, 2000), 22.

[9] See Muhlestein, "European Views," 3; see also Belzoni, *Travels*, 14, 18.

[10] See Muhlestein, "European Views," 3, 7–8.

[11] See Fekri A. Hassan, "Imperialist Appropriations of Egyptian Obelisks," in *Views of Ancient Egypt Since Napoleon Bonaparte: Imperialism, Colonialism and Modern Appropriations*, ed. David Jeffreys (London: University College London Press, 2003), 23.

[12] See David Jeffreys, "Two Hundred Years of Ancient Egypt: Modern History and Ancient Archaeology," in *Views of Ancient Egypt Since Napoleon Bonaparte: Imperialism, Colonialism and Modern Appropriations*, ed. David Jeffreys (London: University College London Press, 2003), 1–2.

[13] See Morris L. Bierbrier, "Art and Antiquities for Governments Sake," in *Views of Ancient Egypt since Napoleon Bonaparte: Imperialism, Colonialism and Modern Appropriations*, ed. David Jeffreys (London: University College London Press, 2003), 70. See also J. C. Herold, *Bonaparte in Egypt* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1963).

[14] Jeffreys, "Two Hundred Years," 1.

[15] See Mark Lehner, *The Complete Pyramids* (London: Thames and Hudson, Ltd., 1997), 46; Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 38.

[16] See Napoleon Bonaparte, *Correspondance de Napoleon Ier; publiee par ordre de l'empereur Napoleon III* (Paris: Impr. Imperiale, 1858–69), 29:450.

[17] See Bierbrier, "Art and Antiquities," 71–73.

[18] See Bierbrier, "Art and Antiquities," 73–74.

[19] Yahya Armajani and Thomas M. Ricks, *Middle East: Past and Present* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), 177. For an example of British help in modernizing Egypt, see Albert Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 267.

[20] See Hassan, "Imperialist Appropriations," 61.

[21] Bierbrier, "Art and Antiquities," 74.

[22] See Belzoni, *Belzoni's Travels*, 26.

[23] Bierbrier, "Art and Antiquities," 75.

[24] See Nicolas-Christophe Grimal, *A History of Ancient Egypt* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1992), 9; see also Lehner, *Complete Pyramids*, 48; Jeffreys, "Two Hundred Years," 4.

[25] See Lehner, *Complete Pyramids*, 48–49.

[26] The reason for this situation is not understood. We only gather it from a letter from a journal entry of Belzoni, in

which he records that Lebolo had “left Piedmont after the fall of the late government,” meaning the Napoleonic government. See Belzoni, *Travels*, 197. See also Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 44.

[27] See Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 47.

[28] See Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 54.

[29] See Peterson, *Story of the Book of Abraham*, 47–48.

[30] See Muhlestein, “European Views,” 7.

[31] Widtsoe, in Conference Report, October 1927, 25.