1907 campaign

In the spring of 1906, industrialist Édouard Empain (1852–1929) announced to Jean Capart (1877–1947), who was then assistant curator of the Musées Royaux des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels (known as the Musée du Cinquantenaire) in Brussels, of his intention to relieve congestion in the city of Cairo. He would do so by developing a new town to the north of Cairo, consisting of residential neighbourhoods and gardens. Having chosen an airy, 2,500-hectare plateau near Tell Hasan (or Tell el-Hisn), the alleged site of the necropolis of ancient Heliopolis, he wanted to be sure that his new town would not be covering over an ancient site. He contacted Capart, who had founded Egyptian studies in Belgium. Capart had just accepted a donation of an Egyptian mastaba by Empain, who had purchased it and paid for its shipping. Empain offered to fund three archaeological missions led by Capart, with an annual budget of 40,000 Belgian francs, and with staff and equipment loaned from his company, the Cairo Electric Co. In exchange for his work, Empain promised to acquire Egyptian antiquities for Capart’s museum.
The idea of digging in Egypt attracted Capart. He sought permission from his superiors and began to research Egypt’s ancient religious capital. He quickly concluded that ‘we know almost nothing about it’. Since the nineteenth century, a few Egyptologists had shown interest, but overall their research had produced little result. In July 1906, Capart went to London to seek advice from his former teacher William Flinders Petrie (1853–1942). In October, he went to Paris to meet with Gaston Maspero (1846–1916), director general of the Egyptian antiquities department. Maspero informed him that the department had granted land that it owned in Heliopolis to the king of Italy, and that the king had sent the Egyptologist Ernesto Schiaparelli (1856–1928) there. As a result, Belgium had to restrict itself to requesting a concession to excavate on the land belonging to Empain. Maspero told Capart that he had no illusions about the result of archaeological research in this area, but Capart nevertheless took up the challenge.

In November 1906, Belgium asked the khedival government for a concession to excavate within agreed limits. The news aroused the interest of most Egyptologists who had already dug at the site. On the eve of his third trip to Egypt, Capart was highly optimistic, and told anyone who would listen that he would also discover, in addition to the necropolis, traces of the journey of the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus, as well as the journey of Plato, through the City of the Sun.

On 4 February 1907, Capart left Belgium accompanied by Dr Charles Mathien, one of his students at the University of Liège, who was to act as photographer and physician. Once in Cairo, he called on Empain and Albert Daninos-Pacha (1843–1925), an archaeologist and antiquities dealer who had been one of the first to dig at Heliopolis. Daninos did not provide Capart with any useful information, but this did not prevent him from informing Empain of his desire to serve as a volunteer on the Belgian team. His proposal, however, came too late to be considered.

On 13 February, Capart and Mathien were welcomed to Heliopolis by Fernand Mayence (1879–1959), a young classical philologist from the University of Louvain who had just
completed his first excavation at the French School at Athens. A team of workers arrived on the 17th. Depending on the day, anywhere between 138 and 250 of them were at work on the site. After consulting an engineer, Capart carried out methodical surveys, starting with the point nearest the village of Kafr el-Gamus: a mound about 9 metres in diameter on the sides of which several circular basins marked the possible site of ancient burial shafts. The first few shovelfuls raised hopes – after unearthing a few fragments of fired brick, the archaeologists expected to find ‘something’ at any moment.

At Heliopolis, archaeological work began at around seven in the morning and ended at five in the afternoon. The work of the Belgian trio involved inspecting the various sites, some of which lay more than 2 kilometres from the camp. Unfortunately, in February 1907 Heliopolis witnessed some highly unusual weather, to say the least – it was either cold, rainy or blowing up a gale. As a result, the workers fell ill in droves. But this was not the only problem: no convincing archaeological evidence was turning up. The large basins were opened one after the other, and each time there was the same disappointment: ‘Unfortunately, we are finding absolutely nothing!’ Nothing except ancient animal bones and fragments of charcoal. On 2 March, Capart explored the mountain with Mayence in the hope of identifying more promising sites to excavate in the following year. The prospecting continued during the first half of March. While the ancient necropolis was staying well hidden, Capart showed the site to colleagues visiting from nearby Cairo. From Brussels, chief curator Eugène van Overloop (1847–1926) kept the team’s spirits up. But night after night, Capart returned empty-handed. Worried, he asked Jules Couyat-Barthou, a colleague in the Service de la Carte géologique de France, to analyse the terrain. Couyat-Barthou noted that the site they were excavating was located in the middle of a Pliocene-Pleistocene formation that long predated the designated historical period. He therefore advised them to stop everything.
In mid-March, upon learning the turn that the Heliopolis campaign had taken, Maspero promised Capart that in 1908 he could explore another part of the mountain belonging to Empain. It was understood that after this, if he had still found nothing, the expedition would be at an end.18 For the time being, the Belgians gave up exploring trenches arranged in staggered rows, every 120 metres, across a 300-hectare area between Kafr el-Gamus and Zeitoun. Van Overloop attempted to put things into perspective: ‘The problem you have been assigned is certainly one of the most difficult faced by archaeologists in Egypt. … Let us suppose that you find nothing. You will have demonstrated that there was nothing and the negative answer that was sought will have been achieved. And the people of New Heliopolis can sleep peacefully without fearing that the dead will rise up and pull on their toes at night.’ On 19 March 1907, Capart put an end to the Belgian excavations at Heliopolis. He seemed greatly vexed and, echoing van Overloop’s hunting metaphors, referred to himself as a ‘poor hunter’. On 7 April, having received confirmation from Maspero and Schiaparelli that the Italians would not transfer their excavation area to him, he decided to ‘unload [his] rifle’. He deplored the failure of his archaeological research.19

As often happens in such cases, a scapegoat was needed, and for some Capart fitted the bill. In mid-April, very shortly after his return to Europe, he vigorously defended himself but, undermined by his critics, he came down with cerebral anaemia, which forced him to suspend all activity for several weeks. Maspero and van Overloop pleaded ‘extenuating circumstances’ to the scientific community and the ministry. Thanks to them, the controversy blew over.

The failure of the 1907 Heliopolis campaign did not dissuade Empain – at least not at first – from maintaining his trust in Capart.20 Thanks to his financial support, the museum acquired 76 pieces covering every period in Egyptian history, from the prehistoric period up to the Greco-Roman era.21 This was much more than a consolation prize – it was a sign of friendship from a sponsor to his favourite Egyptologist.
In 1911–12, the industrialist and collector Raoul Warocqué (1870–1917), who was Empain's contemporary and friend, travelled to Egypt. There he met Albert Daninos-Pacha, a former collaborator of the Egyptologist Auguste Mariette (1821–1881). The meeting of the two men was followed by a series of letters and purchases of Egyptian antiquities for the Château de Mariemont, Warocqué's home, which later became the Musée Royal de Mariemont.

Warocqué returned from Egypt filled with excitement. He had seen the ancient monuments, but he had also discovered the new Heliopolis, and had decided to lend financial support to the archaeological campaign that Daninos had organized at the supposed site of the remains of the ancient city. As their correspondence continued, however, the continual requests for money grew wearying, and Warocqué, in view of the non-existent findings, withdrew his support. Daninos then offered him Egyptian antiquities, and succeeded in selling several important pieces, although for the most part he failed. Finally, Daninos suggested investing in Egypt, which Warocqué also declined to do. Daninos's extreme disappointment can be seen in his final letter to the Belgian industrialist. However, these letters throw a spotlight on the new archaeological campaign at Heliopolis.

In a letter dated 12 January 1912, Daninos writes: 'This is to confirm the discussion I had the pleasure of having with you on the subject of the excavations at Heliopolis, for which I have obtained the concession and which I hope to undertake, with your assistance, following your planned acquisition of my head of Cleopatra in grey granite, and the two clasped hands of Mark Antony and the famous queen.'

Daninos writes that the bust and the two hands have been sent to Belgium. In announcing this to Warocqué, Daninos hastens to add: 'B[aron] Empain was very sorry that he did not know that I was selling this bust. He told me how much he wanted to donate it to the Musée de Bruxelles, but I believe that he wanted it for the terrace of his palace at Heliopolis.' When Daninos obtained the concession to excavate in 1912, he looked for
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the necropolis and the Mnevisseum. Like the Serapeum at Memphis, the Mnevisseum was a burial place for sacred bulls. To justify his fruitless quest, Daninos evoked Mariette’s problems during the Serapeum dig:

‘Unfortunately, all of the funeral pits that I have explored up to now (some 20 in all), which are between 20 and 50 metres deep, and sometimes even 60, have produced nothing of interest, with the exception of broken human mummies, and the bones of sacred animals and birds, as well as some fragments of Roman and Arabic vases and pottery. This indicates that these graves have already been dug, during both of these periods, by treasure-seekers. I am not in the least discouraged, because I always keep in mind my illustrious friend Mariette Pacha, who finally located the Serapeum at Memphis after searching for it for 14 long months.’

As the exchange of letters continued, Daninos urged Warocqué to continue financing the work at Heliopolis. He attempted to arouse Warocqué’s interest by giving him news of other Egyptologists – Flinders Petrie and George A. Reisner (1867–1942) – who were digging in the region. He spoke of the empty years that preceded Petrie’s important discoveries, and recalled the fact that Reisner had been working for five months near the pyramids without finding a thing, whereas three years earlier he had discovered statues of the pharaoh Menkaura.

In one letter to Warocqué dated 28 August, Daninos reported his invaluable progress in finding the Heliopolis necropolis. The site, he noted, had been vainly sought by renowned archaeologists, from Mariette to Capart. Daninos went on to emphasize the ways in which he had found new sources of financing for the work: by the sale of an antiquity on one hand, and on the other by rekindling the interest of Baron Empain in archaeological research at Heliopolis. In order to encourage Warocqué to continue providing financing for the excavations, Daninos sent him a clipping from Le Figaro dated 25 June 1912, in which the journalist recounted the story of Daninos’s campaign at Heliopolis.

During the summer, Daninos broke off the dig to travel to Paris for a few days, and then spent a month at Vichy taking the waters, as he did every year. He remained until the end of July 1912. Upon his return to Egypt he sent an account of his expenses to Warocqué. The invoice, the only one that Warocqué received, contains some interesting details. We learn
that Daninos employed 80 workers at two sites, and that four months of operations cost him 29,276 francs. After receiving it, Warocqué quickly resolved to put an end to his support for archaeological research at Heliopolis. Daninos sent him a few potsherds and a mummified human head and foot—the only results that the campaign produced.

In the early twentieth century, as the new Heliopolis was being planned and developed, two archaeological campaigns were financed by two exceptional Belgian industrialists: Baron Empain and Raoul Warocqué. However, neither the sondages carried out by Jean Capart in 1907, nor the excavations by the archaeologist Albert Daninos-Pacha in 1912, delivered up the desired result. The discovery of the major monuments of ancient Egypt’s megalopolis would have to wait for later excavations.