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# **The National Museum of Egyptian Civilization: A Narrative Analysis of Nationalism**

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## **Abstract**

This thesis explores the narrative of the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization in Cairo and seeks to expose the underlying nationalist ideology of the Egyptian state. Through observations of the museums curated content, the thesis employs the tools of narrative analysis to uncover the specific conception of the nation that the state seeks to promote. Understanding the museum as an ideological state apparatus, the research seeks to demonstrate how museums utilize narratives of the past in order to achieve political goals of legitimacy and nation-building in the present. The research found that through the use of architecture, strategic locating of the museum, and deliberate curation of cultural and historical artifacts, the museum constructs a narrative of historical continuity, enduring sovereignty, and civilization glory. In addition, the museum constructs the nation of Egypt as Islamic, with origins in a glorious ancient past and the modern state as both the heir and steward to this history.

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## 1. Introduction

On April 3, 2021, the Egyptian government held a “lavish, multimillion dollar spectacle” known as the Golden Pharaoh’s Parade to facilitate the relocation of twenty-two royal mummies from the Egyptian Museum in Cairo to the newly opened National Museum of Egyptian Civilization (NMEC) (Hussein, 2021, para. 1). Loaded onto replica Pharaonic boats mounted on trucks, escorted by motorcade and horse-drawn carriages, the remains of eighteen kings and four queens were ceremonially received by President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi (Yetikyel, 2021). The event, both pageantry and political theatre, marked the official opening of a museum whose conception had been decades in the making.

The concept of a museum like the NMEC can be traced back to Egypt’s monarchical era under King Farouk; however, it was not until 1982 that an initiative between the Egyptian government and UNESCO to establish the NMEC was launched (State Information Service, 2023). Construction formally began in 2004, but political upheaval, such as the 2011 uprisings and the 2013 coup, delayed completion. The museum opened a temporary exhibition in 2017, before finally being inaugurated in April 2021.

The museum is one of its kind, as it seeks to display the entire span of Egyptian history in one space. Historically, Egyptian history was displayed in compartmentalized form, each historical era represented by its own museum or set of museums (Shaw, 2007, pp. 261-262), as well as curated under foreign control (Reid, 2002). Even after independence, museums often focused their exhibitions on specialized themes such as archaeology, biography, or specific topics, partially continuing the curatorial practices established during the colonial period. Attempts at comprehensive display of the Egyptian nation, such as a brief 1940s experiment (Wien, 2017), failed to fully materialize until the NMEC. It thus represents a rare opportunity for the Egyptian state to present its story of Egypt, on its own terms, to both citizens and the world.

For the Sisi regime, this opportunity clearly had political resonance, as can be seen from the state-sponsored pomp in which the museum was opened. In the wake of a revolution and a coup, and continued economic hardship, exacerbated

by a global pandemic, the NMEC offered a platform for reinforcing state legitimacy. It could serve as a symbolic stage on which to project a unifying vision of “Egyptianness,” rooted not in organic popular identity but in a state-crafted nationalist ideology.

National museums as tools of political storytelling are well recognized in the West (Aronsson & Elgenius, 2014), and increasingly in studies of non-Western authoritarian regimes, particularly in China and the Gulf (Erskine-Loftus, Hightower and Al-Mulla, 2018; Exell, 2016; Vickers, 2007). However, little has been done on the topic in Egypt. Partly this reflects its unique historical context in which it experienced a prolonged period of Western museological control, followed by domestic curation that often retained colonial habits. While scholarship has addressed Egypt’s colonial heritage in museums (Riggs, 2013; Zhu, 2024), the post-independence use of museums as vehicles for nationalist ideology remains under-analyzed.

Recognizing the political function of cultural institutions is essential to understanding regime endurance in the MENA region. While much scholarship emphasizes coercive institutions, museums can be seen as part of what Althusser termed *ideological state apparatuses* (ISAs), the non-coercive institutions that help secure consent through the shaping of dominant cultural values and perceptions (Althusser, 2001). In Gramsci’s terms, they exercise hegemony, selectively producing knowledge that legitimizes the ruling order (Gramsci, 1992). Choices about what objects are displayed, how they are framed, what histories are told, and even the spatial and architectural design, are all tools for constructing a desired national narrative. Understanding museums as ISAs means recognizing that these exhibitions are not neutral collections but carefully crafted narratives. These narratives organize history into stories that reflect and promote the state’s ideological priorities.

National museums tell stories, stories of the nation, what it means to belong, who belongs, and how the nation wishes to be viewed by others. This story takes the form of a narrative. Not only is there a narrator telling it, various characters, a setting, and a sequence of events, but these elements are brought together in a

way that conveys a particular understanding of the nation's story. As Homi Bhabha argues, the nation itself comes into being through such acts of narration; it is not merely a historical fact but something that is performed and made real through the telling and retelling of its story (Bhabha, 1990). Narrative is therefore a way of bringing the nation into being, whether as a personal understanding or a political conception shaped by state ideology.

The museum itself functions as an ideal space for the performance of such a narrative. Like reading a book, the visitor moves through a sequence of events, each "page" revealing selected elements of the nation's past. Interpretation is shaped by what is included (or excluded), as well as how the past is framed and arranged. The state, through the museum, constructs a narrative of the nation with the aim of ensuring visitors absorb the state's understanding of the nation. The power of narration lies in the authority to decide both what is shown and how it is shown, each choice shaping the way the story is read. In this sense, the museum's narrative is inherently ideological. Reading between the lines can reveal the ideological work embedded in the narrative's text. If the museum itself can be considered as performing a narrative, then the tools of narrative analysis can illuminate the ideological messages embedded in its exhibits, displays, spatial organization, and architecture.

The aim of the research is analyzing the narrative constructed by the NMEC and reveal how it reflects and reproduces the nationalist ideology of the Egyptian state. It will establish the story of Egypt being told and how it is told, unveiling the ideological constructions that bind it. Thus, this research will be guided by the following research question:

*How does the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization construct a narrative of the Egyptian nation through its curated content, spatial arrangement, and architecture to express and reinforce the state's nationalist ideology?*

Both recognizing the utility of museums in constructing narratives and shaping identities, and studying museums as active agents in this process, fall

within the scope of new museology. Emerging in the late 20th century as a critical response to traditional museum practices, the new museology challenges the idea of museums as mere repositories of objective knowledge or collections-focused institutions. Instead, it emphasizes museums as social and political actors that actively construct knowledge, which is fundamentally socially constructed rather than neutral or purely factual. Moreover, practitioners and scholars within this field have increasingly recognized that museums have expanded roles beyond education and preservation. In the context of Egypt and the NMEC, this expanded function is evident, where the museum is deliberately employed not merely as an educational institution but as a site for social engagement and political expression.

## **2. Literature Review**

This literature review will begin with a discussion of the new museology, discussing some of its core assumptions, and how it departs from the old museology. It will then go into the contributions of cultural theory to the field, discussing the influence of structuralism, post-structuralism, and the application of Foucault to the museum. Next, the review explores scholarship on museums and the display of nationalism, detailing the various mechanisms states utilize museums for to convey nationalist messages, with an emphasis on the role of narrative in articulating these messages. Finally, the review shifts its focus to Egypt, providing an overview of studies on nationalism in general and museums specifically, while identifying a gap in the literature concerning this topic within the Egyptian context.

### *2.1 The New Museology*

The concept of “new museology” was introduced by Peter Vergo, who described it as arising from dissatisfaction with the “old museology,” which focused on the “methods” of the museum rather than questioning the purpose and social function of museums (Vergo, 1989, p. 3). Eilean Hooper-Greenhill critiques this older approach, highlighting its critically unexamined assumptions on the rationality of

classification, fixed meaning of objects, and the stability of museum identity (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). She argues these are all, in fact, constructed and subject to change. In response to these critiques of the old museology, Vergo recognizes the need for a critical reexamination of the field of museology and presents his anthology *The New Museology* as an admittedly partial attempt to begin this process (Vergo, 1989).

Building on Vergo, Sharon Macdonald identifies three central calls to action for new museology. The first call, echoing Hooper-Greenhill, urges a shift toward viewing museum objects as “situated and contextual” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 2) rather than as inherently self-evident. The second call is to draw attention to topics previously considered outside the scope of museum studies, thereby broadening the field’s approach (Macdonald, 2006). Finally, the call for more research on visitors and the ways that exhibits and displays can be interpreted by those who view them.

Generally speaking, the issues with old museology and the calls to action coming from the new museology illustrate the general assumption that we can no longer see the museum as something static and unchanging, but as an institution that is both “contextual and contingent” (Macdonald, 2006, p. 3). At its core, the new museology is about applying new approaches to the museum, taking an interdisciplinary approach that draws on the ideas, theories, and methods from a variety of fields that, prior to the new museology, were seen as separated from the field of museum studies. Since Vergo’s writing, many have come to answer the call, applying a wide range of methods and approaching the museum from a diversity of disciplines.

## *2.2 Cultural Theory and the Museum*

While the new museology has grown into a broad field encompassing diverse approaches, this research specifically situates itself within cultural theory. Mason goes as far to call new museology “the name of the branch of museum studies” which deals specifically with the same issues as cultural theory (Mason, 2006, p. 23). The two most important contributions to the study of museums have been the

textual approach to the museum and the application of Foucault's ideas to understanding the museum. This section will go over the ways in which the museum has been analyzed as a text and the ways in which Foucault has been applied, as well as some responding critiques to the view.

### *2.2.1 The Museum as a Text*

The idea that the museum can be considered a text that can be read is grounded in the tradition of the structuralism and post-structuralism and the application of linguistic theory to various aspects of social life. This application gave rise to the study of semiotics, the study of signs. Semiotics seeks to understand how communication works by analyzing systems of signs, which consist of signifiers (spoken, written, or visual cues) and signifieds (the meanings or concepts they represent) (Mason, 2006, p. 18). Considering the museum at its most basic level is a repository of artifacts, or a building that holds a range of objects that are supposedly meaningful in some way, the theory of semiotics has been adopted as a useful approach to understand exactly how objects are given meaning in the context of the museum.

Susan Pearce's *Museums, Objects, and Collections: A Cultural Study* is an often-referenced example of the use of semiotics to analyze museum display (Pearce, 1992). Drawing on Saussure's and Barthes' concepts of "langue" and "parole," Pearce argues that museum objects participate in a wider, culturally shared "language" of material culture (langue), the structured system of associations and categories to which an object belongs in society. However, she emphasizes that once objects are selected and contextualized within the museum, their meaning can shift, as curatorial display and interpretation (parole) grant objects new or heightened significance, enabling them to participate in specific institutional narratives and ideologies.

Building on semiotic foundations, the museum can be further understood as a *narrative* text whose meaning arises not only from individual objects but from how these objects and other elements are arranged and interpreted within the exhibition space. This dual dimension is captured by the concepts of the

poetics and politics of display (Karp and Lavine, 1990; Lidchi, 1997). The poetics of display refers to the formal and semiotic strategies of organization, including how objects, lighting, labels, and spatial layout create layered meanings and shape the visitor's experience. In contrast, the politics of display highlights how these narrative constructions serve ideological functions, producing social knowledge that reflects and reinforces power relations, cultural identities, and historical perspectives. However, this approach to the museum as a narrative text does not apply the principles of narrative analysis.

Mieke Bal understands the museum as a narrative text and applies the principles of narrative analysis to its study. She positions narrative as the central organizing principle of the museum, applying narratology to decode how exhibitions tell stories with traditionally literary concepts such as protagonists, temporal structures, and focalization (Bal, 1996). This approach not only builds on semiotic analysis by interpreting the meaning of objects but also exposes the poetics of how meaning is arranged and the politics behind what messages are communicated, revealing the ideological work museums perform through their narratives. The approach to the museum as a narrative text allows for comparisons with other mediums that also employ the principles of narrative.

An example of this comes from Duncan and Wallach, who interpret the museum as a "script" enabling visitors to enact a particular ritual or performance (Duncan & Wallach, 1980). They theorize museums as theatrical stages where visitors take on roles as citizens or subjects, performing social meaning through their movement, engagement, and interpretation of displays. In this view, visitors are co-creators of meaning, shaped by the spatial choreography of the museum. Duncan explains in a later work that the visitor at the center of their analysis is more of a hypothetical concept, an "ideal" visitor best equipped to perform the script as it is laid out in the display (Duncan, 1990, p. 4).

Nonetheless, recognizing the visitor as essential to meaning making is key to understanding the museum's full narrative. Bal similarly stresses that the visitor, like a reader, is a necessary participant for an exhibition to exist at all (Bal, 1996, p. 4). As we will see in the next section, attending to how visitors

interpret the museum, and how the museum acts upon them, is central to studying museums through the lens of cultural theory.

### *2.2.2 The Disciplinary Museum*

Understanding the museum as a text allows us to “read” exhibitions and interpret their ideological content, but more is needed to grasp how the museum functions as an ideological institution. Cultural theory’s second main contribution to museum studies offers this framework. Applying Foucault’s theories clarifies how power is exercised through the museum. This section examines how his ideas have been applied to museum studies.

In *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, Hooper-Greenhill applies a Foucauldian approach to the museum arguing that the museum is an institution actively involved in producing and shaping knowledge itself (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992). Drawing on Foucault’s notion of “effective history,” she emphasizes that museum knowledge is historically specific, contingent, and embedded in power and knowledge formations rather than universal truths (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, pp. 9–11). She shows how the evolution of museums reflects shifting epistemes, the unconscious, productive frameworks that define and limit knowledge within each epoch (Hooper-Greenhill, 1992, p. 12). From this perspective, museums embody and reproduce the dominant episteme of their time, shaping what is accepted as valid knowledge or objective truth. Hooper-Greenhill thus sees the museum as a disciplinary institution, reflecting the functioning of institutions in the modern episteme. Her work laid the foundation for more nuanced Foucauldian analyses, including Tony Bennett’s applications to the museum.

Tony Bennett expanded Hooper-Greenhill’s Foucauldian analysis of the museum, seeing it as akin to a disciplinary institution but with key distinctions. He situates the museum within what he calls “the exhibitionary complex,” a set of institutions that, unlike Foucault’s disciplinary complex, which made subjects visible to power, makes power visible to subjects (Bennet, 1995). Through displaying objects in the museum, power is made visible to the people, allowing the people to identify with power, having a disciplinary effect on them. Museums

subtly shape social order by integrating visitors into the moral and ideological framework of the state, promoting a form of self-regulation via the experience of the museum. Bennett's concept thus broadens Hooper-Greenhill's Foucauldian analysis, recognizing the nuances of the museum as an institution. In this view, the museum is an instrument of power that disciplines through inclusion and identification, rather than exclusion and punishment.

In sum, the Foucauldian approach to museums, as developed by scholars such as Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Tony Bennett, fundamentally views the museum as an institution deeply embedded in dynamics of power and knowledge production. Museums produce, regulate, and discipline knowledge, often serving as instruments of state ideology and social control. From this perspective, museums operate as top-down sites where power shapes not only what knowledge is deemed legitimate but also how people are expected to behave and identify within social and political orders.

In contrast, the "contact zone" model by Clifford highlights the museum as a site of negotiation, conflict, and dialogue among multiple actors, rather than a unidirectional apparatus of power (Clifford, 1997). Clifford theorizes the museum as a contested space where identities, histories, and meanings are not passively imposed but are dynamically redefined through interactions among curators, source communities, and visitors. These relationships are often marked by inequality and historical asymmetries (Clifford, 1997). Rather than emphasizing top-down discipline, this model foregrounds "contact" and the possibility of resistance, stressing that museums are arenas in which cultural meanings and power relations are continuously negotiated and rearticulated. Despite its aspirations toward collaboration and dialogue, museums still reproduce colonial power asymmetries under the guise of intercultural exchange (Boast, 2011). He contends that many purportedly democratic "contact zones" function as subtle extensions of neocolonial control, masking ongoing appropriations and exclusions rather than dismantling them.

### *2.3 Nationalism in the Museum*

Whether as a contact zone or disciplinary institution, the national museum is a space where nationalist ideology has taken a foothold. It is an ideological institution that displays the state's nationalist ideology to shape people's conception of the nation. Museums do this through selective articulations of the past, shaping shared understandings that sustain the imagined community (Anderson, 1991; Ranger & Hobsbawm, 1993). The past is a contested but vital symbolic resource the state uses to legitimize present goals, especially in national museums that hold objects representing the nation's culture and heritage (Appadurai, 1981; Kaplan, 1996). The museum utilizes a wide range of techniques in performing nationalist ideology, from the exhibitions, objects, and collections to spatial arrangement and design of the museum's architecture. Central to all these techniques is narrative, as this is the medium in which these techniques take place and through which nationalist ideology is performed.

#### *2.3.1 The Mechanisms of Nationalism in Display*

The selective use and framing of the past to emphasize national unity, historical continuity, and political legitimacy is a common mechanism through which nationalist ideology is articulated. Vickers demonstrates how the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) draws on the pre-socialist past, designing museums and curating history in a way that emphasizes continuity with the first Republic of China and ancient Chinese civilization (Vickers, 2007). Mitter discusses a similar rearticulation of the past in the Beijing War of Resistance Museum, which reframes the fight against the Japanese invasion as a nationalist struggle and incorporates actors previously excluded from revolutionary narratives (Mitter, 2000). In both cases, Chinese museums exhibit a past that emphasizes nationalist credentials over socialist ones to legitimize the CCP's continued rule and economic reforms.

In Turkey, the state has selectively framed history in a way that emphasizes continuity with the Ottoman past, thereby providing political legitimacy to a neo-Ottoman nationalism (Posocco 2019; 2020; Hassan and

Posocco 2023). In Iraq, the ancient Mesopotamian past has been selectively framed to emphasize continuity with the Ba'athist regime to foster a sense of national unity under the Iraqi state (Baram, 1991). As these cases demonstrate, establishing historical continuity with the past is a crucial element in states' strategies of legitimation through the museum.

Nationalist ideology is additionally enacted through the museum by means of the materialization and objectification of the nation through displayed objects. Varutti argues that objects serve a metonymic function, standing in for the nation, as the Chinese government uses them to define national identity and present "evidence" of its unity, continuity, and borders (Varutti, 2014, p. 80). The objects come to materialize the nation, lending concrete form to otherwise abstract notions of national belonging. Similarly, Cassola, drawing on Pearce, analyzes the National Museum of Saudi Arabia to show how objects serve as signs that substantiate state-favored national narratives. These displays convey themes of a glorious past, historical continuity, and pride and reverence for Islam, embodying the ideological messages the state seeks to project (Cassola, 2016). In both cases, objects become central actors in the ideological work of museums, lending tangible authority to their narratives of nationhood.

Another way museums mediate and reinforce nationalist ideology is through new technological display methods, as they enhance the sensory and immersive quality of exhibitions and enable curators to structure and communicate national narratives more effectively. Bozkuş demonstrates how modern representational practices such as panorama design, dramatic paintings, multimedia panels, and sophisticated sound systems transform the 1453 Conquest Museum in Istanbul into a ritualized space (Bozkuş, 2014). The enhanced environment is designed to evoke emotional identification with the Ottoman-Islamic past, cultivating a new sense of Turkish identity aligned with the government's nationalist ideology.

Similarly, Denton examines the increasing reliance of Chinese museums on technologies like film, video installations, dioramas, and miniature models (Denton, 2005). He argues that this shift from displaying "authentic" artifacts to

immersive simulations and reconstructed scenes serves an ideological function, which is to undermine an earlier emphasis on revolutionary “truth and objectivity,” and instead adopt a form better suited to dramatize and emotionally charge national narratives (Denton, 2005, p. 577). These new display techniques are strategically deployed to elicit nationalist sentiment and to reflect, as Vickers and Mitter observe, the evolving priorities of the state’s nationalist project (Vickers, 2007; Mitter, 2000).

Museum architecture is another way in which the museum can communicate nationalist ideology. In China, the embracing of modernist architecture marks a departure from standard socialist narratives and signals China “joining with the world,” while in Turkey, the new exhibitionary practice was part and parcel of the museum's architecture (Denton, 2005; Bozkuş, 2014). The National Museum of Saudi Arabia’s architecture is meant to express the narratives in the museum, its grandness in size relating to the narrative of national greatness and the architectural references to Islam relating to the reverence of Islam within the museum (Cassola, 2016). Qatar has built its national museum in the shape of a desert rose, part of a greater campaign to turn this natural occurring desert stone into the symbol of the nation, a rallying point for the citizens to identify with, as well as a brand to sell the world (Bounia, 2019).

These cases demonstrate the vast tool box the museum provides to states in their pursuance of contemporary political goals. It is thus evident that the museum serves as an ideal medium for the dissemination of nationalist ideology. However, at the core of these strategies is narrative, and in these cases, narrative is taken as granted, instead of systematically examined.

### *2.3.2 Nationalist Narratives of the Nation in the Museum*

Regardless of the mechanism, all these functions contribute to the construction and communication of narratives of the nation. The selection and framing of historical periods, the symbolic deployment of objects, the immersive use of modern technologies, or the monumental statements of architecture are all fundamentally engaged in storytelling. They present coherent and structured

accounts of national identity, history, and belonging that guide visitor interpretation and emotional response.

Watson emphasizes that museums function similarly to historians in their narrative construction, asking crucial questions about which stories are told, how they are sequenced, who is positioned as protagonist, and what is omitted or marginalized (Watson, 2011). Museums imply the existence of the nation, whether they are explicitly pulling from the past to establish some kind of origin story for the nation, or just simply by virtue of displaying an object in a section labeled a particular period of time. They play an essential role in meaning making and the narrative they communicate have “a significant impact on how a particular society presents itself, perceives itself, and projects itself into the future” (Sitzia, 2023, p. 154).

The so called “walking tour” of the museum, the experience of moving through museum exhibitions is itself a narrative (Bal, 1996). It is a story that visitors walk through and physically experience, making abstract national ideologies tangible and personally meaningful. The narrative dimension of the museum experience, as demonstrated by the literature, demonstrates how museums do not simply display objects and provide information on them neutrally, they construct structured stories that culminate in particular understandings of the nation and what it means to be a part of it.

The narrative nature of museums, as spaces where stories about the nation are constructed, performed, and experienced, the analytical tools of narrative theory emerge as the most appropriate and revealing methodological approach for understanding how nationalist ideology is embedded in and transmitted through museum practice. Traditional approaches to museum analysis often focus on discourse, representation, or content analysis, but these miss the specifically narrative dimensions of how museums structure meaning through sequence, focalization, temporal organization, and spatial progression. Even in studies where the “narrative” is analyzed, it remains under operationalized and taken for granted, treated as simply an interpretation of the museum experience without

pointing out and analyzing the nuances of the narrative text that concretely reveal the ways in which the museum is constructing a story of the nation.

Narrative analysis, particularly drawing from the theories of Mieke Bal, allows for an analysis of the museum narrative that is holistic and complex, considering the wide range of practices and strategies in which museums construct meaning and placing them into a single theoretical framework. In addition, narrative analysis is well suited for examining the ideological dimensions of storytelling and can illuminate how the seemingly neutral organization of the museum can make specific arguments about national character, historical trajectory, and political legitimacy. Before expanding on the theoretical use of narrative tools, this literature review will first consider the context of nationalism in Egypt.

#### *2.4 Nationalism and National Identity in Egypt in the Sisi Era*

To understand the ideological narrative on display in the museum, this section reviews literature on Egyptian nationalism as articulated by the state, providing essential context for identifying the nationalist discourses embedded in the museum's narrative. It should be noted that Egyptian nationalism is a complex concept that consists of a variety of dimensions, each of which shifted in emphasis depending on the time period and the regime in power. As a nation at the crossroads of multiple civilizations, it can be said the Egypt is a nation with multiple identities, one local, based in its ancient history and geography, one regional, its Arab character, one religious, its Islamic character and finally, one also based on its geography in Africa, its African character (N. Rozsa, 2024). This complexity of identity can be seen in the history of Egyptian nationalism.

The modern state of Egypt was established after a military coup in 1952 by a group known as the Free Officers. As a result of this coup, the military officer Gamel Abdel Nasser would come to power, whose rule and ideology would be defined by Arab nationalism (Suleiman, 2008). The dominant nationalist ideology would remain Arab nationalism until the defeat of the 1967 war, where it would lose much of its credibility. It was after this defeat until the

present day that Islam played a much greater role in Egyptian nationalism. While Sadat and Mubarak would emphasize the Islamic character of Egypt (Musekamp, 2011), this trend of Islamic nationalism would peak with the election of Mohammad Morsi, and the Muslim Brotherhood. Not much more than a year later, Morsi would be deposed in a coup led by his Minister of Defense, Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, who would usher in a new era of Egyptian nationalist politics.

Initially, after the coup leading to the downfall of Morsi, the nationalism of the Sisi regime was akin to that of Nasser, as there existed an emphasis and comparisons to the 1952 Free Officers coup (van de Bildt, 2015). Over a decade into his rule, a more complex form of nationalism emerged under Sisi, centered on an increasing emphasis on Egypt's pharaonic past, which scholars and observers argue is being used to legitimize his regime and construct a distinctive national narrative (Anderson, 2021; 'Egypt's racial nationalism', 2023; Ibraheem, 2023; N. Rozsa, 2024; Setiyono, 2023).

Sisi is reportedly repositioning Egypt away from the Arab and Islamic world and attempting to cultivate a more uniquely Egyptian national identity (Setiyono, 2023). Through his crackdown and persecution of the Muslim Brotherhood, and friendlier relations with Israel, it is said that Sisi is reorienting Egyptian nationalism away from its traditional Arab and Islamic forms. Sisi's embrace of pharaonic nationalism is reflected in his celebration of ancient heritage, the construction of new museums like the GEM and NMEC and plans to incorporate hieroglyphics into the education system (Setiyono, 2023).

This embracing of Pharaonic identity by the Sisi regime has been argued to be a part of a greater strategy to transform Egypt into a so-called "Civilizational State," a term meant to differentiate Eastern societies from Western nation-states (Tüske, 2024). While an interesting concept, it is seemingly a repackaging of traditional nationalism under an emphasis on ancient civilizations, or nationalism resembling multiculturalism. Sisi's brand of nationalism has thus been described as neo-Pharaonism, a form of Egyptian nationalism popularized in the 1920s, however, one that failed to galvanize the average Egyptian the way Arab nationalism or Islamism could and thus, it

became a footnote in the history of Egyptian nationalism (Wood, 1998). That is, until the present day where we are seeing a resurgence of this articulation of Egyptian nationalism by the Sisi regime.

Sisi's nationalist ideology cannot be boiled down to its neo-Pharaonic tendencies alone. While the regime's banning of the Muslim Brotherhood and relations with Israel may suggest a step away from the Islamic world (Setiyono, 2023), the government has nonetheless embraced an Islamic identity. Sisi is a devout Muslim, and his personal history stands as a testament to that (Aziz, 2019). Additionally, he has even written on the importance of Islam in Middle Eastern society, in the context of establishing democracy (El Sisi, 2006).

In a study on translations from Egypt's National Center of Translation, one of the ideological narratives the researchers identified was an emphasis on Sufi Islam, which is seen as a more moderate form of Islam (Ali, 2024). This aligns with a core pillar of the regime's nationalism, that being opposition to the Muslim Brotherhood, whose interpretation of Islam is seen as a threat (Winter & Shiloah, 2019). Winter and Shiloah also identify a second pillar in the "new Egyptian" identity: the synthesis of a multi-layered identity incorporating all aspects of Egypt's past, pharaonic, Greco-Roman, Coptic, Islamic, Arabic, Mediterranean, and African (Winter and Shiloah, 2019, p. 67). The ideological narrative performed by the state in the museum reflects this broader conception of nationalism.

The literature shows that the nationalist ideology of Sisi entails further nuance. First, literature indicates that Sisi's brand of nationalism is heavily masculinized, depicting him and the military as the powerful and strong saviors of the dependent and feminized Egyptian nation (Naguib, 2020). In addition, there appears to be an attempt by the state to co-opt feminism and women as a way of legitimizing its rule without giving much back to these women (Zaki, 2015). While attempting to fashion itself as a pro-women, rights respecting regime, women are often depicted as responsible for the nation's ills as mothers, as there is a strong association of women with motherhood in the regime (Cappon, 2024).

Second to this issue of women are that of minority groups. As a so-called “civilization state” the regime is attempting to position itself as a guarantor of the rights of minorities, under the protection of a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural civilization, as is seen through its social initiatives involving dialogues among the various religious communities and the state (Tüske, 2024). In the analysis of translation, the narrative of Egypt as a refuge for religious minorities was identified (Ali, 2024). The multi-dimensional identity of the “new Egyptian” also includes the nation’s minority groups, the most explicitly stated being the Copts (Winter & Shiloah, 2019). Finally, there is a technology based component of the nationalism of the Sisi regime that is emphasized in the pursuit of various mega projects such as the New Administrative Capital, the GEM, and even plans for a nuclear reactor, and their positioning as achievements of the nation in nationalist discourse (Taha, 2020).

As can be seen from the various sources reviewed here, research on the nationalism of the Sisi regime is not exhaustive and the topic remains largely unexplored. However, with this review, we can establish a starting point of which to view the state's ideology, assisting in recognizing ideological narratives in the museum, while new narratives that remain unexplored. There is a significant gap in the literature about modern day Egyptian nationalism, and this research intends to assist in filling that gap by identifying the use of the museum to promote the nationalist ideology of the Sisi regime. While nationalism is an unexplored topic in contemporary Egyptian museums, Egypt’s museum have been a topic of study, primarily from the lens of the colonial legacy.

### *2.5 Museums in Egypt*

The gap in the study of modern day Egyptian nationalism extends to the arena of the museum. There are seemingly few studies relating to museums as grounds for promoting the nationalist ideology of the current Egyptian state, even as the nationalist value of mega projects such as the GEM are identified. Studies on museums tend to deal with different topics that precede the Sisi regime. In this section of the literature review, I will provide a quick overview of some of the

major relevant themes in the study of Egyptian museums. While this research will attempt to fill in a particular gap, this section of the literature review is heavily focused on informing the research.

One of the most discussed themes in the study of museums in Egypt is the effect colonialism had on the inception of Egyptian museums, and the extent to which the colonial legacy still impacts them. The history of museums in Egypt are deeply intertwined with the experience of colonialism from the West. Ever since Napoleon landed on the shores of Egypt and initiated a survey of its land and history the collection and display of Egyptian antiquities have been the realm of European colonialists (Reid, 2002). The Egyptian Museum in Tahrir, before its current placement, had several homes, however, regardless of its location, its purpose was always aimed at European tourists or residents, as “a stage on which to act out Europe’s command over the antiquities of Egypt” (Riggs, 2013, p. 66). While this museum is emblematic of the relationship the West had with museums in Egypt, it is certainly not limited to this single museum.

Nor is it related to physical institutions either, as Riggs points out, the impact of colonialism was also on the imaginations of Egypt (Riggs, 2013, p. 67). She argues that three interrelated tropes arose from this time and continue to have influence on Egypt museum practice today; “the superiority of European modernity, the disinterest of contemporary Egyptians in the ancient past, and the availability of the ancient Egyptian body for the European gaze” (Riggs, 2013, p. 68). Now, in an era where the Egyptian state is in control of its own museums, the museums still reflect the practices and ideology of the colonial era (Elshahed, 2014). The National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, while breaking away from previous traditions, is still not entirely free from some of the Western centric, colonial imagination of Egypt’s past.

While the colonial past weighs heavy on the museums of Egypt, there has been some research into the role they play in disseminating nationalism, albeit, not during Sisi and not a very extensive account of it. Zhu writes a very short article on the potential of museums in Egypt to play this role, and notes some concrete evidence that such a stance is beginning to be made, however, her article

is brief and does not include very in-depth research on the topic (Zhu, 2024). One researcher looks at the role of palace museums in Egypt and how they contributed to the development of Egyptian national identity (Ismail, 2019). The article is not an extensive academic study on the topic, however, its observations that these palace museums are seeing some new relevance under the Sisi regime could point to the regime's desire to incorporate all aspects of its identity in its nationalism. The most thorough demonstration of nationalism playing out in the museum in Egypt is the case of the Museum of Egyptian Civilization, not the one under examination here, but the first one.

In 1949, under the auspices of King Farouk, a museum dedicated to all aspects of Egyptian history would open. Like today's NMEC, it promoted themes of unity and continuity, extending Egypt's past to the Neolithic era and creating an unbroken timeline to the monarchy (Wien, 2017, pp. 80–83). It followed a so-called "founders' paradigm" portraying Mehmet Ali as founder of modern Egypt, who restored the nation's stature, despite later historiography emphasizing the continued Ottoman character of this period (Wien, 2017, p. 86). The museum celebrated agriculture, the Nile, and Egypt's status as an empire on par with the West, culminating with the monarchy as the pinnacle of Egyptian civilization. Wien notes that some of these narratives outlasted the museum itself; my research suggests the NMEC continues several of them today.

The final two themes I would like to touch on are both found within the museum and the research informed my interpretation of these topics as I encountered them in the museum. One study focuses on depictions of Alexandria in two museums, and the different narratives of the city presented, one colonialist in the Greco-Roman Museum and one nationalist, the National Museum of Alexandria (Chiti, 2018). Chiti argues that in both museums, there is a neglect of the experiences of the people of the city. As the analysis shows, Alexandria plays a prominent role in the Greco-Roman section of the museum. To what extent does the NMEC mirror these narratives or ignore the population will be discussed in greater terms of the museum's narrative.

Two other pieces dealing with the Coptic Museum in Cairo also present some relevant research as there is a section of the museum dedicated to Coptic Art. One article discusses the history of the museum and places it as unique within the museum environment of Egypt (Bakhoum, 2020), while the other discusses how the Coptic Museum in Cairo functions to place the Coptic population within the grand narrative of the nation (Levitt & Parrs, 2019). The way the museum deals with the Coptic population of Egypt is an important part of analyzing the grand narrative of the NMEC.

As demonstrated here, museums in Egypt are under analyzed in their use for nationalist means. However, what is still clear is that ideology still operates through them, even if only demonstrated by the colonial past or sparsely by succeeding post-colonial governments. In order to fully understand the ideological nature of the museum, it is useful to theorize them as ideological state institutions.

### **3. Theoretical Framework**

This section outlines the theoretical framework of the research. To begin, Gramsci and Althusser are utilized to theorize the museum as an ideological institution, one that exercises power hegemonically. Duncan is included to further demonstrate the ways in which the museum exercises this power. It then discusses the theories of Bal. First, it discusses her theory of narrative, laying the groundwork for the main analytical tools of this research. Then moves on to her theory of museums as a narrative text. Finally, this section provides a theoretical discussion of nationalism and how it is understood in the context of this research.

#### *3.1 The Museum as an Ideological Institution*

To understand the museum as an ideological institution, it is crucial to understand the way power is exercised more broadly. Gramsci's concept of hegemony is a useful starting point. He theorized that dominant social groups maintain power not only through coercion but through securing the "spontaneous consent" of the people to a worldview imposed by the dominant class (Gramsci,

1992, p. 12). Through their social position, the prestige it confers, and the trust it commands, they are able to use social and cultural institutions to promote their ideology for the consumption and acceptance of the subordinate classes.

Museums are an example of this kind of institution. They operate as sites where dominant narratives and values about nationhood, history, and “identity” are presented as natural, inevitable, and authoritative. Through their exhibitions, collections, and interpretive frameworks, museums shape public understandings of the past and present by selectively producing knowledge that reinforces dominant ideological positions. This process not only naturalizes specific versions of cultural memory and social order but also marginalizes alternative perspectives. Thus, Gramsci’s theory reveals how power can be wielded by non-coercive means, as reflected in the museum’s role as a site of knowledge production.

Althusser elaborates on this use of hegemonic power as it is practiced by the dominant group through institutions. Adopting Gramsci’s division of coercive and hegemonic power, he outlines two forms of state institutions that align with each conceptions of power; repressive state institutions (RSAs), which exercise power through force, and ideological state institutions (ISAs), which operate through ideological or hegemonic means (Althusser, 2001). Key to Althusser’s theory is how power is exercised *ideologically*.

Ideology has both an imaginary and material existence according to Althusser. It is the means through which people understand the world around them, it is not necessarily based in some kind of objective reality, and thus, is imaginary (Althusser, 2001, p. 109). However, ideology also requires a material existence, as it can only exist through institutions and their practices, which shape and sustain the ideas held by individuals (Althusser, 2001, pp. 112–114).

Althusser illustrates this with the example of religion, how an individual’s belief in God leads them to perform actions like attending church and praying, showing how the idea is shaped by the rituals prescribed by the institution, the church. With the nature of ideology defined here, we can now explore how ideology functions through institutions, specifically Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs).

Althusser explains that ideology functions through “interpellating individuals into subjects” (Althusser, 2001, p. 115), presenting social roles or identities to individuals as natural. The process is compared to the act of being recognized on the street by someone, the act of calling out “hey you” to someone turns them from an individual into a recognizable subject (Althusser, 2001, p. 117). This process is unconscious in that individuals are “always-already” subjects as ideology has already positioned them before they can question it (Althusser, 2001, p. 117). Ideology shapes our sense of self by interpellating us in social institutions and interactions, such as family, education, and in the current context, museums.

Museums act as ISAs through this process of interpellation, as they interpellate visitors, recognizing them as citizens or members of a national or international community. This is achieved through the curated displays, narratives, spatial arrangements, and rituals they organize. They call out to visitors by framing objects and stories that invite visitors to recognize themselves within the narrative and adopt certain national or cultural identities. Museums play a crucial role in making subjects through materializing ideology in the form of objects, narratives, and spaces that position them within nationalistic and cultural frameworks.

Carol Duncan’s theory of the museum as ritual illustrates the way in which museums function as spaces wielding ideological power. The museum functions as a ritual site by marking off a space and culturally designating it for special attention, creating a sense of liminality where visitors are disconnected from daily life and opened to new perspectives (Duncan, 1995, p. 20). This organization acts as a stage and script for visitors to enact a particular performance (Duncan, 1995, p. 20) which symbolically induct visitors into collective identities and dominant national narratives. The museum’s architectural grandeur, curated exhibitions, and visitor pathways are “material practices governed by material rituals” that instantiate ideology as a lived experience, actively interpellating visitors as subjects of the nation-state. Thus, Duncan’s theory extends Althusser by showing how museums materialize

ideology, making it tangible and experiential through body, space, and symbolic performance, thereby reinforcing dominant cultural and national identities.

This idea of the museum serving as a script for the performance of ideology in the museum is particularly amenable to a narrative analysis. As scripts are the basis of theater productions, which themselves tell stories. In the case of this research, the script is the story of the nation, and it can be analyzed through a narrative analysis.

### *3.2 Narratology: The Theory of Narrative*

Before understanding the museum as a space in which narrative is utilized to disseminate nationalist ideology, a general theory of narrative is required. This research utilizes the narratological tools of analysis laid out in Mieke Bal's work *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* and thus will operate on her theorization of narrative texts. At a basic level, a narrative text is one in which a subject tells an addressee a story through a medium, which can be anything from images to the written word (Bal, 2017, p. 5). From a narrative text, three layers for analysis can be distinguished; fabula, story, and text (Bal, 2017). This distinction is key to the theory of narrative texts. It should be noted that it is possible to analyze these layers separately, however, they are inherently intertwined, and the analysis of this research conducts an analysis reflecting that interdetermination.

To begin, the fabula is defined as "a series of logically and chronologically related events that are caused or experienced by actors" (Bal, 2017, p. 5), essentially the raw data in which the narrative is composed of. The fabula consists of elements, that is, the events, actors, time, and location. Events are simply a change of state. Actors are the entities, not necessarily human, who either cause this change or experience this change. Finally, fabula events take place within a certain time frame and occur in a particular location. Through the manipulation in the of these elements according to the logic of events, the story is constituted (Bal, 2017, p. 7).

The story is defined as “the content of that [the narrative text] [which] produces a particular manifestation, inflection, and “coloring” of a fabula” (Bal, 2017, p. 9). Stories consist of aspects, the various processes in which the fabula material is manipulated to convey a particular message (Bal, 2017, p. 7). One process relates to the sequence of fabula events and how they are arranged in the story, as they can be different in order, or significance which is reflected in the amount of time dedicated to an event. Second, is the process of turning actors into characters through the assigning of distinct traits. A similar process occurs with locations, which are assigned traits and transformed into places. Another process is the creation of relationships between elements in the fabula. The final process is the process of deciding from which perspective the story is told, which is known as focalization (Bal, 2017, p. 7).

The final layer of the narrative text is the text itself. Text is defined by Bal as “a finite, structured whole composed of signs” (Bal, 2017, p. 5). These signs can be “linguistic units, such as words and sentences” (Bal, 2017, p. 5), but can also include pictures, symbols, or even museum objects. As stated before, a narrative text includes an agent telling a story to a receiver. This teller of the story is called the narrator, who is defined as the one responsible for uttering or producing the signs that make up the text. The narrative text also contains fragments which are considered non-narrative, as they can be descriptive or a statement of an opinion or argument (Bal, 2017, p. 8). It should be noted that Bal approaches the medium of narratively very broadly, recognizing that narrative can be found in a wide range of mediums, not limited to written fiction. In her *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis*, it will be seen how she considers the museum as a narrative text.

### *3.3 The Museum as a Narrative Text*

To analyze the museum narrative, it is essential to theoretically establish the museum as a space where narrative can be read. Bal outlines how narrative can be read in the museum, making the argument that the museum is a medium in which stories and narratives are told (Bal, 1996). Furthermore, Bal’s theories of

the expository gesture and expository discourse help explain how museums assign meaning to objects and communicate narratives to visitors through a structured discourse.

Bal identifies exposition as the museum's defining discourse, composed of discursive acts she terms "gestures of exposing" which are realized through display and exhibition practices (Bal, 1996, p. 2). These gestures bring objects into focus by making them visible to the visitor, while silently asserting an interpretation of the objects by presenting them as truths or facts. In more theatrical terms, Bal sums up the first function as the exposition saying to the visitor "look!" and the second as it says to them "that's how it is" (Bal, 1996, p. 2). "Look" relates to the object's physical presence, while "that's how it is" speaks to the epistemic authority of the museum as "exposer" of the object. Connecting this to the theories in the previous section, the museum makes an ideological claim, and through its epistemic authority, the visitor is expected to take its claim as the truth.

The expository gesture establishes a subject/object dichotomy, where the subject, the museum, assumes the role of expositor, exercising epistemic authority, while the object is framed as evidence supporting the museum's narrative. As the addressee of this exposition, the visitor is positioned within this discourse to receive and respond to the claims made through the expository gesture. Consequently, the object is rendered silent, as the exposing subject comes to speak for the object through a "constative" statement, one that is both informing and affirming the object's meaning (Bal, 1996, p. 3). This statement is "apodeictic," meaning the act of display simultaneously makes an argument about the object and points to that object as evidence of the argument. Bal illustrates this discursive situation through a pronominal structure: an invisible "first person" makes a statement to a "second person" about a silent "third person," the displayed object (Bal, 1996, pp. 6–7).

The object or the "thing" acquires its meaning through this discursive situation. Its visibility, combined with its inability to speak for itself, enables the museum to impose an interpretation that may be incomplete, selective, or even

inaccurate. In this process, the object recedes into the background while the assigned statement comes to the fore. It ceases to be a mere “thing” and becomes a “sign,” standing for something determined by the exhibiting subject, it “comes to mean” (Bal, 1996, p. 4). The inability of the object to assign itself meaning, and the ability of the museum to give it meaning creates a gap between the physical presence of the object and the interpretation of the exposing subject. It is here where the narrative nature of the museum is exposed.

The discrepancy between the statement and object is filled in through narrative. The act of exposure impels the subject to “connect the ‘present’ of the objects to the ‘past’ of their making, functioning, and meaning” (Bal, 1996, p. 4). The exposing subject tells the visitor information about the object, contextualizing it, assigning meaning to it, and connecting it to ideas, values, and history. The subject thus connects the physical presence of the object in the museum, its present, to its history, how it was made or used, or the meaning it held in the past.

The museum is additionally narrative by virtue of the “necessarily sequential nature” of the museum experience (Bal, 1996, p. 4). The “walking tour” in which the visitor moves through the museum, connects the various aspects of the exhibitions into a wider narrative structure, similar to reading a book (Bal, 1996, p. 4). Museums are a particularly ideal medium for narratives to be told as they are spaces in which objects are put in order, explained, and “made readable” (Bal, 1996, p. 5). The museum undertakes this task through three “cultural habits” that assign objects their meaning: expository agency, realism, and vision (Bal, 1996, p. 8).

Expository agency refers to the expository subject engaged in the constative use of signs, which includes “constative language use, visual pointing (display in the narrow sense), alleging examples, laying out arguments on the basis of narrative, mapping, and laying bare” (Bal, 1996, p. 8). It is tied to subjects and power structures as only those who are vested with particular cultural authority can act expository agents capable of addressing an audience. The intentions of individuals such as curators are not equivalent to expository

agency, since the gesture of exposing is an “arch-cultural practice” that expresses a given community’s thoughts, feelings, and experiences (Bal, 1996, p. 8).

Alongside expository agency, realism reinforces the museum’s authority by presenting objects as transparent evidence of reality, both through their physical presence and through the act of display itself. This “effect of the real” shifts attention from meaning to the material presence of the object, a strategy historically tied to picturesque depictions of cultural otherness (Bal, 1996, p. 9). Bal connects this to vision, as controlling how objects are seen enables museums to direct interpretation and consolidate epistemic authority. The museum is thus able to present a particular vision along nationalist ideological lines. Now it is important to discuss what nationalist ideology looks like.

### *3.4 Nationalism as Ideology*

As this research looks at nationalism as it is performed in the museum, it is necessary to have a theoretical framework for recognizing nationalist articulations. This research utilizes the theory of nationalism and the nation of Sociologist Sinisa Malesevic, who conceptualizes nationalism as ideology. His theory of nationalism as ideology will then be used to understand the narrative of the NMEC.

For Malesevic, the nation and nationalism are historically contingent phenomena that are the product of modernity (Malesevic, 2006, p. 29). He identifies nationness as a historical process in which a geographical location is transformed into a “firmly demarcated, centrally organized” political unit that commands authority and loyalty among most of its inhabitants. Nationhood, thus, is an ideological construct maintained and reinforced by state institutions and the various actors and entities that comprise civil society. Nationalism is understood as the political ideology that shapes the conditions in which individuals and groups relate to the nation. In order to analyze nationalism as an ideology, Malesevic suggests a rehabilitation of the concept of ideology.

Malešević’s rehabilitation of ideology begins with a shift from a structure-centered approach to an agency-oriented theory. Ideology should not

only be understood as something imposed from above but also as a set of ideas and practices that individuals actively accept and participate in. He draws on Billig's 'banal nationalism,' to highlight how nationalism is constantly reinforced in routine social interaction (Malesevic 2006, p. 73). This agency-oriented theory recognizes the role of institutions in the formation and dissemination of ideology. Instead of fully determining the actions of individuals or groups, institutions are the platforms for ideological dissemination, and impose certain boundaries on agency (Malesevic 2006, p. 75). The museum is understood as one such institution that shapes people's behavior while simultaneously providing a space for active participation in and acceptance of the ideology promoted by the state.

The next part of his rehabilitation of ideology is to shift the focus of analysis to the content and form of ideology, as opposed to its function (2006, p. 75). His framework of analysis that achieves this is precisely what will be used to identify nationalist articulations in the museum. First, such an analysis must look at content related to the "conceptual organization of society," which he identifies as the economy, politics, culture, and the nation (Malesevic 2006, p. 75-76). Next, the analysis should look at the actors operating within the particular ideological narrative, how they are described, what images are associated with them, etc. (Malesevic 2006, p. 76). This type of analysis should also concentrate on the language and images and assess the types of appeal ideological texts contain. Finally, he points out that such an analysis would also need to look at how counter-ideologies are depicted and presented.

#### **4. Methodology**

This chapter will begin with a discussion of the ontological and epistemological position of the research, which is in line with research done relating to the new museology. It will then go on to give an overview of the research design, followed by a discussion on the methods of data collection and analysis. The chapter will end with a discussion on the positionality of the researcher, as well as the limitations of the study.

#### *4.1 Ontological and Epistemological Position*

Grounded in the field of new museology, this study adopts contemporary assumptions that guide the field's understanding of how museums produce knowledge. Robin Boast offers a clear synthesis of these assumptions, which will be outlined before demonstrating that they align most closely with the principles of social constructivism.

Boast points out that knowledge is "fundamentally relative" and that "the nature of reality is dependent on the perspective from which it is observed" (2011, p. 58). In museum research, this perspective on knowledge production is especially useful given the multiple actors involved and the diverse viewpoints of those who consume the museum's knowledge, i.e., visitors. He goes on to note that processes in which individuals come to know knowledge are fundamentally shaped by social processes. The exchange of ideas contributes to several ongoing and interconnected discourses, all embedded within complex and overlapping networks of relationships (Boast 2011, p. 58). In the context of the museum, the way visitors consume, the way curators curate, in general, the way the actors of the museum play their role are all embedded in their own social realities that shape what they interpret in the museum.

On the nature of "knowledge-claims" in the museum, he says that the "tak[e] the form of a narrative or story" that can be used to understand the objects in the museum (Boast 2011, p. 58). Knowledge presented in the museum is often presented as objective or truthful, however, it is important to remember that all knowledge laid out in the museums is presented through a particular narrative or story that does not reflect an objective reality. As Bal points out, museums utilize discourses of realism to create an air of authority, however, the narrative nature of museums remains (Bal, 1996). Finally, the knowledge of the museum is embodied in the objects on display and that engagement with these objects is necessary for the creation of knowledge (Boast 2011, p. 59).

The core assumptions discussed above firmly fall within the tradition of social constructivist ontology. Social constructivism is the idea that "social realities are constructed" (Pernecky, 2016). As seen above, the nature of reality in

the new museology is socially constructed, as it is based on the perspective from which it is viewed. This is also illustrated through the assumption that knowledge is relative and the way in which humans attain knowledge is itself a social process. Finally, it is through engagement with objects, or the material world which itself gives meaning to the material world.

The epistemological position of this research lies within the tradition of critical social theory. It is primarily concerned with ideology and hegemony, viewing the museum as a space where hegemonic actors display the ideology of nationalism. Power is understood as exercised not only through physical force but also through cultural institutions such as the museum (Denzin et al. 2023, p. 96-97). The focus is on how language and discourse wield ideological power, whether through textual displays or the discourse of exposition.

Culture, cultural institutions, and their interrelationships are examined to see how power operates through them. Considering the pedagogical nature of museums, this research examines knowledge production and how it shapes ideological conceptions of the nation. Finally, it follows the critical hermeneutic tradition that rejects a single interpretation of the world (Denzin et al. 2023, p. 99). Considering the research of this thesis is highly interpretive, the data analysis being my own interpretation through a particular theoretical framework, it is important to recognize that there are many other ways this museum could be approached and interpreted, and many different findings that could come from it.

#### *4.2 Research Design*

For this research, a qualitative approach was adopted to understand the way in which nationalism is articulated through narrative in the NMEC. The NMEC was chosen for its uniqueness in the Egyptian Museum scene. Egypt has plenty of museums relating to Ancient Egypt, to Islam, to the military, etc., however, this is the only museum in which “all” eras of Egyptian history are presented. Through the inclusion of Egyptian history as a whole, the story of the nation takes shape in a way that could not be gathered from a museum with a focus on a particular point in time. It should also be noted that the scope of this research is related to

the museum as an institution of ideological production and will not analyze the experience of the visitor.

Having a single museum under the scope of examination, this research is a case study. The decision to make this a case study is partly for the reason mentioned above, the uniqueness of this museum in the Egyptian museum scene. However, it was also chosen for more practical reasons relating to the nature of my research question. One of the most appealing reasons for the use of the case study is the holistic approach that it allows the research to employ (Denscombe 1998, p. 56). A holistic approach is particularly useful in the context of the museum as there are many different techniques employed in the museum to create the final product. The ability to include most if not all these aspects into an analysis provides a thicker answer to the research question.

#### *4.3 Data Collection*

The primary method of data collection was fieldwork. Observation of the museum and its various exhibitions took place over the span of six visits in March 2025. The bulk of the data is in the form of photographs taken during these visits, as well as hand-written notes. Below I will discuss the experience of the fieldwork further.

Unlike the Egyptian Museum at Tahrir, the NMEC is situated outside of the center of the city, in the old Islamic capital of Egypt, al-Fustat. It is not easily accessible on foot or public transportation and would require a taxi or Uber. As a student, the price for my ticket was 250 Egyptian pounds, as opposed to the regular five hundred Egyptian pounds for the average tourist. Of course, both prices are considerably higher than the local ticket, at 45 and 90 Egyptian pounds for students and regulars, respectively. While on the surface the local tickets are much cheaper than the tickets for foreigners, they are still relatively out of reach for much of the Egyptian population. Upon passing the first round of security, I entered an open plaza, with a few trees but not much else other than the other visitors and occasionally a museum employee dressed in “ancient Egyptian” dress offering pictures to tourists and other visitors. I took pictures of the

museums outside architecture then made my way to the entrance of the museum where I would be faced with my second round of security.

After this second round of security, you enter the reception hall. My usual routine after this point was to make my way to the onsite café for a note taking session to prepare for a day of observation. On my first visit I took notes on the information available to me about the museum beforehand. The primary source of this information was a phone application they designed specifically for this museum. On the application, they provided a kind of preview of the exhibit as well as an exhibit map. I took note of the various aspects of the museum they emphasized in preparation for what I was about to observe. Next to the cafe is an outdoor balcony area of some sort in which you can walk down and see the view of the park (a park inaccessible to the public) and Ain El-Sira Lake. From this balcony, one can get glimpses of the Egyptian heritage sites that it is said the museum is in good position to view. Most people took their pictures and went back inside. As I did.

The museum consists of two major exhibition halls, the textile hall and the main exhibition. During fieldwork, I collected data from the textile hall but upon reviewing the data and conducting the analysis, I opted to focus on the main exhibit. Aside from concerns on the practicality of including all exhibits, the textile hall did not add much in the way of analysis. It primarily reinforced the narrative displayed in the main exhibit hall.

Approaching the main exhibit, you are faced with an arrow pointing you in the direction of the “proper” starting point of the museum. Typically, one would start the museum visit here, as security guards will even point you in the right direction. In my research I would take both routes through the museum but going backwards in time is discouraged.

My first trip to the museum was primarily for getting some first impressions for my research. This was the first time I approached the museum, not as a visitor, but as a researcher and I used this first day to get used to this new lens. As I walked through the museum I took an abundance of pictures, of each display case, of the spatial layout of the display cases together, the supposed

route through the museum, and the architecture of the museum from various angles. I would take notes as I went through, trying my best not to obstruct the experience of other visitors, every so often leaving the path of the museum to take a seat near one of the four TV-adorned pillars of the main exhibit hall. Of course, I would take those opportunities to film the TV screens as further data collection. Scattered throughout the museum are various attempts at providing a multimedia experience for the visitor. I would take full advantage of these additions as a source of data.

The application was the main non-traditional display technique that I would utilize. Several of the display cases, but not all of them, had a QR code that you could scan and get more information on particular artifacts. I would scan every case and make note of these especially marked cases, while at the same time, the app awards points that build up to a free museum ticket. Another new exhibition technique that I attempted to utilize was another kind of QR code, one that would send you to the reels function of Instagram where you could point it at various artifacts and the app would “reconstruct” the artifact. I was utterly unable to get this function to work and abandoned this early on, however, I did take note of which displays had it.

The museum also utilized a series of various screen-based display techniques. Some cases had small tablets that would provide extra information about a display, usually technical information like how a water clock works or the system of weights and measures that would be utilized by the ancient Egyptians. Dispersed throughout the museum, there were seven interactive information tablet kiosks, five in the main exhibit, one in the textile exhibit, and one in the reception hall with information about the museum's various facilities. Data was collected from all these interactive panels.

After going through the main exhibit, there is a hallway that leads to the Royal Mummies Exhibit. This exhibit tends to be the final stop on the museum visit, as it was for me, although there were times I started with them. Photography in this exhibit was strictly forbidden. When walking through I had to rely on my handwritten notes exclusively. Even taking out my phone would rouse the

suspensions of the security guards. There were twenty-two mummies, each displayed with their own information plaque that noted their most important achievements, their name, the years of their rule, etc. I took handwritten notes about each plaque, taking note of the most important aspects as I was not able to copy every single plaque. I established themes and trends among the plaques and took observation notes of the exhibits' architecture.

To summarize: this research relies primarily on data collected at and within the museum, i.e., pictures of the exhibits, architecture, and surrounding location and environment, as well as thorough field notes based on observations taken at the museum. In addition, online information from official government sources relating to the museum were gathered as supplemental to the data gathered onsite. One final note: all pictures contained within this thesis were taken by me.

#### *4.4 Data Analysis*

The primary means of analysis is through the utilization of the tools of narrative analysis as laid out in Mieke Bal's *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative* and *Double Exposures: The Subject of Cultural Analysis* (Bal, 1996, 2017). In addition, the framework for analyzing the form and content of ideology as laid out by Sinisia Malesevic is utilized to recognize articulations of nationalist ideology in the museum's narrative (Malesevic, 2006). The analysis is organized based on a combination of a priori and a posteriori themes.

It begins with a strictly narratological analysis of the "voice" of the museum, establishing the state as the narrator, expository agent, and focalizer of the museum's narrative. Next, the internal and external architecture of the museum is analyzed, followed by an analysis of the museum's location. The bulk of the analysis is divided by six themes, along with sub themes, which made themselves apparent through the collection of data and preliminary analysis of the main exhibit hall. These themes are as follows:

1. Historical Continuity
2. Civilizational Greatness: The Pharaonic Past

3. Civilizational Greatness: Islamic Civilization
4. Gender
5. Diversity and Multiculturalism
6. The State and the Ruler

Each of these themes arose out of the application of the theoretical tools outlined in the theory section of this research.

The various tools provided by Mieke Bal helped show how narrative is technically and practically used to construct a particular state sponsored view of the Egyptian nation. As noted in the theoretical framework, analysis of narrative texts into three overarching but interrelated levels of analysis; text, story, and fabula (Bal 2017). These layers of the text are not analyzed as individual layers but are consistently applied in concert to understand the narrative, as they are constantly interacting and dividing the analysis on these lines would create too rigid an analysis. Alongside the tools of narrative analysis, the content and form of the nationalist ideology being portrayed through the narrative is considered through Malesevic's framework of nationalist ideology.

#### *4.5 Positionality, Reflexivity*

The history of museums in Egypt are inextricably linked with the history of colonialism in the MENA region, and more so, ancient Egypt has a special place in the Western and colonial imagination (Reid, 2002). As a Western researcher, understanding this relationship between Egypt and the West is crucial in producing ethical and reflexive research on this topic. Egypt, in the eyes of the West, has long been equated with its ancient civilization while the other parts of its history have brushed off to the side and not given the same kind of attention. The Arabs, Egypt's non-ancient inhabitants and Islam, the dominant religion of the non-ancient society were often left out of consideration and at worst, were seen as active impediments to understanding this long past civilization. Ancient Egyptian civilization was often appropriated in the colonial imagination as part of the rise of Western civilization.

I believe it is important to attempt to separate Egypt and the West in this narrative. Egypt has a long, diverse, and fascinating history that comes at the crossroads of many of the world's great civilizations. Modern Egypt is the sum of these parts, each one leaving an important impact that should not be discounted for the other. Egypt's ancient past is just as important as its Islamic past and both are just as important as its present. This research is an attempt to understand at least part of the story of how the nation of Egypt sees itself and Egyptianness. While a state led project, it should be important to note that for the first time, Egypt is telling its story, the whole story, to the world.

Understanding Europe's epistemological position in the study of Egypt is essential to my reflexivity as a researcher, yet it represents only part of my positionality. Bal emphasizes the researchers role in the discursive act of exposition, warning that in cultural studies there is a risk of "missing the subject", focusing solely on the subject of study, forgetting to consider their own position in the argument of exposing (Bal, 1996, p. 7). If the museum is exposing artifacts through their display, my attempt to photograph, describe, and critique their use is all an act of exposition. My academic analysis is itself a form of exposing, embedded in discourse and inherently non-neutral. I am an active agent shaping the subject through my speech act. While my interpretation is only one among many possible readings of the museum, applying narrative analysis that attends to all aspects of the exhibition lends it empirical grounding.

## **5. Findings and Analysis**

To analyze the narrative of the NMEC and the nationalist ideology displayed through it, the tools of narratology and discourse of exposition are employed. The first section establishes the state as the narrator, expository agent, and focalizer of the museum's narrative. This is followed by an analysis of the architecture and location of the museum and what they contribute to the narrative of the museum. Finally, the main exhibition of the NMEC is analyzed, identifying six themes that the narrative of the museum consists of.

### *5.1 Establishing the Narrator, the Expository Agent, and the Focalizer*

The NMEC is a state project. One funded by state institutions (National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, 2023b), directed by a board composed almost entirely of current and former government officials (National Museum of Egyptian Civilization, 2023a), and documented as a Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities project in collaboration with UNESCO (UNESCO, n.d.). Created and curated within the state's cultural and political framework, the state thus simultaneously holds the roles of narrator, expository agency, and focalizer.

As narrator, the state is the one that organizes the story's content and delivers it to an audience in a way that naturalizes the state's vision of the nation. As expository agent, it performs Bal's apo-deictic gesture through its showing, describing, and making arguments about objects, thus directing attention within, and shaping interpretation of the narrative. Finally, as the focalizer, the state is narrating the story of Egypt from its own perspective, which shapes the way the visitors understand the story. By simultaneously holding all three of these roles, the state controls both the content, as well of the framing and perspective of the nation's narrative, which ensures that visitors are guided through an experience that reaffirms the state's ideological vision.

The ideological function of the museum comes to the fore through this control of content and perspective as the state interpellates visitors as subjects in the story of the nation. Through total control of the structure of the museum's narrative, the museum visit is structured as a ritual which inducts visitors into identifying with the nation being presented. In addition, this control allows for alignment with the state's ideology through framing the conceptual organization of society on its terms.

### *5.2 Architecture, Space, and the Narrative*

Duncan observes that museums in Europe were often built to resemble Greek or Roman temples, reflecting the context these museums were established (Duncan, 1990, p. 9). By drawing from Europe's perceived ancient glory, these monumental or temple-like structures for exhibiting the nation prepare the visitor

for performing the ritual of the museum. The NMEC was constructed in a similar fashion, as its design frames the visitors' experience as a ritual of national belonging, drawing on the symbolism of its Pharaonic past. The crowning pyramid, its sandstone coloring, vast entrance plaza all evoke connection to ancient Egyptian civilization (Fig. 1). Inside the museum, the main exhibit hall is constructed in a way that resembles an ancient Egyptian temple complex, with especially high ceilings, seemingly propped up by massive pillars, and crowned with an inverted pyramid (Fig. 2).

The architecture of the main exhibit hall structures the "walking tour" (Bal, 1996) of the museum, guiding the visitor through a state-scripted narrative of the nation's past. Floor markings on the ground near the exhibit entrance explicitly guide the visitor in which direction they should begin the experience. Green arrows indicate the "correct" path to take, while red marking indicate the wrong direction (Fig. 3). From here on, the visitor walks through each era of Egyptian history in this order, which are also lightly guided by arrows on the ground: the prehistoric/predynastic, Dynastic or Pharaonic, Greco-Roman, the "Coptic," the Islamic, and modern eras. As Bal notes, place in a narrative is bound to the point of perception; here, the NMEC itself is that fixed point, shaping how the visitor perceives the "place" of Egypt (Bal, 2017).

At the center of the main exhibition hall lies the Royal Mummies Hall, spatially outside the main chronological flow, yet symbolically central. Like the external architecture and the design of the main exhibition hall, the Royal Mummies Hall explicitly draws the Pharaonic past in that it was specifically designed to simulate the experience of walking through an ancient Egyptian tomb (State Information Service, 2021). Visitors navigate dark halls, connecting a series of rooms, each having one or multiple mummies on display, along with a plaque noting their most well-known achievements. As such, it is the most explicitly ritualized space of the museum. Considering the position of this hall in the center of the whole museum, the museum serves a similar purpose to a pyramid, a new resting place for these kings. It becomes a monument to

authority, materializing an ideological conception of political power, one that glorifies centralized rule.

The NMEC's architecture blends Pharaonic symbolism with contemporary modernist design principles. Modernist architecture can be defined by the principle that form follows function, meaning that a building's design is shaped by its intended use (Johnson, 2016). The architecture's "emphasis on spatial clarity and functional circulation" reflects this principle, illustrated by the organization of the museum's various facilities and grounds "around a central atrium" which serves as a visual focal point and orientational hub, connecting the main galleries and service areas through a coherent radial layout (The Editors of the Madain Project, 2025). The museum's "subdued" and "rectilinear" design which utilizes "local materials and muted color palettes" allows it to blend in more appropriately with its surroundings (The Editors of the Madain Project, 2025). Thus, the museum's architecture physically and symbolically bridges Egypt's historical legacy with its contemporary identity.

Utilization of a museum's architecture in order to visualize the nation constructed by the state is common and has been observed in the Middle East (Alraouf, 2016; Bounia, 2019; Mozaffari, 2007). In the case of the NMEC, the architectural synthesis of the past and present makes a statement about the nation. It indicates that the modern Egyptian state is not a break from the past but its rightful heir and custodian, naturalizing the state's claim to continuity. Ancient symbolism evokes a sense of timelessness and continued cultural greatness, while modernist elements suggest progress, functionality, and active stewardship. In conjunction, they communicate a narrative of historical continuity, connecting the glory of Egypt's Pharaonic civilization, to the contemporary nation-state. The past is thus a foundation for the present, framed and curated so visitors perceive Egypt's historical depth alongside its ongoing legacy and evolving identity.



FIGURE 1: OUTSIDE VIEW OF THE NMEC

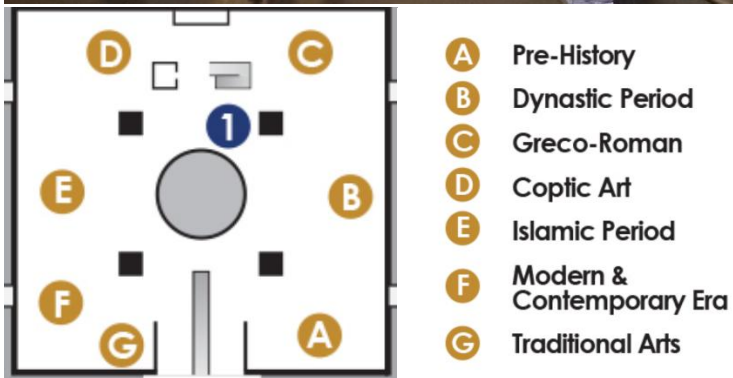
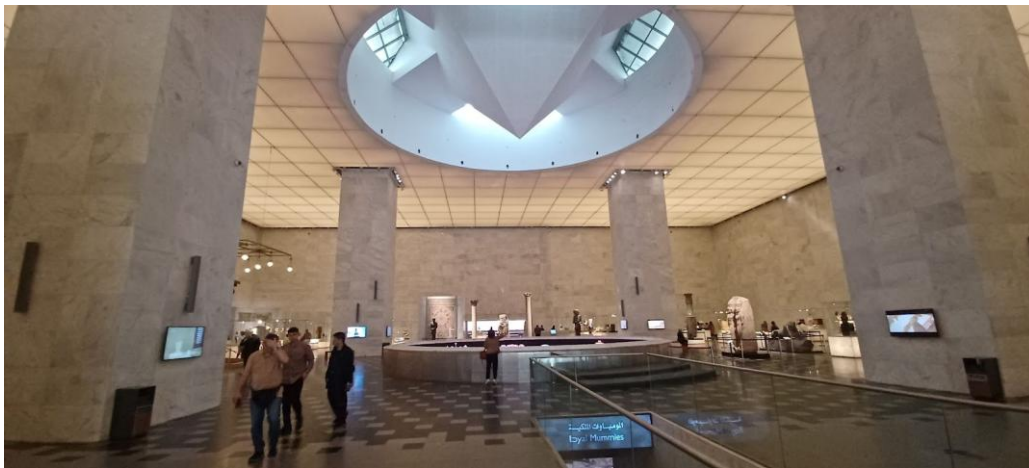


FIGURE 2: THE MAIN EXHIBITION HALL AND EXHIBITION MAP FROM PAMPHLET



FIGURE 3: ENTRY TO THE MAIN EXHIBIT

### 5.3 Location

The NMEC is in al-Fustat, Cairo, which was the first Islamic capital in Africa, established by the Rashidun Caliphate (Moniem, 2005). This location operates narratively through Bal's expository gesture in that it both "shows" and "tells" visitors a foundational narrative about Egypt's history (Bal, 1996), that of its Islamic past. While the space and architecture emphasize the Pharaonic past, its placement in al-Fustat actively foregrounds the state's vision as central to Islamic civilization. However, al-Fustat also embodies Egypt's broader historical layers as it houses historic mosques, Christian and Jewish sites, a Roman fort, and links to Egypt's prehistoric and Pharaonic history, materializing Egypt's status as a crossroads of civilization.

Through this location, where one can witness all aspects of Egypt's history, the state scripts a myth of continuity and coexistence. The visibility of Christian, Islamic, and Roman historical sites act as evidence in an expository argument that asserts Egyptian society has always been tolerant and pluralistic. The former director of the museum has even explicitly stated that the choice of location was meant to demonstrate the tolerance of Egyptian society for all cultures (Moniem, 2005). Thus, the location performs focalization, positioning visitors interpret Egypt's past along the lines of the state's stated multiculturalism and tolerance. It interpellates visitors as subjects of a tolerant and diverse nation, or as witnesses to its endurance. Thus, the location is not just a physical site, but

an ideological moment which embeds the state's narrative into the visitor's point of view before they even enter the museum.

#### *5.4 The Main Exhibition*

The main exhibition of the NMEC is a single room, in which the visitor walks through a chronological retelling of the nation's history. The beginning of the museum starts with the prehistoric and predynastic era, which quickly shifts to the Dynastic era. The museum then presents a large array of different objects from the Pharaonic period before it enters a brief section regarding the Greco-Roman period. Embedded between the previous section and the Islamic section is one dedicated to "Coptic Art." After the Islamic section, the museum ends with a so called "modern/traditional" section of the museum (Fig. 2). The analysis of the narrative of this part of the museum revealed six major themes.

##### *5.4.1 Historical Continuity*

The museum's narrative of historical continuity rests on two main strategies. First, it situates the modern Egyptian state within a deep temporal framework, extending its origins to the distant past. Second, it selectively frames historical events to minimize periods of foreign domination and emphasize Egypt's enduring independence and agency. While eras of conquest are acknowledged, they are often downplayed or presented in ways that underscore the resilience and autonomy of the Egyptian people and state. As will be shown, a combination of narrative strategies are employed to naturalize the Egyptian nation as timeless and sovereign, key elements in the state's nationalist ideology.

The museum's walking tour begins with the prehistoric and predynastic eras of Egypt's history, introduced by two information panels. The prehistory panel acts as the narrative's opening fabula event, marking the transition from a state of nature to use of tools; the first act toward civilization. This narration is supported by the apo-deictic gesture: the panel explains that stone tools and human remains demonstrate continuous human presence in this region, and this assertion is materially anchored in the display case containing the Nazlet skeleton

(“the second oldest skeleton found in Egypt”) and associated artifacts (Fig. 4-5). Positioned together, text and object function as an expository argument that presents these remains as incontrovertible proof of national antiquity.

The expository argument goes a step further and constructs these prehistoric humans as “Egyptian” folding them into the *national* story. Implicitly, the act of putting them on display in the NMEC makes a claim to their Egyptianness, to include them is to say, “they are Egyptian.” However, the placards explicitly construct them as such, describing the users of these neolithic tools as “ancient Egyptians” who lived “2 million years ago” (Fig. 5). This expository act serves to naturalize and legitimize the idea that the land of Egypt has always been inhabited by Egyptians. It situates the origin of Egypt and by extension, the modern Egyptian nation-state, in deep prehistory, asserting an unbroken continuity and ancient legitimacy, reinforcing a central tenet of nationalist ideology.

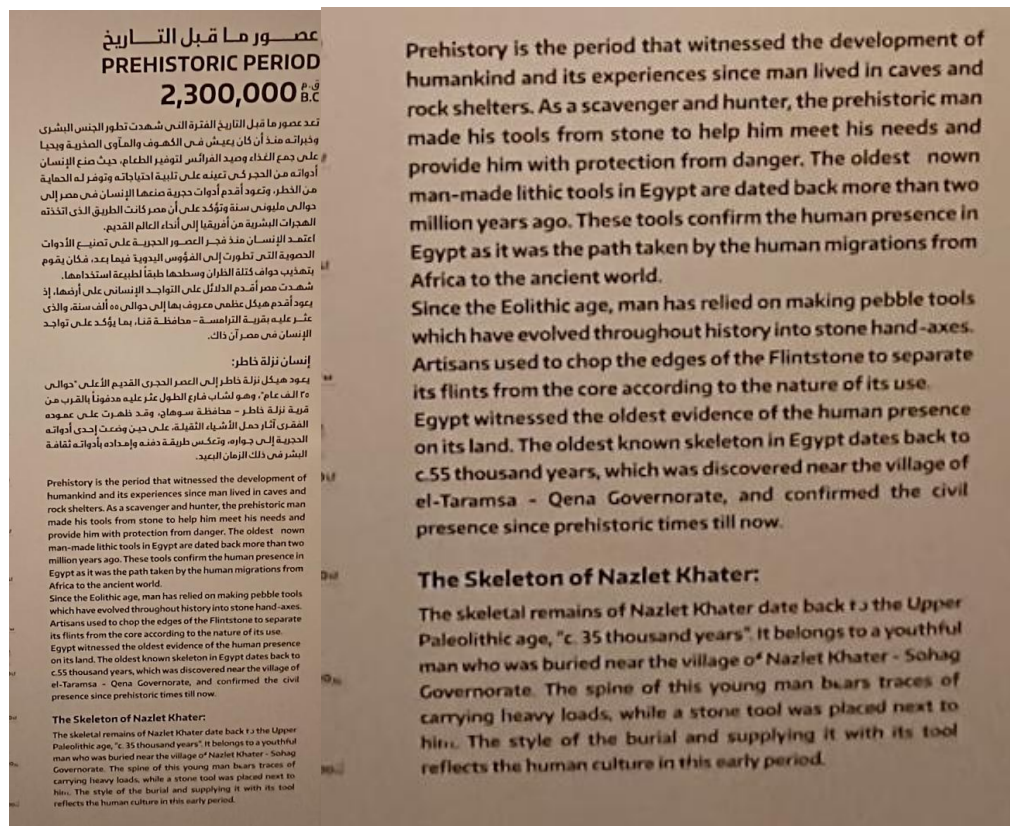


FIGURE 4: PREHISTORY INFORMATION PLACARD

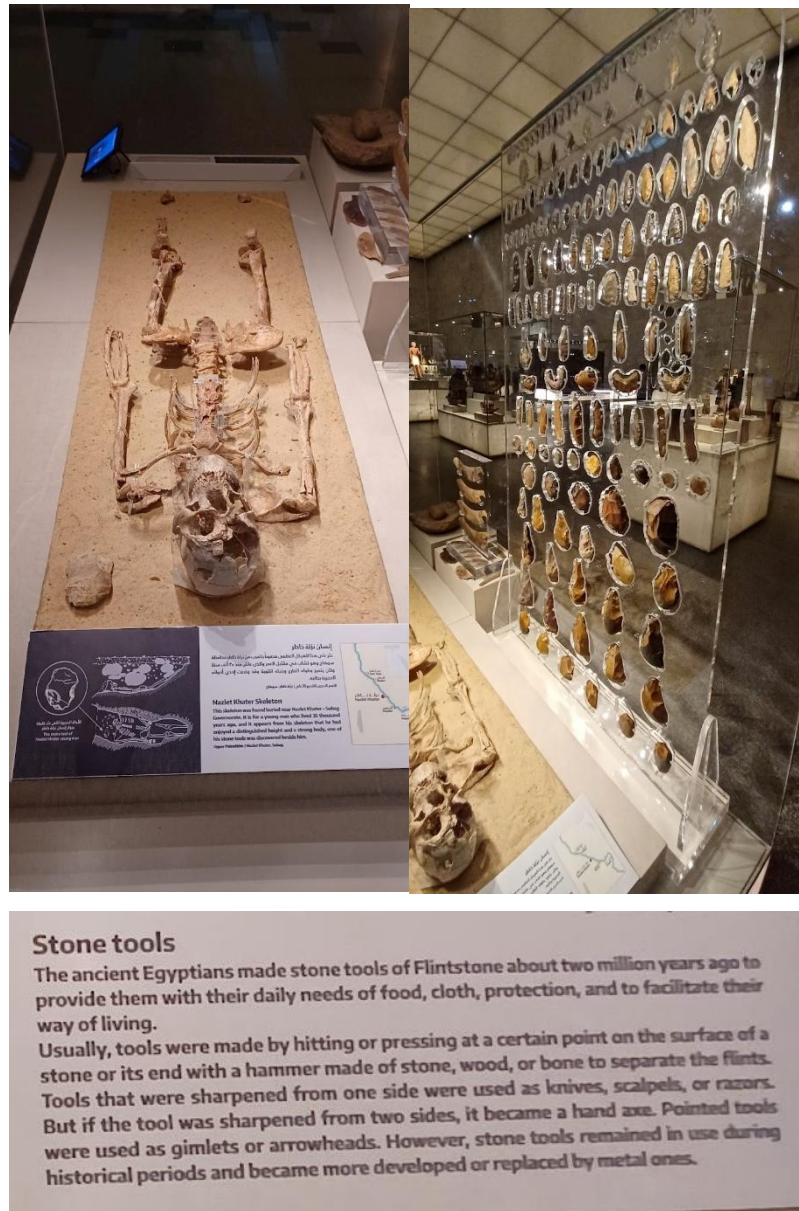


FIGURE 5: NAZLET SKELETON AND STONE TOOLS DISPLAY

Another way the museum constructs historical continuity is by selectively displaying and framing fabula events, manipulating what Bal calls the *rhythm* of the story, the patterning of attention and emphasis within the narrative (Bal, 2017). Two narrative strategies are deployed in the manipulation of the rhythm: *summary*, (condensing events), and *ellipsis* (omitting them). These devices guide visitors' focus on events that highlight Egypt's agency and independence, while

minimizing interruptions to this image, aligning perception with the state's nationalist vision.

The Dynastic Period information panel illustrates the use of summarization to downplay breaks in Egypt's independence. For example, the Second Intermediate Period is euphemistically summarized as a time when Egypt was “subject to Asian migrations” (Fig. 6), referencing the Anatolian Hyksos invasion. Similarly, the Third Intermediate Period is summarized as a period in which Egypt was invaded by “people of the Libyan Desert, the Upper Nubia, and Assyria” (Fig. 6). These invasions brought foreign control and dynasties recognized in academic chronology (Lloyd, 2010). As an expository gesture, the timeline frames these events within a nationalist narrative of continuity, reinforced through realism. The tone of scholarly reporting produces an “effect of the real” that obscures the selectivity of its account and presents it as objective historical truth. This condensation and reframing of fabula events casts foreign domination as peripheral, supporting the nationalist image of an unbroken dynastic sovereignty.

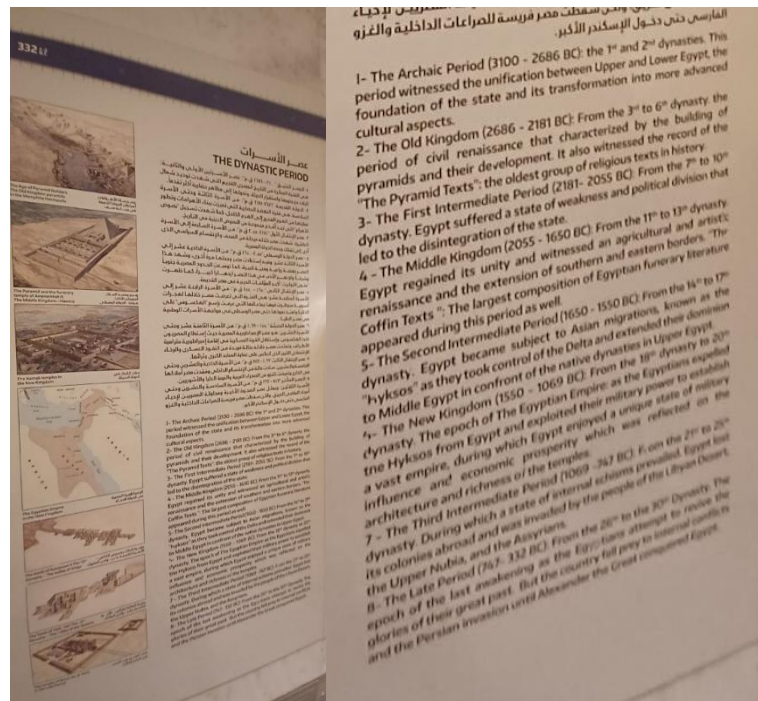


FIGURE 6: THE DYNASTIC PERIOD INFORMATION PLACARD

The narrative contains a notable ellipsis between the Pharaonic and Greco-Roman periods, omitting the Persian period as a *fabula* event. Bal notes that ellipses cannot be explicitly perceived in a story but can be logically inferred from the narrative structure (Bal, 2017, p. 91). The Persian period is mentioned only twice: first, the Dynastic Egypt panel (Fig. 6) alludes to a Persian invasion ending with Alexander the Great's conquest; second, in a Ptolemaic Period kiosk stating that Alexander liberated Egypt from Persian rule (Fig. 7). Thus, Persian occupation is referenced without specifying its duration, effectively creating an unmarked temporal gap. This omission minimizes tensions in continuity by smoothing over a historical period of foreign domination that contrasts with the museum's ideological focus on Egyptian independence and agency, thereby maintaining a seamless narrative transition from Pharaonic to Hellenistic Egypt that reinforces a national story of unbroken sovereignty.

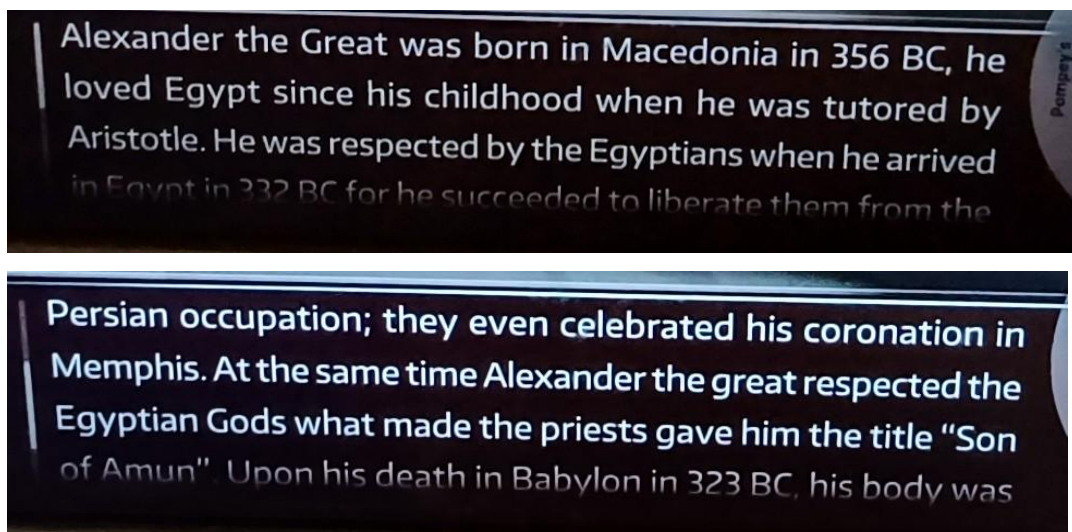


FIGURE 7: ALEXANDER THE GREAT SLIDE ON GRECO-ROMAN INFORMATION KIOSK

The conquest of Egypt by Alexander the Great in the *fabula* signals an ideological shift in the narrative from emphasis on independence to agency. Although Alexander the Great's conquest of Egypt entailed the end of independent Egyptian kingdoms, the museum's narrative presents it as an event shaped by the will of the Egyptian people. One way in which this is done relates to how Alexander the Great is constructed as a character in the narrative.

As Bal notes, characters are actors endowed with anthropomorphic form and “specifying features the narrator tells us about” (Bal, 2017, p. 104). In the NMEC’s account, Alexander is the actor responsible for the fabula event of Egypt’s incorporation into Hellenistic civilization. However, rather than being depicted solely as a conqueror, he is endowed with the traits of a liberator who respected Egyptian traditions and gained the people’s approval (Fig. 7). This characterization reframes conquest as a consensual transition, preserving the appearance of Egyptian agency within the broader narrative of historical continuity.

Egyptian agency during the Greco-Roman period is further emphasized in the museum’s narrative by foregrounding Alexandria—and Egypt as a place—as central actors. Whereas the Pharaonic displays center ancient Egyptians, the Greco-Roman section shifts to credit most cultural and historical achievements to Egypt and Alexandria, despite acknowledging rulers like Alexander and Ptolemy I. For instance, the information panel states that Egypt “witnessed critical transformations,” and Alexandria “became... a prominent center of science, arts, and culture” (Fig. 8), with architecture, industry, and agriculture all flourishing. Notably, the narrative downplays mention of Alexandria’s Greek foundation, instead presenting it as inherently and continuously Egyptian.

This strategy relies on the visitor’s “frame of reference” (Bal, 2017, p. 108), encouraging an understanding of Alexandria’s present Egyptian identity while minimizing its Greek origins. Alexandria is one of Egypt’s most famous and in the present is distinctly Egyptian. The expository gesture points to this section as the history of Alexandria, the *Egyptian* city, not the Greek one. By centering Alexandria as an Egyptian city, the museum subtly reinforces a sense of uninterrupted national continuity, reframing even multicultural or foreign-founded legacies as essentially Egyptian.

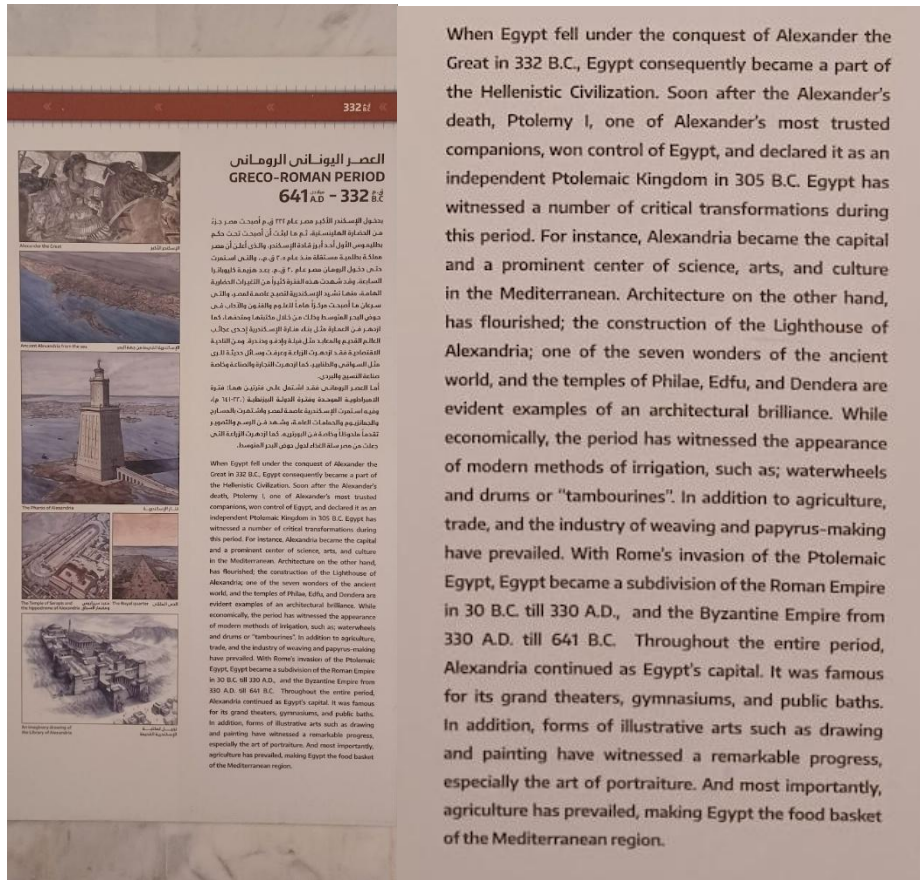


FIGURE 8: GRECO-ROMAN PERIOD INFORMATION PLAQUE

Similarly to Alexander's conquest, the Arab conquests are reframed to emphasize Egyptian agency and control of its destiny. This is evidenced by the information panel presenting Egypt's "affiliation" with the Rashidun Caliphate as Egypt becoming its own Islamic state (Fig. 9). Additionally, another ellipsis relating to the Ottoman period occurs. While Ottoman influences appear in peripheral exhibits (see Appendix A), the Ottoman period is largely excluded from the main narrative, noticeably absent from the Islamic empires timeline on the placard, which lists Rashidun to Mamluk dynasties but omits the Ottomans and ends with Muhammad Ali's dynasty. Muhammad Ali's Dynasty is portrayed as an independent Egyptian Dynasty, regardless of its historical affiliation with the Ottoman Empire. Additionally, the years of the Islamic period are noted as 641 AD to 1517 AD, the Ottoman defeat of the Mamluks.

After this panel, the timeline is not extended past this designation. After references to the Mamluks, the next political unit controlling Egypt is not

identified as the Ottomans, but as Muhammad Ali's Dynasty. This is an example of synecdoche, which Bal identifies as a device in which a part of something is displayed to represent the whole (Bal, 1996, p. 78). In this context, Muhammad Ali's Dynasty, historically a part of the Ottoman Empire, is displayed to stand in for the Ottoman period as a whole. Through this act of synecdoche, the domination of Egypt's Ottoman past is downplayed. The Alawite Dynasty, while affiliated with Ottoman rule, was indeed a period in which Ottoman control of Egypt was weakest. Through foregrounding this period over Ottoman dominance, the ideological narrative of continuous sovereignty is maintained in the museum's narrative.

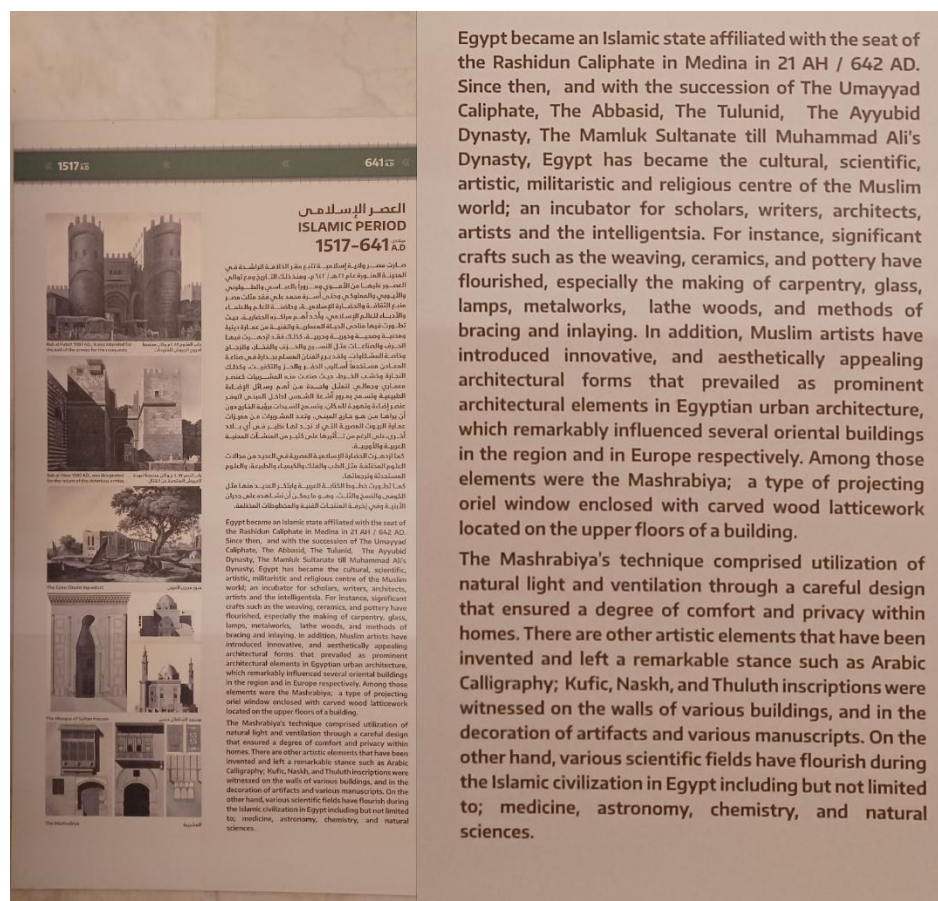


FIGURE 9: ISLAMIC PERIOD INFORMATION PLAQUE

The museum's narrative also exhibits a notable ellipsis regarding Western colonial rule in Egypt. A placard with Muhammad Ali's portrait briefly notes he was sent to remove the French (Fig. 10) but gives no detail on the French

occupation, a short yet influential episode in modern Egyptian history and its ties to Europe. British rule, beginning nearly a century later, is also minimized. It is mentioned on a placard linked to King Fouad I, noting he signed a treaty “ending” British rule (Fig. 10), and on Mahmoud Mukhtar’s placard, which references the occupation in the context of his support for the 1919 Revolution (Fig. 27). These selective mentions omit much of Britain’s prior dominance and ignore Egypt’s continued subordination after the treaty. This narrative gap silences crucial episodes of foreign domination, preserving the museum’s overarching ideological emphasis on Egyptian sovereignty and continuity.



FIGURE 10: KING FOUAD I AND MUHAMMAD ALI INFORMATION PLACARDS

Historical continuity is a crucial aspect in the narrative of any nation. Placing the origins of a nation as far back as possible and then creating a continuous line relation between that time and the current state gives the ruling authority a large degree of legitimacy. If this narrative is accepted, then the state is seen as the legitimate heir to a continuous line of native Egyptian rule. In

addition, establishing unbroken sovereignty shows the world that Egypt is a powerful and resilient nation, one that deserves a space among the world's strongest nations. The exposition here serves as a way for the state to assert Egypt's place in the world. This final point connects to the next section, as through glorification of the Pharaonic past is another way in which Egypt is presented as a great nation worthy of this recognition.

#### *5.4.2 Civilizational Greatness: The Pharaonic Past*

As seen from the museum's architecture, the Pharaonic past is an important part of the narrative of this museum. Based on contents alone, more than half the space of the museum is dedicated to ancient Egyptian artifacts. The narrative of the museum thus attempts to emphasize the glory of this period through highlighting Egypt's civilizational credentials. This manifests as emphasis on the early achievements of the ancient Egyptians, as well as through demonstrating the influence of ancient Egypt on succeeding civilizations up to the present day.

The museum positions Egypt as a foundational civilization during the Pharaonic period through an emphasis on what I term "civilizational firsts," being key achievements of civilization portrayed as among the earliest in human history. The earlier discussion of locating the nation's origins in the prehistoric past is the first example of this strategy. Egypt's early development is further reinforced through non-narrative, argumentative textual fragments, statements about the world outside the fabula that reveal a narrative's ideological underpinnings (Bal, 2017). Framed in the language of realism, these claims are presented as fact, strengthening the museum's ideological argument for Egypt's primacy in world history.

Next to the prehistory panel, which establishes the origins of Egypt, a panel on predynastic history narrates the fabula event of Egypt's transition from "scavengers and hunters" (Fig. 4) to "sedentary societies" practicing agriculture, culture, and early industry (Fig. 11), dated to the 6th millennium BC. The way this is framed represents Egypt taking an early step towards civilization through dating in the sixth millennium BC.

This panel contains several non-narrative statements that serve to support the narrative of civilization greatness, stating that the Egyptians discovered the smelting of materials, as well as established “the oldest known writing system in history” (Fig. 11). Two nearby display cases function as evidence in the expository gesture, one on the Naqada culture, a culture in the region during the predynastic era who developed signs of culture and practices of smelting, as the displays show through their artifacts (Fig. 12). Nearby is one dedicated to agriculture, functioning as evidence for the early establishment of one the key components to the establishment of civilization (Fig. 13).

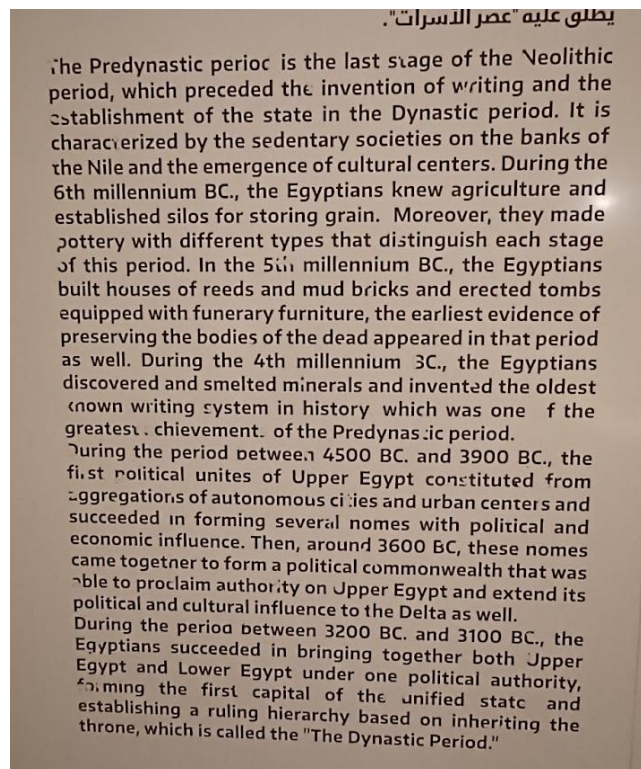
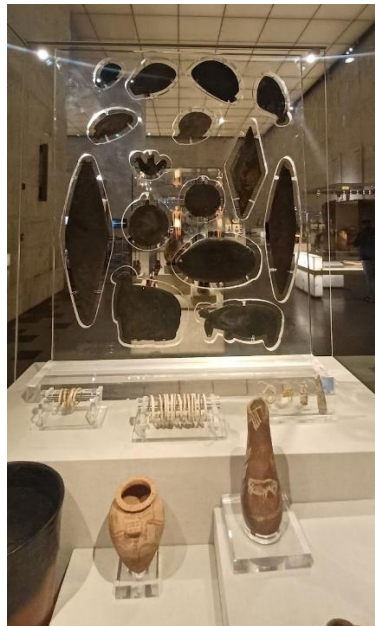


FIGURE 11: PREDYNASTIC PERIOD INFORMATION PANEL



#### Naqada cultures

Appeared within the periods before the unification of Egypt, divided into Naqada I (3800 – 3500 BC) known for its red pottery with white decoration and geometric palettes for makeup. Naqada II (3500 – 3200 BC) pots are beige with red decoration, often featuring boats, birds, and human figures and slate palettes in animal form. Naqada III (3200 – 3050 BC) has plainer pottery and palettes but has a greater variety of statues and ritual objects.

FIGURE 12: NAQADA CULTURE DISPLAY AND PLACARD



FIGURE 13: AGRICULTURE DISPLAY

The ancient Egypt panel asserts Egypt's early rise as one of the first states, marked by the establishment of "the oldest administrative machinery in history" (Fig. 14). This claim functions ideologically to establish a narrative of

historical and geographical continuity, linking the ancient state's founding with the present-day state on the same land. The adjacent panel (Fig. 6) further reinforces Egypt's civilizational greatness by highlighting the creation of the oldest religious texts and some of the largest funerary caches ever discovered. These are argumentative texts making a claim of historical greatness based on Egypt's early development of religion and the sophistication of that religion. The claims are further reinforced through the realist language employed, as these claims are meant to be taken as fact by the scholarly institution of the museum, regardless of the historical accuracy. Ultimately, the expository gesture points to these claims as evidence of Egypt's early development and advancement.

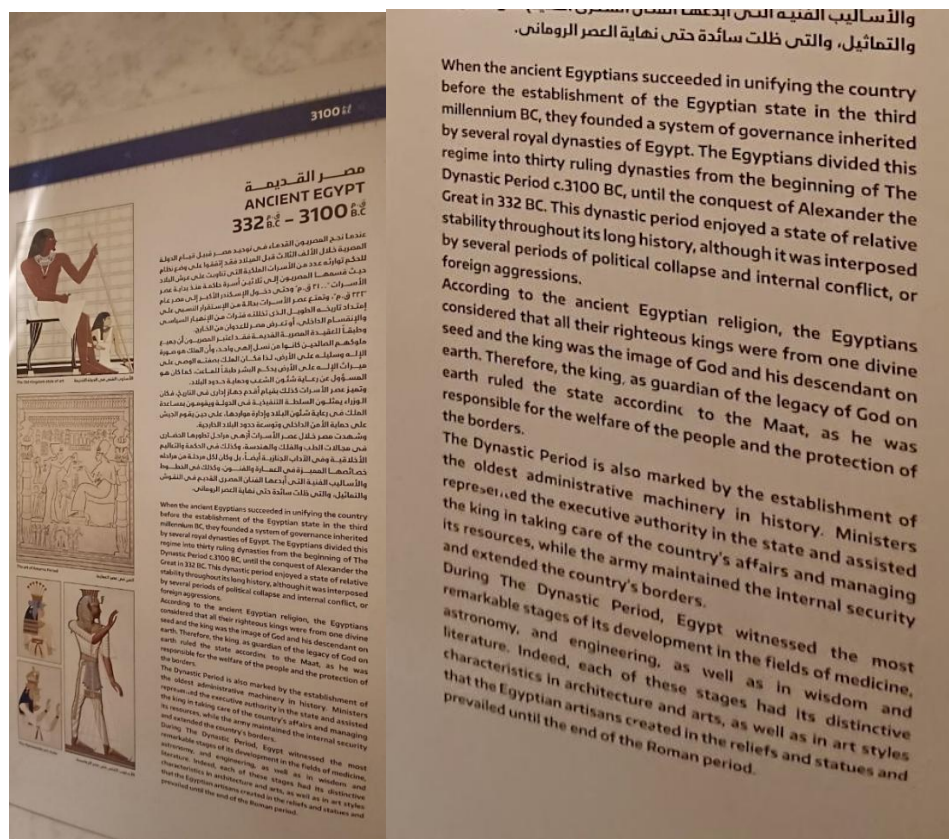


FIGURE 14: ANCIENT EGYPT INFORMATION PLAQUE

Another crucial element to the establishment of civilization is the creation of a writing system. The panel dedicated to the establishment of Egyptian writing, emphasizes early development, and points to a display case of some early examples of it (Fig. 15) as evidence. It makes a series of argumentative

statements to attribute the development of writing, even further than is physically displayed as recorded based on archaeological evidence.

The panel gives a brief description of the way this writing system worked, then goes on to make the statement that “this method must have been preceded by several stages of preparation and diffusion at least a thousand years before” (Fig. 15). This statement is speculative, however, through realist language, this statement is meant to come off as having a reasonable basis in reality. In reality, archaeological records provide the only reliable dates for the creation of these writing systems; pushing them further into the past is conjecture serving to convince the reader that Egyptians were the first to invent writing.

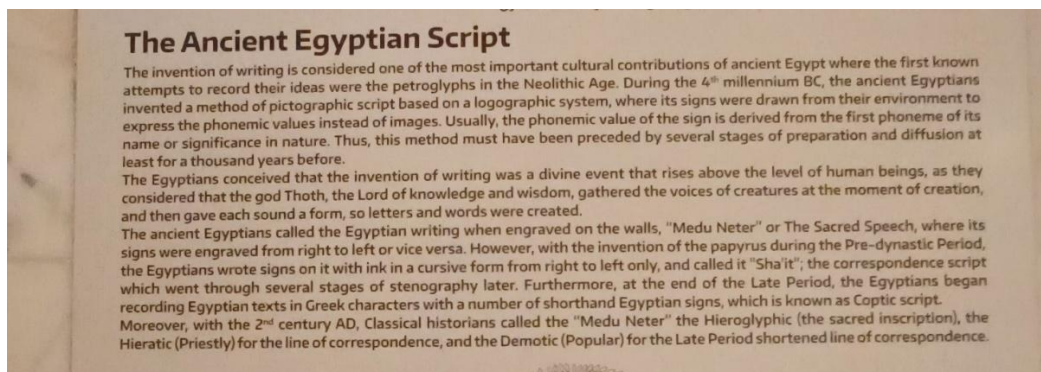




FIGURE 15: THE ANCIENT EGYPTIAN SCRIPT INFORMATION PLACARD AND DISPLAY

The greatness of the Pharaonic period is also put on display in the narrative through emphasis on ancient Egypt's influence on succeeding civilizations and the world. This is achieved through the consistent use of *anachronism*; breaks in the narrative's fabula that refer to the future (anticipatory) or the past (retrospective) (Bal 2017). Anticipatory anachronisms are utilized within the content of this section to stretch the influence of ancient Egypt into the far future. Ideologically, this serves to position ancient Egypt as an enduring origin point whose legacies persist globally and within the modern Egyptian state.

One example, in the panel dedicated to bread in ancient Egypt, states the word "cake" is ancient Egyptian in origin (Fig. 16), specifically emphasizing that this is the word used in a variety of languages today. Another linguistic influence that is attributed to ancient Egypt is related to the word for brick, which would pass down into the Coptic language and colloquial Egyptian Arabic (Fig. 17). The same panel notes that some of the methods of architecture used in ancient Egypt are still being used in "traditional" architecture in the present day. If one scans the QR code connected to the architecture display, it brings up a description related to the "dovetail," noting this architecture element made its way to medieval Italian architecture (Fig. 17). These examples demonstrate how the

narrative positions ancient Egypt as an important and influential ancient civilization whose legacy can be felt in the present day.



**The Bread**

Bread is one of the oldest products based on crops and was the reason for the emergence and stability of agriculture. The oldest known bread from ancient Egypt goes back to the Badari civilization, where its making relied mainly on emmer and wheat, or sometimes barley.

The bread was usually prepared in houses, just as there were general bakeries for mass production. For making bread, women used to grind grains and sift flour from grit, the dough was prepared from flour, water, and a little salt, and yeast was rarely added to it. Usually, the dough was cut into loaves that were placed directly on fire or in molds placed inside horizontal ovens or stuck in tannurs.

The ancient Egyptians knew more than forty types of bread and pastry that varied according to their ingredients and shapes, such as round bread, cone molded bread, large molded bread, spiral bread, and pies, as well as rusks and pieces of bread in the form of animals and birds. Some additives distinguished each type of bread separately, such as adding whole grains of wheat and barley to decorate the surface of loaves, as well as adding cumin or coriander, garlic and cheese as well.

Desserts were made from flour, eggs, butter, and honey, and decorated with dried figs, dates, and raisins. The Egyptians called desserts "Ka'k", which is the origin of "cake" which is currently used in many languages of the world.

FIGURE 16: THE BREAD DISPLAY AND INFORMATION PLACARD



### Brick Architecture

The mud-brick architecture is one of the oldest architectural techniques used by ancient Egyptians, as its earliest examples date back to the Naqada I period (c.3800 BC). Ancient Egyptians called the block of bricks Djebet and Tubet, and Twbe in Coptic, which became Tuba in the colloquial Arabic. Bricks were made from a mixture of Nile mud and sand with straw and cow dung, where the mixture was struck by wooden mold and stamped by the workshop then left in the sun to dry. Egyptians used mud bricks in civil architecture like palaces, fortresses, and houses as well as in temples and tombs. Moreover, the specific gravity of a brick is about 1650 kg/cm<sup>3</sup> that helped its durability for millennia. The bricks were laid in undulated courses to increase the resistance of the wall while its thickness narrows as it rises upward. Egyptians used several bonds in laying bricks and connecting the courses with a mortar consisting of mud, straw, and cow dung, a technique that is still used today in traditional architecture.

FIGURE 17: ARCHITECTURE INFORMATION PLACARD AND DISPLAY

In the Greco-Roman section, retrospective anachronisms are utilized for a similar purpose. The first is contained within the app scan of the coffin of Nedjemankh, which states that the presence of funerary scenes on the coffin indicate that the religion of the Pharaonic era was popularly practiced even during the Greco-Roman period (Fig. 18). Another example is a set of statues labeled the Royal Statues, which notes that Egyptian art would begin to influence Greek art with its ancient traditions (Fig. 19). The mosaic floor displayed in this section is framed as an example of further influence of ancient Egyptian culture in its application scan. While it is noted that the advanced form of mosaic art appeared in Greece, it notes that the art is found as far back as the Third Dynasty, and that the art itself was passed down to each civilization to the present day (Fig. 20).

These artifacts and several others whose stylistic origin is clearly from the Pharaonic era are all part of a narrative strategy to establish continuity between Greco-Roman and Pharaonic eras. While technically under control by foreign powers, these artifacts function as evidence of the Egyptian character of this time period. Thus, this section is serving a dual section in the narrative museum,

establishing the power of ancient Egyptian culture through its influence on what came after it and maintaining historical continuity.

These anticipatory anachronisms are not neutral references but function as strategic narrative devices. By projecting the significance of Pharaonic achievements into later eras, the museum constructs a temporal bridge that reinforces the idea of uninterrupted cultural influence and continuity. This framing serves an ideological purpose as it positions the Pharaonic period as foundational, directly relevant to subsequent cultures and the contemporary Egyptian nation, thereby justifying claims of historical greatness and ongoing legacy.

As can be seen from the narrative and expository strategies in this section, Egypt is positioned as one of the world's first and greatest civilizations, one whose influence would be widespread and transhistorical. This era is constructed as an origin point for the modern Egyptian state, thus connecting it to a glorious and distant past. This past glory is then connected to the present day, to emphasize the greatness of Egypt in contemporary times. Through exposition, an argument is being made about modern Egypt. This is its past, and it's worthy of glorifying, as is the modern state who has inherited it.



## Coffin of Nedjemankh

Anthropoid coffin of Nedjemankh, the priest of Heryshef, lord of Herakleopolis Magna. The coffin is made of cartonnage (layers of linen and plaster) and plated with a thin layer of gold. The eyes are inlaid to give them a lifelike appearance. The coffin is decorated with funerary scenes and inscriptions from the Book of the Dead, such as the weighing of the heart and mummification by Anubis, indicating the popularity of traditional ancient Egyptian religious beliefs during this period. This coffin was stolen during the

FIGURE 18: COFFIN OF NEDJEMANKH DISPLAY AND APPLICATION SCAN

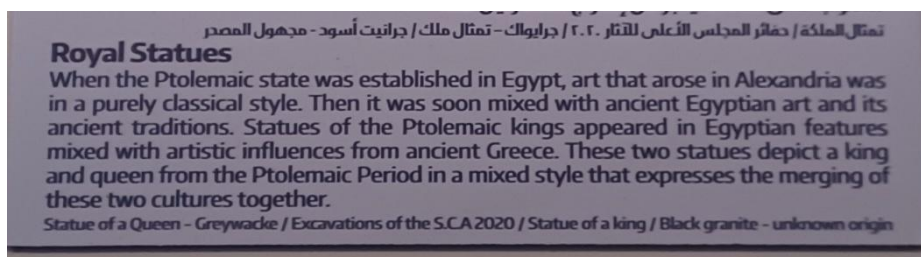
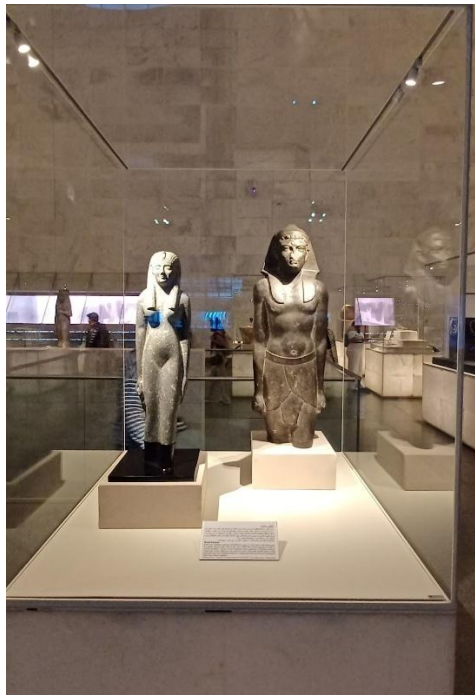


FIGURE 19: ROYAL STATUES DISPLAY AND PLACARD

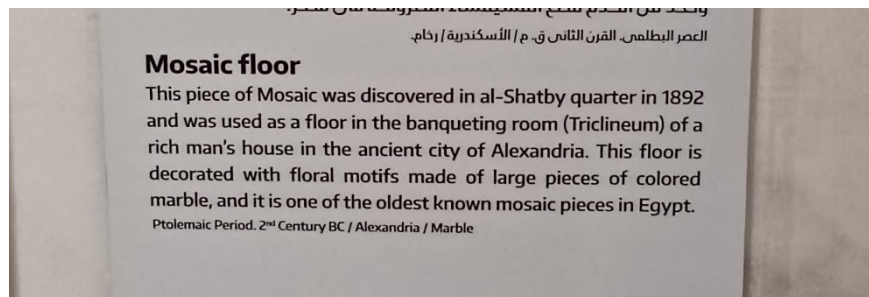


FIGURE 20: MOSAIC FLOOR AND PLACARD



FIGURE 21: ISLAMIC AND MODERN SECTION

#### 5.4.3 *Civilizational Greatness: Islamic Civilization*

The narrative of the museum also positions Egypt as a great Islamic civilization, one that extends to the present day. An example of the importance of Islam in the narrative of the museum is the space dedicated to Islamic artifacts, taking up nearly as much of the museum as the Pharaonic section (Fig. 21). Islam is depicted as a core part of Egypt's history *and* present, as can be seen from the use of Islamic artifacts and displays into the "modern era" section of the museum. Egypt as an Islamic civilization is thus greatly emphasized through displays, some of the most prominent displays being dedicated to it.

Egypt is situated as a central part of Islamic civilization in the museum's narrative is through treatment of the fabula and story surrounding the Arab conquests. Although the "Arab conquests" are briefly acknowledged as a fabula event in several areas, they are largely absent from the main historical placards guiding the museum's narrative. For example, on the key information placard for this era, Egypt is not described as "conquered by the Arabs," but instead as having become "affiliated" with the Rashidun Caliphate (Fig. 9). This narrative move preserves Egypt's agency and sense of historical continuity, reframing Egypt as a willing participant in its embrace of Islam, rather than adopting it by force, thereby strengthening Egypt's Islamic credentials.

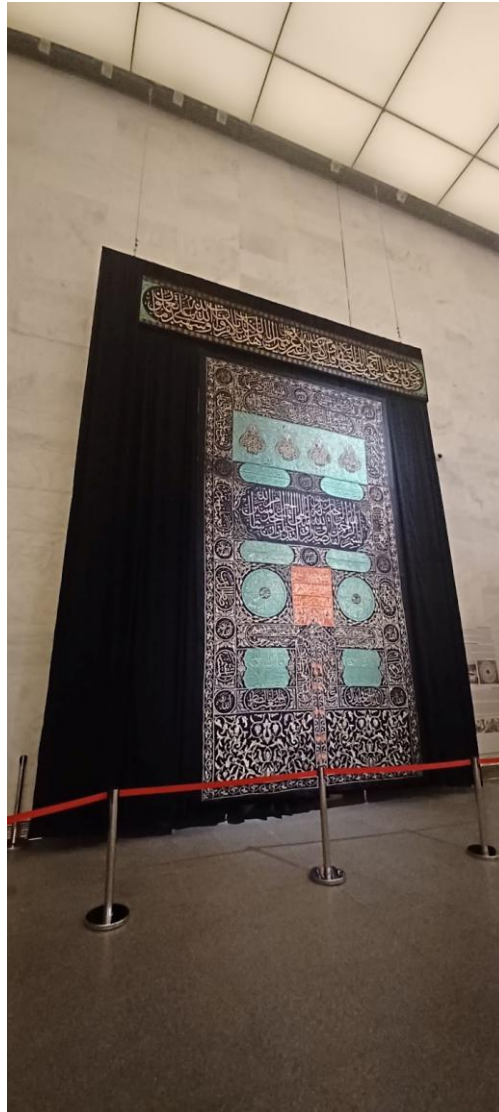
The sequence of historical information panels ends with the Islamic era. Subsequent developments, such as the establishment of modern Egypt under Muhammad Ali (Fig. 10), are relegated to smaller display labels rather than full narrative treatments. However, this structural choice blurs the boundary between the Islamic and modern eras and appears deliberate. The effect is to subtly incorporate the modern era as a continuation or extension of the Islamic period, suggesting that Egypt remains in an ongoing Islamic epoch. In this way, the museum underscores Egypt's Islamic history and identity as crucial elements of the state's nationalist ideology. Through this exposition, a claim is made about Egypt, one that asserts Islam as core to the Egyptian nation.

Referring to the same panel above, an argument is made that Egypt would become the "cultural, scientific, artistic, militaristic, and religious center of the Muslim world" and "an incubator for scholars, writers, architects, and the intelligentsia" (Fig. 10). This positions Egypt as an important, even *crucial*, part of Islamic civilization. The panel goes on to list more accomplishments by Egypt during this period, however, the primary evidence of this statement is the surrounding Islamic artifacts which are being pointed to as proof of Egypt's Islamic credentials.

The Islamic and Modern sections of the museum are filled with iconic Islamic symbols. One of the most prominent displays in the museum, as it can be seen from just about any point you are standing in the museum, is the Kiswa covering of the Kaaba (Fig. 22). The panel first emphasizes the importance of this task, arguing that it is "one of the greatest and most honorable deeds in Arab and Islamic culture" (Fig. 22). It goes on to emphasize that Egypt retained this honor of creating the Kiswa, placing Egypt as an important actor in Islamic civilization.

Egypt's Islamic character is further emphasized through the placement of important Islamic artifacts such as the Quran, key to Mecca, Quran boxes and a prominent display of the mosque pulpit and a variety of objects related to Islamic art that were created in Egypt such as lamps, ceramics, and metalwork (see Appendix B). The exhibition of these items in the museum make an argument for

their Egyptianness. Through display, the state points as these objects as essentially Egyptian and playing a crucial role in their conception of the nation.



العاملين في صناعة النسيج وتطريزه.

### The "Kiswa" Covering of the Holy Kaaba

Manufacture of the "Kiswa" covering of the Holy Kaaba is considered one of the greatest and honourable deeds in Arab and Islamic culture. The tradition of covering the Kaaba goes back to the King "Tubba As'ad al-Kamel" of the Himyarite Kingdom (387-430 AD) as the Arab traditions attributed to him the first covering of the whole Kaaba before Islam, and this tradition continued to the present day. Noteworthy, the drape of Kaaba varied between cotton, velour, linen, and silk. Moreover, its color switched between white, red, green, and yellow until the Abbasid Caliph "al-Ma'mun" (813 – 833 AD) established the current practice of dressing the Kaaba once a year with black silk.

Since the reign of the Caliph "Abu Bakr al-Siddiq", making the kiswa varied between Egypt, Damascus, and Yemen, but during the reign of "Al-Malik as-Salih Najm al-Din Ayyub" (1240-1249 AD), Egypt retained the honor of making the kiswa and sending it annually to Mecca. Therefore, many textile workshops were established in Tennes, Tuna, and Shata for its manufacture. Noteworthy, the last kiswa workshop was the "Dar al-Kiswa al-Musharrafah" established by "Muhammad Ali" in al-Khurunfash district in (1818 AD) that included hundreds of the most skilled workers of textile and embroidery.

FIGURE 22: THE "KISWA" COVERING OF THE HOLY KAABA DISPLAY AND PLACARD

The narrative also emphasizes the contributions Egypt made to Islamic civilization, positioning Egypt further as an active participant in the development of Islamic civilization. One example is the Mashrabiya window, created in Egypt and would influence the rest of the Islamic world while noting that the design of Mashrabiya in Egypt had “no parallel in the world” (Fig. 23). Another contribution was the sabil, the fountain that was seen as a way of the wealthy to practice their Islamic duty of helping the poor (Fig. 24). Egypt contributed a second story called the “kutab” which was a place of study for the young in which they would study the Quran and other academic disciplines such as writing and arithmetic. These examples selectively focus on Egyptian innovations to frame the nation as a cultural leader within the Islamic world, providing evidence to the claims made in the panel (Fig. 9).

Through the expository gestures and narrative strategies deployed in these examples, Egypt is constructed as an Islamic nation. The materialization of Islam through the display of iconic Islamic objects situates Islam as a timeless and natural feature of Egyptian civilization. Additionally, the framing of Egypt’s history in the fabula serve to construct the nation as Islamic. Ideologically, the exposition makes an argument on behalf of the state. Egypt is Islamic, and it has been Islamic for as long as Islam has existed. Islamic identity is thus naturalized and promoted as key tenant in the state’s nationalist ideology.



### Mashrabiya "Oriel Window"

#### "The Organization of Light in Islamic Architecture"

Mashrabiya or Oriel windows are among the most important artistic and architectural elements in the Islamic period, being influenced by decorated stone and stucco windows. Generally, The Mashrabiya was made of lathe wood that allows the natural light and ventilation to pass through the hollows into the place. Mashrabiya appeared around the 6th century AH/ 13th century AD and flourished during the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. These windows specifically characterize the Egyptian domestic architecture and without parallel in the world.

FIGURE 23: MASHRABIYA "ORIEL WINDOW" DISPLAY AND PLACARD



### Sabil (Fountain)

Sabil (fountain) is one of the prominent features of the Islamic architecture, especially in the Mamluk and Ottoman Periods, where the Sultans and princes, as well as wealthy people, used to build it in the markets, crossroads, and in front of the mosques to provide drinking water for people or animals, as well as ablution water for prayers for free as a devotion to God. Moreover, the Sabil was evidence of the social status and the wealth of its builders, as it required the availability of financial resources or endowments for spending on it.

The earliest surviving Sabil in Cairo was installed by the Mamluk Sultan al-Nasir Muhammad Ibn Qalawun (1325-1326 AD). The typical Sabil usually consisted of a two-story building, where the first floor was located underground and contained a well or a cistern to preserve freshwater. The second floor consists of the "Tasbil" or "al-Mazamlah" room which contains a carved marble panel called "Selsabil", which may have served the purpose of aerating the water as it runs on it coming from the cistern, while the "Muzammalat" or the Sabil's attendant distributes it to passers-by in metal cups from the copper windows of the Sabil. The Egyptian Sabils were distinguished from other Sabils in the Islamic world by adding a third-floor containing "Kuttab" room to memorize The Holy Qur'an and to teach children the principles of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Thus, it was spent on this "Kuttab" from the proceeds of the Sabil endowments.

FIGURE 24: SABIL (FOUNTAIN) DISPLAY AND PLACARD

#### *5.4.4 Gender*

The narrative has an unavoidable gendered element to it. There is a stark contrast between the ways women and men are depicted. Whether it be the words used to describe each, the narrative roles they are assigned, or the societal roles they are generally given, the way men and women are depicted give clear indication of the position of genders in the nationalist ideology of the state. These differences become quite acute when the principles of narrative are applied to the analysis of the displays. Men are depicted as the main actors in Egyptian history, while women are largely relegated to a role of subservience to men, and serve no functional role in the shaping of Egyptian history.

The gendered aspect of the museum's narrative is most stark when considering the actors displayed in the museum. Keeping in mind that “actors” in the narrative structure are those entities, whether human or object, that have a role in the progression of the fabula. In the museum’s displays, if the actors are human, they are consistently depicted as male.

This can be seen as early as the first fabula event in which “man” is responsible for the transition of humanity from a state of nature to that of one capable of imposing its will on nature using tools (Fig. 4). Alexander the Great is positioned as a main actor responsible for Egypt’s transition to the Greco-Roman period (Fig. 8). Mohammad Ali and King Fouad I are both examples of actors responsible for the establishment of the Egyptian state and the removal of European colonial empires such as Britain and France in the modern era (Fig. 10). Sultan Muhammad Ibn Qalawun is often depicted undertaking projects in developing Egyptian civilization during the Islamic period, such as the building of al-Balaq palace, playing a significant role during the Islamic era (Fig. 25).

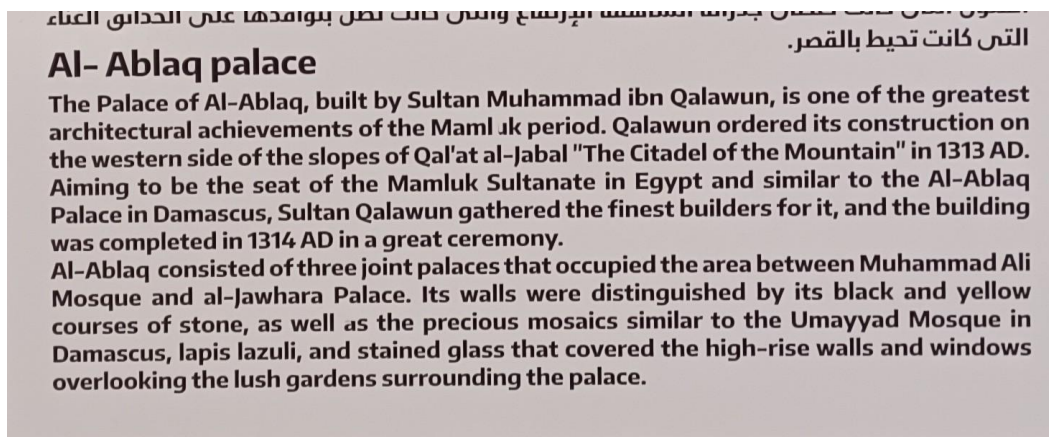


FIGURE 25: AL-ABLAQ PALACE PLACARD

While the actors in the narrative of the museum are exclusively male, not all depictions of men can be given this role of actor. However, where men are depicted elsewhere, the expository gestures still send an ideological message within the narrative. The exhibition of males as museum objects, they come to stand for what the image of a man in the state's ideology. They serve a metonymic function in this sense. For example, men are consistently depicted as being the main participant in government and the exercising of power. They are kings, government officials, emperors, sultans, consistently spread out through the museum's displays in which a male is depicted and usually in some kind of position of power (see Appendix C).

By contrast, women are never portrayed as actors in the progression of Egyptian history. When mentioned, they are in a role of subservience to men and used as arguments to articulate various aspects of Egyptian culture. Portrayals of women in the museum tend to be display and object focused, coming to serve a metonymic function for ideological conceptions of women's place in Egypt society. This position given to women tends to revolve around being a wife and mother, or servant to the needs of man.

Motherhood is a particularly widespread position women are placed into in the museum. One example of this is the display of a statue called "Lady and Children", with a display placard that notes how it was found and what it depicts; "a woman with some children who may [my emphasis] have been her sons" (Fig. 26). The statue "reflects the high stature of the mother in the hearts of her sons as

she was depicted with them in honor and appreciation of her memory (Fig. 26).” Couched in the discourse of scholarly realism, its position in the museum, the expository argument has two parts. First, it points to this display as a “woman,” however, not just a woman, one with “children.” Furthermore, by portraying these children as her own children. Finally, the exposition positions the statue as an example of the respect her children have for her.

This is a perfect example of assigning meaning to an object which may not necessarily line up with its original intention. This is not to say I know what the object meant to the ancient Egyptians, what matters is that an interpretation is being placed on it by the museum. There is nothing to tell us exactly who the statue is depicting or what it is supposed to symbolize, however, the museum interprets it and expects the visitor to adopt this view of the item, through trusting the institution. This item thus comes to stand in for a particular ideological notion of what it means to be a woman, being a woman means being a mother.

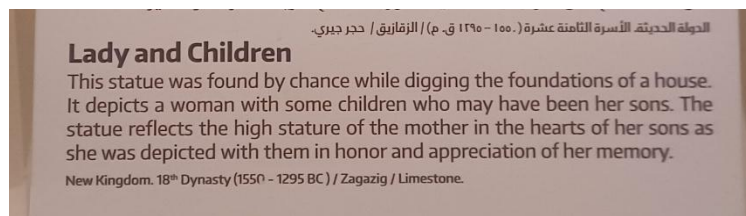


FIGURE 26: LADY AND CHILDREN DISPLAY AND PLACARD

Symbolizing the role of women as holding a position of subservience in the narrative of the museum is exemplified by a display dedicated to an Egyptian sculptor of the early 20th century, Mahmoud Mukhtar (Fig. 27). One statue he created is titled “the Female Peasant” and simply depicts a woman. The placard associated with the sculpture makes the claim that this sculpture represents women and their “main role... in Egyptian society, in the past and present.” The statement thus is making an ideological argument that the most significant role of women in Egyptian society is that of a peasant, a role of subservience, which is seen as both her role in the past of Egyptian history and in contemporary Egyptian society. The expository gesture is clear here; “this is the Egyptian woman, and this is what she does.”

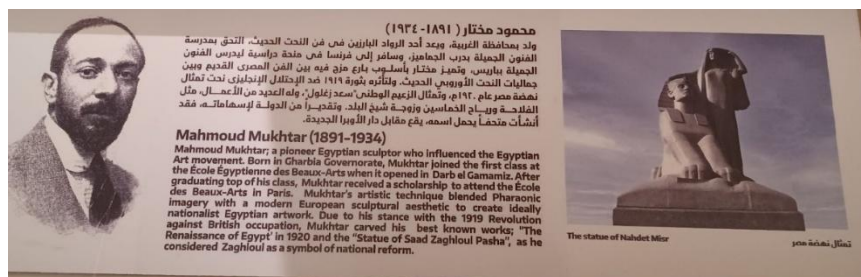
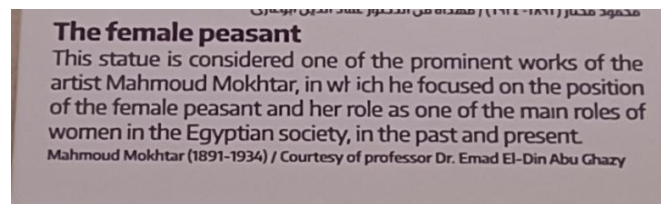


FIGURE 27: MAHMOUD MUKHTAR DISPLAY AND PLACARD WITH THE FEMALE PEASANT

Even in cases where women are depicted in a way that attributes them more power than pure subservience, the framing of the narrative still relegates them secondary to man. A display titled “A Queen in the Form of a Sphinx” (Fig. 28) contains a statue of a woman in the shape of a sphinx, front, and center. The placard dedicated to this statue is not facing the front but off to the side. The sphinx is said to symbolize Egyptians' reverence for women as a mother, first, then a sister and as a wife, and finally as a ruler and goddess “as well.” Here, the statue comes to signify a woman's position as a mother and in relation to men, as a sister and wife.

As a final note she is noted to be appreciated for her role as a ruler and goddess as well, however, the way women are generally framed in the museum renders this addition a meaningless add-on, lip service to a role of women that is not adequately displayed in the museum. This is further demonstrated when we consider the plaque that is in front of the statue, which is dedicated to the king. While seemingly dedicated to women, this display becomes another argument for women being in a secondary position to men.

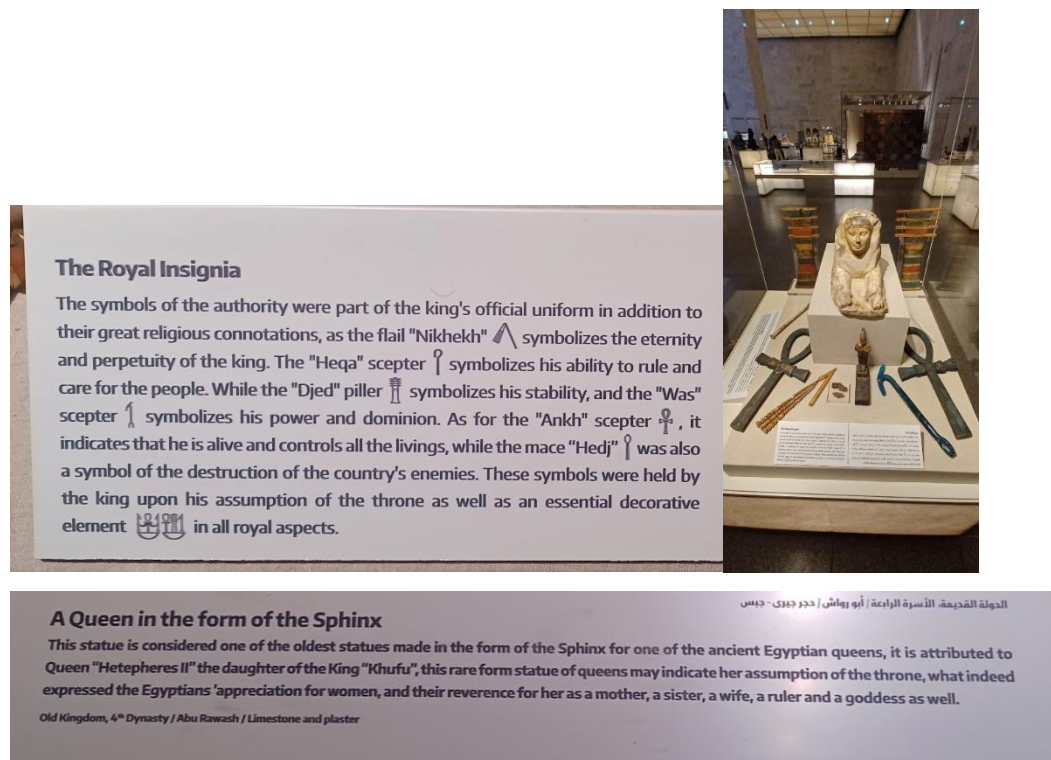


FIGURE 28: THE ROYAL INSIGNIA AND QUEEN SPHINX DISPLAY AND PLACARDS

Even goddesses are depicted as subservient to men. One such display contains the busts of various female goddesses, who are noted to be there for their role in protecting the king (Fig. 29). Women, as goddesses, are thus depicted as being subservient to men once again. Another example of this is the information kiosk dedicated to the goddess Maat, who is ultimately described as being born “in order to support [Atum, a male god] in the heavenly world” (Fig. 30). She is said to be responsible for serving Atum his food every morning and more generally is said to be the “feed of the gods.” Finally, she is also depicted as the consort of Thoth. In all these depictions, Maat, while still a powerful goddess, is depicted in relation to her subservience to men.

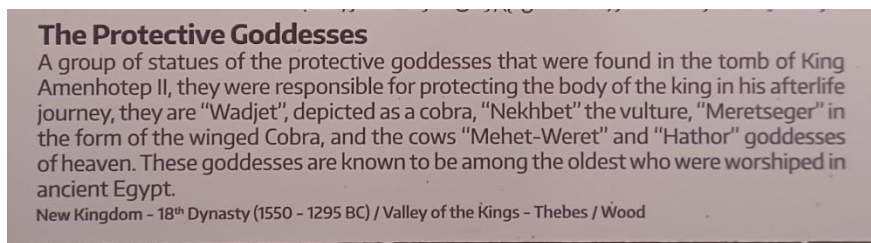


FIGURE 29: THE PROTECTIVE GODDESSES DISPLAY AND PLACARD

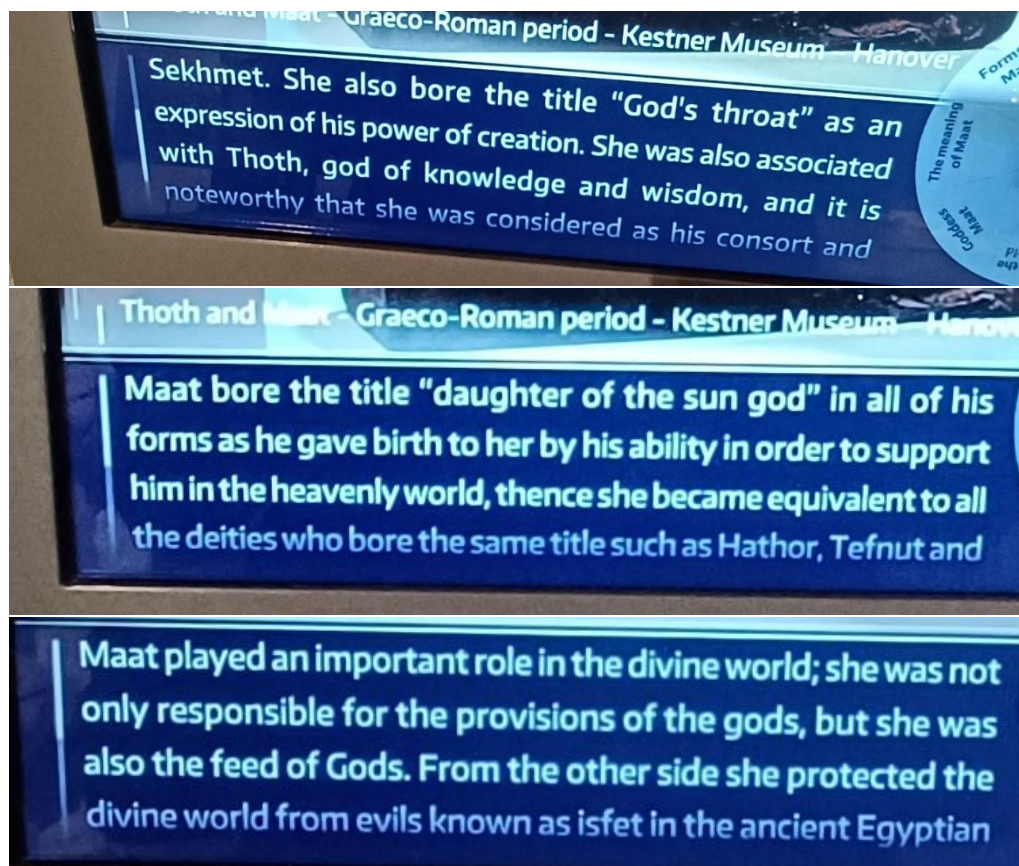


FIGURE 30: MAAT INFORMATION KIOSK

Another way in which the museum depicts men and women differently is in various descriptions of their nature. Men are often described as young, great warriors, kings, builders, as strong or fit, women are often portrayed in feminized terms. One telling example is a display dedicated to ancient Egyptian cosmetics, women are said to be “instinctively attracted to beauty and embellishment” (Fig. 31). The placard here is making an ideological argument about the nature of women, associating them with activities that are seen as more feminine, associating women with more traditional conceptions of what women are. The exposition points to these artifacts as evidence of women’s continuous desire for beauty

In general, men hold positions of power and are described in these terms, while women serve and are more preoccupied with matters of aesthetics. Another display recounts a story from the Greco-Roman period, in which Niobe, the

daughter of a king, is said to have been a braggart about her beautiful children (Fig. 32). This would spur the wrath of another woman, who is depicted as jealous of her children and decides to kill them. In response, Niobe falls into a great depression that results in her turning to stone. Narratively, we can consider this a kind of embedded text in which another story is told within and separate from the main fabula to make a particular point. In this case, the display and the placard are making an argument that women are emotional, prone to jealousy and retribution.

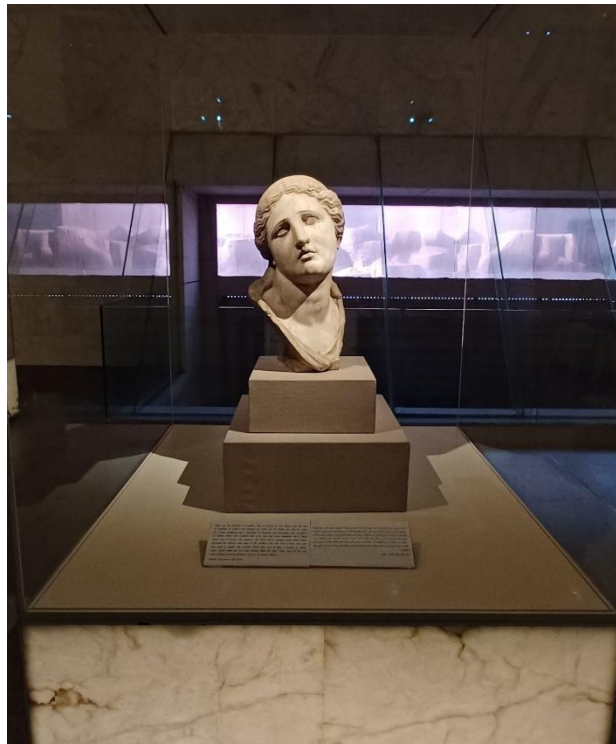
Representations of men and women reflect the state's nationalist ideology by presenting its understanding of cultural, political and social roles. Through the various curated depictions, the state is crafting a narrative in which women hold a particular position in the organization of society and men hold another. Linked with the first theme, the expository argument points to these depictions as natural, making an argument that Egypt has always been this way, thus providing legitimacy to these social positions in the present. The state is eternally masculinized, while women are made servants and feminized.



### Cosmetics

Women are instinctively attracted to beauty and embellishment, Egyptian women had significant interest in beauty since ancient time, thus they had black and green eyeliners that was stored in pots of different shapes and materials, also they used the red tint as blushers. They were very familiar with oils and aromatic fats and carefully stored them in elegant animal or bird shaped pots. She also took care of her hair appearance therefore used combs for styling and hair pins for fixing in front of mirrors made of metals.

FIGURE 31: COSMETICS DISPLAY AND PLACARD



Niobe was the daughter of Tantalus, king of Phrygia in Asia Minor, and the wife of Amphion of Thebes, who founded the Greek city of Thebes and built its walls, the Greeks considered her a patroness of education and knowledge, and a goddess of Thebes. Niobe and Amphion had seven sons and seven daughters, all of them which were of beauty and splendor, and Niobe always bragged about them, which provoked the jealousy and anger of the goddess Leto, the wife of Zeus, who only gave birth to Apollo and Artemis. Which lead Leto to plan a revenge on Niobe, where Apollo killed the boys and Artemis killed the girls; Niobe wept for the loss of her children, until she turned to rock over the Mount Sipylus.

Marble, 2nd century AD, Luxor.

FIGURE 32: NIOBE DISPLAY AND PLACARD

#### *5.4.5 Diversity and Multiculturalism*

The NMEC is frequently positioned as displaying the “diversity” of Egyptian civilization through the ages, as can be seen in the newsletters (Bakar, September 2021, p. 1) and discourse coming from museum officials (Moniem, 2005).

Through the exhibitions, there is a clear attempt at presenting a diverse culture that makes up Egyptian history. However, through the narrative analysis, it is clear these additions are mostly superficial and serve to subsume minority

identities and counter narratives into the Egyptian national grand narrative. The stories of minority populations in the museum are at best, appropriated and at worst, ignored.

As stated early on, the museum's location in al-Fustat is itself an argument, coming from the state, that Egypt has historically been a diverse, tolerant, multicultural society. The justification of the location is best articulated by the first museum director, Ayman Abdel Moniem (Moniem, 2005). He explicitly notes that the land of al-Fustat reflects Egypt's religious tolerance and cultural diversity. While within the walls of the museum there is indeed a diversity of cultures being represented in the narrative, but the way they are being represented complicates the story and contests the image that is being articulated for the museum by the state.

Outwardly, Egyptian civilization is presented as inclusive and diverse, however, this image is complicated by the consistent othering of the Nubians. Although Nubia straddles the modern borders of Egypt and Sudan, it has a significant population and deep historical roots within Egypt. In effect, Nubia is Egyptian. However, the way that Nubia and Nubians are portrayed in the museum often has the effect of framing them as non-Egyptian, and in some cases, as explicitly the adversaries of Egypt. For example, the Dynastic period panel (Fig. 6), states that Egypt was the victim of invasions from "the people of the... Upper Nubia". Nubians are being portrayed as invaders, as opposed to Egyptians, in one of the most crucial periods of Egyptian history. The fabula also ignores the fact that there were Nubian pharaohs (Lloyd, 2010). Ideologically, this is making a statement about the nation, specifically, who counts as Egyptian.

Another display at the museum features artifacts excavated from archaeological sites in Lower Nubia, specifically those attributed to the Ballana and Qustul culture group (see Fig. 33). The accompanying text adopts a scholarly tone, detailing the discovery and exclusively Nubian origins of these objects. While the inclusion of Nubian material culture may ostensibly signal Nubia's place within Egyptian civilization, the representational strategies often construct Nubians as distinct from Egyptians. Here they are portrayed through a dated

anthropological lens. Another example of this dated treatment of the Nubians can be seen in the model display of mannequins dressed as Nubian women inside a model of “traditional” Nubian architecture, their “natural habitat” in a sense (Fig. 34). This mirrors earlier orientalist conventions, reminiscent of how Europe utilized Egypt as a benchmark for civilization (Said, 1978).



### **Ballana and Qustul**

Ballana is located on the west bank of the Nile to the opposite of Qustul, 300 km to the south of Aswan. The excavations conducted at the site between 1928 and 1931 revealed one of the cemeteries of Lower Nubia known as the Ballana and Qustul Culture or the X-Group. The tombs of the cemeteries may have belonged to several kings, queens, and nobles of "Nobatia", one of the Nubian kingdoms that flourished after the fall of the Kingdom of "Meroe", but before the rise of the Christian kingdoms of Nubia between 350 and 600 AD. The tombs were featured one or several underground chambers covered by a huge tumulus. The burial chamber contained the deceased with his funerary equipment and the crown over his head, while his wives, servants, and horses were buried with him as well. The treasures of these tombs were distinguished by their pure Nubian origins and contents, in addition to many objects that were imported from Byzantine Egypt or the Mediterranean which indicated their relation with the Byzantine world before the spread of Christianity there.

FIGURE 33: BALLANA AND QUSTUL DISPLAY AND PLACARD



### The Nubian House

The Nubian House is one of the models of traditional architecture that expresses the culture and heritage of the Nubians, as its design and architectural style reflect a cultural feature characterized by clarity and privacy. The architecture of the Nubian house usually depends on mud bricks and palm leaves. Moreover, it is characterized by its breadth, its façade is perpendicular to the Nile or against the north winds, while its floor is covered with pure yellow sand. The house usually consists of a large entrance with a wooden gate, and a façade topped with geometric decorations of triangles, hollow circles, and symbols of protection and good omen.

The entrance leads to a spacious courtyard called "the heavenly courtyard" where the house is divided into two parts, imposing on visitors a certain social behavior. The first section at the forefront is for men, where the paterfamilias sits and receives his visitors. The second section is reserved for women and has its privacy and inviolability.

The bedrooms are facing the gate and are known as "al-Qabawi", as they are covered with vaults that help to cool down the temperature. Qabawi are equipped with "al-Angaraib" beds made of palm branches. Moreover, the ceilings are decorated with colored palm-leave plates, several "Sha'aliq" decorated with seashells where food dishes are kept away from insects. The multiplicities of Sha'aliqs reflect the prosperity of the household. The "Kanun" room is next to the Qabawi where the grains and flour are stored. The Kanun contains the "Douka"; a metal-sheet oven to make the Douka bread, in addition to Kanun stoves for preparing food for the family.

FIGURE 34: THE NUBIAN HOUSE DISPLAY AND PLACARD

The second major minority group “depicted” in the museum is the Copts. I put “depicted” in quotes because they are effectively excluded from the museum entirely, as a people that is. The first mention of Coptic is in the context of language, when discussing the transfer of the ancient Egyptian word for brick to the modern day (Fig. 17). Other linguistic references to Coptic are contained in the museum, such as how it came to be, when the Egyptians began to incorporate Greek letters into their writing system (Fig. 15).

Aside from these two early linguistic references to Coptic, the next major “inclusion” is a section dedicated to “Coptic Art” (Fig. 35). This was mentioned above as a sort of embedded text in the story of the Greco-Roman period; it is not treated as its own period. There is no mention of the “Copts” or “Coptic people” in any of the displays in this section. The information plaque associated with this part of the history describes the rise of Christianity, explicitly associating Egypt

with Christianity. Egypt, the actor, is depicted as having a key role in the history of Christianity. Egypt is framed in a way that depicts it as being a sanctuary for those persecuted abroad as it describes the journey of the holy family in Egypt as they escape Herod.



FIGURE 33: COPTIC ART INFORMATION PLACARD

With that said, when the panel begins to talk about "Coptic" related topics, it shifts to talking about art. The text itself does not contain references to a particular person making this art. In the English text, the only mention of some

kind of human actor is “the Coptic artist.” In the Arabic text, the actor is established; however, the word for Egyptian is used. This plaque effectively erases the Coptic people from the narrative. They are either just Egyptians, or it is just a form of art. The implication of the artifacts displayed around it serves as evidence to this. They are textiles, clothes, and a couple of religious items. These juxtapositions only slightly hint at the existence of a people; however, it can just as easily be interpreted as a Christian influenced style of art, which is evident from the framing in the historical orientation texts.

Shortly after this section comes a very unexpected display in such a museum; a 19th century Torah and Torah case (Fig. 36). The brief placard notes its late-19th-century origin and offers only some minimal context on Eastern Jews, without indicating any connection to Egypt. This disconnect between object and interpretation is striking. Egypt once had a sizable Jewish population, now long diminished due to departure or expulsion. The Torah’s inclusion appears less about historical accuracy than about signaling religious tolerance, functioning as evidence that Jews lived, or still live, in Egypt. Omitted is any mention of the circumstances of the community’s disappearance; the display’s silence itself becomes an argument for tolerance, even when that narrative diverges from historical reality.

These depictions of Egypt’s minorities form part of an expositional strategy designed to position the country as a religiously tolerant and diverse civilization. However, this is achieved by tokenizing or ignoring the actual groups involved, subordinating them to the dominant national narrative or erasing them entirely. The museum promotes a superficial notion of diversity that neutralizes counter-narratives, perspectives that challenge the framing of Egypt as an Islamic civilization, while maintaining a curated image of Egypt as multicultural. In doing so, the narrative asserts who counts as “Egyptian” defining them in religious terms that privilege an Islamic identity, while

overlooking the fact that many Egyptians are Christian. In addition, through the tokenization of Nubians, the narrative distances Egypt from its African identity, preferring to associate with the West through an adoption of their orientalist gaze.

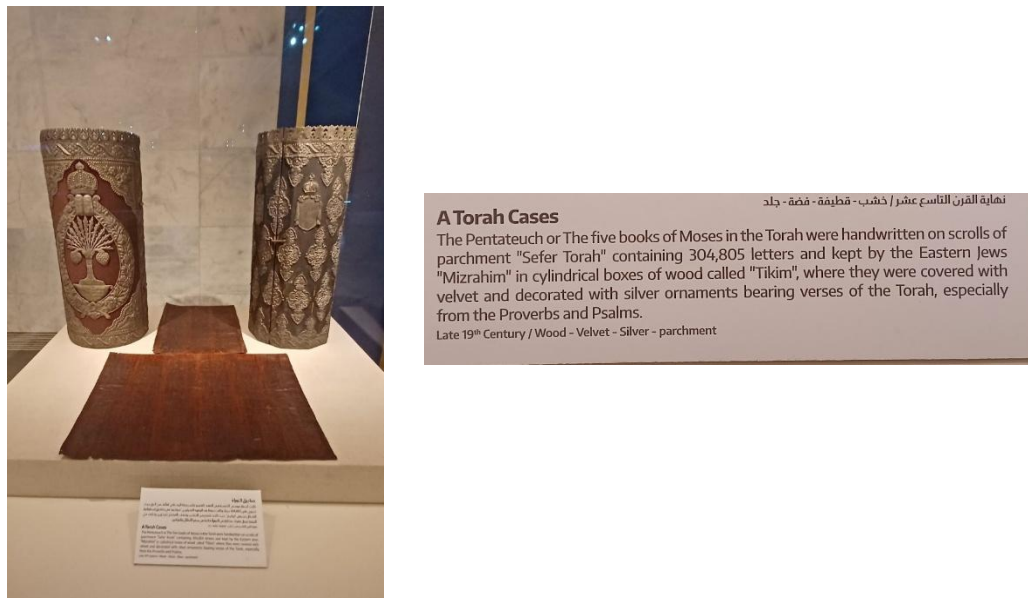


FIGURE 34: TORAH DISPLAY AND PLACARD

#### 5.4.6 The State, The Ruler

The final major theme in the narrative of the NMEC is the conception of the national leader and the state. Closely tied to gender representation, where men are most often cast as the primary agents of historical change, rulers are portrayed as decisive figures responsible for the state's welfare and development. They are constructed as singular strongmen whose ambition secures the glory of the nation. Religion is also central as the ruler is not only ambitious, authoritarian, and devoted to the state's prosperity, but also closely connected to God. Through the narrative principle of repetition, this image is reinforced across historical periods, creating a sense of continuity from antiquity to the present. In doing so, the museum naturalizes an authoritarian and religious model of governance, implicitly suggesting that Egypt has always been ruled in this way.

The first mention of state functions is described in the information plaque dedicated to ancient Egypt, in which it describes the "old administrative machinery in history" (Fig. 14). The text lays out the roles of various aspects of government, the first being the divine nature of the ruler. This theme comes up

consistently through the Pharaonic era, kings are almost always depicted in relation to some kind of God or divine rule. This expands beyond the Pharaonic era however, as Alexander the Great was depicted as being a religious man, one who greatly respected the religion of the ancient Egyptians (Fig. 7). Further on, there is a clear emphasis of the Islamic credentials of rulers as they are often depicted building Islamic inspired architecture, or their Islam otherwise emphasized.

The historical figures of the Ali Dynasty depicted in the modern era are more implicitly constructed as religious, due to the character of the state and their position in it. It is not stated in their information placards; however, their displays are surrounded by Islamic artifacts (Fig. 21), emphasizing the Islamic character of the state, if not the ruler directly. The ancient Egypt historical panel goes on to define the nature of the ruler, noting that he is protector of the people and of the nation's borders (Fig. 14). This is reinforced through a display about the Royal Insignia (Fig. 28) which notes the role of the ruler; to wield the power of the state and protect the people.

The panel on Dynastic Egypt also assigns a role to the military, describing it as responsible for internal security and the expansion of Egypt's borders (Fig. 14). It further notes the importance of ministers in assisting the king with governance and resource management. This caste of ministers is entirely masculinized: throughout the museum, ministers of state are invariably depicted as male, with the only exception being in religious contexts, where women are shown in priestly roles. While the panel outlines the functions of king, army, and ministers, the museum firmly positions the monarch as the central political actor. Rulers are shown as the primary wielders of military power, with their victories, such as those of Thutmose III in expanding Egypt into an empire (Fig. 37) or Muhammad Ali's extension of dominion into Sudan (Fig. 10), particularly glorified. Ministers, by contrast, are presented in purely administrative capacities, a portrayal repeated across the museum's displays.

Another role consistently ascribed to rulers in the museum's narrative is that of the builder. Alongside military victories, architectural projects are

highlighted as among a ruler's greatest achievements. In the Royal Mummy Hall, just about every ruler has either some reference to a construction project he initiated or a military victory in which he was responsible for. In the main exhibition, a similar trend can be observed. The Greco Roman period often discusses Alexander the Great's building of Alexandria and the various architectural projects related to it, such as the Pharos Lighthouse or the Great Library (Fig. 8). The Islamic period contains emphasis on accomplishments by Ibn Qalawun in the realm of architecture such as the al-Balaq palace (Fig. 25). When one arrives in the modern period, architectural accomplishments by the Ali Dynasty are emphasized, such as the building of the Suez Canal and various modernization projects in Cairo (Fig. 10).

Taken together, these displays construct an image of the Egyptian ruler as a divinely sanctioned, militarily powerful, and architecturally ambitious patriarch, whose authority is both absolute and central to the states conceptual organization. Through repetition of particular depictions of leaders as religiously devoted, the museum's narrative constructs political authority with spiritual legitimacy. Military victories and monumental building projects are presented as evidence of enduring attributes of leadership across millennia. This repetition naturalizes an authoritarian, masculinized model of governance, recasting it as an unbroken national tradition from antiquity to the present. In doing so, the NMEC's narrative works ideologically to legitimate contemporary forms of centralized rule by embedding them within a timeless vision of Egyptian statehood.



### King Thutmose III

Thutmose III was one of the greatest warrior kings in ancient Egypt and leader of a unique military genius in planning battles and war operations that made Egypt a great power in the ancient world. He succeeded in establishing a great empire that extended from the Euphrates in the north and the 5<sup>th</sup> Cataract to the south. Moreover, he commissioned many architectural projects and erected temples in the Delta, Memphis, Karnak, and Aswan.

New Kingdom - 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1550 - 1295 BC) / Karnak / Black granite

FIGURE 35: KING THUTMOSE III DISPLAY AND PLACARD

## 6. Conclusion

This research sought to uncover how the National Museum of Egyptian Civilization constructs a narrative of the Egyptian nation through its curated content, spatial arrangement, and architecture in a way that expresses and reinforces the state's nationalist ideology. Through an analysis utilizing the principles of narratology, the research has established a set of themes that illustrate the nationalist ideology of the Egyptian state. The analysis indicated that through the museum's narrative, the state has constructed the Egyptian nation as one with a deep foundation in its Pharaonic past, alongside an emphasis on

its Islamic past and present. It showed how the state views political power, gender relations, culture, and its sense of self.

Narrative analysis was utilized due to the essentially narrative nature of museum display. The sequential nature of the museum visit, along with the connection of the past and present through the use and interpretation of objects positions the museum as especially amenable to this type of analysis. In addition, as an ideological state apparatus, the museum functions as an ideal medium to tell stories of the nation that reinforces nationalist ideology.

Understanding the narrative of the museum is an ambitious task. Including every aspect requires a thorough, interdisciplinary approach that this research has attempted. However, including all insights gained from the research requires a project of greater length. With that said, this research presented the main themes of the museum's narrative and adequately made the case for an empirical reading of the museum's nationalist ideology.

What was not the focus of this study is exactly how this ideology is internalized by visitors. The museum was theorized here as an institution that promotes nationalist ideology in the hopes that visitors internalize the message and come to identify with the message being presented. However, a further study on visitor experience to show to what extent this is achieved would serve as a valuable continuation of this study. In addition, this research did not engage directly with staff that had a role in the creation of the narrative. Further engagement with actual museum staff and their intention when they created displays would also prove to be a beneficial accompaniment to the themes put forth in this research.

Ultimately, this research contributed to the field of new museology and the study of nationalism in the museum through a thorough application of narrative principles and analysis of nationalism in an under researched context. With this research, the use of museums as an ideological tool of the state was further explored. It also contributed to an understanding of the nationalist ideology of a state who is emerging from various crises and with a complicated past in regard to nationalist ideology.

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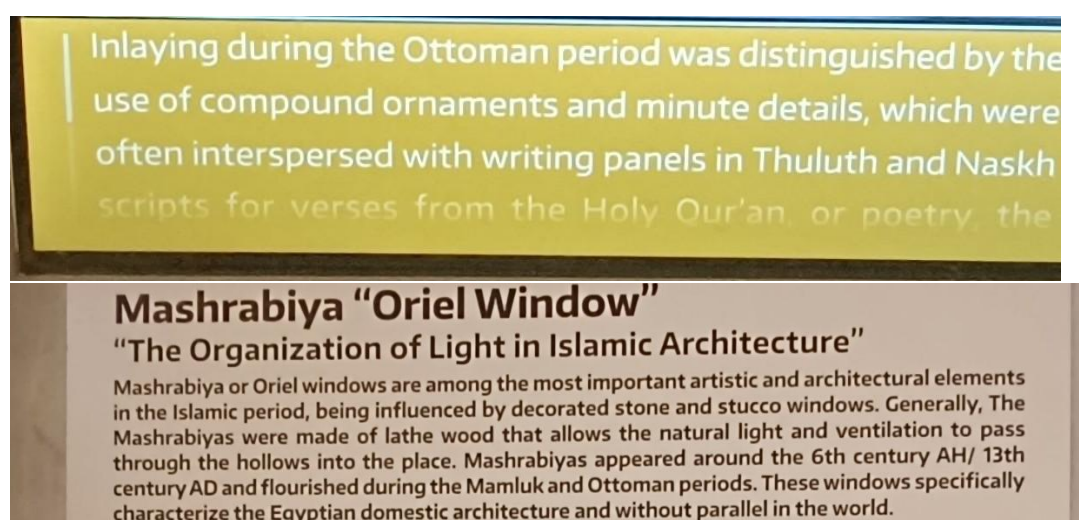
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## Appendix A: Mentions of Ottoman Period



### **Mashrabiya “Oriel Window”**

Mashrabiya appeared around the 6th century AH/ 13th century AD and flourished during the Mamluk and Ottoman period.

Mashrabiya consists of small pieces of wood that are collected to make a latticework that allows the entry of air and light and allows those inside to see the outside. It also distributes and renews the air, where the narrow holes from the bottom allow cold air to enter, and from the top with wide openings for the exit of hot air, thus the air circulates inside the house and is constantly



## Appendix B: Islamic Artifacts



## Appendix C: Depictions of Men



### Stela of King Qa'a

Qa'a was the last king of the first Dynasty that witnessed the rise of the monarchy and the establishment of the unified state. This stela is one of several stele which he erected in front of his tomb in Abydos. His Horus name is recorded above the decoration known as "Serekh" (the royal palace). The Horus name is one of the oldest royal titles in ancient Egypt which associates the king with Horus, the patron of kingship, as his heir on the throne of Egypt.

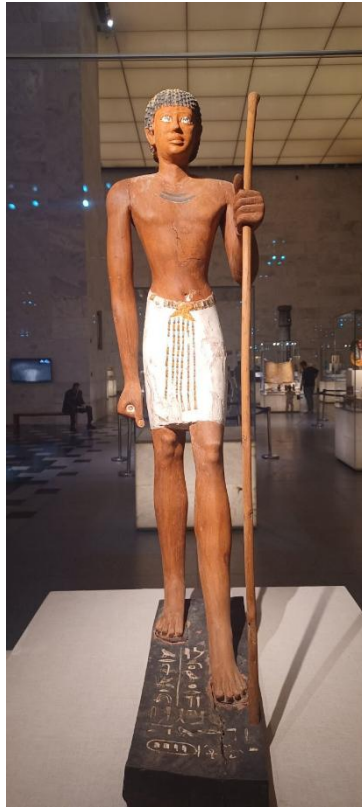
Archaic period. 1<sup>st</sup> Dynasty (3100 – 2890 BC) / Abydos / Basalt



### The Judge Kaherset

Kaherset occupied the position of the judge and royal scribe during the Old Kingdom. He erected this rare funerary wooden stela that depicts him with his family members.

Old Kingdom, 5<sup>th</sup> dynasty (2494 – 2345 BC) / Saqqara / Wood



### Niankhpepy Kem's Statue

Niankhpepy Kem was a very important individual, holding many titles, including: Overseer of Upper Egypt, Head of the Treasury, and Sole Counselor of the King. This rare wooden statue shows Niankhpepy Kem's elaborate clothing and accessories appropriate to his rank: a pleated kilt secured by an elaborate belt.

Old Kingdom, 6<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (2345 – 2181 BC) / Meir, Asyut / Painted wood - Stucco



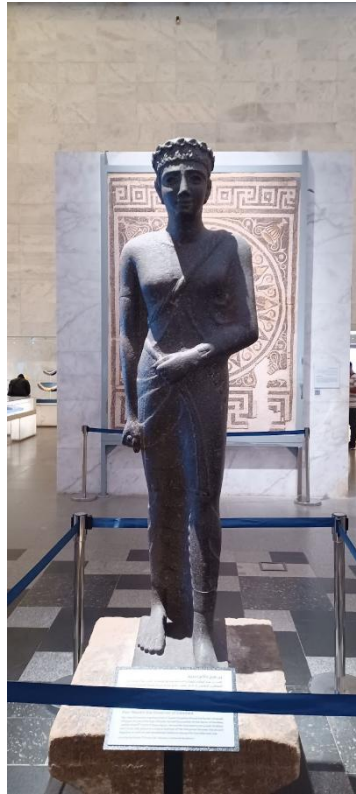
الدولة الوسطى، الأسرة الثانية عشر ( ١٦٨٥ - ١٧٩٥ ق.م ) / هواره - الفيوم / جرائيت السود

## Sphinx of King Amenemhat III

Sphinx statues expressed the living king on the throne as the image of the god "Shu", who was depicted as a crouching lion that controls the boundaries of the universe.

This statue was one of the statues of Amenemhat III which flanked the processional route in front of his great temple at Hawara.

Middle Kingdom. 12<sup>th</sup> Dynasty (1985 – 1795 BC) / Hawara – Faiyum / Black Granite



### **Pen-Menkh the Governor of Dendara**

Pen-Menkh lived during the period of Queen Cleopatra VII and the Roman conquest of Egypt. As one of the high officials, he held the position of the Mayor of Dendara, capital of the 6<sup>th</sup> Nome of Upper Egypt. He was the royal deputy and priest of Hathor and Horus, this statue is a unique example of the mergence between the ancient Egyptian art with its well established traditions along with the Hellenistic one.

Greco Roman Period. 1<sup>st</sup> Century BC / Dendara / Granite and Sandstone.