

CyberScribe 167 - July 2009

In response to a request from an ARCE Chapter member, the CyberScribe is using a special bit of software to shorten the URL addresses...those long strings of letters and numbers that take you to a special website or news item. These complex web addresses are hard to type, prone to error and rather annoying. Miss even one letter, comma, period or backslash...and you will not get your desired reward.

As indicated, there are ways to shorten them to human proportions. This month the CyberScribe will begin using only the new, short versions.

In the items below, the standard URL will be replaced by another URL address with the prefix 'SNIPURL'. Just copy the short string of letters and numbers that follow this label...and the program should effortlessly take you to the actual sources.

For example. Here is a short version. 'SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/jnuff>'. Enter the string <http://snipurl.com/jnuff> ... ignore the 'SNIPURL' prefix...and you will get to your desired article with much greater ease!

Let's see how it works!

The CyberScribe wishes to begin this month with a wonderfully insightful and reasoned essay on the meanings of the word 'pagan'. Not only is this a great piece, it is written by Jill Kamel, a person I believe to be a devout Muslim, a person struggling to understand the conflicts between her own religion and those ancient and modern tenets in the world around her.

The CyberScribe has cited her works often in the past. This article (shortened slightly for space reasons) is from Al-Ahram Weekly Online (SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxhnj>).

"On a recent occasion we got to talking about paganism. As an Egyptologist I naturally associate the word "pagan" with polytheism, the worship of many gods before the introduction of the divine or "revealed" religions: Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Characteristic of pagan traditions, I presented, is the presence of a living mythology that explained natural phenomena and religious practice.

“However, a friend claimed that paganism referred to atheists and agnostics. A third asked, rhetorically, what of Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism and the Bahaai faith, surely they are not pagan, or are they? When I pursued the conversation with others that evening, I heard the remark that the Old Testament of the Bible (the Hebrew Scriptures) contained references to pagans as those communities surrounding the Hebrews, and they included Babylonians, Canaanites, and Philistines.

“In fact, everyone I spoke to seemed to have a different definition of the word "pagan", and at some gatherings, as the argument became more and more heated, I realized that while opinions differed, most of my compatriots remained convinced that their meaning of the word was the correct one. There was obviously no consensus, and, I observed, not even a "correct" definition of the word "pagan". So I decided to look it up on the Internet. There I was in for a number of surprises. "Paganism" is actually derived from the Latin *paganus*, meaning "country dweller, or rustic", and was a term originally used to describe the religions and spiritual practices of pre-Christian Europe; by extension, it was a term for polytheistic traditions or folk religion (like that of ancient Egypt) seen from a Western or Christian viewpoint.

“Today the word pagan encompasses all of the religions of the world outside of the Abrahamic group of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And that includes Eastern and native American religions and mythologies. Ethnologists, by the way, avoid the term "paganism" in referring to traditional or historic faiths, calling them shamanism, pantheism, animism and the like. But this too is criticized as terms that refer only to aspects of different faiths, but do not denote the religions themselves.

“So, what is paganism? If one tries to define it, broadly speaking, as anyone involved in any religious practice that is not Jewish, Christian or Muslim, and which is outside of Hinduism and Buddhism, then are pagans those without a religion -- i.e. are they atheists? Far from it. After all, in the strictest sense paganism refers to the authentic religions of ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome as well as surrounding areas. They originated way back in the Stone Age, and while the belief was in many gods, one was chosen to represent the chief god and supreme godhead, worthy of special worship. That supreme god was generally a nature god and kingship was associated with it.

“When one wanders through the colonnades of Egyptian temples, strolls through museum galleries, stands in awe before the relief on a massive sarcophagus, or simply observes the remarkable detail of a single gold statue or illuminated papyrus, the vast number of divine images staggers the imagination. We are conscious of the vital part religion played in the life and

experience of the ancient Egyptians. The capitals of columns are adorned with sculptured reliefs of Pharaohs making offerings to the ram-headed god Amun, or hawk-headed Horus. Statues and statuettes in granite, limestone and sandstone portray different deities, seated or standing, all frozen in hierarchical attitudes.

“Although we know the names of the gods of ancient Egypt and can identify their attributes, we in fact understand surprisingly little of their nature and, with some exceptions, know few myths and legends concerning them. The reason is that an awareness of the roles and attributes of the gods and goddesses was handed down from generation to generation by word of mouth.

“On the first occasion that we discussed paganism the question was raised as to why (in a country that had embraced Christianity from the early centuries and where Christianity was the declared religion of the Roman empire at the beginning of the fourth century), there was a mass conversion of the population to Islam in the seventh century. To avoid taxation, responded one member of the group with certain resolve. That would only partially explain the reason, said another. And I myself came up with the suggestion that it was because the bulk of the population was still pagan. Now, that was greeted with total denial. The very idea that there were still pagans in Egypt in the seventh century was rejected out of hand.

“This troubled me, because it indicated a misunderstanding of the very word "pagan". Unfortunately, owing to misrepresentation, pagans have come to be regarded as sexual deviants, devil worshippers, practitioners of "black magic", witchcraft and the like. In fact, I was referring to an unknown number of Egyptians who had not actually embraced Christianity, yet believed in the organic vitality and spirituality of the natural world and its divine nature. If this is paganism, then in my opinion there is evidence of paganism until today in Egypt's highly religious society -- among Muslims and Christians alike.

“Let me give you an example of my personal confrontation with pagan belief within my very own household. I had a maid, Fatma, who stole 15 pieces from a canteen cutlery I had received for a wedding present. She of course denied that she had taken the items and, because she was a poor woman, I did not wish to pursue the matter with the law. So I sacked her. More than a dozen years later I received a telephone call from a resident in Maadi. She asked me if I had lost any forks, knives and spoons. She said a woman called Fatma was ill and dying and had asked her to return them! I went to a house on Road 18, and there, wrapped in a yellowed and torn newspaper covered with strange signs, was the missing cutlery. She told me Fatma's story. She

had apparently run into a spate of bad luck: Her husband had died, she had lost a young child, and her older daughter was desperately ill, so she wanted to make an offering to god. She was now old and dying and wanted me to know that she had not stolen the objects with a view to selling them, just to use them as an offering with her prayers, and that now she wanted to return them. I looked at the strange sketches on the newspaper and realized that some of them were not unlike the magical texts I had seen on manuscripts in the Coptic Museum.

“Egyptians are deeply religious and superstitious at all levels of society. That is certain. Rich and poor alike keep talismans or purify their homes with incense. It is not unusual for Egyptians to observe the strictest religious rituals and, at the same time and without any sense of contradiction, hold to a belief in the protective blue bead, fortune telling games, purifying with incense, palmistry and offerings to the divine (if only a piece of cloth), not to mention sacrifices. Faith is a question of personal piety after all. Those who make offerings, like Fatma, but generally of a more modest nature, extend well beyond mere superstition. It is a personal outlook and belief in a higher power.

“The ancient Egyptian who wrote a prayer to the god Amun (on the votive stela of Nebre) that includes the words "When I call to you in my distress you come to me, you come to rescue me, to give breath to he who is wretched...." cannot be regarded as a "pagan" in its modern, derogatory sense. Even until the end of Egypt's ancient history, when old beliefs gave way to the monotheistic faiths, the old ways proved to be seeds from which new religious ideas continued to grow. Hymns, prayers, and songs of praise today, requesting help, protection, guidance, and the continued gift of life, whether from a merciful and benevolent higher being, an honored ancestor, or from a sense of deity seen in the world around us, is a relationship with the divine wherever it may be found in any part of the world.

“Since the word "pagan" cannot be expunged from the dictionary, let us at least add a new definition, one cleaned of its negative connotations, and described as a part of a living culture.”

Another story has appeared that relates to everyday Egyptians, but which also has a link to the past. This column has related the efforts to oust the residents of the village of Sheikh abd el-Gurna...the houses built over the tombs of the nobles on the wets bank at Luxor. Most of the people and their houses are gone now, but here is a rather interesting follow-up story

(abbreviated) on the site comes from 'Times on line' (SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxior>)



Um Sayid al-Bikri with her son Mahmoud and his family in their traditional mud brick home near Luxor

“Just outside the Valley of the Kings a set of ancient tombs has created a very modern controversy. The village of Qurna, on the outskirts of Luxor, arose more than a century ago when farmers on the banks of the Nile fled seasonal flooding and moved into the shelter of Pharaonic tombs that dot the rocky bluffs above the river. People built elaborate houses of mud brick and wood around the caves and, with the advent of tourism, made a living showing visitors their in-house tombs and selling souvenirs.

“But five years ago President Mubarak decided that Luxor was becoming a slum, overrun with hawkers and unauthorized buildings that were obscuring and damaging its ancient treasures.

““One of the first orders of the President was to transfer the people of Qurna,” said General Farrag, now the city’s governor. So arose the village of New Qurna, a grid of pink and cream concrete terraces farther into the desert, lacking the character of its predecessor but provided with running water, a post office, schools and sewerage for the 3,000 families moved there.

“Some international experts on Egypt say that the Government is sacrificing a unique community to cash in on tourism. “The Egyptian authorities are now determined to sterilize the area, creating a kind of archaeological tourist park stripped of any trace of anything living or anything relating to the more modern [Roman onwards] history of the site,” said one expert from Britain.

“Ahmed Tayyeb, who earns his living by restoring tombs, denied that the old villagers had damaged the burial sites. He said that bulldozers used to demolish many of the houses probably did far more damage, although General Farrag insisted that houses over tombs were demolished by workers using only sledgehammers. “It destroyed a unique way of life,” Mr. Tayyeb said.

“The controversy over Luxor may hurt Egypt’s nomination of its former Culture Minister, Farouq Hosni, as the next head of Unesco. Mr. Hosni’s campaign is already faltering after it emerged that he had publicly called for the burning of Hebrew language books in the Alexandria library.

“Under the plans, a handful of the houses in Old Qurna will remain standing over their ancient tombs and be open to tourists. One is still inhabited by Umm Sayyid, a 76-year-old woman who was born and married in it and brought up her children and grandchildren there. She was unsentimental about moving, saying she would be ready to move if offered decent housing.

“One of her daughters muttered: “Don’t listen to what the men say. This house is too much work.””

Zahi Hawass seems to always have an interesting announcement each month and this time he has rewarded us with a discussion of the steps taken to preserve that wonderful underground site called the Serapeum. Once in danger of collapse and loss, the Supreme Council on Antiquities, under the leadership of Hawass, has done wonders to stabilize this unique monument. In a statement (SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxjf5>) he relates the progress to date. (The CyberScribe encourages you to go to the original article for larger and more detailed photographs, plus the complete text).

“The Saqqara plateau served as a burial site to the ancient Egyptians for over three thousand years. It is home to pyramids, private tombs and temples, and is even the burial place of sacred animals. The most famous of the animals buried at Saqqara were the Apis bulls. For over a thousand years

these bulls were laid to rest in the darkness of the Serapeum, a massive gallery of tunnels and niches carved into the rock below Saqqara.



Dr. Hawass visiting the Serapeum (Photo: Property of SCA).



Sarcophagus protected during conservation work (Photo: Maggie Bryson)

“The bulls were buried at the Serapeum for over one thousand years, from the Eighteenth Dynasty to the Ptolemaic Period, amid great mourning and ceremony. During this long period of time there were three major stages of architectural development. At first the bulls were buried in individual tombs with offering chapels erected above them. Then, from the 55th year of Ramesses II, a large subterranean gallery was cut out from the stone. From

this time until the reign of Psamtik I of the Late Period each bull would be buried in a large niche leading off from this one long corridor; as each bull died the corridor would be extended and a new niche would be carved out from the rock. Within, the bull would be laid to rest in a wooden coffin. Today, Egyptologists call this gallery the Lesser Vaults. From the 52nd year of Psamtik I to perhaps the reign of Cleopatra VII, a new grander corridor was cut from the rock, known as the Greater Vaults. This was similar to the earlier Lesser Vaults, but built on a larger scale. Now the spacious niches would contain large granite or basalt sarcophagi, each weighing around 80 to 85 tons.

“Among the great treasures of the Serapeum are the many stelae that were discovered within. These were dedicated by people who had come to visit the Serapeum, and they teach us much about the history of the monument, such as the names of the individuals associated with the burial of the bulls, as well as information about the lives of the bulls themselves. Today, the stelae have all been removed and taken to museums, leaving only small niches in the walls where they once could be found.



Niches that once held the Serapeum stelae (Photo: Maggie Bryson).

“Despite being an important and unique monument, the Serapeum has been closed to visitors for many years as it was deemed unsafe. An earthquake in 1992 seriously weakened the stone, causing cracks to appear in the ceiling and walls, leaving the entire monument in danger of collapse. For thirteen years, as Director of the Pyramids of Giza, I spoke with every antiquities director to try and find a good solution to preserving and protecting this unique monument. My personal suggestion was to support the ceiling and the

weak parts of the structure with iron and steel frames, but not everyone agreed that this was the best course of action, and no antiquities director would make a decision about what to do. However, if there was another solution to the problem, no one ever suggested it.

“The first day when I became Secretary General of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, I asked Hassan Fahmi who is a professor at the Faculty of Engineering at Cairo University, for his advice on my plan for saving the Serapeum. I then made a committee of Egyptian scholars, foreign scholars, engineers, conservators, and archaeologists and we all met at Saqqara. I told them that the Serapeum was falling apart, and asked if they had any ideas about how to protect it. None of them could make any suggestions, so I told them that my plan was the best proposal for the moment. I said that if they weren't happy they could take the iron and steel supports down in one hundred years, but, I added, the Serapeum needs to be protected now.



A sarcophagus that once contained the mummy of a sacred Apis bull (Photo: Maggie Bryson).

“The tunnels are now being reinforced with steel archways; these act as a cage in the weakened chambers to ensure that the ceilings do not collapse. The massive stone sarcophagi are protected in wooden casings as the work continues. Standing inside the tunnels today, thin tubes can be seen hanging from the cracks in the ceiling; these are used by the conservators to inject a

substance called epoxy into the stone; this strengthens and protects the stone and will stop the ceiling from collapsing. The floors are also being protected and the archways that lead into the burial chambers are being fixed. Humidity can have a serious effect on the stone and so a monitoring system is being set up to record the humidity levels. A ventilation system is also being installed. This work is being conducted by a brave team in dangerous conditions, through their dedication, and with stringent safety precautions, they are saving the Serapeum for future generations.

“When all the work is complete, the Serapeum will be opened to the public again so that all visitors to Saqqara can visit this unique and mysterious monument.”

Yet another intriguing find was also recently announced by Zahi Hawass (SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkcv>), this one was also from Saqqara and involved a new site's discovery. Shortened slightly for space requirements, it tells us that:

“Minister of Culture, Farouk Hosni, announced today that Egyptian archaeologists, performing routine conservation work at the southern side of Saqqara's step pyramid (2687-2668 BC), have stumbled upon what is believed to be a deep hole full of the remains of animals and birds. The mission has also found that the hole's floor is covered with a layer of plaster.



Cartonnage discovered during work at Saqqara (Photo: Property of SCA).

“Dr. Zahi Hawass stated that the mission unearthed a large quantity of golden fragments during restoration work at the southern tomb of Djoser’s pyramid. These may have been used by the ancient Egyptians of the Late Period to decorate wooden sarcophagi or to cover cartonnage. Thirty granite blocks were also discovered, each weighing five tons. These blocks, Dr. Hawass explained, belonged to the granite sarcophagus that once housed Djoser’s wooden sarcophagus - the final resting place of the king’s mummy.

“While cleaning the internal corridors of the pyramid, the mission has also found limestone blocks bearing the names of King Djoser's daughters, as well as wooden instruments, remains of wooden statues, bone fragments, the remains of a mummy, and different sizes of clay vessels.



A limestone block mentioning the daughter's of Djoser and the name of the king himself (Photo: Property of SCA).

Space requirements often force the CyberScribe to leave out wonderful sites and announcements...and this remains the same today. The URL addresses

below, however, will lead you to a number of nice videos that have recently appeared on the web. You are very much encouraged to check them out.

Video links

Ramesses VI tomb

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxksz>

Tut tomb

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxktm>

Tut face revealed

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkuc>

Luxor temple at night

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkv3>

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkvs>

Computer reconstruction of Luxor temple

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkwj>

Computer reconstruction of Philae

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkxj>

Abu Simbel

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxky4>

Step Pyramid at Saqqara

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxkzm>

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxl0l>

Pyramid of Meidum

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxl1b>

Valley of the Kings, tomb of Tausert & Setnakht

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxl24>

ROM Book of the Dead

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxl32>

Discovery of Khufu's boat

SNIPURL: <http://snipurl.com/kxl32>

One of the funniest items this month, suggests the CyberScribe is this extensive site called the '2012 Giza Plateau Memorial'. The data is voluminous, but sounds more than a little nit bogus. Read some of the snippets below, and you decide if this is where you want to spend eternity.

"The 2012 Giza Plateau Memorial will be a SMALLER scaled-down version, but a real life recreation of the actual, renowned Giza Plateau in Egypt. The memorial will feature each of the 10 Pyramids and the Sphinx that are known to be present at the existing site, including the 3 Great Pyramids, 7 Queen's Pyramids and The Sphinx (Temple). These structures will represent the plateau and house the actual TIME CAPSULES RECEPTICALS & PARTICIPANTS CAPSULE KITS. The memorial will be laid out and constructed in accordance with the required scale in a manner that replicates the actual Egyptian landmark. The memorial site will NOT actual be in Egypt but will be reconstructed to the required scale here in the United States of America at a location yet to be finalized. Current possible sites under review are Crestone, Colorado and Sedona, Arizona.

"The total and perceived number of final project participants, prior to any land grant or acquisition, will ultimately, at the appropriate phase of development, determine the size and scale of the proposed memorial. Our goal and prime objective is to obtain over 250,000 participants, and the plateau/memorial will be reconstructed on between one and five acres of land. However, it is important to note that one of the reasons, (among many) for the selected "theme" of the memorial is the manner in which it enables the foundation to scale, organize and pace the entire project based on its number of participants, within the allotted timetables of the project. Additional detailed memorial plans will be released when a general scope of public participation helps to identify the scale at which the memorial will need to be to accommodate all participants.

(Suggests the CyberScribe, with all those pyramids, etc., plus 250,000 dead memorials...that one acre site may get a tad crowded)

"The memorial is intended to become an historical monument for the common people and children of humanity wherein will be preserved one of humanity's greatest treasures of the 21st century and perhaps beyond. There shall be housed, protected and maintained the REAL LIFE, HERMETICALLY SEALED time capsule receptacles, each for a period of no less than 50 years. They will contain the personal treasures, which are the priceless contribution of the memories, legacies and other memorabilia made by we, the common people (i.e., project participants). Participation will be organized by the method of obtaining from the foundation, and returning to

us, their personally SEALED Time Capsule Kits for inclusion in The 2012 Giza Plateau Memorial Project, by a pre-set date which will be determined as the project proceeds. 50 years later from the date of the Memorial Inaugural Dedication & Closing Ceremonies, these treasures will be released back to their intended inheritors. Within these documents and archives, and by the individual choice of each participant, will be contained, what might be the greatest of gift that any one person could contribute or leave to future generations of humanity.

(Ponders the CyberScribe...won't this rather startle folks when 50 years from now the UPS man knocks on the door of one of your grandkids and hands them...you and a bunch of your knick-knacks?)

“PROJECT PUBLIC LAUNCH DATE: PHASE 1 - Friday, June 05, 2009
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION CLOSE DATE: PHASE 7 - Saturday, December, 31, 2011

(Hmmm, says the CyberScribe...they missed the first date and still don't even know which state this thing will be housed in)

“TOTAL DURATION FOR PARTICIPATION : Approximately 30 Months
PHASE 1 OBJECTIVES TO BE COMPLETED BY: on or near FRIDAY JULY 10th, 2009

(Better get busy, says the CyberScribe ...you only have till July 10 to get registered)

“THE INAUGURAL MEMORIAL DEDICATION & TIME CAPSULE CLOSING CEREMONIES:

1. Spring (Vernal) Equinox Ceremony on: TUESDAY, MARCH 20, 2012 and/or
2. Summer Solstice Ceremony on: THURSDAY, JUNE 21, 2012 (Number of ceremonies TBD based on participation)

(This suggests to the CyberScribe that you will have to be dead by June of 2012. Better make your plans now)

(What will this cost you, asked the CyberScribe?)

“INDIVIDUAL KITS & RESERVATIONS: Includes the FULL KIT as described above, AND MEMORIAL RESERVATION SPACE in one of the actual

HERMETICALLY SEALED Memorial Capsules, Complete Instruction Manual with Legal Certification Documents, and PrePaid Return Kits. ONLY \$150 each.

“FAMILY or GROUP KITS & RESERVATIONS: Includes a TOTAL OF 3 INDIVIDUAL KITS & MEMORIAL RESERVATION PACKAGES. Again you may consider SHARING INDIVIDUAL KITS & RESERVATIONS by preparing a single kit collectively as a family or group. YOU DO NOT NEED THE FAMILY KITS & RESERVATIONS UNLESS YOU WANT MULTIPLE INDIVIDUAL KITS OR RESERVATION SPACES. Discounts at \$135 ea. or \$405 Total.”

Well, notes the CyberScribe, their pages go on and on, promising all sorts of neat goodies, like calendars (which may not be needed, since you'll be dead), note cards, pens and colored pencils, etc. What a deal!

And in case you wondered, the CyberScribe does not endorse these scam artists...and won't even help you find the URL (smile).

See you next month!

If you would like to contact the CyberScribe (also known as Clair Ossian) to ask a question or to suggest an item for a future column, please send an e-mail to clastic@verizon.net or call (972) 416-5211. Don't forget to look up the North Texas Chapter of ARCE's Internet Homepage located at this address: <http://www.arce-ntexas.org/>.

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