

# Giza our ancient stone back demand Egyptians

Wrangle over legal ownership of museum exhibit

■ HENRY GOODWIN

AN ancient stone from the Great Pyramid of Giza due to go on display in Edinburgh is at the centre of a diplomatic storm, after the Egyptian government said it might have been illegally smuggled into the UK.

Egyptian officials have contacted the National Museum of Scotland, which possesses the rare artefact, to demand proof of legal ownership.

The stone – a large block of white limestone – will form the centrepiece of the new Ancient Egypt Rediscovered gallery at the National Museum of Scotland, and will be on public display for the first time since it came to Scotland in 1872.

It will be the only casing stone from the pyramid to be displayed outside of Egypt.

The museum announced that the stone will be exhibited from February 8 to mark the bicentenary of the birth of Charles Piazzi Smyth, one-time Astronomer Royal of Scotland, who along with his geologist wife Jessie, conducted the first large-scale accurate survey of the Great Pyramid in 1865 and the couple originally displayed the block in their Edinburgh home.

However Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities said it will take "all necessary action" to ensure the stone is returned to Egypt if the museum is unable to provide documentation showing it was imported into the UK legally and with the correct authority granting permission for its exportation.

Built for Pharaoh Khufu, who ruled from 2589 to 2566 BC, the Great Pyramid of Giza is the oldest and largest in the Giza pyramid complex.

The stone was discovered among a rubble heap by an English engineer working on behalf of Smyth, Wayman Dixon, in 1869 and brought to the UK three years later, where it was put on display in Smyth's Edinburgh home. It was donated to the National Museums by the Royal Observatory in 1955.

A spokesman for Egypt's Ministry of Antiquities said: "We have addressed the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take all necessary action to contact the Scottish authorities and the National Museum of Scotland to communicate the documents of ownership

and export certificates of that stone mass, the method of exit from Egypt and the date of obtaining it.

"The current Egyptian law on the protection of effects criminalises trafficking in effects. They are not allowed to be exported and are considered public funds.

"If the mass or any other artefact were to be found removed illegally, all necessary action would be taken to recover it."

National Museums Scotland said Smyth "had the official permission of the Viceroy of Egypt and the assistance

of the Egyptian Antiquities Service" when he began research in Giza in 1865.

A spokeswoman said: "After reviewing all the documentary evidence we hold, we are confident that the appropriate permissions and documentation were obtained, in line with common practice at the time."

Cairo has repeatedly called on the UK to return the Rosetta Stone, on display at the British Museum and, in 2011, urged a Berlin museum to return a 3,400-year-old bust of Queen Nefertiti.

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OWNERSHIP: Assistant Curator Dr Daniel Potter with the only casing stone from the Great Pyramid of Giza to be displayed anywhere in the world outside of Egypt; below left, an illustration of the Great Pyramid by Charles Piazzi Smyth; below right, Charles Piazzi Smyth; bottom, a view of The Great Pyramids



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