chapter 14

Georg Zoëga and the Borgia Collection of Egyptian Antiquities: Cataloguing as a Method

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The Borgia Collection of Egyptian Antiquities

Georg Zoëga was the first scholar who studied the Borgia collection of Egyptian antiquities, one of the two main groups of artifacts which constitute the Egyptian section of the National Archaeological Museum of Naples (MANN), the other one being a private collection sold by Giuseppe Picchianti in 1827.

After Cardinal Borgia’s death, his nephew and heir Camillo tried to sell the Egyptian antiquities to the Danish King, but Pope Pius VII opposed this; Camillo was thus obliged to find a new buyer, and proposed the collection to Joachim Murat, king of Naples, in 1814. Due to the critical political situation, however, the transaction was concluded one year later and the artifacts were not transported to Naples before 1817.

In 1821, Michele Arditi, director of the Real Museo Borbonico established the Egyptian section exhibiting the Borgia antiquities together with few Egyptian artifacts from the Farnese collection and some findings from the Flaegrean and Vesuvian areas: the section was arranged in the eastern wing of the Museum.

When, between 1827 and 1857, Picchianti sold his collection to the Museum and some small private groups of artifacts were also added, changes became

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1 The two authors have discussed and agreed on the general content of this paper, where the first paragraph was edited by Rosanna Pirelli and the latter by Stefania Mainieri.


3 According to his words recorded in the volume Documenti inediti per servire alla storia dei musei d’Italia, 1, (Roma: Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1878), xiv.
necessary and two new expositions were realized: one in 1848 by the Minister of Education, Paolo Emilio Imbriani, and the latter by a new curator, Luigi Vassalli, in 1861.

Finally, in 1864, the section was moved by Giuseppe Fiorelli to the basement of the Museum, where the artifacts were hosted until the end of 2007. During this long period, however, the exposition underwent several changes and was closed for long periods.

In 1983, the exhibition *Civiltà dell'Antico Egitto in Campania* gave birth to a joint project between the Soprintendenza Archeologica per le Province di Napoli e Caserta and the chair of Egyptology of the University of Naples, “l'Orientale”: the artifacts, although stored in the same rooms in the basement, had not been displayed for 25 years, and all their museological information had been forgotten. After taking quite a bit of time and effort to reconstruct the history of the various groups of artifacts and to study most of them, the first almost complete catalogue of the Egyptian collection was published⁴ and a new exhibition was inaugurated on the 14th December 1989.

As it was the first catalogue of the whole collection, priority was given to the main Egyptological information, and archives were consulted only with the purpose of attributing an inventory number and the original provenance collection of the artifacts. At that time, moreover, we had not yet met the precious archive documents kept in The Royal Library in Copenhagen.⁵

As we mentioned above, in 2007 the collection was closed again (and it is still closed today) as rooms and showcases needed to be refurbished and adapted to new safety criteria. The Soprintendenza Archeologica decided to use this occasion to update the whole catalogue of the collection and to make a new plan for its exposition. The project (which started a few months ago) is again a joint project between the Soprintendenza Archeologica and the University of Naples “l'Orientale”, which assigned a regional scholarship for a PhD research on this topic.

Before approaching the main subject of this paper, i.e. the great work of Georg Zoëga on the Egyptian collection, it is appropriate to say a few words on the personality of Cardinal Stefano Borgia.⁶

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⁴ Cantilena, Rubino, *La collezione egiziana*.
⁵ The authors of this paper express their gratitude to Daniela Picchi for involving them in the project for the study of Zoëga’s manuscripts.
⁶ F. Münter, “Il Cardinale Stefano Borgia”, in *Stefano Borgia e i Danesi a Roma*, Centro Internazionale di Studi Borgiani—Quaderni 1, a cura di R. Langella, (Velletri: Edizioni tra 8 & 9, 2000), 63–76.