

In the Ministry of Education

The School of Languages

We must congratulate the Ministry of Education, for it has now achieved something—at least, something it believes merits congratulations. The Ministry of Education now has an official newspaper, and within this official newspaper, official writers who defend it and sing its praises—though they deserve, behind their polished titles and glittering descriptions, little more than those very titles conceal. The Ministry now possesses its own mouthpiece; yet this official organ does the Ministry more harm than good. It heaps praise upon it, whether deserved or not, with no concern for accuracy or benefit, and with little regard for dignity—its own or the Ministry's. It seems quite content, even eager, to make itself and the Ministry objects of ridicule.

Did you read what *al-Muqattam* published when it announced the results of the examinations in the elementary teachers' schools? It claimed that the credit for this brilliant success belonged to a certain official in the Ministry of Education, showering him with praise—some deserved, much undeserved. But the paper forgot, or pretended to forget, that this man had been transferred the day before to another department, and therefore could have had no part, good or bad, in the achievement it celebrated.

And did you read *al-Muqattam*'s effusive praise when it published the results of the qualification exams? That praise was distributed so liberally that it reached those who had no share in education, great or small. It lauded the examination heads, the ministry clerks, the correctors—everyone, from top to bottom. By such means, the Ministry of Education wins whatever commendation it desires, caring little whether that praise is earned or fabricated, sincere or farcical. What matters is that the daily press applauds it—just as illiterate village headmen once sought flattery in bygone days.

To this level has the Ministry of Education in Egypt descended: it buys praise, even at the cost of turning itself into a laughingstock. How can such a ministry be expected to oversee education and learning seriously, when it values applause more than achievement, and adulation more than reform?

The Ministry of Education, then, has an official newspaper that defends it and extols it. And it grants this newspaper and its writers privileged access—information denied to other journalists and papers—because those others might care for truth, might temper their praise, might incline toward criticism. And so they are promised statements that never arrive; they request clarifications and receive no reply. But perhaps we should not be surprised: officials of the Ministry are human beings, subject to the same weaknesses and failings as others.

The Ministry thus entrusts its secrets and inner workings to its official paper and its tame writers, publishing what it calls “semi-official communiqués” to answer its critics. We read in *al-Muqattam* the supposed “history” of the School of Languages—its discussions, the meetings held in the Minister's office, the decisions adopted there—all written in the tone of one who speaks with divine certainty. And yet, despite this solemn assurance, we doubt the accuracy of what was reported. We are convinced that the Director of the Egyptian Antiquities Service does **not** share the Ministry's view, nor that of Aḥmad Kamāl Pasha, concerning the teaching of hieroglyphics in this barren fashion already described to readers.

We would like the Ministry to prove us wrong—to assure us that the specialists have indeed joined it in this folly, and that they have decided that hieroglyphics should be taught in Egypt in so absurd a manner. If it confirms this, we shall have no hesitation in saying that the Director of Antiquities, like the Ministry, has lost his way, and that he has managed to hold two contradictory opinions at once: one expressed in the Royal University report, and the other in this latest meeting.

But the Ministry's conduct has gone further still. It does not content itself with defending its policy; it must also defend Aḥmad Kamāl Pasha himself—as though anyone had attacked him or spoken of him with disrespect. In doing so, however, it follows a crooked path whose harm outweighs its benefit. For in defending him, it casts insinuations and slights upon the French scholars who organized the Egyptian Museum and founded the science of Egyptology—remarks unworthy of anyone, especially in these times.

Nor does it stop at *Mariette* and *Maspero* and their peers; it even sows petty divisions among Egyptians themselves. It wishes to persuade us—or rather, its trumpeters wish to persuade us—that Kamāl Pasha has rendered immense service to Egypt, producing pupils of whom the country may boast. Heaven forbid! Who has denied that Kamāl has done good and useful work? No one. But they claim for his pupils what even his pupils do not claim for themselves: authorship and translations that, they admit, were collaborative efforts involving others who did not study under Kamāl, who learned neither hieroglyphs nor archaeology at his hands.

They attribute to Kamāl's teaching alone accomplishments his students themselves ascribe to the two years they spent working in the Museum—learning there, under other masters, how Egyptian antiquities should be studied. It is in this sense that we call for the creation of a *School of Antiquities*: to adopt the same method the Museum has successfully followed in training both Kamāl's students and others—to teach them how to study hieroglyphics **and** archaeology together.

Yes, this is what we demand: that the *School of Antiquities* be founded on the Museum's model, located within the Museum itself, not attached to the Teachers' College. That is what we want—but the Ministry wants something else. And it may well persist in its will, but its persistence will not change reality. Its new "school" will remain as futile and unproductive as before.

We insist still: the Ministry of Education has failed, and Kamāl Pasha has failed with it, in the teaching of hieroglyphics. There is no point in repeating failure. The Ministry has given partial attention to one thing and neglected another entirely. It has shown concern for the age of the Pharaohs but ignored the age of Islam. And even that concern for the Pharaohs is incomplete and sterile. The era of the Muslims, their civilization and their art—all these deserve at least equal care, even if that care were imperfect.

We ask the Ministry plainly: why this haste to teach hieroglyphics, and this complete neglect of Islamic antiquities? Will they say: because of the discovery of Tutankhamun's tomb and the stir it caused? But the Ministry, like other ministries, showed no special care for these treasures. The objects are displayed in the Museum, yet not a single official visit has been made to them—except by Marshal Allenby and his wife!

Meanwhile, Islamic antiquities of great value have been uncovered—works that have stirred interest in Europe and in Egypt alike. But the one who revealed them was no Englishman; he was an Egyptian like you and me—‘Alī Bey Bahgat, not Carter or Carnarvon. It was *al-Fustāṭ* that was unearthed, inspiring books and studies that Europeans have eagerly read. And yet we, Egyptians, remain utterly ignorant of them. What ignorance could be greater than this—that these books, written in French and published in Europe, remain untranslated, unread by us?

Surely these works possess scientific and artistic worth beyond question. So what has the Ministry of Education done to promote them, or to make their contents known? To translate and publish them in Arabic would cost the Ministry a tenth of what it will spend printing Kamāl Pasha’s dictionary—whose scholarly value remains untested.

We ask again: why this concern for one thing and neglect of another? We do not think this disregard of Egypt’s Islamic heritage stems from contempt, but rather from narrow-mindedness on the one hand, and from the exploitation of popular sentiment on the other. Narrow-mindedness—because the Ministry’s vision is too small to conceive of establishing a *comprehensive* School of Antiquities embracing all of Egypt’s ages. And opportunism—because the public, excited by recent discoveries, wishes to see its government take interest in Pharaonic relics. So the Ministry seizes on this desire to claim that it “fulfills the will of the nation” and “serves the public good.”

But the public knows well that to serve the nation’s will is not to parody it, and that whoever claims to serve the people must do so fully, not half-heartedly. Therefore, if you truly wish, Your Excellency, to act according to the people’s desire—to honour Egyptian art and antiquity—then do it rightly: found a *comprehensive School of Antiquities*, directed by competent scholars and taught by specialists, open to students who wish to devote themselves to its disciplines, and to citizens who wish to learn Egypt’s history, art, and glory.

Let it be such a school—not a mere “hieroglyphics class” followed by an afternoon visit to the Museum. That would be nothing but trifling with minds and deceiving the public.

And let us remind you once more, Your Excellency: before you build the house, lay its foundations. Create first a Department of Fine Arts and Letters, and entrust it to specialists; then charge them with founding this *School of Antiquities*. Only then will you achieve real benefit, only then will you truly find the right path.

Ṭāhā Ḥusayn
al-Siyāsa, 16 July 1923