

# ICOM Preliminary report on museums in Egypt

Thursday, 03 February 2011

Due to circumstances, following data could not be officially confirmed so far

## 1/ Situation of the Egyptian Museum, also known as Cairo Museum:

*Museum Director: Mr Tarek El Awady*

The century-old building exhibits over 100,000 artefacts from ancient Egypt. The institution is home to the largest and best collections of ancient Egyptian art in the world. The museum is located near some of the most intense of the mass anti-government protests sweeping the capital. It is overlooking Tahrir Square in Cairo's city centre and adjacent to the headquarters of the ruling National Democratic Party that protesters had set ablaze on Friday. Therefore there were big threats by the torched building.

### Friday, 28 January 2011

Many people entered the museum's gift shop, and stole modern jewellery. Later, some people entered the exhibition rooms, broke artefacts and attempted to steal two mummies.

When protesters took notice of the danger, thousands of young Egyptians created a human chain surrounding and protecting the museum. This was partially effective, because the raiders had entered from above through the ceiling windows. But the chain could prevent the thieves of getting out with their loot; they were forced to leave the mummies behind when they broke into pieces as they carried the ancient artefacts towards the museum doors. The civilians managed to stop and capture some of them, and deliver them to the army forces.

Through his blog, Dr. Zahi Hawass, also ICOM Egypt President, gives a detailed description of the events: <http://www.drhawass.com/blog/situation-egyptian-antiquities-today>

### The building

The main Building has suffered no damage.

The new backside annex (opened in Nov 2010) with ticket office and museum gift shop was completely ransacked.

### The collection

On Saturday, the first official information by Dr. Zahi Hawass stated that heads of two mummies were ripped off, and about 10 small artefacts were damaged - but that nothing was stolen of the museum. Whereas the latter information seems to be true, the first one was corrected by himself on Tuesday: "A total of seventy objects have been broken, but the museum was dark and the nine robbers did not recognize the value of what was in the showcases. They opened thirteen cases,

threw the seventy objects on the ground and broke them, including one Tutankhamun case, from which they broke the statue of the king on a panther. However, the broken objects can all be restored, and we will begin the restoration process this week.”

Saturday morning, a photographer joined the military patrol checking the exhibition rooms. His pictures were shown by Al Jazeera TV<sup>1</sup>. Screen shots were taken and distributed via blogs<sup>2</sup>. Within less than 24 hours the international web community had identified several of the damaged exhibits<sup>3</sup>. Fortunately, it seems the damaged antiquities can be restored and initially it seemed that few, if any pieces, had been stolen from the Egyptian Museum.

## **Tutankhamun**

Theft and vandalism happened in the 1<sup>st</sup> floor, a most sensitive area, because a big portion is dedicated to the finds in the tomb of the 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE Pharaoh Tutankhamun. This caused a lot of concern among friends of Egyptian Art worldwide. But as far as we know at the moment, there were three gilded ritual statues of the pharaoh damaged.

It should be mentioned that a large collection of objects from King Tut’s tomb are currently on tour across America. The travelling exhibition “Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs” has been shown until mid of January in New York and Denver. From 18 February it will be on display in St. Paul at the Science Museum of Minnesota.

## **Who were the ransackers?**

Mrs. Wafaa el-Saddik, the former director of the Museum of Egyptian Antiquities (2004 – 2010), told the German Newspaper “Die Zeit” in an interview<sup>4</sup>:

Die Zeit: *Who did it?*

El-Saddik: *Those (looting the gift shop) were the guardians of the museum, our own people. Some of the policemen had apparently pulled out their uniforms not to be recognizable as policemen. A second group of offenders then came from the back: climbing a fire escape and then entering through the skylight. The destructions happened all on the first floor, where there is also the treasure of Tutankhamun.*

Die Zeit: *And why do you believe the guards, who protect some of the most valuable objects in our global heritage, did it?*

El-Saddik: *They are paid very poorly. I wrote the fingers crooked and asking for more money for these people. All for free. A security guard earns about 250 Egyptian pounds, or 35 € a month. We have about 160 security guards plus several dozen police officers who are basically conscripts in police uniforms. These policemen earn even less ...*

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=B81G62H-KzA>

<sup>2</sup> <http://hyperallergic.com/17815/egyptian-museum-damage/>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.eloquentpeasant.com/2011/01/29/statues-of-tutankhamun-damagedstolen-from-the-egyptian-museum/>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.zeit.de/politik/ausland/2011-01/interview-el-saddik>

## **Security condition during the last days**

Starting from Saturday morning 5 a.m., Egyptian army commandoes secured the building and its grounds. Nevertheless two further attempts happened. A military general at the museum said soldiers arrested about 35 men trying to break into the building on Sunday, and another 15 on Monday. Snipers were stationed on the roof of the building, and dozens of troops patrolled the grounds of the famed antiquities museum.

On Wednesday, the clashes between pro and contra demonstrators on Tahrir Square led to a very dangerous situation for the museum, particularly as Meret Basha (road down east side of museum) became a major struggle zone. Many Molotov cocktails were thrown, some of them landed within the ground of the museum. But the Army was present around the museum with armored vehicles and water cannons. They managed to hose down the small fires. Nevertheless the museum is in an endangered position these days.

## **2/ Other museums and sites:**

According to Dr. Zahi Hawass, “all the 24 national museums are now under protection of the army”.

### **Abusir**

This site causes greatest concern, as there are widespread reports of looting on a massive scale. It was reported from that area that the site was too dangerous to enter because gangs of men were there, digging for antiquities. But they were unlikely to find anything valuable, as all of the valuable artefacts had already been transferred to the storage facilities at Saqqara.

“The magazines and stores were opened, and I could not find anyone to protect the antiquities at the site.” (Dr. Zahi Hawass, Saturday)

Dr Zahi Hawass is annoyed by all the false reports of damage and stated that there is no damage to any of the sites in Abusir: *“Everything is safe at the site of Abusir”, “Nothing has been stolen from Abusir.”*

### **Alexandria: Alexandria National Museum**

Unsuccessful attempt of looting

### **Alexandria: Royal Jewellery Museum**

Unsuccessful attempt of looting

“Luckily, the foresighted employees of the Royal Jewellery Museum moved all of the objects into the basement, and sealed it before leaving.” (Dr. Zahi Hawass)

### **Alexandria district**

“Sites around Alexandria were robbed, but the military is now protecting them all” (Dr. Zahi Hawass)

### **Aswan: Aswan Museum (on Elephantine Island)**

Reported to be untouched (Ms Wafaa el-Saddik and the Austrian Archaeological Institute)

### **Cairo: Coptic Museum**

The museum seems to have survived the attempted attack with minimal losses.

### **El Hibeh**

The site has been looted but should now be protected. The degree of damage is unknown.

### **Giza**

An attempted break in was unsuccessful. The Giza Pyramids and Sphinx are guarded by the army and believed secure.

The status of the greater Giza site is unknown. Damage to antiquities on the site was reported, but there is no indication yet that this was major damage.

### **Luxor: Luxor Museum**

*Museum Director: Ms Sanaa Aly*

Luxor Temple and the Mummification Museum are closed and guarded by soldiers; safety is confirmed by Museum director and Ms Wafaa el-Saddik.

### **Luxor: Karnak Temple**

*Director of the Temple area: Mr Ibrahim Suliman*

Looters armed with guns attempted to enter Karnak warehouse but the local people came to the defence of the site and some of the men were apprehended by local citizens

### **Luxor district**

"... the West Bank (where the mortuary temples and the Valley of the Kings are located) the police have abandoned the monuments so protection is being organized by local people who are taking measures to ensure that the sites are safe. There are no protests on the West Bank. On the East Bank, the main town of Luxor where the temples of Luxor and Karnak are located, there are low key protests being carried out but they are very different from those in Cairo." (From a blog of local archaeologists)

### **Memphis: Memphis Museum**

The Memphis Museum is a small institution roughly 25 km south of Cairo. It is the open air museum of the archaeological sites at the ancient capital of Egypt – dominated by a colossal limestone statue of Ramses II. It is essentially a collection of limestone and granite sculpture and architectural elements from ancient Memphis.

"The Museum in Memphis and his magazines were robbed on Saturday morning completely. The leaders there have called me in desperation and prayed: "Save us, do something." I first called the police, but did not respond. I've alerted an Army General, I know. But it was too late. (Ms Wafaa el-Saddik)

As there were no small objects on display, no cases, it is difficult to understand what the "looting" consisted of – maybe it was more on the order of vandalism.

### **Quantara (near Ismailia on the Suez Canal)**

The warehouse contained 3,000 objects from the Roman and Byzantine periods. Many of the objects had been found in Sinai by the Israelis after they occupied the peninsula during the 1967 war with Egypt, and had only been recently returned to Egypt.

A worker at the warehouse reported that the looters had said they were searching for gold. The worker told them there was no gold but they continued to pillage the storehouse, smashing some items and taking others.

“East of Quantara in the Sinai, we have a large store containing antiquities from the Port Said Museum. Sadly, a large group, armed with guns and a truck, entered the store, opened the boxes in the magazine and took the precious objects.” (Dr. Zahi Hawass)

“The storage magazine that was looted in Quantara, in the Sinai, has had 288 objects returned! I cannot say exactly how many objects were lost, but it seems that the majority of what was stolen has been returned.” (Dr. Zahi Hawass)

### **San el-Hagar (in the Delta)**

At this site important 21st and 22nd Dynasty tombs are located; it is being protected by the local Egyptians.

### **Saqqara**

The numerous reports from this vast complex of pyramids and pharaonic-era tombs south of Cairo, some 5,000-years-old, are very contradictory.

#### It was reported that

- the local museum at Saqqara has been looted,
- pyramids in South Saqqara were opened,
- the sealed tombs were entered,
- looters broke into at least a half-dozen storage facilities,
- armed looters stole or damaged some wall carvings and hieroglyphics that were under excavation,
- gangs have been digging day and night attempting to find unopened tombs,
- the damage is “vast” and “immense”,
- in the villages adjacent to the site, the fear of looters and highway bandits is high, even during daylight. Drivers paused every few miles to ask advice from other travellers about the road ahead, while groups of men formed neighbourhood watches to deter thugs who were rumoured to be roaming the area.

#### Positive reports:

- The Step Pyramid, the Imhotep Museum and the adjacent central magazines are currently protected by the military.
- An emergency committee formed by Dr. Zahi Hawass, despite finding padlocks broken at the sites of Saqqara’s ancient tombs, found that the tombs themselves had not been entered nor vandalized or burgled in any way.
- Thieves were unable to break into the main storage depot, which contains the site’s most valuable items and is guarded by steel doors. More than 40 other storage installations also were untouched. (Mr Ragad Turkey, site supervisor at Saqqara)

- Reports had been exaggerated, at least in Saqqara. “These things are untrue. We are in full control of this site,” said Mr Kamal Wahid, director of the government agency that oversees the site.
- At Saqqara, military officers led an impromptu tour of the security measures they have put in place. Since troops arrived on Sunday morning, steel doors have been welded shut, and soldiers have been deployed to guard the 10-square-kilometre site. Each night, the soldiers chase off people who come to dig for relics, the officers said. But the site remains well guarded and most of the diggers are just local children, Mr Wahid said.

## **Thebes**

The antiquities in West Thebes have not suffered any damage or plunder. The local authorities remained on duty at all time and made every efforts to ensure the protection of the antiquities (including organizing guards during the nights on the site). (Mr. Mustafa Waziri, General director of the West Bank and the Belgium expedition led by Dr. Bavay)

## **Dr. Zahi Hawass’ statement on Thursday, 03 February 2011, reassuring the world on the safety of Egyptian heritage**

<http://www.drhawass.com/blog/state-egyptian-antiquities-3-february-2011>

## **Conclusion**

It is believed that Egypt’s antiquities remain under threat, as protests and violence continue. Officials are now assessing the damage that has been caused by looters. But the fate of archaeological sites and museums still remain unclear. Museums in Egypt appear to have little in the way of disaster plans. Security at the Egyptian Museum has been poor, with its 1902 building allowed to deteriorate and antiquated display cases still in use.

## **Communications:**

### **Dr. Zahi Hawass, new Secretary Minister of Antiquities, President of ICOM Egypt**

<http://www.drhawass.com/>

### **Egypt Cultural Heritage Organization**

<http://egyptology.blogspot.com/2011/02/tuesday-updates-as-they-arrive.html>

### **ICOM**

<http://icom.museum/news/news/article/icom-urges-to-protect-egypts-cultural-heritage/L/0.html>

### **ICOM International Committee for Egyptology (CIPEG)**

<http://cipeg.icom.museum/index.php?c=News>

### **Blue Shield**

<http://icom.museum/press-releases/press-release/article/blue-shield-statement-on-egypt-31-january-2011/L/0.html>

### **UNESCO**

[http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco\\_director\\_general\\_launches\\_heritage\\_and\\_press\\_freedom\\_alert\\_for\\_egypt/](http://www.unesco.org/new/en/media-services/single-view/news/unesco_director_general_launches_heritage_and_press_freedom_alert_for_egypt/)

## US cultural organizations

<http://uscbs.org/news/index.php>

## Web resources:

### Lists of Egyptian Museums

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_museums\\_in\\_Egypt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_museums_in_Egypt)

<http://www.egyptianmuseums.net/index.html>

### Egyptological Looting Database 2011 (by Kate Phizackerley)

<http://egyptopaedia.com/2011/>

### Egypt 2011 Blue Shield solidarity (Christophe Jacobs)

[http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group\\_177685922273010](http://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_177685922273010)

### Egyptologists for Egypt. Supporting the people's demands

<http://www.facebook.com/pages/Egyptologists-for-Egypt-Supporting-the-peoples-demands/104270532983680>

### Restore + Save the Egyptian Museum (Sarah Parcak)

[https://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group\\_197921123555505](https://www.facebook.com/home.php?sk=group_197921123555505)

### Egyptology News

<http://egyptology.blogspot.com/2011/01/updates-as-they-trickle-in.html>

### Egyptology News Network

<http://egyptologynewsnetwork.blogspot.com/>

### Hyperallergic

<http://hyperallergic.com/17896/egyptian-museum-looted-by-own-guards-memphis-looted/>

### Map of major sites

<http://ancientegyptonline.org/egyptnews/p/mapofantiquitiestheft>

### News from the Valley of the Kings

[http://www.kv64.info/2011\\_02\\_01\\_archive.html](http://www.kv64.info/2011_02_01_archive.html)

### Talking Pyramids

<http://www.talkingpyramids.com/pyramids-at-saqqara-abusir-broken-into/>

### The Eloquent Peasant

<http://www.eloquentpeasant.com/2011/01/29/statues-of-tutankhamun-damagedstolen-from-the-egyptian-museum/>

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