

Ancient Egypt on the Route of the Sea Voyagers: from the Beginning to the End of the New World.

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Introductory Remarks

This article - *Ancient Egypt on the route of the Sea Voyagers from the Beginning to the End of the Now World* – proposes a pioneering study into the historiography of Egyptomania. It seeks to compare the facts surrounding similar examples of Egyptomania, found by chance, and produced in Portuguese and Spanish speaking countries. This investigation began with the images of obelisks printed on the same in the same kind of publication: the covers of two books published in Portugal and Argentina, respectively.

The idea for this research came into being in the charming lanes of Coimbra, Portugal, in February 2006, with the discovery of a book with a front cover showing a photo of an obelisk of monumental proportions that exists in the centre of Lisbon, the Portuguese capital of. The publication had an intriguing title: *O imaginário de Lisboa nos romances (The imaginary of Lisbon in novels)*. This discovery reminded me of another that had occurred some years earlier and that had also caused me some surprise: a *Guia da Cidade de Buenos Aires* (Buenos Aires City Guide) in which the front cover shows a couple dancing the tango with an image of the huge obelisk located on Av. 9 de julho, the most important street in the port city and an essential thoroughfare for everyone there. The theme of this article arose with the discovery of the two book covers and led to their comparison in the search for possible qualitative and differential meanings behind the use of one of the icons of ancient Egypt – the obelisk – on the covers of books concerning such specific subjects referring to two cities located on widely separated continents of America and Europe, and also about very different themes: tourism in Buenos Aires and Lisbon in novels?

Tekhen was the name given by the ancient Egyptians to the obelisks and meant, **textually**, ‘sun ray’. It was the Greeks who gave these objects the name ‘obelisks’ that, in their language meant ‘needle’ or ‘pine tree’. Originally, the obelisk was a tapered

stone monument in the form of a needle with the top carved in the form of a pyramid. This basically follows the model of the ancient *benben* stone, at the temple of the sun god, in Heliopolis, which was considered sacred by the Egyptians from the time of the first dynasty (3100 – 2890 B.C).

Anyone arriving in Cairo would find it natural to come across one of these obelisks from the era of the Pharaohs, even at the airport and on the way to the city centre along the avenue known as Three Pyramids. However, the sight of these symbols far from Egypt, even knowing that they are currently produced, may cause some surprise, due to the unusualness of the image out of its context and the lack of knowledge regarding the meaning of these constructions, recognized as being the first material supports for the writing of history! This is the case of the visitor that, in search of traces of Peruvian culture and history, finds at the airport of Cuzco, located at the height of the Andes mountain chain, an obelisk, which, besides being a monument without any links to the local culture, presents an extraordinary innovation: the monolith has two wings! Immediately, the tourist might wonder what the story is behind this exotic creation. In reality, what the visitor is seeing is much more than a simple obelisk: it an example of Egyptomania!

Egyptomania is one of the three forms in which interest in ancient Egypt is manifested. The other two are Egyptology, a science created in the 19th century, with the deciphering of the hieroglyphics by Champollion, in which everything related to ancient Egypt is studied, and Egyptophilia, which refers to the appreciation of the architecture, objects and texts of ancient Egypt or material referring to these aspects (HUMBERT, 1994: 21). Egyptomania, the oldest phenomenon of the three, consists in transculturalisation, that is, the appropriation of the elements of one culture by another, which always implies change, or transformation of the content or expression.

On finding the book in Buenos Aires, I began to search for the meaning of the construction of the monument on the cover and this led to the discovery of other examples of Egyptomania in Argentina. I found that the obelisk on *Ave 9 julho* has a controversial history, it being built, amid protests by some citizens, with the purpose of enhancing the grandeur associated with the celebration of the four-hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city of Buenos Aires.

The design of the obelisk was entrusted to Alberto Prebisch (1899-1970), at the time considered the most important representative of the modern rationalist architecture in Argentina. At the end of 1933, Prebisch had visited the United States of America,

with a grant from the North-American Argentinean Cultural Institute. He visited many cities, among them Washington, where public works were being completed. There, a 167m tall obelisk built in homage to George Washington, which had been chosen through a public contest, had been in place since 1833 (BAKOS, 2005).

In fact, with the passing of time, the disputes regarding the obelisk in Buenos Aires were put to one side and it came to acquire a special *status*, becoming one of the symbols of the Argentinean capital. Accordingly, its image is copied and sold to the tourists mounted in different forms, such as magnets fridge for example.

In the Recoleta Cemetery, a must for visitors, there are beautiful sculptures inspired by ancient Egypt. A shop selling fine leather goods, located on Florida Street, among the ten most important in the world, is called *Sobek*, the name of the crocodile god of ancient Egypt. Colored sphinxes brighten a visit to the zoo in Buenos Aires; another watches over the customers at a shopping that is located in the vicinity of a sophisticated night club located in an elegant district of the city, where the decoration is a mixture of hieroglyphs with Indiana Jones!

Visiting Argentina once again, in February of 2005, I continued to find examples of Egyptomania, even in Ushuaia. As well as a shop, and logotypes with the names of Pharaohs, among others, I found an imposing obelisk. This monolith marks for eternity the first time that the Argentinean flag was hoisted on “*the land at the end of the world*”, in 1884. The present article takes advantage of this find in its title in referring to the long sea voyage undertaken to bring this monolith from the banks of the River Nile to its current resting place among the glaciers at the southern extreme of the Americas!

This study demonstrated that, in the construction of an obelisk, powers come into play that transform it into their own instrument and symbol. This applies within the political and legal environment and requires that a series of enquires are made regarding the individual examples in order to reveal the set of phenomena relating to each creation. Hence, we can see how many questions are related to the analysis of an obelisk:

- 1) What kind of political discourse suggested or imposed the project of erecting an obelisk and what was the reason behind the choice of this monument and not another;
- 2) What legal discourse chose/imposed the what, when, how and where the obelisk should record and how this was engraved on the support of the monument?

- 3) What is the authorship of the monument: what were the identities of the proponents and builders?
- 4) What are the erudite and/or aesthetic criteria present in the monument;
- 5) What was the reception of the community and the political/economic/media elites to the monument? (BAKOS, 2005)

By one means or another, the imaginary pertaining to the civilization on the Nile arrived in South America, in part with the European colonizers and/or immigrants of various origins, in part by the press, but mainly by the education system, as has been shown in earlier stages in this project. For example, in the research on Brazilian Egyptomania that I have been carrying out since 1995, the role played by the Portuguese royal family in the introduction of elements from ancient Egypt is of particular note. In the first urbanization project of Rio de Janeiro, in 1783, the public gardens and footpaths were designed to the taste of the aristocracy, incorporating wide spaces representing ancient Eastern paradisiacal traditions. The monarchs D. Pedro I and II are responsible for the most important collection of Egyptian items in South America. This fact leads us to affirm that the route taken by Brazilian Egyptomania passes through Portugal. (BAKOS, 2004, p.18-27)

The discovery of the aforementioned book in Coimbra on the imaginary of Lisbon in the novels of Thomas Mann and Hanns-Josef Ortheil was fundamental for the confirmation of the hypothesis. In the very introduction of this publication from the *Centro Interuniversitário de Estudos Germanísticos* (Interuniversity Centre of Germanic Studies) there is an interesting allusion to the possible reasons for the choice of the image of an obelisk on the cover. It explains that the word “imaginary”, contained in the title of the work, comes from the word “image”, which refers to “a vocable of Latin origin (*imago*) that, in terms of the visual arts, has come to be preferred by literary critics in recent decades in order to approximately designate the representations of the foreign in the literature of a country, having even given rise to a particular tendency in the most extensive domain of literary studies: comparative imagology”. (MADEIRA, 2002, p.19)

From this perspective, the obelisk would symbolize the foreign presence in Portugal, in place of the traditional element?

The considerations expressed by the author led me to rescue the symbolism associated with the obelisk and examine their destinations in the Western world as well as the very essence of the creations of Egyptomania. With this, the deduction of the

author began to make sense for my research, as the employment of Egyptian obelisks in the Western world since the time of Octavio Augustus until the present has marked the construction of new urban space. According to the known thought of the classical historian **François Guizot**, in examining the history of Rome you will see that it was the history of the conquest and construction of cities! After the victory of Octavio Augustus in Egypt, the Roman Imperial Capital came to acquire the largest number of original Egyptian obelisks outside of Egypt. In more modern times, this example was followed by the most powerful capitals: Paris, London and New York, which exhibit original obelisks in places of distinction, representative of their modernity.

At the end of the last millennium, Washington DC, the United States capital, Buenos Aires in Argentina and Rio de Janeiro in Brazil, for lack of Egyptian originals, constructed their own obelisks. The first of which is of such monumental proportions that it can be seen from any point of the city!

The cover of the book from Lisbon led to a long journey Portugal in order to discover if the image printed on the cover was the only Portuguese monolith. I soon discovered that this was not the case. I found other obelisks in Faro, Obidos, and in the small town of Batalha where I also found a women's clothes store with the name **Pyramid**.

The oldest obelisk found in Portugal is located in Vila Real de S. Antonio and was built 1775, in homage to the king D. José I, by the local fishing merchants and was completed in 5 months under the watchful supervision of Marques de Pombal. The bronze plaque expresses the gratitude of the Vila to the monarch, who is hailed as the restorer of arms, literature, agriculture and the *restorer of public happiness and glory*.

We see that obelisks stand out among the Egyptian symbols most widely found in the Western world. Being, in general, of monumental proportions, these monoliths are used as supports for memorials to events, and personalities as well as marking regional and/or national frontiers. But are there other examples of Egyptomania on the Iberian Peninsula?

The affirmative response was soon found in the streets of Lisbon and other cities in the region. These contained, as well as obelisks, other elements that became visible when we opened our eyes to Egyptomania! One of the most impressive examples was the image of an imposing two-meter high concrete statue of the Egyptian sun god, Horus, located in front of the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. The image of the sacred

bird was built in imitation of the original sculpture that stands till this day at the Edfu Temple, in Egypt. What was of particular interest in this example of Egyptomania was its composite character: seated in front of the mythological god was a sculpture of Calouste Sarkis Gulbenkian. In his will, dated June 18th 1953, this naturalized British, Armenian millionaire, left a significant part of his personal fortune for the creation of a private institution of public benefit, based in Lisbon. The perpetual trust administers donation made in recognition of the warm welcome he received in his old age from Portugal.

(Image of Gulbenkian)



There are obelisks in Spain too, but the most surprising example of Egyptomania is at the **road junction** that marks the entrance to the city of Torremolinos, where there is a monument that offers greetings to the tourists. This made us especially happy not only for the welcome sign but also for unusual example of Egyptomania, the column containing the greeting for the tourist was decorated with four splendid Egyptian sphinxes.

Gibraltar, a piece of the Iberian peninsula dominated by the British, was the last sight of Europe that the sailors had as they set sail west, in the era of the great sea voyages. There is a souvenir shop with the suggestive name of '*The Last Shop in Europe*'. In front of this building, a large stone pyramid was built, with inscribed bronze plaques on two sides of the monument. On the first it is written:

The last shop in Europe began its life as such as Nr 56, in 1844.

Hence we have a typical phenomenon of Egyptomania. The pyramid – that was, in its origins, the centerpiece of the funeral complexes of the Egyptian Kings – has had its image re-employed, perhaps in the externalization of the place as an historical mark and of cultural exchanges, with very different attributes from those of the original: the tomb of the Egyptian pharaoh. It is also possible to speculate that, as the cardinal points were taken into consideration in the construction of the pyramids, so in Gibraltar some similar significance might be intended in relation to the great sea voyages!

On the plaque on the other side of the pyramid, there is a phrase of historical significance containing important information:

Europe point the edge of the old known world where Hercules is said to have divided Europe from Africa and where the Atlantic and Mediterranean meet. 70,000 ships cross the strait each year.

It is important to remember that Hercules's Columns were **merely** the point of arrival and/or departure on for the great sea voyages. The full voyage was long and almost always triangular. It was through the sailors that information, objects, customs and practices were exchanged, and that these were mixed with the populations of the ports and taken long distances by family and friends. Among these developing tastes

was the fascination for the mysterious creations of the Egyptians, for their hieroglyphics, which remained unintelligible until the middle of the 19th century, and mainly for their belief in eternity.

Since the middle of the 17th century, the contacts between the Orient and the West multiplied, by sea through the Mediterranean and Red seas and the Indian Ocean. They are largely motivated by religious missions to the Orient, the creation of Turkish and Persian embassies and the of the great trading companies. With the development of the printing, the stories of witnesses were recorded and multiplied, arriving to America. They fired the imagination of the people that read and heard the stories of great pyramids, sphinxes and monumental obelisks!

The pyramid in front of the shop in Gibraltar, which was built in 1965, has a special significance for this study, because it bears witness to a still-remembered Egyptian element, on European soil. In this sense, the pyramids, sphinxes as well as the obelisks on the covers of the books, also mark, on the one hand, the line of continuity of Egyptomania, which **characterizes** a lasting movement of a crosscultural nature between Egypt, Europe and America, as mentioned above (BAKOS, 2005). On the other hand, such images can lead to the search for the specificities of each one of these creations. This would go some way to explain the continuous innovations in relation to Egyptian elements, over the millennia. It would explain, for example, the phenomenon of the creation of a winged obelisk in Cuzco! In a rapid investigation, it came to our knowledge that the wings represent a homage to a national hero of Peruvian aviation, Alejandro Velazco Astete, who died tragically when landing in the city of Puno, in the north of Peru, after completing the first crossing of the Andean Cordillera (BAKOS,).

Finally, the comparison of the uses of the obelisks on the covers of the books established the possible degrees of similarity and difference in the meanings of the use of a same image, in the same format, in Egyptomania. On one of the covers, the Egyptian monument represents the foreign view of the Portuguese capital, and, on the other, the obelisk symbolizes Buenos Aires itself. If we add these discoveries to the other practices mentioned above such as the winged obelisk in Cuzco, the sphinxes greeting the tourists in Spain, the pyramid in Gibraltar eternalizing the crossing of ways, we can assess the wealth of this transcultural study. It implies the necessity of seeking the cultural history of, at least, six countries in order to reveal the genesis of the creative

potential of the collective imaginary with regard ancient Egypt which has existed from the beginning to the end of the new world to the present.

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For more information on the Egyptomania project visit the site:
<http://www.pucrs.br/ffch/historia/egiptoman>

Images http://pt.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calouste_Gulbenkian 9/6/2006, 17:30h and photo of the author.