

On the Road to Cairo: Conducting Papyrus Conservation Courses in Egypt

ABSTRACT

In 2002 and 2003 I had the great fortune and honor of conducting papyrus conservation workshops and training in Egypt. The activities were sponsored by the Institute of Nautical Archaeology-Egypt (INA-Egypt) and were funded through grants from the U.S. Agency for International Development and American Research Center in Egypt. The workshops took place in Alexandria at the INA-Egypt's headquarters and in Cairo at the Egyptian Museum. It was a very moving and enlightening experience for me. I had the opportunity to train and interact with conservators and conservation department heads from across Egypt during two-week courses of instruction that covered practical concepts of papyrus conservation as well as basic paper conservation theory and practice. During my sojourn in Egypt I saw many great things such as the fantastic and newly opened Alexandria Library, archeological sites, and the Egyptian culture itself. This paper will briefly cover my experiences and impressions of working and traveling in Egypt.

INTRODUCTION

The myths and legends concerning ancient Egypt have been around for much of recorded time. The age-old lore of Egypt has been reflected in the splendor of its awe-inspiring treasures and its breathtaking ancient ritual sites. The Egyptians of the past used hieroglyphs on stone and papyrus to record for history their customs, acts of government, daily lives, great myths, and legends. It is from these important annals that archeologists from many lands have strived for centuries to unearth artifacts that would lead to a better and deeper understanding of humankind.

Papyrology has been an important area of research for Egyptologists. Papyrus artifacts can be found in major museums and research libraries throughout the world. The information gleaned from them is essential in drawing important conclusions and facts about the ancient Egyptians and their substantial influences in the world. Therefore, the care of papyrus artifacts is vital and important. A research organization that has recognized the importance of the proper care of papyrus manuscripts and artifacts is the Institute of Nautical Archaeology-Egypt. It was under its auspices that I conducted several conservation workshops for the care of papyrus manuscripts in Egypt at various times from June 2002 to May 2003. This paper will briefly relate my experiences in Egypt over that time period.

INSTITUTE OF NAUTICAL ARCHAEOLOGY-EGYPT

Dr. George F. Bass founded the Institute of Nautical Archaeology, or INA, in 1973. INA is a non-profit, scientific, and educational organization based at and affiliated with Texas A&M University. Its primary purpose is to conduct worldwide maritime research and preservation, which includes work in twenty nations on five continents. INA expanded its activities to Egypt and the Middle East in the early 1990s.

The coastline of Egypt and the area around the mouth of the Nile, where it empties into the Mediterranean Sea, are full of lost shipwrecks spanning thousands of years. They are buried in sand and silt, and require an acute sense of maritime archaeological expertise to uncover them. This is why INA-Egypt was formed at its base in Alexandria, which is approximately 225 kilometers northwest from Cairo, the capital of Egypt. Doug Halden has supervised the operations since its inception in Alexandria. Doug is assisted by Eric Nordgren and Shariff Shaban, both of whom are maritime archaeologists.

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Alexandria is an excellent location for the headquarters of any maritime archaeological activity. Its great harbor has had ships from all corners of the Mediterranean visit it for many centuries. Its historical influences include those of the ancient Egyptian and classical Greek and Roman civilizations. Old trade routes brought materials and goods from Persia, Central Asia, and the Far East streaming through the port. The harbor is currently being excavated by several international organizations that are trying to unlock its many secrets.

INA-EGYPT Papyrus Conservation Course

In the fall of 2001 INA-EGYPT produced a circular that appeared on a conservation list-serve Website. It asked for applications from conservators who had extensive expertise in the preservation of textiles, metals, and papyrus manuscripts to instruct two two-week conservation courses in Egypt. The first course would take place in Alexandria at the INA-EGYPT headquarters. The next session would be at the famed Egyptian Museum in Cairo. A third part of the activity involved returning again for several days to train the conservation staff at the Egyptian Museum on the use of newly purchased conservation equipment for the laboratory. The entire project was conducted with the support of Egypt's Supreme Council of the Antiquities. Funding was provided by the U.S. Agency for International Development and the American Research Center-EGYPT. From several candidates, I was fortunate enough to have been chosen to conduct the papyrus conservation portion of the courses.

Alexandria: The First Conservation Course

The first course was conducted from late June to early July 2002 in Alexandria. The compound at Alexandria is small and has just a few staff people, most of whom are Egyptian. Before I arrived I took several months to prepare the course material and order supplies for the course in Alexandria and the renovated conservation laboratory at the Egyptian Museum in Cairo.

The weather was extremely hot in Egypt upon my arrival. It was my first time ever in the country. The driver that was supposed to have met me at the crowded Cairo International Airport never showed up. After being unable to contact anyone at INA I was forced to take a taxi from Cairo to Alexandria. Negotiating a price for the ride was an adventure to say the least. I arrived at my hotel in Alexandria at midnight, after a ride of many long hours. The next morning I met Doug Halden in the lobby of my hotel, the Windsor Palace, which is a fantastic period establishment built in 1906 during British rule. I learned that my colleague, Elizabeth Peacock, who would be instructing the textile conservation course, was also having transportation problems and would arrive the next day. Elizabeth is a professor at the Institute of Archaeology-

Vilenskapsmuseum in Trondheim, Norway. She is an American who had traveled abroad to work in conservation. INA was unable to find someone to teach the metals conservation portion of the course. As a result, Eric Nordgren of INA, an archeologist specializing in that discipline, was to instruct the metals portion.

The participants in my group were composed of conservators and museum department heads from Egypt such as the Greco-Roman Museum in Alexandria and the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. There were ten participants in all. The vast majority of them could not speak English, and my Arabic comprised only two words. Mawar Said acted as an excellent translator for the course. Shariff Shaban, whose English is also very good, and who is Mawar's brother-in-law, monitored the course and helped to smooth over any complications.

My class was held in a small, air-conditioned building (thank God). Courses began on a Saturday and concluded for the week on a Wednesday. In the Middle East Thursday and Friday make up the weekend. Workdays usually started around 9:30 a.m. with a break at 11:30 a.m. The day ended at about 1:30 p.m. in the afternoon.

I determined before I arrived, and after getting a sense from Doug about the skill and knowledge level of the participants, that I would concentrate the first week of the course on basic paper conservation theory and practice, with some relevant hands-on activities toward the end of the week. This period included information about how paper and papyrus are made, their chemical compositions, and how they degrade. The course also reviewed practical exercises and protocols in examination, testing and analysis, and treatment of an object. We discussed how a treatment report is composed, and how to evaluate and regard its various elements. Also, we reviewed how to determine the condition of an object, and translate the information into practical, appropriate, and safe options for a treatment plan. We discussed collection condition surveys and standard photodocumentation techniques. At the end of the first week, and into the first couple of days of the following week, we discussed stain-reduction techniques and housing systems for papyrus manuscripts and fragments, common concerns with this sort of material. Here the participants had the opportunity to create various types of housing systems with material that we had on hand.

The next phase of the course involved leaning how papyrus sheets are made according to ancient Egyptian traditions. While I was planning the course I thought that this would be an invaluable piece of knowledge for the participants to acquire. I proposed the idea to Doug and asked if he could find someone at the Papyrus Institute in Cairo who could come up and teach that portion of the course. The Papyrus Institute has been in existence since the turn of the twentieth century and has done a lot of valuable research into the history of papyrus in Egypt. Doug agreed,



Fig. 1. Nassif Nagah (left) and Mawar Said (right) giving instruction on the making of papyrus sheets. Nassif gave the instructions in Arabic, and Mawar was kind enough to translate them into English for me.

and was fortunate to find someone at the Pharonic Village in Giza, on the outskirts of Cairo. The Pharonic Village is a theme park of sorts that centers on life in ancient Egypt. Nassif Nagah was kind enough to conduct the last several days of the course as he demonstrated to us how traditional papyrus is made (fig. 1). He brought along a VHF cassette tape program and slides that the Pharonic Village produced, which displayed papyrus sheet-making using traditional methods. Nassif also brought with him some papyrus plants that we used to make the papyrus sheets. Most members of the course had the opportunity to participate in one of the several papyrus sheet-making procedures. The papyrus sheet-making turned out to be very instructive to all, including myself. The courses concluded with a class photo (fig. 2) and a trip to the new National Library of Alexandria.

THE NATIONAL LIBRARY AT ALEXANDRIA

The Royal Library of the Ptolomies, which is often referred to as the Great Library of Alexandria, was founded around 300 B.C. during the rule of Egypt's King Ptolemy I, who sat on the throne from 305-282 B.C. Ptolemy was one of Alexander the Great's most important generals during his conquest of the known world at that time. It is Ptolemy who began the Greek rule of Egypt, which ended the Pharonic Period of native Egyptian rule of the empire that had lasted for thousands of years. Ptolemy wanted to establish a sort of "Library of Congress" in the ancient world where all the known knowledge of the universe written in Latin, Hebrew, Persian, Buddhist, and Egyptian would be gathered and translated into Greek. It would be one great depository for scholars from everywhere to visit and use the material. However, the Royal Library was destroyed during Roman



Fig. 2. The papyrus course participants and me (front row, third from right), posing for the camera. Some are holding papyrus stalks.

rule, its manuscripts lost through fire or taken away to Rome.

The Royal Library had its renaissance when it opened in October of 2002. It had not formally opened during the time of my visit in July, but it was still possible to visit the magnificent structure. The Library's construction was funded through support of UNESCO and its member nations. Various countries donated money, materials, and expertise such as granite from Zimbabwe, cables from South Africa, a conservation lab from Italy, audiovisual equipment from Japan, and furniture from Norway. A Norwegian architectural firm designed the building. The planning and construction took over ten years at a cost of over \$200 million. During excavation of the site ancient mosaics of Greek influence were found and recovered.

The exterior of the building is similar to a wedge of cheese in shape. It has a sloping glass roof that reflects the waters of the harbor before it. The complex, which includes a conference center and planetarium, covers 48,000 square yards. The outside walls are deeply etched with alphabets from ancient and modern civilizations.

The interior of the building is even more striking. The interior is very spacious with rising majestic columns that are reminiscent of those in a mosque (fig. 3). The light from the polished glass roof is very pleasant and relaxing. The library is equipped with the latest technology for computer and internet services, fire suppression systems, and climate control. There is enough shelving for four million volumes, but so far they have only 500,000 volumes planned for eventual shelving. Since acquisition funding is extremely low, most material is being donated from other countries.

During my visit to the library I found the exhibit spaces and materials there very well organized and displayed. The exhibit materials are centered around the past and immediate history of the country. I had the opportunity along

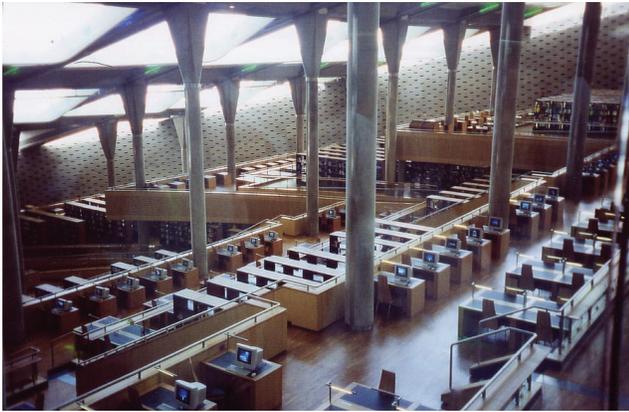


Fig. 3. Part of the very spacious interior of the Alexandria Library.

with my colleague, Elizabeth Peacock, to briefly visit the library's conservation lab. The lab was small and was staffed by three or four conservators, who mainly dealt with book conservation. No wet treatments were carried out at all. At the end of the day we said our goodbyes to all the participants in the courses, and we departed.

CAIRO: THE SECOND CONSERVATION COURSE CUT SHORT

I returned to Cairo in October of 2002 to conduct the second papyrus course at the Egyptian Museum. The museum was founded in 1835 by the Egyptian government. Its present building, designed by French architect Marcel Dourgnon in a neo-classical style, was erected in 1900. The building was undergoing renovation at the time of my visit. The collection holds over 120,000 objects from the prehistoric era to the Greco-Roman period. The museum has only about ten percent of the collection on display. The rest has remained stored in crates, most since the early 1920s when they were found.

The papyrus conservation course at the Egyptian Museum proceeded in the same manner as it had in Alexandria. The class size here was a bit smaller and was composed chiefly of the Egyptian Museum conservation staff. At the end of the first week of the course I received word that my mother had passed away at her home in Washington, DC. I was fortunate to find a seat on a flight the next day back to the United States. Shariff was working with me as translator for the course in Cairo, and since he closely monitored my course in Alexandria, it was no problem for him to instruct the remainder of the course.

EQUIPMENT TRAINING SESSION AT THE EGYPTIAN MUSEUM

I returned again to Cairo and the Egyptian Museum a second time in May of 2003. I found that the renovation of

the exterior walls had been completed, and the museum now had an auxiliary gallery space opened to the public. It was very high-tech and very well-designed, as opposed to the rest of the building, which has essentially remained the same since it was erected in 1900. In the rest of the building, the gallery spaces are hot and humid when packed with visitors. Air pollution from the outside also invades the spaces.

During a three-day period I trained the conservation staff on the operation and control of a MuseumServices-model suction table that had recently arrived (fig. 4). As before, Shariff provided the translation. The training was specifically aimed toward techniques for conserving papyrus. The techniques included approaches for cleaning, treating stains, and tape removal. I brought some blank sheets of papyrus for the participants to practice on, even though the only solvents that were available in the lab were some small containers of absolute ethanol and isopropyl alcohol that I brought with me. I thoroughly reviewed with them the proper protocols for safely handling and controlling solvent-based liquids. The staff quickly picked up how to operate and control the suction table, and they seemed to understand very well various treatment concepts.

In addition to the suction table, the conservation lab received a polarized light microscope, a digital camera, and a small water wash table for textile treatments. Elizabeth Peacock was there to train the staff on the use of the textile washing table and some preservation computer software. A company representative was scheduled to come in later and train the staff on the use of the microscope and camera.

At the end of the third day, my work at the Egyptian Museum was done. I learned after my departure that the suction table had become a showpiece for visitors to the lab. I'm sure that with continued experience the conservation staff will learn the intricacies of the suction table and



Fig. 4. Shariff Shaban (foreground) translating for me during the course of instruction at the Egyptian Museum. The museum's conservation staff is gathered around the newly acquired suction table in the conservation lab.

broaden their treatment options. Thus they will be better able to preserve the museum's papyrus collections.

CONCLUSIONS

I thoroughly enjoyed the time that I spent in Egypt teaching, learning, making new friends, and discovering a new country. The projects were very successful and I was happy that I was able to contribute in some small way to the field of conservation in Egypt. Hopefully, the course attendees gained some practical knowledge in the conservation of papyrus, and the Egyptian Museum conservation staff benefited greatly with the addition of a suction table and the training on how to use it.

It was through the great efforts and energies of INA-EGYPT that the projects were proposed, managed, and successfully completed. It was a very commendable task, and one that was sorely needed in Egypt. Unfortunately, INA-EGYPT closed its doors in December of 2003. The reasons are unknown to me, but I feel that it served a very worthy purpose in its research and educational activities. It will be deeply missed in the region.

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