Storage of Egyptian Heritage:
Risk assessment, conservation needs and policy planning

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Introduction
This conference could be a base of sustainable forum, among experts, researchers, international organizations, local authorities, heritage lovers and policy makers, for planning better future strategies for the conservation of Egyptian antiquities, and build a sustainable basis in partnerships to document and preserve Egyptian artifacts in Egypt and abroad. Egypt has incomparable archaeological heritage which has world-class importance. Therefore, there are many past and ongoing international efforts to document and preserve Egyptian archaeological heritage and present it for public including Accessing virtual Egypt project [Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, 2013] and Cornucopia [Cornucopia website] and ACCESS [ACCESS website]. However, Egyptian archaeological finds suffer a long history of neglect, dispersal, and centuries of illicit trafficking. Furthermore, the current storage and global distribution of Egyptian antiquities force us to think seriously about their current inconsistent state of conservation and facilitate their physical and intellectual accessibility to a wider public. In Egypt, museums and storage rooms of archaeological sites are full of range of valuable non-documented collections which would show, when displayed, various aspects of national identities, attract different sorts of researchers and build new personal connections with local and foreign audiences. Stored collections are those objects that are not on display, not on loan, and not in a teaching or handling collections, including those that are in open stores normally accessible to the public [Keene, S. 2008:12]. Most collections in storage (museum basements or site store) have minimal standards of environmental control and few measures for preventive conservation [Stolow, N. 1981:17-18] with a high risk of damage and rubbing of mostly non-documented objects located in unsecured building. Therefore, the authorities in
Egypt need to overcome fears and risks and recognize the importance of increasing the public demand for physical and intellectual access to the hidden treasures through sharing information using online cataloguing and data bases [Ericksen, H. and Unger, I. 2009]. Increasing the public interest of new sorts of stored collections will put pressure to improve their conservation conditions. Improving the accessibility for the stored, displayed and buried Egyptian material would promote a better understanding of collections, would initiate a sense of true ownership and responsibility, and would foster a fundamental knowledge of conservation and would necessitate documentation. Any access that may harm an object or show lack of respect to the cultural origin of the object must be refused.

**Risk assessment:**

In the past 30 years in Egypt, there has been a huge increasing in the number of museums (~115 museum) and expeditions in archaeological sites. But this has been done with the widespread and worrying absence of quality security, documentation, storage and conservation for the objects. The antiquities authorities and academic institutions have critical tasks in Egypt for assessing their current performance and approaches towards the Egyptian antiquities and their role in education, outreach, engaging public and social enjoyment. Expeditions need to develop protocols that determine approaches to conservation and preservation work. This will help in creating better clear strategies and policies for Egyptian heritage using the minimal available resources [Artlab Australia. 1999] Assessment of priorities, based on knowledge of the history, context and significance of collections is a key issue in good conservation and preservation assessment plans of Egyptian stored heritage.

The recent damage of Egyptian finds may be attributed to absence of risk analysis, documentation, and security instability and also of poor storage, untrained personnel, non-suitable conservation treatments and shortage of academic advice, consultation and adopted standards for effective methods for conservation and collection management. Also, the field of conservation has a limited number of institutions currently offering suitable professional training and education programs for the implementation of international standards for improving the documentation, and preventive conservation. Currently, Egypt has a poor
management of people and shortage of trained and skilled researchers and experts, policy
makers, and strategy implementers in the field of antiquities in comparison with the wide
spread heritage and archeological remains. Many of the staff working directly with heritage are
unskilled and have not had access to education. Lack of continued training of staff, and
irresponsible development of resources and low status of management have lead to losing the
needed skills to be well trained, professionally organized, confident and had the minimum
Conservation practices in Egypt need to overcome obstacles such as absence of basic scientific
analysis and examination instrumentation, technical support and large backlog of objects to be
accessioned in storage rooms which cause lack of regular well-documented examination and
routine cleaning and preservation which could be lead to complete loss of objects. Most
archaeological objects can deteriorate more rapidly once they have been stored in a museum
than when they were buried in the ground. There is no way to retrieve the lost information of
damaged objects which has no documentation or history of conservation treatments or objects
movements.

An international survey was conducted in 2011 by ICCROM and UNESCO [ICCROM-UNESCO
International Storage Survey. 2011], including 1490 museums worldwide in 136 countries,
where many problems for storage of antiquities have been addressed. Most of the Egyptian and
archaeological sites have poor unsecured spaces for storage of high-value antiquities. Storage
spaces in Egypt suffer from the lack of storage units and space where the antiquities, in some
areas, are mounted on the floor and directly in contact with dirt, pests and uncontrolled
surrounded environment. I have witnessed the decomposition of two unknown mummies,
mounted on the floor, in museum storage rooms where the mummies lost the top half due to
the active biological infection. Even the storage units at new facilities currently under
construction, are not adapted to specific sizes of different types of object, but are instead
standarised hangers more similar to warehouses than museum storage elsewhere in the world

Conservation practice in Egypt suffers from a shortage of sustained teamwork which depends
on shared understanding for implementing integrated plans of damage assessment and
monitoring including the control and choice of lighting, filtering and monitoring of pollutants, adjustment of temperature and humidity and exclusion of pests which all depend on the cooperation of many museum staff and their departments. Therefore, the Egyptian antiquities are continually subject to decontextualizing due to the irregular conservation procedures where some objects of stored collection may be damaged or have deteriorated beyond the conservator ability to treat them.

**Conservation needs:**
Conservation enriches the experience of cultural materials, preserves its significance, cultural context and technical art history. This goal of conservation requires transferring existing stored and displayed collections to online compatible formats using affordable technologies [Dawson, A. 2012]. New technologies also enable us to share knowledge more readily, work cooperatively within the conservation profession and bring new opportunities to establishing of virtual museums [Lewis, G. 2004:5] which could assist in reuniting decontextualised collections and objects.

Conservation is an important aspect of documentation and digitization as material often requires some level of conservation to stabilize objects for handling. The hardest challenge in Egypt for antiquities is the implementation of conservation assessment plans as a first step in the process of conserving objects and collections management using the large number of conservators, curators and other heritage workers. Antiquities authorities and non-governmental organizations in Egypt need to work more effectively with international organizations to deliver training programs on collection and sites management including documentation, databases, proper storage and raising standards of collection care.

Conservators and curators need to understand their role and duties in documentation, conservation, storage, exhibition and publication of the antiquities. These duties start with developing greater knowledge of collections, terminology, ethics, history of conservation, cultural context, history of technology, preventive conservation, material science, health and safety, analytical technologies, treatment materials and methods and information technology [The Getty Conservation Institute and the American Institute for Conservation. 2002]. Furthermore, staff (conservators, curators, scientists, guards and mangers) needs to improve
their ability to work systemically and collaboratively with an understanding of conservation priorities with a sense of professionalism, and they have to better understand the objectives and reasons of conservation of collections. They need to keep updated with rapid changes in technologies and methodologies to inform effective preservation strategies and to be engaged with local and international organizations, working in the field, to develop their profile and build networks. Antiquities staff needs to be motivated through encouraging research, publication and annual recognition of excellence in documentation, display, storage and conservation efforts. An ultimate goal in requalifying professionals is to create networks between other Egyptian conservators and links between Egyptian cultural heritage centres in Egypt and abroad.

For my own country and other countries with minimal budgets, keeping the number of museums and archaeological excavations to a minimum will allow conservation of the objects already excavated and assure their proper maintenance and storage. In Egypt, there are many new museum structures which have been suspended due to the shortage of funds and there is a big risk to collections which deteriorate before receiving basic conservation and stabilization treatments or could be dispersed due to the random collecting polices.

The nature of the locations of finds in Egypt requires authorities to provide appropriate security to protect the collections against theft or damage in storage areas or in displays [Lewis, G. 2004:6]. For better survival of antiquities, collections storage areas should be located in secured and well maintained areas to minimize risks of damage, environmental fluctuations and looting. Selection of objects and collection for display in new national and site museums and displayed stores needs to be based on research and historic and educational criteria not just random gathering without any prospective of new knowledge and entertainment. The Imhotep site Museum is an exemplar of practical solutions and strategic site management to be dedicated only to attractively displaying many discoveries and stored collections from Saqqara. Also, the Amarna site museum [Amarna Project. 2000], which will combine artifacts from the recent excavations at Amarna with models photograph and information panels, is another example of sustainable strategies for survival of new excavated objects. Uniting objects and collections within or close to their original context gives greater appreciation of unique value. However,
visible display of storage units, timed tours for storage areas and temporary/new exhibits need to be adopted and accommodated for displaying stored objects in storage/display facilities [Caesar, L. 2009:3-19][Keene, S. 2005]. This will assist in better inspection and damage assessment of stored antiquities and implementation of basic and remedial conservation procedures.

Furniture used for stored collections, such as cabinets, boxes, shelves and packaging materials, should be stable and non-reactive [Ladkin, N. 2004:24] with adequate space between objects for safe handling and retrieving processes. Stores need to be equipped with sufficient space and state-of-the-art tools for better documentation, conservation and displaying of archaeological finds. Computerized documentation records of excavated, stored and displayed antiquities, including full identification and description of each object, provenance, conditions, tracking of treatments and object movements, publications and any analytical data, should be established and kept in a secure environment and be supported with retrieval systems providing access to the information by all responsible staff [ICOM. 2013:5]. Documentation will also facilitate physical and intellectual access for stored antiquities by scholars and students.

**Policy planning:**
The recent security situation of antiquities during the Arab Spring in Egypt and our neighbors has emphasized the need to implement risk analysis and develop polices for conservation and collection management and increase research and public engagement, prioritize conservation practical needs, display and online access to objects databases. The situation in Egypt confirms the need for urgent national and international gatherings and forums among staff, experts, organizations, policy makers, stakeholders and governing authorities about the current performance and the future policy for survival of Egyptian antiquities.

Therefore, short and long term integrated strategic plans must be established to dedicate the very modest budget required for controlled and parallel excavations and enough, well-maintained, secured storage and display spaces. But first we need to develop criteria for determining significance and identifying the many items and dispersed collections of unique significance, and to strengthen the infrastructure for their conservation and preservation.
Implementation of conservation management and performance measurement in museums and archaeological sites is necessary where full documentation and sharing of information should be a main strategy [Keene, S. 2002:8-9]. Documentation is playing an essential role in future conservation processes and helps the retrieval of information from archaeological finds which can be lost, neglected or badly restored. Egypt needs better affordable documentation systems and databases of our material. The necessity for the documentation of non-displayed antiquities is not budgeted for, nor are there conservation plans systematically in place.

Conservation and collection management in museums and sites could be used for educating and teaching young generations, while universities/school museums could be a major source for research and education [Keene. S. 2005:17] and a solution for better training for students who should have the minimal connection with the antiquities before they start their career. Establishing policies of collecting and selecting collections for new museums and temporary exhibitions will assist in sharing different types of stored objects and that can overcome risks such as objects might finish in storage, not appreciated, sold decontextualised or treated in different ways.

Clear strategies and instructions for all archaeological excavations in Egypt must be declared. Egypt authorities should develop short and long term plans for archaeological missions with collaborative efforts from all foreign missions. All archaeological missions should be co-directed by fully trained Egyptian and fully trained foreign experts. No specific sites should be uniquely allocated to each mission [Quirke, S. 2011]. No country should be allowed to send an archaeological mission to Egypt without agreement of exchanging missions and experts and training students.

**Conclusion**

Without better access to collections, risk assessment, better training for conservators and professionals and a clear policy for antiquities, we place our cultural heritage at risk. Egypt has a vast number of objects and archaeological sites from antiquity, and other important and unique objects from more recent civilizations all of which require protection and conservation. With economic growth and increased building and pollution, cultural heritage is at even greater risk.
Documentation and the demand for electronic access require a concerted effort in order to allow greater world-wide access to cultural heritage objects in Egypt. Responsible and ongoing collaboration with foreign conservators and missions in Egypt is fundamental, and is preferable to one-off training events for selected professionals or policy makers.

References:

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