

## Ministry of Education

### The Sound Approach to the Study of Antiquities

By Ṭāhā Ḥusayn

God grants success to some people: He inspires them with sound judgment and guides them toward what is good. They then pursue benefit swiftly, methodically, and securely, stumbling over nothing. And God withholds success from others: their minds grow confused, the paths of benefit are closed to them, and the truth is barred from their reach. They move forward one step only to fall back several; they incline now to the right, now to the left, with even greater deviation; they stir and bustle with much noise and commotion, yet their movement is neither orderly nor productive.

God grants success to some people, and they are guided to what is good. God withholds success from others, and they sink into error. I do not know whether God will grant the Ministry of Education success, in the matter of antiquities, toward benefit and truth—or whether He will withhold it. I am inclined to think that the course the Ministry of Education has chosen in this affair, after advice was offered to it, guidance was given, and the path of benefit clearly shown, is nothing but one of the forms of abandonment.

We have lost hope in the Ministry of Education and in its willingness to heed the advice of sincere counselors or the guidance of honest guides. The Ministry of Education has not forgotten the age of autocratic rule, and it is loath to forget it; it is equally loath to place its trust in the new democratic systems. Accordingly, once it adopts an opinion, it proceeds with it regardless of what is said for or against it. In other countries with free ministries of education, no serious educational decision is taken without consulting scholars—and often the matter is taken even further, with consultation of the public and the press. But that is in democratic countries, not in Egypt.

We therefore despair of the Ministry of Education and believe that it will persist in what it intends. Yet we do not despair of Parliament. We continue to believe that Parliament will return the Ministry of Education to the path of moderation and compel it to act according to true benefit and right.

There is neither benefit nor right in Egypt possessing the richest museum of Pharaonic history, the richest museum of Egypt's history under the Greeks and Romans, and the richest museum of Egypt's history in the Islamic age—while lacking a truly productive school in which these antiquities, stored in museums and scattered across the land, may be studied. It is neither right nor beneficial for Egypt to be filled with antiquities and yet devoid of a school of antiquities. Thus, if Egypt wishes one of its sons to become a scholar of antiquities, it must send him to the Louvre in Paris, the British Museum in London, or other institutes in Vienna or Berlin.

It is neither right nor beneficial for Egypt to lack such a school. Yet when Egypt presses insistently for its establishment, the Ministry of Education deceives it with lessons offered at the Teachers' School on hieroglyphics and a few ancient languages—lessons that neither benefit nor avail. What is right and beneficial is for the Ministry of Education to assess Egypt's needs, Egypt's true interests, and Egypt's dignity, and to establish the school whose absence brings Egypt shame—a school whose creation would not, in truth, require great expense.

In its barren project, the Ministry of Education concerns itself with teaching the hieroglyphic language and deceives the public by claiming that the professor of this language and his students will visit the Egyptian Museum for practical training and will tour Egypt to see its antiquities in their variety. We must point out to the Ministry of Education that such visits will be of no benefit, for they will lack the continuity and regularity necessary for students to become acquainted with antiquities one by one and to master the diverse techniques by which they are identified, classified, and studied.

It is enough to note that Kamāl Pasha's budget allocates fifty pounds for travel—a sum insufficient for even a single person to tour Upper Egypt during the winter. How, then, could it suffice for many students and a professor burdened with many needs? Yet there is something worse than this.

Care for Pharaonic antiquities may indeed be obligatory, but there is another obligation no less pressing: care for Arab and Islamic antiquities. Care for what is preserved in the Museum of Arab Antiquities, for the mosques and monuments scattered across Egypt and beyond—monuments whose study Europeans have mastered while we ourselves frequent them without truly knowing them. Care for the diverse Arabic inscriptions that represent the history of Islam and the share of Islamic states in civilization and artistic refinement.

What has the Ministry of Education done for the care of Arab art and Islamic antiquities? What has it prepared for their study? Why did it not consult Bahjat Bey about establishing a school—or at least a department within the Teachers' School—where these antiquities might be taught and where students might emerge conscious that there exist Arabic inscriptions which Europeans have collected, interpreted, and studied, while we have remained utterly ignorant of them?

The Ministry of Education has thought of none of this, nor could it have done so. As I told you yesterday, it is narrow in conception: it sees matters from one angle only, not from two, still less from many. Had God granted the Ministry of Education success, He would have guided it to establish a School of Antiquities in which Pharaonic antiquities, the antiquities of Egypt under the Greeks and Romans, and the antiquities of Egypt in the Islamic age were all studied—one that, within a few years, would extend beyond Egyptian antiquities to other Semitic and non-Semitic antiquities alike, becoming one of the few great archaeological institutes of the world. Such an outcome would be fitting for Egypt, where civilizations have met and where the ancient world knows no history that does not leave some trace.

But the Ministry of Education is too narrow in vision to accommodate so broad an idea. There is nothing surprising in this. One does not harvest grapes from thorns, nor should non-specialists be asked to decide the affairs of specialists. A man of the streets cannot draw the plan of a house, nor design a School of Antiquities. Such matters must be referred to those who possess knowledge of them.

The gravest evil is that the Ministry of Education has involved itself in matters it does not understand. Had Egypt possessed an independent administration for the arts and letters—as we have called for a thousand times—this administration would have conceived this project soundly and carried it out to real effect. But God has willed that the Ministry of Public Works supervise the antiquities, and that the Ministry of Education involve itself in what it does not do well.

When I recently visited the Minister of Education, he told me that he was thinking of establishing an Administration of the Arts, and that he had written a report on the matter to be submitted to the government. If this is true—and we do not doubt that it is—why then does the Ministry build the roof of the house before laying its foundations? Why does the Minister not direct all his effort first toward establishing this administration? Once formed and made independent of engineers and those concerned with buildings and the distribution of charities, this administration could be charged with establishing whatever schools and research institutes were needed.

Is this not the good? Is this not the right? Indeed, it is the good and it is the right. But when has the Ministry of Education ever been known to pursue good or right effectively?

Believe me, Your Excellency, what Egypt truly requires is that you first establish an Administration of the Arts and Letters, bringing together the Egyptian Museum, the Museum of Arab Antiquities, the Egyptian National Library, the Royal Opera, and the various schools of art. Once this administration is established and organized, you will be able to consult Lacau, Bahjat, and their fellow specialists in establishing an Egyptian school in which Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike may study Egyptian and non-Egyptian antiquities.

This is the truth, and this is the benefit. Turn, then, toward truth and benefit, and do not allow yourself to be deceived by projects that are, in reality, nothing more than glittering phrases with no substance and no yield behind them.

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