

The Ministry of Education: The Right Approach to the Study of Antiquities

al-Siyasa, 13 July 1923

God grants success to some peoples, inspiring them with right guidance and directing them toward the good; and so they pursue their own benefit swiftly, in an organized manner, safe from every stumble. And God abandons other peoples, so that their minds fall into confusion, the paths to benefit are barred to them, and truth is kept from their reach; and so they flounder, taking one step forward only to fall back several, leaning now to the right, now to the left, stirring with much noise and commotion, yet with nothing orderly or productive in it.

God grants success to some, and they find their way to the good; God abandons others, and they become entangled in error. I do not know whether God will grant the Ministry of Education success in the matter of antiquities, guiding it toward benefit and truth, or whether He will abandon it. But I suspect that the Ministry's determination to press ahead with this scheme, even after counsel was offered to it, good advice given, and the path of benefit pointed out to it, is nothing but a form of that very abandonment.

We are beginning to despair of the Ministry of Education, and of its ever heeding the counsel of any counsellor or the guidance of any guide; for the Ministry of Education has not yet forgotten the age of autocratic rule, and finds it hard to forget it, hard to feel at ease with the new democratic order. And so, once it has settled on an opinion, it presses ahead with it, paying no attention to what is said, whether for good or ill. In other countries, it is customary for a free ministry of education never to undertake anything of consequence in educational matters without consulting men of learning on it — and sometimes it goes so far as to consult the public and the press as well. But that is how things are done in democratic countries, not in Egypt ...!

We despair, then, of the Ministry of Education, and believe it will go on doing as it pleases. But we do not despair of Parliament, and we still believe that Parliament will bring the Ministry of Education back to the right path, and hold it to what genuine benefit and truth demand. There is nothing beneficial, nothing right, in Egypt possessing the richest

museum in the world for the history of the Pharaohs and of Egypt under the Greeks and Romans, and the richest museum for the history of Egypt in the Islamic era, while lacking any truly useful, productive school in which to study these very antiquities stored in its museums and scattered across the length and breadth of the country.

There is neither right nor benefit in Egypt being filled with antiquities while entirely lacking a school of archaeology. If Egypt wants one of her own sons to become a scholar of antiquities, she must send him off to the École du Louvre in Paris, or to the British Museum in London, or to some other such institute in Vienna or Berlin.

There is neither right nor benefit in Egypt lacking this school. And when Egypt's insistence on establishing such a school grows too strong to ignore, the Ministry of Education deceives her out of this wish with a few lessons delivered at a teachers' college on hieroglyphics and a handful of ancient languages, lessons that neither help nor avail anyone. That is neither right nor beneficial; the right and the benefit lie, rather, in the Ministry of Education properly assessing Egypt's need, Egypt's benefit, and Egypt's dignity, and establishing this school whose absence is a source of shame to Egypt — a school which, were the Ministry to establish it, would cost it very little in expense.

The Ministry of Education, in its barren scheme, concerns itself with teaching the hieroglyphic language, and deceives people into believing that this language's professor and his students will visit the Egyptian Museum and carry out some practical exercises there, and will travel about the various regions of Egypt to see its antiquities in all their variety. But we would draw the Ministry of Education's attention to the fact that such visits will be of no use, since they will not be regular or sustained enough to enable the students to become acquainted with these antiquities piece by piece, and to master the various disciplines that teach them how to identify them, classify them, and put them to proper use.

Suffice it to say that Kamal Pasha's budget allots fifty pounds for travel! This is a sum insufficient for the travels of even a single individual in Upper Egypt during a single winter — how, then, could it possibly suffice for a large number of students and a professor with many needs of his own?! But there is something in this matter worse still: attending to the Pharaonic antiquities may well be a duty, but there is another duty no less pressing than this one — attending to the Arab-Islamic antiquities;

attending to what is held in the Museum of Arab Art, and to those mosques and buildings scattered across Egypt and beyond it, which the Europeans have made themselves masters of understanding, while we ourselves visit them again and again without knowing the first thing about them; attending to the various Arabic inscriptions that represent the history of Islam, and the share the lands of Islam once held of civilization and artistic refinement.

So what has the Ministry of Education actually done to attend to Arab art and Islamic antiquities? What has it prepared for the care of this art and these antiquities? And why has the Ministry of Education not consulted Bahgat Bey about establishing a school, or a department within the Teachers' College, in which these antiquities might be studied, producing for us students who are made to feel that there exist Arabic inscriptions which Europeans have taken great care to collect and interpret, and of which we ourselves remain in total ignorance?

The Ministry of Education has given no thought to any of this, nor was it ever likely to. As I told you yesterday, it is narrow of vision: it sees a matter from one side only, never from two sides, still less from every side. Had God granted the Ministry of Education success in this matter, He would have guided it toward establishing a school of antiquities that would study the Pharaonic antiquities of Egypt, the antiquities of Egypt under the Greeks and Romans, and the antiquities of Egypt in the Islamic era — a school which, within a few years, would extend from Egyptian antiquities to the other Semitic antiquities, and to non-Semitic antiquities besides, becoming one of the select archaeological institutes counted among the great ones of the world, as ought to be the case in Egypt, where so many different civilizations have met, and where scarcely any period of the ancient world's history is without some trace of its own.

But the Ministry of Education is too narrow in its vision for so expansive an idea ever to enter its head. Nor is there anything strange in this: you cannot harvest grapes from thorns, and one ought not to demand that non-specialists take up matters belonging to specialists — no man off the street could ever draw you the plan of a house, or design for you the scheme of a school of archaeology. These are matters which must be referred to those who actually know them.

The whole trouble is precisely that the Ministry of Education has taken up a matter it does not understand. Had Egypt possessed an independent department for the arts and letters, as we have called for a

thousand times over, that department would have conceived this matter properly and carried out its execution in a useful and beneficial way. But it was willed, instead, that the Ministry of Public Works should oversee the antiquities departments, and that the Ministry of Education should take up a matter it does not do well.

The Minister of Education told me, when I visited him recently, that he is considering establishing a House of Arts, and that he has written a report on the matter which he intends to submit to the government. If this is indeed true — and we have no doubt that it is — why, then, does the Minister of Education wish to build the top of the house before its foundation? Why does the Minister of Education not direct his efforts, before anything else, toward establishing this very department? For once it is formed, and made independent in its own affairs from the engineers and the supervisors of building regulations and the distribution of charitable funds, this department could then be charged with establishing whatever schools and research institutes it needs. Is this not the right course? Is this not correct? Indeed it is — it is both good and correct. But when has the Ministry of Education ever been known to pursue the good, or the correct course, well?!

Believe me, Your Excellency the Minister: what Egypt is rightly owed by you is that you establish, first of all, a department for the arts — and that it is only fitting that this department should bring together the Egyptian Museum, the Museum of Arab Art, the Egyptian National Library, the Royal Opera, and the various schools of art. Once this department has been established and organized, you would then be able to consult Lacau, Bahgat, and their expert colleagues on establishing an Egyptian school in which Egyptians and non-Egyptians alike could study both Egyptian and non-Egyptian antiquities.

This is the right course, and this is where the true benefit lies; devote yourself, then, to the right and to the beneficial, and let yourself not be deceived by these schemes which are, in truth, nothing but glittering, seductive words, behind which lies neither profit nor substance.