



EGITTOLOGIA 4

THE MATERIALITY OF ANCIENT EGYPT: OBJECTS AND MUSEUMS

STUDIES PRESENTED TO MARILINA BETRÒ

edited by Gianluca Miniaci, Christian Greco,
Paolo Del Vesco, Mattia Mancini, Cristina Alù

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>List of abbreviations</i>	III
<i>Introduction</i> GIANLUCA MINIACI, CHRISTIAN GRECO, PAOLO DEL VESCO, MATTIA MANCINI, CRISTINA ALÙ	1
<i>La collezione egizia del Marchese Malaspina a Pavia, la visita di J.-F. Champollion, lo 'Stabilimento' di Belle Arti</i> CLELIA MORA	5
<i>The story of restoration of the Egyptian Department, and few surprise</i> ELISABETH DELANGE	11
<i>University Museum Systems. Exploring the Historical Evolution and Management Practices in Italy and Pisa</i> CHIARA TARANTINO	19
<i>Digital Egypt: Technological Advances in Musealization and the Frontier of Metaverses</i> NEVIO DANELON	25
<i>Reconstructing the biography of the Predynastic fishtails</i> MONA AKMAL M. AHMED	33
<i>The Palermo Stone: history, digital epigraphy and museology</i> MASSIMILIANO NUZZOLO	53
<i>The tomb of Ipiankhu and the recording of Middle Kingdom coffins in Egyptology</i> WOLFRAM GRAJETZKI	63
<i>The diagonal star table fragment P. 4084 at the Museo Egizio</i> ENRICO FERRARIS	79
<i>Loret, Lortet et les Onguents des Princesses de Dahchour</i> LAURE PANTALACCI	89
<i>As told by things. A story told by a cosmetic box</i> STEFANIA PIGNATTARI	97
<i>Stele del sacerdote-wab Djehuti a Torino</i> GLORIA ROSATI	105
<i>A jar for a woman. A painted pottery vase from Gebelein</i> FEDERICA FACCHETTI	113
<i>A Ramesside foundation deposit from the Valley of the Kings at the 'Museo Egizio' in Florence</i> ANNA CONSONNI	123
<i>Ramesses VIII and X at Pi-Ramessé?</i> HENNING FRANZMEIER	133

<i>L'Enveloppe de Momie en Cartonnage d'Hérîb – Musée du Louvre E 13018 (AF 13029)</i> PATRICIA RIGAULT-DÉON	141
<i>Shabtis of im.y-ḥnt wp-nṯr.wy priests from the collection of Giuseppe Acerbi</i> ALESSANDRO GALLI	153
<i>Demotic Papyrus Archives in the Museo Egizio – Past, Present and Future Research(ers)</i> SUSANNE TÖPFER	165
<i>Une stèle hiéroglyphico-démotique du Sérapéum de Memphis (Louvre IM 3345)</i> DIDIER DEVAUCHELLE	175
<i>Retour sur la « tombe de style gréco-égyptien » de Tôd</i> CHRISTOPHE THIERS	183
<i>The ḳrsw coffin of Tapeny</i> CHRISTIAN GRECO	193

THE PALERMO STONE: HISTORY, DIGITAL EPIGRAPHY AND MUSEOLOGY

MASSIMILIANO NUZZOLO*

Abstract

Dating back to the mid-Third Millennium BC, the Palermo Stone, kept in the Regional Archaeological Museum 'Antonino Salinas' in Palermo, represents an unparalleled source of information on the earliest phases of Egyptian history. Together with the six other associated fragments, kept in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo and the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology in London, the Palermo Stone represents the oldest example of royal annals known to us from ancient Egypt. However, despite its crucial importance, the stone still presents several challenges in deciphering its hieroglyphic text, and the events surrounding its arrival in Sicily remain shrouded in mystery. Moreover, the artefact is almost unknown to the general public, which has impacted its museum exploitation thus far. In 2017, a new project was launched to address these gaps in our understanding of this crucial historical document from ancient Egypt. This paper aims to address the main issues connected to the acquisition, interpretation, and current museum exhibition of the Palermo Stone, in light of the forthcoming re-arrangement of the museum's overall collection.

INTRODUCTION

When I went to the Regional Archaeological Museum 'Antonino Salinas' in Palermo for the first time in 2017 to start the 'Palermo Stone Project', I was quite astonished that this unique piece of a historical document was practically unknown to a wider audience. During the five days in which I was working in the room where the Palermo Stone is still currently kept, I received so many questions from the visitors asking me about the nature of the artefact we were working on and why scholars from abroad should be interested in what looked like a worthless black piece of stone. When I answered that this black piece of stone is actually the first list of kings of ancient Egypt and is engraved with historical information which is unparalleled in ancient Egyptian history, almost all visitors' reaction was unanimous: "Why, then, is it in Palermo and not in one of the most famous Egyptian museums, such as the Louvre or the British Museum?" My answer was always, "It is a long, complicated story to say in a few words".

In this paper, I wish to contribute to the still little-known story of this unique historical document from ancient Egypt, which certainly deserves

greater attention in Egyptology and, primarily, a much more appropriate space inside the museum than the room in which it is currently preserved.

In doing this, I wish to pay tribute to Prof. Marilina Betrò, who has done so much throughout her extraordinary Egyptological career to broaden the horizons of Egyptology to a wider audience.

ACQUISITION OF THE PALERMO STONE

The Palermo Stone was donated to the museum's director, the famous archaeologist Antonino Salinas, on 19th October 1877, by the lawyer, nobleman and collector of antiquities Ferdinando Gaudiano. On the deed of donation, a straightforward and concise document (Fig. 1), neither the origin/provenance of the object nor its date of acquisition by Gaudiano is recorded. This detail, apparently not crucial, is, in fact, interesting when we consider that Salinas was meticulous in recording the provenance of the objects that entered his museum. He even refused to accept certain items if their origin could not be traced.

The lack of attention given by Salinas to this donation is also confirmed by the brief description of the object in the museum register as "un

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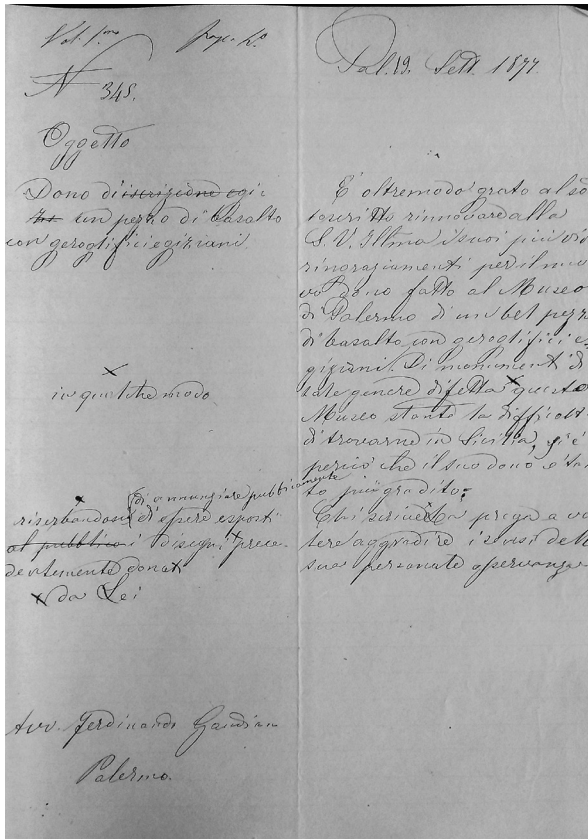


Fig. 1 - The deed of donation of the Palermo Stone
 © Museo Archeologico Regionale Antonino Salinas, Palermo.

pezzo di basalto con geroglifici egiziani” (a piece of basalt engraved with Egyptian hieroglyphs), although the artefact was already known to scholars as the ‘Palermo Stone’ at least since 1866. This was the year that the renowned French Egyptologist Emmanuel De Rougé published the first scientific article on the document, giving it the name “la Pierre de Palerme” (Palermo Stone in English), with which it is still known today.¹

In this article, De Rougé does not provide any information about the provenance of the stone, except for the mention that he received a lithograph of it from his Italian colleague Michele Amari.² Amari was a prominent historian and Orientalist,

a patriot of the Garibaldi uprisings of 1860, and later an influential politician of the newly founded Italian State.³ This information is of the utmost interest when we consider that Amari was a close friend of Salinas and had been his mentor during the years that Salinas spent in Turin for his early studies before leaving Italy for a scholarship in Germany (Berlin).⁴

As we discovered from Astorre Pellegrini’s scientific publication, Amari was also a close friend of Ferdinando Gaudio. It was Amari’s idea to make copies/lithographs of the stone to be sent to several prominent scholars in Europe.⁵ Presumably, this was done to verify the stone’s true historical worth.

We cannot rule out, therefore, that Salinas’s lack of information on the stone in the museum register might be due to the artefact’s blurred origins, which neither Gaudio nor Amari – both close friends of Salinas – were able to clarify even many years after its acquisition.

These remarks bring us back to another interesting detail concerning the stone’s provenance. In his article, Pellegrini mentions his meeting with one of the closest relatives of Ferdinando Gaudio, i.e. his nephew Nicolò Pensabene, who said that the stone was acquired by the father of Ferdinando (whose name is not mentioned) and later inherited by his uncle and eventually donated to the Palermo Museum.⁶ However, a few years later, Nicolò Pensabene referred to another scholar writing about the stone, i.e. Giacomo De Gregorio, that it was his uncle who received the stone in 1859 directly from a commander of a ship coming from Egypt, who had used the stone as one of his ship ballasts.⁷

Today, verifying the authenticity of any of this information is impossible. However, the careful examination of the already mentioned correspondence between Amari and Salinas, as well as my analysis carried out in 2018 of the documents kept in the historical archive of ‘Santa Maria della Catena’ in Palermo, indicates that Gaudio travelled extensively in the Mediterranean between the end

¹ DE ROUGÉ 1866, 88.

² DE ROUGÉ 1866, 88.

³ Amari was also Minister of Education from 7th December 1862 to 23rd September 1864: for the life of Amari, see ORLANDO 1930, 1-68.

⁴ On the relationship between Amari and Salinas see CIMINO 1985.

⁵ PELLEGRINI 1896, 298.

⁶ PELLEGRINI 1896, 298.

⁷ DE GREGORIO 1905, 4.

of the 1840s and the end of the 1850s.⁸ Gaudio was a leading figure of the Sicilian ‘Risorgimento’, together with other key figures of that period, such as the abovementioned Michele Amari and, most importantly, Francesco Crispi, the greatest supporter of Garibaldi’s 1860 expedition to Sicily, who later became (four times, between 1887 and 1896) Prime Minister of the newly born Kingdom of Italy.⁹

Before the successful accomplishment of Garibaldi’s 1860 expedition, however, Gaudio participated very actively in the revolutionary uprisings of 1848. These uprisings were bloodily repressed by the Bourbon’s regime, with several death sentences and many people – especially prominent figures of the local aristocracy – forced to escape abroad. As far as we can understand from the documents in our possession, one of these figures was Gaudio, who spent several years in France and perhaps also in Tunisia. We are not sure how long Gaudio remained a political exile abroad, but it is certain that in 1859 he was based again in Palermo,¹⁰ where he was actively participating in the organization of Garibaldi’s future (1860) expedition and where, as previously mentioned, he may have received the stone.

Be that as it may, what is remarkable in the context of the present paper is that Gaudio’s donation to the Palermo Museum did not involve any other Egyptian objects, but only the Palermo Stone. This lends further credibility to the hypothesis that Gaudio might indeed have received (or acquired) the stone directly in Palermo and held it as a separate spare piece for a number of years, rather than including it in his broader collection of antiquities. It is probable that Gaudio did not fully appreciate the significance or authenticity of the stone until its first scientific publication in the mid-1860s.¹¹

THE PALERMO STONE: A HIGHLY DISPUTED OBJECT

After its donation to the archaeological museum, the Palermo Stone surprisingly suffered from a long period of oversight and carelessness by scholars. In his comprehensive article on the history of the stone, Godron records that it was only thanks to the interest of Emile Guimet – founder of the famous ethnological museum in Paris named after him – that the stone again found new attention in the scientific milieu. In fact, in 1895, Guimet visited Palermo and was astonished to find the stone abandoned on the floor in the corner of the main museum courtyard (“abandonnée dans le coin d’une cour”),¹² without any indication of its nature and significance. Guimet thus proposed to Antonino Salinas, the abovementioned director of the Palermo Museum, to send the stone to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo. In exchange, Salinas would receive a large collection of Graeco-Roman artefacts from Egypt. This proposal would have provided the stone with a more appropriate setting in Egypt and given the Palermo Museum a significant ready-made collection of Egyptian antiquities.¹³

According to Godron, there was considerable correspondence between Jacques De Morgan, the director of the ‘Service des Antiquités de l’Égypte’ (the predecessor of the modern Supreme Council of Antiquities) at that time, and Antonino Salinas, with Guimet acting as an intermediary, and the two partners agreed on the exchange. However, in the same year (1895), Edouard Naville, the famous Egyptologist, informed by Guimet himself, visited Palermo and made a hand copy of the stone, thereby raising new interest in the object and indirectly alerting Salinas to its true importance. Finally, only a few months later (in 1896), the stone was masterfully published by Pellegrini, who clearly demonstrated its incredible historical value. As a result, the deal was eventually blocked.¹⁴

This reconstruction, however, must be amended in several crucial points. First of all, Naville records that he only visited Palermo in 1899 to check and study the stone Pellegrini had already

⁸ NUZZOLO 2021, 58.

⁹ On Francesco Crispi and the unification of Italy, see DUGGAN 2000.

¹⁰ It is worth noting that this is also the year in which Michele Amari came back to Italy after a long exile in France, which confirms how strictly intertwined the lives of these two prominent Sicilian characters were. See GIARRIZZO 2013.

¹¹ See NUZZOLO 2021, 58.

¹² GODRON 1952, 18.

¹³ GODRON 1952, 18.

¹⁴ GODRON 1952, 18.

published.¹⁵ Moreover, the existence of the above-mentioned deal between Salinas and De Morgan is highly questionable. As a matter of fact, and despite my own first-hand investigation, I could not find any trace of the letters exchanged between them, neither in Palermo nor in Cairo. Most importantly, the existence of this deal seems to be indirectly denied in a letter, dated June 15th, 1901, sent by Salinas to the Italian Minister of Education Carlo Fiorilli and his colleague Ernesto Schiaparelli, the director of the Egyptian Museum in Turin.

Based on the content of this letter (see below), it appears that Salinas had indeed received several proposals from various renowned international museums, including the one in Cairo, but had always categorically refused any deals:¹⁶

Palermo, 15 Giugno 1901

Da parecchie parti mi son venute offerte di cambi e cambi molto splendidi (come, per esempio, dal Museo del Cairo) dei quali non ho creduto di dar notizia a codesto Ministero, tanto la cosa mi è parsa assurda e indecorosa. Ora sento che il collega Schiaparelli fa una proposta simile, sulla quale si chiede il mio parere. Or questo non può essere che assolutamente negativo, per la semplicissima ragione che di quella pietra fece lascito al Museo di Palermo il fu avvocato Ferdinando Gaudiano. Io non so se giuridicamente il Governo abbia il diritto di disporre di un oggetto pervenuto in quel modo; so, e di certo, che violerebbe ogni riguardo dovuto ai morti ed ai vivi qualora ciò facesse. L'ostacolo principale che io ho sempre incontrato per ottenere oggetti da municipi e da privati è che il Museo è governativo e che il governo, ente di cui il pubblico ha sempre paura, potrebbe a suo libito portarsi via ogni cosa. Al collega Schiaparelli fo omaggio di due fotografie, che eseguii espressamente per agevolare le ricerche di egittologi nazionali e stranieri; usando le maggiori cure riuscii a trarre da una pietra tutta nera e con incisioni leggerissime copie più leggibili, in alcuni posti, del testo stesso. E queste fotografie, che rimet-

to all'E.V., basteranno, spero, agli studi del mio illustre collega.

Archivio di Stato di Roma: MPI, DG AA BB AA, III Versamento, II Parte (1898-1907), Busta 85, Fascicolo 162 (Affari Generali - Doni e scambi)¹⁷

Additionally, what is even more interesting is the fact that Salinas refused to send the stone even to the director of the Egyptian Museum in Turin, Ernesto Schiaparelli, who had previously requested it through the direct intervention of the Minister:

Torino, 17 Maggio 1901

Riferendomi alla mia lettera odierna di numero 1901, mi permetto richiamare l'attenzione di codesto R Ministero sull'opportunità che dal Museo archeologico di Palermo venga ceduto a questo Museo un frammento di antichissimo monumento egiziano, che già fu assai accuratamente pubblicato dal Prof. Astore Pellegrini. Però la fatta illustrazione abbisogna di ulteriori e più profondi studi, che, e da me e da altri studiosi in nessun luogo potrebbe essere fatta meglio che in questo museo.

Archivio di Stato di Roma: MPI, DG AA BB AA, III Versamento, II Parte (1898-1907), Busta 85, Fascicolo 162 (Affari Generali - Doni e scambi)

For our reconstruction of the history of the Palermo Stone another minor detail of the letter written by Salinas on June 15th, 1901, is also noteworthy, namely the fact that Salinas mentioned taking two pictures to facilitate the studies and research of national and international colleagues. These two pictures were taken by Salinas himself, some time in 1900, at the request of the German scholars Ludwig Borchardt and Heinrich Schäfer.¹⁸ In 1902, the latter was the first to publish – with the help of Borchardt and Kurt Sethe – the entire hieroglyphic text engraved on the stone, including both sides of it (Recto and Verso) and not just

¹⁵ NAVILLE 1903, 64.

¹⁶ I wish to express my gratitude to my colleague Paolo Del Vesco, curator of the Old Kingdom Section of the Museo Egizio Torino, for informing me about the existence of this and the following letter in the Central State Archive in Rome and for providing me with a hand-copy of their content.

¹⁷ A copy of this letter is also kept in the Archivio di Stato di Torino: Fondo Museo Egizio, I Versamento, M 48, n. 8.

¹⁸ SCHÄFER 1902, 3-4.

selected pieces of the text, as done by all previous scholars.¹⁹

To make the hieroglyphic text as much legible as possible, Salinas spread chalk on the stone,²⁰ as can be assumed from his own words in the already mentioned letter dated 15th June 1901: “usando le maggiori cure riuscii a trarre da una pietra tutta nera e con incisioni leggerissime copie più leggibili, in alcuni posti, del testo stesso”.

This technical practicality – which would also be used by Petrie on the fragment of the Palermo Stone (the so-called London Fragment)²¹ that he purchased on the antiquities market in Cairo in 1916 – made it possible to read the artefact as never before by highlighting the contrast between the dark black colour of the stone and the hieroglyphic text, now sprinkled with white chalk. The resulting quality of the pictures taken by Salinas (Fig. 2) was, and still remains, such that even the most modern and highest resolution photographs can hardly enhance the legibility of the hieroglyphic signs with the same effectiveness (see Fig. 3).

Paradoxically, the exceptionally high quality of the photographs taken by Salinas in 1900 is also one of the reasons why nobody else after Salinas took any more pictures of the Palermo Stone. This ultimately had a twofold result: on the one hand, most of the scholars dealing with the Palermo Stone after Schäfer’s publication did not go to Palermo for first-hand analysis of the document but preferred to work using the existing photographs. This has created considerable difficulties in reading and interpreting the hieroglyphic text, especially of the Verso, which is not entirely readable even in the picture taken by Salinas (see the next section). On the other hand, even the most recent publications on the stone lack an adequate photographic reproduction of the object, which is unacceptable in modern Egyptology, considering the enormous progress made in digital photography.

This is precisely what happened with the most recent monograph on the stone, published by Toby Wilkinson around 25 years ago.²² Despite being the very first study to consider the Palermo Stone with its associated fragments (see below), Wilkinson’s publication lacked photographic reproductions of

either the Palermo Stone or the other fragments. This methodological flaw undermines the validity of his work, particularly his translation of the hieroglyphic text, rendering it highly debatable.²³

THE PALERMO STONE: NEW TECHNIQUES OF DIGITAL EPIGRAPHY

Looking carefully at the photograph taken by Salinas in 1900 of the Verso (*i.e.* what is conventionally defined as the back of the inscription) of the Palermo Stone, it is immediately noticeable that the entire lower half of the document is unclear and not easily readable to the naked eye. Even the abovementioned escamotage of using chalk had not succeeded in highlighting the hieroglyphic text on this part of the document, which had been significantly damaged by the passage of time and, perhaps, also by events that affected the stone before it arrived in Palermo (see above).

Nevertheless, none of the publications that appeared after Schäfer’s (1902) attempted to fill this fundamental gap in the photographic reproduction/documentation of the stone. This is probably due to the fact that Schäfer, thanks to his extraordinary philological skills and the careful use of a magnifying glass, had managed to provide a very thorough reading – though not entirely complete – of the hieroglyphic text of this part of the royal annals.

For this reason, in 2017, together with other specialists from different universities and with different scientific backgrounds, I set up the ‘Palermo Stone Project’, namely a thorough investigation of the Palermo Stone using all the modern technologies of digital photography and documentation. The new primary means of investigation of the artefact was the so-called ‘Reflectance Transformation Imaging’ (shortened here as RTI), *i.e.*

a computation photography technique that captures the surface shape and color of the artefact and enables the interactive re-lighting of the subject from any light direction. Starting from a set of photographs acquired with a fixed camera under varying lighting conditions, RTI encodes the acquired data in a compact way, using

¹⁹ See SCHÄFER 1902 compared to NAVILLE 1903 and all previous editions of the stone.

²⁰ NAVILLE 1903, 65 defines it as quicklime “lait de chaux”, although it is more likely chalk, as can be inferred from the modern geochemical analyses.

²¹ STEWART 1979, 6.

²² WILKINSON 2000 in the bibliography.

²³ NUZZOLO *et al.* 2021, 74-6.



Fig. 2 - Recto (left) and Verso (right) of the Palermo Stone (Antonino Salinas photography 1900; © Museo Archeologico Regionale Antonino Salinas, Palermo).

view-dependent per-pixel reflectance functions, allowing the generation of new images using any light direction in the hemisphere around the camera place.²⁴

Nowadays, RTI has become quite widespread in archaeology and Egyptology, and it would be out of context here to discuss it. Back in 2017, however, this was a reasonably new technology in Egyptology. Given the black colour of the stone, it was particularly effective for our scope and even more helpful when combined with other digital

photography techniques, such as photogrammetry, which we also used extensively during our project.²⁵

The primary project goal was to fill the gap in reading the hieroglyphic text of the Palermo Stone. At the same time, however, the project aimed not only at the complete documentation of the Sicilian artefact but also at the insertion of this artefact in a broader context, *i.e.* an overall historical/textual reassessment of all the fragments associated with the Palermo Stone, *i.e.* the five pieces preserved in Cairo,²⁶ and the one in London.²⁷ These seven fragments, and not solely the Palermo Stone, constitute

²⁴ See the website <https://vcg.isti.cnr.it/rti/index.php> <last visited on 10.03.2024>, with further bibliography.

²⁵ See NUZZOLO *et al.* 2021, 81-9.

²⁶ DARESSY 1916, 161-214; DE CENIVAL 1965: 13-7.

²⁷ PETRIE 1916, 114-20.



Fig. 3 - Recto (left) and Verso (right) of the Palermo Stone
(Mohamed Osman photography, September 2017; © Palermo Stone Project).

what is usually known in Egyptology as the Old Kingdom ‘royal annals’ (see the abstract).²⁸

For this reason, the project was not limited to the sole photographic documentation and analysis of the seven fragments employing the already-mentioned new technologies. Instead, we decided to accompany this campaign of digital photography documentation with new methods of non-invasive geochemical analyses of all the fragments, such as observations using digital microscopy (portable USB-Dinolite), X-ray Fluorescence and Infra-red Spectroscopy in Fourier transform (EF-FTIR).²⁹

The latter ensemble of analysis is fundamental to understanding the composition of the fragments and, consequently, to try and clarify their provenance. All the fragments (not only the Palermo Stone) lack any provenance or archaeological context, given that they were purchased on the antiquities market. Moreover, these fragments entered their respective museum (Palermo, Cairo or London) under very different circumstances and even in different years, sometimes much later than other fragments of the corpus.³⁰ These elements prevent us from accurately tracking the dating and

²⁸ WILKINSON 2000, 18-20.

²⁹ Nuzzolo *et al.* in press, 245-87.

³⁰ The typical case is Cairo Fragment no. 5, which was purchased on the antiquities market in 1963, therefore almost 100 years after the donation of the Palermo Stone to the Sicilian museum. This incredibly long chronological gap can, of course, affect our entire perception and understanding of the corpus and, therefore, deserves a separate treatment by means of dedicated new technologies. See NUZZOLO 2021, 58.

provenance of the fragments and ultimately complicate our global understanding of the issue. Last but not least, to date, no analysis of the geological composition of the artefact has ever been carried out. This analysis is crucial considering that specialized Egyptological publications, even recently, have alternatively defined their material as ‘amphibolite’, ‘amphibolic diorite’ or ‘basalt’.³¹

THE PALERMO STONE: A NEW EXHIBITION PROJECT

Beyond the specific Egyptological aspects mentioned above, for which we refer to other more recent and complete publications,³² one of the main – though indirect – goals of the ‘Palermo Stone Project’ was the creation of new awareness of the exceptional historical value of the artefacts for both the wider audience and the direction of the Salinas Museum.

In 2004, when I first visited the museum as a MA student, the Palermo Stone was displayed in the main portico leading to the central open-air courtyard of the museum, lacking a proper label and displayed in a very thick, unsealed glass case. The latter not only prevented an adequate view of the object (and, of course, made it almost impossible to read the hieroglyphic text) but also caused the formation of considerable condensation inside the case on days of high humidity, which is very common in Palermo throughout the year. The consequence of this display was that the stone seemed to exude, like a holy relic, for most of the year.

Eventually, from 2005 to 2015, the museum was closed for a lengthy restoration project, and when it finally re-opened, the Palermo Stone received a much more adequate setting. The stone was displayed in a pleasant and well-ventilated room next to the museum entrance and displayed in a thin and sizeable cubic showcase attached to the room’s back wall. The stone was displayed vertically and attached at both ends via iron pins. It was accompanied by a large label with an appropriate explanation of its historical features and an attempt at its original reconstruction together with the other associated fragments.

However, even this new exhibition did not fully and properly emphasize the historical uniqueness of the artefact. Firstly, being attached to the wall, the stone can only be seen from the main side

(the so-called ‘Recto’). However, due to the width of the showcase and the presence of other archaeological items on the shelves below, the stone was not easily noticeable by visitors. The hieroglyphic signs are very small (averaging only 1 cm) and invisible if viewed from a distance of more than 1 metre. Furthermore, although the stone was better contextualized than before, it was placed alongside other inscribed objects whose provenance was mostly Sicily or Southern Italy (Greater Greece) in the so-called ‘Writing Room’. This gave visitors the misleading impression that the stone was only significant because it was inscribed, rather than being the oldest list of kings of ancient Egypt and a truly unparalleled historical document.

Stimulated by all the above issues I raised during the project, starting in 2019, the new direction has been to create a new exhibition project that could put the stone again into focus. Finally, in 2022, the project was approved and funded. At the time of writing this article, a new room is being prepared on the museum’s first floor for hosting the stone with a totally new and entirely appropriate didactic-scientific apparatus. This includes, first and foremost, the stone being placed, again, after decades, in the center of the room, thereby being completely visible and understandable to visitors, with appropriate lights. This new exhibition project – which also encompasses the display of a small collection of Egyptianizing objects in the same room, around the stone – will focus on the issue of ‘contextualization’, in an attempt to answer key questions connected to it, such as:

1. Provenance;
2. Original reconstruction;
3. Historical and ideological value;
4. Materiality.

Last but not least, the new presentation of the Palermo Stone will be accompanied by a brief introductory video – actually an art wall – on the main peculiarities of the object, located at the museum’s main entrance, to guide visitors towards the highlights of the collection.

Our final hope is, therefore, that this new museum exhibition, also somehow prompted by our ‘Palermo Stone Project’, will eventually open a new phase of musealization of this unique and extraordinary object of ancient Egyptian civilization

³¹ NUZZOLO 2021, 61.

³² See NUZZOLO 2021, 61-78; Nuzzolo *et al.* 2021, 89-94.

by giving the Palermo Stone an adequate space in the museum's storytelling as well as a key-position in both the museum's scientific objectives and the visitor's perception of the collection.

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The artifacts housed in museums wield undeniable power, embodying complex and multifaceted histories encompassing their creation, use, modification, reuse, abandonment, rediscovery, analysis, interpretation, display, and reception. The essays collected in this volume, presented to prof. Marilina Betrò, interweave the many stories concealed within museum objects and the archives of the collections that currently safeguard them. This fosters an ongoing conversation between ancient materials, texts, religious beliefs, and modern scholarship and interpretation.

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