



Mission Report

Civil-Military Assessment Mission for Egyptian Heritage

By Blue Shield and IMCuRWG

February 12 to 16, 2011

Objective

The objective of the mission was to assess possible damages and looting attempts to Egyptian Heritage sites and museums after the recent unrests.

Many contradicting messages were reported regarding looting and vandalism, without the possibility of properly checking the real situation. Therefore there was an urgent need to send a mission especially to those sites that were supposedly affected by criminal acts, in order to **document** the situation, to **state** damages incurred and to **encourage** the parties involved to further efforts in protecting the invaluable Cultural Heritage of Egypt.

Composition of the Mission

The mission had 3 main persons involved.

Karl von Habsburg is President of the 'Association of National Committees of the Blue Shield' (ANCBS) since 2008. He is a former member of the European Parliament for Austria and has specialized in International Humanitarian Law and Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection. A former air force pilot, he is still serving in the reserve of the Austrian armed forces as Cultural Property Protection Officer. He is vice president of the Austrian Society for the Protection of Cultural Heritage and a founder member of Blue Shield Austria. Karl von Habsburg is frequent lecturer and author of several publications on the subject of Intangible Cultural Heritage Protection and Military Cultural Property Protection.

Drs. Joris Kila is chairman of the 'International Military Cultural Resources Work Group' (IMCuRWG). He is a researcher at the Institute of Culture and History of the University of Amsterdam. He has been acting chairman of the cultural affairs department at the Civil-Military Cooperation (CIMIC) Group North in the Netherlands, and in that capacity he undertook several cultural rescue missions in Iraq and FYROM (Macedonia). He is author and co-author of several publications on the subject of cultural property protection in times of armed conflict utilizing militarized experts. He is a reserve Lieutenant Colonel and is regularly asked to advise the Dutch MoD on Cultural Property Protection issues. In 2008, he co-authored a study on "Vernacular Mudbrick Architecture in the Dakhla Oasis, Egypt".

Dr. Thomas Schuler is chairman of the Disaster Relief Task Force (DRTF) of ICOM (since 2005). He was director of the Stadtmuseum Tübingen (1985 – 1992) and of the Schlossbergmuseum Chemnitz (1992 – 2004). He has specialized in Museum Management and Disaster Preparedness and Management. He was lecturer at the Museology Department of HTWK Leipzig and is regularly offering training courses for museum staff.

Karl von Habsburg and Drs. Joris Kila went to Egypt, Dr. Thomas Schuler coordinated the mission from Germany and did background research.

Political Situation (the main players)

The political environment in Egypt was still very complicated and confusing. After Hosni Mubarak stepped down as President, the Parliament was dissolved and the Constitution declared invalid. This is problematic since only the Parliament can change or amend the Constitution. The process by which the President stepped down was also not according to the Constitution, which was then still valid. This put the whole legality of the State in question.



The de facto power lays currently with the military, so making the head of the Armed Forces Supreme Council, Field Marshal Tantawi, the actual ruler of the country.

The security system in Egypt was still not really in place. The police in Cairo had literally vanished after the beginning of the demonstrations, since they were identified with the repressive measures of the old regime. They were now slowly coming back. The police functions were taken over by the military and by spontaneously created neighborhood watch groups. There were many roadblocks around Cairo and Alexandria manned by thugs, but this was now dissipating.

The demonstrations were overall peaceful and conducted with astonishing restraint. The Tahrir Square demonstrations were dealing with the democratization process and Hosni Mubarak. Currently most demonstrations are dealing with employment, wages, bad economy and other matters.

It is foreseen that elections will take place in September; the current government staying in place though changes would be announced by the military. If elections are held earlier, it is likely that the two organizations who have currently nationwide structures, Mubaraks old National Democratic Party NDP and the Muslim Brotherhood might gain the best result.

Preparatory Work

After it became clear by end of January that the Egyptian Cultural Heritage was really in danger through looting and vandalism, Karl von Habsburg and Joris Kila consulted with Thomas Schuler who had been following and analyzing the situation closely, regarding a mission to find out the truth between all conflicting messages and documenting the situation. All were aware of the very insecure situation: Travel warnings had been issued by almost all embassies in Cairo and foreigners evacuated in great numbers. Therefore it was decided that the mission should be small, flexible and conducted by Cultural Heritage Experts with military expertise. On February 5th the date was set for the mission to take place a week later.

While Thomas Schuler was conducting media research and liaising with academics, Karl von Habsburg and Joris Kila were activating their contacts in the political and diplomatic world, but also their personal contacts in Egypt. The staff of the Austrian Embassy in Cairo was also very helpful with information and organization.



Joris Kila on Tahrir Square

Short Description of the Mission

Karl von Habsburg and Joris Kila arrived in Cairo on February 12 coming from Vienna. It was decided to take only small digital tourist cameras since until the day before often camera equipment was confiscated upon arrival. In the evening the mission decided to visit the area of the Egyptian Museum and Tahrir Square to get an impression of the situation. Getting around Cairo was very complicated, the fastest way usually by foot. Although the mood was generally jubilant, Mubarak had just stepped down and the situation was far from secure. The area of the museum was teeming with military and tanks. That evening the mission tried to make contact with their personal contacts in order to get an objective impression of the situation. A night curfew still existed.

On February 13 the mission visited the Dutch Institute. From there it was possible to reach an official of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) in Saqqara, who confirmed attempts of looting but denied anything had been stolen. A big problem was the constant stream of contradictive information as well as the large number of complot theories and fantasy or propaganda driven stories. It was also decided to focus on the archaeological sites around Cairo who had mostly not been visited by independent experts since the beginning of unrest in Egypt. The Egyptian Museum had already been visited several times at least by journalists, but the experience gained in Iraq showed that it is dangerous to focus only on one important museum and at the same time neglect the important archaeological sites. That day the mission received multiple background briefings on the situation in Egypt and Cultural Heritage.

In the morning of February 14th the mission went to the area of Saqqara accompanied by the director of the Austrian Institute of Archaeology in Cairo, but was turned away by armed guards. In Memphis they managed to get access to the open air museum. To the great relief of the mission the museum was, in spite of many contrarian reports, seemingly untouched. At noon the mission had a meeting with the Minister of Antiquities Dr. Zahi Hawass. Dr. Hawass is personally known to the mission members since many years and promised his support for the mission to visit Saqqara, Abu Sir and Dahshur. The situation at the ministry, the former SCA building, was very tense. There were vast demonstrations outside the building and the mission members had to enter and leave the building through a besieged backdoor. In the afternoon the mission tried to check out the situation in Abydos and the Kharga Oasis by phone. Both places had reported violent unrest but damage to Cultural Heritage could not be confirmed.

On February 15th the mission, accompanied by the office manager of the Dutch Institute, left early to Saqqara. After some initial difficulties it was possible to have a conversation with the local SCA official. He was telling us about his experiences during the time of looting in Saqqara and Abu Sir. After that the mission visited several sites at Saqqara, following a provisional list of reported damages. In Abu Sir it was, due to time constraint, only possible to visit a few places reported to be affected. The mission decided it was very important to visit Dahshur, and especially the De Morgan warehouse where looting had been reported that supposedly took place until the day before the mission arrived. Although strongly discouraged to go there and with all sorts of constraints, the mission found that the doors and windows of the warehouse had recently been walled in (the mortar still being wet). The accounts of the local guards were not encouraging. At the end of a day enriched by a constant sandstorm, the mission visited the red pyramid of Snefru at Dahshur.

On February 16th, the mission still explored further possibilities to support training of Cultural Heritage Protection staff in Egypt and left back in direction of Vienna in the afternoon.

Results

Memphis

The museum was seemingly untouched. No broken windows in the office building, no signs of vandalism. The shopping stalls were equipped with the usual goods but no personnel. There might have been demonstrations in front of the museum.

Later info learns that there is supposed to be a warehouse containing objects somewhere in the environment; however the mission did not know at the time, so possible damage to this facility was neither checked nor confirmed.



Assessment of Memphis by the Director of the Austrian Archaeological Institute at Cairo, Irene Forstner-Müller, Joris Kila and Karl von Habsburg.



Even the souvenir shops at Memphis remained untouched.

Saqqara

The museum and the main storage facilities next to the main office building were untouched according to the SCA inspector, but could not be visited.

During the tour of the premises the mission went first to see the tomb of Mereruka – it looked seemingly undamaged

Teti – undamaged

Tomb of Kagemni – the door was opened by vandals but now it was welded shut, supposedly no damage.

Unas Pyramid – was especially opened for the mission, obviously closed since a long time and was untouched.

Tomb of Isisnofret – door was welded, supposedly unharmed

Tomb of Maya – clear signs of vandalism (broken locks, broken pieces of wood), supposedly no looting. The entrance to the famous reliefs was sealed with an SCA seal so it could not be visited. It was guaranteed to be in perfect order. The mission had no real reason to doubt this, since reliefs were generally left untouched.

Tomb of Tia & Tia – cupboards for reliefs were not locked, though reliefs look untouched. Some cupboards were sealed but definitely only after the break in.

Tomb of Horemheb – seemingly untouched, same as Tia.

2 brothers – new locks, doors welded shut, definitely broken into before.

The same applies to Nefer.



The guard house at the entrance to the site is intact and the police is back on duty.



Chamber of the Unas pyramid

Abu Sir

The mission was told by a very helpful SCA inspector about illegal diggings. Supposedly they went no deeper than 50 cm and were already filled in again. But the illegal digs were too far away to be checked within the limited time available. It was decided to visit only the Mastaba of Ptahshepses as an example. This one could not be locked, and the mission was told that there had been people there but no damage could be immediately assessed.



Assessment of Abu Sir by the Office Manager of the Dutch Institute at Cairo, Tilly Mulder, (Joris Kila and Karl von Habsburg)

Dahshur

The mission went to see the De Morgans storage facility. It was recently broken into several times up to February 14th, but now the doors and windows were walled off. The roof was secure. The mission found ammunition shells around the compound. Important pieces were supposedly brought to other more secure warehouses, but there was no doubt that looting on a big scale took place.



De Morgans storage facility

Lessons Learned

The mission was definitely necessary and very well received as shown by the encouragement of the local staff on site, once they were convinced that the mission was about Cultural Heritage Protection and not about journalism or tourism.

A crucial element of the mission proved to be the reach-back capacity at the home base (office of Dr Thomas Schuler in Chemnitz / Germany) that was constantly furnishing the newest information and coordinating contacts.

The mission would not have been possible without a concentrated effort from the people in public positions, diplomacy and the military. A basic condition for the operation was the willingness of the participants to go and take certain risks without waiting for insurances. The disappointment that other big NGO's and GO's dealing with Cultural Heritage, had not yet managed to send experts or assistance to Egypt could be heard from all sides.

Suggestions for the Future

It is important to plan further missions in Egypt in the near future, since only a very small portion of areas where damage was reported could be surveilled.

It is strongly suggested by the mission that a conference in Egypt should be planned in the near future to analyze the security situation at archaeological sites, on how to deal with emergency situations and how to create contingency plans using the Egyptian example.

Military contacts and training about protection of cultural property are indispensable, this is for instance mandatory under IHL (1954 Hague Convention and Protocols) and is still not put into practice in many countries. The damage and access problems would have been less if the international community realizes this and would live up to the treaties they sign not only in word but also in practice.

Acknowledgements

The mission would like to recognize the support they got from the Ministry of Archaeology, the Minister Dr. Zahi Hawass and the whole staff of the SCA in Egypt in these very difficult and tense times.

The mission would also like to recognize the outstanding support by the Austrian Embassy, the Cultural Attaché, the Defense Attaché and the Director of the Austrian Archaeological Institute in Cairo.

Without the personal support of the office manager of the Dutch Institute, Tilly Mulder, and her perfect and convincing command of the Arabic Language, a lot of the goals of the mission could not have been achieved.

Only the help of the many individuals the mission met in Egypt, but also those helping with information from abroad, made the success of the mission possible.

Links

The photo documentation of the mission can be found at <http://www.blueshield.at/>.