

Finding the Village: Qurna in the 1810s between Antiquities Collectors and Local Working Practice

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Abstract

Historians and archaeologists tend to detach sites and objects in urban and rural settings from the people living there, as neglected treasures awaiting recognition and rescue by an outsider. In this paper, we consider the range of persons and institutions involved in accumulating material evidence for the Ramesside artists who worked on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings and lived in a village between the Theban desert cliffs and the fields. A first wave of extracting their monuments, in the late 1810s, offers an opportunity to investigate the processes involved in collecting antiquities, and the relations between the protagonists—local, international, and intermediary. We argue that a focus on questions of historical method and sources would increase precision on statements of provenance in collections and help to align a more self-critical history of archaeology with the primary aim of others to understand a past society.

الملخص

لقد اعتاد المؤرخون والآثريون على فصل المواقع الأثرية والقطع المكتشفة بها سواء بالريف أو الحضر عن سكان هذه المناطق كما اعتادوا على تصوير هذه المواقع والقطع الأثرية بأنها كنوز مهملة عادة ما تحتاج إلى شخص من خارج هذه المناطق لتقديرها وإنقاذها. تتناول هذه المقالة دراسة للأشخاص والمؤسسات التي قامت بتكوين مجموعات من آثار فناني عصر الرعامسة. هؤلاء الفنانون الذين عملوا بمقابر وادي الملوك وسكنوا بمدينة تقع بين تلال صحراء طيبة والحقول الزراعية. وتقدم لنا دراسة أولى عمليات تمت بهدف التنقيب عن آثار هؤلاء الفنانين بنهاية عام 1810 مثال لفهم أساليب تكوين مجموعات الآثار المصرية وما تتضمنه هذه الأساليب من علاقات مختلفة بين مستفيدين محليين وعالميين وما بينهما من وسطاء. وتسلسل هذه المقالة الضوء على كيفية استخدام الأدلة التاريخية وطرق البحث المستخدمة في علم التاريخ لمعرفة أماكن اكتشاف المجموعات الأثرية على نحو أكثر دقة وتساعدنا هذه الدراسة على تقديم رؤية نقدية لنشأة وتاريخ علم الآثار المصرية مما يجعل فهم المجتمعات القديمة من أولويات البحث في علم الآثار.

On Funders and Finders in the History of Egyptian Archaeology

The primary aim of an archaeologist or ancient historian today may be to understand past human lives and practices.¹ The evidence may be analyzed at different scales on a spatial spectrum from region, to site, to find

¹ See G. Lucas, *Critical Approaches to Fieldwork: Contemporary and Historical Archaeological Practice* (London-New York, 2001), 62, noting changes in “the prevailing conception of the past” over the 19th and 20th centuries, “as the evolution of culture, as the history of cultural groups, and as cultural behaviour,” such that, for current fieldwork archaeologists, “the site is a repository of behavioural patterns, structured activities revealed through close analysis of contextual association within or between assemblages.”

context, to object.² Even at the level of the object, as the atom in this sequence of scales, the underlying target in research is likely the society that produced, used, and deposited it. However, our developing knowledge of ancient lives cannot be detached from the circumstances and process of finding. The starting point that enables any understanding is the modern life story of the objects. Therefore, precision on the circumstances of finding should be of acute importance, but a general practice of naming finds after modern sponsors of collections has come to distort our view, not only of the history of collecting but of the ancient society at the heart of the study. In this article, we assess the impact of this problem, and the possibilities of identifying the modern finders, through a paradigmatic case: monuments from the community of artists known to Egyptology as Deir al-Medina.³

Information on the early nineteenth-century collections of ancient Egyptian objects regularly connects them with names of a range of individuals, mainly from western European countries and never from Egypt. This practice continues in research writing and museum display text despite recent attention to a wider circle of participants, starting from the skilled foremen and workforce recruited for archaeological fieldwork since the mid-19th century.⁴ Prominent in current histories of Egyptology are European funders directly involved in collecting activity, such as Henry Salt,⁵ William John Bankes,⁶ and Bernardino Drovetti.⁷ Here we define the funder as the person who pays for others to organize collecting activities in the field. These funders may accumulate more than one name, as in the case of hereditary landowners whose legal title to an agricultural base changed, seen in the equations Lowry-Corry = Belmore⁸ and Annesley = Valentia = Mountnorris.⁹ A second category of protagonists in collection history comprises the paid agents who supervised collecting activity in the field, such as Athanasi,¹⁰ Belzoni,¹¹ Passalacqua,¹² and Rifaud.¹³ These sets of European names in the “acquisition history” field of a museum database for objects from Egypt raise two immediate questions: how did this material come to be in the hands of the named person? And where are the Egyptian names? In the public sphere of both the museum and archaeology, the modern personal name now attached to an ancient object involves a normative but one-sided claim: a collecting funder or agent or fieldwork director is made the primary point of contact between modern societies and the ancient objects and their societies.

Closer examination reveals a more complex tale. Beatrix Gessler-Löhr has outlined one particularly spectacular instance where the prize of contact name is contested between funder and field agent:¹⁴ the rediscovery in autumn 1817 of the tomb of king Sety I in Biban al-Muluk the Valley of the Kings at Qurna on the West Bank of the Nile across from Luxor, ancient Thebes. In 1816, the London African Association agent Louis Burckhardt (1784–1817) and the English Consul in Cairo Henry Salt (1780–1827) had engaged a trained engineer Giovanni Battista Belzoni (1778–1823) to organize the removal of the detached upper part of a colossal statue of Ramses II from Qurna.¹⁵ Following the success of the operation, Belzoni received further funding from Salt

² On the difficulty of defining the breakpoints in this spectrum, see the history of use of the word “site” in J. Trampier, *Landscape Archaeology of the Western Nile Delta* (Atlanta, 2014), 7–23.

³ The site is also the focus of the excellent study, with comparable results, by J. Gee, “The Archaeological Context of the Late Rameside Letters and Butehamun’s archive,” in S. Töpfer, P. Del Vesco, and F. Poole (eds.), *Deir El-Medina Through the Kaleidoscope. Proceedings of the International Workshop Turin 8th–10th October 2018* (Modena, 2022), 181–208.

⁴ W. Doyon, “On Archaeological Labor in Modern Egypt,” in W. Carruthers (ed.), *Histories of Egyptology: Interdisciplinary Measures* (New York, 2015), 141–56; S. Quirke, *Hidden Hands: Egyptian Workforces in Petrie Excavation Archives, 1880–1924* (London, 2010).

⁵ M. Bierbrier, *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, 4th edition, (London, 2012), 484–85.

⁶ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 38–39; P. Usick, “William John Bankes’ Collection of Drawings of Egypt and Nubia,” in P. Starkey and J. Starkey (eds.), *Travellers in Egypt* (London, 1998), 51–52.

⁷ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 161–62.

⁸ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 340–41.

⁹ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 22.

¹⁰ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 28.

¹¹ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 52–53.

¹² Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 418.

¹³ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 467.

¹⁴ B. Gessler-Löhr, “Who Discovered Belzoni’s Tomb? A Glimpse behind the Scenes of Early Exploration and the Antiquities Trade,” in M. Betrò and G. Miniaci (eds.), *Talking along the Nile: Ippolito Rosellini, Travellers and Scholars of the 19th Century in Egypt* (Pisa, 2013), 101–23.

¹⁵ E. Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities: Egyptology, Egyptomania, Egyptian Modernity* (Durham, NC, 2007), 24–71.

to continue forming a collection of antiquities on the model set by the ex-Consul of France Bernardino Drovetti (1776–1852).¹⁶ In the following two years, Belzoni established himself as one of the leaders in the extraction of large quantities of antiquities, most notably monumental sculpture, and their transport from Luxor to Cairo for passage onward to Alexandria and export to Europe. His later autobiographical account, as published in English, recounts the finding of the tomb of Sety I as his own single-handed act of genius, even against the advice of the workforce recruited from the *fellahin* “farmers” of Qurna.¹⁷

(a) “I” (European travelogue author) = discoverer

“On the 16th I recommenced my excavations in the valley of Beban el Malook, and pointed out the fortunate spot, which has paid me for all the trouble I took in my researches.”

(b) local inhabitants ≠ discoverers

“...The Fellahs who were accustomed to dig were all of the opinion, that there was nothing in that spot, as the situation of this tomb differed from that of any other.”

(c) “I” (European travelogue author) = discoverer *despite local advice*

“I continued the work however, and the next day, the 17th, in the evening, we perceived the part of the rock that was cut, and formed the entrance. On the 18th, early in the morning, the task was resumed, and about noon the workmen reached the entrance”

(d) “I” discoverer roles: (a) organizer of finding; (b) first to see/enter

“... I descended, examined the place, pointed out to them where they might dig, and in an hour there was room enough for me to enter through a passage ... I perceived immediately ... that this was the entrance into a large and magnificent tomb.”

Belzoni had good reasons for insisting on his role in the narrative published in 1820. Within a year of the “find,” he had to defend his version of events against rumors that he had simply bought the information on the tomb location from a Qurna inhabitant. Belzoni blamed the rumors on, and fought with, his main rival Joseph Rossignana¹⁸ (also known as Yussef Cachef), an agent collecting for Drovetti. However, Gessler-Löhr identifies another source, Eduard Rüppell,¹⁹ who in the 1840s, recorded his own 1817 Nile journey. According to this account, on his way from Cairo to Luxor in April 1817, Rüppell was treated for smallpox at Asyut by the surgeon Filiberto Marucchi. Marucchi had just returned from directing the retrieval of antiquities at Luxor on behalf of the Defterdar (Director General of Finance, an Ottoman office²⁰) Muhammad, governor of Upper Egypt and son-in-law of the powerful governor of all Egypt Muhammad Ali (1769–1849).²¹ European-language narratives have downplayed or dismissed this active involvement of a member of the Muhammad Ali family in these decisive early years of the Theban antiquities gold rush. Gessler-Löhr wonders whether the surgeon told his patient about struggles with Belzoni, who would claim in his autobiography to have started work in 1816 at the site explored by Marucchi, and that Marucchi even “went to the west side of Thebes, and forbade the Fellars with threats to sell any thing to the English.”²² Once cured, Rüppell sailed on to Luxor, where, in May 1817, he received on board “ein alter Araber, in der Umgegend der berühmten Königsgräber ansässig” (“an old Arab, living in the area of the famed Tombs of the Kings”). The man offered to reveal the location of a treasure for

¹⁶ S. Guichard, *Lettres de Bernardino Drovetti consul de France à Alexandrie (1803–1830)* (Paris, 2003), 29 on how Drovetti, after receiving from the Bourbon authorities in Paris the letter terminating his position as consul in December 1814, began two projects, one being a small trading house at Alexandria, and the other, apparently separately, “la recherche des antiquités,” “soutenu dans ces démarches par Méhémet Ali qui s’oppose à son départ et lui fait des propositions avantageuses.” See 62–64 on the question “À quelle date Drovetti a-t-il commencé à collectionner?” noting the limited evidence for a first journey to Upper Egypt in 1811–1812 with Yves Boutin, agent of Napoleon, and concluding that antiquities collecting became a major activity for Drovetti only in 1815–1816, after losing the salaried position of consul.

¹⁷ G. Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations and Recent Discoveries Within the Pyramids, Temples, Tombs and Excavations in Egypt and Nubia; and of a Journey to the Coast of the Red Sea, in Search of the Ancient Berenice; and Another to the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon* (London, 1820), 230–32.

¹⁸ S. Cincotti, “Les fouilles dans le musée: La collection égyptienne de Turin et le fonds Rifaud,” *Karnak* 14 (2013), 279–80.

¹⁹ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 479.

²⁰ N. Michel, *L’Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle*. Collection Turcica XXIII (Leuven, 2013), 43.

²¹ K. Fahmy, *Mehmed Ali: From Ottoman Governor to Ruler of Egypt* (Oxford, 2009).

²² Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations*, 149; Gessler-Löhr, “Who Discovered Belzoni’s Tomb?,” 108.

twenty Spanish piasters. Rüppell dismissed the idea, but later that month he met Belzoni at Kom Ombo and told him the story.²³ Four decades later, in 1862, Rüppell travelled to London to relate a more detailed version of the tale to Joseph Bonomi: “The Arab related that one day he had seen a fox or a jackal come out of a hole in the side of the mountain of Gorna, whereupon he went and enlarged the hole sufficiently to admit himself,” returning the next day with candles to explore his find as far as the burial chamber with its “large box of a fine material like crystal.”²⁴ Rüppell had dismissed the tale as fantasy but told it to Belzoni at dinner to which “Belzoni replied that he had heard of it but that he knew the man to be mad and that there was no truth in the story.” In 1843, John Gardner Wilkinson, a traveler who had lived in Thebes in the 1820s, so several years after 1817, relayed a similar line of events, but with an anonymous collective in place of the single man: “The sinking of the ground at this part, from the water that had soaked into the tomb, led the peasants to suspect the secret of its position, which was first mentioned to Dr. Rüppell, and afterwards to Belzoni.”²⁵

Through the fog of the half-recollected English and German versions from Belzoni and Rüppell, the reader cannot readily judge who knows whom, or what, when in October or May 1817, or earlier. The status of the information in each part of the story seems equally unclear: what is at stake for either Belzoni or Rüppell, or for the one or more “anonymous *Gurnawi*”?²⁶

From the African Great Lakes to Mount Everest, European history and science tend to narrate their overseas ventures in the terms of heroic exploration, but the paths turn out to be well trodden.²⁷ In the alternative version of the Sety I tomb “find,” the first modern finders are those living closest to the site. The initial instinct in the biographical tradition might be to recover the names of anonymous finders. However, inquiry into historical sources may reveal different, equally fundamental factors, in the collective, multi-layered and multicentric dimensions to “finding.” Even if we cannot identify key individual protagonists at Qurna by name, we may find evidence for the local organization of antiquities finders in the early 19th century. To test the possibilities, we offer here a further case-study from the West Bank at Luxor, with a focus on Deir el-Medina. This history of collecting may remind us how current research practice still prefers literary narrative to a search for new documentary sources in a way that strategically excludes local modern populations from the discipline. In the tangled relations of knowledge and power, researchers should be alert to the difficulty of changing the standard narrative or its litany of funder and agent names. Nevertheless, as a first move, we argue for a renewed focus on the documentary evidence for find-place, as a precondition also for understanding ancient Egypt.

(Re-)Constructing Context for Antiquities without Securely Documented Provenance: Finds Ascribed to Deir el-Medina

Most ancient makers are as anonymous to us as the modern local finders. However, through their own inscriptions on architecture and artefacts, one group within the archaeological record documented itself particularly vividly: the team comprising sculptors who prepared the limestone walls and artists who drafted and painted the scenes covering them in the corridor tombs cut for kings in the Ramesside Period (13th–11th century BC), including that of Sety I. These artists lived with their families in a purpose-built stone-walled village set apart from the fields, on the east side of the mountain from their main workplace in the Valley of the Kings.²⁸ For this settlement site, Egyptologists have adopted the Arabic name Deir el-Medina “Monastery of the Town,” evoking

²³ Gessler-Löhr, “Who Discovered Belzoni’s Tomb?,” 111–13.

²⁴ Gessler-Löhr, “Who Discovered Belzoni’s Tomb?,” 113–17.

²⁵ J. Wilkinson, *Modern Egypt and Thebes: Being a Description of Egypt; Including the Information Required for Travellers in That Country*, vol. 2 (London, 1843), 202; Gessler-Löhr, “Who Discovered Belzoni’s Tomb?,” 104.

²⁶ Gessler-Löhr, “Who Discovered Belzoni’s Tomb?,” 119.

²⁷ J. Fabian, *Out of Our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley, 2000).

²⁸ R. Demarée, “The Workmen who Created the Royal Tombs,” in R. Wilkinson and K. Weeks (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Valley of the Kings* (Oxford, 2016), 75–86.

the Christian community established in the earlier temple enclosure;²⁹ the 13th–11th century BC inhabitants had called their home *whyt* “the village.”³⁰

Several museums now have online access to images and provisional information from their inventories of Egyptian antiquities, including inscribed objects made by the Ramesside community of artists from Deir el-Medina. The examples from four major collections (Table 1) provide a useful starting point for research into the first period of extraction and export of the object collection. The museum accession dates span much of the 19th century, and Athanasi assembled collections in Luxor into the 1830s. However, the main collecting activity on the ground seems concentrated in the years 1815–1824. As noted above, Drovetti seems to have started in earnest on forming a major collection for sale in 1815–1816, followed in 1816–1817 by Salt. The British Museum and the Egyptian Museum in Turin received the largest number of Deir el-Medina items, respectively, from Salt in 1823 and Drovetti in 1824. William John Bankes travelled in Upper Egypt in 1815 and 1818–1819,³¹ and Somerset Lowry-Corry, the 2nd Earl of Belmore, was there in 1817–1818.³² A stela acquired by the British Museum from Samuel Rogers in 1856 may seem an isolated later find but is also already recorded in the 1820s.³³

Table 1. Objects with hieroglyphic inscriptions related to the Deir el-Medina artist teams and accessible on the online collections databases for London, Liverpool, Kingston Lacey, and Turin.

<i>British Museum acquisitions:</i>	
Annesley 1854 (from Salt)	EA 810–12, 814–16, 818
Athanasi 1845	EA 807, 1388
Hay 1868 (in Egypt 1820s)	EA 916, 918, 1243, 36861
Somerset Lowry-Corry (2nd Earl of Belmore) 1843	EA 262, 264, 265, 267, 269, 273, 284, 286, 589, 597
Rogers 1856	EA 35630
Salt 1823 (received 1821)	EA 332, 342, 355, 359
Salt posthumous 1835 auction	EA 217, 291, 305, 345?
Sams 1834 (from Athanasi?)	EA 360, 371, 373, 381, 446, 8497
Wilkinson 1834	EA 8493
Unidentified before 1840- Birch slips	EA 144, 150, 186, 191, 270, 316–17, 320, 328, 341, 344, 369–70, 372, 444, 448, 8501
<i>World Museum Liverpool:</i>	
Mayer 1867 (in large part from Sams)	M13830, M13832
<i>Kingston Lacey Dorset:</i>	
Bankes (in Egypt 1815, 1818–1819)	NT 1257687-91, 1257693-701 (total 14 stelae)

²⁹ R. Coquin and M. Martin, “Dayr al-Madinah,” in A. Atiya (ed.), *The Coptic Encyclopedia* 3 (New York-Toronto, 1991), 816–18; for the 6th–8th century AD Coptic graffiti, see C. Heurtel, *Les inscriptions coptes et grecques du temple d’Hathor à Deir al-Médina: suivies de la publication des notes manuscrites de François Daumas, 1946–1947*, Bibliothèque d’Études Coptes 16 (Cairo, 2004).

³⁰ R. Ventura, *Living in a City of the Dead: a Selection of Topographical and Administrative Terms in the Documents of the Theban Necropolis*, OBO 69 (Freiburg, 1986), 184; J. Černý, *A Community of Workmen at Thebes in the Ramesside Period*, BdÉ 50 (Cairo, 1973), 92; A. Zingarelli, “Comments on the Egyptian term *whyt*: family or quasi-village?,” in P. Kousoulis and N. Lazaridis (eds.), *Proceedings of the Tenth International Congress of Egyptologists: University of the Aegean, Rhodes. 22–29 May 2008*, OLA 241.2 (Leuven, 2015), 909–20.

³¹ P. Usick, *Adventures in Egypt and Nubia. The Travels of William John Bankes (1786–1855)* (London, 2002), 32, 51, 98, 146–47.

³² As narrated in R. Richardson, *Travels along the Mediterranean and Parts Adjacent in Company with the Earl of Belmore, during the Years 1816–17–18: extending as far as the Second Cataract of the Nile, Jerusalem, Damascus, Balbec, &c. &c.* Volumes 1–2 (London, 1822).

³³ J. Burton, *Excerpta Hieroglyphica* (Cairo, 1825–1828), pl. 37.15.

<i>Egyptian Museum Turin:</i>	
Drovetti 1824	Cat. 1372, 1450-3, 1455?, 1463, 1471, 1514, 1516, 1522, 1533, 1542, 1546, 1548-9, 1553, 1566, 1570, 1579-80, 1587, 1589-91, 1606-8, 1618, 1648, 1658, 1754, 3032, 3038-40, 7357-8
Unidentified before 1882 catalogue	Cat. 1521, 1593, 1603, 1619

From these 114 entries, we select as our case-study a pair of stelae in which one artist from Deir el-Medina, Neferaabet, repents for taking the name of a deity in vain.³⁴ Although the inscriptions on the stelae are often cited by researchers on ancient Egyptian religion, the lack of any documented provenance removes essential information about the object. This problem tends to be either overlooked, or replaced by assertions of an inferred provenance, that then becomes accepted as if an observation. On one stela, now in the Egyptian Museum Turin (fig. 1), Neferaabet prays to Meretseger, the goddess presiding over the Theban mountain; in the other, now in the British Museum (fig. 2), his hymn is to Ptah, the god of artistic creation. Their online databases currently provide the following fields and content:

Stela 1: Egyptian Museum Turin Cat. 1593³⁵ (fig. 1)

Provenance: Deir el-Medina

Acquisition history: Acquired before 1882

Stela 2: British Museum EA 589³⁶ (fig. 2)

Found/Acquired: Deir el-Medina (Thebes)

Acquisition name: Purchased from Somerset Lowry-Corry, 2nd Earl of Belmore.

Acquisition date: 1843

Egyptological researchers have tended to apply the toponym Deir el-Medina as a provenance for the objects whose owners are designated as *sdm ꜥꜥ m st mꜣꜥt*, Servant in the Place of Truth or other titles ending with Place of Truth, as characteristic of artists living there.³⁷ However, while “made by X in the Place of Truth” may indicate that an object belongs to a member of the community of artists living in Deir el-Medina, it does not necessarily mean that it was deposited in their village. It seems misleading to extend our use of the place name to every location where the artists left their mark. Even the immediate site of their village valley contains buildings with a wide range of functions: houses, tombs (comprising offering-chapels above the ground and the underground burial spaces), chapels and small temples to deified rulers and deities, and a religious-administrative building called the *khenu* of Ramesses II. Beyond this inner circle of diverse buildings around the village, objects dedicated by the artists of Deir el-Medina have also been found in the nearby rock-cut chapels on the route from their village to the Valley of the Queens,³⁸ and in the West Bank royal temples (e.g., the stela of Ramose³⁹ from the Ramesseum and the stela of Nebamun⁴⁰ from Medinet Habu), besides the objects they left in their main work places, the Valley of the Kings and the Valley of the Queens.

³⁴ M. Lichtheim, *Ancient Egyptian Literature*, vol. 2, *The New Kingdom* (Berkeley-Los Angeles-London, 1976), 107–9.

³⁵ M. Tosi and A. Roccati, *Stele e altre epigrafi di Deir el Medina* (n. 50001-50262), TCB 1 (Turin, 1972), 94–95, 286 (CGT 50058); The Egyptian Museum Turin database: https://collezioni.museoegizio.it/it-IT/material/Cat_1593/?description=&inventoryNumber=&title=&cg=50058&yearFrom=&yearTo=&materials=&provenance=&acquisition=&epoch=&dynasty=&pharaoh= (accessed 3 October 2021).

³⁶ The British Museum database: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/Y_EA589 (accessed 3 October 2021).

³⁷ Demarée, “The Workmen who Created the Royal Tombs,” 75–77.

³⁸ B. Bruyère, *Mert Seger à Deir El-Médineh*, MIFAO 58 (Cairo, 1930).

³⁹ J. Quibell, *The Ramesseum*, ERA 2 (London, 1898), 8, pl. 4.

⁴⁰ Bruyère, *Mert Seger à Deir El-Médineh*, 299; Chicago OIM E4653A-B, documented as found “by the high gate in rubbish”; an example with a different location within Deir el-Medina is published in E. Teeter, “A Stela of the Family of Khaemtir (i) and the Scribe Qenherkheph-shaf (i) (Chicago OIM E14315),” *JARCE* 50 (2014), 147–60, documented in the Oriental Institute excavation records as “found in the precinct of the Small Amun Temple, north of the Achoris Porch” on 3 February 1928.



Fig. 1. Stela of Neferaabet with hymn to Meretseger, Egyptian Museum Turin Cat. 1593 © Museo Egizio Torino.



Fig. 2. Stela of Neferaabet with hymn to Ptah inscribed on both sides. British Museum EA 589.
© The Trustees of the British Museum.

Some object types may connect more readily with one particular part of the site of Deir el-Medina, as in the case of the lucarne stelae bearing inscriptions and depictions of solar and lunar deities. In her study of this type of object, Wilbrink⁴¹ acknowledged the problem of reconstructing their archaeological context, as many had found their way into early 19th century private collections. Of the seventeen stelae gathered in her study,⁴² two were acquired by Banks (Banks 1, 5), three by Lowry-Corry=Belmore (British Museum EA 266, 268, 271), one came from Salt (British Museum EA 332), and one through Drovetti (Egyptian Museum Turin Cat. 1515). These collections did not yet deliver archival or published evidence for a specific provenance of an item within the West Bank. However, from the ancient Egyptian depictions of tombs, Wilbrink could confirm previous suggestions that the lucarne stelae were originally placed in the niches of the small pyramids on the tomb-chapels in the village of Deir el-Medina.⁴³ Similarly, the material from Drovetti now in the Egyptian Museum Turin includes many figurines of a type known by its ancient Egyptian name *shabti*, inscribed with the name of a person; as documented finds of *shabtis* are mainly from burials, these figurines could be ascribed to particular tombs at Deir el-Medina.⁴⁴

Coffins are another object type directly associated with a particular place of deposit, the burial chamber, and at some periods and in some contexts, they might be accompanied by other types of objects, some with and some without funerary associations. For dispersed burial assemblages, archival studies are of central importance in helping to define more precisely when and where which objects were extracted. John Taylor recently presented an especially striking example on how to identify original contexts for an assemblage through published and unpublished records of antiquities collectors and their closer circle of contemporary travelers and friends, and from the brief descriptions in antiquities auction catalogues.⁴⁵ From references to finds in the publicity around sales of the Athanasi collection, he was able to reconstruct the joint provenance of objects, including a set of bow, arrows, and club, together with the coffin of a man named Sebekaa, and identify the burial location as the area outside the Ptolemaic temple enclosure at Deir el-Medina. Taylor could also confirm that provenance from the travel diary published by John Madox, who was in Egypt in 1823–1824, for Madox records that he stayed at Athanasi's house in Qurna and visited his digging work around Deir el-Medina.

While it may be possible to propose plausible locations for the provenance of lucarne stelae, *shabtis*, and coffins, or to connect published and archival sources with specific museum objects, suggesting a find-place for other items seems more challenging. Other types of stelae are attested from votive chapels, temples, and tombs. In this context, a serious problem arises from the lack of evidence for the way in which the Neferaaet stelae reached museums in Turin and London.

The Meretseger stela of Neferaaet has no clear acquisition history; its attribution to the Drovetti collection is a plausible, but so far, an undocumented inference. The Ptah stela of Neferaaet formerly in the Belmore collection, now in the British Museum, is presumably one of the “stones covered with deities, offerings, priests, and hieroglyphics” mentioned by Robert Richardson among the material presented by Athanasi to Lord Belmore at Luxor in January 1818.⁴⁶ Bierbrier suggested that this stela “probably came from the sanctuary of Ptah on the road to the Valley of the Queens.”⁴⁷ However, in a 1843 publication edited by Edward Hawkins, Keeper of the Antiquities Department at the British Museum, after the museum's purchase of the Belmore collection in 1842,⁴⁸ there is a caption at the bottom of each plate indicating where the object was found. For the plate with the stela

⁴¹ H. Wilbrink, “Stelae and stelophorous statues with hymns to the sun in Deir El-Medina tomb chapels,” in J.-C. Goyon and C. Cardin (eds.), *Proceedings of the Ninth International Congress of Egyptologists Grenoble, 6-12 Septembre 2004*, OLA 150.2 (Leuven, 2007), 1951.

⁴² Wilbrink, “Stelae and stelophorous statues,” 1953, no. 15.

⁴³ Among the sources she cites, note especially N. M. Davies, “Some Representations of Tombs from the Theban Necropolis,” *JEA* 24.1 (1938), 25–40.

⁴⁴ P. Del Vesco and F. Poole, “Deir el-Medina in the Egyptian Museum of Turin: An Overview, and the Way Forward,” in A. Dorn and S. Polis (eds.), *Outside the Box. Selected papers from the conference “Deir el-Medina and the Theban Necropolis in Contact,” Liège, 27–29 October 2014*, *Aegyptiaca Leodiensia* 11 (Liège, 2018), 101–05.

⁴⁵ J. Taylor, “The Collecting Activities of Giovanni D’athanasi: Recovering Object Provenances and Associations from Archival Sources,” in A.-H. Perrot, R. Pietri and J. Tanré-Szewczyk (eds.), *L’objet égyptien: Source de la recherche* (Paris, 2020), 249–74.

⁴⁶ Richardson, *Travels along the Mediterranean*, vol. 2, 2–3.

⁴⁷ M. Bierbrier, *The Tomb-Builders of the Pharaohs* (London, 1982), 97–98.

⁴⁸ Bierbrier, *Who Was Who*, 246.

of Neferaabet, the caption reads: “A stone tablet, engraved on each side, found in a tomb at Thebes, 1818.”⁴⁹ Hawkins referred in his introduction to checking and following the sequence of plates in a copy belonging to Lord Belmore.⁵⁰ If that copy could be relocated, it might provide information about the object’s provenance as told to him by his agent Athanasi or by another, anonymous, finder.

Views from the Outside in Literary and Epistolary Evidence: Towards a Closer Reading

The Richardson account of the Belmore journey is a characteristic example of the literary sources used in histories of archaeology for investigating the means of acquisition and the full cast of characters involved. Its contents typify the hazards of travel accounts and letters; the genre tends to internal repetition, with a high degree of citation and plagiarism.⁵¹ As Edward Said analyzed a wider range of English and French writing, these features are compounded by mutually reinforcing tendencies of nationalist rhetoric and racialized prejudices.⁵² The heroizing and demonizing make it difficult to recognize the hard work of several past protagonists in the field, even among the Europeans in Egypt, a problem compounded by borrowings and reuses. Already in the century before the Sety I find, the impressive series of notes and drawings by Father Claude Sicard (1677–1726) went largely unpublished although it was heavily mined by others after his early death.⁵³ Travelogue readers must usually reconstruct for themselves a string of essential factors: the gap in time between event and writing and publication; expectations of the readership in the eyes of the author; marked and unmarked borrowings from previous writers; involvement of editors; and, as Abbas Amin⁵⁴ has charted, the long and internally complex history of genres of travel writing.

The quality of the information on antiquities extraction around Luxor in 1816–1819 depends on the role of the writer, as defined above all by first space and then time. How long was a writer present in the Luxor region? On that criterion, two main players stand rather outside the theatre of action: Drovetti and Salt both resided in Alexandria and Cairo. Therefore, the precise length of their stay at any one site deserves scrutiny, in relation to the extent of the information available to them about the way others formed collections for them. Neither of the two published accounts of their work, but their views and actions are open to study from their posthumously published, if incomplete, correspondence.⁵⁵ The authors of published autobiographical accounts and travelogues may be divided into the field agents supervising extractions of antiquities, the artists employed to draw monuments, the short-term visitors to Egypt involved in medium- to large-scale activities, companions to those collectors, and short-term visitors who seem not to have formed a collection (Table 2).⁵⁶

⁴⁹ E. Hawkins, *Tablets and Other Egyptian Monuments from the Collection of the Earl of Belmore, now deposited in the British Museum* (London, 1843), pl. 7.

⁵⁰ Hawkins, *Tablets and Other Egyptian Monuments*, 1.

⁵¹ We are grateful to the anonymous reviewer for drawing our attention to the analysis of a particularly striking example, relating directly to the modern history of Qurna, by T. Mitchell, “The Invention and Reinvention of the Peasant,” in T. Mitchell, *Rule of Experts: Egypt, Techno-Politics, Modernity* (Berkeley, 2002), 123–52.

⁵² E. Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1978); H. Aboul-Ela, “Is There an Arab (yet) in This Field?: Postcolonialism, Comparative Literature, and the Middle Eastern Horizon of Said’s Discourse Analysis,” *Modern Fiction Studies* 56.4 (2010), 729–50.

⁵³ M. Martin, “Les avatars d’un “récit de voyage”: la relation de Granger,” in J.-C. Vatin (ed.), *La fuite en Egypte. Supplément aux voyages européens en Orient*, CEDEJ (Cairo, 1989), 161–67.

⁵⁴ A. Amin, *Ägyptomanie und Orientalismus: Ägypten in der deutschen Reiseliteratur (1175–1663)*, Studien zur deutschen Literatur 202 (Berlin, 2013).

⁵⁵ J. Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt, Esq. F.R.S. &c: His Britannic Majesty’s late Consul-General in Egypt*, 2 vols. (London, 1834); S. Curto and L. Donatelli, *Epistolario, 1800–1851, Bernardino Drovetti* (Milan, 1985); S. Guichard, *Lettres de Bernardino Drovetti*.

⁵⁶ Table 2 covers published narratives, and so excludes major funders Drovetti and Salt (see previous note), and Banks. On unpublished sources for his travels, and his role in writing up the narrative by Finati, see Usick, *Adventures in Egypt and Nubia*.

Table 2. Examples of European-language writers of published accounts of 1816–1819 antiquities extraction at Thebes.

Work supervisors	Draughtspeople	Other collectors	Short-term visitors	Companions
Athanasi	Linant de Bellefonds	Forbin	Fuller	Richardson
Belzoni	Ricci	Rüppell	Irby and Mangles	
Cailliaud				
Finati				

However influential these authors may be in our attempts to view Luxor in the 1810s, they constitute only one part of the overall foreign presence. Outside the list are those who wrote their own narratives but never managed to publish them, notably the architect Jean Nicolas Huyot.⁵⁷ The bias of selection is further exacerbated by the filter of translation into English from Greek (Athanasi) and Italian (Finati, and perhaps Belzoni). Overshadowing these issues is the relation to authors writing in Arabic and Turkish, whether scholars of the region or government officials or visitors, with their own diversity of views. One brief account by the Egyptian historian Abd al-Rahman al-Jabarti has entered discussions of antiquities collecting in this period. In his entry for 1817, Jabarti reported the frenetic activity by Europeans in Upper Egypt, and the collections: “They have sent the objects to their own land, to sell at many times the amount they had spent on them, these being for them a type of curio merchandise.”⁵⁸ This succinct assessment is part of his description of a visit to the house of Henry Salt to view objects collected from Belzoni and other field agents. Elsewhere Europeans lay this charge at European rivals, as where two English military officers remark “Mr. Drovetti is not an amateur, but collects to sell.”⁵⁹ However, the comment by Jabarti concerns the entire enterprise of foreigners forming collections in Egypt and exporting them to Europe. The accuracy of his observation is clear from views expressed by Salt himself after arriving in Egypt to take up his position as consul and settling in Cairo. On 28 December 1816, he wrote to his former employer and patron George Annesley (from 1793 titled Viscount Valentia, and then from July 1816 Earl of Mountnorris):

I found that Monsieur Drovetti, the quondam French Consul, was in Upper Egypt, buying up everything there to complete a collection upon which he has been engaged some years. This collection, which I have lately had an opportunity of examining, contains a great variety of curious articles, and some of extraordinary value... The whole is intended for sale, and I have tried to persuade him to send proposals to the British Museum: but do not know whether it is rich enough to buy it. The collection, I imagine, will not be sold for less than three or four thousand pounds. Since our release from quarantine, I have taken every possible means to collect, and am glad to say that I have been very successful; so that I shall in spring have to send you a cargo of such thing as I believe you have not before seen. I must however inform you, that I am so bit with the prospect of what may still be done in Upper Egypt, as to feel unable to abstain from forming a collection myself...⁶⁰

While Salt had promised to send antiquities, including coins and medals, to Annesley (recently elevated to Mountnorris) and his son (simultaneously elevated to Valentia), evidently the catalyst for his entry into the collecting business was the sight of the material amassed for Drovetti. In spring 1817, he employed a Mr. Riley to organize collecting in Upper Egypt,⁶¹ and then Burckhardt introduced Belzoni for the single challenge of trans-

⁵⁷ P. Pinon, *Le voyage d'Orient de l'architecte Jean-Nicolas Huyot (1817–1820) et la découverte de la maison ottomane* (Leuven, 1994).

⁵⁸ C. Bosworth, “Al-Jabartī and the Frankish Archaeologists,” *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 8 (1977), 229–36; Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 73–74, 290–91 nn. 2–3.

⁵⁹ C. Irby and J. Mangles, *Travels in Egypt and Nubia, Syria, and Asia Minor, during the years 1817 and 1818* (London, 1823), 44.

⁶⁰ Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, vol. 1, 472.

⁶¹ Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, vol. 1, 486.

porting the Ramses II colossus fragment from Qurna,⁶² as outlined above. The dramatic success of this operation and subsequent collecting activity by Belzoni brought Salt some hope for his future, as he expressed already to Mountnorris in a letter from the Valley of the Kings dated 18 January 1818:

In the way of antiquities I have been very fortunate; though my expenses have far exceeded what I had intended ... All that I wish is, to be reimbursed my expenses, as it breaks in seriously on the small patrimony which I have inherited, and which is all that I have to look to for support should I ever return to England, which, after a certain number of years, I cannot help, even upon that small pittance, looking forward to.⁶³

With his direct financial interest and expenditure, Salt expected a substantial sum to cover his costs, but at the crucial moment the British Museum Trustees objected to paying for what they expected to be more of a gift to the nation. After several years of negotiation, a settlement at £2,000 in 1823 left out the prize of the collection, the translucent calcite sarcophagus of Sety I which would, in nationalist rhetoric, be “saved for the nation” only when the architect John Soane acquired it for his London house the following year. In 1826, Salt was happier to sell a second massive batch of material to the king of France.⁶⁴

The modern history of the sarcophagus of Sety I brings to center stage both the financial calculations and the uncertainties over naming finders. For Egypt, as for many regions, archaeologists and historians of the modern period have not engaged with each other, and, partly as a result of this, the home language may still be excluded from scientific research in archaeology.⁶⁵ In these conditions, the inextricable tangle of economic and scientific factors in any fieldwork may remain beyond our capacity to analyze and to change. Accordingly, as Egyptologists, we seek in our concluding section to introduce some recent publications by colleagues in anthropology and history, inviting their comments and corrections on this question of finders in Qurna two centuries ago.

Anthropological Approaches to the History of Qurna

For present and recent past, Caroline Simpson has striven to document the changes of recent decades, including foremost the 2006–2009 demolition of Qurna houses and resettlement of villagers away from the central monument zone.⁶⁶ Kees van der Spek has charted from his own ethnographic fieldwork the contemporary patterns of life on the West Bank of Luxor governorate, incorporating the histories detectable through both the accounts by the Qurnawi themselves and the literary versions by Europeans who spent less or more time in the area.⁶⁷ For the settlements over the foothills at the low desert, van der Spek reports two groupings of communities, locally named from ancestral figures, particularly Harb, Ghaba, and ‘Atya as three sons of Adman who settled at the area where the Sety I temple stands, near the point where the Theban mountains and foothills come closer to the river Nile.⁶⁸ One group name is al-Hurabat (from Harb), and relates to the zone south from Asasif, al-Khukha, and Sheikh abd al-Qurna to Qurnet Murai; to their north along Dra abu al-Naga are the groups al-Hasasna,⁶⁹ al-Ghabat, and al-Atyat.

⁶² Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, vol. 1, 490.

⁶³ Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, vol. 2, 52–53.

⁶⁴ Halls, *The Life and Correspondence of Henry Salt*, vol. 2, 295–386.

⁶⁵ N. Hansen, “Arabic and its role in Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology” *Archaeologies: Journal of the World Archaeological Congress* 4.1 (2008), 171–74.

⁶⁶ C. Simpson, “Qurna History Project,” accessed 11 October 2021, <http://www.qurna.org/index.html>.

⁶⁷ K. Van der Spek, *The Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun. History, Life, and Work in the Villages of the Theban West Bank* (Cairo, 2011).

⁶⁸ Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 49, 135–36.

⁶⁹ Hasasna may relate to a further ancestral figure Hassan; note the comment by Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 131, on references to Qurnawi groups in 1820s–1830s English-language publications: “It is of interest that there is no group as yet that could be identified with present-day al-Hasasna in the northern foothills, possibly confirming the later arrival of Shaykh Tayyeb’s ancestors.”

Among his European-language historical sources, Van der Spek assigns a prominent place to the vivid and positive description published in London in 1836 by Athanasi.⁷⁰ As a field agent collecting in Thebes and other sites both for Henry Salt and for himself, Yanni Athanasi lived in the Qurna foothills from 1818 to around 1835.⁷¹ In his narrative to accompany the posthumous 1835 sale of a last set of antiquities amassed for Henry Salt, Athanasi identifies in Qurna “six tribes, of which two together form one class, and each of the united classes form a third of the village,” giving names that correspond in part to the southern Harabat and northern Ghabat-Atiyat zones in the anthropological investigation by Van der Spek: Ilhourabat, protecting a smaller group Ildigagat; Ilgabat-Oullatlat; Imassaah Oullovassa.⁷² Athanasi also conveys an agricultural dimension of these divisions, stating that the “lands are also divided into three portions, for the occupancy of which the three classes draw lots, in order to avoid all complaint and dissension on the subject.” This part of his description in turn echoes, in the opposite historical direction, the 16th century tribunal and land registers surviving from the first century of Ottoman Turkish rule over Egypt.

Legal and Economic Documentary Evidence: The Ottoman Period Tax Registers

According to the analyses by Nicolas Michel, the Ottoman Period administrators assigned everyone in the farming population of each district to a particular *ḥiṣṣa* “part” of the *ḥarāḡ* or amount due from a specified land.⁷³ In one detailed entry for 1586 for Abu Numrus, a village in Giza governorate, fourteen villagers declare that they have covered the sum due for a total of 125 feddan divided into two equal halves, each of six *ḥiṣṣa* “parts,” with one or two individuals responding for each “part.”⁷⁴ Unusually, this listing gives the names of the “parts” as well as the persons held accountable for them, enabling Michel to draw a social portrait of Abu Numrus village. One person emerges as a leading figure, some but not all “parts” are named after a lineage, and there is one Coptic “part.” From this and other documents, he concludes that the assignment of responsibility across the village operated in a flexible way. While family ties might be a recurrent or dominant principle, other factors are also present, as indicated by references to associates and groups, though the records do not provide information on the nature of the association.

The 16th century registers provide Michel with crucial evidence to clarify the terms of village authority, above all in relation to the expression *shaykh al-balad* “the village shaykh” (with *naḥiya* a synonym for *balad*).⁷⁵ First, the tribunal registers indicate that each village had not one *shaykh* but several, and therefore contrasts with the later choice of English colonial power to impose a single official at the village level, the *‘umda*. Secondly, to designate responsibility for collecting dues from village to center, the registers set the word *shaykh* after the personal name as a context-specific role, not in front of the name as would be the case for a religious title. Thus, *shaykh al-balad* is an administrative role, not a religious authority. The registers use the plural *mašāyih*, as in the summary of villagers as *al-mašāyih al-nāhiya wa-l-fallāḥīn bi-nāhiyat X*: “*shaykhs* and farmers of village X.” Michel cites from the registers of the tribunal at Mit Ghamr (Sharqiya governorate) for 1613–1615 the extended phrasing *al-mašāyih wa-l-fallāḥīn wa-ru’ūs al-ḥiṣṣa wa-l-muzārī’in*, “the shaykhs and farmers, the heads of parts and cultivators.” Here, “heads of parts” would identify the function of the shaykhs much as the word “cultivators” describes the *fallāḥīn* “farmers.”⁷⁶

To this view of the village through a fiscal lens, the Athanasi description of Qurna would add a local method of assigning responsibility for the agricultural yield; there, allowing for translation from Arabic to Greek to English, three “classes” draw lots to decide on “the occupancy” of the “portions.” Further research in the 19th

⁷⁰ G. Athanasi, *A Brief Account of the Researches and Discoveries in Upper Egypt Made Under the Direction of Henry Salt* (London, 1836); Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 82, 101–2, 130–33.

⁷¹ Taylor, “The Collecting Activities of Giovanni d’Athanasi,” 251–54.

⁷² Athanasi, *A Brief Account of the Researches*, 130–31.

⁷³ N. Michel, *L’Égypte des villages autour du seizième siècle*, Collection Turcica 23 (Leuven, 2018), 291, 294–303.

⁷⁴ Michel, *L’Égypte des villages*, 297–302.

⁷⁵ Michel, *L’Égypte des villages*, 288–92.

⁷⁶ Michel, *L’Égypte des villages*, 290–92.

century land and tribunal records might indicate whether this democratic procedure applied either outside the immediate aftermath of the state confiscation of large estates in Upper Egypt after 1811, or outside the singular ecology of Qurna. Here it is important to avoid exaggerating differences with other villages. While accepting the word of Athanasi, as he lived at Qurna for eighteen years, Van der Spek warns against too literal a reading of other European accounts, especially where they are most evocative, as in this vivid portrayal by Frédéric Cailliaud:⁷⁷

Aujourd'hui les hommes ne suffisent plus pour les fouilles; ils emploient leurs femmes à fouiller aussi les catacombes: elles parcourent sans cesse les plus grands et les moindres tombeaux; et, jusqu'à leurs enfans depuis l'âge de neuf ans, tous travaillent incessamment à porter la terre au dehors. Cette manie est poussée à un tel point, que si les *kâchef* ou les *qâymaqâm* n'obligeoient avec rigueur les Arabes à travailler à la culture, ceux-ci abandonneroient entièrement leurs terres, pour se livrer uniquement à la recherche des antiquités.

(Today the men no longer suffice for the digs; they employ their wives to dig the catacombs too: the women are ceaselessly scouring the tombs from largest to smallest; and, with even their children down to the age of nine, everyone works incessantly carrying out the earth. This mania is pushed to such a point that, if the *kashef* or *qaymaqam* were not forcing the Arabs rigorously to work the fields, they would abandon their lands entirely and devote themselves solely to the hunt for antiquities.)

However usefully Cailliaud raises questions of age and gender here, Van der Spek seeks to correct the extreme distortion from the outsider focus on an ancient past: “by and large, the reality of the Qurnawi preference for antiquities over agricultural work is one of western representation and portrayal, and a product of European single-minded antiquarian pursuit.”⁷⁸ In our attempt to trace the local organization of antiquities finders in the late 1810s, the pattern of village authority in the earlier official Ottoman records may help towards decoding the partial information from European-language travelogues; the motives and stock motifs of the travelogue-writer may also become clearer, and therefore easier to filter out, from comparison with analyses of other ages of travel.⁷⁹ Future archival research in Egypt may be expected to add names for the officials most often identified in European travelogues only by their titles *kashif* and *qaymaqam*.⁸⁰ As is clear in the Belzoni narrative on the Ramesseum colossus, the role of both positions in the chain of authority was crucial for providing or refusing access to the labor for extracting and moving antiquities. The names and social networks of these officials would add another local dimension to the history of antiquities collecting at Qurna.⁸¹ As Michel observed from the 16th century registers, the internal division of the village reflects a socially heterogeneous space, where prestige and economic power are unequally distributed.⁸² A combination of historical and anthropological enquiry seems essential in any effort to identify the factors involved at any moment in this landscape.⁸³

Re-Reading the European-Language Literary Evidence

Keeping in mind the essential warning above from Van der Spek, here it may be useful to cite again four of the references to labor organization in European publications from the early 19th century formation of antiquities

⁷⁷ F. Cailliaud, *Voyage dans l'oasis de Thèbes et dans les déserts situés à l'est et l'ouest de la Thébàide* (Paris, 1821), 82.

⁷⁸ Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 48–51, 97–102.

⁷⁹ Discussions relevant to each side of the Egyptian-European encounter include H. Touati, *Islam et voyage au Moyen Âge: Histoire et anthropologie d'une pratique lettrée* (Paris, 2000), and Amin, *Ägyptomanie und Orientalismus*.

⁸⁰ Exceptions include Belzoni's visit to Soliman, *kashif* of Armant, south of Luxor, at his estate at Tahta, near Asyut, far to the north: Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations*, 288–89.

⁸¹ Colla, *Conflicted Antiquities*, 24–70.

⁸² See also K. Cuno, *The Pasha's Peasants: Land, Society, and Economy in Lower Egypt, 1740–1858* (Cambridge, 1992).

⁸³ Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 171–217 and ch. 7 “Agriculture, Conflict and the Maintenance of Stable Social Relations.”

collections, including passages where the local choice is represented as a choice by the “I” or, less often, “we” imposed by an outsider field agent:

(1) Athanasi: “...we determined on commencing our excavations into the Tombs of the Kings, having first divided our Arabs into companies, whom we appointed to work in different quarters.”⁸⁴

(2) Belzoni: “The Fellahs of Gournou who dig for antiquities are sometimes divided into parties, and have their chiefs over each; so that what is found by any of the party is sold, and the money divided among them all.”⁸⁵

(3) Belzoni: “The men were divided into two classes. The most knowing were making researches on their own account, employing eight or ten to assist them.”⁸⁶

(4) Irby and Mangles (August 1817 meeting Belzoni in Qurna, during disputes between field agents for Drovetti and Salt): “About a dozen of the leading characters of Gournou, that is, the greatest rogues in the place, have headed their comrades, and formed them into two distinct digging parties, or resurrection men, designating them the French and the English party; these are constantly occupied in searching for new tombs, stripping the mummies, and collecting antiquities. The directors have about three-fourths of the money, and the rest is given to the inferior labourers.”⁸⁷

These authors separate the finders into two groups: an undifferentiated mass of seekers, and their leaders. On its own, the statement by Belzoni on the “most knowing” is ambiguous, as it may just be a comment on relative success, rather than qualifying a “class” of leaders. The ambiguity in these brief descriptions perhaps reflects outsider ignorance about local modes of operation, which would likely be concealed in such a lucrative business. However, in specifying “eight or ten” assistants, Belzoni adds a useful point of detail where further research might find evidence to corroborate or revise his account. The aspect that seems least clear is the distribution of seekers, and the authority to seek, across the landscape. On the European side, the increasingly violent altercations in late 1817 to early 1818 between the rival field agents for Salt (Belzoni to December 1817, Athanasi from 1818) and Drovetti (Rifaud on the East Bank, Rossignana on the West Bank) led to an official settlement, described in spatial terms by Belzoni (finding no ground permitted for work on return to Thebes 10 May 1818)⁸⁸ and Cailliaud (“lignes de démarcation” across Karnak in January 1818).⁸⁹ On the ground, matters might have been more flexible, and it is not clear how long a demarcation was meant to last, or whether it was arranged between the European protagonists or imposed by the authority of Mohammed Ali. For archaeological enquiry in the field and in museums, we see this question of local authority over space as a priority for future research.

With the information on conditions of collecting in 1810s Qurna, we may return to the history of acquisition of the two monuments of Neferaaet. First, we can review what we can know of the way they were moved from their find-place to their present locations in separate west European cities. The Meretseger stela arrived in Turin at some point before 1882. From the history of the museum, it most plausibly left Egypt as part of the Drovetti collection, but no further detail can be given from present knowledge. The Ptah stela entered the British Museum as part of the Belmore collection, and again there is no precise record of the find for this individual item, though Belmore seems most likely to have acquired it during his Nile journey. According to Richardson, on 14 January 1818, Athanasi showed Belmore the material assembled in Thebes over the previous three months, when Belmore himself had been away on a journey into Nubia.⁹⁰ Two weeks later, Cailliaud recorded that, at least at Karnak, either the officials of Muhammad Ali, or Salt and Drovetti as the main rival funders of collecting, had demarcated the terrain allotted to the Drovetti field agents and the Salt field agents, in order to prevent further conflict between them. Were demarcation lines in force at the time that each stela was found, and, if so,

⁸⁴ Athanasi, *A Brief Account of the Researches*, 12.

⁸⁵ Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations*, 159; Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 107.

⁸⁶ Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations*, 165; Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 108.

⁸⁷ Irby and Mangles, *Travels in Egypt and Nubia*, 44.

⁸⁸ Belzoni, *Narrative of the Operations*, 289: “on my arrival at Thebes I found, that all the grounds on each side of the Nile were taken, partly by Mr. Drovetti’s agents, and partly by Mr. Salt himself, who marked the grounds before his return to Cairo this last time” (presumably the January-February period in Thebes with the Belmore party).

⁸⁹ Cailliaud, *Voyage dans l’oasis de Thèbes*, 82, arriving at Thebes 29 January 1818, “tout l’espace occupé par les ruines de Karnak étoit couvert par des lignes de démarcation qui séparaient le terrain des Français, celui des Anglais, celui des Irlandais, celui des Italiens &c.” (“Irlandais” referring to the Belmore party, from his position as an Irish peer in the House of Lords in London).

⁹⁰ Richardson, *Travels along the Mediterranean* vol. 2, 2–3.

would they apply to local finders who sold to the field agents?⁹¹ There are also limits to our knowledge of find-place, in relation to the type of object. As indicated above, a votive stela might be placed at any of the shrines at and around Deir el-Medina, or across the wider Theban West Bank. Alongside the absence of find-place, it is important to note the absence of a find date so far for either object. Finally, as yet there is no clear understanding of the local organization of finders and its interface with the outsider funders who were collecting on a large scale.

Qurna and the Outside World

In 1818, Upper Egypt hosted, perhaps for the first time, the director of a European institution of a fairly recent type, the national museum in its late 18th century revolutionary form. When the alliance against Napoleon restored the Bourbon monarchy in France, the director of the Louvre, Vivant Denon, seemed too close to the Napoleonic cause, and the government of the new king Louis XVIII replaced him in 1815 with the painter Count Auguste de Forbin. Two years later, Forbin sailed to the Ottoman territories in the Eastern Mediterranean to seek cheaper means of acquiring ancient Greek and Roman art for the French capital, bankrupted by war and defeat.⁹² On return, he published an account of his journey including a call for national funding for the national museum in his charge, whenever that would become affordable again. As his dedicatory preface addresses the king directly, his aims in publishing the travelogue are clear enough. Forbin arrived in Egypt from Palestine, and travelled via Damietta to Cairo. There, like Salt two years earlier, he was impressed by the ex-consul Drovetti and the antiquities on display in his house. Drovetti was as closely tied to Napoleon as Denon had been, and Forbin needed to make an especially strong argument for buying his collection. At the time, despite the hopes of Drovetti and Salt, no European government considered ancient Egyptian antiquities worth large sums. The reports from the most influential travelers would slowly change this attitude, but it was only several years later that the government of Savoy, at Turin in Piedmont, agreed to purchase the collection amassed for Drovetti, himself Piedmontese, as the first instance of large-scale national expenditure on ancient Egyptian material.

Forbin travelled south in January 1818, and at Luxor he visited the Drovetti field agent Joseph Rossignana, briefly stating his views of the business of collecting: “Je voyais cette tribu d’Oulâd-Aly trafiquer des restes des morts, et défendre contre les prétentions des autres Arabes le privilège de ce commerce impie” (“I saw this tribe of Awlad Ali trafficking in the remains of the dead, and defending against the claims of other Arabs the privilege of this impious trade”).⁹³ According to his narrative, Forbin had planned to travel on as far as Abu Simbel, but the lure of adventure and the unknown evaporated when Luxor filled with a large English group just returning from Elephantine: “Lord et lady Belmor avaient visité une partie de la Nubie: ils voyageaient avec un luxe extrême; trois ou quatre grands bateaux suivaient celui qui les portait. Maris, femmes, petits enfans, aumôniers, chirurgiens, nourrices, cuisiniers, tout cela parlait d’Eléphantine” (“Lord and Lady Belmore had visited part of Nubia; they were travelling in extreme luxury; three or four large boats followed the one carrying them. Husbands, wives, little children, chaplains, doctors, nurses, cooks, all spoke of Elephantine”).⁹⁴ Fleeing the disenchanting wave of other Europeans, Forbin sailed back north to Cairo and then on to Alexandria where the governor of Egypt himself, Mohammad Ali received him in audience, interrupted by an episode curious enough for inclusion in the published narrative:⁹⁵

Au milieu de notre conversation, et lorsqu’il me parlait de la France avec un vif intérêt, en homme bien instruit de sa situation et de ses ressources, on introduisit des Arabes, des Bédouins de la tribu d’Oulâd Aly, qui lui offrirent une jeune panthère, une gazelle blanche et une petite autruche. Mohamed Aly souriait : les Bédouins prosternés se traînaient jusqu’au bas de sa robe pour la baiser, et demeuraient dans

⁹¹ On the demarcation in practice, see the evidence presented by Gee, “Archaeological Context of the Late Ramesside Letters,” 182, 195.

⁹² P. Linant de Bellefonds, “The Journey of the Comte de Forbin in the Near East and Egypt, 1817–1818,” in C. Foster (ed.), *Travellers in the Near East* (London, 2004), 107–33.

⁹³ A. Forbin, *Voyage dans le Levant en 1817 et 1818* (Paris, 1819), 262.

⁹⁴ Forbin, *Voyage dans le Levant*, 273.

⁹⁵ Forbin, *Voyage dans le Levant*, 303.

cette position jusqu'à ce que des chiaoux les relevassent, en les faisant sortir du divan d'une manière assez dure.

(In the middle of our conversation, while he was talking to me about France with keen interest, as a man well informed of his situation and his resources, some Arabs, Bedouin of the Awlad Ali tribe, were brought in and offered him a young panther, a white gazelle, and a little ostrich. Mohammad Ali smiled: the prostrated Bedouin dragged themselves to the edge of his garment to kiss it, and remained in that position until the attendants had them stand, removing them rather roughly from the audience chamber.)

Here, Forbin uses the same name that he had given to the Qurna finders. Yet Awlad Ali is not one of the Qurnawi terms in describing themselves to Athanasi or Van der Spek, whereas it appears for people in the north-western desert of Egypt, up to the Fayum and Nile Delta.⁹⁶ Whether error or co-incidence in the Forbin narrative, the recurrence of this name at the point of his departure may prompt us to rethink the way our histories marginalize the rural and exclude it from the global stage.

The Saharan way-stations and oases connect with one another and with the Nile Valley through a network of roads that are becoming better documented now in archaeological fieldwork, including routes entering the Nile floodplain from the mountains at the west of Thebes.⁹⁷ Van der Spek has drawn attention already to the possible link between Qurna and long-distance trade centuries ago, through supplies of *mumiya*, a resinous material from the remains of ancient embalmed bodies, to city pharmacies.⁹⁸ He cites the report from the physician Abdallatif of Baghdad, around AD 1200, on the trade at Cairo, and suggests that the material was for export to western Europe though that was perhaps amply supplied from nearer sources at Saqqara and Giza.⁹⁹ His argument seems plausible with regard to the role of *mumiya* trade in the development of a wider practice of collecting other antiquities on an industrial scale. However, at the time of Abdallatif of Baghdad, and still in the 18th century, western Europe seems a minor participant in Egyptian trade, as compared with the lucrative Arab World and farther Asian markets. As the thriving metropolis of Ayyubid and Mamluk power, Cairo seems more likely to have generated its own interest in, and market in, the resinous matter from ancient burials. Therefore, any trade from Qurna sources would more plausibly have been directed for an internal Egyptian market, even if it was known to, and interesting also to, visitors from other lands, including the small number of traders from the Latin West. It might also be doubted whether Qurna played a large part in the internal Nile Valley trade. The larger Late Period to Roman Period cemeteries at sites closer to Cairo would presumably be the primary sources. Throughout the second millennium AD, the majority of sources for mining the *mumiya* might have been the large-scale multiple burials of the Late Period, not necessarily deposited with many objects.¹⁰⁰ In future research, it would be interesting to pursue the question of whether western Europe contributed substantially to the volume of any aspect of Cairo trade in proportion to the vast wealth circulating in the Islamic world before the mid to late 18th century.¹⁰¹ In relation to trade in the opposite direction, from the Nile Valley towards Arabia and India, it is interesting that Van der Spek further notes the suggestion from Garcin on the commerce in *mumiya* going through Qus, 40 kilometers north of Luxor, at a juncture of Upper Egypt and the Red Sea trade.¹⁰² Inhabitants

⁹⁶ O. Bates, *The Eastern Libyans: An Essay* (London, 1914), maps; H.-D. Müller-Mahn, *Die Aulad 'Ali zwischen Stamm und Staat: Entwicklung und sozialer Wandel bei den Beduinen im nordwestlichen Ägypten* (Berlin, 1989).

⁹⁷ F. Förster and H. Riemer (eds.), *Desert Road Archaeology in Ancient Egypt and Beyond* (Cologne, 2013); J. C. Darnell and D. Darnell, *Theban Desert Road Survey in the Egyptian Western Desert*, vol. 1: *Gebel Tjauti Rock Inscriptions 1–45 and Wadi el-Hôl Rock Inscriptions*, OIP 119 (Chicago, 2002); J. Darnell, *Theban Desert Road Survey*, vol. 2: *The Rock Shrine of Pahu, Gebel Akhenaton, and other Rock Inscriptions from the Western Hinterland of Naqada* (New Haven, CT, 2013).

⁹⁸ Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 102–3.

⁹⁹ Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 77.

¹⁰⁰ Compare the brief report in W. M. F. Petrie, *Gizeh and Rifeh*, BSAE/ERA 13 (London, 1907), 29: “The later burials at Gizeh yielded very little that was worth note,” with about 1,400 individuals from “a large number of tombs.”

¹⁰¹ We did not succeed in identifying any immediate leads for this research in A. Raymond, *Artisans et commerçants au Caire au XVIIIe siècle* (Damascus, 1973–1974).

¹⁰² Van der Spek, *Modern Neighbors of Tutankhamun*, 76; J.-C. Garcin, *Un centre musulman de la Haute-Egypte médiévale: Qûs* (Cairo, 1976), 12 n. 3.

of rural and desert margins may participate visibly in long-distance circuits wherever and whenever the routes or the resources themselves are located there.

From the surge in attention that first drew Forbin into Qurna and Luxor, and then rudely propelled him away, it seems that the year 1818 cemented a short phase of transition (1815–1817) between two long timespans. In the pre-1815 history of Thebes, unearthing objects seems a marginal and sporadic activity. In contrast, the post-1818 age of its modernity, colored by increased European intrusion, normalized an industrial scale of antiquities extraction, to the extent that now we cannot imagine how any past inhabitant or traveler could fail to collect. The emergence of Neferaabet into the view of those collecting and then reading monuments is part of a larger movement with a precise modern history. We can trace the names of some of those who paid for and received payment for, the transfer of his monuments from Qurna to Cairo, Alexandria, Livorno, Turin, and London. We cannot yet name any of the people who made the first move of the object from its ground. A biographical instinct propels us to find out, as a matter of justice, giving credit where it is due. However, we might equally ask why anyone should give his name to a stranger—a foreigner or an official from outside. Athanasi reported at the Giza pyramids work “an Arab, named Argian, which in the Arab language means ‘naked,’ a man of gigantic height, but as thin as a stock-fish.”¹⁰³ In 1828–1829, a decade after our tale of Neferaabet, Champollion and Rosellini directed an epigraphic expedition, and undertook limited excavations at select sites, including in Thebes.¹⁰⁴ Their expedition records give names for several leaders of finders for the expedition: Timsah, Abu Sakkarah, and the “two sheikhs Awad and Mohammed, ten men each.”¹⁰⁵ These references take us close in time to the social networks in 1810s Qurna and Karnak. Yet the doubt remains, would AH 1230s /AD 1810s Qurnawi finders want us to ask for their names? Are Timsah and Abu Sakkarah the names they used in talking to foreigners, rather than the names they used in other settings? For resolving such questions, the disciplines of archaeology and Egyptology need help again from those living near the site, and from those studying the direct documentary evidence of the period in their languages.

¹⁰³ Athanasi, *A Brief Account of the Researches*, 21.

¹⁰⁴ M. Betrò, “Ippolito Rosellini, Egypt and Egyptology,” in M. Betrò (ed.), *Ippolito Rosellini and the Dawn of Egyptology. Original Drawings and Manuscripts of the Franco-Tuscan Expedition to Egypt (1828–29) from the Biblioteca Universitaria di Pisa* (Cairo, 2010), 20–21.

¹⁰⁵ M. Betrò, “Lost and (Sometimes) Found: Contexts and Objects from the Franco-Tuscan Excavations at Thebes West (1828–1829): The case of Tamutnefret,” in A.-H. Perrot, R. Pietri, and J. Tanré-Szewczyk (eds.), *L'objet égyptien: source de la recherche* (Paris, 2020), 276–77.