Taking the "Souvenir of Egypt" Research Project to the Next Level*

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Abstract

How can researchers take information that they have gathered and build a focused argument about it? This module is part 6 of a 6 part series on researching the background of the Souvenir of Egypt, a textile that is part of the Travelers in the Middle East Archive. It brings together the information that we have uncovered and explores a few directions in which the research project may be taken next. The module discusses how historians frame arguments and looks at political history and material culture.

1 Refining Our Research Project

Introduction

In the series of modules that make up the course on the "Souvenir of Egypt"[1] , we have been trying to learn as much as we can about this unfamiliar textile, which is part of the Travelers in the Middle East Archive (TIMEA)[2] . In the process, we have used various research strategies, including consulting experts, using reference sources, searching online databases, and consulting general histories. We have identified the Texts[3], Flags[4], Faces[5], and Symbols[6] found in the silk. Now that we have deciphered the majority of the images in the Souvenir of Egypt, it is time to hone our research project. The next step in the project could take us in any number of directions. This is the time to reflect on what we have done so far and ask: What about the research we have done so far has really caught your interest? What questions remain unanswered? Among all that we have discovered about the souvenir of Egypt, what seems to be the most historically significant aspect?

In this final section of the course, we will explore a variety of research topics using the work we have done so far as our foundation. It is, of course, impossible to list all of the possible directions we can take the project from here. But it is possible to discuss different ways of thinking about those directions.

The most obvious fields of historical research our artifact/document fits into are Political History and the study of Material Cultural. But, to be sure, there are countless ways our souvenir could be used to tell

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[1]http://hdl.handle.net/1911/9886

[2]http://timea.rice.edu

[3]"Analyzing Literary and Cultural References: Identifying the Texts in the Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13016/latest/>

[4]"Identifying the Flags of the Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13028/latest/>

[5]"Identifying Historical Figures: The Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13017/latest/>

[6]"Analyzing Symbols in Artifacts: The Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13029/latest/>

a story about the past. Let's take a look at what we mean by Political History and the study of Material Culture.

Political History

Political history is what we usually think of when we think about the writing of history. It focuses on dates, names, places, and events with an eye to connect them all in a narrative. Often, the emphasis of political history is on states or nations and the way they change independently or in relation to one another over time. It is the kind of history we find in middle-school textbooks, but don't be fooled into thinking that political history is for kids. Some of the most sophisticated and influential works of history have been in this genre.

Material Culture

Material Culture consists of the relationship of people to the material objects around them. Scholars of material culture assume that the things people surround themselves with, from coffee cups to aircraft carriers to birthday cakes, have discrete functions and meanings in their lives. These scholars seek to explore those meanings and functions by uncovering the ways people understood and viewed the things around them. Some areas of investigation in this field would be how things are produced, obtained or consumed.

2 The Brainstorm

Good history usually begins with good questions. First, we will simply sit, reflect on the work we have done so far and allow our brains to unload all of the nagging questions we have collected onto paper. In other words, we will brainstorm. Brainstorming is simply a free-writing exercise in which we review what we have done so far and write down every question or idea that we have with as little organizational constraint as possible. This pillaging of our minds for any and all questions is one of the most productive ways to discover what is about our research that truly interests us. Here, we will divide ours into the categories of Political History questions and Material Cultural questions, just to put some descriptive and, hopefully, productive parameters around where we are headed with them.

Material Culture Questions

-Who made the silk and why?

-Who was the intended consumer of such a product?

-What sentimental significance would such a souvenir have?

-What can the existence of such a souvenir tell us about the kinds of experiences Europeans were having or expected to have while in Egypt?

-Were there tourists in Egypt at this time?

-Was there a culture of tourism in Britain?

-What do the depictions of the flags and leaders indicate about national identity at this time?

-What kind of aesthetic relationship can we discern between the images of exotic labor and the ring of world leaders and national flags?

Political History Questions

- The silk contains many images of flags and world leaders, but certainly not all of them. Why these and not others?

-What events in this history of the region whose flag we are considering prompted the change in the design of its flag?

-Under what circumstances was the design of the flag altered in subtle ways, such as the addition of a crest or symbol, and in what circumstances was it changed in more significant ways, such as the shift from a solid color to a series of colored stripes?

-Who is traditionally responsible for initiating or authorizing changes in the design of the flag? Has this position changed over time, from a King to a Prime Minister for example?

-What do design changes generally indicate about the political or social changes the region itself is going through at the time?

-What is the significance of the symbols, colors, or other aspects of the design culturally? Do they have specific functions or meanings in the daily lives of the people of the region?

-What is going on in the regions mentioned during the period of the silk's production? Is there a historical relationship between the regions? How does Egypt fit into the story of Britain's history, and vice versa?

-How do the other elements of the imagery relate to each region, such as the texts or abstract imagery? Is the indication of an "alliance" and a possible "victory" in the Arabic text, for example, suggestive of a shared military endeavor between England and Egypt?

-At what point in history were all of these regions and leaders represented in the silk involved with one another in ways that would initiate the production of such an image?

-What is the significance of the order in which the flags and portraits are presented?

-Why is it that, from the number of languages presumably spoken by the leaders represented, only Arabic and English are used in the presentation of the text?

3 The Souvenir of Egypt in a Political History Project

Let's begin with some unanswered questions about the silk and then develop them into viable political history research topics.

Question:

Why would a souvenir of Egypt have images of the flags and leaders of so many European countries on it?

Insight into the question we have gathered from our research:

Recall our study of the Texts[7]. The Arabic text declared, "May God make victory our ally." Perhaps the nations represented are allies in some military adventure. The majority of the text on the silk is in English, however. It is safe to say that the silk was produced by and for people who spoke English– and that would be the British among our multi-lingual array of other leaders.

Recall our study of the Flags[8]. We found that some of the Flags met the end of their periods of use between 1917 and 1923. Does this change of flag design have anything to do with the perceived multi-national alliance?

Development of the question into a political history research project:

The image in the Souvenir of Egypt reflects, potentially, the desire of some Britons to portray for other Britons an allied relationship between the nations of Britain, Egypt, France, Belgium, Italy and Russia during the period between 1913 and 1917. Our research project will examine the national histories of each of these regions during this period to ascertain the actual nature of their relations with one another. It is suspected that the nations were involved in some sort of military adventure with serious, but unevenly distributed, impact on the nations' political situations. The importance of this allied representation to the British will also be considered in light of our findings.

Let's try another, more specific question.

Question:

Why are Egypt and Britain the only nations mentioned by name in the silk?

Insight into the question we have gathered from our research:

Recall our examination of the Flag of Egypt. Did we not find some mention of a British period of occupation in Egypt from around the turn of the century? That would be in line with our other findings, the English text on the silk seeming to indicate that the silk was meant for British consumption, for example.

Development of the question into a political history research project:

The place of prominence of the leaders of Egypt and Britain in the imagery of the Souvenir of Egypt suggests a special relationship between the two nations with in a larger, international alliance in the period between 1913 and 1917. In light of the British occupation of Egypt around the turn of the century, a mutually cooperative alliance between Egypt and Britain at this time seems unlikely. Our research project will examine the place of Britain in the history of Egypt, and vice versa, in the first quarter of the twentieth century for an explanation for this unbalanced representation of British-Egyptian relations.

[7] "Analyzing Literary and Cultural References: Identifying the Texts in the Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13016/latest/>

[8] "Identifying the Flags of the Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13028/latest/>

4 The Souvenir of Egypt in the Study of Material Culture

As we did with the section on Political History, let's begin with some unanswered questions about the silk and then develop them into some viable topics for a research project in Material Cultural History.

Question:

Who made the silk, and for whom to buy?

Insight into the question we have gathered from our research:

Recall our examination of the Texts. The two languages represented are Arabic and English. Also, the only nations actually named are Egypt and Britain. But, even if the silk presented no text to read, the predominant flags in the silk are Egyptian and British and the imagery is of dark skinned and turbaned individuals working near a river before pyramids. This cultural snapshot is presumably not of the Thames River.

Developing the question into a research project in the study of Material Culture:

The existence of the Souvenir of Egypt indicates the existence of an English-speaking, presumably British, tourist culture in Egypt in the first quarter of the twentieth-century. Our research project will examine the cultural significance of this and other souvenirs of international travel by looking for additional evidence of a culture of tourism, such as travel accounts and guides, agencies for the promotion of tourism and the impact of an exposure to foreign cultures on trends of fashion and décor in London.

Let's try another question.

Question:

Why is the image of the laboring Egyptian along the Nile River before the Great Pyramid of Giza that appears in the Souvenir of Egypt such a predominant image in European representations of Egypt?

Insight into the question we have gathered from our research:

Recall our stumbling across the genre of Orientalist art in our analysis of theSymbols[9] in the imagery of the Souvenir of Egypt. The emphasis of difference or "otherness," to use a term brought to the fore of historical research dealing with Europe's perceptions of the non-European, seems significant to the study of our artifact. Taken in one way, the surrounding European leaders seem to be peering in to the scene of exotic labor from the outside, or perhaps containing it.

Developing the question into a research project in the study of Material Culture:

The imagery of the Souvenir of Egypt is a complex interplay of the familiar and the exotic. The scene of the simple, and yet decidedly exotic, figures laboring beneath the mysterious pyramids of Giza is countered by the surrounding visages of the wider political universe, also mysterious for different reasons. Our research project will examine the ways in which the British tourist's experience in Egypt shaped and was shaped by such representations of the familiar and the unfamiliar as we find in the Souvenir of Egypt.

5 Where to Go From Here

This is an excellent point in the project to consult with your advisor on where you are going with the project. We have done an extensive amount of research so far and have found much useful information about the silk and its imagery. Often, when one has spent as much time as we have on a project like this, we don't see what might be an obviously productive direction. Introducing your research to someone on the outside can be very helpful in this respect, especially if that person is familiar with you and your work. Your advisor is the perfect person to have this conversation with.

[9] "Analyzing Symbols in Artifacts: The Souvenir of Egypt" <http://cnx.org/content/m13029/latest/>