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THE INTERNATIONAL SCIENTIFIC COOPERATION IN THE CONSERVATION OF THE MONUMENTAL HERITAGE IN THE EGYPTIAN ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

The importance of the Egyptian monumental heritage and its conservation has captured international attention for a long time, particularly that of European countries, where restoration knowledge is based on old theoretical and technological experience.

Egypt can boast a real tradition in promoting scientific cooperation in the field with foreign countries. Since 1881, Egyptian and foreign scientists have organized both documentation and conservation activities together, in the "Comité de Conservation de l'Art Arabe" and the "Service des Antiquités", laying the basis of the scientific cooperation operating in the field at the present time.

Since 1952 the exchange of technical knowledge and a common elaboration of restoration methodologies has been carried out mostly through the activity of foreign archaeological missions, but on occasion, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization has asked for foreign intervention in order to utilize "high technologies for the rescue of particular monuments (for example, recently, the temples of Abu Simbel and Philae).

The international cooperation was strengthened during the UNESCO campaign for the rescue of the Nubian cultural heritage.

Nevertheless, the numerous cases of cooperation (that kind of "cooperation") have not usually promoted the training of a self-operating Egyptian staff, fit for facing the serious and specific restoration and conservation problems of the Egyptian heritage and environment.

International meetings have repeatedly emphasized the emergency situation of the monuments and more recently, that the progression of the decay is becoming more and more rapid, but these warnings have had an operative and permanent effect only in a few cases. As a matter of fact and in spite of the great efforts, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization and other Egyptian institutions, have fought till now against mass ignorance and indifference concerning its own heritage, and the availability of a restoring staff which is not numerous enough for prepared enough nor facing the particular problems of our monuments.

The presence and the activities of the "Italian-Egyptian Restoration Center" (which is a seat of the "Centro di Formazione per il Restauro e l'Archeologia") has proven to be much more important in the present situation.

Since its beginning, the "Cairo Center" has been characterized by the interest to involve the Egyptians in the restoration research and activities. In fact, the founder and promoter is Prof. Fanfoni, whose presence as a teacher in the restoration field had been required by the Cairo University. The University course provided a practical experience and activity, flanking the methodological teaching. The restoration yard was

located in the Mewlewi Dervishes Sama'khana, fortunately and casually discovered by Prof. Burri.

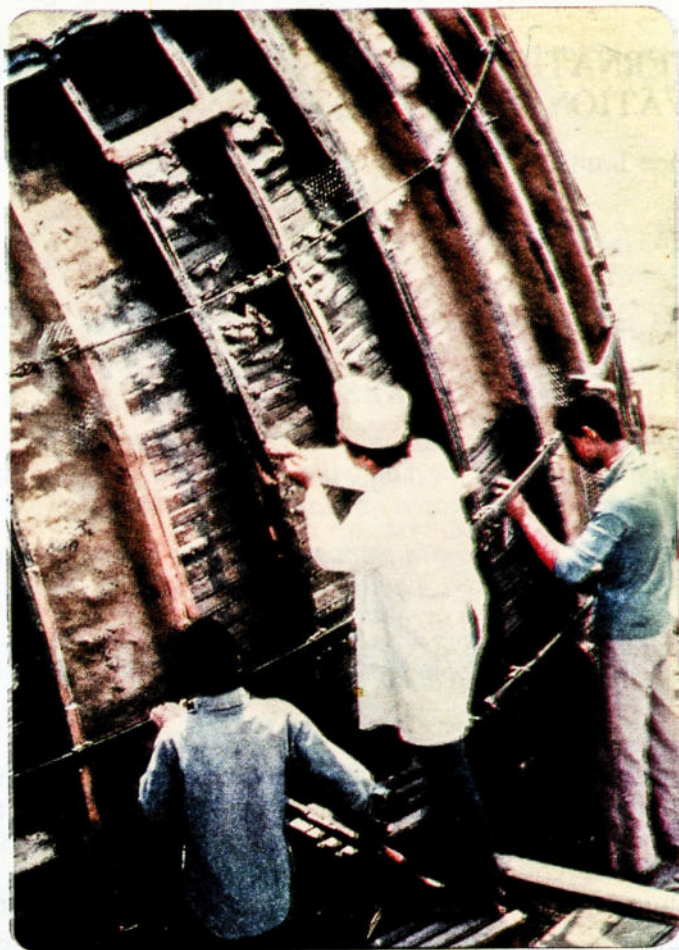


Fig. 1. The restoration of the Sama'khana dome

It was 1977. Since that year the field-school in Helmeyyah had been developing its aim of creating a Restoration Center. An association was founded in 1986, including Italian and Egyptian members. The "Italian-Egyptian Center for Restoration and Archaeology" was officially inaugurated in 1988.

The Restoration Center has acquired a large experience in the knowledge and utilization of local materials and historical techniques in the course of its long activity. Meanwhile, "appropriate technologies" have been developed, which respect the historical aspects of the restored buildings by integrating the old materials with the ones, and properly deal with the specific problems linked with the geological and geographical environment and its recent modifications.

That is due to the fact that the restoration project of the Mewlewi architectural complex developed also through direct experience and knowledge of the ancient materials and techniques used in the buildings in the course of time. Therefore, this also explains the choice of restoration materials.

For example, the analysis of the ancient materials determined the selection and choice of consolidating mixtures for the injection in the walls, respecting the compatibility with the resins presently available. Of course, new materials and techniques were used for the waterproofing and the thermal insulation of the building in sight of the changed atmospheric and climatic conditions of the country, but particular attention was given in each case in order to respect and preserve the original aspects of the building itself.



Fig. 2. The archaeological remain of Sunqur Sa'di Madrasa and the iron structure supporting the over-lying Sama'khana



Fig. 3. The painting restoration intervention

Fine artisan solutions were found for sewing-up the laths forming a covering under and over the wood centers of the dome structure, and for keeping the original connections of the beams.

A complex technical system was devised in order to allow for archaeological excavations under the Sama'khana, which was saved by a solution that provided for the recovery of the most ancient Islamic remains found in the area till now.

A documentation of the works carried out, with specifications relating to the materials and technical solutions is the subject of a permanent didactic exhibition located in the "Center" itself.

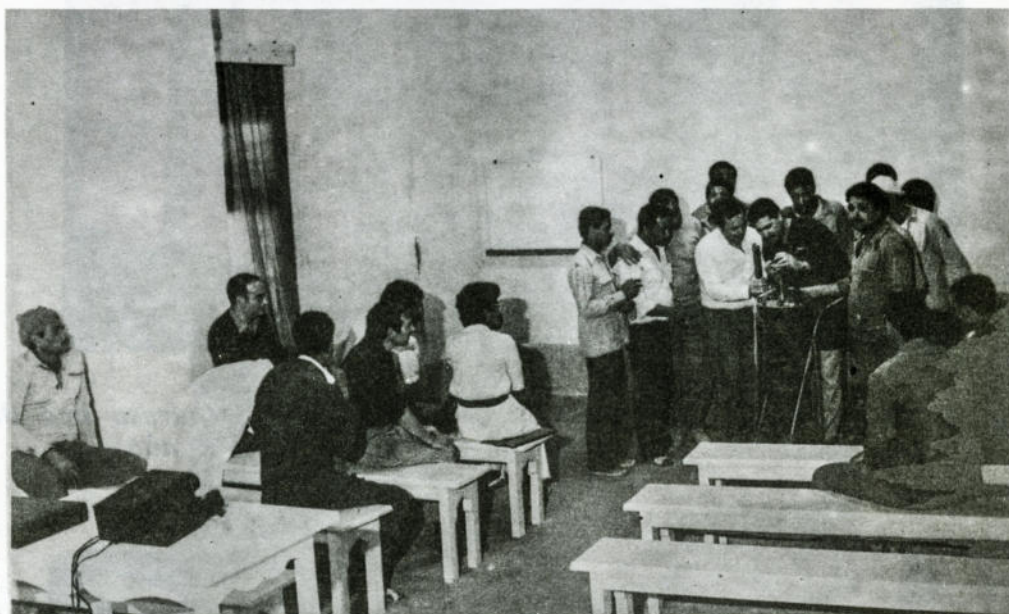


Fig. 4. A group of Egyptian students during the theoretical lesson.

The working experience of the "Italian-Egyptian Center" has shown that a restoration project must develop in its course and on the spot, by studying directly the monuments in every moment and from an interdisciplinary point of view. For that reason, restoration projects cannot be directly imported.

The high technologies can facilitate diagnosis and work, but are useless if they are not elaborated by the technical support given by practical and operative intervention and knowledge. Moreover, they are usually very expensive, and it is better, when possible, to utilize more modest (and generally well tested) means.

Direct and constant observation has pointed out that the most dangerous element of decay of the Egyptian monuments is strictly linked with the geological origin of the building materials and the geological aspects of the ground. The raising of the High Dam has increased the speed of the natural degradation of the monuments.

Only the long study on the rising dampness has convinced Prof. Fanfoni to use "advanced technologies" with the consent and the cooperation of the Egyptian antiquities Organization. Specific machinery was imported and modified, owing to particular aspects of the masonry of the walls. Presently new elements of the machinery have recently been made directly in Egypt, in order to increase the working power of the equipment, according to a political program of the "Italian-Egyptian Center" aiming to utilize the local means, as far as possible, and to train local experts and craftsmen. In fact, only those kinds of experts can adequately and permanently conserve their huge monumental heritage with the help of a real international

cooperation. Many university students and inspectors and craftsmen from the Egyptian Antiquities Organization after training have become teachers themselves in the antiquities organization and universities.

For that reason I want to conclude my paper by saying that our monuments cannot wait any longer because they are already decaying. The Egyptian heritage needs quickly skilled personnel and to be physically supported (not just Pharaonic projects and very expensive technical solutions, since we have no time to verify if they can be achieved), because every day we are losing a piece of our history.



Fig. 5. The interior of the restored Sama'khana.

I hope that, in sight of this, the Italian Authorities will support their cooperation institutions which have been operating for a long time in the restoration field with documented results.

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