

Egyptian Notions of Cultural Heritage in Ancient Times: Memory and Identity

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Paper-abstract

Monuments as material culture are created and interpreted by people, but they can also be re-interpreted and mis-interpreted. They imbue values and convey messages that often shift over time. Thus, the same monument can be a container of multiple cultural meanings. The biography of monuments entails a sequence of different moments including alterations, restorations, destruction, reuse, remembrance, and forgetting. Furthermore, monuments can be vehicles of inscriptions that fix people and events in time. Like monuments, inscriptions also go through different phases that may include revisions and erasures. They can lose their original meaning or suffer the consequences of people's desire to erase the memory of individuals (*damnatio memoriae*).

The concepts of *permanence* and *preservation* were deeply rooted in the culture of pharaonic Egypt (ca 2700–332 BCE), and were also embodied in the Ancient Egyptian word for “monuments”: *mnw* (read: menu), which derives from the verb *mn* (read: men) that means “to be stable, firm, established”, and “to endure”. Despite the absence of law codices from Ancient Egypt, restoration programs were extensively undertaken throughout the pharaonic time, and even later when Egypt became a Roman province. *Restoration inscriptions* carved on the façades, gateways, and walls of buildings bear evidence of monumental intervention in the form of restorations, reconstructions, and embellishments. Furthermore, explicit allusions to the *intent* to preserve or destroy monuments, *implicit wishes* and *metaphors* on the protection or not of monuments appear in different genres of written compositions on various material formats such as papyrus and ostrakon. Previous studies have mostly focussed on the methods of restoration, as the monumental interventions are archaeologically traceable. Moreover, the *restoration inscriptions* have so far only been studied in their relationship to the archaeological traces of the restoration work. Special attention also went to the *post-Amarna* period, when repairs were made to monuments that had been vandalized under King Akhenaten (ca. 1353-1336 BCE) as *damnatio memoriae*. Hitherto, there has been no discussion on the Egyptian concept itself of *preservation of monuments* and the attitudes towards it. In this paper I will discuss selected excerpts from textual sources to give you some examples of different ways in which ancient Egyptians conceptualised and dealt with the preservation and destruction of monuments. The assessment of the inscriptions will help to fix the (changing) identity of monuments by reconstructing the various phases of their cultural meaning.