

Notes from the Field: Digging through a Revolution

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When I tell people that I am an archaeologist, many times their first response is to ask about my favorite type of dinosaur. After rectifying that misconception--explaining that I'm more like *Indiana Jones* than *Jurassic Park*--people ask where I have worked. Although I have worked in a number of places, the majority of my excavation experience comes from Egypt. When people hear that, most of the time they express their life-long dreams to go on an excavation in the Saharan desert, where they are certain gold, mummies, curses and fame await. The air of mystery and intrigue that surrounds Egypt is a result of the enduring majesty of the Great Pyramids of Giza, Howard Carter and his excavation of King Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922, and the more recent *Indiana Jones* movies, but the fervor of their sentiment is still apparent.

Archaeological excavation in Egypt is unlike most other excavation work done today throughout the world. In Egypt, there is still a sense of the Victorian mentality, where local workmen do the digging while out-of-country archaeologists stand over the site, dictating what to do next. It is an antiquated system, but one which is the lifeblood for many people, including both Egyptians and non-Egyptians. Some of the best archaeologists are the local workmen, whose communities have been looking at the different colors of these sands for generations. The non-Egyptians who work in Egypt call themselves Egyptologists rather than archaeologists who simply excavate in Egypt. Egyptologists tend to focus more on historical texts and leave the heavy lifting of actual archaeological fieldwork to the local workmen. An excavation in Egypt tends to be unlike any other excavation, which can be a jarring experience for those trained

in the American tradition.

Excavations in Egypt generally are hot experiences, where mountains of sand are tirelessly moved from one spot to another, with the hope of finding the next “King Tut” always on the minds of the principal excavator. The archaeological sites are set in grids and, through the sometimes mind-numbing tedium of the process of removing sand, each grid is individually excavated and its secrets are exposed. While brushing away the sand, conversations in broken English and Arabic happen and form connections between the local workmen and the non-Egyptian members of the team. Dreams, wishes, and experiences are passed from one person to another in these dialogues. Specific names for items in English or Arabic are swapped back and forth. Tea and food are shared. It is considered rude to be invited to breakfast with the workmen and not reciprocate and participate. I have spent many “second breakfasts” with the workmen laughing and trying various foods. Dancing and singing also occurs at the end of the meal, which brings smiles to everyone’s faces. I believe that these connections help strengthen and produce a productive work environment. If a cultural anthropologist were to study an archaeological dig, it would be an interesting ethnographic example unto itself.

Normally excavations are very predictable, with little deviation from expectations. A plan is made to excavate a tomb or a temple and sand is removed. At some point during the excavation season, people from the Supreme Council of Antiquities Department magically appear, everything is swept clean, and the progress of the work is assessed; but these visits, and the hoopla that they represent, are few and far between. Maps are drawn, artifacts are washed and recorded, and generally the site reveals its secrets. The world outside of the site does not really seem to exist during this time; everything beyond Luxor is veiled by sand and heat. But there have been a few times in my experience when the outside world has become

part of the excavation.

In December of 2010 I went to Egypt for a six-week archaeological season. Excavating in Egypt in December is vastly better than excavating in June or July, although, instead of intense heat, one has to deal with thousands of tourists. The site that I worked at was next to a busy road, and busloads of people would drive by on their way to the Valley of the Kings and stop to take pictures. One workman's specific job was to yell at the passing buses, "No photos! No photos!" He would make a huge fuss and look like he was very pissed off, but, as soon as the bus left, the man would turn around with the biggest grin on his face. Having your photo taken from the top of the road felt like being at a zoo, where I was the animal on display in my supposedly "natural" habitat of the dig. December 2010 had been a successful excavation season. The expedition had cleared the back portion of a temple, which had belonged to a female pharaoh during the Late Bronze Age (11th century BCE). The holiday season and the New Year had been celebrated with great pomp and circumstance. The atmosphere seemed jovial. None of the external people on the excavation realized what was to occur a mere two weeks after we left the site and country.

The Egyptian Revolution, which was part of what is often known as the Arab Spring, occurred in Egypt in late January of 2011. Some friends of mine, who had the ability to take a semester for the dig season and not just winter break, were in Egypt during the revolution. A few of them tried to leave the country, even though the Cairo Airport was closed, while others decided to stay. My colleagues in Cairo during the start of the revolution told stories of hearing gunfire at night, of fearing to leave their hotel rooms, and of the masses of people filling Tahrir Square. They finally managed to get out of Cairo after a few days waiting in the airport.

My colleagues who decided to stay in Egypt throughout the revolution were not in Cairo but in Luxor. More rural

and less cosmopolitan, Luxor is a community that is primarily dependent on tourism and on the agricultural fields that line both banks of the Nile. In Luxor, everyone seems to know everyone and want to help each other out. Case in point, when some people started to vandalize antiquities sites and tombs in Luxor, local people, many who work in the archaeological field, formed human barriers around important sites such as Deir el Bahri and the Luxor Museum. My colleagues in Luxor lost power a few times and saw many military tanks ride in from the desert roads, but not much more. President Mubarak was ousted in February, and by the next year things appeared to be somewhat back to normal in terms of expectations for our excavations.

Over a year later, I was in Egypt excavating in May and June of 2012. It was right before the first presidential election following Mubarak's ouster, and excitement was in the air. In Luxor people seemed anxious to get back to work and to get the local economy moving, as many expeditions had suspended work during the Arab Spring and in the subsequent months. I remember sitting with the workman discussing the presidential candidates: Mohammed Morsi and Ahmed Shafik. The first was a candidate of the Muslim Brotherhood and the second was the final prime minister under the deposed President Mubarak. Many of the workmen, who survived on meager wages, expressed that they wanted Morsi to win. Some shared that Morsi and his followers had handed out bags of rice. Some believed that Morsi was the man for the job; he was providing food and would bring prosperity. Other workmen were in favor of Shafik. They noted that he represented the old way and it seemed that some people did not want change. This discussion between who would win went back and forth. Several times throughout the workday a truck with young men hanging out of the windows and doors would drive by the site. Horns would honk, and loud speakers would reverberate with the chants of either Morsi or Shafik's campaigns. The truck

speakers and chants were incredibly loud, and sometimes the Egyptian workers would stop the digging and the endless path of going back and forth to the sand pile to join in with their support of the campaign. The workmen would also start chanting work songs, which otherwise were used to break up the monotony of the workday.

The day of the final election arrived. Many of the workmen came to work with an ink soaked index finger; one way the Egyptian government marked who had voted. These workmen had pride in their eyes; they had voted for the person they thought was right to lead their country. The expedition gave the workmen the next day off, as we were unsure what the atmosphere would be like following the results of the election. Everyone went back home after the election workday. Radios, chat rooms on the Internet, and televisions were all tuned in to the election results. As the sun went down behind the red mountains in the west, the first gunshots were heard. Caravans of trucks, bikes, cars, and motorcycles began to line the main drag of Luxor on the east side of the Nile, while small explosions of fireworks could be seen on the west bank. Gleeful shouts were heard. "Morsi, Morsi, Morsi," chants were broadcast on the speaker system that usually called people to prayer. Morsi had won, and many people were happy, but a few dissenters could be heard. As non-Egyptians, my team stayed in our rooms that night and hoped that things for our excavation would return to a more usual state in the coming months with the new government.

The next day was a workday and many of the workmen were overjoyed. A few of them came up to me to talk about it, saying, "Morsi win! Morsi win! Now it be good for Egypt!" One of the workmen, who had been working with American and British expeditions for years, said to me while we sat sweeping away the sand from what would be the mummified head of a two-thousand-year-old corpse, "This is good. Morsi will help make Egypt better. He brings food to our bellies.

Alhamdulillah!" I responded with the appropriate Alhamdulillah, and hoped that he was right.

I returned once again to Egypt during the summer of 2013. This summer the atmosphere felt different, and not just because it was 130°F. The excitement of the previous summer was gone. Rolling brown-outs occurred every day. A few days in row we were without power during the hottest part of the day. Long lines of cars, buses, and shared vans used to transport people in the dust-filled city sat patiently waiting for petrol for hours. Many donkey-pulled carts, filled with canisters for cooking gas, were interspersed amongst the cars and vans. There never seemed to be enough fuel for the city and its rural counterparts. Many of the workmen complained about the power outages and lack of money. We would hire about fifty men for the two-week excavation period and every morning there were new men waiting for us at the site, wanting a job. "Please I need job! I need to feed my family," they would shout. This sense of desperation could be felt throughout Luxor, where the levels of tourism were almost zero. Stores and restaurants were closing left and right in the more affluent part of the city next to all of the European hotels. It appeared that remaining non-Egyptians were getting ready to leave.

Things came to a peak one afternoon. It had been a relatively cool 115 °F during the morning, and many of the non-Egyptian expedition members decided to go swimming in the hotel pool, which sat in the Nile. As we cannonballed into the two meters of water to cool off and forget about the intense heat for a few minutes, a strong smell started to permeate the air. In Egypt, it is not uncommon to smell the rancid flames from burning trash or sugar cane. The smell on that hot June afternoon was different--more like burning rubber. We looked around to see where it was coming from and saw a tower of black smoke that appeared to be about one kilometer away. We did not find out what was on fire until we reached the room and turned on the television.

BBC World was broadcasting protests in Luxor against the newly-appointed governor of the area. The new governor, who had been given the job by President Morsi, was part of a political organization associated with the group thought to be behind the killing of 62 people--including both tourists and Egyptians--at the temple of Deir el Bahri in Luxor in 1997. It seemed that many people in Luxor did not want anyone associated with what was known locally as "The Incident" in charge of this region. The protestors set fire to tires in front of the governor's office, which sat on the bank of the Nile. Their protests were seen across the world that day. The non-Egyptian expedition members stayed away from the governor's residence and kept to the hotel. There was not a direct fear associated with this specific protest, but there was an urgency by the expedition to get the work done before anything else unexpected might occur. The excavation ended two days later, on the day that it was planned to end, and everyone left for vacation or the States. Three weeks later, in a military-orchestrated coup, President Morsi was ousted. A military government again came into power.

Those remaining days in the excavation season, before the coup, went on much the same as usual. The last days of a season are always hectic, trying to make sure that everything proposed at the beginning of the season has since been done. There was a slight tension in the air at the excavation site, but this was mostly the result of trying to get all of the work done before the season came to an end. The workmen dug away more sand, and the students and volunteers continued to gather, wash, and dry thousand-year-old ceramics. I ran around the site trying to collect as much data about the different mummy parts uncovered during the season as possible and making sure that the site had been properly recorded in photographs and on paper. The Arab Spring and subsequent political changes in Egypt affected the excavations in some ways, but, like a persistent plant, the excavation springs backs and survives.

Archaeological work perseveres in Egypt; new tombs are constantly being discovered, and known temples are recorded and conserved for future generations. It seems that as long as there is a thirst for knowledge about ancient Egypt, archaeological excavation will endure.