

## AKPIA TRAVEL GRANT REPORT

by Azra Dawood

Submitted: September 26, 2010

In 1926, the U.S. Egyptologist James Henry Breasted presented Egypt's King Fua'd I with plans for a New Egyptian Museum and Research Institute at Cairo. A series of stunning watercolor drawings illustrated a neo-Pharaonic, neo-classical Beaux-Arts complex that would replace the existing Cairo Museum, built by the British and French in 1902. Breasted, the United States' first Egyptologist and the Director of the University of Chicago's Oriental Institute, was the project's mastermind and had secured the support of the U.S. philanthropist John D. Rockefeller Jr., who pledged \$10 million for the museum's construction and endowment, as well as the services of his personal architect, William Welles Bosworth, for its design. To the surprise of the Breasted-Rockefeller team, the Egyptians subjected the proposed museum to a series of negotiations and ultimately rejected it. Publicly, the U.S. team blamed the failure of the project on Egyptian intransigence and "vanity,"<sup>1</sup> Oriental mistiness, and "suspicious"<sup>2</sup> nationalism. The archives, however, demonstrate otherwise.

With the aid of the 2009 – 2010 AKPIA Travel Grant, I carried out archival research on the Breasted-Rockefeller project in preparation for my SMArchS thesis. There are two main archives in the United States pertaining to the Breasted-Rockefeller project: the Rockefeller Archive Center (Sleepy Hollow, NY) and the Oriental Institute Archives (Chicago, Illinois). A third (secondary archive) is the Caltech Archive (Pasadena, CA). Funds from the Grant enabled

---

<sup>1</sup> "Egyptian Museum Negotiations: 1925-1926. Report by Chauncey Belknap," Belknap to Rockefeller, March 10, 1926, folder 258, box 25, series 2E, RG 3, Office of the Messrs. Rockefeller (hereafter designated OMR), Rockefeller Archive Center, Sleepy Hollow, New York (hereafter designated RAC).

<sup>2</sup> John Albert Wilson, *Thousands of Years; an Archaeologist's Search for Ancient Egypt* (New York,: Scribner, 1972).

me to spend a week in January researching the Breasted-Rockefeller team's correspondence at the Oriental Institute Archives (OIA) in Chicago. (Research at the Rockefeller Archive Center was conducted independently).

Documents at the OIA – and the Rockefeller Archive Center (RAC) – revealed that the official U.S. version of the project's failure masked a complex, international network of political maneuverings, Western imperial ambitions, Orientalist assumptions, cultural attitudes, and emerging Egyptian nationalism that sank the project. I approached the documents – and my research – with two main questions. The primary question – indeed *the* question – was of course, “Why was the museum proposed in the first place?” Answering this question provided clues to the answer for the logical follow-up question, “Why did the project fail?” A close reading of the correspondence demonstrated that the proposal and its failure were both lodged in the political and cultural moment between the First and Second World Wars. By foregrounding this moment, it became clear that although the museums' conception was ostensibly motivated by science and cultural philanthropy, and although it was presented as a gift from “the Great Democracy of the West,”<sup>3</sup> the project was fueled in part by the Breasted-Rockefeller team's desire to pry open the political field in Egypt, which was dominated by the British and French empires and by Egyptian nationalists, and to allow the United States to partake of it. The museum, with its stately and majestic architecture, was to be the bait.

The key discovery in the archives was the initial exchange of letters between James Breasted and the Rockefeller team. I singled out two decisive letters (both authored by Breasted

---

<sup>3</sup> *The New Egyptian Museum and Research Institute at Cairo* (England, 1925), 11.

and addressed to prominent individuals within Rockefeller's vast philanthropic network), which provided me with a crucial framework for my understanding of the genesis and collapse of the project.

The first letter is dated 1919, and it successfully launched the Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago – the first major Breasted-Rockefeller collaboration. (Breasted and Rockefeller's successful collaboration on the Oriental Institute facilitated their later collaboration on the museum project). The second letter is dated 1924 and it launched the proposal for the museum. Together these letters reveal not only Breasted's plans for the museum, but also his imperial vision for the United States. The 1919 letter introduces Breasted's notion of the United States' political "opportunity" and civilizational "obligation" with regards to the Near East.<sup>4</sup> In this letter – written a few weeks after the departure of U.S. President Woodrow Wilson for the Paris Peace Conference that marked the end of World War I – Breasted wrote to Dr. Wallace Buttrick, President of the Rockefeller-endowed General Education Board<sup>5</sup> (GEB), of an unparalleled turn of events in the Near East:

As I realize that in these last few weeks since we last met in New York, the opportunity of the ages has come to us ... For the first time in history the birthlands of religion and civilization lie open to unrestricted research and discovery. Palestine, Syria, Asia Minor, Assyria, and Babylonia have suddenly become ours.<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> For citation, see footnote 7.

<sup>5</sup> The General Education Board was a philanthropic foundation created by Rockefeller Jr.'s father, John D. Rockefeller, in 1902.

<sup>6</sup> James Henry Breasted (hereafter designated Breasted) to Wallace Buttrick (hereafter designated Buttrick), January 13, 1919, folder 6851, box 659, sub-series 4, series 1, General Education Board Archives (hereafter designated GEB), RAC.

The three-page letter was accompanied by a document titled, “Plan for the Organization of an Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago,” in which Breasted wrote:

The study of these lands is the birthright and the sacred legacy of all civilized peoples. Their delivery from the Turk brings to us an opportunity such as the world has never seen before and will never see again. Our Allies in Europe are financially too exhausted to take advantage of the great opportunity. This makes both the opportunity and the obligation all the greater for us in America. <sup>7</sup> [Emphasis mine]

Breasted’s understanding of the nature of the United States’ “opportunity” and “obligation” with respect to the Near East (and his subsequent appeal for the creation of the Oriental Institute) is key to understanding the future museum project. He based his argument for the New Egyptian Museum on these same grounds.

Although the First World War was fought in modern times against modern rivals, Breasted celebrated the “delivery” of ancient lands from the Ottomans. He used his scholarship to demonstrate that these lands and their ancient civilizations were the origins of the ‘American civilization.’ To make the claim, he denied this heritage to the lands’ modern-day inhabitants, whom he described as ignorant and uninterested. With combined Western victory over the “Turk,” the lands were finally under control of the civilized people of the West, who alone could protect and study their ancient civilizations. The financial incapacitation of the Europeans and the defeat of the Ottomans meant that the U.S. must – and finally could – step into the field of Near Eastern studies and, presumably, the Near East.

---

<sup>7</sup> “Plan for the Organization of an Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago,” January 13, 1919, folder 6851, box 659, sub-series 4, series 1, GEB, RAC.

The 1919 letters were Breasted's second appeal to Rockefeller's philanthropic network for the creation of the Oriental Institute. The GEB expressed interest in the project but declined to pursue it, prompting Breasted to turn to Rockefeller, Jr. himself, which finally brought about the desired result. Breasted's initial failure to engage the GEB shows that the Board did not share his ordinary view of the Near East, nor did it recognize the need for, or benefit of, U.S. involvement in this field, and hints at the obstacles to Breasted's ambitions.

The obstacles, as Breasted perceived them, were many. Internationally, Breasted was competing with established European – and rising native – Egyptologists. To contend with them, Breasted required funding from U.S. patrons. On the home front, however, due to the field's associations with philological pursuits and biblical archaeology, Near Eastern studies were perceived as an “oddity at the county fair”<sup>8</sup> on the outer fringes of science, at a time of scientific enthusiasm in the United States. And within the humanities, Near Eastern studies were pushed aside by a strong classical bias. From 1895 (the beginning of Breasted's career as an Egyptologist) to 1914 (the beginning of the First World War) Breasted struggled to raise funds, turning primarily to the Rockefeller network because of its reputation for supporting unexplored areas of study, and its association with the University of Chicago.<sup>9</sup> He met with limited

---

<sup>8</sup> Charles Breasted, *Pioneer to the Past : The Story of James Henry Breasted, Archaeologist, Told by His Son Charles Breasted* (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2009). 96.

<sup>9</sup> John D. Rockefeller Jr.'s father, Rockefeller Sr., founded the University of Chicago.

success.<sup>10</sup> Eventually, the outbreak of World War I put an end to all further possibilities of fieldwork in Egypt and the Near East.

Breasted used his years of “exile”<sup>11</sup> from the Near East to systematically attack the unfavorable perception of Near Eastern studies by writing a succession of academic and popular books on the field.<sup>12</sup> Breasted’s books conveyed his scholarly view that the Near East – particularly ancient Egypt – was the origins of Western civilization and modern religion, preceding the Greco-Roman civilizations; he presented Near Eastern civilizations as the “keystone of the arch, with prehistoric man on one side and civilized Europe on the other”<sup>13</sup> with Americans as the ultimate heirs of this civilization.<sup>14</sup> As such, great men like Rockefeller were duty-bound to ensure the protection, documentation and study of the ancient Near East. The

---

<sup>10</sup> For example, in 1903, Breasted wrote to Frederick T. Gates (Rockefeller Sr.’s advisor) to secure a grant on behalf of the University of Chicago for archaeological field expeditions in the Near East. This grant – the Oriental Exploration Fund – resulted in the 1906-1907 Nubian and Egyptian Expedition. In 1907, Breasted outlined a scheme for more thorough documentation of ancient Egyptian monuments. He proposed a floating, archaeological research laboratory on the Nile, but Gates rejected the proposal arguing that a project of this scope should be undertaken by the Egyptian government itself, and not by an American enterprise. Egyptian archaeology was not yet considered an established science, worthy of such private philanthropic funding. Furthermore, the U.S. public and philanthropists did not view the study of ancient Egyptian civilizations as fundamental or foundational to an understanding of Western civilization. See also, ———, *Pioneer to the Past; the Story of James Henry Breasted, Archaeologist* (New York, : C. Scribner's Sons, 1943).

<sup>11</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr., a Portrait*, [1st ed. (New York, : Harper, 1956). 359.

<sup>12</sup> Breasted wrote the following books during this time:

James Henry Breasted, *Ancient Times, a History of the Early World* (Boston, New York [etc.]: Ginn and company, 1916).

James Henry Breasted, *Egypt through the Stereoscope: A Journey through the Land of the Pharaohs* (New York, London: Underwood & Underwood, 1900).

<sup>13</sup> ———, *The Oriental Institute* (Chicago, Ill., : The University of Chicago Press, 1933). 11.

<sup>14</sup> The sentiment of U.S. inheritance of European civilization is expressed in, “Plan for the Organization of an Oriental Institute at the University of Chicago,” January 13, 1919, folder 6851, box 659, sub-series 4, series 1, GEB, RAC, 2.

books were hugely popular so that when the war ended, Breasted felt confident enough to turn once again to the Rockefeller philanthropic network with his vision for U.S. involvement in the Near East.

These themes of U.S. “opportunity,” “obligation,” and scientific and responsible custodianship of the West’s ‘origins,’ are picked up again in the 1924 letter (written to Rockefeller, Jr.’s legal adviser, Raymond Fosdick) but of particular importance here is an understanding of architecture and site as an embodiment of the Breasted-Rockefeller team’s vision, and as bait for the Egyptians.<sup>15</sup> Aerial photographs of the proposed site, water color illustrations of the proposed design, and architectural plans, sections, and detail drawings – all of which are located at the Oriental Institute Archives – allowed for an original site and architectural analysis of the project in my thesis.

- - -

Research at the OIA (complemented by that at the RAC) allowed me to look beyond my immediate thesis project, and to suggest other potential research areas. Using the available material, I was able to place the museum project within a larger framework. Although Breasted was the mastermind behind the project (he is clearly the main correspondent in the archives and was the man on the ground in Egypt), there is another protagonist without whose interest and money the proposal would have been impossible: Rockefeller, Jr. Retired from his father’s business ventures as early on as 1917, Junior – as he was known to his associates – turned instead to philanthropy. Of Rockefeller’s impressive philanthropic contributions – the

---

<sup>15</sup> Breasted to Fosdick (Letter), October 7, 1924, folder Cairo Museum Project – Correspondence: Curtis, Fosdick and Belknap, box Cairo Museum Project, Breasted Papers, OIA.

endowment and construction of museums, academic research institutions, observatories – his official biographer wrote that the industrialist was spurred into action by the devastation of the First World War, and in an attempt at:

flagging the next war before it plunges suddenly around the curve to pile into us as it did in 1914.<sup>16</sup>

But as I have shown, my research into one of these projects – the New Egyptian Museum and Research Institute at Cairo – complicates this statement by revealing the Breasted-Rockefeller team’s sophisticated dual vision of the United States’ political “opportunity” and its cultural, civilizational, and scientific “obligation.” It follows that a study of all of Rockefeller’s projects and the debates surrounding them would paint a complete picture of his team’s political use of architecture. This points the way to larger, future research on structures and landscapes (built and unbuilt, ancient and new, at home and on foreign soil) that are archives in themselves of the ambition and vision of John D. Rockefeller, Jr.<sup>17</sup>

- - -

---

<sup>16</sup> Raymond B. Fosdick, *John D. Rockefeller, Jr., a Portrait*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Harper, 1956).

<sup>17</sup> My initial research at the OIA and RAC enabled me to propose a project and formulate a research abstract for the SOM Foundation’s 2010 Travel/Research Fellowship Award.