

A work experience in Egypt: the TT39 project

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Abstract

This article narrates the experience lived throughout the Project for the conservation and study of the Theban Tomb 39. This international project developed by the Mexican Society of Egyptology, the Universidad del Valle de México and the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia, began in 2005. This research project characterizes for its interdisciplinary approach in which archaeologists, restorers, historians and epigraphists worked side by side to ensure the conservation of the Egyptian monument located in the Valley of the Kings, which is currently listed as a World Heritage Site. With a duration of 15 years, this conservation project allowed the Mexican team to familiarize with the international and Egyptian guidelines used to preserve this kind of heritage, as well as to provide an idea of the conservation problems that the buildings in the desert region of Egypt face constantly. At the same time, it addresses the implications of setting up an international and interdisciplinary work team.

Keywords

Egypt; archaeology; Egyptology; tomb.

In 2005, a project in Egypt started with the collaboration of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) staff: the Project for the conservation and study of the Theban Tomb 39. The Sociedad Mexicana de Egiptología (SME) in partnership with the Universidad del Valle de México (UVM) obtained the permission to study and preserve this tomb, summoning a team of professionals among epigraphers, archaeologists, architect restorers, photographers and restorers, under the direction of Gabriela Arrache. This team became the First Mexican Mission in Egypt.

Owing to the invitation extended by the Mexican Society of Egyptology, restorers from INAH have integrated into the fieldwork since the first season in 2005, as part of the team of specialists involved in this project.



Over the course of 15 years, the project has been rewarding for the restorers both academically and personally; it has also been an opportunity to reaffirm the quality of the conservation work of the Mexican team at an international level, and has represented an exercise of adaptation to a new culture and in the formation a multicultural team. The text presented below, describes different aspects that have been important throughout this experience, from the perspective of the conservators specialized on architectural finishes.

A tomb, a World Heritage site

The Theban Tomb 39 is part of the private tombs of the Pharaonic Era that belonged to the aristocracy; they are located in ancient Thebes, now known as the region west from Luxor, the West Bank, in central Egypt. The tomb belonged to Puyemrá, second priest of Amon during the mandate of two great pharaohs Hatshepsut and Thutmose III, in the XVIII Dynasty, around 1500 BC. According to the geography of Northern Africa and specifically of the region, the desert surrounds it and the sand covers the rocky limestone beds. However, at a short distance, like in representations of the Pharaonic Era, you can see the crop fields on the extensive slopes of the Nile River.

It is a tomb of medium dimensions (16.77 m long, 12.15 m wide, 3.79 m high, approximately) carved in the rocky mantle of limestone, completed with ashlar of the same stone and some of sandstone. It has a courtyard with an outer porch, and a corridor that gives access to three rooms inside. The central room extends to a chapel, while the southern room has a niche. All the walls on the outside and inside of the tomb are decorated with scenes carved in low relief or sunk relief according to the iconographic and epigraphic discourse, as well as remains of a rich polychrome decoration. The scenes narrate the importance and function of Puyemrá, making him worthy of a prosperous life after death; there are passages of his daily life that are pleasantly interesting and rich in representation. Approximately, the tomb has 642 m² of decorated surface.

Beyond the temporal and spatial location, the Theban Tomb 39 is part of a region with an astounding cultural wealth, declared in 1979 as a World Heritage Site. It is difficult to break down all the elements that combined into a single UNESCO nomination and all the elements of value that exist there. As it usually happens, it is not only the architectural and decorative richness that amazes for its quality and level of preservation, but also because throughout history the region has received international attention as no other culture has seen, with the eyes of the world upon it from centuries ago.

This tomb has witnessed the passing of history, of villages mentioned in the Bible, civilizations that came to settle in the region and peoples who have learned to live in the desert; but also, political and economic pressure, the impact of mass tourism, and unfortunately terrorist acts too.

A common reaction is to compare the places where we arrive to, with those where we come from. This was not the exception, and before such a magnificent manifestation of cultural heritage, we were able to recognize the richness of our own Mexican heritage, the importance of nature to define the characteristics of that heritage, as well as all the living manifestations that exist in our Mexican culture. Working on the Theban Tomb 39 in the middle of the desert in Egypt, and working with mural paintings, lime plasters or stone reliefs in archaeological sites such as El Tajín or the Mayan area surrounded by the jungle does not mean we are neglecting our Mexican heritage, but that we are adding knowledge to our favor.



Figure 1. Panoramic view of the Theban Tomb 39. *Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.*



Figure 2. Detail of the inside scenery. *Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.*



International guidelines, Egyptian rules

The reason why this is a World Heritage Site is not only because of its nomination by UNESCO, but due the attention it receives from scholars from around the world, a fact that is truly fascinating. In the Valley of the Kings, where the Theban Tomb 39 belongs to, neighboring missions from Egypt and other countries work together; Spaniards, French, Poles, Swiss, Germans, Colombians, Italians, among others. Some of these missions come from a tradition of more than 100 years, and even own a house in the place, as happens with the Polish one.

The coexistence between the teams is constant and the exchange of opinions is important within the day-to-day work. Visits to learn about the work of the other teams take place constantly. Therefore, the common language among conservators is not only English or French, the two languages that are most commonly used by locals and foreigners for labor communication, but the proper language of conservation. The guidelines embodied in the international letters and documents transform from texts to tangible applications by teams from different parts of the world, becoming a mosaic of interpretations. This is where we recognize that the training received in the field of conservation in Mexico provides us with the basis to face efficiently conservation problems in other contexts and in a clear international competitiveness.

However, in a country where the interest of other nations has not ceased to exist and colonization took place over several centuries, the norms have gradually established. For a long time the French colonized the country and the rules were dictated accordingly. It took a great effort for the Egyptians to achieve independence from those established norms and move on to those they considered necessary.

The norms are now dictated by the authorities of the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA) currently known as the Ministry of State for Antiquities (MSA) and must be followed by locals and foreigners alike. Some of the foreigners grew accustomed to feeling like the owners of the territory, and for decades carried out the research, conservation, handling and projection of this patrimony towards the whole world. Consequently, the current norms established by the Egyptian authorities and the bureaucracy that accompanies the country are not always well accepted nor logical for the teams that arrive from abroad.

It is important to recognize the strength of the Mexican legislation on cultural heritage, as well as the fact that in Mexico, we are the ones leading the study and conservation of our own heritage. Unfortunately, bureaucracy is a factor that we both share.

Davies

The Valley of the Kings and the Theban Tomb 39 also offer the opportunity to learn about the history of the study and conservation of cultural heritage during the 20th century in this region of Egypt. In the case of this tomb, the intervention was carried out by Norman de Garis Davies, who worked intensely in it from 1915 to 1916, publishing the description of his work and his conclusions in 1922. Davies received funding from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York to develop his campaigns in this and in several other tombs in the same valley. However, the Theban Tomb 39 received special attention from him, as he expressed in his publication and in the work done in the tomb.



It is very interesting to observe the solutions Davies applied for the conservation of the structure and architectural finishes. When he found a considerable amount of fragments of the half-collapsed tomb, he decided to carry out the reconstruction of complete sectors, such as the façade and the chapel, and made a proposal for the relocation of multiple stone fragments with relieves that helped to reconstruct the scenes. Davies used the materials that were low cost and available in the region at that time. This enabled the intervention to be compatible with the original materials, he also picked up the knowledge of antique construction techniques that, despite of being more than a thousand years old, are still used on the West Bank of Luxor just as if time had frozen. In addition, his interventions, which have lasted for more than 100 years and thanks to which the Theban Tomb 39 is now preserved, were also reversible, as if he had foreseen with great respect future restorations: the conclusion of those that were left unfinished by the outbreak of First World War and/or those that may have had other interpretations.

It is also very interesting to observe the criteria used by Davies, where we suppose he favored the reading of the scenes at all times; meaning that the conservation treatments became a tool to facilitate the study of the tomb; and the conservation itself was not the main objective. Thus, the cleaning of the walls is incomplete, only enough to allow the reading of the scenes, while the consolidation proved insufficient to ensure its long-term preservation due to the large fractures of the stone. Therefore, it is evident the priority given to the aesthetic and epigraphic values. However, a century later, we can observe the same happening in some tombs and monuments, where, the broadening of the vision and taking into account another set of values, is still a pending issue. Also, and to our amazement, some teams do not count with a specialized conservator.

Therefore, it is worth taking into account the difference between this vision and the current approach applied to the Mexican pre-Columbian heritage, where aesthetics and iconography are part of the set of values that are considered relevant for research and conservation projects. The preventive conservation activities, such as stabilization, are constant and prioritized tasks, which occupy great and continuous efforts to stop the great impact that the geographical and climatic context causes on the cultural heritage of our country. In addition, from the perspective of conservation, in Mexico we usually privilege the integral reading of decorative elements with their surroundings (architectural, urban, natural landscape), their historicity, uses and functions throughout their history, including current ones, as well as the archaeological information that they can provide.

The conservation problem

Definitely, the geographical and social context provide different characteristics between our own Mexican cultural heritage and the Egyptian. On the Theban Tomb 39, we do not have conservation problems caused by the presence of water, and consequently there are no salts, no disintegration of original materials caused by the flow of humidity, nor a humidity source to control. The problems in this case are the by-products of the construction techniques of the tomb, as well as the presence of human activity in the transformation and use of this heritage. Therefore, the diagnosis had to concentrate on aspects that are not usually the priority in the conservation of pre-Columbian Mexican heritage, and in consequence, the search for solutions had to address this challenge.

On the other hand, in Egypt, access to conservation materials is not as easy as it is in Mexico. In Luxor, far from the capital, imported materials usually have high costs. This has positively forced us to take on a sustainability perspective, following the example of the Egyptians, who use only local materials for conservation processes. In particular, we can highlight the use of local clays





Figure 3. Restoration process. Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.

found in mantles in the desert, called *hebas*, which characterize for their plasticity and color that allow to execute fillings and plastering with ideal properties of integration and compatibility with the original materials used in the Pharaonic period. The same happens with the consolidation of wall sectors, where significant amounts of material have been lost, so the stuffing is done with limestone slabs and a mortar of sand and lime, in a similar way as in the Pharaonic times.

This differs considerably with the approach used by other missions from other regions of the world, where the use of imported conservation materials is common. These materials are considerably expensive and their long-term results within the Luxor context will be evaluated in the future.

Setting up a work team

Over the years, the conservation team working on architectural finishes has been growing, since there are more sectors ready for intervention thanks to the structural consolidation carried out by the areas of archeology and architectural conservation; and because of a better understanding of the monument, achieved by the area of epigraphic and iconographic studies. Initially, the project only had two restorers: Isabel Sánchez from Spain and the Mexican Dulce María Grimaldi (Conservator from INAH). However, the need to work on several fronts at the same time, a task that requires complete preparation and concentration, forced the integration of two more INAH conservators: Patricia Meehan and Germán Fraustro, the latter, eventually replaced by Luis Amaro. In addition, a team of Egyptians workers was involved from the start, and it has gradually increased in numbers too. In recent seasons, the project has hired between 15 and 20 Egyptian workers: one conservation supervisor (a person required by the MSA), three or four conservators, six technicians and five laborers.





Figure 4. Example of damage in the tomb.
Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.

The integration of the team goes beyond the number of participants. The expertise of the Egyptian workers attending the Pharaonic heritage, as well as local resources, is complemented with the knowledge in planning and organization of the Mexican restorers. We have also contributed with a methodological approach, our knowledge of the alteration processes product of the presence of synthetic polymers used in conservation, and the insistence to address all the values that can be found in the tomb throughout its history. The joint strengths of the workers of both nationalities has resulted in a solid and harmonious team, proud to develop a project of international quality.

The work dynamic has been built on the respect and recognition of local workers and their inclusion in discussions aimed at decision-making. This dynamic is not common among the teams of foreign missions and is a determining factor for the commitment in the participation of the Egyptian laborers. In addition, sharing behavior codes, despite the distance between both countries, reflect cultural empathy.

It is important to point out that the conservation team has had the support of students who have joined the project looking to enrich their experience, as well as volunteers who have attended the field for several seasons. Likewise, Architecture students have collaborated with office work in Mexico, developing social service and professional practices. In addition, we have had the valuable support of personnel who collaborate in the projects of the Coordinación Nacional de Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural¹.

¹ Students from the ENCRyM, ECRO and UASLP Restoration Schools: Miriam Segura, Ilse Von der Meden, Hortensia Rodríguez, Giselle Bordoy, Claudia Alicia Martínez, Ángela Castro, Karen Limón, Lucía Torres. Personnel hired from the CNCPC- INAH: Designer Alfonso Osorio, Architect Fernando Uriostegui. Architecture Social service and professional practices: Cecilia Cuevas, Fernanda Quezada, Scarlett Padilla.





Figure 5. Mexican mission. Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.

Two similar cultures

The history of Egypt and Mexico share a trait that undeniably marks them; both have been colonies. Could this be the reason why the participants from both countries are so similar?

The media has presented the Arab culture charged with stereotypes and traits that are very different from what we have seen in the current reality of the Luxor region. There, we have shared the work with the conservators, technicians and laborers that are integrated into the architectural finishes conservation team, and in the evenings we interact with the local population, a small town called Gezira El Bairat, on the west side of the Nile. In both cases, we have found warm and cheerful people, curious about the restorers that come from a country so close to the United States of North America. However, we have also found that these people require motivation to work, because like in many of the Mexican cities and provinces, they live under precarious conditions.

We share the same sense of humor, and the need to establish an emotional connection in order to feel motivated and accepted at work. An indispensable attitude of tolerance and respect has been the foundation of the friendship bonds with the team. Over time, we have also noticed the importance of keeping caution about cultural differences, since this translates into behavior codes that we often do not know and, consequently, without realizing we may incur an act, a word or an attitude that could be considered offensive.

Notwithstanding, there are also notable differences that have to do with culture, such as religion. One expression illustrates this difference very clearly: when a worker is entrusted with a task, his immediate response is usually *In sha Allah*, which means if God wills. Understanding this concept is difficult when we are in a hurry to see the conservation tasks finished, time is money and the



expenses are many. However, understanding that this expression does not represent a negative to what is being asked nor an absence of will to solve the entrusted task, has cost us several years. It is an expression that reflects their confidence on leaving the decisions of life to their deity, without it interfering with the work.



Figure 6. Working on a fragment. Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.

Other aspects that stand out are the language differences and the gender inequality in the Luxor region (trying not to generalize the situation in a country without certainty). Directing and coordinating a conservation team as a woman certainly causes some discomfort among Egyptian workers. Not speaking the Arabic language ends up hindering the panorama. However, it is not the words but the attitude that solves the confusions. Among the members of the team, we speak in English when we can, and we have gradually become familiar with the most common Arabic terms used in the work, which has enabled to improve our communication considerably.

The pass of time

Fifteen years of a project are also several years of life, and in them, we have witnessed personal changes, changes in the development of the project and transformations in Egypt. During this time, different Mexicans have participated, along with other collaborators from North America and Spain. Each of them contributed to the project, and although several have only participated in one field season, they all had valuable experiences. Likewise, many have been collaborators from the Egyptian side, some of whom continue working from positions of greater hierarchy, participating with opinions, technical or bureaucratic support, among other things, and besides that, we have become good friends.



Meanwhile, for the permanent work team of Mexicans and Egyptians, we have witnessed the families that grew, children that were born, and diseases that have appeared over time. We have seen how they have fallen in, and overcome crisis, caused by the political-economic effects of the 2011 Spring Arab Revolution, as well as the changes in institutions and policies regarding foreign missions. Somehow, we have shared a chapter of our lives, which has been enriching and endearing.

Also during this time, we have gone through different stages regarding the conservation of the Theban Tomb 39, gradually moving from an intervention that required extensive registry, documentation and archaeological work, to one where we can focus on the architectural finishes and start thinking in its future presentation to the public, the ultimate goal of the project. As time goes by, we have become more confident about the work we developed on the site. From a better identification of conservation problems, the evaluation of the interventions we apply, and to define what we want to leave as another chapter in the history of the tomb, what values we want to show and share with this and future generations.

During this time, several Ambassadors from Mexico passed through Egypt, and their support and recognition of the project has been manifested with receptions at the Ambassador's house, visits to the site to learn about our work and, even, the dissemination of our work in the media and social networks.

Throughout the years, we have also seen the transformations Egypt has undergone. An important aspect was the relocation of the population that for a long time lived outside the tombs, courtyards and ceilings, towards the "New Gurna". With this, the landscape has cleared of the invasion of the urban sprawl, where houses, roads, artisan's workshops, etc., surrounded the tombs; and where several generations cohabited with the souls of the deceased. After the people's relocation, the reading of this valley of private tombs has been recovered, spite of the suffering of the inhabitants who had to rebuild their lives in a new space assigned to them.

Perhaps the event that impressed us the most was the Arab Spring Revolution in 2011, just a month after the end of the field season, the revolution that led to the fall of Mubarak from power began and with that a succession of leaders in search of a different system for the country. Until 2010 the field seasons had been carried out one for year without interruption, but it had to be suspended pending the political stability that could ensure the team's safety. In the following years, we witnessed an economy with setbacks and the fall of tourism to a point of great concern for the population in Luxor, that directly and indirectly depends on this activity, even though we also witness the gradual recovery of the place. While we were attending a photographic exhibition of the project in Cairo, that was originally going to be carried out in the Cairo Museum, but because of the uprisings it had to be moved to the Instituto Cervantes at the Spanish Embassy, we watched the protests wounded in the Tahirir Square.

During that time, we were able to recognize how important this heritage is to maintain an economy associated with foreign visitors, but also how fragile it is and the consequences regarding not only the conservation and research of cultural heritage, but in the welfare of a huge percentage of the people that depend on it. This makes us recognize a risk related to the importance of economic relations associated with tourism, in regard of the cultural heritage of our own country; a topic of discussion raised before the proposals made by the current Mexican government.



Final considerations

The project is currently in progress; the proposal is to develop two more field seasons and finish with a last one where we will carry out the installation of the infrastructure needed for the public visits. Regarding the conservation of architectural finishes, it has been possible to have a complete record of the elements and their alterations. There is also a diagnosis and several lines of research: characteristics and behavior of the materials used in the conservation treatments of the Theban Tomb 39, processes of alteration of the pictorial layer, and criteria used throughout the conservation interventions of the tomb. To this date, we have covered several direct conservation actions: consolidation of the stone and pigment surfaces of the entire tomb, cleaning of most elements, and still in progress: we are working on the final presentation of every surface, looking to achieve the best reading and integration possible. We have also worked extensively on the insertion of fragments detached throughout the history of the tomb and in their cataloging and packaging. In close collaboration with the epigraphy and architectural restoration teams, we have carried out the reinsertion of these fragments. Some objects found during the work of the archeology team have also been preserved and packed for a long-term storage.



Figure 7. Assembling pieces. Image: ©Misión Mexicana en Egipto CNCPC-INAH.

By the end of our work in the project, as a team of conservation of architectural finishes, we aspire to deliver a Pharaonic tomb whose surfaces are stable and in such a state that allows the observer to recognize the totality of its values, including the aesthetic, historical, archaeological and technological. It is also important to conclude with the insertion of as many fragments as possible, in such a way that the epigraphic and iconographic reading of the tomb can be



recovered. All this must be appropriately registered and documented in text, photography and graphics, in such a way that the characteristics, deterioration and intervention are clear and transparent for future studies. We also intend to leave a catalog of the fragments that were not inserted in the walls, due to the lack of information regarding their original location or the technical difficulty for their incorporation. Equally relevant will be to leave the fragments not inserted in stable conditions and with an adequate packaging. The same is intended for the objects found during the cleaning and study of the tomb; its catalog and due packaging will be indispensable for their long-term preservation. Finally, we consider necessary to make a maintenance proposal that allows the Egyptian authorities to conserve the architectural finishes of the tomb in good conditions for the future.

Over the course of 15 years, the INAH, throughout its professionals, has collaborated with the Sociedad Mexicana de Egiptología and the Universidad del Valle de México to build the presence of the first Mexican mission in Egypt. Currently, we are part of the academic landscape of the place, thanks to the professional work of Egyptologists, archaeologists, architectural restorers, photographers and conservator-restorers of architectural finishes, with the help of students and volunteers. The work has been carried out directly on the Theban Tomb 39, and texts that report the progress on the research have been published. Therefore, it is important to celebrate the Mexican collaboration that allows us to join forces with Egypt regarding the conservation of this monument, which is part of the World Heritage.

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