

## **Site Specific Texts:**

### **Embodied Performances in the Written Record of Late Period Egypt in the Past and the Present**

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Liturgical and ritual performances always formed an important part of activities taking place in Egyptian temples (Arnold, 1992, 47-49), but there is little clear documentation of them before the later first millennium B. C. E. In 6<sup>th</sup> century B. C. E., a group of northern rulers, known as the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, controlled Egypt following a period of rule by the Kushite kings of Sudan and an invasion by the Assyrians before being subsumed by the Persian empire. Although there were periods of sporadic revolt after this, native rule of Egypt was to all intents and purposes over. Most of the texts which describe liturgical and ritual activities are found on the walls of temples dating from the subsequent Ptolemaic period (332-30 B.C. E.), when the land was ruled by descendants of one of Alexander's generals and a large, culturally Greek community was established, from whom members of the ruling elite were drawn. Indeed, the Ptolemaic temples are notable for extremely extensive inscriptions that give an enormous amount of information about all kinds of mythological, theological and ritual matters (Kurth, 1997).

The fact that the only detailed expositions of many important religious performances, theological dogma and descriptions and directions for the use of important cultic paraphernalia occurs in these documents raises a number of issues. Are we dealing with the invention of a tradition designed to bolster indigenous identity in the face of political and cultural pressure by outsiders? Or are we looking at the reworking of existing materials as a form of resistance to these pressures? On the other hand, are foreign rulers appropriating the cultural archive for the purposes of legitimation? Or is the entire corpus a massive work of exegesis that tried to recuperate and explain a tradition lost in repeated and catastrophic discontinuities? While some interrogations of

this material presuppose that it constitutes a discourse of resistance (Fairman, 1973, 33; Watterson, 1998, 103), it is obvious that its perpetuation both as text and activity and the imposing structures in which this took place were the result of generous patronage by these foreign rulers. Indeed there is considerable documentation of the enthusiastic participation of Ptolemaic pharaohs in various cultic and patronage events connected with the temples which remained important centres of economic activity (Bowman, 1986).

Even more intriguing than the problematic nature of these texts is their site specificity. In fact, the majority of Egyptian monumental texts are site-specific. From the Third Millennium onwards texts and representations in or around the cult rooms of Egyptian temples showed the king performing key acts in the cult (Baines, 1997, 223ff.) and private tomb chapels depicted mummification, the funeral procession and the offering ritual, the latter of which occurred in or nearby the chapel. Temples of the New Kingdom depict processions on their walls. Actual processions would have included the temple on their routes. Kings of this period, like other Near Eastern Rulers, erected monumental stelae inscribed with accounts of wars or the texts of international treaties at prominent places in their foreign dominions, often at natural boundaries such as rivers. However, although many of these texts and representations clearly depict ritual and liturgical routines or processions, they do not describe the performance in any detail. Apart from having a “magical” or “symbolic” function, these documents assume a prior knowledge of the activity preserved either in memory or on papyrus. By contrast, the materials preserved in Ptolemaic temples and Late Period Papyri give very specific instructions either for acts or speeches or both. As we shall see, deliberate juxtaposition of these texts and representations with particular spaces inside the temples and elsewhere allows us to begin to understand how they unfolded within the space and who was involved. In the case of the Apis bull funeral there survive a large number of textual sources as well as buildings and spaces that can be associated with the activities described in them. The existence of such sources in relation to the spaces in which the activities were performed allows not only for their reconstruction but re-enactment. For the past five years I have directed the performance of several of these religious routines by my students in an undergraduate class at York University which examines the culture of Graeco-Roman Egypt. But while the production of these activities and the

interpersonal interaction and coordination of the players is useful in reconstructing the *habitus* and logistical constraints of the original participants, a direct working out of the relationship with the sites has not proved possible. Our exploration of the space of Egyptian ritual performance takes place through the mechanism of *allegory*, defined here as the extension of a metaphor through an entire speech (act) or passage (Lanham, 1991).

The mummification and burial of the Apis bull, the activity with the earliest attestation, is recorded not in a temple but a number of sources, including papyrus documents, numerous dedicatory stelae found in the communal burial place of these creatures in old Egyptian capital, Memphis and assorted literary sources in Greek and Latin. The dedicatory stelae which extend back as far as the 9<sup>th</sup> century B. C. E., describe mourning for the bull and its funeral procession (Vercoutter, 1962). P. Vindobiensis 3873 is a collection of notes from other sources on how to embalm the bull and probably dates to the early 2<sup>nd</sup> century B. C. E., although it incorporates material going back to the 7<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> century (Vos, 1993, 15-16). The Serapeum Papyri, of the same date, are a collection of Greek documents found near the burial place of the bulls, and refer to young twin girls who were actual participants in the funeral (Wilcken, 1927). Numerous other textual sources refer to the obsequies of this animal, a incarnation of the gods who enjoyed a cult of national, if not international importance up to the 4<sup>th</sup> century C. E. An ostentatious burial vault for these animals was constructed by the rulers of the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty in the 7<sup>th</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> centuries (Mariette, 1857-82), and they also refurbished the mummification house for the bulls which has recently been reexcavated and intensively studied (Jones and Milward Jones, 1982-88) as has P. Vindob (Vos, 1993). In the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, rulers who had fought off Persian domination in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, constructed a great processional way, lined with sphinxes across the desert to the front of the tomb, along with a complex of temples and rest houses (Davies and Smith, 1997). This ensemble continued in use until the Roman conquest in the first century B. C. E. Study of both the sites and the text has allowed the formation of plausible hypotheses about what happened during the burial rites, when and tentatively, where.

The *Triumph of Horus* is a series of texts and representations found on the outer northern wall of the sanctuary of the temple of Horus at Edfu in southern Egypt. This temple which replaced a New Kingdom building, was built by the Ptolemaic rulers

between the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries B. C. E. and was dedicated to Horus, the god of the kingship (Cauville, 1984,1987). It clearly served as centre for the legitimation of their rule in an area which on occasion had offered it vociferous resistance (Watterson, 1998). The *Triumph of Horus* is part of a ensemble describing the festival of Victory, one of a number of such celebrations that took place in the temple on a yearly basis, and celebrates the victory of the god over his enemies, who are also the enemies of the state. The *Triumph of Horus* describes his vanquishing of Set, the slayer of his father Osiris, in the form of a hippopotamus. A series of tableaux, combined with brief descriptions of the action and speeches, have been interpreted as scenes of a play, complete with a chorus and responses by the audience (Fairman, 1973). Support for this theory has been recently provided by a demotic (cursive) text with a similar subject whose layout clearly shows its dramatic character (Gaudard, 1999). While the character of the work seems assured, its venue is unclear. The text itself specifies a lake, perhaps the sacred lake of the temple, but this has been questioned on the grounds of the logistics of the actual site (Fairman, 1974; Geßler-Löhr, 1983).

While the funeral of the Apis bull was a public spectacle, as was perhaps the *Triumph of Horus*, the Mysteries of Osiris was just that, a secret activity performed at the beginning of winter, when the crops were planted, that ensured both the fecundity of the land and resurrection of the dead (Cauville, 1988). While the Mysteries of Osiris is attested as far back as the Middle Kingdom (early 2<sup>nd</sup> Millennium B. C.. E.), they took quite a different form, consisting of a procession and a mock battle (Meeks and Favard-Meeks, 1996). By the later period this event had been subsumed in a private routine where two small figures made out of sand and barley, on one hand, and alchemical elements on the other. A text in the roof chapels of the temple of Dendera, also in southern Egypt, describes in great detail how this is done, as well as a number of ancillary events that take place around this activity (Chassinat, 1968). Sylvie Cauville's intensive study of this and other texts and representations in the roof chapels, suggests that all the activities, unless otherwise stated, took place in these chapels, which were constructed by Cleopatra the Great in memory of her father in the mid first century B. C. E. (Cauville, 1997a, b). Prosopographical materials from this area also point to actual individuals who could have been involved in these events (Cauville, 1999).

In all of these above performances, characters or roles are specified as well as materials and/or props to be used. In the case of the *Triumph of Horus*, the location is generally specified, that of the Apis bull obsequies can be ascertained with a little more precision, and the Mysteries of Osiris is entirely site specific. In the case of the Triumph of Horus, there is considerable latitude in choosing the site of the performance. My class at York University chose a large indoor public space with a walk through audience who were given programmes with scripts of the responses. The mummification of the Apis bull took place in two different rooms, one for the evisceration and the other for the bandaging. The procession required a little more ingenuity, it being necessary to devise a route the same length as the Serapeum way and take into account topographical features such as lakes. Not all the topographical features of the site or text could be accommodated. The Mysteries of Osiris took place in analogous but not similar spaces, such as classrooms or hallways with a final public ceremony and a burial of the models in a wood representing the sacred necropolis. The events happened at different times of year and in different climatic conditions to the originals. Wouldn't it just be easier to perform these routines on the original site and learn more about their relationship to the spaces provided for them?

At this point I would like to address Ian Hodder's paper, "Performances at Sites," which appeared on the University of Surrey at Roehampton Archaeology and Performance website in October 2002 (Hodder, [www.roehampton.ac.uk/arts/performance/ARCHAEOLOGY/](http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/arts/performance/ARCHAEOLOGY/) ). In this piece, Hodder examines activities at the site of Çatal Höyük, where "the urge to perform at the site itself has become more clearly stated of late." Hodder notes two types of performance at sites. Firstly there are those by archaeologists themselves, designed to better understand the relationship of the space to the body, and secondly there are performances by artists or individuals with a spiritual purpose in mind. The latter tend to be members of cultural or social elites, and in postcolonial societies, generally visitors from the west or westernized upper or middle class. Hodder's discussion suggests that the fragmenting and individuating effects of globalization exist in tension with its totalizing aspects and that such performances are a form of neo-colonial intervention, albeit a subtle and diffused one. However, Hodder concludes that if a mutual awareness and tolerance

can prevail, an enhanced sense of locality may be generated.

Hodder elects not to deal with events like large scale performances of *Açda*, although, as I will argue below, they have some relevance to this discussion. He focusses on Adrienne Momi's spiral installation at Çatal Höyük as well as the interventions of "New Age" travellers at this and other archaeological sites. Hodder observes that such travellers are "searching for personal renewal, searching for self in the otherness of the past," or if I may put it this way, increasing their spiritual capital through the reification of other space, so to say, other time. (The two are often confused.) What kinds of outcomes are there for these quests?

In 1974, U. S. conceptual artist Lowry Burgess, travelled to Afghanistan, to Bamiyan, to create *Inclined Galactic Light Pond*, an ephemeral site-specific work, designed as the first part of a larger composition, *Quiet Axis*, encompassing terrestrial and extra-terrestrial sites. Each month, over a six month period, Burgess buried two holograms showing part of an image of waterlilies in a lake. This site was situated in the Kushkak valley and oriented between the giant Buddhas and the rising sun (Burgess, 1987). During his stay in Bamiyan, the artist reported excellent relations with the people who lived there.

In Spring of 2001, following the destruction of the Buddhas on order of the Taliban government, Burgess wrote a manifesto entitled "The Right to Historical Memory," in which he argued "as global networked communication systems grow in flat simultaneous electronic time, more and more the actual artifacts and monuments from deep historical time increase in psychological and sociological significance...The participation of historical artifacts and monuments in this local-global communication and communion is dependant on their continued existence." (Burgess, 2001) While Burgess seems largely in agreement with Hodder on this point, one might ask whose locality and whose communion? Like archeological finds and even performances, the destruction of the Buddhas of Bamiyan has its own context.

While this act was apparently in direct retaliation for the closure of the only unofficial Afghan government office in the U. S., there is also a long history of destruction of Buddhist images going back at least to the 1920s (Bernbeck, 2002). Such activities were also motivated by the almost exclusive orientation of foreign

archeological work in Afghanistan to the non-Islamic past and the disruptive nature of their explorations. (For example, the painted caves at Bamiyan were once home to many families). The situation also seems to have been exacerbated by offers of various western based entities to buy these and other images in the Kabul museum at a time when humanitarian aid was being refused to the Afghan government (Bernbeck, 2002).

On November 17, 1997, over 60 people, most of them foreign tourists, were killed by gunmen at the temple of Deir el Bahari at Luxor in southern Egypt. Members of al-Gamaa al-Islamiyya, who claimed responsibility, said the tourists were killed while their gunmen were trying to take them hostage in an attempt to secure the release of their spiritual leader Omar Abdel Rahman. from a U.S. prison, where he was being held in connection with the first attack on the World Trade Center in 1993 (Van Marsh 1997). Attacks like these which had been taking place since 1992, were intended to undermine the tourist industry, which is crucial to Egypt's economy, thereby destabilizing the secular regime of Hosni Mubarak (Anon. 1997; Meskell and Pels, 2004). However, it may not be a coincidence that less than three weeks before, a performance of *Açda*, "an imperial spectacle designed to alienate and impress an almost exclusively European audience" (Said, 1993), had taken place on the site. Productions of *Açda* are extremely costly to mount and prohibitively expensive to attend. Such productions cater only to the very rich, which is of course equally true in the developed as in the developing world.

In a dramatic reversal of these scenarios, and one that deploys an allegorical turn, Alberto Fujimori, the former president of Peru, re-conceived, reinterpreted, recreated, represented and had performed the archaeological site of Chavín de Huántar. This all took place between December 1996 and April 1997, when a series of tunnels was dug beneath the Japanese embassy in Lima in order to free hostages taken by Tupac Amaru guerillas. Fujimori claimed that he was inspired by a dream about the 3,000 year old site with its network of underground galleries, thereby devising his plan for freeing the hostages (Silverman, 1999). The president cleverly chose a site with both nationalistic and spiritual resonance for Peruvians, although the original use of the tunnels was clearly cultic rather than military and the enactment involved real soldiers and guns in an operation that ended a real hostage situation at considerable loss of life.

The Deir el Bahari massacre, the destruction of Bamiyan Buddhas and the Ghriba

synagogue in Tunis (CBC Online Staff, 2002) and the proposed demolition of Strasbourg Cathedral by el Qaida operatives (Valasek, 2002) point to the development of a site-specific cultural terrorism (also related to the “cultural cleansing” that has recently been seen in India and the former Yugoslavia and part of what has been described as a discourse of “negative heritage” [Meskell, 1998; 2002]) that is one kind of response, albeit of a very negative kind, to the globalization of the local, on the spatial and temporal level. Pressure brought to bear on these sites and those who people them can take the form, not only of tourism but of a system of value that privileges exotic pasts against impoverished and ideologically strident or divided presents. In this sense, the performing the site by outsiders is the last step in a trajectory of appropriation that replaces the present, localized *habitus* with one that completely alienates it from its environment. While Fujimori’s performing of Chavín de Huántar, at first appears as its opposite, it is also another hegemonic intervention/appropriation. Local actors have little chance to intervene in this process. Although I am not trying to argue for a direct relationship between site-specific performances, archaeological or otherwise, in the developing world, and vandalistic and/or terrorist acts that involve heritage sites, I believe they exist in a charged contiguity. Ruptures of discursive understanding go beyond the production of vibrant new identities but instead reveal unbridgeable gulfs more akin to the *differend* of Lyotard (1988) than the culturescapes of Appadurai (1991). The impact of recent wars on the landscape is experienced by archaeologists as much as other human activities but it has not been discussed and theorized as much as it could be (Bernbeck, 2002). Nor should it be forgotten that political, economic, ideological and even logistical impetus of such conflicts flows, like other cultural and economic activities, from the developed to the developing world.

To conclude, even if the formidable logistical and economic obstacles to performing the ancient routines described above on the original sites were to be removed, I would still have considerable reservations about the re-location of this kind of activity. The discursive gaps and conflicts around such events raise not only the spectre of actual conflict leading to bodily harm, but also suggest that the sites in their present form are not so “actual” after all. A performance by persons from the developed world in, say, an ancient Egyptian monument at the present time might be every bit as *allegorical* as it

would be back in North America.

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