

Fatma Ismail:

Dr. Mohamed Kenawi is a Research Associate at the School of Archaeology and Ancient History, University of Leicester. He received his doctorate degree on surveying and documentation of Greco Roman archaeological sites in the Western Delta from Sienna and Oxford universities. He was a Researcher and Training Manager at the School of Archaeology, University of Oxford for the Endangered Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa project. He was Head Researcher, followed by Acting Director of the Hellenistic Center of Hellenistic Centre of Bibliotheca Alexandrina. He taught at the American University in Cairo and at Catania University. He has participated in various archaeological missions in Libya, Italy, and Egypt, among them those at Kom al-Ahmer/ Kom Wasit, Athribis, Dionysias, and Monqbad. He currently collaborates on projects with Padua University in Italy and Tübingen University in Germany. Thank you for coming to talk with us about the AI Amasili Project in Rosetta Dr. Kenawi.

Mohamed Kenawi:

Thank you very much.

Ismail:

During the Medieval Period, new cities in the Delta emerged as important cultural and economic centers. A particularly notable example was the city of Rosetta, where the famous Rosetta Stone was found. During the Mamluk and Ottoman Periods (1250 to 1800), Rosetta became the second important city in Egypt after Cairo. Can you tell us a bit more about the city of Rosetta and what inspired you to start a cultural heritage conservation project there?

Kenawi:

Yes, indeed, Rosetta is a town where the famous Rosetta Stone was found and which led to the decipherment of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs. The town is located on the west bank of the Nile River, and it's 45 minutes' drive from Alexandria, and four hours' drive from Cairo. So, the town flourished in the Medieval Period, and it was one of the main gates to Cairo and Upper Egypt. In fact, the majority of travelers after the year 1500 had to go through that in order to sail up the Nile. The town also experienced rapid economic development after the abandonment of the port of Alexandria in the 14th century, becoming, as you said, the most important town after Cairo, hence, the high number of archaeological heritage sites dating from that period. Rosetta started to decline after the excavation of Mahmodia Canal and the new port of Alexandria during Muhammad Ali burial. So this idea to start, a

heritage project in Rosetta was developed over many visits over many years to the town, and after consulting photographs of Rosetta and different archives that showed that a glorious burial in that town. The potential of the town for heritage project was obvious, giving them many historical buildings suffering from neglect and abandonment. Until the 1940s. I remember well, the town was full of Ottoman houses, but now only 22 houses remain and are suffering various degrees of deterioration. So, the idea was discussed with my colleagues from Padua University in Italy, about the possibility of presenting a different example or fieldwork in Egypt, where we could first document and restore a structure and use it for public activities. Therefore, we chose the Amasili complex, which was already open to visitors to try this new approach and to do something different from the traditional restoration projects in Egypt. We suggested to the Ministry of Antiquities that the Amasili complex should not only be restored but transformed into a hub that will eventually work as a museum and cultural center and contain a conservation laboratory. The Minister of Antiquities agreed and granted the permission to Padua university. So here I have to thank the American Research Center in Cairo in Egypt and the Minister of Italian foreign affairs, we were able to undertake the first phase of interventions to the most damaged area of Amasili house, the second floor and the roof.

Ismail:

Why was the Amasili house chosen by the mission? When was it built? And what are its distinctive features.

Kenawi:

So the mission opted for the Al Amasili House because it's one of the largest houses in Rosetta, and also one of the most endangered due to the water ingress. The house tower was not closed during the previous restoration, which means that every time it rained in winter, and it rains a lot in winter in Rosetta, so high volumes of water would soak the top floor, although there was limited damage to the remaining floors. Regarding the date of the house, so the house was broadly built at the end of the 18th century, but no fixed date can be given. Its unique features are its large, well-proportioned rooms, decorated wooden ceilings and wooden fixtures distributed over different floors.

Ismail:

I saw many of the pictures of the wooden ceiling and it's beautiful. What about the Amasili project? What's unique about it?

Kenawi:

The unique thing about our project for me is that it is accessible to the general public. The structure remained open during our work, giving the opportunity for visitors to see what we were doing, ask questions and give feedback. Usually, visitors to a temple, a museum or even an archaeological site never see the work of conservators and restorers. They are normally presented with just the final result. In our case, we wanted to show everyone what is happening behind the scenes explaining our actions in detail. Another important aspect of our project is the close collaboration between the team and the Ministry of Antiquities. So, the Italian approach is to come to a consensus on every detail with the director for the Antiquities' office. This is because we are not willing to impose our work, but instead trying to create a model where stakeholders are valued. That can be used by local conservators for their own work. So, our team is directed by Christina Mondin. Michaela Asolati of Padua University and myself. And the team has two conservators, Sergio Calò, who's Italian and Luciana Carvalho who is a dual Brazilian British National, and also, we have an Italian architect Maurizio Trevisan, and an Italian archaeologist, Nunzia Larosa, specialized in the photogrammetry and she conducted a great work documenting all the external walls of the house. During the work, our team interacts on daily basis with inspectors and conservators of the ministry, negotiating solutions so that our needs along with their needs are met.

Ismail:

That's a good model for conservation work. Did allowing visitors to see and interact with your work give you good feedback or lead to any modification of the project?

Kenawi:

Yes, of course, because the engagement was useful for us, as it enabled the team to reflect on the interventions, to deal with the expectations and to learn from the visitors themselves. Among these visitors, there were many architects who specialized in Ottoman architecture, and heritage professionals eager to learn about specific details from the workers themselves.

Ismail:

How has the local community been involved with the project?

Kenawi:

So, Rosetta is a small town, not a village and the local community has been involved in different ways. Our workers or all our workers, builders, carpenters, or electricians are from Rosetta, our relationship is not only based on commissioning and paying for work. For example, our conservators trained some of

the workers on new techniques for restoring walls and applying the new plaster. So, workers were not only being paid to do a job, they were learning new skills, which they can use in other projects in the future. We also tried to purchase building materials from local shops, buy our lunch in the souk, the traditional one. And we use local drivers. It was important to make the local community a part of the project. And we received daily visits from family members of the workers and inspectors. So, we were all one big family.

Ismail:

How do you think the local community will be impacted by the increase in tourism?

Kenawi:

First, we think increased numbers of visitors can create opportunity for meaningful cultural and intellectual exchanges. We consider mass tourism as practiced in larger towns that have ancient Egyptian antiquities not appropriate here. There is already a steady influx of visitors coming from Alexandria and Cairo normally on the weekend. They are interested in Ottoman architecture, and we expect more visitors will come from other towns in the Delta, rather than a sudden influx of foreign tourism. So, Rosetta is a special town where visitors can enjoy one day or two days trip. There is a natural beauty of the Nile and Mediterranean coast; forts that protected the north coast during the Medieval period can be visited and Ottoman passing complex and over 20 houses from the Mamellouks to early Ottoman burials. There are also historical mosques and a church that incorporate in their construction used ancient Roman columns. So visitors can also enjoy the shops in the souk which will, which is still preserves a sort of a Medieval arrangement of different trades, enjoy homemade bread and sweets from the many bakeries around the town and also purchase handmade traditional carpets from the various shops. One of these shops in fact is the government cooperative supporting widows and housed in the in the building opposite the Amasili house. Not to forget that Rosetta was a location where the stone was found, which is an extra extra important element that should be attractive point for tourists. A very important aspect of the project for local community will be the activities that can take place at the Al Amasili complex. At present, there isn't even one cinema in Rosetta, or a quiet place where local artisans could meet or present their ideas and showcase their work. So, we believe that subject necessity permission is being obtained and according to the Ministry regulations, the Amasili complex will be able to plug that gap. In fact, I would say that Rosetta is a very beautiful city that has a bright future with all of its beautiful sights.

Ismail:

Of course! I have to declare my bias, though. I love the Corniche in Rosetta, where the western branch of the Nile flows into them into Mediterranean Sea, but the opposite point or mouth whereas the eastern branch of the Nile pours into the Mediterranean at Ras el Bar in Damietta is just splendid. It's a natural wonder that's unmatched anywhere in the world in my opinion.

Kenawi:

I agree with you.

Ismail:

What have the main challenges been Dr. Kenawi?

Kenawi:

Oh, so being a part of the daily bureaucratic machine small issues happens everyday everywhere. The main challenge from the start was finding the financial support to cover the cost of this first phase of works. In fact, here I have to thank again, the American Research Center in Egypt, and the Minister of Italian Foreign Affairs, it was the first time that ARCE supported a heritage project in the Delta, an area that has long been neglected by donors, despite its rich archaeological and historical heritage in the Delta and North Coast. So in fact, ARCE is a pioneer in the different heritage sector, helping to promote the Delta to the world and Rosetta especially.

Ismail:

Very happy to hear that.

Kenawi:

So, I would continue on with my list of challenges. And in fact, another indirect challenge is perhaps the modernization of the Rosetta town in general that started after 2011. The modern systematic constructions have a negative impact on the landscape. And in few years, the Ottoman and Mamluk structures that will still remain will be surrounded by jarring high buildings. I don't need to talk here about the traditional challenges like climate change, humidity and increase of underground water, but I would invite all of you to visit the town and take a tour as that will demonstrate interest of the public.

Ismail:

You talked about the many threats to Rosetta's heritage, are these threats the same everywhere in the Delta?

Kenawi:

There are threats of different types present everywhere and particularly in the Delta. Many larger scale projects are making these issues more visible, like the Al Mena project and the Delta Survey Project, among others. Given the challenges, I would hope that more missions would be interested in implementing conservation projects in the Delta. Likely enough, in Rosetta, we have received great support from the Ministry representatives who understand the issues very well and have provided great assistance to us.

Ismail:

I believe when you complete the project, Inshallah, Al Amasili complex will be a remarkable heritage conservation story, a model to be replicated everywhere, but especially in the Delta. How will the next phases of the project be accomplished?

Kenawi:

So, the first phase of the work concentrated on making the main building watertight, as the issues with the roof could have led to a partial collapse. In fact, that involved the removal of all roof layers, replacement of rotten beams, and installation of a new roof protection layer. Internally the cement plaster was completely removed from the walls of the top floor and replaced with a plaster mix developed to take into account the current climate of Rosetta. However, what we'll be able to do this year is to stage an exhibition about our work inside the house, presenting the past and present challenges to the Rosetta heritage and inviting visitors to consider its endangered status in the context of ever increasing sea levels, and the impact of modern lives pressures on the town's heritage. In the future on the next phase of the project, we will be replacing the plaster covering all the walls of the first and ground floors and install a new lighting system. This can be done in one year or two years, and we hope that ARCE will continue to support us.

Ismail:

How do you plan to document the work that has been done at Amasili house?

Kenawi:

We are documenting our work with different ways. In addition to the official reports, we believe that videos like the one that ARCE shared two weeks ago and 3D scanning virtual tools are great for documenting and communication of our work. And so, this podcast also, we also have a Facebook

page. And in the interest of being more traditional, we are preparing a booklet that will be available to all the visitors of house.

Ismail:

One final question on a somewhat unrelated topic but of interest to many of our listeners. It's about the recent discussion of the site of Taposiris Magna, 40 miles from Rosetta, as a likely site for the tomb of the famous Queen Cleopatra. What do you think of this?

Kenawi:

Well, I hope in fact, that archaeologists who was working there can prove that evidence of discovery. I think we shall ask ourselves a question more wide, rather than just searching for the tomb of Cleopatra or the tomb of Alexander. Where are the burial locations of all the governors of Egypt during the Ptolemaic Kingdom? So, we have very famous things like Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II, we need to ask a wider question. Where is the location of all these burials?

Ismail:

Yeah, there's a gap of at least 300 years between the time of Alexander the Great, and Cleopatra, where are the tombs of all the kings and queens who ruled Egypt during that time?

Kenawi:

In fact, there's a gap of 300 years of a complete absence of any royal tomb in that period, and in fact, archaeologists and historians would, I think they shall start thinking about this issue in a wider context.

Ismail:

Thank you and all the best to you and the team, Dr. Kenawi.

Kenawi:

Thank you very much.