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The Sphinx and the Awakenings of Egypt

ABSTRACT

The article discusses some interesting themes of using the image of the Egyptian sphinx in contemporary contexts: the Egypt Awakened (Nahdat Misr) monument in Cairo, symbolizing modern Egypt, and the use of the sphinx motif as an aspect of social protests; the so-called Arab Spring and the political upheaval in Egypt of 2010–2012.

KEYWORDS: Egypt, Sphinx, Nahdat Misr, Neo-Pharaonic Style, Maḥmūd Muḥtār, Banksy, Arab Spring

STRESZCZENIE

Sfinks i przebudzenie Egiptu

W artykule omówiono kilka interesujących wątków wykorzystania wizerunku egipskiego sfinksa we współczesnych kontekstach: pomnik Egypt Awakened (Nahdat Misr) w Kairze, symbolizujący współczesny Egipt, oraz wykorzystanie motywu sfinksa jako aspektu protestów społecznych; tzw. arabska wiosna i przewrót polityczny w Egipcie w latach 2010–2012.

SŁOWA KLUCZE: Egipt, sfinks, Nahdat Misr, styl neofarański, Maḥmūd Muḥtār, Banksy, arabska wiosna

In the heart of Cairo, at the end of the representative University Bridge, stands a monument that bears the same name as the broad avenue leading from it towards the University: *Nahdat Misr*, which can be translated as *Egypt Awakened* (*Egypt's Renaissance* or *Egypt's Reawakening*). The monument symbolizes modern Egypt's recovery of its political subjectivity, but it also represents an attempt to embrace the impressive legacy of its own history.

Almost since the early 19th century – in fact, until today – there has been an ongoing debate about the place of this great legacy in the paradigm of the contemporary state on the Nile; about its inclusion in the structures of social consciousness, the complex religious conditions, and the pride in the sense of multi-millennial continuity, which had been not only ambiguous for centuries, but even deliberately rejected (Crabbs, 1984; Gershoni & Jankowski, 1993; Reid, 2002; Colla, 2007; Cuno, 2008. See also remarks in Vymazalová, Megahed & Ondráš, 2011).

Turkey's *de facto* rule over Egypt ended in 1881; Britain then established a colony on the Nile, and on the eve of World War I, Egypt was declared a British protectorate. Soon after 1914, battles raged in the Middle East against the severely weakened Ottoman Empire, ending with the loss of any political influence Istanbul had over the territories.

In fact, the military-political turmoil continued until February 28, 1922, when Egypt officially declared its independence from Great Britain and the formally reigning King Fu'ād (I) became Egypt's first modern independent ruler. A year later, the constitution was acclaimed. Despite its legitimized independence, however, Egypt was still under effective British influence, although in subsequent years, despite governmental crises and economic turmoil, it gradually freed itself from dependence. Moreover, from the first decades of the 19th century, Egypt underwent Europeanization, with varying dynamic, and more or less successful attempts were made to implement European systems of economic management, industrialization, and relatively modern social and political reforms.

Many young Egyptians were educated in Europe, also maturing – despite strict supervision – under the influence of European views and customs. Future Egyptian engineers, military, and politicians were educated on the Old Continent, especially in France, but sporadically they also took up studies at, for example, art schools, which was not so obvious in view of the place visual arts had in Islamic religious conditions (aniconicity). This was the kind of study undertaken in Paris (in 1911, as a scholar at the Parisian *École des Beaux-Arts*) by the twenty-year-old Maḥmūd Muḥtār (Mukhtar, 1891–1934) (Goldschmidt, 2000, p. 138; Colla, 2007, p. 227 et seq.; Kanafani, 2020, pp. 151–155)¹, who had previously studied at the School of Fine Arts in Cairo (from 1908), whose establishment was sought by the prince Yusuf Kamal (1874–1932), who favored modernism.

1 See also R. El Shimi, *Celebrating Egyptian sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar 120th birthday*: Ahram. Retrieved from: <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/5/25/11678/Arts--Culture/Visual-Art/Celebrating-Egyptian-sculptor-Mahmoud-Mokhtar-th-b.aspx> (access: 10.05.2011); Radwan, 2017.

The design of a monument that would embody the idea and symbolism of the national liberation struggle most perfectly began to evolve in Mukhtar's imagination under the influence of mass demonstrations that took place especially in Cairo, but the idea itself was born earlier, in Paris, where he befriended activists of the national-liberal Egyptian Wafd party. Members of the Egyptian diplomatic mission who were traveling around Europe at that time, promoting the Egyptian cause in European capitals and salons, decided to commission him to create a monument having visited the Parisian atelier of their compatriot (Dika Seggerman, 2013).

Despite several variants of the composition, from the very beginning, the work was supposed to depict two figures, looking boldly ahead in one direction: a woman and a sphinx. The young woman is dressed in a long gown; she may be a simple and proud Egyptian peasant, but she may also be a distant echo of the goddess Isis or Queen Cleopatra. The depiction of a human figure, and even more so, one of a woman, was in itself highly iconoclastic to traditionally, conservatively oriented Egyptians, not to mention religious dogmatists. The woman lifts her niqāb headscarf with a determined gesture, revealing her face looking towards a new epoch, including enlightenment, knowledge, hope of a better future, and equality. Next to it, the sphinx, wearing the Pharaonic headgear (the *nemes*), with a stern, masculine face, rises proudly on its straightened front paws, as if suddenly roused from a thousand years of rest, inactivity, or sleep; and grasping proudly, firmly, and aggressively into the pedestal of the monument with its great menacing claws.

An important issue was also raised concerning the choice of the maker; there had already been sculptors working in Egypt for several decades, specializing in designing and erecting monuments, especially those dedicated to rulers and prominent military commanders (following the European model), but they were mainly Italian artists hired by subsequent rulers. Mukhtar, it was emphasized, was a commoner, a talented “son of the land of Egypt,” and the idea and design themselves came “straight from his heart,” not merely from an order placed with a foreigner, even if backed by great talent and excellent craftsmanship. What is more, Mukhtar immediately decided – also symbolically – that the monument would be carved, like the ancient obelisks and statues of the pharaohs, in geologically unique pink granite mined near the city of Aswān, at the southern tip of Egypt (Brown & Harrell, 1998; Aston, Harrell, & Shaw, 2000)² even though it was an extremely expensive and logistically complicated undertaking. This was one of the arguments raised by various parties opposing

2 By the way, the statues themselves are made of pink granite, while the pedestal is made of black blocks.

the erection of the monument, even causing periodic halts in execution work. One can also mention petty disputes, such as those over the features of the sphinx's face (which allegedly bore a "fair" or "unfair" resemblance to various political figures of the time, which inflamed the disputes).

The work was completed in 1928; the monument was unveiled ceremonially six years after Egypt's declaration of independence, in one of Cairo's main squares, Maidān Ramsīs. It was also moved to its current location in a political context, after the 1952 revolution and the establishment of the republic. However, even the most violent political turmoil in Egypt did not result in questioning of its symbolism. However, the icon and symbol of modern Egypt, which was intended to be modern by its creators, was not the rising sphinx from Mukhtar's vision. There have been attempts to explain that it is the woman figure who "awakens" the sphinx (an Egyptian man from his unchanging position in patriarchal-feudal structures from time immemorial), which clearly translates into a symbolic message about an at least equal role of women in contemporary society, in the "awakening" of modernity, in political and social participation. It is no coincidence that the silhouette of this monument was included in the logo of the National Women's Council.³

There is an interesting context that somewhat questions the full originality of Mukhtar's idea, especially the symbolism of the rising (ascending) sphinx: in 1915 a commemorative medallion was made in Germany (according to a design by Karl Goetz), depicting a face of an old man with a gloomy expression on its heads, with his hands folded as if in a gesture of propitiatory prayer; a large skull sticks out from behind his left shoulder, while over his right shoulder, there is a skeleton hand holding a spouting hourglass. The scene is surrounded by the inscription: *SIR GREY ZEIG'DEINE MACHT!* (*Sir Grey, show your strength.*) Edward Grey was then foreign minister of Britain, facing the very complex issues (in fact, disastrous for England) of establishing a protectorate over Egypt and the escalating conflict with Turkey. The tails of the medallion shows a scene under the pyramids: in the background there is a crowd of mounted figures, probably Turkish troops, while the foreground is dominated by the sphinx sitting up, just like in Mukhtar's design. Under the sphinx there is the text: *ÄGYPTEN ERWACHT* (*Egypt Awakened*).⁴

The image of the Great Sphinx of Giza has appeared on Egyptian banknotes many times, almost continuously (as one of the most important

3 *The Muslim World*, Volume 18, Issue 4 (Oct. 1928), pp. 402–408; Karnouk, 2005, pp. 16–18.

4 More than a dozen casts were made and are sometimes offered at numismatic auctions; one of the medallions is exhibited, for example, in London's Imperial War Museum (Art. IWM MED 302); Redling, 2011, pp. 119–121.

symbols of the country): already in 1898 on the 50 piastres banknote. The British administration of the protectorate kept this motif in a new edition from 1914. After the revolution of 1952 (military coup d'état of July 23, 1952, as a result of which King Farouk (Fārūq) I was overthrown and Ġamāl 'Abd an-Nāšir gained authoritarian power), the National Bank of Egypt introduced a banknote of 10 Egyptian pounds with an image of the Great Sphinx, withdrawn a few years later. In 1976 (and in a new issue after 1997), the Great Sphinx also adorned a small, so extremely popular banknote of 10 piastres (e.g. Regier, 2004, pp. 177–178).

Sphinx symbolism has appeared several times in the context of violent socio-political turmoil in the Middle East, especially in Egypt, but most powerfully in times close to ours. Shortly after midnight on October 22, 2013, on the sidewalk of a neglected alley in the New York City borough of Queens, an unusual sculpture, or rather a kind of installation, appeared, made of sand-filled bags, cement, and old cinder blocks. There was no doubt – it was the silhouette, actually rather just the head and chest, of a sphinx, emerging, amidst the street trash and debris, from a large puddle of dirty, muddy and stale water. The question of authorship was immediately solved, further shocking the art world; for the photograph of the sphinx's head appeared on the website of the British street art artist Robert Banks, known to the world as Banksy.⁵ Under the photograph there was an enigmatic signature, or rather a kind of commentary: “No turn unstoned. A 1/36 scale replica of the great Sphinx of Giza made from smashed cinderblocks. You're advised not to drink the replica Arab spring water.”⁶ Naturally, the entire project is Banksy's characteristically sophisticated symbolic commentary on the events that shook the world, especially the Arab Middle East, between 2010 and 2012. At that time, a wave of violent and mass demonstrations exploded, especially at the beginning of 2011, prompted by a variety of factors, among which were massive unemployment, rising prices, the discomfort of having no prospects, and the increasingly strong perception of gigantic nepotism and authoritarianism of the corrupt authorities, accompanied by a deficit of civil liberties. In Egypt, the culmination of mass protests happened in January/February

5 The real name of the artist is also not clearly identified; perhaps Robert or Robin Gunningham (born 1974), uses various techniques in his work: graffiti, installations, also photography and film; he also modifies classical paintings (Monet, Hopper). The works are created in surprising places, while Banksy effectively hides the process of creation itself. Most of his works, often aesthetically controversial, have an ironic political, social or ecological message. See also <https://www.banksy.co.uk> and Elsworth-Jones 2013.

6 His installation, made by Banksy at Queens (127th Street / 35th Avenue), has been reconstructed in New York's Keszler Gallery: <http://www.keszlergallery.com/> See also <https://www.businessinsider.com/banksy-built-a-replica-of-the-great-sphinx-of-giza-in-queens-2013-10?IR=T>

2011 (demonstrations in Tahrīr Square in Cairo) and consequently led to the removal of President Ḥusnī Mubārak from power, who had been in office since 1981, the seizure of government by the military,⁷ and early parliamentary elections.

Banksy's sphinx has a grim skull with empty eye sockets, instead of a face (though the Great sphinx's face is, after all, as we know, damaged). The icon of civilization and symbol of eternity, has ended up here as a dead, crumbling cadaver.⁸ Arguably, the British artist's narrative is not only a reassertion of Victor Hugo's thesis that revolutions are sphinxes (*Les Misérables*), but also a terrifying conundrum of their true causes and effects. Romantic "peoples' revolts," eruptions of hope for change, are, in the parlance of conspiracy theories, directed, globally controlled games of big business: "if we want everything to stay as it is, everything has to change."

The distinctive silhouette of the Great Sphinx was already being exploited politically as unrest in Egypt grew and escalated, and caricatures of the sphinx with the faces of politicians (especially President Mubārak) illustrated political press commentary. The sphinx with the face of Mubārak in a police helmet suggested the strength, power, and brutality of the authorities (this president, by the way, was often called a "pharaoh") and, at the same time, his "perpetual" immovability from office; at other times the drawings of the sphinx were infographics in journalistic texts with other theses: the slothfulness of politicians or the inertia of society itself, the apathy and petrification of political structures, stagnation of the conservatives, etc. By the way, at the time when the demonstrations in Cairo were intensifying, the well-known illustrator and graphic designer, Christian Adams, drew a four-frame cartoon in which the silhouette of the Great Sphinx of Giza transforms into that of a tank.

Finally, let us pay attention to two drawings. David Horsey published a caricature of the "irremovable" President Mubārak in the press, towering over demonstrators in the form of a sphinx, hissing cynically through

7 After President Ḥusnī Mubārak was ousted from power and General Ḥusain Ṭaṭṭāwī took over, a satirical drawing by renowned illustrator Dave Brown (*The Independent*) circulated the world press, showing the monumental silhouette of the Great Sphinx of Giza, with Mubārak's head torn off, lying next to it in the sand, and the "new" one installed – Ṭaṭṭāwī's, wearing a military cap. See: http://www.englishblog.com/2011/11/cartoon-meet-the-new-sphinx.html#.Vcsex_ntJw

8 <http://www.complex.com/style/2013/10/banksy-new-york> oraz http://animalnewyork.com/2013/banksyny-22-a-sphinx-in-queens/?utm_source=dlvr.it&utm_medium=twitter. Also note that some of the nocturnal butterflies of the Sphingidae (Lepidoptera) family have a distinctive cadaver skull shape on the abdomen. The terrifying vision of a giant moth is the theme of a short story by Edgar Allan Poe, *The Sphinx*.

his teeth: “*Move? In my own time...*,”⁹ however, when the riots became so massive that effective suppression by police forces was out of the question, the world press circulated a satirical drawing by another cartoonist, Satish Acharya, in which the sphinx with a humble and terrified face of Ḥusnī Mubārak utters an imploring “meow.”¹⁰

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9 <http://www1.hdnux.com/photos/11/43/05/2502980/5/920x920.jpg>

10 http://lowres.cartoonstock.com/-egypt-regime_change-political_change-democracies-riots-sahn25_low.jpg

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Figure

Mahmoud Mukhtar, *Nahdat Misr*
(*Egypt's Reawakening*). Photo by Alex
Dika Seggerman: public domain.

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