

Pisa 1825–26 and the Origins of Modern Egyptology

Workshop

Recentering the formation of modern Egyptology: Egypt, Pisa and Livorno 1770s-1825

Place and Date: Pisa, 11-12 December 2025

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Abstract

In 1825-1826 Ippolito Rosellini inaugurated the world's first academic course on ancient Egyptian history and language, at the University of Pisa. This workshop seeks to revisit this underexamined event and its role in the emergence of Egyptology as a university discipline.

Unlike the often-celebrated narrative surrounding Champollion's decipherment of hieroglyphs, the establishment of Egyptology in Pisa has seldom been idealized or rigorously historicized. Yet it is precisely this moment and its precursors—rooted in the intertwined histories of Mediterranean trade and intellectual ambitions—that deserves renewed scholarly attention. In the 1810s, with the defeat of the Mamluks by Mohamed Ali, and the end of the Napoleonic Wars in Europe, Egypt modern and ancient rapidly became more materially accessible to outsiders. Against this backdrop, two Tuscan cities—Livorno, with its bustling free port receiving some of the first major collections of Egyptian antiquities in Europe, and Pisa, where Rosellini began to institutionalize their study—emerged as important nodes in the long birth of Egyptology.

This workshop aims to redress that imbalance by revisiting Pisa 1825 not as a footnote in a broader narrative, but as a key spatio-temporal coordinate in the construction of Egyptology as an academic discipline. It invites scholars to reconsider its origins as the product of a wider matrix of economic, social, political, and cultural forces. The field did not arise from the genius of a lone scholar or the whim of an enlightened patron; rather, at least in Europe, it was shaped by trade networks, the circulation of antiquities, emerging museum cultures, and an epistemological need to “decipher” a civilization thought to predate Greek and biblical history. Egyptology, in this environment, was not so much an act of recovery, as a tangled set of migrations inside and outside Egypt, but an intellectual and material process marked by selection, exclusion, and the imposition of new scholarly frameworks.

This workshop invites papers that investigate political, social, economic, or cultural dynamics that catalysed the formation of Egyptology in the 1820s. Why did which people in which particular lands, large and small, move to invest in the study of an ancient civilization whose written past was only beginning to be deciphered? What interests underpinned the creation of a chair in Egyptology and the expansion of museum collections? Are comparable factors and interest groups identifiable in other lands, first and foremost in Ottoman Egypt before and during the time of Mohamed Ali? How did academic institutions, collectors, and merchants collaborate—explicitly or implicitly—to shape this nascent field?

We are especially interested in contributions that explore:

- The roles of the university city Pisa and the port Livorno as case studies in the broader Mediterranean context;
- The early flows of Egyptian antiquities and their socio-political implications;
- The new constructions of Egypt's past through acts of scholarly "restoration" and cultural abstraction;
- The institutional frameworks—academic, religious, diplomatic, and economic—that impacted the emergence of Egyptology;
- The apparent, or invented, absence of medieval and early modern intermediaries in shaping late modern understandings of ancient Egypt, and whether this encouraged late 18th and early 19th-century scholars to position themselves as cultural "restorers".

From the local dynamics of Pisa and Livorno to the broader geographical contexts, this workshop seeks to foster a wide-ranging discussion on the possibilities, conditions, motivations of Egyptology's foundational moment.