

The Artifaction of the Memnon Head

According to the curator's report, the head of the statue of the younger Memnon was elevated onto its pedestal in the Egyptian Sculpture Room in early January 1819.¹ Perhaps, by the end of this day, when it was set among other Egyptian antiquities in the British Museum, the Memnon head had become that special kind of modern object known as an artifact. Yet it is highly doubtful whether the act of elevation in and of itself transformed the object into the museum artifact. More reasonably, one might recognize it as merely one event in a long chain of events in the biography of the object. Fortunately, much of this narrative is available by way of travel accounts and the correspondence between the collectors in Egypt, the officers of the British Museum, and their go-betweens in the navy and the diplomatic corps. Thus the Memnon head's movements can be traced with surprising precision. In late July 1816, a work team removed the head from its location in the complex of ancient Theban ruins called at the time the Memnonium. On August 12, 1816, it arrived on the west bank of the Nile, opposite the town of Luxor.² On November 21, it was loaded onto a flat-bottomed river barge. It arrived in Cairo on December 15,³ and in Rosetta on January 10, 1817. Four days later, British military engineers unloaded it at the pasha's warehouse in the port of Alexandria.⁴ By this time, the museum trustees had been notified many times over by travelers and diplomatic agents that the colossal statue was on its way to London. The head then waited in Alexandria⁵ as the British Museum and the Foreign Office arranged transportation with the British Admiralty. In October 1817, it was loaded onto the British naval transport *Minerva* bound for Malta,⁶ and in December 1817 it was transferred at Malta to the storeship *Weymouth*.⁷ In March 1818, the Admiralty and the Foreign Office announced its arrival in England.⁸ On April 10, the Memnon head and the other antiquities which accompanied it arrived at the customs

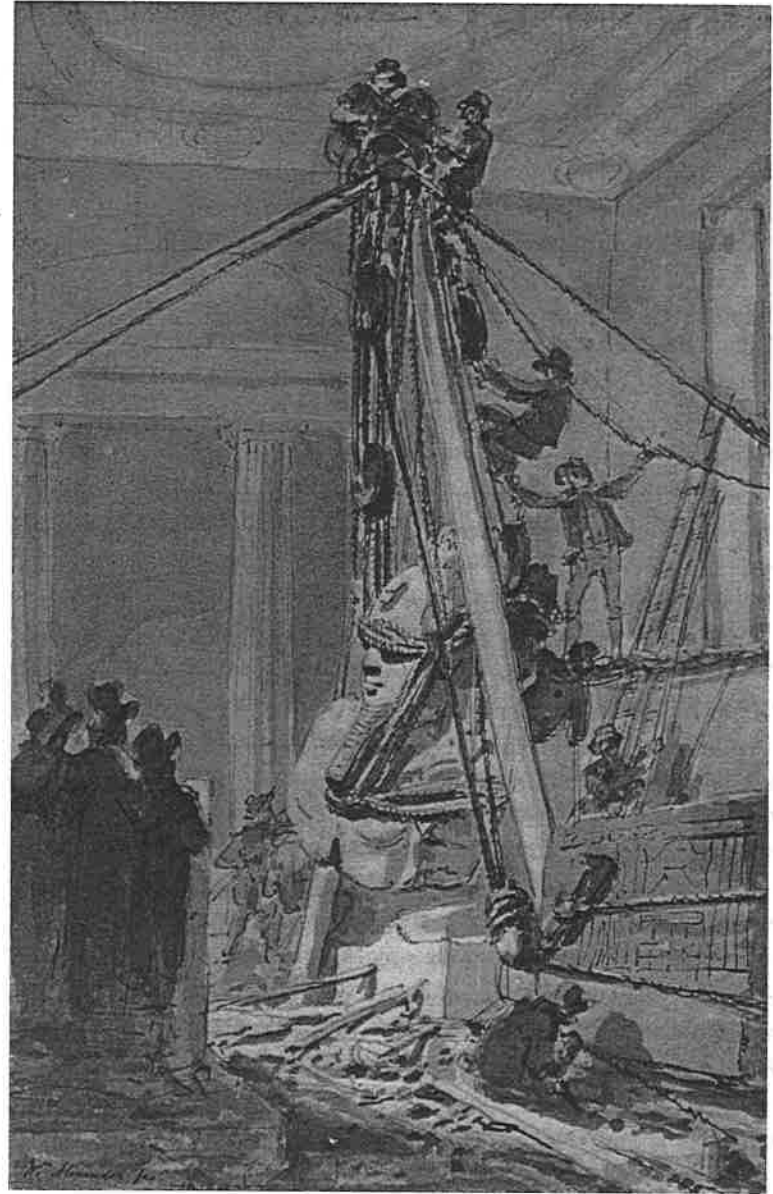


Figure 2. Installation of Head of the Younger Memnon, January 9, 1819. Watercolor, inscribed "Wm. Alexander fac.," 1819. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

office, which deemed them, as gifts for the British Museum, free from import taxes;⁹ on April 17, the British Museum asked to use the Office of Ordnance's crane for unloading the Memnon head at London's Tower Wharf.¹⁰ Throughout the period the head was en route, announcements of its "discovery" and imminent arrival appeared in the European press.¹¹ Inspired by the news, the poets Percy Bysshe Shelley and Horace Smith competed with one another in composing sonnets on the theme of the colossal statue.¹²

What does this paper trail reveal? First, it illustrates that the act of installing the Memnon head in the Egyptian Sculpture Room was but the culmination of a long, deliberate process involving many sets of actors acting in various capacities. In this way, the dates and locations of the object's transshipment not only indicate events in the life of the Memnon head, but also mark nodes in a network of actors and organizations. As we shall see, in itself, the first task—moving the colossal statue fragment from its original site to the banks of the Nile—involved complicated and tense labor as well as diplomatic and imperial negotiations. The collectors, working as agents of the British consul, contracted local peasants, interacted with regional and local officials of the nascent Egyptian state, and competed with antiquities collectors working for the French government. Transporting the Memnon head down the Nile, exporting it through customs, and unloading it in London involved equally complex sets of relationships and more dispersed organizational networks, including the port authority of Alexandria, the British Foreign Office, the Admiralty, customs officials, and finally the trustees and officers of the British Museum.

Besides mapping the networks of the actors involved, however, the paper trail is itself a segment of the process by which the Memnon head became a museum artifact. This is part of the significance of the travel accounts, the letters, and the curators' reports that have always been attached to the statue during its museum life. Together, these documents form the Memnon head's provenance, the story of its movements from the field to the museum. The provenance is not just a record of the events that occurred during the transport of the Memnon head *ex situ* to the place where it became a museum piece. The provenance certainly chronicles these processes. But the creation of a textual record of the object's biography was fundamental to the very process of artifaction itself. Indeed, many of the actors involved in collecting the Memnon head made a

conscious effort to create and organize an archive of their work. Likewise, for their part, the officers who installed the head in the museum and who cared for it afterward collected and preserved these texts because their existence was understood to be vital to the meaning of the object. Because of their efforts, we are able to read about the journey of the Memnon head in the same detail—particular names, dates, and places—we find in the accounts of human travelers from the same period. The paperwork attached to the Memnon head thus performs two functions: on one hand, it tells the story of how the Memnon head became a museum artifact; on the other, as an archive attached to the object, it plays a central role in the process by which the Memnon head became an artifact.

The invention of the Pharaonic artifact, of which the Memnon bust is most exemplary, marks a turning point in the modern European view of Egypt. Part of the novelty was that the agents who helped bring the Memnon bust to London were acquiring objects not for private collections but for the young national museum of Great Britain. The new form of the museum entailed new modes of collecting, such as collecting antiquities as unique pieces rather than as more or less interchangeable objects. Moreover, they sought them out on a scale never before attempted and marshaled unprecedented levels of private and public resources to accomplish their goals. This innovation was not of their own invention, however, but rather a result of new arrangements between Mehmed 'Ali, the pasha of Egypt, and the European powers concerning excavation in Egypt. At the same time that the rules discouraged individual Europeans from undertaking excavations around antiquities sites, they granted consular agents unprecedented freedom to pursue collection activities.¹³ The arrangement that emerged by the mid-1810s was that the diplomatic representatives of the European powers with the closest ties to the Egyptian state—the French and Austrian consuls—had a near total monopoly in the antiquities commerce. If we are to trust the accounts of European travelers at the time, their only competition was the Upper Egyptian village of Gurna, which, given its location and organization, had long been a powerful player in the commerce of sculpture, papyrus, and mummy.¹⁴

The collectors who removed the Memnon head from Egypt were acting in the name of the new British consul. Moreover, they claimed that they sought that object neither for personal gain nor for political profit. But this is not the whole story: while it is true that the Memnon head was

collected as a gift for the British Museum, it is also true that the other antiquities collected during the same expedition were meant to be sold to the highest bidder. Yet it was the Memnon head's value as a museum piece, not as a commodity, that motivated the activities and rhetoric of the collectors who brought the colossal bust to London. It was this rhetoric also that informed its reception into the museum. To be clear: the new set of values did not change the basic patterns by which antiquities were removed from Egypt. Indeed, the traffic continued apace and even increased. However, the *meaning* of that traffic changed with the emergence of artifact discourse. Excavation and transport now took place in the name of disinterested management and study, that is, "acquisition." This new way of speaking about and treating Pharaonic antiquities enabled Europeans to gain control over antiquities sites throughout the nineteenth century, and its logic expanded British and French power and profit even as it disavowed both. Once generalized, the discourse of the artifact gave both shape and substance to later forms of colonial discourse about managing *all* the resources of modern Egypt.

This chapter traces the artifaction of the Memnon head as a set of processes. In speaking of artifaction as a process, I am employing terms and concepts not usually associated with this period of antiquities collection in Egypt. To clarify: the normative sense of the artifact refers to a particular scientific method divorced from most of the aesthetic and historical debates described in this chapter. My point in widening the concept of the artifact is to show that the moment in which the Memnon head was collected marks the beginning of a new era of treating Egyptian antiquities, one deviating significantly from older antiquarian habits, even if it does not fully resemble the kind of scientific archaeology normally associated with the term "artifact." In this regard, one might ask, At what point did the colossal antiquity become that modern object peculiar to the institutions of art history and archaeological sciences? Did its life as an artifact begin the moment it was elevated on a pedestal at the museum? When it was excavated? Or was it already an artifact in its ancient resting place? The answer to these questions is that there is no originary moment, but rather a series of events in an ongoing process. Moreover, the truths of these events depend on the perspective from which they are viewed. Thus the story of artifaction may well convey a sense of how an object becomes an artifact, but it does not begin to explain the unique significance such

objects have once their status as artifacts is obtained. This last point is the focus of this chapter's conclusion, where I argue that it is most precise to define the artifact not in terms of its intrinsic qualities, but rather by way of the tensions and contradictions which permeate and link it to intense political, social, and cultural conflicts.

EXCAVATION AND REMOVAL

The great head of Memnon will please, and when you contemplate its grandeur, recollect that Thebes has at present the remains of thirty-seven statues of equal dimensions: many greater.—CHARLES LEONARD IRBY AND JAMES MANGLES, *Travels in Egypt*

In 1816, Henry Salt, the British consul in Egypt, contracted the services of the Paduan Giovanni Belzoni "for the purpose of raising the head of the statue of the younger Memnon, and carrying it down the Nile."¹⁵ Salt had more than one reason compelling him to acquire the Memnon head. He had read about the colossal bust in numerous travel accounts¹⁶ and had also received direct reports from colleagues such as John Lewis Burckhardt. More immediately perhaps, Salt had only recently arrived at his post in Cairo and began to realize that his official salary was seriously deficient.¹⁷ Looking to supplement his income, he did what other European consuls in Egypt did at the time: he engaged in the commerce of antiquities.

As for the Memnon head, it was part of a complex of ruins that had long been a pilgrimage site for Western explorers, tourists, and writers. Diodorus Siculus had identified the site as belonging to Ozymandias, a corruption of "User-maat-Re," one of Ramses II's names. Diodorus's description of the site and citation of the inscription ("King of Kings am I, Ozymandias. If any would know how great I am and where I lie, let him surpass one of my works") would be echoed in Shelley's poem "Ozymandias."¹⁸ An earlier traveler, Strabo, had referred to the site as the Memnonium, after Memnon, the Egyptian king said to have joined in the siege of Troy.¹⁹ In modern times, travelers visited the site and compared what they saw to how the places were described by the ancients. In the process, they replaced a long-standing deference to the accounts of the ancients with a new style of travel writing based on empirical experience.

The English traveler Richard Pococke visited the site in 1737. His description of the Memnonium follows Diodorus but also notes that ages had passed since the ancient traveler visited the place.²⁰ His narrative includes a number of images of the Memnonium ruins, including one that appears to have been of the statue of which the Memnon head was a part. That same year, the Danish traveler Frederick Lewis Norden visited the site, described what he saw, and produced drawings considered the most accurate until the turn of the nineteenth century.²¹ James Bruce visited the site in the late 1760s, commenting on the Memnon head in glowing terms.²² During their short occupation of the country at the end of the eighteenth century, the French referred to the site as the Memnonium and studied it at length. Vivant Denon's account of his travels in Upper Egypt during the occupation even further fixed the Memnonium—and Ozymandias—as one of the most prominent monuments in this literary and pictorial tradition of describing Egypt.²³ Published in 1802, *Voyages dans la basse et la haute Égypte* went through forty editions during the next century and was not just an essential component of libraries but effectively functioned as a guidebook for European tourists until the twentieth century. At the same time, the encyclopedic *Description de l'Égypte* (1809–20), composed by Napoléon Bonaparte's savants, depicts the Memnonium in massive plates that were considered the most accurate even after the invention of photography.²⁴

These depictions only encouraged more visits, and more depictions. William Hamilton's oft-cited *Aegyptiaca* (1809) lingers at the Memnonium and declares it "the most beautiful and perfect piece of Egyptian sculpture that can be seen throughout the whole country."²⁵ Hamilton noted that the French had apparently used explosives in an attempt to move the colossal head. Local villagers repeated this claim to the Swiss-Anglo traveler John Lewis Burckhardt. Burckhardt, known as Sheikh Ibrahim because he traveled through Upper Egypt in 1813 in the guise of a Muslim cleric from Hindustan, was told that years earlier the French had failed to move the Memnon head but had drilled a hole in it while trying.²⁶ In 1814, Henry Light, traveling through Egypt and the Red Sea, visited the Memnonium and commented that the colossal head could be moved if one could employ the labor of local villagers.²⁷ In 1815, a wealthy English traveler, William John Bankes, took ropes and pulleys to the site in the hope of moving it but was unsuccessful.²⁸ That same year, Burckhardt attempted

to persuade Mehmed 'Ali to send the colossal head as a present to the prince regent in England, but the pasha did not consider stone an appropriate gift.²⁹ Meanwhile, in England, the study of hieroglyphics continued among antiquarians, who were as anxious as ever for more texts on which to practice their linguistic theories.³⁰ By 1816, Hamilton was secretary of the Africa Association as well as undersecretary of state at the Foreign Office. In a memorandum from the previous year, the Foreign Office had urged its diplomatic agents to collect for the British Museum, promising recompense no matter the outcome: "Whatever the expense of the undertaking, whether successful or otherwise, it would be most cheerfully supported by an enlightened nation, eager to anticipate its Rivals in the prosecution of the best interests of science and literature."³¹ The British Museum had good cause to worry about the activities of rival acquisitionists, especially in Egypt, where the French consul, Bernardino Drovetti, had been using his position to corner the market in antiquities ever since he had been installed in 1802.³² Apprised of the importance of Egyptian antiquities that could be brought to England, the most active trustee of the British Museum, Joseph Banks, advised the newly appointed Consul Salt to use his diplomatic position for the museum's benefit. Likewise, Salt's former patron, Lord Mountnorris, requested Salt to collect Egyptian antiquities on his behalf.³³

By the time Salt was installed as British consul in 1816 there was thus a wide array of influences leading him not only to seek out antiquities, but also to take a particular interest in the Memnon head: a classical and modern tradition of celebrating the monuments of Upper Egypt, and the Memnonium in particular; a strong personal interest in Egyptian antiquities among key individuals at the British Foreign Office, the Africa Association, and the British Museum; and an ever-growing scholarly interest in ancient Egypt and its writing systems. Additional factors were the personal economic distress of a recently appointed consul, the existence of a vibrant market in antiquities, and the practical experience of travelers who knew what it would take to move the Memnon head.

Giovanni Belzoni, who was contracted, as noted, to collect the Memnon head, had met the British consul by way of Burckhardt, and it was Burckhardt who together with Salt commissioned Belzoni's journey to Upper Egypt.³⁴ Belzoni was an unlikely person to be hired to undertake such difficult work, considering he had not lived very long in Cairo and had

never visited Upper Egypt. At the time, Belzoni's reputation was largely associated with the fact that he had performed for years in London as a circus strongman called the Patagonian Sampson.³⁵ Belzoni had, however, learned water mechanics while producing scale reproductions of famous naval battles for the stage at Sadler's Wells. On the basis of his practical knowledge of hydraulics, Belzoni was recruited by an agent of Mehmed 'Ali, who was looking for European engineers to aid in the development of Egypt's water resources. Hired to produce a new kind of waterwheel, Belzoni eventually found himself out of work when what he built failed to impress the pasha. Thus, suddenly unemployed in the summer of 1816, Belzoni approached his friend Burckhardt, knowing he was interested in delivering the Memnon head to London.

Besides detailing how Belzoni should prepare for the expedition, Salt's contract elaborates how to communicate the British consul's authority through the domains of various Ottoman officials in Upper Egypt.³⁶ This was to be done by way of letters that extended the pasha's protection and aid to their bearer. Salt had acquired the letters from the pasha and consigned copies of them to Belzoni for the duration of his trip. Belzoni was expected to use this kind of document—a *firman*—to announce his presence to high officials as he journeyed through the provinces of Upper Egypt.³⁷ His first political negotiation would thus be accomplished by presenting his letters from Mehmed 'Ali, the pasha of Cairo, to his son Ibrahim, pasha of Upper Egypt at the time. The contract next stipulates in great detail where the desired object was located and sets further conditions on the mission, stating that should the task prove too difficult Belzoni should cease his operations. It requests that Belzoni maintain records of his expenses, which would be reimbursed. Finally, it emphasizes that, once the statue was on board, the boat should proceed directly to Alexandria, stopping only at Bulaq for further directions. As Belzoni wryly notes in his account, the contract does not stipulate the matter of his payment. The dispute over whether Belzoni was Salt's partner in the enterprise or merely his employee was to have real significance for all parties concerned.

Supplied with a line of credit and a small amount of cash, Belzoni left Cairo accompanied by his household and a hired interpreter, Giovanni d'Athanas, who had long served as dragoman at the British consulate.³⁸ In the town of Manfalut, the group met Ibrahim Pasha, who happened to be en route to Cairo. Ibrahim requested that Belzoni present his papers to the

official he had left in charge. Ibrahim was traveling with the French consul Drovetti, who was himself accompanying a shipment of antiquities he had collected in Upper Egypt. Much to Belzoni's annoyance, the French consul informed him that "the Arabs would not work at Thebes."³⁹ Belzoni's party arrived in Assyut (Siout), and Belzoni, as Salt had requested, met with Dr. Scotto, Ibrahim Pasha's personal physician.⁴⁰ When Scotto heard of Belzoni's plan to remove the Memnon head he replied that there were "many difficulties: first, about obtaining permission to have the necessary workmen; then there were no boats to be had; and next, the bust was a mass of stone not worth the carriage; at last, he plainly recommended to me not to meddle in this business, for I should meet with many disagreeable things, and have many obstacles to encounter."⁴¹ Belzoni later presented the firman Salt had obtained from Mehmed 'Ali Pasha, and the official provided him with orders to the provincial officials and local officials where Belzoni intended to work. In Assyut, Belzoni hired a Greek carpenter, and they proceeded farther south. A week later, the party arrived at Luxor, whose sight greatly impressed Belzoni. He writes,

I beg the reader to observe, that but very imperfect ideas can be formed of the extensive ruins of Thebes, even from the accounts of the most skilful and accurate travellers. It is absolutely impossible to imagine the scene displayed, without seeing it. The most sublime ideas, that can be formed from the most magnificent specimens of our present architecture, would give a very incorrect picture of these ruins; for such is the difference, not only in magnitude, but in form, proportion, and construction, that even the pencil can convey but a faint idea of the whole.⁴²

Belzoni's astonishment echoed that of the accounts of modern Western travelers to Egypt.⁴³ But this language of aesthetic experience was relatively recent in Belzoni's day. Western travelers may have long marveled at the ancient monuments of Thebes, but the attribute of beauty was not often applied to antiquities in Egypt until the 1780s. In fact, when travelers in the late eighteenth century began to describe Egyptian monuments in terms of beauty and sublimity, they were engaged in a polemic about expanding the standard of beauty beyond the classical measure of proportion derived from Greek sculpture, architecture, and music.⁴⁴ Part of this shift away from proportional standards of beauty involved the attempt to expand the history of fine art beyond its traditional Greek

origins to include Egypt.⁴⁵ But part was also linked to the rise of empirical experience as a value in itself.⁴⁶ Thus, Belzoni's comments belong to an Enlightenment aesthetic tradition (including Edmund Burke, Immanuel Kant, Friedrich von Schiller, and the English romantics), in which beauty was said to be a product of experience and perception. In this account of aesthetics, beauty was not some property intrinsic in objects, but rather belonged to the feelings aroused within the subjects who regarded them. The significance of this is not just that Belzoni's travel experience, like that of his contemporaries, resonated with the themes and dispositions of romantic poets.⁴⁷ It is also that the new sensibility established a relation between subjects and objects—a claim on them—that was directly sensory and emotional but moral as well.

Belzoni's depiction of his arrival at Thebes is also noteworthy for what it says about the place as a collection of ruins: "It appeared to me like entering a city of giants who after a long conflict were all destroyed, leaving the ruins of their various temples as the only proofs of their former existence . . . who will not fail to wonder how a nation, which was once so great as to erect these stupendous edifices, could so far fall into oblivion that even their language and writing are totally unknown to us."⁴⁸ As Alois Riegl pointed out, the ruin is a particularly modern kind of antique object.⁴⁹ Not merely a dilapidated building or a structure whose form has been completely obliterated, the ruin exists somewhere in between—as a liminal space providing the particular aesthetic pleasure associated with the picturesque.⁵⁰ More than a pile of rubble but less than a monument whose original use has been preserved, the ruin evokes a peculiar sense of historical time, namely, that there is an absolute break between the ancient past and the modern present. What matters in the aesthetic experience of ruins is the meeting between the modern and the ancient. All else is distraction. The rise of this romantic sensibility would have had few consequences if not for the fact that, since the period of their original construction until the modern period, Pharaonic monuments usually had served many functions (including habitation) and held many meanings for the people who lived in and around them. According to the new aesthetic norms, indications that the ruins had an abiding local meaning that was not purely ancient were to be ignored and obliterated. In this way, the discourse of the ruin created a particular kind of ethnographic relationship between the traveler and the natives who live in and around ancient

monuments.⁵¹ As we shall see, the romantic discourse of ruins was crucial for developing the notion that the monuments of ancient Egypt should be sharply separated from forms of modern Egyptian life, since these detracted from their proper meaning as ancient objects.

Belzoni, aware that he would have to take advantage of the rising river if he hoped to move the statue, got to work:

As I entered these ruins, my first thought was to examine the colossal bust I had to take away. I found it near the remains of its body and chair, with its face upwards, and apparently smiling on me, at the thought of being taken to England. I must say that my expectations were exceeded by its beauty, but not by its size. I observed that it must have been absolutely the same statue as is mentioned by Norden, lying in his time with its face downwards, which must have been the cause of its preservation. I will not venture to assert who separated the bust from the rest of the body by an explosion, or by whom the bust has been turned face upwards.

As a description of Belzoni's first encounter with the Memnon head, this passage is richly suggestive. Like travelers before, Belzoni compares his own direct perception of the object to impressions gathered from the accounts of others. This is not a moment of pure discovery. The tropes of this passage reverse the agency of what is about to happen. It is the bust that seems to have expected Belzoni's arrival, and it is the bust, not Belzoni, that seems most pleased Belzoni has come to remove it. The prosopopoeic figure—the nonobject that beckons the collector—recurs throughout this account and others of the time.

At this point, Belzoni's party set up camp in the Memnonium and unloaded the rudimentary tools they had brought to transport the colossal bust to the river's edge: fourteen thick wooden beams, four lengths of palm rope, and four logs for rolling. On July 24, Belzoni presented himself to the provincial official, the *kashif* (district governor), in Erments in order to obtain permission to employ eighty Egyptians from the village of Gurna. Belzoni notes that the *kashif* received him with the deceptive "politeness which is peculiar to the Turks, even when they do not mean in the slightest degree to comply with your wishes."⁵² According to Belzoni, after he presented the firman he had obtained from the official in Asyut, the *kashif* gave a number of contradictory reasons why the request was impossible: the peasants were too busy to want to work for him; it was too

much to ask people to undertake such an arduous task during Ramadan, the month of fasting; the peasants' labor could not be spared since it was badly needed at the moment by the pasha. Angrily, Belzoni replied that he would go the next morning to Gurna to engage his workers. The kashif replied that tomorrow they would see to it. The next day, no workers arrived. Belzoni visited the kashif again, presenting him with a gift of coffee and tobacco and hinting that there would be more such presents if his request were granted. Belzoni visited the *qa'im-maqam* (local administrator) of Gurna, only to learn that the man was a close business associate of his rival Drovetti, the French consul and antiquities collector. Again the answer was "tomorrow, perhaps." Again, the next day no workforce materialized, even though Belzoni was convinced the peasants wanted the opportunity to work for him. Finally, on the third day, a number of men appeared, and Belzoni hired them at thirty paras per day, which, according to Belzoni, was substantially more than they earned working in the fields. The work itself was straightforward:

The mode I adopted to place [the head] on the car was very simple, for work of no other description could be executed by these people as their utmost sagacity reaches only to pulling a rope, or sitting on the extremity of a lever as a counterpoise. By means of four levers I raised the bust, so as to leave a vacancy under it, to introduce the car; and after it was slowly lodged on this, I had the car raised in the front, with the bust on it, so as to get one of the rollers underneath. I then had the same operation performed at the back, and the colossus was ready to be pulled up. I caused it to be well secured on the car, and the ropes so placed that the power might be divided. I stationed men with levers at each side of the car, to assist occasionally if the colossus should be inclined to turn to either side. In this manner I kept it safe from falling. Lastly, I placed men in the front, distributing them equally at the four ropes, while others were ready to change the rollers alternately. Thus I succeeded in getting it removed the distance of several yards from its original place. According to my instructions, I sent an Arab to Cairo with the intelligence that the bust had begun its journey towards England.⁵³

Belzoni's description of the movement of the Memnon head deserves comment. The first-person voice of the passage makes it clear that the agent behind this effort is Belzoni himself; he is literally the subject of

the actions performed. Additionally, he directs the action and organizes the bodies of the natives, who perform subordinate and passive forms of work. There is something curious about the presence of the Gurna natives in this passage: they are present, but it is as if they are not actors in the scene. In this scene, Belzoni seems to be distinguishing two kinds of labor: his own effort, which is purposive and human, and the labor of the Gurna peasants, which, lacking intent, is not fully active, not fully human. In this regard consider the following image, taken from Belzoni's narrative, which represents the labor of the Gurna villagers as collective, undifferentiated, and, in comparison with the Memnon head, puny.

The following day, Belzoni, by his own account, had to "break the bases of two columns" in the Memnonium in order to make room for the car carrying the Memnon head, and by that evening the bust had been transported fifty yards. Over the next week, work proceeded apace, and the Memnon bust was brought closer to a point of land where it might be safely loaded on a boat during the inundation. On August 6, someone ordered the Gurna peasants to stop working for Belzoni. The situation was precarious, seeing that, unless the statue was moved to higher ground quickly, the rising river waters would cover it. Belzoni accosted the *qa'im-maqam* of Gurna that day, holding him at gunpoint while his bodyguard disarmed the official. After thrashing the man, Belzoni learned that the stoppage order originated with the kashif of Erments. Later, Belzoni would learn that it was Drovetti who had given the official the idea. The theme of rivalry with the French consul recurs throughout Belzoni's account.

That evening, Belzoni visited the kashif, dining with the official's entourage as they broke their fast. Belzoni made a present of his pistols to the kashif, at which point the kashif redrafted a new firman authorizing Belzoni to hire the peasants at Gurna. On August 12, 1816, the Memnon head arrived at a suitable place for loading. Belzoni paid his workers "bakshis" [*sic*] of one piastre each, noting, for the only time, that they had performed labor for him: "They well deserved their reward, after an exertion to which no labour can be compared. The hard task they had, to track such a weight, the heavy poles they were obliged to carry to use as levers, and the continual replacing the rollers [*sic*] with the extreme heat and dust were more than any European could have withstood; but here is what is more remarkable, during all the days of this exertion, it being

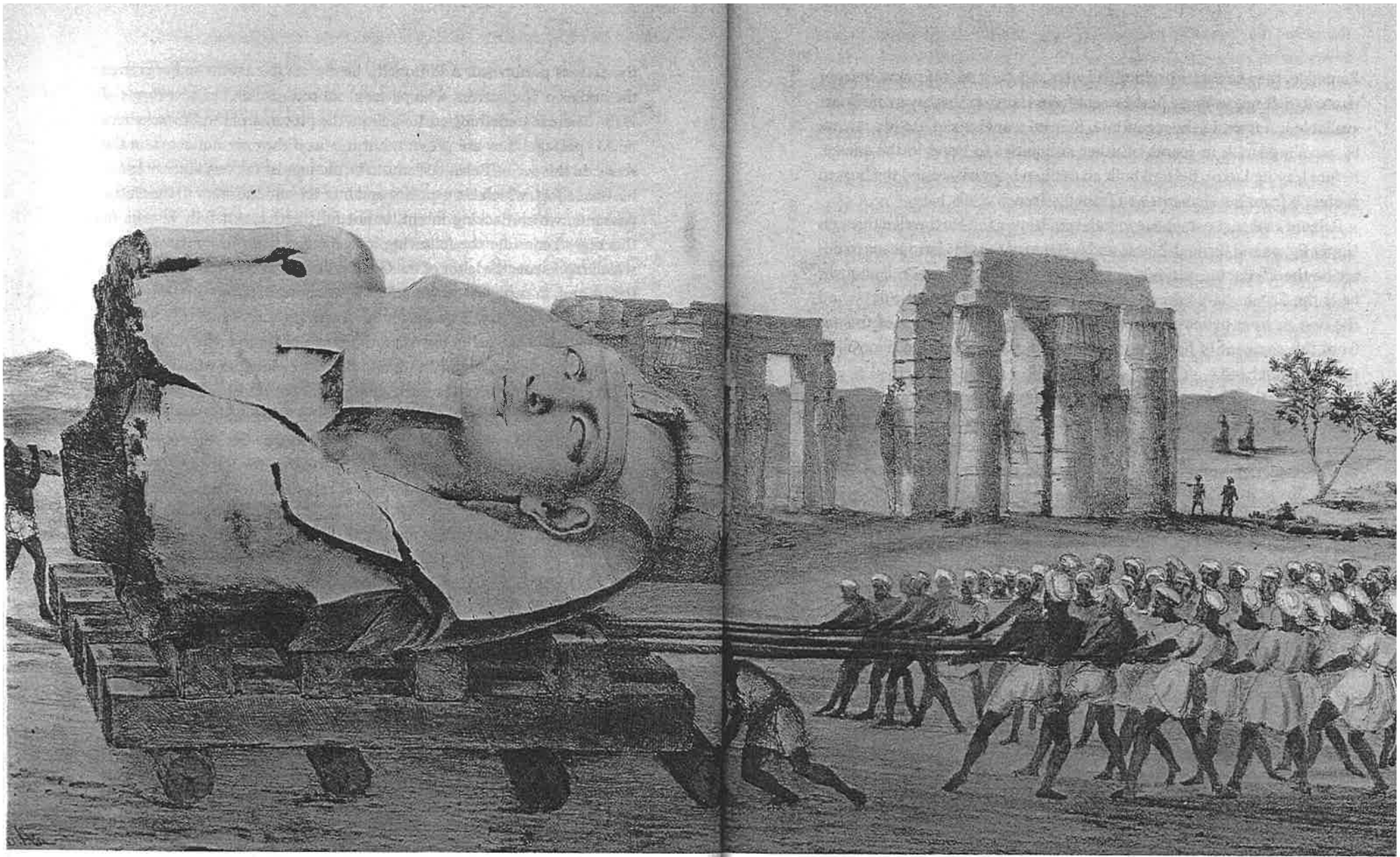


Figure 3. Giovanni Belzoni, "Mode in Which the Young Memnon Head Now in the British Museum was Removed," from *Plates Illustrative of the Researches and Operations of G. Belzoni in Egypt and Nubia* (London: John Murray, 1820). Image by permission of The Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University.

Ramadan, they never ate or drank till after sunset.⁵⁴ At this point, Belzoni wrote to Salt requesting a boat be sent from Cairo, as there were no boats available in Luxor. In the meantime, Belzoni would make use of his time by traveling south in search of other antiquities to bring to the consul. Before leaving Luxor, Belzoni built an earthen bulwark around the bust to protect it from the elements and from his French rivals.

Belzoni's subsequent journey south is well known.⁵⁵ He traveled through Upper Egypt and through Nubia and was one of the first Europeans to describe the Pharaonic antiquities beyond the second cataract. Famously, he is the first to have excavated the base of the Abu Simbel colossi and the first to have penetrated their interior temple. A number of themes from this segment of his account bear upon the story of the removal of the Memnon head.

On more than one occasion, Belzoni comments on what he saw as a disparity between the beauty of ancient Egyptian monuments and the ugliness of modern Egypt. Much of the town of Edfu, for instance, was built into an ancient temple at the time.⁵⁶ He notes that the town was

inhabited by people of a different religion from those who built the temple. The pronaos is very wide and is the only one to be seen in Egypt in such perfection, though completely encumbered with Arab huts. The portico is also magnificent; but unfortunately above three-fourths of it is covered with rubbish. . . . The fellahs have built part of their village on the top of it, as well as stables for cattle, &c. . . . On looking at an edifice of such magnitude, workmanship, and antiquity, inhabited by a half savage people whose huts are stuck against it not unlike wasps' nests, and to contrast their filthy clothes with these sacred images that were once so highly venerated makes one strongly feel the difference between the ancient and modern state of Egypt.⁵⁷

The juxtaposition of the modern and the ancient—a recurring feature in the discourse on ruins—caused Belzoni much consternation. In describing the difference between the modern and the ancient in terms of “rubbish” versus “magnificence” and “savagery” versus “perfection” he was not alone. From the moment in the late eighteenth century when Europeans began to seek aesthetic experiences around Egyptian monuments, the fact that the monuments were inhabited was a problem. European travelers and, later, tourists were dismayed to find their view of ancient monuments

encumbered by modern habitations and their immediate experience of the (sublime) past interrupted by encounters with the (squalid) present. Belzoni's discourse on ruins expresses an emerging desire to separate the objects of the past from their present context and to protect antiquities from the threat posed by peasants.

At Abu Simbel, Belzoni needed a small army of laborers to pursue his excavation, an undertaking far more considerable and complicated than the removal of the Memnon head had been. As at Gurna, Belzoni encountered resistance from local officials, who, being much farther removed from Cairo, were under little obligation to regard the firman Belzoni presented them. As at Gurna, Belzoni used a mixture of bribes and force to convince local notables to help him marshal a force of day laborers. There was at least one difference, however: whereas wage labor was a known practice in Gurna, at Abu Simbel this apparently was not the case. Indeed, according to Belzoni, the local officials told him that goods were exchanged through barter in the region and that his Cairene coins were of no value. This not only complicated Belzoni's negotiations over labor tremendously, but thoroughly confused his discussion of the value of the antiquities as well.

When Belzoni first met with the kashif, he refused to believe that Belzoni was interested in the antiquities themselves. Like the villagers of Gurna, he assumed that Belzoni was seeking the gold that frequently was found among ruins. According to the kashif, only a short time earlier another European (Drovetti) had carried away such gold from the region. Why, the kashif asked, would Belzoni come so far in search of *stones*: “What had [Belzoni] to do with stones if it were not that [he] was able to procure gold from them?” Belzoni answers, “The stones I wished to take away were broken pieces belonging to an old Pharaoh people; and that by these pieces we were in hopes of learning whether our ancestors came from that country, which was the reason of my coming in search of stones.”⁵⁸ A few months later, Belzoni was accused of this same charge of treasure seeking among the ruins.⁵⁹ The distinction struck between stones and gold is intriguing because it articulates a collision between two systems of value—one economic, one apparently not—taking place in the material of the objects at stake. In this sense, the distinction between stones and gold most clearly and genuinely expresses the peculiar set of noncommercial values motivating Belzoni's expedition.

Still, to pursue his disinterested acquisitions, Belzoni first had to produce a sense of economic interest in the project among others. To convince the suspicious kashif that Egyptian currency might have value, Belzoni staged a performance of monetary economy. First, he arranged with the captain of his boat that if someone were to approach with money, he was to exchange it for its worth in grain. Then, while negotiating with the kashif about wages, he displayed a piastre coin, handing it to a man in the audience and telling him to go to the boat to see what it might buy. It was only after this man returned with the story of how he had exchanged the money for grain that the kashif agreed to Belzoni's scheme, though he stipulated a daily wage of two piastres, many times over what Belzoni had paid his workers at Gurna. Yet, it was one thing to reach an agreement over hypothetical wages and another to obtain political permission for the excavation. Belzoni went farther south in search of another kashif whose support was now necessary. This official, like the other, was convinced that Belzoni was a treasure seeker pursuing gold. Belzoni promised "that if I found the temple full of gold, I should give him half. . . . if I found only stones, they should be all my own property."⁶⁰ Since the kashif cared little for stones, he assented. Now, it only remained for Belzoni to raise a labor force. Again, Belzoni depicts those who would work for him as "complete savages . . . entirely unacquainted with any kind of labour" and ignorant of the value of money.⁶¹

Here, Belzoni encountered a different order of problem: he wanted only thirty men, but the nearby village demanded he hire one hundred; later, they would demand to be paid collectively, regardless of the actual labor of the individuals involved. More bribes, confrontations, and gifts followed, and eventually work began. There were stoppages and obstacles again. In order to keep up the momentum, Belzoni found it advantageous not to correct what he saw as the avaricious superstitions of his savage laborers: "As it was the first day of our enterprise, they went on better than I expected, and all their thought and talk were on the quantity of gold, pearls, and jewels, we should find in the place. I did not discourage them in their supposition as I considered it to be the best stimulus they could have to proceed."⁶² In time, it becomes clear that Belzoni's avowed motivations diverged sharply from those of his workforce and the local officials:

[The two kashifs] gave me to understand plainly that all that was there was their own property and that the treasure should be for themselves. Even the savages began to lay their account in the division of the spoil. I assured them that I expected to find nothing but stones and wanted no treasure. They still persisted that, if I took away the stones, the treasure was in them; and that if I could make a drawing or likeness of them, I could extract the treasure from them also, without their perceiving it. Some proposed that if there were any figure discovered, it should be broken before I carried it away to see the inside of it.⁶³

What is striking about Belzoni's account of the work at Abu Simbel is how much of it revolves around the confusion between commercial and noncommercial systems of value. Nevertheless, if there was confusion, much of it stemmed from the contradictory messages about acquisition that Belzoni brought into Nubia. On the one hand, he attempts to communicate that his desire to collect antiquities was not driven by riches and that his motivation was one of scholarly disinterest. On the other hand, to accomplish this goal, he not only introduces the notion of the wage and the workings of a monetary economy, but also encourages his laborers and their political bosses to entertain the notion that the value of the antiquities lies in the gold (supposedly) found in or near them. In Belzoni's own words, antiquities represent a source of material wealth even as their true value is said to be nonmaterial; nevertheless, even as he claims they have no value, that they are mere stones, the undertaking of acquisition inextricably links the antiquities to networks of power and motives of profit and exchange.

In the fall, Belzoni halted his Abu Simbel excavation, leaving what remained to be done for the following year. At this point, he was pressed for time to return to Luxor before the Nile receded. On arriving at Luxor, Belzoni heard disparaging remarks made by some of Drovetti's agents, who claimed that the colossal head was not worth the effort of moving so far. These same agents had returned to Gurna and, with the qa'im-maqam's support, insisted that no more work be done for British collectors. Belzoni also began to seek a boat to transport the Memnon head. At this point he encountered great resistance among the boat captains of the town, who told him that if, as Belzoni claimed, the Memnon head did not contain

gold, it was not worth the risk and expense to load it onto the barge. Belzoni finally negotiated with a boat owner who was on his way upstream to return to Luxor. To secure the agreement, Belzoni paid an extravagant sum. While waiting for the boat to return, Belzoni explored Luxor, Karnak, and the Valley of the Kings, collecting an array of smaller statues that he would also ship to the consul. In November, the boat Belzoni had hired returned from Aswan, though it was now unexpectedly filled with dates. Belzoni learned that the owner had reconsidered the deal and wanted to return the deposit. The change of heart, as Belzoni learned, was due to Drovetti's agents. At the same time, Belzoni heard reports that the same agents mutilated a number of other statues he had left in Philae until he could arrange their transport. It was at this low point, according to Belzoni, that he found a door open onto the favor of the kashif of Erments. Belzoni learned that Drovetti's latest gifts from Cairo—recompense for the kashif's support during that season of antiquities collection—had been far from generous. Belzoni pounced on the opportunity, and announced that the British consul would be very grateful for any aid the kashif might show its agents. The kashif interceded on Belzoni's behalf and ordered the boat owner to honor his prior agreement with Belzoni. For his efforts, the kashif was promised a brace of pistols from Cairo. On November 15, 1816, Belzoni writes, "[We] collected, though not without trouble, a hundred and thirty men; and I began to make a causeway by which to convey the head down to the river side, for the bank was more than fifteen feet above the level of the water which had retired at least a hundred feet from it."⁶⁴ The following day, Belzoni was told he did not have to pay the peasants, since the kashif intended to make "a present of their labour." Belzoni refused, saying "it was not my custom to have the labour of men for nothing nor would the consul of England accept such a present."⁶⁵ On November 17, the head was successfully loaded onto the boat. Belzoni's account of the event again depicts him as the chief force driving the event:

I succeeded in my attempt and the head of the younger Memnon was actually embarked. I cannot help observing that it was no easy undertaking to put a piece of granite of such bulk and weight on board a boat that, if it received the weight on one side, would immediately upset. . . . The causeway I had made gradually sloped to the edge of the water close

to the boat, and with the four poles I formed a bridge from the bank into the centre of the boat so that when the weight bore on the bridge, it pressed only on the centre of the boat. The bridge rested partly on the causeway, partly on the side of the boat, and partly on this centre of it. On the opposite side of the boat I put some mats well filled with straw. I necessarily stationed a few Arabs in the boat, and some at each side, with a lever of palm wood, as I had nothing else. At the middle of the bridge I put a sack filled with sand that, if the colossus should run too fast into the boat, it might be stopped. In the ground behind the colossus I had a piece of a palm tree firmly planted, round which a rope was twisted and then fastened to its car to let it descend gradually. I set a lever at work on each side, and at the same time that the men in the boat were pulling, others were slackening ropes, and others shifting the rollers as the colossus advanced.⁶⁶

The next day, the boat sailed for Cairo, then Rosetta. Leaving the Nile, the boat sailed to the port of Alexandria, where, with the help of the crew of a British transport that was equipped with tackle, it was unloaded on the pier.

RECEPTION

We saw here the great head of Memorandum; and I'm sure I shall never forget him. Some say he was King of the Abiders, which I think likely, from his size: others say he was King of the Thieves, in Upper Egypt. At any rate, it's a great lump of stone, and must be the best lot the Government thought. —THE SATIRIST, August 18, 1833

While there was much confusion during the removal of the Memnon head about the source of its value, the mixed welcome it received at the British Museum only added to the ambiguities of its acquisition. Though the piece was popular with museum patrons, it was far less so with the men officially entrusted with its care. Taylor Combe, head of the Department of Antiquities, acknowledged the installation of the Memnon head in a single terse sentence appended to an otherwise enthusiastic report about medieval numismatic acquisitions from the British Isles.⁶⁷ Combe's

subsequent report describes the installation of the piece solely in terms of the problems it caused to the aesthetic composition of the display in the Townley Gallery.⁶⁸ Again, after noting coin acquisitions, Combe writes, “[I] made a new arrangement of the articles in the Egyptian Room; in which arrangement it has been his aim to preserve the same line of objects, as in the other compartments of the Gallery, and to produce as much symmetry as was compatible with the situation on one side of the room, of so large an object as the colossal head.”⁶⁹ The reaction of the museum’s trustees to the gift was tempered.⁷⁰ At the very moment the Memnon head was being installed, Joseph Banks, the director of the British Museum, wrote to Salt, “Though in truth we are here much satisfied with the Memnon, and consider it as a *chef-d’oeuvre* of Egyptian sculpture, yet we have not placed that statue among the works of *Fine Art*. It stands in the Egyptian Rooms. Whether any statue that has been found in Egypt can be brought into competition with the grand works of the Townley Gallery remains to be proved unless however they really are so, the prices you have set upon your acquisitions are very unlikely to be realized in Europe.”⁷¹ These were sharp words from the man who had earlier so encouraged Salt to use his consular office to collect antiquities. Yet Banks’s ambivalence about the aesthetic value of the Memnon head was actually not so remarkable, being simply the expression of an old aesthetic tradition that drew a sharp line between the Egyptian sculpture and fine art.⁷²

Banks’s reference to price raises another issue. Though the Memnon head had been sent as a gift to the British Museum, Salt was pressing the museum to purchase other antiquities he and his agents (including Belzoni) had collected. This last point drew the rebuke of Banks, who went on to censure Salt for abandoning his “original intention” of placing the matter of antiquities collection “in the hands of the public.”⁷³ Here, an aspect of the 1816 expedition that is partly submerged in Belzoni’s account is relevant: though Belzoni was certain that his acquisitions were “disinterested,”⁷⁴ he also knew Salt was funding the expedition as a for-profit venture. The mixture of the categories of public/private and commercial/noncommercial may have been what troubled the museum trustees.⁷⁵ More likely, however, it was the recent public uproar caused by the extravagant purchase of the Parthenon friezes from Lord Elgin that led the trustees to insist that acquisitions from Egypt be gifts, a point to which I will return shortly. Banks was not alone in his sharp response to Salt’s attempt to sell

the museum the other pieces that arrived with the Memnon head. Hamilton, the man whose glowing description of the Memnon head had led Salt to acquire the piece, wrote similarly discouraging words.⁷⁶ In a third letter, Salt’s former patron, Lord Mountnorris, joined Banks and Hamilton in admonishing Salt for trying to sell antiquities to the museum. Together, these sharp responses to Salt’s gift indicate two lines of resistance to the reception of Egyptian antiquities at the British Museum in 1819: the first had to do with the *Egyptian* character of the antiquities; the second, with the *commercial* character of such acquisitions.

While Egyptian antiquities had been included in the collection of the British Museum from its inception, in 1819 they were not considered part of its fine art collection, of which Greek and Roman statues held pride of place. There were at least two reasons for this: a long-standing scholarly tradition that placed Athens and Rome at the origin of European art and world civilization, and a lack of basic knowledge about ancient Egyptian language, history, and culture. In light of this, it is not difficult to understand the response of curators who had been mandated to build a collection in order to inculcate a clear art-history narrative to the public. They were at a loss as to what to do with Egyptian pieces, whose aesthetic style was contrary to the Greco-Roman standard of beauty and whose origins and meaning were unknown. Given these factors, how could they have assimilated the Egyptian antiquities into the existing standards of beauty and narratives of art history? Even though British travelers had been vociferously asserting the beauty of the art they saw in Egypt, their claims had little resonance at the British Museum.

The uncertain reception of the Memnon head has very much to do with philosophical shifts taking place within the British Museum during the early nineteenth century. Ian Jenkins has aptly described this as a conscious shift in thinking about the meaning of the museum itself, a shift from the paradigm of the *Wunderkammer* to that of the *Kunstkammer*, that is, from the royal curiosity cabinet to the public art museum that offers a universal survey of aesthetic history.⁷⁷ These changes were themselves instantiated in the increasing tendency toward administrative division and specialization within the museum’s collections. From its inception in 1756 until 1807, the museum had only three departments—Manuscripts, Printed Books, and Natural History. The capture of celebrated Egyptian antiquities from Bonaparte’s army in 1801 and the purchase in 1805 of a large

private collection of Greek and Roman sculptures from Charles Townley massively increased the museum's holdings of antiquities. With this large addition, the old administrative categories, which placed statuary under the care of librarians, no longer made much sense, and in 1807 the Department of Antiquities was formed along with a subdepartment of Prints and Drawings.⁷⁸ These divisions did more than solve organizational problems; they also expressed an emerging consensus that the department's holdings should be a finely crafted collection that formed a systematic survey of art, not a conglomeration of wonders, oddities, and curiosities. The construction of the Townley Sculpture Gallery in 1808 gave architectural form to these new ideas. Originally, curators arranged the pieces thematically around the concept of the picturesque, though they soon moved to a more strictly chronological arrangements of objects.⁷⁹

The shift from the appreciation of static classical forms to a historical understanding of art bore greatly upon the meaning of Egyptian antiquities. In the eighteenth century, in the work of the influential aesthetician Johann Winckelmann most particularly, Egypt had offered the antithesis of the aesthetic values embodied in classical Greek and Roman statuary. Paraphrasing Winckelmann, a museum guidebook from 1832 states, "It is generally assumed that all Egyptian figures are stiff, ugly, and devoid of grace which Winckelmann, going a step further . . . attributes to the general want of beauty in the nation."⁸⁰ Winckelmann urged scholars to concentrate on the purest Greek forms rather than "waste . . . thoughts on trifles" and occupy oneself "with low ideas."⁸¹ Moreover, he provided a method of study, beginning with the details of individual pieces and moving to the deeper unities underlying different eras of classical statuary. Winckelmann's hermeneutic—a study of parts, synthesized into more abstract wholes, brought to bear again upon the study of parts—would provide the logic for the modern scholarly study of fine art. By the early 1800s this relatively static taxonomy would be supplemented by another notion—that art's history was one of progress.⁸² In this model, "the chain of art" began in Egypt, then continued through the more familiar history of Greece and Rome. Nevertheless, Egypt did not figure here as part of the history of progress, but as the lifeless ground from which civilizational progress—a uniquely Greek invention—rose.⁸³ These concepts imbued the curatorial attitudes toward statues and the rooms which held them alike. In the Townley Gallery, curators paid the same attention to the values of

balance and proportion in their display as to such attributes in the objects themselves. The arrangement of objects on display was an amplification of the kinds of patterns found in art. Hence, one can begin to understand Combe's frustration when he was given the impossible task of fitting the Memnon head into a space ruled by the proportions and scale of classical humanism. As a non-classical piece, it had no easy place in the collection, a problem magnified by the enormous size of the piece itself.

The sense that art had a history was crucial for understanding the place of Egyptian antiquities within the department's collection in 1819. Egyptian objects, while apparently popular with patrons, served as a primitive and rough example when set against the higher, more dynamic forms of beauty found in the Greek and Roman statues. By this logic, the Memnon head would be installed in the Egyptian Sculpture Room even as it failed to reach the higher standards of classical statuary. In this regard, the 1832 guidebook remarks,

The stranger who visits the Gallery of Sculpture, in the British Museum, cannot fail to be struck with the curious collection of objects in the room of Egyptian Antiquities. Passing from the contemplation of the almost faultless representations of the human form in marble, the triumph of Grecian art, he comes to figures more remarkable, at first sight, for their singular forms and colossal size, than for their beauty. Though the contrast between what he has just left and the new scene to which he is introduced, creates at first no pleasing impression, feelings of curiosity and admiration soon arise from a more careful examination of what is around him.⁸⁴

The welcome Egyptian antiquities had was thus complicated: though they were not fine art, their meaning had some relation to aesthetic values. They were not beautiful objects but aroused curiosity instead.

The category of the curiosity opens upon another set of ambiguities in the reception of the Memnon head. Not all Egyptian antiquities were included in the antiquities collection. Some were displayed as curiosities alongside wonders of the natural world. As the museum transformed from the model of the curiosity cabinet to the nineteenth-century pedagogical public museum, the category of the artificial curiosity became increasingly problematic. An earlier series of incidents involving Egyptian curiosities is telling in this regard. Even before the formation of the

Department of Antiquities, museum officers were rethinking the rationale of the collection and the fitness of articles on display. In 1806, a directive was issued to create order among the collections and to label the items on display. As Edward Miller notes, "The following year an even more drastic reorganisation took place. Certain objects, most of a medical or anatomical nature, were declared unfit to be preserved in the museum and were ordered to be disposed of to the Hunterian Museum, which, as a professional medical collection, was considered a more suitable home to them."⁸⁵ At the top of the list of items the director of the museum asked to be removed from display were Egyptian mummies, along with other such "artificial curiosities, many of which are of a very trifling nature and by no means fit to be exhibited in such a Repository as the Museum."⁸⁶ These mummies may be the same that appear in a housecleaning report from 1809, which was likewise directed at scouring up the basement rooms of Montagu House, the original, now-dilapidated building of the British Museum. The author of this report referred to the threat to the objects posed by water in dire terms and recommended removing objects like mummies from the collection rather than "suffering them to decay and be consumed in the damp apartments they are now deposited."⁸⁷ Years later, the problem of rotting lumber, rubbish, and unwanted curios remained. Combe inherited this problem in 1811, reporting that "4 mummies . . . in a state of decay on the ground floor of the New Buildings . . . are a harbour for dirt, and are only fit to be destroyed."⁸⁸ Not long after, Combe found a solution by donating the mummies to the Royal Academy of Surgeons.⁸⁹ It was easier to clean the basement than to transform antique curiosities into suitable objects for the museum's galleries of art.

Long before the Memnon head was on its way to London, most of the museum reorganization had already taken place, and most of the curios had been effectively purged from the Department of Antiquities. Nevertheless, one of the first notices the trustees received about the imminent arrival of the piece praised Egyptian antiquities for being exactly this, "curiosities" and "ornaments."⁹⁰ Thus, on its arrival, the Memnon head that appeared was something of an artificial curiosity, the very category of object which the museum was attempting to purge from its collection. The shifting semantic field of the term *artificial curiosity* is critical to understanding how the Memnon head was received. The word *curiosity* took on a pejorative meaning and came to mean an object of wonder and mystery more fitting

for a natural history exhibition—or carnival show—than a place where scholars studied the art of human civilization. In contrast, the word *artificial*, meaning "man-made," did not bother curators. In fact, the appropriateness of this term increased as the museum focused its attention on the study of human rather than natural history. The persistent value of the concept of man-madness is arguably what provoked the transformation of the adjective *artificial* into the substantive noun *artifact*, a neologism of the moment.⁹¹

It was not a simple matter to transform the Memnon head from a curiosity into a piece fit for inclusion within the art-history paradigm of the Department of Antiquities, especially when so little was known about its original historical context. Much hinged on developments that took place outside of the museum, particularly those linked to recent linguistic theories concerning hieroglyphic writing. Throughout the reports he filed until his death in 1825, Combe's reception of Egyptian antiquities remained skeptical, even hostile. Keeper of the Antiquities Richard Westmacott was warmer, although he continued to relegate Egyptian statuary to a lesser place.

In contrast, the museum catalogues and guides from the period indicate a subtle change occurring in attitudes toward Egyptian antiquities. A museum guidebook from 1821 describes the contents of the Egyptian Sculpture Room as follows: "Many of the articles contained in this Room were collected by the French in different parts of Egypt, and came into the possession of the English army, in consequence of the capitulation of Alexandria, in the month of September, 1801. They were brought to England in February, 1802, under the care of General Turner, and were sent, by order of His Late Majesty, to the British Museum."⁹² The description is not so much of the objects' composition or meaning as of the history of their acquisition. The entry for the Memnon head follows this pattern in that it has more to say about the feat of removing it than it does about the piece as an object of study in itself.⁹³ This fact is not so surprising considering how little besides its contemporary history was known about the piece at the time.

Soon after the head's arrival, G. H. Noeden, a sublibrarian assigned to assist Combe, studied the Memnon head and published his findings in 1822.⁹⁴ Noeden's study marks the first attempt to remake the Memnon head into an object fit for inclusion in the institution as an *object of study*

rather than as curiosity or pretense for narrating the heroic deeds of contemporary collectors. Central to Noeden's effort was the task of measuring the piece. Exact figures for height (8' 9"), circumference (15' 3" at top of breast, 14' 7" below), and weight (between 10 and 12 tons) appear in a table as crucial facts in themselves. Other measurements of various segments of the statue suggest that Noeden was searching for ratios that might attest to an association between Egyptian and Greco-Roman standards of beauty. In Noeden's account a new kind of description is at work, one which, by means of measurement, establishes both its material factuality and its aesthetic status in relation to known standards of beauty. Arguably in these lines the beginnings of artifact discourse on the Memnon head are discernible.

The 1832 guidebook on the Egyptian antiquities in the museum's collection (published by the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge) was perhaps the first to state openly another assumption about how an artifact, as opposed to a curiosity, might be received. Though he concedes that aesthetic appreciation of Egyptian pieces could only follow historical knowledge, the author asserts that Egyptian antiquities deserved more attention than mere curiosity. While such knowledge was more or less lacking at the time, the author of the guidebook makes clear that Egyptian antiquities belong in the same collection as classical antiquities because they too are art. To make this conceptual shift, the author argues, one needs to absorb the context from which Egyptian antiquities were taken.⁹⁵ This guidebook devotes most of its discussion of the Memnon head to narrating at great length the history of its acquisition and citing the story of French vandalism alongside descriptions that appeared in *Description de l'Égypte*, Denon, and Norden. It also includes Noeden's table of measures and presents a close reading of Egyptian statues as pieces of art. The author's comments on the Memnon head's racial features are striking in this regard. He writes that the nose of the

Memnon may be called beautiful, though it has not the European form; it is far from being so round and thick as that of his colossal neighbour opposite. Indeed the nostrils of the Memnon are, in our opinion, the finest pair in all the Museum, if we compare them with those of statues in perfect repose, and it is only with such that any comparison can be fairly made. . . . The lips of the granite figure opposite the Memnon are the

thickest specimen the Museum offers, and the whole character of this face is much rounder and more massy than any other which we have seen. Though it is not the negro face, we cannot help feeling, as we look upon it, that its features recall to our minds that kind of outline which we understand by the term African, a word that means, in ordinary acceptance, something of the negro cast of face.⁹⁶

Racialized aesthetic analysis may not have persuaded many curators. In fact, locating Egyptian art in Africa would have had wholly negative associations in contemporary models of aesthetics (such as G. W. F. Hegel's). Nevertheless, it does signal a new framework by which one could study the Egyptian antiquities in the collection as pieces of art. And in the end, it was this imperative—to study Egyptian antiquities as if one were studying examples of classical art—that mattered most.

By the early 1830s, following growing acceptance of Champollion's theories, there was widespread skepticism toward earlier traditions of interpreting Egyptian antiquities. With regard to the Memnon head, it was at this time confidently pointed out that there was no reason to call the colossal bust by the name of Memnon.⁹⁷ This skepticism would be replaced by a more positivist confidence in the 1840s as scholars began to read the primary sources of Egyptian history and the now-legible names written on the museum pieces. The consequences of this knowledge were wide: it was possible to read not only Egyptian history, but also the history of the objects in the collection. The name of Memnon was corrected to Ramses II during these years, and the place of Egyptian art in the antiquities collection transformed. An introduction to a museum guidebook from 1842 reads as follows:

The object of the present work is to publish a Selection of the Choicest [*sic*] Monuments existing in the National Collection of this country. It commences with those of Egypt, from the high authenticated antiquity of many of them, and from their being the source from which the arts of Sculpture and of Painting, and perhaps even the Sciences, were handed to the Greeks—from the Greeks to us. *They are the Alpha of the history of Art.* The collection of the British Museum is so rich in this newly opened mine of antiquity, of which so little has been edited, that no apology is necessary in commencing with this branch.⁹⁸

Not only had Egypt been allowed into the same aesthetic narrative as classical art, but it had now become the *origin* of that history. Within roughly twenty years, the place of Egyptian antiquities, including the Memnon head, shifted from the margins of the museum's art collection to its center. Moreover, there had accrued by this time enough information about the origins, uses, and meaning of Egyptian antiquities that they were no longer interpreted solely through the old lens of Greece and Rome:

Attached to every object will be found a succinct description of its use, application, locality, and relations; such as will, it is hoped, suffice the general reader and offer to the Archaeologist the broad outline of the subject. In treating each Branch, a preference will, of course, be given to the first authorities; thus, Egyptian Antiquities will be illustrated from the monuments and Hieroglyphics of Egypt, not from the second-hand information of the Greeks which the present state of hieroglyphical knowledge refutes or challenges. Hellenic remains will also be judged by Hellenism, and the labours of Continental Antiquaries brought before the British Public.⁹⁹

Furthermore, these guidebooks suggest that the accumulation of knowledge about ancient Egypt generally led to an increase in the ability of curators and connoisseurs to arrange Egyptian antiquities into a coherent historical narrative and to appreciate objects as discrete items worthy of individual study. Gone were the days in which the principle of balance and symmetry determined the style of arrangement, replaced by a taxonomic logic and historical arcs. Subsequent guidebooks built on these principles, and by the 1850s museum visitors would be given increasingly comprehensive historical lessons about ancient Egypt, the purpose of which was to increase their ability to appreciate Egyptian antiquities as art:

Before we proceed to the separate description of the Monuments which have been procured from Egypt, and which now enrich the National Collection at the British Museum, we propose briefly to lay before our readers an outline of the nature of the celebrated country in which these, the earliest remains of ancient art, have been discovered, with some account of its most celebrated cities and buildings now wholly ruined. It seems, indeed, hardly possible thoroughly to appreciate the remains of ancient art without some knowledge of the peculiarities of the lands which they

once adorned and illustrated. Thus a knowledge of the religious creed of a nation or a race, the language they spoke, the ordinary life they led, are almost essential requisites in tracing out the course of their artistic history.¹⁰⁰

These institutional and philosophical changes obtained in the spaces of the museum displays themselves. In 1832, the museum opened a permanent gallery built especially for the Elgin marbles. Since their installment in 1817, the Elgin marbles had been consigned to a hastily built room off the Townley Gallery. Now, they had an expensive new gallery, with top lighting, in the new wings being constructed by Robert Smirke. With the completion of a new Egyptian Sculpture Gallery in 1833, it was proposed that the Memnon head be immediately relocated to fill the larger space. The task of moving the head was daunting. Westmacott wrote at the time,

I am in some difficulty and quite at a standstill with the head of the Memnon. There is no private source on which I can rely for its removal with safety either to the men or to the object itself. I calculate the weight at about 14 tons, but this could be effected with care by the Government tackle and three or four of their men.¹⁰¹

The Office of Ordnance was contacted again, and a detachment of gunners was sent to the museum. In order to accomplish their task, the military engineers were compelled to reinforce floors. In June 1834, the Memnon head was installed in the new, much larger space.

Unlike the gallery built for the Elgin marbles, however, the new Egyptian Sculpture Gallery, like the old Egyptian Sculpture Room, was designed for side lighting rather than top lighting. This detail was itself a consequence of the aesthetic judgment that Egyptian sculptures, being of inferior quality, did not deserve the special lighting reserved for higher Greek and Roman forms. James Fergusson, writing in the 1840s, would spell out the logic of this arrangement, arguing that "the light is sufficient and sufficiently diffused, and for Egyptian sculpture it is of very little consequence how or in what direction the light falls. The artists on the banks of the Nile never aimed at aesthetic beauty of form, so that the sculptural products of their art scarcely depend more on their shadows than architectural members do."¹⁰² In sum, even as the Memnon head was finally admitted into the

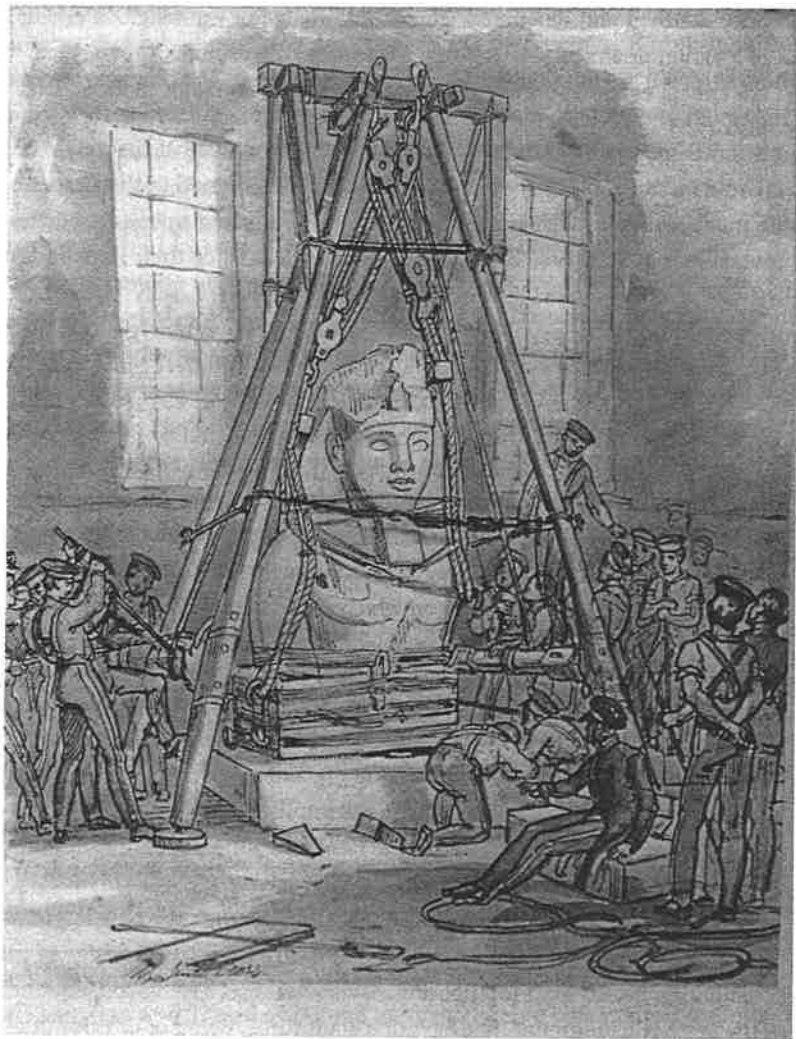


Figure 4. Gunners installing Memnon head in Egyptian Sculpture Gallery. Drawing by E. W. Cooke, signed June 2, 1834. © Copyright the Trustees of The British Museum.

British Museum's realm of art, its place was still behind that of classical Greco-Roman art. Moreover, as knowledge about Pharaonic political dynasties accumulated in the years thereafter, the treatment of the Memnon head and other such objects began to change in curators' descriptions. This shift is slight but perceptible, away from questions of the compositional or mimetic aspects of individual pieces, and toward issues of material composition, ornament, patterning, and use. If, during the 1820s, questions of taste and experience dominated the description of Egyptian antiquities, in later decades this was supplemented by debates about how such objects might be studied to learn about ancient history itself.

The slow but steady warming in the aesthetic reception of the Memnon head was only one factor in the development of its significance as a museum artifact. The other was tied to anxieties about the museum's public financing. Part of this had to do with the fallout from the purchase of the Parthenon friezes in 1816.¹⁰³ There is no doubt the friezes revolutionized English painting and literature and encouraged artists and poets to discard the derivative beau ideal style for direct experience with the original. The museum trustees, pressing their case for purchase with public funds, were confident, stressing that Elgin should be recompensed not only for offering the friezes to the country, but for saving them from either sure destruction at the hands of the Ottomans or certain acquisition at the hands of the French.¹⁰⁴ A royal act authorized the purchase, invested Elgin and his heirs as trustees to the museum, and stipulated that the pieces "be preserved and kept together in the . . . British Museum whole and entire, and distinguished by the name or appellation of 'the Elgin Collection.'"¹⁰⁵ Thus, the Parthenon friezes were rebaptized as the Elgin marbles.

Almost forgotten in this story is that the huge cost of the marbles (thirty-five thousand pounds, roughly equivalent to 3.5 million dollars in today's currency) to the British government was seen as excessive by many, especially given that the country was still reeling from recent war expenditures. The response of the trustees was consistent: since the purchase was invested in a public institution (the museum), its benefits accrued to the public. Yet claims about the public character of the museum only intensified the debate. From the outset in 1753, the founders of the museum insisted that the collections were meant "for the use and benefit of the publick, who may have free access to view and peruse the same."¹⁰⁶ Likewise, from this early time, the trustees won public funds to support the

foundation, expansion, and maintenance of the institution. Also from the outset, however, there were serious questions about whether public funds should go to support the collection of “knick knackereries” donated by wealthy travelers.¹⁰⁷ With regard to admission, the museum’s effective definition of *public* was one that, until midcentury and beyond, excluded the vast majority of the working- and middle-class British public.¹⁰⁸ The museum was referred to disparagingly as “a place intended only for the amusement of the curious and rich,” useless for the nation at large.¹⁰⁹ Throughout this period, arguments arose within the museum administration first about whether (and later about how) to make the definition of the public more inclusive. But the officers did not proceed quickly enough. As one angry critic put it in 1836, “The baneful spirit of aristocratic monopoly interferes even with our national institutions, and operates, in a great degree, to the exclusion of the working classes from the enjoyment of the blessings bequeathed for public good, by a generous benevolence. These prefatory remarks are especially applicable to the British Museum, which, even on the cautious admissions of its own officers, is characterized by inefficient management, and a very narrow accessibility as regards the great body of the people.”¹¹⁰ Hence, rather than mollifying critics, the key term (“the public”) in the trustees’ response to criticism of the Elgin purchase only increased demands that admission to the museum be opened up to a wider spectrum of society.

With regard to the use of public funds for acquisition, the trustees of 1819 were not willing to expend any of their budget on Egyptian antiquities. By the mid-1820s, however, they were negotiating to purchase small groups of pieces collected by Salt and even Drovetti. Still, the figures involved in the purchase of Egyptian antiquities were a fraction of those paid for Greco-Roman statuary. Nonetheless, the rising costs of acquisition, the upkeep of Montagu House, and later the new construction meant that the issue of the museum’s funding and its public character would be raised by those who were outraged by the institution’s exclusionary practices. Striking in this account from a debate in 1823 in the Supply Committee of the House of Commons is how aesthetic questions about Egyptian antiquities are woven into a basic fiscal point:

[The trustees] imported taste from a country which was said indeed to have been once the land of arts and sciences; they brought and imported

from Egypt a head of Memnon; and having got it safely home, they discovered that it stood rather higher than their ceiling. Then they wanted a place to hold the head, and two other huge Egyptian relics of a singular shape; so they built a double cube, which was the continuation of the aforesaid parallelogram. Unfortunately, it turned out that this head of Memnon was a dev’lish long head, insomuch that they were obliged to raise the ceiling of his closet somewhat higher, so that the roof of the closet which held the Townley [statue of] Venus was at one elevation, and the roof of the closet which enclosed the Memnon’s head was at another. The arrangement of these different closets was so odd, the closets themselves were so dissimilar the one from the other, that they were, as Shakespeare said, “Each monstrous, till its fellow came to match it.”¹¹¹

After praising the “disinterestedness” of the trustees, the member of Parliament cites their inept management as a waste of public funds. Banks, representing the museum, attempted to correct the record by pointing out that this account of the Memnon head in Montagu House was patently untrue. Nonetheless, the criticism stuck. Through this period, criticism of the public character of the museum expanded to cover the procedures of admission, the affordability of museum guides, and the costs of antiquities acquisition.

Although the gift of the Memnon head in 1819 might have been eagerly received by the trustees of the British Museum, it was not, and the reasons for this were not just aesthetic. In contrast to the acquisition of the Elgin marbles, the colossal head involved little expense to the museum. Still, coming on the heels of the sharp debate about the worthiness of public spending on other Mediterranean rocks, the Memnon head could not be easily championed at the museum. In that the statue’s value could not be easily assimilated into the art-history order which privileged Greek and Roman art, and in that its historical significance was a cipher, the Memnon head was as much a burden as it was a blessing for the museum in 1819. Indeed, for a long time it was clearly easier for the trustees to continue their pursuit of expensive acquisitions in Greco-Roman statuary than it was to receive Egyptian antiquities free of charge. Arguably, what eventually changed the trustees’ attitude toward Egyptian antiquities was probably not aesthetic debates or even the accumulation of solid historical information about the past. Rather, it was French success in the field of

collecting Egyptian monuments. Anglo-French rivalry in collecting was, during this period, fairly lopsided—acquisition agents, including both the French consul, Bernardino Drovetti, and the British consul, Henry Salt, found the Louvre much more eager to purchase what they collected, and it paid handsomely. In other words, the desire not to be left behind in the imperial rush of collection was likely the decisive pressure that changed the place of Egypt in the British Museum's collection.

THE MEMNON HEAD AS ARTIFACT

The story of the Memnon head speaks volumes about the cultural institution of the artifact at the moment of its emergence. It illustrates that the artifact is a product of a history of making and remaking, and that each of these moments of creation is itself expressive of social conflicts and cultural emergences. The story also suggests there is an abiding normative quality to artifacts. That is, they circulate in specific institutions and in doing so embody the rules and regulations of those institutions. The artifact can thus be said to articulate a matrix of social and cultural forces. That is, the artifact both joins and separates a number of fields of activity, the most obvious of which are the commercial and noncommercial aspects of the colonial enterprise emerging simultaneously in Egypt, England, and elsewhere. As the account of the Memnon head suggests, it may make more sense to define the artifact not in a positive sense, but rather in terms of interlocking tensions: it is sacralized as an object understood to be complete in itself (a work) and also the fragment of something larger (a piece);¹¹² it is both an instrument (of pedagogy) and an end (to be appreciated) in itself; it is sometimes a good for sale and most often a noncommodity;¹¹³ it is an object both found and made; it belongs to both private and public interest; it is both a fact and a value;¹¹⁴ and finally, impossibly, it is something both alienable and socially entangled.¹¹⁵

The concept of the artifact has had a special meaning in the disciplines of archaeology, museum studies, and art history: a product of human thought and labor, as distinct from objects taken from the realm of natural history. In labeling such objects artifacts, the art historian or archaeologist seeks not to evaluate them according to the aesthetic or cultural prejudices of the present, but, as much as possible, to understand the val-

ues and uses they may have had in their original context. For modern disciplines that study the material culture of the ancient past, *artifact* is both a useful label for classifying proper objects of study and a powerful concept that helps to move the horizon of interpretation beyond that of the immediate present. For archaeologists, to speak of artifacts may only involve two acts: to refer to a specific kind of material object, and to think according to the given theoretical concepts of the sciences whose objects of study are artifacts. For students of archaeology's history, however, it involves at least a third act: to employ the term "artifact" that belongs to a specialized discipline, ascribes its unique authority, and excludes others.

Distinguishing between these aspects of the discourse of artifacts allows one to recognize some of its peculiarities. Theoretically, the label of the artifact might be applied universally to all objects created by human culture. In practice, however, not all such objects are treated as artifacts for the simple reason that not every product of human civilization is put into a museum or studied as an example of material culture. This is an obvious but critical observation: there are specific disciplinary practices associated with the word *artifact*; and those objects known as artifacts exist as artifacts only insofar as they have been brought within the modern institutions of archaeology, museums, art history, and so on.¹¹⁶ Thus the term *artifact*, despite the careful neutrality of its common disciplinary usage, is value laden in more than one sense.¹¹⁷ Most important, the concept of the artifact has a rhetorical function in the traditional histories of Egyptology, such as in this recent account:

The exploits of Salt and Drovetti sometimes make sad reading these days. An archaeologist, or anyone who cares about the past, resents grave robbers and artifact hunters, for these people do irreparable damage to the remains of the past. It seems tragic that for more than a century the Nile Valley was subjected to the depredations of people like Salt and Drovetti, their hired plunderers, and others more destructive. This, however, was the prearchaeological age. Many professional collectors were well-intentioned people who thought they were performing a useful service to scholarship while making money. . . . There is some consolation in the fact that many of the antiquities that were taken from Egypt during the nineteenth century eventually found their way to museums where they could be protected and appreciated—indeed, many artifacts

were probably saved by being removed from Egypt—but even in those cases there was a loss that could never be made good.¹¹⁸

Indeed, traditional histories of Egyptology commonly assert that part of what distinguished the kind of intellectual work done by the first Egyptologists from the kind of work done by those antiquarians who came before was that Egyptologists worked on artifacts. In this way, the invention of the artifact was critical for legitimating Egyptology as a science and distinguishing it from its prehistory in the amateurism of antiquarian hobbyists and gentlemen excavators. With this in mind, one might reframe the distinction that was so crucial to Egyptology's self-making: while the word *artifact* may be used to denote objects of study, at the same time it connotes a range of values and practices associated with the institutions of modern science. Moreover, inasmuch as the emergence of Egyptological science was predicated on the invention of this new class of objects, it helped create a new class of experts whose knowledge granted them privileged access and authority over regions where antiquities were found.¹¹⁹ Whether the treatment of the Memnon head I have traced here fully matches up to later, normative definitions of the scientific object known as the artifact is doubtful. For one thing, the head was intentionally collected as a unique piece, and its significance was initially debated in terms of aesthetics. For another, many of the methods associated with scientific archaeology—the attention to material composition, patterning, and the closed site—entered the field of Egyptology much later, during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Nonetheless, in nascent form, many of the key elements of artifact discourse were at work in the new treatment of the Memnon head, and as its treatment changed over the course of the early nineteenth century, they developed too. For this reason, it is a useful case for exploring the processes of how antiquarian treatments gave way to new practices, how pre-science became science.

More than merely describing a set of objects, the language of the artifact—which emerged at the same time as the acquisition of the Memnon head—organized its objects within a new form of knowledge and claimed them for new institutions of interpretative power. As a language for laying claim to objects, the discourse of the artifact is peculiarly normative, since it both implies and disavows claims of ownership. In the Memnon head's paper trail, appropriation and possession are major themes, yet the notion

that the artifact belongs to those collecting it is so taken for granted that it is seldom articulated. Moreover, at no point do any of the agents—the travelers, the acquisitionists, the consul, the trustees—involved in collecting and transporting the Memnon head to London lay claim to the object for themselves. Similarly, while the Memnon head may have come into the possession of the British Museum, it was not claimed as property either by anyone there or by anyone involved in the acts that effected its transport to England. In this sense, there is no deed that definitively establishes the object as the property of the British Museum. Its provenance attempts to explain why the object rightly belongs where it sits but succeeds only in telling how it got there. Thus one of the fundamental paradoxes of the artifact as a cultural object: it may be in the custody of those who proclaim themselves to be the best parties to conserve and study it, but it is not their property. According to artifact discourse, if the Memnon head must belong to someone, it belongs to civilization or humanity in the abstract. In this rendition, the British Museum claims to be not the owner of the piece but merely its custodian.

The story of the removal of the Memnon bust from Egypt narrates the movement of an object through time and space and also the emergence of new institutional practices of culture based on the artifact form. Still, an obvious question dogs this account of the Memnon head: was the process of artifaction not also an act of theft?

It is tempting to call the acquisition a kind of theft at least insofar as those involved in acquiring the Memnon head knew (or supposed) that the natives did not appreciate its true value and thus could be prevailed upon to surrender it without fair compensation. The facts of the transaction seem to fit the textbook definition of the crime of larceny. But how is it that even though the story I have told is well known (as it is), there has never been a consensus that (let alone serious consideration whether) the act was done in bad faith, or was criminal in nature? The lack of consensus is not because this acquisition was exceptional compared to what came after. On the contrary, the artifaction style by which the Memnon head was removed became the rule of acquisitions, and its example was repeated, with variations of course, throughout the nineteenth century.

Condemnations have always been raised against this kind of antiquities acquisition, both by Europeans writing at the time and in more recent

decades.¹²⁰ Because those individuals raising the criticism have been working at a distance from the centers of Egyptological and museum authority, however, their voices have been largely ignored. Similarly, for reasons I will discuss in subsequent chapters, there has never been a serious attempt on the part of Egyptians or Egyptian governments to repatriate objects collected in the nineteenth century, nor should we expect them to.¹²¹ This apparent Egyptian indifference toward the transgressions of antiquities acquisition functions crucially in traditional accounts of Egyptology and has gone far to support the claim that the acquisition of Pharaonic antiquities could not have been theft. A key part of that argument, which has been rehashed from the 1810s until the present, is that Egyptians are more than indifferent in their attitudes toward Pharaonic antiquities: as Muslim iconoclasts and ignorant peasants, they pose a grave threat to the objects' survival. In this narrative, European acquisitions appear as acts of redemption, not dispossession. Once the objects were relocated to Europe, the language of conservation extended this line of thought and helped fuel the notion that the remedy for bad local government (in places like Egypt) is always European intervention. As we shall see, the notion that Egyptians did not care or could not manage their antiquities had its roots in a deliberate misrecognition of alternative Egyptian and Muslim traditions of thinking about and appreciating Pharaonic antiquities. In other words, fears about Islamic iconoclasm and peasant ignorance have had an important conceptual function in claims for colonial intervention. Because acquisition was represented as an act of conservation offsetting the kind of destruction to which antiquities were doomed if they were left in place, it was seen—and continues to be seen—as more or less legitimate. In the light cast by conservation discourse, the issue of acquisition is rarely described as illicit.

So, was the artification of the Memnon head a form of theft? Those who describe this history of antiquities acquisition in terms of theft have largely restricted their critique to claims about property rights.¹²² I would argue, though, that such claims fail to grasp the particular *modus operandi* of acquisition carried on under the banner of the artifact and founded on the persistence of two not entirely incorrect impressions: on the one hand, the legal and commercial transactions that took place around antiquities collection were quite ambiguous; and on the other, acquisition was an act of preservation. Here one begins to see how the discourse of the artifact

did not obscure claims about property rights concerning antiquities but rather effectively shifted the field of claim and contestation altogether. Before the 1810s, Europeans had been taking antiquities from Egypt without ever speaking about preservation or calling their activities anything other than what they were: commercial exchanges among local, state, and diplomatic agents. There are many indications that this commerce was large and formed a substantial part of the off-season economic activities of portions of Upper Egypt.¹²³ Though the removal of the Memnon head relied on this commerce, the style of its acquisition was new in that it sought a moral grounding for its actions and sought to legitimate itself as noncommercial and disinterested. The peculiar form of moral discourse surrounding the acquisition of the Memnon head—the discourse of the artifact—combined elements of salvationism, altruism, and scientism. Taken together, these elements of artifact discourse illustrate why the act of acquisition, so often criticized, has rarely been associated with theft. More than that, however, the powerful and persistent capacities of artifact discourse also suggest that any serious critique of acquisition cannot be confined to claims about discrete acts of theft, since what was at stake was the emergence of a new, more diffuse form of power—a network joining material objects and human subjects, powerful states and shifting aesthetic sensibilities, scientific fieldwork and museum pleasures. If this issue were considered with regard to restitutive justice, it would become apparent immediately how the claim of theft fails to grasp fully the broader context of colonial power: while one might imagine a successful legal campaign to repatriate individual objects like the Memnon head, this would still not undo the history of colonial domination that artifact discourse helped produce.

These last insights are clearly reflected in the official accounts of the removal of the Memnon head, which, though indifferent toward discrete property rights, are deeply concerned with shifting power relations. In fact, the primary sources describing the Memnon head's removal are saturated with the description of imperial power and its effects, rules, and ambiguities. One might say that the story of the Memnon head's artification tells also of the intersection of four imperial powers. Most obviously, the acquisition of the Memnon head took place in the context of competition between the French and British empires. Quite literally, the acquisition agents saw their competition as one over spaces and objects, territories

which either empire might dominate. Acquisition concerns were not distinct from the diplomatic activities of each empire; moreover, the military capacities of each were marshaled to accomplish the task. These competitions in Egypt were then consciously reproduced in the museum collections of each empire's metropole. At the same time, British-French competition for antiquities took place in the territories of a third empire. The Ottoman Empire's grasp on North Africa was already tenuous by the 1810s, although Egypt would remain under Ottoman sovereignty, and later under nominal Ottoman suzerainty, for another hundred years. Although Belzoni's account tells the story of how British power might be projected into Upper Egypt and Nubia, the fact of Ottoman governance infuses its every page. Although Belzoni's depiction of Ottoman rule may have been motivated by the fact he had to negotiate with regional and local officials throughout his travels, the centrality of Ottoman rule in his account goes beyond the merely descriptive. For Belzoni and Salt, each empire implied a set of particular moral values. If these authors assumed the British Empire to be dynamic, fair-minded, efficient, and rational, they saw the Ottoman Empire as stagnant, tyrannical, corrupt, and ignorant. There was little new about this kind of Orientalist moralism save for the mediating role played by the specter of a fourth empire in Belzoni's account—Pharaonic Egypt. In many senses, it was the shadow of ancient empire that motivated acquisition in the first place.¹²⁴ Undoubtedly, a substantial share of the aesthetic and historical value that accrued in objects like the Memnon head derived from their association with one of the most powerful empires of the ancient world. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, the imperial character of Pharaonic antiquities could rub off on those powerful enough to hold them in their grasp.

Ozymandias

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said:—"Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them on the sand,
Half sunk, a shatter'd visage lies, whose frown
And wrinkled lip and sneer of cold command
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamp'd on these lifeless things,
The hand that mock'd them and the heart that fed.
And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye mighty, and despair!
Nothing beside remains: round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare,
The lone and level sands stretch far away."
—SHELLEY, "Ozymandias"

My account of the artification of the Memnon head has foregrounded the material aspects of the process of artification. For the most part, I have read sources indexically, as references to actual events, actual people, and an actual object. Of course, each source is also a representation. To observe this is to emphasize a point made earlier about the performance played by the paper trail of the provenance itself. That is, the archives did not merely tell the story of how the Memnon head became an artifact; they were also gathered to guarantee that very outcome. To underscore the substantive role played by representations in the artification process I want to briefly consider Shelley's sonnet "Ozymandias" since it too belongs to this body of texts bundled with the Memnon head. Much might