

Towards a Universal History of Antiquarians

Hacia una historia universal de los anticuarios

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Recibido: 30-05-2013

Aceptado: 14-08-2013

ABSTRACT

Historians of archaeology have traditionally seen antiquarianism in opposition to archaeology. According to this view, archaeology came of age at the beginnings of the 19th century when European scholars were able to take the great step forward that bridged the gap between antiquarianism and archaeology. In this paper, I explore the history of antiquarian research from classical antiquity until the 18th century. In particular, I examine how the notion of antiquarianism has articulated an understanding of the relationship between memory and forgetting that is essential to understand modern conceptions of the past.

KEY WORDS: *Antiquarianism. Ruins. Collective memory.*

RESUMEN

Tradicionalmente, los historiadores de la arqueología han opuesto anticuarismo y arqueología. Así, de acuerdo con una interpretación muy extendida, la arqueología habría alcanzado su mayoría de edad a principios del siglo XIX al avanzar desde el mera recolección anticuaria al desarrollo de la arqueología científica. En este artículo, examino la historia del anticuarismo desde la Antigüedad hasta la Europa moderna. En particular, analizo cómo la noción de anticuarismo articula una interpretación de la relación entre memoria y olvido que es fundamental para comprender la concepción moderna del pasado.

PALABRAS CLAVE: *Anticuarismo. Ruinas. Memoria Colectiva.*

1. Introduction

During most part of the 20th century, much of the history of archaeology read as an account of the progressive journey out of the darkness of antiquarianism toward scientific archaeology, typically associated to rationality and objectivity (e.g. Daniel 1962, 1978). Since the 1970s, however, a number of authors have called into question this widespread interpretation of the history of archaeology. In particular, they have questioned the idea of 'antiquarianism' as a mere pre-scientific period in the history of archaeological thought (e.g. Piggott 1976, 1989; Schnapp 1993, 2002). In this setting, I seek to explore in this paper the idea that most human groups appear to have some interest in collecting relics from the past. In particular, I propose a short history of antiquarian research from classical antiquity until the 18th century, providing the reader with numerous examples concerning what seems to be a universal curiosity about the past.

What does it mean to be an antiquarian? Does this term exclusively refer to someone who collects antiquities? A collection entails an indefinable pleasure that drives people of all ages, origins and religions to select and remove from their natural environment certain objects, or even simple natural aggregates, in order to preserve, study, display and class them. Krzysztof Pomian defines the collector's activity as a semantic operation in which the collected objects are what he calls *sémiophores*. Collectors bestow importance on these objects by isolating them from their original context, from the place where they lay, from the layers that obscured them (Pomian 1993; 2004). According to a well-established tradition, histories of antiquarianism begin in the Renaissance when collectors and Italian travelers developed collections for the sake of curiosity rather than as medieval treasures. Recent studies, however, have shown that medieval treasures also served as an instrument of knowledge (Borgeaud & Volokhine 2005).

In our quest for the most ancient examples of such *sémiophores*, Egypt provides us with a fossilized sea urchin, picked up by an ancient Egyptian priest who engraved his name upon it. André Leroi-Gourhan lets us go even further back in time, to the caves of Arcy-sur-Cure, where he observed a group of flint stones far more ancient than the archaeological layer that he was studying. The analysis of these findings provided proof beyond doubt that Paleolithic humans were interested in objects from older ages and they appreciated the importance of these discoveries. Additionally, a collector may derive pleasure from the collection in and of itself; the col-

lection sometimes forms the most improbable series of objects or fragments. Collectors are capable of making the greatest of sacrifices to satisfy their devouring passion. Paradoxically though, they can also decide from one day to the next to abandon the very collection that had cost them so much time, work and money, only to begin all over again. For instance, Jacques Doucet sold his entire collection of eighteenth century painting to go on to establish one of the most magnificent private collections of contemporary art of his time. The history of collections is full of tales of such impassioned and versatile figures, as systematic as they were unforeseeable. Like the hunting instinct, the desire to collect things is one of the most consuming-time activities undertaken by humans. Like the hunter, the collector is always on the look out, attentive to every sign, to any information that might help him to entrap the object of his desire. Count Caylus, who certainly knew what he was talking about, referred to himself as a hunting hound (*canis venaticus sum*) tracking down antiquities.

After briefly listing the principal strategies that European society developed since the Renaissance to recall its past (collections, restorations of historical monuments and archaeological digs), I will explore the vast history of antiquarianism so as to demonstrate that Western antiquarianism is only one facet of a consciousness of the past, what I would call an *art of memory*.

2. The European *Wunderkammer*

The collection of exotic and faraway objects (be it in terms of space or time) and the exploration of ancient monuments are activities that may be definitively connected with those *virtuosi* of the European Renaissance who laid the grounds for a culture of the rare, the exotic and the ancient. This fascination materialized in the creation of so-called curiosity cabinets, *cabinets de curiosités*, or to borrow the expression that became fashionable in princely German courts, *Wunderkammern*. From J. Von Schlosser to W. Benjamin and the ground-laying book by K. Pomian, this type of collection, bringing together *artificilia* and *naturalia* (i.e. the creations of man and of nature), has been eagerly studied. From the fifteenth century onwards, curiosity about the past was no longer the privilege of princes and aristocrats, it became an integral part of a culture shared by the aristocratic elite and the bourgeoisie. Our modern disciplinary classifications are unrecognizable in this highly complex organization of knowledge that merges the past and the present, the familiar and the foreign, nature and culture. Nev-

ertheless, many of our scientific disciplines, such as paleontology, archaeology, geography and ethnography, grew out of this vast effort to explore the world and the mind. The human curiosity to collect had a strong impact on the history of ideas. Additionally, it highly contributed to the emergence of cosmography, topography and natural history and it played an important role in the development of astronomy, physics, medicine, political thought, economics and the study of national traditions.

It remains to be said that collecting is not an activity first developed during the Renaissance. Collectors and antiquarians existed throughout the Middle Ages; *Catulus*, Horace and the *Verrines* by Cicero provide us with portraits of collectors, giving us an appreciation of their role in the ancient Roman and Greek worlds, particularly during the Hellenistic period. Needless to say, the Alexandrian principle of the museum derived from an analogous interest in the creations of mankind, whether they are material or immaterial, whether they seek to observe nature or society.

The act of collecting is most basically defined as the extraction of a material object (it may have been produced by man or be a product of nature) from its ordinary environment and its conservation in some shape or form. We can identify traces of such activity in the past thanks to what we might call *intrusive objects*; these objects are unrelated to everyday life and religion, or otherwise different from what we expect to find in the archaeological context being studied (whether it is a monument or a stratigraphical layer). When such objects come with a label or an *étiquette*, as was often the case in Egypt and Mesopotamia, then the intention is more obvious. The Mesopotamian custom of deporting the statues of a defeated party, many of which were found carefully deposited in palaces and temples, attests the existence of collections of votive objects in the pre-Christian world. Collections of ancient objects and inscriptions are well documented for towns such as Sippar or Babylon; however, the exact purpose of these collections – religious, scholarly, political – is difficult to define. These examples illustrate that most human groups appear to have some interest in collecting things. This being said, what distinguishes these ancestral collections from the *Wunderkammern* that emerged in the Renaissance? For most historians of collections, the latter are related to the development of new fields of knowledge – the exploration of the planet, the definition of categories of classification, the identification of the origins of objects, the description of the places where they were found and extracted – and they were also used by their owners as a symbolical means of affirming their political power. For instance, in 1565 Samuel

de Quicchelberg established a set of rules for collectionism that extended the classificatory practices applied in the realm of ideas to the realm of physical objects (see Falguières 1992).

Organizing objects in the restricted space of a collection is a way of organizing the world. The curiosity cabinet should not be looked upon as a simple reunion of inanimate objects, rather it should be considered in relation to other similar practices, including botanical collections and the collection of rare and exotic animals. As P. Falguières has underlined, the fame enjoyed by such *Wunderkammern* can only be understood in the context of a new fascination for the historical (Falguières 2003: 78-79). In other words, to explore the genealogy of species, of human productions or of families were just different means to the same ends, to reinforce the identity of kingdoms and contribute to the establishment of an ordered narrative of past events. In a sense, the *Wunderkammer* is the materialized expression of an intellectual need to control the world, a princely prerogative that could also be shared by the richest and the most curious of his subjects. In other words, just as the recording of history has political significance, so does the act of collecting.

In 1452, Augsburg was the first town in Europe to set about the task of writing its own history, a project entrusted to a monk named Sigismond Meisterlin. This work of local history, illustrated with original illuminations, was the earliest discovered text to give a picture of Europe's prehistory, thanks to the combined study of Latin texts, observations made of the traces of history left in the ground itself and ancient local customs. The *Wunderkammer* was modern Europe's expression of curiosity. It manifests a certain cultural specificity but it also shares a strong affiliation with a far more ancient tradition, which goes back to Egypt, Mesopotamia and China.

3. Stone and time: the poetics of ruins as a means of discovering the past in ancient Egypt

In ancient Egypt a strong sense of appreciation for the rare, exotic and ancient characterized the activities of the Pharaoh, his dignitaries and his scribes. Khaemwaset, son of Ramses II, lived during the thirteenth century B.C. and is without doubt the most-documented and well-known antiquarian and restorer of monuments that we know of in ancient Egypt (Gomaà 1973: 68). An inscription found on a statue representing one of his ancestors, the prince Ka-Wab, son of Cheops, provides us with perhaps one of the oldest tales of a fortuitous archaeological discovery, which bears witness to a sensitivity for tradition and knowledge, markers of any true

antiquarian curiosity. Learned Egyptian dignitaries communicated with each other across the ages, sending messages into the future. For the Pharaoh's scribes and collaborators, observing and studying monuments, as well as copying and interpreting ancient inscriptions, was a normal part of their regular activities. Moreover, they did not shy away from carrying out excavations to uncover monuments and to restore them.

We can see that cultivating an interest in monuments, ancient objects and rare texts was not the Pharaoh's exclusive privilege but was also the assigned task of all learned members of society. This form of curiosity, intimately related to a sense of history, shows that historical practice in ancient Egypt was not, as it has long been thought, limited to the establishment of chronicles, nor was the past conceived of as a simple series of events and dynasties.

To face up to the challenge of a crisis, the death of a sovereign, a war, a flood or a battle, the scribes examined the chronicles for records of similar events. If nothing could be found they would exaggerate the uniqueness of the situation, the unheard of nature and the exemplarity of the action taken by the actual sovereign, thus reinforcing his image as a pioneer who respected the past as studied by his scribes. This sense for the passage of time appears to have been an immanent element of the Egyptian's sense of self, which explains the particular nature of their perception of the past. The past was a doorway to a better understanding of the present, a reservoir of attitudes and actions that any man of state, priest or warrior could call upon when it was deemed necessary. Hence the imperative need to preserve the past in the form of texts and material monuments. What purpose could the Egyptian obsession with monumentality serve if not to defy time itself? In his excellent essay *Stein und Zeit* (1995), Jan Assmann maintains that the stone (*Stein*) is a form of the being (*Sein*). According to Assmann, memory can only exist if the lives and works of great and noble sovereigns are perpetuated, a process that requires society to master all written forms and also all material monuments as complementary sources. When Khaemois, son of Ramses II, discovered the statue of his ancestor Ka Wab, son of Cheops, in the park of Memphis, he not only had it excavated and restored, as the above-mentioned inscription indicates, he ritually reinstated it. Discovering, collecting, interpreting and restoring ancient inscriptions and monuments was not the mere pastime of learned dignitaries, it was their duty. These practices were not the sole reserve of the sons of Pharaohs, they were the hallmark of a social attitude that was to develop continuously over time.

A certain Petosiris, a priest who lived in the fourth century B.C., left us this extraordinary testimony:

The temple of Heqat [...] which had long since been destroyed. The waters came in every year, whilst its general disposition no longer corresponded with the description entitled *Detail of the temple of Heqat* or so it was said...I called on the scribe who resided in the goddess' temple. I gave him plentiful sums of money to erect monuments there on this day. I had it surrounded by a colonnade all around so that the waters would no longer be able to reach it. I questioned every scholar to learn about the rites (Vernus 1995: 106-107).

The restoration of a sanctuary is an erudite undertaking that relies on a tradition of its own; in some cases, like this one, it is based on a criticism of available sources and a sense for monumental heritage. Over the course of time the historical awareness of the Egyptians underwent a kind of revolution. Their desire to question the past remained, but the point of view changed. During the Ramesside period a profound intellectual mutation forced a break with tradition, which opened a gulf between the past and the present. According to Assmann, tradition was placed on a pedestal (Assmann 1995: 307), a position that meant it could be placed at a distance and so questioned. Already during the Middle Empire had the famous Pharaoh Khâkhpêrêseneb spoken out against the weight of tradition:

That I might dispose of unheard expressions, original formulations, made from new words that are not out of use, that include nothing repeated, without expressions handed down through oral traditions already spoken by my ancestors (Vernus 1995: 4).

Confronted with the same repeated formulations, his dissident voice rose to defend the autonomy and the originality of expression. Despite the heavy cloak of tradition, the Egyptian civilization knew how to dominate time, creating the possibility to reflect on and dialogue with the past, and so developing an antiquarian practice. Although different in nature to what we observe in Renaissance times, there is nonetheless a shared awareness of the transience of human life, the fragility of empires and the immensity of time.

The Egyptians privileged stone, constructing the most solid of edifices and carving majestic inscriptions to bear witness to future generations of their greatness. The Mesopotamians were more discrete; aware of the fragile nature of their clay brick con-

structions, they inscribed clay tablets as a means of perpetuating their magnificence.

4. Tablets against time: beating erosion at its own game

Nearly all sovereigns of great empires attempt to tame time either by leaving lasting traces of their reign for posterity or (and often for the same reason) by emphasizing the privileged nature of the ties that bound them to their most glorious ancestors. From such a perspective we might say that in a way the ancient Egyptians, Mesopotamians and Chinese had a common strategy: ‘oriental despotism’ might also be interpreted as a laboratory for the perfection of the art of memory.

In terms of behavior and method, however, there are a certain number of obvious differences. While Egyptian Pharaohs tried to resist the wear of time by counting on the indestructible nature of their immense stone constructions, Mesopotamian sovereigns imagined a very different solution by carefully burying inscribed brick tablets in the foundations of their palaces and temples. These bricks bore inscriptions that glorified the sovereign, testifying to his piety and generosity, and insuring the transmission of the details of his accomplishments to his descendants and followers (see Ellis 1968; Lackenbacher 1990). A form of transmission that is somehow ironic, for it is not the strength of the walls nor the sumptuous nature of the painted and sculpted decorations that bear witness to the grandeur of the sovereign, but the simple sun-dried clay bricks carefully engraved by vigilant scribes. In stark contrast to the majestic stones of the Pharaohs, Mesopotamian sovereigns understood the fragile nature of their brick constructions; thanks to this modest method they found a way of effectively recording their grandeur for posterity. This subtle strategy relies on the transmission of a shared knowledge that unites scribes across the ages. It implies mastering philological techniques, such as the ability to read archaic forms of writing; these skills characterize well the activity of Mesopotamian scribes, who were avid collectors of inscriptions as well as skilled translators.

The Egyptians and the Mesopotamians showed a similar faith and interest in the past, but their methods of questioning it were different. Aware of the fragility of their brick constructions, the Mesopotamians set about fighting erosion with knowledge. Their palaces fell quickly to ruin when abandoned, which covered the ground and so protected the foundation bricks that they had inscribed and buried. To communicate with the future, however, it

was not enough to devoutly confide inscribed messages to the ground, one needed to insure the continuity of a tradition that compelled kings and scribes to explore the earth in search of these indestructible messages. The modern archaeologist may be somewhat troubled to encounter what seem to be ancestors fired by the same passion and equal eagerness to examine the ground in search of former substructures, dating and interpreting the walls, objects and inscriptions that surface.

Such an exploration of the past should be considered an act of historical piety that requires a complex set of skills and knowledge. The Mesopotamian king and his scribes needed to know how to decipher ancient scriptures in order to confirm their discoveries; they also needed to use their knowledge of topography and climate to recognize the marks left behind by ancient temples and places of worship. In short, antiquarian skills and knowledge were an integral part of the functions of Mesopotamian royalty, a means of reinforcing their grandeur and their affiliation with the gods.

In parallel to the Egyptians and the Mesopotamians, the Chinese developed a somewhat different approach.

5. Comparing eastern and western traditions: A note on collections and the sense of fragility of the past.

In a strikingly poetic book, Stephen Owen (1986) draws our attention to a very old Chinese record from the twelfth century (*Records on Metal and Stone*) that describes the composition of an impressive collection of antiquities. The record is remarkable for the quality of the critical observations, but it is the postscript written by the collector’s wife after his death that is of particular interest to us here:

When the book collection was complete, we set up a library in “Return Home” hall; with huge book cases where the books were catalogued in sequence.... There was no longer the same ease and casualness as before. This was an attempt to gain convenience that led instead to nervousness and anxiety. I couldn’t bear it. And I began to plan how to do away with more than one meat in our meals, how to do away with all finery in my dress; for my hair there were no ornament of bright of pearls or kingfisher feathers; the household hat no implements for gilding or embroidery ... Books lay ranged on tables and desks, scattered on top of one another on pillows and bedding. This was what took our fancy and what occupied our minds, what drew our eyes and what our spirits

inclined to, and our joy was greater than the pleasure others had in dancing girls, dogs, and horses (Owen 1986: 86-87).

I know of no other text that expresses more strongly or with more conviction the feelings that characterize every collector's passion. This captivating voice emanates not from Sir William Hamilton or some other virtuoso of the Enlightenment, not from Cassiano dal Pozzo or Peiresc, austere scholars of the Age of Reason, nor is it from Quichelberg inventing the definition of the modern museum, but from a woman in a far-off Chinese province during the Song period in the twelfth century. Li Qig Zhao was the wife of an unfortunate governor who found himself expelled from his official functions when his province was invaded. Not only was she the first woman so far found in the historical record to stake a claim to the title of antiquarian, but she also expressed with clarity the nature of the desire that drives the collector, a passion for bringing together objects. This text paints the stirring image of a woman who saved spending on her appearance to give way to a fever as consuming as the thrill of the hunt. While Li Qig's preface can most certainly be interpreted as homage to her husband, and the catalogue that she established a substitute for the collection that had been scattered and burned by the invading barbarians, there is more to it. The text testifies to the author's critical stance, her desire to differentiate the part played by each partner in the establishment of the collection, yet also to show that the devouring practice of collecting that they shared transcended this division. The collected objects were not simply considered by Li Qig for their delicacy or their rarity; the inscriptions that her husband had gathered were "a means of correcting historical errors, establishing historical judgement, allowing for praise or blame" (Owen 1986: 81). Inscriptions and ancient books were more than objects of delectation; they were to serve as tools for a critical pursuit of history.

The approach she describes can be interpreted as a Chinese version of the Varronian ideal of historical erudition that seeks out new monuments to interpret and confront them. It recalls nearly word for word the Peirescian definition of an antiquarian in the Age of Reason. After criticizing those that "seek to collect (antiquities) so that they may be known to possess them," Gassendi, when writing about Peiresc's life, adds: "those who are entirely worthy of praise and who are not wasting their time in seeking out antiquities, are those who study and publish them to throw light on noble authors, to help illustrate history's circumstances" (Gassendi 1641: 235). Interestingly, we find the expression of a col-

lecting ethic that seems to justify the practice itself in both the East and in the West. It would appear that in very far removed times and places different scholars have come to the same conclusions.

Borges clearly understood the importance of collections, and particularly of antiquities, not only for legitimizing the actions of those who seek absolute power, but also to produce a kind of normative memory. *The Wall and the Books* was written well before Chinese archaeologists discovered the extraordinary clay armies that were buried during the third century B.C by Qin Shihuang, the emperor who first unified China. These finds have only come to confirm the equation Borges set out in his book between power and memory of the past. It was this same emperor who undertook the construction of the Great Wall of China, in order to protect the frontiers of his empire, and who demanded the burning of all books that bore witness to past traditions. The "first emperor" sought to deny all possible precedents of a civilization that he intended to found. What strikes Borges is the scale of these undertakings and the strong connection that unites them:

He constructed a wall, because walls are a means of defence, he burnt books because the opposition made reference to them in praising past leaders. Burning books and constructing fortifications is an activity common to many princes, the actions of Chi Hoang ti (Qin Shihuang) stand out only because of their scale. (Borges 1993:673).

Humans are forgetful, monuments fall to pieces and collections are dispersed; nevertheless, some small part of the past always survives, making what does remain all the more precious.

6. Permanence and transitivity

This lesson from China calls many others to mind: Horace's statement "*monumentum aere perennius*" that inspired Ronsard's declaration "*plus que fer j'ai fini mon ouvrage*," or Martin Opitz's "*dem Erz nicht zu vergleichen*". It is even more unsettling to discover the same theme in an Egyptian text dating from the second millennium B.C.E.

A Book is more precious than a house with standing walls
more precious than a funerary chamber facing the West
more precious than a castle solidly built on its foundations
more precious than a votive stone in a temple
(Assmann 1995: 173)

In the face of *tempus edax* the arts must compete with each other and collectors make their choice.

They, along with the bards and the poets, preserve the past by collecting objects, rediscovering monuments and keeping alive the memory of dispersed collections: “A ruin destroys and replaces that ruin which precedes it”. Borges would most certainly have associated this sentence by Benjamin Péret with the fable told by Samuel Agnon concerning Israël de Rizhin, one of the last great Hassidic mystics:

When the Baal Shem (master of the Name, founder of Hassidism) had a difficult task before him, he would go to a certain place in the woods, light a fire and meditate in prayer-and what he had set out to accomplish came to pass. When a generation later the “Maggid” of Meseritz was faced with the same task he went to the same place in the woods and said: We can no longer light the fire, but we can still speak the prayers-and what he wanted done became reality. When a generation later Rabbi Moshe Leib of Sassov was confronted with the same task, he too went into the woods and said: “We cannot relight the fire, we know not what secret meditations accompanied the prayer, but we do

know of the place in the woods to which these refer-and that must be sufficient”; and sufficient it was. But when another generation passed and again the Rabbi Israel of Rishin was called to the same task, he sat down on his golden chair in his castle and said: “We cannot light the fire, we cannot speak the prayers, we do not know the place, but we can tell the story of how it was accomplished.” And the storyteller adds, the story which he told had the same effect as the actions of his three predecessors (Scholem 1941: 368).

Words no more than things are capable of resisting the wear of time and the succession of generations; memory is preserved, however, by those who take on the task of collecting different versions, so insuring a continuity of past events. The collection of words and things are part of a common strategy in the face of time; it becomes the key to any knowledge of the past. Traces, words, monuments – everything perishes, yet all it takes is an intuition or an intention so that even the most fragile of things find their place in the memory of those people that may be called by the old Roman word, antiquarians.

NOTES

This text outlines a collective research project on antiquarians supported by AREA, the Getty foundation, the University of Paris I, the Louis Gernet centre, the MSH foundation and the INHA. The project group members are Irène Aghion, Lothar von Falkenhausen, Tim Murray, Peter Miller and Alain Schnapp. The results of this work will be published by the Getty research Institute in 2013. I am grateful to Amelia Pope for her careful revision of the English of the text.

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