

## **The *Museum of Lies*: Incorrect facts or advancing knowledge of ancient Egypt?**

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**Keywords:** museum, object, object biography, material culture, Egyptology

“Die Lüge im Dienste der Wahrheit wäscht den Staub des Alltags von den Sternen.”<sup>1</sup>

(The lie in the service of truth washes the dust of the daily routine off the stars.)<sup>2</sup>

### **Introduction**

In his seminal work *The Mind of Egypt*, Egyptologist Jan Assmann expressed very prominently the connection of memory, knowledge and reception: ‘We are what we remember, which is another way of saying that we are nothing other than the stories we can tell about ourselves and our past.’<sup>3</sup> This statement is not only valuable for the remembrance

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<sup>1</sup> Lügenmuseum (ed.), *Lügenmuseum: Katalog zur Ausstellung* (Gantikow, 2007), Front cover.

<sup>2</sup> Translation K. Zinn.

<sup>3</sup> J. Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and meaning in the time of the pharaohs* (New York, 2002), p.10.

of specific pasts in area studies or specific historical disciplines, but is equally applicable to reception studies. To remember the past helps to balance and contend with the present – or, to follow Assmann again: ‘Narratives look to the past in order to shed light on the present; memories are the fictions of coherence out of which we organize our experience.’<sup>4</sup>

Following the premise set out by Assmann, this paper will introduce the activities of, and ideas behind, the *Museum of Lies* project which is part of an annual cycle of exhibitions around Egyptian artefacts belonging to the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery, Merthyr Tydfil, Wales (UK). The *Museum of Lies* is the latest component of the Cyfarthfa Castle Project which started in 2011/12 with cooperation between the museum and the University of Wales Trinity Saint David Wales (UWTSD), Lampeter Campus led by the author. The overarching venture is aimed at the literal and cultural (re-)discovery of ancient Egyptian artefacts.<sup>5</sup>

The Egyptian artefacts of Cyfarthfa Castle Museum could be subsumed under what Alice Stevenson defines as *scattered finds* which are to be found ‘between national museums, public schools, masonic lodges, royal palaces, universities and auction houses,’<sup>6</sup> Most of the objects dealt with in this project fall under the category of being *unassuming*. As this regional museum serves the South Wales valleys by offering an insight in the daily life and history of this region, the museum personnel found it very difficult to incorporate the Egyptian collection into the narrative of their permanent exhibition. The situation is complicated even more by the fact that most of the objects are unprovenanced. Nothing or very little is known about where they came from, when they were acquired, or if there were several owners in

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

<sup>5</sup> For a short overview to this project see K. Zinn, ‘Object Biographies and Political Expectations: Egyptian Artefacts, Welsh Heritage and the Regional Community Museum’, in G. Rosati and M.C. Guidotti (eds.), *Proceedings of the 11<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Egyptologists, Florence, Italy 23-30 August 2015* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 693-700; and the following introductory project documentary:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ix6168O8TjE>. For the collection, see P. Nicholson and S. Stevenson, ‘The Egyptian collection at Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr Tydfil’, *Egyptian Archaeology* 12 (1998) pp. 11-13.

<sup>6</sup> A. Stevenson, *Scattered Finds: Archaeology, Egyptology and Museums* (London, 2019), p. 1.

modern times. The objects lack their archaeological and – in most parts – collection records and have therefore lost much of the information traditionally seen as being necessary to establish an object biography.<sup>7</sup>

The entire project surrounding the Egyptian collection at Cyfarthfa Castle Museum is focused on ‘unpacking the collection’, with the intention of tracing the ‘networks of material and social agency.’<sup>8</sup> In order to do this, participants such as researchers, students, artists, and the wider public create academic object biographies – making them available for Egyptologists – and also generate their own narratives about the objects by telling stories surrounding these artefacts to interest the audience of the museum and other involved communities. This two-tier approach connects these unprovenanced ancient objects with the modern identities of the several communities. This spans from the local community of Merthyr Tydfil in rural Wales. This is the location of the Cyfarthfa Castle Museum which houses collections from the Crawshay family and other acquisitions. The second distinct community is the students of UWTSO in Lampeter 75 miles to the west who are involved in primary research and as a consequence offer the objects to a wider community around Lampeter – the population in this area, local school children and visitors. The final community connected to the artefacts is

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<sup>7</sup> It would take far too long to discuss *object biography* in the scope of this article, though it is one of the main underlying concepts. For further discussion on objects and their value see A. Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things* (Cambridge, 1986) – especially the chapters by A. Appadurai, ‘Introduction: commodities and the production of value’, *Ibid.*, pp.3-63, and I. Kopytoff (‘The cultural biography of things: commodization as process’, *Ibid.*, pp.64-91). Following on from that, we have seen extensive discussion of objects, their value and agency as well as their different life-cycles over the last 30 years. See also R.A. Joyce and S.D. Gillespie (eds.), *Things in Motion: Object Itineraries in Anthropological Practice* (Santa Fe, 2015); L. Malafouris and C. Renfrew, ‘The cognitive life of things: Archaeology, material engagement and the extended mind’ in L. Malafouris and C. Renfrew (eds.) *The cognitive life of things: Recasting the boundaries of the mind* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 1-12.; and J. Joy, ‘Reinvigorating Object Biography: Reproducing the Drama of Object Lives’ in *World Archaeology* 41 (2009) 4, pp.540-556.; Y. Marshall and C. Gosden (eds), ‘The cultural biography of objects’ in *World Archaeology* 31(1999)2, pp. 169–320. For Egypt, see: L.M. Meskell, *Object Worlds in Ancient Egypt: Material Biographies Past and Present* (Oxford, 2004); and P.Š. Rezníček, ‘Artefact (Re)contextualization: Comparative Context Analysis from the Egyptian Collection in Zagreb’ in J. Chyla, K. Rosińska-Balik, J. Dębowska Ludwin and C. Walsh (eds.), *Current Research in Egyptology 17* (Oxford, 2017), pp. 209–224.

<sup>8</sup> As such, this project addresses the title of S. Byrne et al [*Unpacking the collection: Networks of material and social agency in the museum.* (New York, 2011).] and seeks to contribute to this discussion. S. Byrne, et al., *Unpacking the collection: Networks of material and social agency in the museum.* (New York, 2011).

the international academy of scholars. The Lampeter community and academics were interested in the project's intent to bring the objects back to life due to the fact that their – the object's – exhibition and study could hold great interest for a variety of disciplines. All interested parties follow and are actively involved in the simultaneous creation of different types of cultural representations via academic outputs, exhibitions, story-telling, and – since 2017 – a *Museum of Lies*. This undertaking, which could be called “playing around with your wonderful things”<sup>9</sup> and lends this paper its name, describes a collection of events, fictional stories and artwork inspired by the shown items. These representations of the *Museum of Lies* are exhibited together with the tangible objects and their traditional Egyptological and archaeological description in order to inspire and draw in the audience beyond traditional discipline-specific narratives. The definition of ‘lies’ is beyond the so-called ‘black lie’ which constitutes anti-social behaviour defining a liar as someone who benefits from deceiving, resulting in the audience being affected by the lie. In the context of this article, ‘lie’ is defined in a provocative way as being the opposite of a perceived (academic) truth which this article intends to challenge. The approach to the *Museum of Lies* exhibition constitutes new perceptions promoting both audience as well as academic discussion. This is especially necessary and helpful when dealing with unprovenanced objects and their historical complexities. The exhibition draws attention to them and highlights so the complexities involved in defining them.

The inspiration for the *Museum of Lies* came from the *Lügenmuseum* in Radebeul, Germany (formerly in Gantikow, growing out of the *Kunsthaus Babe*)<sup>10</sup> as well as Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence* – both as a novel and museum, and the follow-up documentary *The*

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<sup>9</sup> Posterpresentation “Playing around with a few of your favourite things – forgotten Egyptian objects, lost provenance and the *Museum of Lies*”; British Museum, ‘Displaying Egypt’, Annual Egyptological Colloquium, July 19-20, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> *Lügenmuseum*, *Lügenmuseum* and the museum's website <https://luegenmuseum.de/>.

*Innocence of Memories*.<sup>11</sup> Both museums deliberately displace objects from their common or natural setting by inserting them into a fictional or unusual situation.<sup>12</sup> It is striking that this moving position reaffirms the original idea, meaning or identity the objects (might have) had but did not reveal anymore. A good example to highlight this phenomenon are the below mentioned wooden Sokar birds.<sup>13</sup> Being robbed of their original setting they appeared to be simple little bird figurines. Both the fictional short stories as well as the triptych created by artist Julie Davis reconnected these ornaments with their original ancient Egyptian idea of flying and overcoming space and time.

The points raised here are to be seen as a work in progress.<sup>14</sup> The approach, set out by the *Museum of Lies* from the beginning, interconnects theory and specific activities with the objects. This article shall not be seen as the final answer to questions such as ‘What the extent of academic knowledge is,’ or ‘What shall be called the truth?’ Though this discussion is happening in an academic environment, it has and will have a direct relevance for non-Egyptologists and non-scholarly persons. Therefore, this article will further the interrogation of such concepts as the meaning of lies, the interdisciplinary nomenclature of Egyptology,

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<sup>11</sup> For the novel, see O. Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence* (London, 2009). For the museum accompanying the novel: O. Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects* (New York, 2012) and the museum’s website <https://masumiyetmuzesi-en.myshopio.com/>. Following on from the novel and capturing the spirit of the museum as a story or fiction is the documentary *The Innocence of Memories: Orhan Pamuk’s Museum & Istanbul*. DVD. Directed by G. Gee (London, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> This article does not give enough space for a more detailed unpacking of the methodologies and approaches undertaken by these two unusual museum projects.. The author plans to outline this in a later publication.

<sup>13</sup> CCM 1694.004 and CCM 1681.004.

<sup>14</sup> An article covering questions about how to reinvigorate dormant Egyptian objects or even collections outside and within non-Egyptian regional museums will be published later this year (K. Zinn, ‘Pop up or pop down to beat oblivion? – Reinvigorating dormant Egyptian collections outside and within non-Egyptian regional museums’, in *CIPEG Journal: Ancient Egyptian & Sudanese Collections and Museums* 3(2019), forthcoming). Another contribution addressing the seemingly controversial connection of academic object biography, Egyptological truth and stories we have to tell was prepared for a conference on *Displaying Egypt* at the British Museum (19-20 July, 2018). This paper will also discuss questions of how distinctive settings shaped displays of Egypt and vice versa. The main point raised will focus on how non-display/storage/display of certain artefacts influenced research on, and perceptions of, Egypt. Does the formation of (alternative) narratives, as undertaken as part of this project, justify to use lies in the sense of non-academic narratives within the academic research of these objects? What role does narrative play in the part of this project, and how do narratives contribute to material culture research? What problems could such an approach bring for Egyptologists? The contributions of this conference will be prepared for publication in 2020.

Museum, or Reception Studies, and the relevance of these activities for the displaying Egypt as part of non-traditional approaches.

### **Museum: Curiosity or Truth?**

In 1971, Duncan F. Cameron claimed that

The museum provides opportunity for reaffirmation of the faith; it is a place for private and intimate experience, although it is shared with many others; it is, in concept, the temple of the muses where today's personal experience of life can be viewed.<sup>15</sup>

He was pleading to define the museum as a forum instead of a temple, but it took nearly 40-50 years until the discussion of the importance of *curiosity* was brought back into the debate.<sup>16</sup> Curiosity is here understood as an eagerness to experience new things or to re-experience already known ideas / phenomena. Nicholas Thomas connects this with the fact that material culture is forming collections and forcing us – in a good way – to tell stories.<sup>17</sup> It is often said that visitors go to museums to participate in the canonised, where all of the things that they expect to see in exhibitions are presented in a tangible form. In contrast to that, it seems that it is the unexpected that we are curious about.<sup>18</sup> Being curious enables a narrative to be formed and recontextualises things. Applied to the particular case of the *Museum of Lies* that means that the objects in the exhibition are appraised beyond scholarly description.<sup>19</sup> The new or altered narrative and its initiated refocus on the object renews the

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<sup>15</sup> D.F. Cameron, 'The Museum, a Temple or the Forum', *Curator: the Museum Journal* 14 (1971), p. 17.

<sup>16</sup> N. Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity: What Museums are good for in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (London, 2016).

<sup>17</sup> Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity*, p. 8.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup> In the context of this particular part of the article, object and thing could be seen synonyms as we are dealing with tangible phenomena which have a physical existence (object). The author is fully aware of the discussion in regard of differences between *object* and *thing* which has a wider definition which includes objects, but also

minds of everyone connected with this process, and in a circular fashion reinvigorates the objects talked about and the museum / exhibition displaying these artefacts. The ambiguous *Freude am Neuen* (delight in the new) stands against the oft harboured idea of the museum as a dusty institution harbouring things which are real but dead. The German term *museal* not only means to be pertinent to a museum but also expresses the connotation of being something of a bygone time.

How does the curiosity of audiences, inherent possibilities of the objects, and the idea of truth understood as “the real thing” come together? Museums have always had a tainted or troubled relationship with truth, authenticity and “the real thing”.<sup>20</sup> Truth is not always the opposite of fiction and the understanding of these terms differs with time and complicates them even further. How does emotion and cognition fit into this? The framework which sets the boundaries for this discussion needs to include the tangible object as well as the intangible world of relations, context and narratives.<sup>21</sup> What is usually perceived as the *truth* of these objects is often reduced to either their biography before the time of their acquisition, or to the nature prescribed for them by archaeologists and Egyptologists. Traditionally, this comprised the archaeological provenance of the artefacts, often included the function these objects had in their first life cycle and – as recently started – might be extended post discovery with facts about collectors and museums. This correlates to a narrow understanding of object biography and follows a very binary stance in regard to story vs. history.<sup>22</sup> However, objects operate at the borderlines between such frontiers, too. These borderlines are also creating truth, despite being ambiguous and incoherent. The power of the tales in-

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concepts and qualities. See Appadurai, *Social Life of Things* and B. Brown, ‘Thing Theory’, *Critical Inquiry*, 28 (2000) 1, pp. 1-22.

<sup>20</sup> V. Golding, ‘Museums and Truth: The Elephant in the Room’, in A.B. Fromm, V. Golding, and P.B. Rekda, *Museums and Truth* (Newcastle upon Tyne, 2014), p. 3.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4-5.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

between, of different representations was and still is underestimated and often being silent about.<sup>23</sup>

All these questions indicate that this project could have a place in the current discourse around the “museums are not neutral” movement. This development grew out of evaluations of the impact of American art museums and aims to challenge the understanding that museums are objective and unbiased. The *Museum of Lies* takes part in this discourse by questioning what is exhibited and how it is shown, problematising who *should* or *could* make this decision.<sup>24</sup> What is the impact of connecting audiences and objects via alternative methods as part of this process?

### **Forgotten and unloved?**

Very few pieces of the Egyptian collection of Cyfarthfa Castle Museum were exhibited since arriving at the museum. Most objects having been housed in storerooms for the last 100 years. The written guide to the museum from the year 1956 mentions Egyptian artefacts in the *Natural History and Antiquities Gallery* without presenting images as would be expected from a catalogue.<sup>25</sup> Emphasis was laid on the Southey bequest which forms the largest part of the collection.<sup>26</sup> Neither the public nor Egyptologists had seen the full range of objects. Many of them were forgotten in boxes in the store rooms.

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<sup>23</sup> If we go beyond the object, then we can state that here lies one of the reasons for the present sparked debate around the latest ICOM definition of *museums* – see Z. Small, ‘A New Definition of “Museum” Sparks International Debate’, *Hyperallergic*, August 19, 2019, <https://hyperallergic.com/513858/icom-museum-definition/>

<sup>24</sup> L. Raicovich, ‘Museum Resolution: Dismantle the Myth of Neutrality’, *Walker Art Magazine*, Walker Art Center, January 8, 2019, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/soundboard-museum-resolutions-laura-raicovich>

<sup>25</sup> County Borough of Merthyr Tydfil, “*What to see*” at *Cyfarthfa Castle Museum and Art Gallery*. (Merthyr Tydfil, 1956), p. 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.



Forgetting is a process often seen in museums, especially small museums. Curators, scholars and the public alike are dealing with (archaeological) objects whose provenances are absent. Such artefacts are often called *unprovenanced*. Their source where they have been found or point of origin is known. In discussion about ethical implication of looting of antiquities and illicit trade, the term unprovenanced objects is often used synonymously for looted artefacts. Even I refer here to objects which have come to the museum about 100 years ago and we can exclude the latter, we still do not know the history of these objects. This is cut off by displacing them from their point of origin – in this particular case from Egypt to West Wales. This often leads to objects being misplaced in the museum which furthers the danger of being forgotten or misinterpreted despite the fact that one is made to believe that “museums are forever” or, in other words, that museums themselves and their contents are timeless and permanent.<sup>27</sup> However, it does not have to come to a disaster such as the fire in Rio de Janeiro’s (Brazil) 200-year-old Museu Nacional in September 2018 to realise that museum objects or even whole collections disappear. The world of museum studies has even a specific term for this phenomenon – *museum taphonomy*.<sup>28</sup> It seems contradictory that one pleads against forgetting in times when deliberate *de-growing of museums* is discussed.<sup>29</sup> However, regional museums face different challenges and responsibilities while “facing new heritage futures”.<sup>30</sup> Before deciding to de-grow museums – or parallel to this decision – museum staff need to fulfil their obligations to care for their museum collections in order to enable the future to know about the past, our present and themselves.<sup>31</sup> This can sometimes simply mean

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<sup>27</sup> S. Lubar et al., ‘Lost Museums’ *Museum History Journal*, 10 (2017) 1, 1-14.

<sup>28</sup> C.S. Fowler and D.D. Fowler, ‘Formation processes of ethnographic collections: Examples from the Great Basin of Western North America.’ in W. D. Kingery (ed.) *Learning from Things: Method and Theory of Material Culture Studies*, (Washington DC, 1996), pp. 129–144.

<sup>29</sup> J. Morgan and S. Macdonald, ‘De-growing museum collections for new heritage futures’, *International Journal of Heritage Studies* (2018), <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527258.2018.1530289>.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. [1].

<sup>31</sup> M.A. Mares, ‘The Moral Obligations Incumbent upon Institutions, Administrators and Directors in Maintaining and Caring for Museum Collections,’ in H. H. Genoways (ed.) *Museum Philosophy for the Twenty-first Century* (Lanham, 2006), p. 96.

re-discovering forgotten or neglected parts of their collections and making them accessible to audiences in order to weed out and make space. The *Museum of Lies* presented below is an example of the importance of taking objects out of storage.<sup>32</sup> This postulated idea for contemporary material culture<sup>33</sup> is even more applicable when dealing with neglected ancient artefacts, even the handling of or dealing with these objects should be different insofar as this could be guided by the idea of rediscovery and curiosity.

As mentioned above, the overall Cyfarthfa project, including the annual exhibition with the *Museum of Lies*, aims to bring objects back to life by creating different simultaneous types of cultural representations. These representations include academic outputs,<sup>34</sup> annual Egyptological exhibitions through pop-up exhibitions outside the retaining museum, catalogues, story-telling, and the *Museum of Lies* exhibit. The latter includes artworks which are incorporated into the exhibition alongside objects. These versions not only aim for traditional audiences such as academics or visitors, but are also used for teaching in school curricula and for modules in the Higher Education sector. These approaches are employed to promote the interactive element of objects; the process of doing so ultimately shedding light on our perception and understanding of them. We feel them, feel better about them and feel better with them, they become ‘our favourite thing’<sup>35</sup>. Tangible objects and our intangible ideas and feelings will be un-earthed when we create concepts which will help us to

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<sup>32</sup> S. Brennan, ‘Making Room by Letting Go’, *Preservation Nation, National Trust for Historic Preservation*, Blog, August 12, 2014, <http://blog.preservationleadershipforum.org/2014/08/12/collections-making-room-by-lettinggo/>.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> K. Zinn, ‘Object Biographies’, pp. 693-700; K. Zinn, ‘Lacklustre offering plates? Symbolic food consumption, ritual, and representations in ancient Egyptian funerary culture’, in L. Steel and K. Zinn (eds.), *Exploring the Materiality of Food ‘Stuffs’: Transformations, symbolic consumption and embodiments*. (London, 2017), pp. 205-225; K. Elliott, ‘A happy ancient Egyptian family? The bronze statuettes of Osiris, Horus, and Isis (Cyfarthfa Castle, Merthyr Tydfil 1697.004, 1699.004, 1705.004)’ *The Student Researcher, Journal of Undergraduate Research University of Wales Trinity Saint David* 3 (2014) 1, pp. 7-18.

<sup>35</sup> This emphatic approach follows loosely I. Hodder, *Entangled: An Archaeology of the Relationships between Humans and Things* (Chichester, 2012). For the term of the “favourite thing” please see Poster presentation ‘Playing around with a few of your favourite things – forgotten Egyptian objects, lost provenance and the *Museum of Lies*’; British Museum, ‘Displaying Egypt’, Annual Egyptological Colloquium, July 19-20, 2018.

transform objects which are non-cared for and therefore not appreciated. As we are connected and entangled with them through interaction and attachment, it is important to understand that humans depend on things in the same way as things depend on humans.<sup>36</sup> Taking this concept together with the idea of the shifting social identities of objects, it can be postulated that they are not connected to just their original setting, but also to any new habitat, including the current one they inhabit.<sup>37</sup> This can be taken further to suggest that these objects can be brought into self-created habitats within the ‘storied world’ of the 21<sup>st</sup> century AD.<sup>38</sup> Creating such stories defies the conundrum of a fixed space and time and helps visitors and scholars alike to remember, research and understand objects in all phases of their life cycle.

### **Enchanted and charismatic objects**

Every year, Cyfarthfa Castle Museum loans 5-10 artefacts to UWTSO’s Lampeter campus. Studying these objects is not only part of staff research projects but is also incorporated into the teaching process in order to give students first-hand research experience. This part of the process centres mainly on the traditional Egyptological object biography. On a voluntary basis and outside of the syllabus, students can participate in the preparation of annual exhibitions for the public around Lampeter including workshops for local schools, home-schooled children and several societies in Lampeter. In this way they learn practical skills in writing catalogue entries, curating, teaching in schools and taking part in outreach. The combination of these activities with the fact that the objects are unprovenanced creates a need for gap filling where the incorporation of *story-telling* fits into the framework.

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<sup>36</sup> Hodder, *Entangled*; I. Hodder, *Studies in Human-Thing Entanglement*, 2016. last updated February 18, 2019, <http://www.ian-hodder.com/books/studies-human-thing-entanglement>.

<sup>37</sup> T. Insoll (ed.), *The Archaeology of Identities: A Reader*. (Abingdon, 2007).

<sup>38</sup> T. Ingold, *Being alive: Essays on movement, knowledge and description*. (Abingdon, 2011), pp. 141-176.

Story-telling techniques and public engagement have previously been used in the field of science,<sup>39</sup> but the humanities and social sciences took longer to engage.<sup>40</sup> These projects take a new spin on ‘creative imagination’ which was used by past Egyptologists to fill gaps with educated guesses. By deliberately creating different counter narratives in addition to the expected traditional object biography which are then set in relation to each other, one can understand all layers inherent to the objects.<sup>41</sup> Creating stories delivers a narrative beyond the Egyptological analysis and initiates a bond between the storyteller(s) – which in this case includes Egyptologists and students of Egyptology– and their audience via the object. Researchers, audiences and objects engage with each other by using academic knowledge to create new settings. The newly formed / altered narrative is a more embracing biography refocused on the object. Story-telling and activities related to objects of antiquity from outside of academic disciplines are often dismissed by professional academia. However, it is important to consider the way that we understand these objects. By being serious about the frivolous and frivolous about the serious, individuals can interact with the past on a deeply personal level. This helps to create *charismatic objects*<sup>42</sup> due to the shared emotional character of both the storytelling process and what it imbues into the object. This term, applied originally to a Buddha statue, is transferable due to the objects discussed gaining ‘unusual qualities of the material object itself, beyond the details of its age, value and “art-historical” significance, which demand a response from those humans who encounter it face

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<sup>39</sup> Wellcome Trust, ‘Telling Stories: how the Public can engage with Science: Bangalore 2009 Conference Report’. Published 2009. [https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wtx062632\\_0.pdf](https://wellcome.ac.uk/sites/default/files/wtx062632_0.pdf).

<sup>40</sup> See projects like E. Kavanagh, *Layers in the Landscape*. <http://www.geomythkavanagh.com/layers-in-the-landscape> or the recent discussion at TAG Chester 2018 (TAG Deva: 40th Theoretical Archaeology Group Conference, 17th-19th December 2018, session *Creative Frontiers* – organisers: Erin Kavanagh and Eloise Gouvier - and *Applying Theory: An Archaeopoetic Installation – Exhibition* – E. Kavanagh).

<sup>41</sup> As such I follow the idea raised by Renfrew and Bahn: “Archaeology is partly the discovery of the treasures of the past, partly the meticulous work of the scientific analyst, partly the exercise of the creative imagination.” (C. Renfrew and P. Bahn, *Archaeology: Theories and Methods in Practice* (London, 2000). p. 11).

<sup>42</sup> C. Wingfield, ‘Touching the Buddha: encounters with a charismatic object’, in S. Dudley (ed.), *Museum Materialities: Objects, Engagements, Interpretations* (London, 2010).

to face'.<sup>43</sup> Narratives highlight the culture-bearing qualities of objects by showcasing their enchantment to a particular culture/audience.

My first encounter of thinking about the emotive power of objects started by accident during research on a Graeco-Roman plaster burial mask.<sup>44</sup> When preparing the catalogue for the exhibition *Scarabs and Dragons: A taste of Ancient Egypt in Lampeter*,<sup>45</sup> the author experimented with ways to photograph the objects and did so by setting archaeological photographs against more atmospheric ones (Fig. 1 and 2). The latter resonated with the visitors to the exhibition and was marked as a highlight. As reason for this choice, visitors named the lightening in the photo as well as the fact that the mask was half hidden behind the tissue paper and stated that this created a mysterious atmosphere. Some visitors did not recognise the real mask in the exhibition and asked for the more interesting and enigmatic one.

The aforementioned approach was piloted in a teaching module where a small offering dish<sup>46</sup> was examined under very diverse, yet complementing angles. The object in question was an example of a red coarse ware pottery bowl made from Nile silt, 5cm in diameter and 1.4cm high. The miniature bowl is hand moulded with a level base. It is well preserved, except for some areas of the rim which are broken away. As the students had dubbed this object as boring and nobody wanted to work on it, I set it as my aim to raise their interest by creating a whole module around that object. Some of the sessions were pre-dominantly Egyptological/archaeological in nature (excavations, sites, dating issues etc.), while others focused on making a replica dish, thinking about the physical engagement with the material and the emerging form in the process of making, exploring ways to imbue additional layers of

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<sup>43</sup>Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>44</sup> CCM 331.004. Plaster, Roman Period, 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD.

<sup>45</sup> Exhibition, 2012, Roderic Bowen Library and Archives, UWTSU.

<sup>46</sup> CCM 308.004, for an academic discussion of this dish see Zinn, 'Lacklustre offering plates?', pp. 205-225.

meaning by placing the dish in certain situations/ environments, writing hieroglyphs on it and so forth. During the final session, we talked about an execration ritual in which one would write the name of an enemy / adversary on the bowl before smashing it.

I knew I had succeeded in giving the object meaning and building up an emotional response towards it when the students “celebrated” their dishes before shattering them. They photographed their objects in particular aesthetically-pleasing settings and placed an offering on it. As it was the week before Easter, they chose little chocolate Easter eggs (Fig. 3). This created a symbiosis between the ancient Egyptian functionality and a modern setting which they could all relate to. It was the perfect transition of the ancient Egyptian object we had started with into the present world. This translation process of bringing meaning to an object created a situation in which the lifeless thing had become part of the identity of the students. Their emotional response removed the initial classification of the objects as *boring*.

This was not only a personal outcome for the participating students: they were also able to communicate a sense of being entangled with and enchanted by the dish in the extra-curricular activities connected with the annual exhibition. When teaching sessions to school children as part of the Welsh curriculum in Religious Education, having workshops with home-educated children or delivering public talks, all students were able to communicate their stories to an audience and gain their interest. This seemingly lacklustre object became entangled in a variety of community events from teaching to the Lampeter Food Festival. The dish was included in the accompanying academic programme *Food for Thought*<sup>47</sup> which connected the offering plate with cooking activities that followed recipes inspired by ancient Egypt, sharing the food with the audience afterwards. The unprovenanced offering dish was

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<sup>47</sup> Food for Thought / Rhywbeth I Gnoi Cil Drosto, 25 July 2015, UWTSO, Lampeter, session: Eat like an Egyptian / Bwyta fel Eifftiwr (Katharina Zinn).

able to act as a tool of learning in a variety of ways for modern audiences finding a new step in its life-cycle and usefulness in current culture.

### ***The Museum of Lies***

Having come to the realisation about charismatic/enchanting objects through teaching and thinking creatively, it was not difficult to coin the *Museum of Lies*. This sub-project uses some already-existing partners (local schools, students of adjacent programmes and local artists) to develop strategic project deliverables. Collecting fictional stories inspired by the objects aim to create new tools for a successful process of unpacking the collection and assist therefore the overall Cyfarthfa Castle project.

The first *Museum of Lies* was set out as a project to accompany the 2017 exhibition *The Materiality of the Ancient Egyptian Afterlife*.<sup>48</sup> Partners in this project were the pupils of Ysgol Bro Pedr school, Lampeter<sup>49</sup> who wrote phenomenal and funny short stories which were inspired by the objects. In the workshops organised for the collection of stories, I presented photographs of the artefacts and deliberately withheld information about the objects. The students could choose the object they found either most appealing or most boring. While they were writing, I delivered further details about the objects not seen in the images and I answered any questions that they raised. Most of the pupils were in agreement that they wanted to refrain from knowing too much of the Egyptological explanations for the objects. The resulting narratives were fictional and deliberately imaginative stories inspired by the items. The pupils' enthusiasm and amazement surrounding the objects led them to invent the most incredibly crazy, funny and peculiar "untruths".

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<sup>48</sup> Exhibition, 2017, Roderic Bowen Library and Archives, UWTSO.

<sup>49</sup> I would like to thank Ysgol Bro Pedr, Lampeter for the support, especially to Year 10 English (academic year 2016/17) and their teacher Ms Phillips.

One pupil's observation of an incompletely preserved, yet beautifully made headrest of elegant proportions (Fig. 4)<sup>50</sup> inspired the following story:

How much longer do we have to use these for? I think I've made it really clear that I don't like them, especially since my brother and I broke off the stem and used it as a Boomerang. I don't think anyone likes them, Cindy broke the stem of hers and used it as a headband to hold her hair back! Sleeping on concrete is bad enough without these stiff headrests. My back is so, so sore. At least the aliens are coming tomorrow to help build the pyramids. Even Tupac is coming to help! I wonder if he'll bring Biggie?<sup>51</sup>

These two co-writers wanted to know the purpose of this object, but nothing else. What is unfortunately impossible to replicate here is the performance of this story during the workshop which catapulted this imaginative and “wonderfully bonkers”<sup>52</sup> narrative into the realm of potential truth through its performative-narrative style.<sup>53</sup> This extra dimension was re-created when this story was exhibited together with the object itself using images of headrests and the unique catalogue entry written by the students.<sup>54</sup>

The pupils' perspective of an ancient object coupled with Egyptological and archaeological understanding add to the burgeoning dimension of the object's history. Looking at the Egyptological explanation, headrests are implements on which one person was able to sleep. The shape of this particular headrest examined by the students was so common and timeless, used during several periods of the Egyptian history, that it is nearly impossible to date. Only existing archaeological context or known provenance would help narrow down the date.

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<sup>50</sup> CCM189.996; K. Zinn, 'Did you sleep well on your headrest? – Anthropological Perspectives on an Ancient Egyptian Implement', *Journal of Ancient Egyptian Interconnections* 17 (2018), pp. 203–204.

<sup>51</sup> Written by Chloe George and Nia Evans.

<sup>52</sup> Oral feedback of a visitor to the exhibition.

<sup>53</sup> I was reminded of this moment when watching the film/documentary *Innocence of Memories*.

<sup>54</sup> K. Zinn (ed.), *The Materiality of the Ancient Egyptian Afterlife: Catalogue of 2017* (Lampeter, 2017), pp. 6–10. Object analysis by Bethan Phillips and Olivia Berry, sketch by Leon Collie.



None of these were available with this artefact. Being completely unprovenanced is typical for objects which entered Western collections in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Taking all this into account, the easiest way to interest audiences in this curious piece of wood would be via a recreation of its original *Sitz im Leben* – the original context<sup>55</sup> – in order to replace the lost contextual information. This is a common approach when dealing with the material culture of past civilisations in museums. In our exhibitions, this was achieved by the catalogue entry which compared this object to similar existing ones. However, this was not thought to be sufficient, so the headrest was combined with experimental and experiential archaeology. Together with a skilled carpenter,<sup>56</sup> a replica was crafted enabling the experience of sleeping on a headrest (Fig. 5). This replica was then used for the outreach programmes as part of the exhibition.

Leading up to the 2018 exhibition,<sup>57</sup> I decided to run the creative writing workshops again for years 10 and 11 (aged between 14 and 16) to produce alternative, yet complementing, narratives of objects. In addition, I approached local artist Julie Davis who agreed to take part in the project by creating an artistic narrative for which she chose the two Sokar birds<sup>58</sup> as inspiration for a triptych titled *Into the Light* (Fig. 6). She artistically captured many of the notions behind the representations of the funerary god Sokar<sup>59</sup> though being unfamiliar with Egyptological scholarship. The triptych features three panels with the actual object<sup>60</sup> painted on the left (as seen from the viewer), the capture of the biological bird species on the right and a scene which gave the triptych its name (a bird having come to life flying out of a dark space into the light) in the middle panel. The latter, as well as the idea to use recycled wood

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<sup>55</sup> Zinn, 'Did you sleep well on your headrest', pp. 207–209.

<sup>56</sup> I would like to thank Steve Parsons for making the replica following without hesitation and in a trial and error procedure all my requests in regard to material, form and size.

<sup>57</sup> "I have flown up in primeval time" – *Ancient Egyptian Funerary Beliefs*. Exhibition, 2018, Roderic Bowen Library and Archives, UWTSU.

<sup>58</sup> Sokar Bird (large, painted) – CCM 1694.004, Sokar Bird (small) – CCM 1681.004.

<sup>59</sup> R. Wilkinson, *The Complete Gods and Goddesses of ancient Egypt* (New York, 2003), pp. 209-211.

<sup>60</sup> Sokar Bird (large, painted) – CCM 1694.004.

as the material on which to paint, captures the ancient Egyptian idea of rebirth and overcoming death.<sup>61</sup> Further narratives on the Sokar birds were provided in different formats including a catalogue entry,<sup>62</sup> research scrapbooks illustrating the imaginative research process of the students as part of the group, workshops, and the short stories written by the pupils of Ysgol Bro Pedr. From the collection of short stories in the supplementary booklet “Museum of Lies 2018”, the following emphasises the unique element of a pupil’s narrative about the Sokar bird:

It’s been a long distressing Sunday, full of working and never ending cleaning. The dog has been hysterically hyped since sunrise this morning. At about 6:20 Bobster, the dog, was driving me insane and I thought he needed an adventurous walk. He was trailing me along the tall straight grass by pulling me through to the other side. He was drastic to adventure the woods! We had not been for an exercise all day, so here we go.

Bobster tiptoed across the bridal path and started nosing in a hill of red leaves. He dug and stared when he saw a wooden detailed bird. I plunged down and tried working out what the little creature was. I went and picked it up before it flew off and was unseen.

A little wooden bird which turned into being colourful and alive.<sup>63</sup>

In the exhibition, I included the objects, triptych, the above quoted short story, a well-illustrated research scrapbooks in which the students documented their research progress, detailed photographs, and a modern artistic take on a Sokar Bird created by one of the

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<sup>61</sup> For an interview with the artist which highlights the artistic process see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vz5yxPYPTU8&feature=youtu.be>.

<sup>62</sup> K. Zinn (ed.), *"I have flown up in primeval time" – Ancient Egyptian Funerary Beliefs: Catalogue of the Special Exhibition 2018*. (Lampeter, 2018), pp. 16-21. *Sokar Bird (painted)* written by Molly Gogh; *Sokar Bird (small)* by Hannah Pickering.

<sup>63</sup> Anonymous submission (Special Exhibition 2018: *I have flown up in primeval time" – Ancient Egyptian Funerary Beliefs*).

students (Fig. 7). The ancient Egyptian objects of antiquity have and continue to inspire art, performative and written narratives. These part truths of modern cultural interpretation contribute to the understanding of the objects and reveal their emotive character. The Sokar birds' exhibition from the *Museum of Lies* was the best received exhibit attracting a long staying audience who expressed their enjoyment of the exhibition.

Following this line of thought, and accepting artefacts as being constantly negotiated through interaction in both their material and intangible characteristics,<sup>64</sup> these narrated, yet unprovenanced objects deliver an advance in knowledge within and beyond Egyptology. This is happening from un-orthodox angles by the inclusion of narratives rarely used in an academic discipline specific or even interdisciplinary object biography. In addition to the advance in knowledge, this kind of story-telling fosters discussion with new audiences. Both sides connect modern sensibilities with the past. In so doing, objects make sense of the past by helping audiences to appreciate and understand what could have been and what was happening, and work with both time and space. Telling lies to find the truth therefore takes the remoteness of the past away and creates a sense of place for both the objects and (potential) audiences.

### **Inspiration is everywhere**

As previously mentioned above, two museum projects provided the underlying idea for the above outlined activities: the *Lügenmuseum* in Radebeul, Germany (formerly in Gantikow, developed from the *Kunsthaus Babe*)<sup>65</sup> as well as Orhan Pamuk's *Museum of Innocence* –

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<sup>64</sup> S. Knell, 'The intangibility of things', in S.H. Dudley (ed.), *Museum Objects: Experiencing the Properties of Things* (London, 2012), p. 327.

<sup>65</sup> *Lügenmuseum*, *Lügenmuseum* and the museum's website <https://luegenmuseum.de/>.

both as a novel and museum as well as the follow-up documentary *The Innocence of Memories*.<sup>66</sup> Both museums are ‘using objects to explore the world’.<sup>67</sup>

Founded in 1989 by Reinhard Zabka, the *Lügenmuseum* promotes the idea that an interesting and unknown collection of things – similar to a cabinet of curiosities – revives the creativity of visitors, playing with their associations and enabling communications. Materials and objects, classified as rubbish to be discarded, receive a new and meaningful life when they are included in larger themes circling around change, movement and migration. To achieve this, Zabka chose constellations of objects which tell lies in order to serve the truth.<sup>68</sup> Even the history of the museum starts with a fairy tale or legend. Zabka attributed the foundation of the *Lügenmuseum* to the half-fictional character Emma von Hohenbüssow<sup>69</sup> in the year 1884 when she started her collection of non-existent items such as a hole of Mozart’s Magic Flute, the cut-off ear of Vincent van Gogh and similar things. At one point the items were said to be lost and reappeared miraculously in the 1980s as relics of happy times.

Later, added installations dealt with the social situation that existed in East Germany before 1989, the feelings and events during the re-unification of Germany and explanations of seemingly hopeless or unwinnable situations. Harsh reality is countered with laughter and winking following the museum’s musing and equally amusing motto: “Es gibt Lügen, da hört der Spaß auf. Es gibt Lügen, da fängt der Spaß an,”<sup>70</sup> This wordplay, which translates as

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<sup>66</sup> Pamuk, *The Innocence of Objects* and the museum’s website <https://masumiyetmuzesi-en.myshopio.com/>.

<sup>67</sup> O. Pamuk, *The Innocence of Memories: Screenplay* (London, 2018). p. 69

<sup>68</sup> *Lügenmuseum, Lügenmuseum*, p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> In my interpretation, this character is to be seen as a parallel to the half fictional and half historic figure of Baron von Münchhausen. German novelist Rudolf Erich Raspe created in 1785 the fictional character of a German nobleman as the main protagonist of his book “Baron Munchausen’s Narrative of his Marvellous Travels and Campaigns in Russia” written in the first person. The character is loosely based on Hieronymus Karl Friedrich, Freiherr von Münchhausen replicating some of his embellishing reports on his military career. Outside Germany this person is mainly known as the eponym of the factitious mental disorder called Munchausen Syndrome. Reinhard Zabka in his capacity as director of the *Lügenmuseum* calls himself the *Lügenbaron* (Baron of Lies), one of the epithets used by Münchhausen.

<sup>70</sup> *Lügenmuseum, ‘Home,’ Lügenmuseum*, <https://luegenmuseum.de/>.

“There are lies where the fun stops. There are lies where the fun begins”,<sup>71</sup> refers to the dual nature of lies. Even lying is a form of deception, but this does not always involve bad intention. Deceit in the sense of misleading communication can be used as strategic measure to achieve a certain goal. If this goal is to avoid hurting someone's feelings or even protect them, then we speak of a white lie. In a museum setting lies as communicated information which the creator know not to be true can be used to highlight objects.

This museum, whose development I followed since the 1990s (shortly after their move from the *Kunsthaus Babe* to Gantikow) not only lends its name to the project talked about here, but also reveals the dangers, as well as the chances, that exist in the forgetting of things, their original settings and connected cultural moments. Beyond that, it has encouraged me to approach what might appear as frivolous amusement as serious possibilities of using academic knowledge to create a new setting with new narratives or object biographies which then help to re-focus on the object in question.

A second line of inspiration and encouragement comes from the specific planned setup of Orhan Pamuk’s *Museum of Innocence*. The Museum of Innocence is not only a fictional and encyclopaedic novel, as well as a physical museum, it was also planned with this duality from the onset. The novel and the museum follow a structure inspired by objects, places and concepts.<sup>72</sup> The objects that illustrate the narrative of the novel were bought in junk shops around the area where the museum is currently situated. The museum house is featured as the living place of the main protagonists in the novel. Due to the close relationship of place, objects and ideas, the novel illustrates the real and intangible history of Istanbul based on actual and tangible objects for which fictional narratives are told. Pamuk’s museum is inspired by small Turkish house museums collected by ‘hoarders’ who tried to preserve the

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<sup>71</sup> Transl. K. Zinn.

<sup>72</sup> Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, p. 15.

old Istanbul in dignity as ‘eternally patient guardians of a community’s sacred relics, symbols, and banners’.<sup>73</sup> Moving away from the hopelessness he felt with these house museums, Pamuk entered the past by joyfully and optimistically telling challenging stories through arranging objects ‘with love and care.’<sup>74</sup>

### **Instead of a summary – creating truth...**

My prince<sup>75</sup> was not going to be real. But because he was going to display and describe real objects in a museum, visitors would soon [be] persuaded that he was real, just as they would realize with amazement that Kemal is a real person. I wanted to collect and exhibit the ‘real’ objects of a fictional story in a museum and write a novel based on these objects.<sup>76</sup>

I end this paper with one statement and one question: *Reception comes in many disguises and who decides what is truth?*

Orhan Pamuk’s *Modest manifesto for museums* states that we had ‘epics, representation, monuments, histories, nations, groups and team[s], large and expensive’.<sup>77</sup> We now need ‘novels, expression, homes, stories, persons, individuals, small and cheap’<sup>78</sup> I use this way of thinking to formulate a manifesto for objects that require:

- Stories
- Attention

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<sup>73</sup> Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, p. 50.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., p. 52.

<sup>75</sup> His Imperial Highness Prince Ali Vâsib, see Pamuk, *The Museum of Innocence*, p. 9.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., p. [57].

<sup>78</sup> Ibid, p. [57].

- Awareness for materiality
- Identity (receiving and giving)
- Any scale

Unprovenanced objects are *non-compliant things*<sup>79</sup> and need much more of the above mentioned in order to reveal their strength and full emotive power. Stories give attention and identity, heightening the awareness of materiality. These stories do not have to be true in an academic, intradisciplinary or interdisciplinary sense, but they need to be true or accurate in the realisation of the potential inherent to these artefacts and what advancement that they can provide in the understanding of the world that they create. In this way, ‘lies’ create different truths for everyone reading, watching and hearing them.

All of these part-truths create the understanding of the object, its *Sitz im Leben* in the past and present and therefore its potential for the future.

As mentioned before, the project of the *Museum of Lies* is work in progress. When looking to the future – then I ask myself what to do with the *lies*? The experiences of the last three years (2017-2019) are encouraging, revealing and raising an interesting debate, yet they are still too anecdotal in terms of evidence of effectiveness and detailed evaluation. Most of the feedback received was passing comments in unscheduled discussion. Capturing visitor responses and their strategic interpretation would need to be increased after this first testing phase. One particular point to discuss with the wider audience would be the fact if they understand how the different parts of the exhibition are playing with the truth. Even the exhibition design clearly states what is archaeological truth and fictional truth. It would be interesting to discuss the liminal spaces in-between: where do the visitors draw the line between one and the other?

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<sup>79</sup> C. Dorsett, ‘Things and Theories: The unstable Presence of Exhibited Objects’ in S. Dudley et al., *The Thing about Museums: Objects and Experiences, Representation and Contestation* (London, 2012), pp. 102.

However, this project is deliberately slowly delivered and set out to use experiences from one year to steer the next. This patient perseverance is vital when working with local museums and audiences as we are touching sensitive areas of identity proving the current discourse that “museums are not neutral”.<sup>80</sup>

### **Acknowledgments:**

I would like to thank the organisers of the conference “Tea with the Sphinx: Reception of Ancient Egyptian Myth, Magic and Mysticism” (Birmingham, 28-30 June 2018) and all participants for a stimulating discussion of the project. Special thanks goes to the contributing artists, pupils and my students for following this unusual idea with huge enthusiasm. I also want to express my gratitude to the two peer-reviewers who drew my attention to some lines of discussion in *Museum Studies* which I had not been part of previously. And last – but definitely not least – my thank goes to the editors of this special issue who made the editing process an enjoyable academic discussion.

### **Figures:**

Fig. 1: CCM 331.004, archaeological photograph, © Steven Thomas.

Fig. 2: CCM 331.004, atmospheric photograph, © Katharina Zinn.

Fig. 3: CCM 308.004, Easter eggs and execration ritual, © Steven Thomas (archaeological photograph) and Katharina Zinn.

Fig. 4: CCM 189.996, © Steven Thomas.

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<sup>80</sup> For a short introduction and reading, see L.T. Autry, T. Raiford and M. Murawski ‘Museums Are Not Neutral’. <https://artstuffmatters.wordpress.com/museums-are-not-neutral/>.



Fig. 5: Replica and sleeping on a headrest, © Katharina Zinn.

Fig 6: Julie Davis, 2018. *Into the Light* (Triptych: oil/acrylic on wooden panels), © Katharina Zinn.

Fig. 7: Exhibiting the Sokar Birds CCM 1694.004 and CCM 1681.004, © Katharina Zinn.

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