

DISCOVERING ANCIENT EGYPT IN MODERNITY: THE CONTRIBUTION OF AN ANTIQUARIAN, GIOVANNI BELZONI (1816-1819)¹

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Abstract

The main objective of this article is to allow a better understanding of the relationship between the British Empire and Ancient Egypt, and show the ways through which European countries – and particularly Great Britain – used the image of the Egyptian civilization to build a national identity and memory. Antiquarians who travelled to search for exotic antiquities had a very important role in this process because they left in their notes a record of their thoughts about the cultures of the places they visited and about the material culture they found there. These memories and reports circulated in Europe and were regarded as a source of knowledge, since they offered a version of the unknown “other” and reported the travelers’ interpretations of the past and present of foreign places. In this article I analyze the journal of one of these antiquarians, Giovanni Belzoni, in order to understand how his discourse may have corroborated the construction of a national identity, since he helped to form a large collection of Egyptian pieces of the British Museum, in England.

Keywords

Giovanni Belzoni; Ancient Egypt; antiquarianism in the Eastern World, uses of the past, material culture, national identity.

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Resumo:

O principal objetivo do presente artigo é compreender a relação entre o Império Britânico e o Antigo Egito, a fim de demonstrar como os europeus, em especial os britânicos, utilizaram a imagem da civilização egípcia para a construção de uma identidade e memória nacional. Dessa forma, destaca-se o relevante papel que os viajantes antiquaristas tiveram neste processo, pois ao realizarem suas viagens deixavam registradas todas as suas impressões a respeito das culturas dos locais por onde passavam e, também, da cultura material que encontravam. Tais relatos eram constantemente lidos na Europa e utilizados como fonte de conhecimento, pois traduziam para o europeu o “outro” e relatavam suas interpretações a respeito do passado e presente de determinado local. Dessa forma, analiso o diário de viagem do antiquarista Giovanni Belzoni com a intenção de compreender como seu discurso pode ter contribuído para tal afirmação nacional, uma vez que este ajudou a construir uma grande coleção de peças egípcias do Museu Britânico, na Inglaterra.

Palavras-chave

Giovanni Belzoni; Egito antigo; antiquarismo no Oriente, usos do passado, cultura material, identidade nacional.

Introduction

During the 19th century the new national states of Europe had a growing interest in building a history or collective memory that could ground the constitution and affirmation of national identities. In this context, historical and archeological studies, which started to be regarded as scientific disciplines, were used as instruments to legitimate the “origin” of those Nations. The interpretations produced in the fields of Archeology and History became a bridge that allowed Europe to have information about different societies of non-European territories. As such, these disciplines have not risen as discursive mirrors of reality, but as political, economical, and ideological instruments, forged from the rivalry between European nations in search of their own recognition as nation-states. Therefore, the consolidation of a national history and of a unique national character became an important issue in that period. The constitution of places of memory such as national museums was an essential strategy in this process, as they exposed artifacts that allowed the construction of a national heritage.

Rivalry between new European states led them to adopt expansionist policies, and also to search for symbols of that expansionism, such as antiquities of unknown peoples and territories, mainly from the Eastern World, in order to increase their museum collections. In this context, travelers who collected antiquities in different territories had an important role in the construction of a national memory, as they carried information from one place to the other. Most of these travelers took notes of everything they could see, often describing in detail lands and peoples they visited in travel journals. These journals were an important record of expeditions, and had a wide circulation in Europe as main sources of information about “other” people and “other” lands. They also contained interpretations about the past and present of the places and peoples described in them, and for this reason they are important today for the understanding of the way Modernity regarded the Ancient World. This article intends to offer an analysis of some of these interpretations, in particular, the journal of an Italian antiquarian, Giovanni Belzoni, who traveled in Egypt between 1816 and 1819, focusing on the way antiquarians, administrators and political agents made use of Ancient Egypt to design the idea of a national identity and to legitimate expansionist policies. In his travel journal, Belzoni left a very detailed record of all expeditions he took part, and also of his work as antiquarian, collecting many valuable artifacts that constitute a significant part of the great Egyptian collections of the British Museum, in England.

Rather than the past itself, this analysis regards a particular *use of the past*, a perspective opened by the end of 20th century in historical studies, which concerns the meaning of Antiquity in modern and contemporary times. From this perspective, the research focus shifts from Antiquity to the different views and uses of Antiquity: as part of a cultural heritage and as basis to define historical continuity. An important reference for this research perspective is the work of Martin Bernal about the role played by the Ancient World in the

definition of modern politics (Bernal, 2005: 224). History is considered by this author as a representation of the past, and, therefore, as the product of a subjective view. In this sense, each epoch would be influenced by the values of its present time, and would rescue from the past the elements that could satisfy present needs.

In his works, Bernal examined the way in which Antiquity became a reference for many nations as an important part of nationalist discourse, as basis for the definition of national identities, and as means to legitimate political interests. This new perspective has led to a shift in Ancient History research – involving both historians and archeologists – regarding principles and methodological procedures, which resulted in a new series of works, interpretations and debates about modern uses of history. This new trend has gained ground in the most recent research about Ancient History, providing less normative and less conservative views of the past, adopting a rather critical approach (Funari, 2005: 119), and has been followed by a great number of historians and archeologists engaged in the study of modern and contemporary appropriations of Antiquity.

This article is divided in four sections. The first one, *Ancient Egypt in Modernity*, regards the (re)discovery of Egypt in modern times, the presence of travelers in there, and the exploration of material culture. The second section, *Giovanni Belzoni and antiquarianism in the early 19th century*, presents aspects of the life of Giovanni Battista Belzoni and of the antiquarian practice in the 19th century. The third section, *Reflections about Ancient and Modern Egypt: Belzoni's travels narrated to Europe*, presents Belzoni's journal, in which he recorded his discoveries and impressions during his stay in the Pharaoh's lands. The fourth and last section, *Egypt and the construction of a British national identity*, presents an analysis of Belzoni's discourse, discussing the ways in which it regards and designs the image of the British Empire in that time.

Ancient Egypt in Modernity

According to the historian Natália Monseff Junqueira, Ancient Egypt has fascinated other societies since Antiquity, and the interest in Egyptian material culture has been noted in various civilizations throughout time (Junqueira, 2008: 2). It was in Renaissance, though, that a restless search for Egyptian antiquities attracted many travelers to Egypt, and this search lasted until the 20th century. Antiquarians and also archeologists carried out a massive transfer of artifacts from their places of origin to Europe. Paintings, jewels, mummies, papyri, and sculptures could be found in private collections, and later in museum collections (David, 1999: 8). According to Rosalie David,

As a result of the intensified interest since the Renaissance in acquiring antiquities, foreign collectors started to conduct their own excavations in Egypt.

Incredibly, they were able to obtain permission from Egypt's Turkish rulers to remove the contents from tombs and cut out wall decorations and inscriptions from tombs and temples, thereby accelerating the "treasure hunting," with excavators and agents from different countries competing to obtain the finest pieces. Meanwhile, the main aim of this exercise was to supply wealthy patrons with the objects they desired rather than to advance Egyptology. (David, 2003: 8).

Nevertheless, in late 18th century and during the 19th century, Ancient Egypt also attracted the attention of scholars with scientific purposes, and research was widely encouraged by European nations, which established consulates in Egypt. As a result of this new interest, many artifacts were exhibited in national museums, like the British Museum and the Louvre Museum. According to David, two events were extremely important for the development of a discipline dedicated to the past of Egypt: the military expedition of Napoleon Bonaparte (1769-1821) to Egypt, and the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphs by Jean-François Champollion (1790-1832), which allowed a better understanding of Egypt in the West.

This is the context in which Egyptology rose during the 19th century as the study of ancient Egyptian society through its written and material culture, collected by archeologists and antiquarians. According to Jean Vercoutter, it was precisely in the 19th century that Egypt was re-discovered in Europe: "One could say that from one day to the other, without exaggeration, a craze for Egypt took place. From 1802 to 1830 distinguished travelers from France, Germany, England and Switzerland went there to search for [...] Egyptian wonders." (Vercoutter, 2002: 54³)

With the development of Egyptology, the European presence in Northeast Africa became an everyday event, and the spoliation of objects produced by the old civilization that flourished there was a regular practice. Antiquarians and scholars traveled to Egypt and recorded in their journals and notes a detailed account of what they found there: material culture, people, lands. The narratives and drawings of these travelers, "produced during their pilgrimage, contributed to keep the increasing fame of Egypt in that time." (Vercoutter, 2002: 54) Thus, both ancient and modern Egypt have been pictured in written discourse and images, which circulated in Europe and were regarded as sources of trustful information about the country.

Representations of the ancient and modern Egypt produced in the 19th century usually emphasize exotic landscapes, great monuments, and also the differences between Egyptian and European habits. This emphasis on the "otherness" and difference can be considered under the light of the ideas of François Hartog: "say the 'other' is to postulate he is different from us; it is to say that there are two terms, A and B, and that A is not B." (Hartog, 1999:

³ Free translation from Portuguese. (T.N.)

229). For Hartog, the question for the narrator is how to represent persuasively the world, which is the subject of his narration as the “other”, in the same world. Hartog’s rhetoric of otherness consists of a translation process, which aims to bring the “other” to its world through narration:

In order to translate difference, the traveler has at his disposal the figure of inversion, through which otherness is transcribed as anti-sameness. There is no A and B, but simply A and the inverse of A. The project of such discourse is to speak about the same. (Hartog, 1999: 229)

Thus Egypt was translated to Europe in terms of European values and habits, and for this reason difference is a remarkable and recurrent aspect of travelers’ narratives. These narratives conveyed information about Egyptian people and about their antiquities, and had a wide circulation. In other words, they became a primary source of information and opinions about ancient and modern Egypt. Their authors established a subjective narrative place based on their interpretations and impressions. Most times their discourse consolidated a particular image of Egypt in Europe: it was described as an exotic and mysterious land, with a glorious past, but also as a sort of inferior, non-civilized place.

In *Orientalism: Western conceptions of the Orient*, Edward Said discusses the way the West translated, and even invented the Orient for itself. For Said, the East has always attracted the interest of the West, particularly of Europeans, and for this reason the oldest, richest, and well-established European colonies are found there. Furthermore, the East is also a rival of the West in terms of culture, one of the most remarkable and recurrent images of the “other”. According to Said, it is precisely the contrast between this image of the East and that of the West that has participated in the designing of an image of Europe (Said, 1990: 27). Orientalism is the name that the author gives to the Western discourse about the Orient, a discourse present in Western imagination since the 19th century. Orientalism has other intermingled meanings, though: in first place it could be regarded as a form of expression about the Orient based on its importance to Europe; it could be considered as an academic discipline, or the work of a scholar who studies the Orient; a form of reflection founded on an ontological and epistemological distinction between East and West; and, finally, a Western form that legitimates the presence, authority and control of the East by the Western world. In short, “Orientalism [...] is the whole network of interests inevitably brought to bear on (and therefore always involved in) any occasion when that peculiar entity “the Orient” is in question.” (Said, 1990: 30)

Orientalism is premised upon exteriority, that is, on the fact that the Orientalist, poet or scholar, makes the Orient speak, describes the Orient, renders its mysteries plain for and to the West. He is never concerned with the Orient except as the first cause of what he says. What he says and writes, by virtue of the fact that it is said or written, is meant to indicate that the Orientalist is outside the Orient, both as an existential and as a moral fact. The principal product of this exteriority is of course representation: [...] the Orient is transformed from a very far distant and

often threatening Otherness into figures that are relatively familiar. (Said, 1990: 51)

According to Said, Orientalism is essentially an Anglo-French cultural enterprise, since these nations were the first to establish colonies in the East and because they dominated the region from the 19th century until the end of the Second World War. Thus, Orientalism is a cultural and political fact, by which the East is incorporated by Western discourse. It is against this image of the East that the European culture consolidated itself as a form of identity, in contrast with the Orient. The Western reflections about the East invented the place as a form of difference, which was necessary to establish the limits of its own character. The Orient was produced as an inverted image of the West, reinforcing the European ideological hegemony over the Orient as a form of superiority in relation to Eastern backwardness.

This relationship between Europe and the Orient is far from being a simple one, for the Orient can be regarded as a creation, but not a creation lacking reality. (Said, 1990: 32) According to Said, it would be a mistake to believe that the Orient was created to fulfill the needs of European imagination, for the relationship between the West and the East have always been a relation of power and domination. "The Orient was Orientalized not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental", but also because it *could be* - that is, submitted to being - *made Oriental*" (Said, 1990: 32). Therefore, the interaction of West and East was established in relations of power and domination, which ended in the Western hegemony over the East.

From these considerations, one can notice that modern European national states engaged in a nation-building project in which the definition of a national identity was strongly influenced by the contrasting image of other cultures. In this context, the Orient and Orientalist discourse were present in the reflections intellectuals, travelers and even politicians who wrote about the East and, particularly, about Egypt. The discourse of travelers conveyed to the West their impressions about the East, often attributing new meanings to the cultures they met - both ancient and modern Egyptian cultures. This is the context in which the travel journal of the Italian traveler Giovanni Belzoni was produced, as a relevant collection of impressions of a 19th century antiquarian about Egypt.

Giovanni Battista Belzoni and Antiquarianism in the Early 19th Century

Giovanni Battista Belzoni was born in Padua, in Italy, in 5 November 1778. According to Ivor Noel Hume, the author of one of his biographies, Belzoni was a tall, extremely strong, and handsome man, a description reported by his contemporaries (Hume, 2011: 6). At the age of 17 Belzoni moved to Rome in order to study hydraulics; but in that time the political scenery

in Europe was stormy due to the military campaign of Napoleon. When Rome was invaded by the French army, Belzoni moved first to Paris, and then to Holland, places where he did not stay for long. In 1803 he moved to England, where he lived for nine years and was admitted for citizenship (Huem, 2011). To make a living, Belzoni sold water toys of his own invention in fairs, and took part in circus performances in many English cities – including the Sadler’s Wells Theatre, in London. He took advantage of his strong physical constitution to act as ‘strongman’, showing feats of strength (Siliotti, 2007: 196).

It was also in England that Belzoni met his wife, Sarah, who accompanied him in his travels and expeditions in Europe and Africa. In 1812 they decided to leave England and start travelling. They visited Portugal, Spain and Malta, where they arrived in 1814. In Malta Belzoni met Captain Ismail Gibraltar, an emissary of the vice-king of Egypt, Mahomed Ali, who invited him to go to Egypt. The vice-king was searching for European engineers and technicians, wishing to bring new technologies and knowledge for his projects to improve irrigation and agricultural work, and he believed Belzoni’s knowledge of hydraulics would be a useful resource (Siliotti, 2007: 164).

The next year, Belzoni traveled to Egypt together with his wife and an Irish servant. He stayed there for two years, working to produce a hydraulic machine to be used for irrigation (Vercoutter, 2002: 68). Intending to make money with his invention, Belzoni developed it as an alternative to the traditional hydraulic wheel, and presented it to Mahomed Ali. The vice-king was interested in the invention, and asked Belzoni to test it in his presence, but a problem in the mechanism was sufficient to convince Mahomed Ali that the innovation would not do; actually it is not even clear if Belzoni had sufficient knowledge of hydraulics to make it work. According to Stanley Mayes (2010: 23), when Belzoni wrote his travel journal he was already a rather famous traveler, so it is possible that the scientific knowledge he claimed to have did not correspond to reality.

The failure of Belzoni’s machine has ruined his economic prospects: without money, he considered to leave Egypt. It was then that Henry Salt, a member of the Board of Trustees of the British Museum, was appointed as General Consul of England in Egypt. At the request of the director of the British Museum, Sir Joseph Banks, but also at the request of rich collectors, Salt start to collect antiquities. In a public letter of the Foreign Office to Salt, he is requested to “anticipate rivals” in the collection of antiquities (Mayes, 2010: 23). In order to pursue this objective, the British Consul hires agents to help him to find and collect Egyptian antiquities, and at this point, his interests and those of Belzoni meet.

Financed by the British Consulate, Belzoni traveled throughout Egypt and its vicinity between 1816 and 1819 collecting antiquities and making important discoveries, which were recorded in his journal. According to Mayes, the first great feat of Belzoni as an antiquarian was the removal of a colossal bust of Ramses II from Thebes, in Egypt, to the British Museum in London. French agents had already tried the same enterprise, without success: it was

almost impossible to move a massive block of 7-8 tons from the Temple of Karnak, carry it on the sand and load it in a ship. After this achievement, Belzoni traveled in Egypt for the next three years, looking for antiquities and discovering important archeological sites: he opened and excavated the Temple of Abu Simbel, discovered royal tombs in the Kings' Valley, opened the second pyramid of Giza, found the lost city of "Berenice", and organized great collections of Egyptian antiquities – many of them may be seen nowadays in European museums.

In 1819 Belzoni went back to London, and there he decided to organize an exhibit at the Egyptian Hall of Piccadilly, in order to present to the public the artifacts he had collected during those four years of antiquarian activity in Egypt. After Belzoni's death, this exhibit was taken to Paris, in the same period in which Champollion wrote his *Lettre à M. Dacier*, deciphering the mysteries of hieroglyphic writing (Siliotti, 2007: 175). Belzoni was honored as great traveler in Regency London, and, as foreigner, "he was approved of for his devotion to the British interest". (Mayes, 2010: 12). Belzoni died in 3 November 1823, at the age of 45, in a little village near the Benin River, in Africa, where he went with the intention of exploring Tombuctu.

Giovanni Belzoni's journal remained, then, an important record of his actions and feats: the *Narrative of the Operations and recent discoveries within the pyramids, temples, tombs and excavations in Egypt and Nubia and of a Journey to the Coasts of the Red Sea, in search of the Ancient Berenice and another to the Oasis of Jupiter Ammon* was published in London in 1820, in 483 pages divided in three chapters: 'First Journey', 'Second Journey' e 'Third Journey'. In the first chapter, Belzoni narrates his arrival in Egypt, the difficulties faced in dealing with local people, the presentation of his hydraulic invention to the vice-king of Egypt, his relationship with antiquarianism and with the European consuls in Egypt, and, finally, the operation of removal of the colossal bust of Ramses II from Thebes to England. The second chapter contains descriptions of the sites Belzoni explored in Thebes and Luxor, the account of his discovery of temples and tombs in the Kings' Valley, his contact with mummies and animals, and the discovery of the entrance of one of the pyramids of Giza. In the third chapter Belzoni narrates his journey back to Thebes and the preparation for his expedition to the Red Sea, the discovery of the lost city of Berenice, the operation of moving the obelisk of the Philae Island to Alexandria, and, finally, the description of the journey to the Amon Oasis. The book presents also an extra chapter written by Belzoni's wife, Sarah, about the habits of women in Egypt, Nubia and Syria: "Mrs. Belzoni's trifling account of the women of Egypt, Nubia, and Syria". In order to illustrate his work, Belzoni also published a collection of 44 watercolor paintings made by himself during his travels: "Fortyfour Plates Illustrative of the Researches and Operations of Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia".

In the same year Belzoni's work was first published, it was translated to many languages and reached many scholars. One of them was Howard Carter, who discovered the tomb of Tutankhamun; he defined Belzoni's book as one of the most fascinating books ever written

about Egypt (Siliotti, 2007: 162). In his preface to the book, Belzoni explains why he decided to write about his adventures in non-European lands:

On my arrival in Europe, I found so many erroneous accounts had been given to the public of my operations and discoveries in Egypt, that it appeared to be my duty to publish a plain statement of facts; and should any one call its correctness in question, I hope they will do it openly, that I may be able to prove the truth of my assertions. (Belzoni, 1820: ix)

According to Stanley Mayes, Belzoni's declared wish to narrate "plain matters of fact", which he mentions many times in his book, was due to misunderstandings between him and the British Consul, Henry Salt, when they worked together; it was most probably an attempt to establish his own version of the events of that period.

Reflections about Ancient and Modern Egypt: Belzoni's travels narrated to Europe

Giovanni Belzoni makes clear in the preface of his journal that the biggest difficulty he faced in his travels was dealing with people. His complaints about the "manners and customs of the people" he had contact with are recurrent throughout the book, and offer to the reader the picture of a place that is totally in contrast with European civilization. As Belzoni spent a long time in Egypt and around, he claims to have a better understanding of local people, different from the common traveler, who just visits many places, he had to live among other peoples and trade with them, an experience that allowed him to "observe the real character" of those peoples (Belzoni, 1820: v):

no traveller had ever such opportunities of studying the customs of the natives as were afforded to me, for none had ever to deal with them in so peculiar a manner. My constant occupation was searching after antiquities, and this led me in the various transactions I had with them, to observe the real character of the Turks, Arabs, Nubians, Bedoweens, and Ababdy tribes. Thus I was very differently circumstanced from a common traveller, who goes merely to make his remarks on the country and its antiquities, instead of having to persuade these ignorant and superstitious people to undertake a hard task, in labours, with which they were previously totally unacquainted. (Belzoni, 1820: v).

It is possible to observe in many passages of Belzoni's journal the distance he saw between Europeans and Egyptians. He narrates the difficulties he had to face when he arrived in a new place without speaking the local language, and also the risks of the plague and diseases that usually affected foreigners. In Belzoni's words, Eastern peoples are pictured as non-reliable and tricky. He reports the advice he received before leaving to Egypt: "never to credit what an Arab says" (Belzoni, 1820: 6), and this opinion is repeated in many parts of the

book. Furthermore, he described Eastern peoples as non-civilized, primitive and very aggressive. Many passages of the journal are dedicated to the description of peoples who lived in modern Egypt and the way they treated foreign travelers, with a declared intent: "The reader, perhaps, may think my narrative too minute; but I beg to observe, that it is in this way only the true character of these people can be known" (Belzoni, 1820: 48).

Despite the initial shock with the modern Egyptian culture, Belzoni got used to the place and started to observe with more attention that scenery, describing in his narrative the Egypt he had in front of his eyes. He mentions ancient and monumental buildings, the exotic aspect of the scenery, and particularities of the people. That image was a negative of the West, an opposed version of the image of European cities and civilization. When Belzoni first arrived in Cairo, he finds a completely different landscape, and his description of it emphasize the contrast with the European landscape: the way people dress, the way they move in the streets, the way they talk, the unpleasant smell of the place, the beauty of the land distant of the city, the fairs, the things they traded, the antiquities, dances, and other aspects. In other passages, Belzoni praises the beauty and exuberance of the landscape in contrast with the confusion and dirty of the cities. When he describes the view of the pyramids from Cairo, he does not hide his ecstasy: "the distant view of the smaller pyramids on the south marked the extension of that vast capital; while the solemn, endless spectacle of the desert on the west inspired us with reverence for the all-powerful Creator" (Belzoni, 1820: 6).

After some months in Egypt, Belzoni has a closer contact with local people, first because of his hydraulic project, and after because of his work as an antiquarian. He says in his journal that it was very difficult to get used to the place and to deal with local people, an unpleasant experience that lasted until he could get a good acquaintance with them. Belzoni criticize their habits and describe many instances in which he had trouble with them, mainly with local leaders who tried to impede his work as antiquarian by threatening him with arms or physical aggression: "in a country where respect is paid only to the strongest, advantage will always be taken of the weak" (Belzoni, 1820: 47).

In his journal, Belzoni often compares European civilizations to the Egyptian, and tries to emphasize the benefits of the European presence in Egypt, suggesting a certain superiority of West over the East in relation to their attitude in negotiation and in relation to values such as honesty and friendship. The traveler considers the influence of Europe in Egypt as a positive one, mainly because it could bring technological and economic development to the region. Belzoni admired in the vice-king his openness to novelty and constant search for new technological possibilities: "the Bashaw seems to be well aware of the benefits that may be derived from his encouraging the arts of Europe in his country, and had already reaped some of the fruits of it" (Belzoni, 1820: 15).

When he narrates his difficulties in finding men who could work in his project of moving the bust of Memnon – Ramses II – from the Temple of Karnak, Belzoni expresses a great

disappointment with the Cacheff, the local leader that refused to offer his men to do the work. That was another event that Belzoni used to show that people in Egypt would deal with other people only with views to their own interest. He also reports exceptions, in the same way that among Europeans there are dishonest people. This comparison establishes a tacit rule: that Europeans in general are more civilized and honest than Egyptians. Another passage of the journal confirms this view, when Belzoni visits the Temple of Edfu, where he was very impressed by the magnificence of the temple, but disgusted with the condition it was reduced and with the huge quantity of rubbish left around it: according to him, the Arabs did not care at all about the beauty and antiquity of the temple:

The next day I made a cursory inspection of the temple in that town. It is much encumbered with rubbish, and only the portico of it is now to be seen; but the beautiful variety and fine shaped capitals of columns, as well as the zodiacal figures on the ceiling, announce that it was one of the principal temples of Egypt [...]; and it is a great pity that such beautiful edifices should be inhabited by dirty Arabs and their cattle. (Belzoni, 1820: 56)

If we consider questions and impressions contained in Belzoni's journal, it is possible to notice that the different peoples he had contact with were usually portrayed as immoral, rude and impolite when they eat, dance, or in any social behavior. They did not seem particularly intelligent or rational, except if they could take advantage of a given situation or person. In short, the Egyptians were represented according to the views of a European traveler and in relation to his European experience.

In contrast, Europeans were portrayed as a model of civilization, development and technology. The Orient was regarded as a strange world, and, as Edward Said says, the West often assumed the importance of a paternal authority in relation to the Orient. Regarded as morally and technologically advanced, the West was able to lead the Orient to the path of civilization and evolution (Said, 1990: 42). The presence of Western institutions and agents in the Orient were frequently justified as means to promote the development of Eastern peoples, implying that the West knew the Orient and what was good for Eastern peoples "better than they could possibly know themselves" (Said, 1990: 44).

If on the one hand Belzoni expresses his indignation with local culture and habits in Egypt, on the other hand he expresses wonder when he considers the material culture of Ancient Egypt: "Wherever the eyes turn, wherever the attention is fixed, every thing inspires respect and veneration [...]" (Belzoni, 1820: 35).

He was enchanted not only by temples and objects, but also by the exotic landscape of Egypt, which were portrayed in his journal with the colors of fascination. Belzoni's detailed descriptions of the wonders of Ancient Egypt and splendors of its nature designed the picture of an Egyptian glorious past, full of monuments and precious treasures. He selects and describes every admirable element, and searches for every evidence of the grandeur of a developed civilization.

Based on all sites, temples and pieces observed in his expeditions, and particularly after visiting one of the tombs of Hermopolis, Belzoni concludes that ancient Egyptians had been a glorious civilization. "From what I have seen of the tombs in these mountains, I am of opinion, that Hermopolis was inhabited by some great people, as nothing can give juster ideas of the condition of the Egyptians than the quality of the tombs in which they were buried" (Belzoni, 1820: 30).

As far as Belzoni gets involved in antiquarianism, he starts comparing the ancient Egyptian civilization to the modern Egyptians, and tries to understand how such a great civilization, which produced so many wonders, could have become that society he had in front of his eyes: uncivilized, immoral and absolutely careless in relation to the remains of its glorious past:

On the west side of the Nile, still the traveller finds himself among wonders. The temples of Gournou, Memnonium, and Medinet Aboo, attest the extent of the great city on this side. The unrivalled colossal figures in the plains of Thebes, the number of tombs excavated in the rocks [...], with their paintings, sculptures, mummies, sarcophagi, figures &c. are all objects worthy of the admiration of the traveller who will not fail to wonder how a nation, which was once so great as to erect these stupendous edifices, could so far fall into oblivion, that even their language and writing are totally unknown to us. (Belzoni, 1820: 38).

In another passage, Belzoni compares the modern and the ancient Egypt in order to establish the terms which define the superiority of the ancient:

On looking at an edifice of such magnitude, workmanship, and antiquity, inhabited by a half savage people, whose huts are stuck against it, not unlike wasps' nests and to contrast their filthy clothes with these sacred images, that once were so highly venerated, makes one strongly feel the difference between the ancient and modern state of Egypt (Belzoni, 1820: 57)

This passage seem to suggest a sort of affinity between the ancient Egypt and modern Europe: regardless the distance between them in terms of space and time, they would meet in their high level of development and grandeur. In Belzoni's discourse, the gap between that negative image of modern Egypt and the positive image of the ancient Egyptian civilization, described as advanced and glorious, is a sort of justification for the "civilizing mission" undertaken by the Europeans in relation to modern Egypt. This presence of the Europeans in Egypt is thus legitimated in Belzoni's discourse, as well as the spoliation of the antiquities of its ancient past.

It is possible to notice in Belzoni's narrative that one of the concerns of the author was to estimate the value of the pieces he found in his travels, praising the most valuable ones and suggesting that the better destination for them was definitely England. From this perspective, the British invasion of Egypt would have the meaning of a rescue mission, with the intent of preserving those antiquities from the action of time and oblivion – but only the

valuable pieces would be included in this plan. A clear example of this attitude is the evident enthusiasm of Belzoni when he finds the colossal bust of Ramses II – which he removed from its original place in Egypt and sent to the British Museum (where it is today): “As I entered these ruins, my first thought was to examine the colossal bust I had to take away. I found it near the remains of its body and chair, with its face upwards, and apparently smiling on me, at the thought of being taken to England” (Belzoni, 1820: 39). The passage suggests that those remains of a great culture would wish to reach their destiny – England, a nation capable of rescuing the voice of the past. Belzoni’s narrative represents the material culture of Ancient Egypt as a message from the past: a past that longs to speak, begging to be rescued and saved.

Belzoni also describes the way antiquarians – including himself – collected the selected artifacts, without much attention to their scientific value and without a particular technique to preserve the pieces or the sites in which they were found. It is not surprising, though: Archeology was not established as a discipline at the time. As Rosalie David says, the attitude of travelers has been criticized in historical and biographical research when compared to the attitude of scientists and archeologists who worked in Egypt later (David, 1999: 16). For David, such comparison is anachronistic: when Belzoni made his discoveries in Egypt, archeological studies in Europe were at the very beginning, so it would not be reasonable to expect that he could be trained in excavation techniques. Nevertheless, in David’s opinion Belzoni “was undeniably an inspired and prolific excavator and played an important role in the development of the field.” (David, 1999: 16).

Excavators often destroyed some pieces and damaged monuments in their attempt to remove the pieces they regarded as more valuable. Belzoni says in his journal that, in order to remove the bust of Ramses II, it was necessary to destroy some columns of the temple. Another interesting example is the way they treated the mummies found in the tombs they excavated: there was no particular attention to preserve them, and sometimes they were involuntarily destroyed by accident, sometimes they were deliberately broken to make way to the expedition, or were used like a pillow in the moments of rest.

According to the historian Moacir Elias Santos, Giovanni Belzoni lived in an epoch that is considered to be the “Age of Antiquarians”, when Archeology was in its beginnings. Such period was characterized by the search for ancient artifacts without any scientific interest, and, for this reason, there was no method or regular procedure to collect the artifacts, often damaging them. (Santos, 2012: 5). Even though, these antiquarians managed to collect and sell great collections of antiquities to European museums and private collections.

Egypt and the construction of the British national identity

From the passages of Belzoni's journal analyzed in the previous section, we can consider many issues related to the importance of European travelers and their narratives to the affirmation of national identities in 19th century Europe. The representation of the Orient in the discourse elaborated in travel journals and in the choice of material culture items brought to Europe often worked as instruments of cultural domination used by the new nation-states, regarded as more advanced in terms of knowledge and power (Junqueira, 2008: 13). The East is caught by the travelers' narratives; in other words, it is described and classified by a Western point of view, which is impregnated of intention and ideology. These narratives were later studied and represented in research works of Ethnology, Archeology, Anthropology and Philology. The Western scientific interest grew and promoted a significant development of new disciplines dedicated to the past.

We could say that the construction of modern European identities was based on the development of Archeology, since it allowed the representation of non-European peoples in a European form of representation of the "other" (Junqueira, 2008: 14). This is the context in which Egyptology flourishes during the 19th century as the specific study of Egyptian societies through their material culture and writings, which were at first found by antiquarians and then by archeologists. Like Archeology, Egyptology participated in the establishment of a discourse about the "other", since many Europeans were interested in Egypt at that time.

These considerations lead us to the ideas of Margarita Diaz-Andreu about the consolidation of Archeology as a professional science in Europe. According to her, the study of the past acquired a great importance in the constitution and affirmation of European nations with respect to their imperialist policies and nationalism. Many nations invested in the creation of a professional team of Archeologists in the 19th century; in the same period Archeology started to be taught as an academic discipline, and many museums were created to exhibit the antiquities which conveyed the idea of a dignified past to be represented by the new nations-states (Diaz-Andreu, 2001: 17). For Diaz-Andreu, those artifacts exhibited in museums reinforced the image of a civilized nation who was accomplishing its duty of rescuing other nations from their present state of backwardness, and thus justifying the colonial enterprise (Diaz-Andreu, 2001: 17).

The expansion of the British Empire and the invasion of Egypt in the 19th century favored the arrival of expeditions in Egypt with the objective of collecting antiquities to form the great European collections of Egyptian artifacts. This is the period in which excavations were intensified, but now with more scientific procedures. The understanding of this expansion and of the political interests involved in it allows a better understanding of the interactions between past and present elaborated in modernity, and its importance in the process of

making up the idea of a modern society in relation to ancient ones. It also reveals that the purposes of the expansionist enterprise were not limited to immediate political dominance, but also included ideological and cultural dominance. Thus, British policies for Egypt promoted the construction of the idea of inferiority of Egypt in modernity through a discourse about the “other” that worked as the background of a positive image of the British national character and a form of legitimation of British political actions abroad.

When Belzoni narrates and represents ancient and modern Egypt, he takes part in this process of construction of a European – and British – identity. He talks about “two Egypts”, which are presented to Europe in terms provided by Western ideologies and values. In first place he presents the Ancient Egypt, an exotic and magnificent place, full of monuments and of artifacts of a culture that drags the imagination to a distant past. Then he presents the Modern Egypt as a place inhabited by immoral and corrupted peoples – Arabs and Muslims, the antagonists in a narrative in which the West, portrayed as superior people, play the role of the protagonist. Belzoni justifies the European invasion of Egypt with the argument that this was an action capable of bringing Egypt to a state of civilization, preserving its glorious past in the collections of its material culture. Finally, he compares European new nations to Egyptian peoples, contributing to the institution of a national identity in contrast with the Egyptian one.

Despite Belzoni’s dazzle for the land of the pharaohs, for its antiquity and for the monumental splendors of its architecture, the traveler denies the value of its people in his time. He establishes a clear division between “us”, the civilized West, and “them”, the barbarian East, and by doing so reinforces the image of a European and a British identities. Belzoni did not describe Egypt as it was, but as he saw it: to use Edward Said’s words, he represented Egypt not as it really is, but in the way it was “Orientalized” (Said, 1999: 155). Besides, when Belzoni describes and detaches modern Egypt from its past, he also suggests an affinity between the ancient Egypt and modern Europe in terms of development and grandeur. This is the kind of reasoning that would reinforce the belief that the European nations were linked to the Egyptian past as heirs, more than modern Egypt would be. It is in this sense that the travelers’ discourse endorsed the deliberated spoliation of Egyptian material culture in the 19th century. From his part, Belzoni worked for Britain and helped to design and spread a positive image of a modern British identity: a civilized and advanced one, clearly distinct from the primitive Egyptian character.

Final Considerations

When we analyze some passages of Belzoni’s journal, it becomes clear that his discourse justifies the presence of European nations in Egypt, and first of all, the presence of England.

The traveler does so in two manners: first, in the way he describes Egyptian peoples as uncivilized, in contrast with an ideal superiority of European peoples. According to him, Europe had the mission of leading the Arabs to civilization and rescuing and preserving the Egyptian past. Belzoni's impressions of Egypt were impregnated of Orientalism, in the sense that his discourse creates and classifies the Orient to and for the West. His views of modern Egypt are conducted by the idea of its opposition to Europe, and work as a useful instance of comparison in which Europe is portrayed in a position of superiority. In this sense, Belzoni uses the Orient as an inverted mirror of the West, a counterpoint of the ideal of society that the European travelers expected for themselves.

Secondly, Belzoni justifies the European presence and action in Egypt in his interpretation of the material culture he finds there. He defines the value of the artifacts of ancient Egypt and praises them according to a particular purpose: their destination to England. He thus justifies not only the removal of precious antiquities, which were sent to Europe to enrich private collections and national museums, but also the spoliation of Oriental treasures by European invaders as a heritage claim.

This research made visible the fact that the practice of collecting antiquities of Ancient Egypt in the 19th century contributed to the construction of the idea of a cultural heritage, by which the great civilizations – Europe and the Ancient Egypt – would meet in their great achievements and in the superiority of their culture. Inversely, the same idea of cultural heritage detached Europe from modern Egypt, regarded as a savage land inhabited by Arabs and Muslims, unable to preserve the remains of its magnificent past.

Therefore, the construction of the past in Belzoni's work is closely related to recurrent ideas of the time in which he writes: considerations on race and ethnicity are present throughout his narrative. A critical reading of these questions requires the contextualization and deconstruction of prejudices rooted on 19th century European discourse, and also the consideration that such ideas were repeated and spread for a long time. Further to allowing a critical view of Ancient and Modern Egypt, this review of representations produced in the 19th century may be an important instrument for the current debates about racism and ethnicity, and also to allow a re-consideration of the Egyptian civilization in the African context, which is often left aside.

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