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Cultural Relations between Egypt and Hungary during Mubarak's Presidency

Introduction

Cultural diplomacy has long served as a powerful tool for fostering mutual understanding between nations, particularly in contexts where political or economic cooperation alone cannot sufficiently sustain bilateral relations. In the case of Egypt and Hungary, both countries possess rich and ancient cultural heritages that are widely recognized and celebrated. Despite these shared values and the potential for meaningful cultural exchange, their bilateral cultural relations developed unevenly over the course of the twentieth century. While the post-World War II period witnessed several key initiatives and programs aimed at fostering cooperation—particularly in education, heritage preservation, and the arts—cultural ties between the two countries had remained relatively weak during the interwar period. Understanding the historical context behind this delayed engagement is crucial to explaining both the challenges and the long-term significance of Egyptian–Hungarian cultural cooperation.

This paper explores the development of cultural relations between Egypt and Hungary, with a focus on the key turning points that transformed a limited relationship into a dynamic and multifaceted cooperation. By analyzing a broad range of cultural initiatives—including academic exchange programs, the protection of heritage, artistic collaborations, and high-level diplomatic visits – this study highlights how both governments gradually recognized culture as a strategic and symbolic domain of international relations. Particular attention is given to the 1950s as a decisive turning point, marking the beginning of systematic and state-supported efforts to institutionalize cultural exchange.

The main research questions guiding this study are as follows:

- What were the main reasons behind the relatively weak cultural relations between Egypt and Hungary between the two World Wars?
- Why did the 1950s emerge as a turning point for intensifying these relations, and what structural or ideological shifts contributed to this change?

To address these questions, the paper relies primarily on original archival material from the Hungarian National Archives, including correspondence between Hungarian and

Egyptian cultural institutions, embassy reports, and intergovernmental agreements. These are supplemented by contemporary Egyptian newspaper sources, which provide valuable insights into how cultural events, diplomatic visits, and institutional collaborations were perceived and communicated to the Egyptian public. The integration of these primary sources allows for a nuanced understanding of the motivations, limitations, and evolving priorities behind Egyptian–Hungarian cultural cooperation.

By tracing the trajectory of this relationship from tentative beginnings to more structured and strategic engagement, the chapter seeks to contribute to broader discussions on the role of cultural diplomacy in postcolonial and Cold War contexts. It also highlights the importance of cultural heritage and education in shaping long-term international partnerships, particularly between countries that lie outside the dominant geopolitical alliances of the twentieth century.

Historical Background

Cultural relations between the Carpathian Basin and Egypt can be traced back to the Roman period. Archaeological evidence from the former Roman province of Pannonia, which included the territory of present-day Transdanubia (Dunántúl), reveals the presence of an Isis shrine and other artifacts linked to Egyptian religious practices. These finds suggest that Egyptian cults had reached the region during the imperial era. In the medieval period, connections between the two regions persisted. Contemporary Arabic sources document interactions brought about by Turkish conquests and Christian pilgrimages. One notable instance is the arrival of soldiers in Nubia during the late 16th century, believed to be the ancestors of the ‘Magarabs’—a subject explored in the research of István Zimonyi. A further episode in the history of Hungarian–Egyptian cultural encounters occurred in the aftermath of the Hungarian Revolution of 1848, when political refugees established a small colony in Cairo. Hungarian interest in Egyptology also dates back to the early 20th century. In 1907, the merchant and patron Fülöp Back supported Hungarian-led excavations at Gamhud. This period also marked Hungary’s contribution to the broader field of Islamic studies. Scholars such as Ignác Goldziher and Miksa Herz gained international recognition, the former for his pioneering work on Islamic theology and the latter for his architectural documentation and reconstructions of monuments in Cairo. The First World War disrupted much of this early scholarly and cultural exchange. In the interwar period, Hungarian–Egyptian academic ties remained limited, in part due to the prevailing British political influence over Egypt. However, one notable exception was the establishment of the Egyptian Agricultural Museum in 1938, founded under the patronage of King Fuad. This project was heavily shaped by Hungarian expertise. In 1930, Galal Bey Fahim, Secretary General of Egypt’s Ministry of Agriculture, toured several European institutions in search of a model for

the new museum. His visit to the Hungarian Agricultural Museum in Budapest led to the appointment of its director, Alajos Paikert, to oversee the museum's planning and organization in Cairo. The project not only contributed to strengthening the ministry's position in Egypt but also raised public awareness of agricultural development as a field of national interest. Cultural relations between the two countries gained renewed intensity during the presidency of Hosni Mubarak. However, even before the 1980s, earlier decades had seen meaningful cooperation. The 1950s and 1960s were particularly active in terms of cultural diplomacy, with exchanges including music and film evenings, as well as folklore dance performances. This paper explores the nature and significance of Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations, focusing particularly on the 1980s. Drawing on primary sources from the Hungarian National Archives and contemporary Egyptian press, it aims to identify the key factors behind the durability and depth of bilateral cooperation in the cultural sphere.¹ Cultural relations between Hungary and Egypt were established relatively early, with some initial developments taking place during the interwar period. These connections grew significantly in the aftermath of the 1952 Egyptian revolution, leading to a more structured and dynamic exchange of cultural products and ideas. One of the earliest examples of this renewed engagement was the screening of Hungarian films in Egypt. The biographical film *Erkel* was shown in July 1953, introducing Egyptian audiences to key figures of Hungarian cultural history. Hungarian literature also began to reach wider Egyptian readerships. Notably, Péter Veres's short story collection *Próbatétel* was published in Cairo, contributing to literary exchange between the two countries. From September 1954, Radio Cairo began broadcasting Hungarian-language content. As part of its "Loud Newspaper" programme, the station featured readings of short Hungarian narratives and biographical sketches of prominent Hungarian cultural figures, such as composer Ferenc Liszt. Hungarian music was also regularly included in the station's programming. Youth-oriented broadcasts introduced Egyptian listeners to the Hungarian higher education system, highlighting the opportunities available at universities in Hungary. Hungarian films were screened not only in Egypt but also at cultural festivals across the Arab world, particularly in Cairo and Damascus. The 1955 Cairo Film Festival featured several Hungarian productions, including *Gassing*; *Lily Boy*; *Kati and the Wildcat*, and *Gypsy Dance*, reflecting both the diversity and accessibility of Hungarian cinema to regional audiences.²

Between 10 and 16 December 1962, a Hungarian Film Week was held in Cairo, showcasing five recent Hungarian feature films: *Legenda a vonaton* (Legend on the Train), *Szegény gazdagok* (The Poor Rich), *Napfény a jégen* (Sunshine on Ice), and *Kölyök és Dani* (Kid and Dani). The event opened with a recitation of a poem by Sándor Petőfi, performed by the renowned Egyptian actor Yehia Chahine. The reception was highly positive; the Egyptian authorities purchased the screening rights to all the films presented. The Hungarian delegation included actress Ildikó Pécsi and director Tamás

¹ HU-MNLÖL-XIX-J-1-K-1981.

² Naggar 2012: 12–31.

Rényi. During their visit, they took the opportunity to view several Egyptian films. In reflecting on these works, Rényi observed parallels between contemporary Egyptian and Hungarian cinema, particularly in their focus on social issues. He noted that many Egyptian films addressed themes of liberation from oppression and resistance to exploitation—concerns that resonated with similar currents in Hungarian filmmaking of the period. The delegation also visited Cairo's modern Film Academy, where they held discussions with students. Conversations revealed a strong interest among the students in Soviet, Italian, and French cinema. Many expressed a desire to produce or view films that offered alternatives to what they saw as the declining quality of mainstream Hollywood productions. This aspiration reflected a broader commitment to developing a distinct national film culture rooted in social engagement and critical reflection.³

The Egyptian Film Week, planned in Cairo on the 1962 Hungarian Film Week, was held between 16–22 May 1963 at the Uránia Cinema in Budapest. The films screened at the time (*The Mysterious Dweller*, *Modern Cairo*, *Jamila*, *Old Cairo*, *Woman at the Petrol Station*, *The Path of Sin*, *Port Said*, *Love Intervenes*, *The Suez Canal*, *The Aswan Dam*) gave a realistic picture of life in the Arab world. The audience of the films was 70–80%, although the artistic quality of the films did not leave a predominantly positive impression.⁴

Alongside cinema, classical music played a prominent role in fostering cultural cooperation between Hungary and Egypt. One of the earliest and most notable events was the Bartók Festival held at the Cairo Opera House in March 1956, which introduced Egyptian audiences to Hungarian musical modernism and helped establish a platform for long-term musical exchange. The Hungarian pianist Lajos Hernádi also visited Egypt during this period, giving three solo concerts that further raised the profile of Hungarian music in the region. The cultural agreement signed in 1957 marked a turning point in institutionalising bilateral exchanges. Among its key outcomes was the opportunity for Egyptian music students to pursue training in Hungary. This initiative contributed not only to the professional development of young Egyptian musicians but also to the long-term cultural ties between institutions in both countries. In January 1964, a 34-member folk dance troupe affiliated with the Hungarian Builders' Union travelled to Egypt to participate in the International Festival of Folk Arts. Their performances took place at the Cairo Opera House as well as in Aswan and Alexandria, drawing large audiences and showcasing Hungarian folk traditions. In December of the same year, the ballet troupe of the Hungarian State Opera House also performed in Cairo, further strengthening Hungary's cultural presence in Egypt. These visits were followed in January 1965 by the Cairo Puppet Ensemble's tour in Budapest, introducing Egyptian puppetry to Hungarian audiences. Reciprocal exchanges continued later that year when two Egyptian theatre professionals travelled to Hungary to study contemporary performance techniques. These collaborative efforts reflected not only a shared interest

³ Naggar 2012: 13.

⁴ Naggar 2012: 14.

in the performing arts but also a broader willingness to invest in long-term educational and institutional relationships. Cultural interactions of this kind contributed to a climate of mutual respect and familiarity. They allowed each society to gain insight into the other’s values, artistic expressions, and social concerns. This deepened interpersonal and institutional networks, reinforced diplomatic ties beyond formal state relations, and offered a stable foundation for broader cooperation in education, tourism, and trade.⁵

Traditional Music and Cultural Exchange: The 1982 Visit of the Om Kulthum Folklore Ensemble

Traditional music and folklore performances played a meaningful role in deepening Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations. This is well illustrated by a letter sent from the Egyptian Embassy in Budapest to the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs in early 1982. The letter announced the planned visit of the Egyptian folklore ensemble known as the Om Kulthum Group, scheduled for 12–14 March 1982. Their main performance took place at the Vigadó Concert Hall in Budapest on 13 March. The Embassy’s Cultural Bureau took full responsibility for organizing the event, including all logistical arrangements. In its correspondence, the Egyptian Embassy requested close cooperation from the Hungarian authorities to ensure that the programme would be organized to the highest standard. The initiative was framed not only as a performance but as a gesture of cultural goodwill, intended to promote mutual understanding through music and traditional dance. Events such as this demonstrated how cultural diplomacy—particularly through folklore and the performing arts—could reinforce bilateral ties. The presence of a renowned Egyptian ensemble in a central Hungarian cultural venue reflected both governments’ interest in sustaining people-to-people connections and nurturing long-term cultural dialogue.⁶

The presence of the Om Kulthum Folklore Group in Hungary in 1982 held particular symbolic and cultural significance. Om Kulthum herself had been one of Egypt’s most celebrated and influential singers, with a career spanning from the 1920s to the 1970s. Her voice and compositions resonated widely – not only across the Arab world but also in parts of Europe – making her a global icon of Egyptian music. Hosting a group named in her honour offered Hungarian audiences a rare opportunity to engage directly with the tradition of Egyptian oriental music. This event introduced a broad Hungarian public to a central element of modern Egyptian cultural identity and served as a meaningful step in fostering cultural proximity between the two nations. The same year also witnessed Hungary hosting another major international musical event: the 10th Béla Bartók

⁵ Naggar 2012: 15.

⁶ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-K (10-82). 1982.01.18.

International Choir Competition, held in Debrecen from 4 to 9 July 1982. Organized by the University of Debrecen, the event marked the anniversary of the birth of the composer Zoltán Kodály. The competition had first been launched in 1961 and was originally rooted in the long-standing traditions of Hungarian choral music. By 1966, it had become an international gathering, welcoming amateur choirs from around the world. Debrecen's competition soon gained a special reputation among international choral festivals. Its appeal lay not only in its emphasis on performance but in its promotion of compositional innovation in contemporary choral music. During the 1960s and 1970s, foreign composers and choir conductors who visited Debrecen became familiar with the creative achievements of Hungarian music, especially the legacy of Bartók and Kodály. Hungarian choirs and choir masters also developed a broader understanding of choral traditions from other parts of the world through these encounters. In preparation for the 1982 competition, Kálmán Gyarmati, Director of the University of Debrecen, sent an official letter to Mr. Adel Kamel Hanna, a choirmaster and lecturer at the Cairo Music Teacher Training College. Dated 2 February 1982, the letter informed Mr. Hanna that twenty international and thirty Hungarian choirs had been invited to participate in that year's event. Mr. Gyarmati encouraged his Egyptian colleague to attend the festival as an observer, highlighting the presence of leading musical experts and framing the event as an important opportunity for professional and cultural exchange. These events underscore the role of music as a powerful vehicle for mutual understanding. Through performances, collaborations, and observation, both nations were able to share distinctive aspects of their cultural heritage in a format that transcended language and ideology. In Egypt, for example, patriotic songs played a central role in shaping national sentiment, especially during periods of conflict. These songs boosted the morale of Egyptian soldiers and reinforced collective identity. In this context, music was more than entertainment – it was a unifying force capable of bringing together diverse communities and strengthening cross-cultural connections, including those between Egypt and Hungary.⁷

Education and the Egyptian Intellectual Movement, 1970–1981

The intellectual history of Egypt during the early 20th century has long attracted the interest of researchers and historians. Egypt's rich intellectual traditions and its central role in shaping Arab thought positioned it as a focal point of the Arab renaissance. Between 1970 and 1981, Egypt was widely viewed as a hub for modern Arab intellectual currents—offering a foundation for diverse ideological and cultural movements that influenced contemporary Arab societies. Despite this intellectual prominence, the Egyptian educational system during this period faced significant structural challenges.

⁷ HU-MNL-OL-XIX-J-1-K 1982 Általános iratok (35d) 01451/2022 1982.11.11.

Problems included unequal access to education, deteriorating conditions in schools and universities, and persistently high rates of illiteracy. These issues posed serious obstacles to the development of a thriving intellectual life. In response, Egyptian scholars and public intellectuals called on the government to introduce comprehensive reforms that could address these deficiencies and safeguard the country's cultural leadership. Higher education, in particular, experienced mounting pressure. The state-funded university system was increasingly overwhelmed by the sheer number of enrolled students. This overcrowding not only strained institutional resources but also affected the quality of education. Beginning in 1974, during Egypt's shift toward economic liberalisation (*infatih*), proposals emerged advocating for the establishment of private universities. The goal was twofold: to reduce congestion in public universities and to attract Egyptian students who would otherwise study abroad. However, the state viewed this proposal with caution. There were concerns that the expansion of private universities might undermine the status and perceived legitimacy of the public university system, which had long been a cornerstone of Egypt's national development strategy. The issue became a subject of national debate, regularly featured in the Egyptian press. One such example is an article published in *Al-Ahram* on 23 April 1975, which discussed the potential benefits of creating a *jāmi'a ahliyya* (national/private university). The article described the proposed institution as a promising academic initiative, with potential to benefit not only Egypt but also the broader Arab region. It pointed out that, despite rising demand for higher education, only around 10 percent of Egypt's population had access to it. At the same time, Egypt had become a destination for students from more than 100 countries, underscoring the country's regional academic appeal. The rapid expansion of free higher education led to increasing pressure on admissions. Entry into university programmes was determined largely by high school examination scores, administered through the centralized Coordination Office (*maktab al-tansiq*) system. As *Al-Ahram* noted, this system often prevented academically strong students from enrolling in their preferred fields of study, prompting many to seek opportunities abroad—at significant personal and national cost. The proposed *Al-Ahliyya University* offered an alternative for such students, allowing them to pursue higher education within Egypt while maintaining academic standards and diversifying educational pathways. Beyond easing institutional pressure, the initiative reflected a broader recognition of the role that education—particularly higher education—played in shaping the intellectual, social, and economic life of the country.⁸

One of the key priorities of the Egyptian government in the late 1970s was to align its educational planning with models implemented in more developed countries. Two principles were central to this approach: first, that educational planning should be continuous and forward-looking; second, that university graduates should be trained in accordance with labour market needs to ensure balanced job distribution and meaningful employment opportunities. Public discourse around education reform

⁸ Hamoud 2020: 529, 534–535.

was active in both governmental and media circles. *Rose al-Yūsuf*, one of Egypt's leading political and cultural magazines, frequently addressed educational issues. It called for the introduction of democratic practices within university departmental councils, reflecting a broader interest in institutional accountability and participatory decision-making. On 6 April 1979, the Education and Scientific Research Committee of the People's Assembly held a session devoted to discussions about the proposed Al-Ahliyya University. The meeting was attended by several university professors. The committee emphasized the need to implement specialized education across all three levels of the educational system – primary, secondary, and tertiary. It argued that the establishment of a private university should not be viewed with suspicion or as a replacement for the public system. Rather, it should be considered a practical response to the structural challenges facing Egyptian higher education. In addition to structural reform, the issue of literacy remained a major national concern. The committee affirmed that educational institutions could not remain detached from efforts to combat illiteracy. Promoting literacy, especially through the creation of jobs linked to educational outreach, was seen as an essential component of revitalizing Egypt's intellectual life and addressing broader social inequalities.⁹

The Reform of Higher Education in Egypt in the 1990s

By the 1990s, Egypt's higher education system had undergone significant development compared to earlier decades, particularly the 1970s and 1980s. Its progress was such that many developing countries in the Middle East and Africa continued to rely on Egyptian expertise to support the development of their own educational systems. This period also reaffirmed the global academic role of Al-Azhar University, which remained a central institution for Islamic studies and attracted students from across the Arab world and Southeast Asia. The expansion of Egypt's higher education system had begun in the 1970s and accelerated through the mid-1980s. During this time, university enrolments grew rapidly. Helwan University, founded in 1975, marked a departure from traditional models by incorporating higher institutes that were not typically part of university frameworks. However, this rapid expansion began to place increasing strain on the system. Educational leaders expressed concern that the speed of growth had outpaced the capacity of instructors to develop well-structured curricula or apply coherent academic policies. These concerns were particularly acute in the case of technical institutes. By the early 1990s, Egyptian universities were enrolling five times the number of students they were originally designed to accommodate. Overcrowding and inadequate teaching resources led to a noticeable decline in academic quality. Many

⁹Hamoud 2020: 535–536.

institutions faced a shortage of qualified staff, and existing faculties were often unable to meet the demands of a growing student body. In parallel, university admission policies continued to rely on the national examination system introduced in 1954, which had remained largely unchanged. Under this system, students with the highest scores were admitted to the most prestigious faculties, such as medicine, engineering, and the natural sciences. These preferences remained dominant in the 1990s, with pharmacy emerging as an additional top choice. The challenges of the time were not limited to admissions and curricula. Physical infrastructure across Egypt's higher education system was severely underdeveloped. Laboratories, workshops, and classrooms often lacked basic equipment, while outdated curricula and overcrowding further hampered the quality of instruction. By 1992, government universities in Egypt were serving over 500,000 students, with an additional 100,000 enrolled in post-secondary institutes. This dramatic expansion was viewed by Egyptian authorities as a reflection of the country's commitment to democratizing access to education and supporting national development. At the same time, policymakers recognized that sustaining such growth required comprehensive reform. Improving the quality of higher education was seen as essential – not only for domestic economic and social progress but also for maintaining Egypt's regional leadership role in the Middle East and Africa. Three broad goals were identified to guide reform efforts. First, it was necessary to regulate and monitor admissions, aligning university enrolment more closely with the needs of the national economy. Second, improving the quality of academic programmes required significant investment in financial and material resources. And third, a more transparent and accountable system of fiscal governance needed to be introduced to support long-term sustainability and institutional effectiveness.¹⁰

Hungarian Academic Support for Egyptian Postgraduate Education: Scientific Cooperation in the 1980s

Academic cooperation between Egypt and Hungary gained considerable momentum in the early 1980s, marked by growing institutional ties and increasing numbers of student and faculty exchanges. These initiatives reflected not only educational priorities but also broader political and economic interests, particularly in the fields of agriculture and applied sciences. In 1981, a bilateral agreement was signed between the University of Horticulture in Budapest and the University of Mansoura, one of Egypt's leading regional universities. The agreement laid the groundwork for an active partnership, including the exchange of publications, lecturers, and students, as well as the designation of joint research topics. The Hungarian side was represented by Dr. Lajosné Erdei,

¹⁰ Shann 1992: 225, 227–229, 232.

Vice-Rector of the University of Horticulture, while the Egyptian delegation included the rector of Mansoura University. This institutional collaboration served not only academic aims but also indirectly supported growing Hungarian–Egyptian trade and agricultural relations. For example, Hungary’s Plant Protection Research Institute (affiliated with the Ministry of Agriculture and Food – MÉM) worked in close cooperation with the Plant Protection Department at Mansoura University and other Egyptian institutions. Hungarian academic support was particularly significant in light of shared agricultural challenges and the importance of food security in both countries. At a time when Egypt was undergoing structural economic reforms and increasing its openness to international collaboration, Hungary offered not only scientific expertise but also postgraduate training opportunities for Egyptian scholars. These opportunities helped build local capacity in Egypt, particularly in applied agricultural sciences, environmental protection, and medical research. The appointment of Dr. Yehia Massoud as rector of Mansoura University further cemented the ties between the two countries. Dr. Massoud had completed his graduate studies in Hungary in the late 1960s, making him one of the first Egyptian university leaders with a Hungarian academic background. His personal connection to Hungary facilitated smoother cooperation and contributed to the long-term institutional relationship between the two universities. Similar patterns of academic exchange were visible in relations between the University of Minia in Upper Egypt and several Hungarian institutions, including the University of Agricultural Sciences in Debrecen, Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest), the Budapest University of Technology, and a number of Hungarian medical universities. In 1981, the rector of the University of Minia – an influential political figure in the governorate – led a delegation to Hungary to explore opportunities for joint research, curriculum development, and investment partnerships. His close ties with the Hungarian ambassador in Cairo proved instrumental in strengthening cooperation, particularly in connection with Hungary’s agricultural export investments in the MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region. That same year, the rector of Kossuth Lajos University of Science (now part of the University of Debrecen) also participated in high-level meetings to discuss expanded collaboration with Egyptian academic partners. These efforts reflected a mutual recognition of the strategic importance of educational diplomacy—not only for scientific advancement but also for fostering long-term economic and political relationships. Educational exchanges in the 1980s offered concrete benefits for both sides. For Egypt, they provided access to scientific expertise, postgraduate training, and technical knowledge that supported national development goals. For Hungary, the exchanges opened new avenues for international cooperation, positioned its universities as regional partners in scientific progress, and reinforced diplomatic relations with a key Middle Eastern country. The long-term impact of these efforts continues to be felt in both countries’ academic networks and policy circles.¹¹

¹¹ HU-MNL-OL-XIX1982-TÜK iratok (46d) 01447/2022 1982. October

The Importance of Environmental Protection: A Focus on Egypt's 2030 Environmental Strategy

In the heart of Southern Sinai, beneath the mountains of Saint Catherine, the first Egyptian–Hungarian Environmental Conference was held as a symbolic and practical step toward deepening cooperation in environmental science. The event, co-organized by Suez Canal University and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, took place from 5 to 7 April. The conference brought together researchers, policymakers, and experts from both countries to discuss shared environmental concerns and explore strategies for sustainable development. Dr. Abdelfatah Mohammed, Vice President of Suez Canal University, noted that the conference programme extended beyond the lecture halls to include field visits to ecologically significant areas such as the Gulf of Aqaba and the protected reserves of Ras Mohammed. These excursions enabled participants to examine on-site environmental challenges and conservation practices, and to exchange perspectives on ecological preservation in fragile coastal and desert ecosystems. The event was chaired by Dr. Ahmed Ismail Khodir, President of Suez Canal University, who led the organizing committee and underscored the importance of environmental cooperation as a global and bilateral priority. Environmental protection was not treated as an abstract concept but as an urgent area of applied policy – one with consequences for biodiversity, climate resilience, public health, and long-term development planning. For Egypt, environmental sustainability has increasingly become a core component of national strategy.¹²

The Egypt Vision 2030 framework, launched in alignment with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), includes comprehensive objectives for protecting natural resources, reducing pollution, managing waste, and expanding the use of clean energy. Given the country's ecological diversity – from coastal zones and desert landscapes to the Nile Valley – environmental planning has gained strategic significance. Within this context, the Egyptian–Hungarian Environmental Conference represented more than a scholarly gathering. It signaled both nations' commitment to multilateral cooperation on issues that transcend borders. Hungary's scientific expertise, especially in water management, conservation, and environmental technology, provided a strong basis for mutual exchange. Egypt, for its part, offered a complex case study of how environmental challenges intersect with tourism, urbanization, agriculture, and heritage protection. By engaging in joint fieldwork and scholarly dialogue, participants contributed to building a scientific bridge between the two countries – one that could support joint research initiatives, training programmes, and policy advising. Such collaborations are increasingly vital as climate change, resource scarcity, and biodiversity loss become pressing international concerns. The conference thus marked an important

¹² Al-Ahram newspaper, March 14th 1993, 15.

step in aligning the environmental priorities of Egypt and Hungary with a shared commitment to sustainable development and academic cooperation.¹³

The Sustainable Development Strategy: Egypt Vision 2030 highlights the environmental dimension of sustainable development and seeks to integrate environmental considerations into various economic sectors. Its aim is to ensure the effective management and preservation of natural resources and to guarantee the rights of future generations to development. This approach is intended to enhance economic competitiveness, create job opportunities, reduce poverty, and promote social justice. The strategy outlines a series of institutional reforms, including the establishment of a Higher Council for Sustainable Development, the strengthening of institutional and legislative frameworks for water resource management, and the reform of economic policies to encourage sustainable consumption patterns. It also emphasizes the development of infrastructure necessary for the sustainable management of water resources. In addition, the strategy identifies Egypt's key environmental challenges: waste management, air pollution, biodiversity conservation, protection of coastal and marine ecosystems, and climate change. It encourages active engagement with the private sector and civil society, promotes public awareness, and reaffirms Egypt's commitment to fulfilling its obligations under international environmental agreements. Egypt has adopted a range of regulatory tools aimed at addressing various aspects of environmental protection. Environmental policy is primarily developed and implemented by several national bodies, most notably the Ministry of Environment and the Egyptian Environmental Affairs Agency (EEAA). The institutional framework for environmental management in Egypt began in 1982 with the establishment of the Environmental Affairs Agency, which was designated as the primary authority responsible for environmental protection. The agency was restructured in 1994, gaining public judicial status. Its general objectives include protecting the environment and public health and promoting environmental initiatives at the national level by integrating environmental concerns into all national policies, plans, and programmes. Given its coordinating role across ministries, the EEAA was placed under the direct accountability of the Cabinet. The agency's board of directors was intended to serve as a key mechanism for inter-ministerial coordination, enabling the integration of environmental considerations into sectoral development strategies. However, since ministry representatives often lacked the necessary authority to fulfill this coordinating role effectively, the need for a dedicated Ministry of Environment became evident. To address this, the Ministry of Environment was established, tasked with formulating environmental policies, coordinating across sectors, and overseeing the monitoring and control of environmental issues and indicators at the national level.¹⁴

¹³ The first Egyptian-Hungarian environmental conference in 1993. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, March 14th 1993, 15.

¹⁴ Managing the environmental protection Echo system in Egypt (United Nations Development Project) 211–212.

In the 2020 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), Egypt was ranked 94th out of 180 countries, with a score of 43.3 out of 100. While Egypt ranked ahead of Morocco and South Africa, it lagged behind several other Middle Eastern and North African countries, including Tunisia and Lebanon. The report served as a clear indication that the Egyptian government needed to intensify its efforts in environmental protection, particularly in addressing water and air pollution, as well as other forms of waste that pose serious threats to public health and ecological sustainability.¹⁵

The Evolution of Egyptology: Contributions of Hungarian Scholars

Professor László Kákossy was a renowned Hungarian Egyptologist whose influence shaped the development of Egyptology in Hungary, particularly through the establishment of what became known as the “Budapest School.” This school was not defined solely by the forty or so Egyptology degrees awarded under his supervision, but rather by the philological, historical, and archaeological training of his students – and by their deep, personal connection to Egypt, both ancient and modern. Kákossy played a pivotal role in fostering a strong scholarly interest in ancient Egyptian culture among the Hungarian public. His commitment to disseminating knowledge beyond academia made him a central figure in the cultural reception of Egyptology in Hungary. Between 1951 and 1956, he studied under Aladár Dobrovits, a historian and Egyptologist, and Vilmos Wessetzky, who provided him with a solid foundation in Egyptological philology. Kákossy also studied classical archaeology with Zoltán Oroszlán at Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) in Budapest. Wessetzky’s influence shaped Kákossy’s lifelong engagement with philological inquiry, while Dobrovits encouraged his exploration of the historical and cultural dimensions of ancient societies. Following his graduation, Kákossy worked first in the Collection of Antiquities (1956–1957) and later in the Egyptian Collection (1957–1959) of the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. These early years shaped his research interests, particularly through his study of Hellenistic Egyptian terracottas. His growing interest in Greco-Roman Egypt – then a marginal topic in mainstream Egyptology – was reinforced by the iconographic work of his museum colleague László Castiglione, also a student of Dobrovits, and a recipient of the prestigious Academy Prize. In 1960, Kákossy was appointed assistant lecturer at the Department of Ancient Oriental History at ELTE’s Faculty of Humanities. He became a full professor in 1976. In 1982, the Department of Egyptology was officially established at ELTE, with Kákossy as its founding head. His publications throughout the 1960s and 1970s demonstrated the

¹⁵ Managing the environmental protection Echo system in Egypt (United Nations Development Project) 213.

key traits of his scholarly style: precise research questions, clear exposition, historical contextualization, and a concise, accessible, and often literary prose. These qualities contributed greatly to his professional success and wide readership. As a committed educator, Kákósy sought to alleviate the challenges posed by limited library access by writing his own textbooks. The *Sons of Ra*, published in 1979 and later expanded and revised in 1993 and 1998 under the title *The History and Culture of Ancient Egypt*, became foundational texts for students and enjoyed lasting popularity with the general public. Writing these works was part of a broader objective: to create the necessary conditions for the training of Egyptologists in Hungary and to integrate Hungarian Egyptology into international academic research. This goal also guided Kákósy's fieldwork in Egypt, which began in 1983 with the excavation of the tomb of Djehutimes in Thebes. Over time, three generations of his students continued excavations on the west bank of Thebes, and several came to be regarded internationally as leading experts on the noble tombs of the New Kingdom. Kákósy's calm and consensus-oriented leadership style enabled him to meet the growing demands of university teaching, departmental administration, archaeological fieldwork, and increasingly complex research. In the 1990s, he expanded his focus to museum studies, culminating in an analytical catalogue of magical sculptures housed in three Italian museums. This decade also brought increasing recognition, both internationally and at home. A commemorative volume published for his sixtieth birthday featured contributions from leading Egyptologists, and his election to the *Heidelberger Akademie der Wissenschaften* signaled his high standing in the international scholarly community. In 1998, he was elected a member of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – an honour he welcomed not only personally, but also as a gesture of official recognition for the field of Egyptology in Hungary. In the final years of his career, Kákósy produced an impressive body of work on the history of Egyptian religion. His writings, marked by vast knowledge and analytical depth, continue to be read today. They form a lasting legacy and provide a window into the culminating phase of 20th-century Hungarian Egyptology – a tradition to which Kákósy contributed with distinction and dedication.¹⁶

In 1907, Fülöp Back, co-owner of a prominent commercial house in Cairo, commissioned the Polish Egyptologist Tadeusz Smoleński to lead an excavation project. Following Smoleński's death in 1908, the direction of the excavations was entrusted to Ahmed Bey Kamal, a pioneering Egyptian scholar. That same year, Back also made significant efforts to establish an Austro-Hungarian Archaeological Institute in Cairo. However, these plans ran counter to the broader priorities of Austro-Hungarian cultural policy at the time. As a result, further attempts to found a Hungarian institute for Egyptology and Arabic studies were ultimately halted, largely due to the indifference of successive Hungarian governments. After a period of discontinuity beginning in the mid-1930s, the training of Egyptologists in Budapest resumed in the late 1940s under Vilmos Wessetzky and Aladár Dobrovits, both of whom served as curators of Egyptian antiquities at the

¹⁶ Török 2008.

Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. Following the reorganization of museum collections in postwar Hungary, all objects of Egyptian provenance were transferred to the Museum of Fine Arts in 1957. The Egyptian Department was also separated from the Department of Ancient Art. The newly expanded collection was further enriched by antiquities from Lower Nubia, which had been acquired during the 1964 Nubian mission of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, led by László Castiglione. These objects were transferred to Hungary as a gesture of appreciation for Hungary’s participation in the UNESCO Nubian Rescue Campaign – an international effort to preserve archaeological heritage endangered by the construction of the Aswan High Dam. Hungarian involvement in the emerging field of Nubian studies began with this mission and was shaped by the first generation of Egyptologists trained by Dobrovits and Wessetzky. Among their students was László Kákosy, who would later become one of Hungary’s most distinguished historians and Egyptologists. His dedication and scholarly contributions led to the establishment of an independent Chair of Egyptology at Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in 1982. Kákosy was committed to expanding Hungarian fieldwork in Egypt. The first Hungarian-led excavation after the earlier work of Abdallah Nirqui was conducted by Kákosy himself in 1983, in the Western Thebes region, where he excavated the tomb of Djehutymes. Archaeological fieldwork became an integral component of Egyptological training in Hungary under his guidance and continued to be a central part of the education of his students throughout the following decades.¹⁷

Harmony and Function: The Enduring Legacy of Ancient Egyptian Art

Egyptian society valued harmony, known as *māat*, which shaped its worldview and cultural expressions. Egyptian art emphasized perfect balance as a reflection of divine order and was primarily functional in nature. Statues served as dwellings for spirits or gods, while amulets were crafted for protection rather than aesthetic appeal. Artistic works such as tomb paintings and temple reliefs were created with deliberate symbolism, often serving to remind viewers of the eternal nature of life and the central importance of stability. The principle of balance – expressed visually through symmetry – permeated Egyptian art from its earliest stages. Rock art from the Predynastic Period first introduced this value, which became fully developed during the Early Dynastic Period of Egypt (c. 3150–c. 2613 BCE). A significant example from this period is the Narmer Palette (c. 3200–3000 BCE), created to commemorate the unification of Upper and Lower Egypt under King Narmer (c. 3150 BCE). Through a series of carvings on a siltstone slab, shaped like a chevron-shaped shield, the narrative depicts the king’s

¹⁷ Bács, Schreiber, Fábán (eds.) 2009: 16–18.

triumph over his enemies and the divine support he received. While some of the images on the palette remain open to interpretation, the central message of political unification and royal legitimacy is clearly conveyed.¹⁸

In 1995, Egyptian Ambassador to Budapest, Mr. Mokhtar Al Hamzawy, inaugurated an exhibition in the Hungarian capital featuring one hundred works by 25 Egyptian painters, many of whom were professors at the Faculties of Fine Arts in Cairo and Alexandria. The exhibition also included paintings by former Egyptian Minister of Culture, Mr. Farouk Hosny, adding prestige to the event.¹⁹ As part of the cultural celebration, Ambassador Al Hamzawy presented a painting by Dr. Farouk Shehata, titled *The Green Nile*, as a diplomatic gift to the President of Hungary during an official ceremony held at the presidential office. That same year, a delegation from Hungarian Television travelled to Cairo to film a documentary on Egypt's historical monuments. In parallel, the team produced several programmes discussing the state of the Egyptian economy and major national development projects underway at the time. These broadcasts served not only to educate Hungarian audiences about Egypt's cultural heritage but also to present a nuanced picture of contemporary Egyptian society. Among the guests participating in these events and media appearances were former Ambassador Al Hamzawy, along with several prominent Egyptian and Hungarian businessmen. These initiatives contributed meaningfully to the deepening of bilateral relations. Cultural diplomacy, particularly in the arts and media, created a more favourable atmosphere for political dialogue and economic cooperation. By showcasing Egypt's artistic heritage and development trajectory, these exchanges helped foster mutual respect, public interest, and increased visibility for joint ventures in education, culture, and trade.²⁰

Further Strengthening Cultural Ties

In 1996, Mr. Farouk Hosny, then Egyptian Minister of Culture, received an official letter from the Hungarian Ministry of Culture proposing cultural cooperation between the Egyptian Academy in Rome and the Hungarian city of Győr, a city renowned for its year-round artistic and cultural activities. The proposal outlined plans for joint exhibitions focusing on sculpture, photography, and music. Minister Hosny welcomed the initiative and confirmed Egypt's interest in participating. In response, Dr. Magdy Kenawy, President of the Egyptian Academy in Rome, visited Győr in September 1996. During his visit, he toured local museums and explored avenues for collaboration

¹⁸ Mark 2017.

¹⁹ The Egyptian Ambassador opens an art exhibition in Budapest. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, July 10th 1995, 28.

²⁰ Dedicating the green Nile painting to the Hungarian President. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, October 18th 1995, 28.

with the city’s cultural correspondent, Éva Koch. The aim was to prepare for Egypt’s participation in the annual “International Arts Workshop” organized in Győr, and to coordinate the exchange of exhibitions between the Academy and Hungarian cultural institutions. The message of Egypt’s commitment to the collaboration was formally conveyed by Ambassador Mokhtar Al Hamzawy, who played a key role in facilitating these discussions. This initiative represented a meaningful step in the ongoing expansion of Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations. By linking two major cultural hubs—Rome and Győr—the project created new platforms for artistic exchange and strengthened institutional ties. It also reflected the mutual interest of both countries in promoting intercultural dialogue through the visual and performing arts.²¹

In 1996, Dr. Shawky Al-Sayed Khater, former President of Tanta University, announced that a scientific cooperation agreement had been signed between Tanta University and the Technical University of Budapest. This agreement was part of a broader framework aimed at fostering the exchange of expertise and formalizing bilateral scientific collaboration. It played an important role in expanding academic and research-based cooperation, enhancing the quality of education, and facilitating the exchange of delegations between the two institutions. Representing the Hungarian side were the Director of the Scientific Cooperation Centre at the Technical University of Budapest and the University’s Foreign Affairs Coordinator. Their involvement helped ensure structured and sustained engagement between the two universities, focusing on joint research projects, academic mobility, and the development of new technical programs. This form of cooperation significantly strengthened Egypt’s higher education sector. By engaging with established European institutions, Egyptian universities were able to improve research capacity, adopt new methodologies, and internationalize their academic standards. Such partnerships not only contributed to institutional growth but also elevated the international recognition of Egyptian higher education, positioning it as a more active participant in global academic networks.²²

Student Exchange Programmes and Higher Education Initiatives

In 1997, Dr. Amr Ezzat, Vice President of Helwan University, signed six educational cooperation agreements with three Hungarian universities. The agreements covered key academic fields including engineering, foreign trade, fine arts, and physical education.

²¹ Cultural and artistic corporation between the Egyptian Academy in Rome and the Hungarian City of Győr. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, August 22nd 1996, 36.

²² A scientific agreement between Tanta University and the technical University of Budapest. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, October 27th 1996, 21.

The signing ceremony was attended by Mr. Mokhtar Al Hamzawy, the Egyptian Ambassador to Budapest, underscoring the diplomatic and academic importance of the occasion. These agreements created valuable opportunities for student mobility, particularly for Egyptian engineering students, who were able to travel to Hungary and benefit from the educational infrastructure and expertise available there. Similarly, Hungarian engineering students gained access to study programs in Egypt, facilitating a reciprocal exchange of knowledge, research experience, and cultural understanding.²³

In 1999, Dr. Mofid Shehab, Egyptian Minister of Higher Education, signed a protocol outlining a new executive program for scientific and cultural cooperation between Egypt and Hungary for the period 1999–2001. Representing the Hungarian side was the Minister of Education of Hungary. The protocol included a provision to increase the number of academic scholarships offered to Egyptian students. One of the notable achievements of this agreement was the establishment of a Hungarian Language Department within the Faculty of Linguistics at Ain Shams University. This marked the first department in Africa dedicated to teaching the Hungarian language, symbolizing a significant step in academic and cultural exchange. In the field of Egyptology, Egypt continued to host several Hungarian experts annually, particularly in relation to archaeological research and the study of ancient Egyptian monuments. The executive program also received the participation of Mr. Mohammed Youssry, Director of the Egyptian Academy for Scientific Research, along with Hungarian government officials. The main objective of the program was to further strengthen the tools of scientific and cultural cooperation between the two countries, including collaboration between their respective media institutions. The agreement also supported the organization of cultural exhibitions, film festivals, and the mutual exchange of folklore dance troupes – contributing to a richer and more diversified framework of bilateral cultural relations.²⁴

In 2000, within the framework of the new executive program for cultural and scientific cooperation between Egypt and Hungary—signed by Dr. Mofid Shehab, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research—several high-profile cultural events were organized in coordination with the Hungarian Embassy, the Egyptian Cultural Office in Hungary, and the Cultural Affairs Department of the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. One of the highlights of this cooperation was the visit of the Egyptian “Nile Group” folklore dance troupe, which performed four shows in Hungary. These performances were organized under the supervision of former Egyptian Ambassador to Budapest, Mr. Osama Haggag, and former Egyptian Cultural Consultant in Budapest, Mr. Ahmed El Sayed. The troupe presented traditional Egyptian folk dances along the banks of the Danube River in Budapest, as well as in three other cities situated on the shores of Lake Balaton – a popular summer destination for Hungarian tourists. The performances attracted significant public attention and were well received

²³ Six agreements of educational corporation between “Helwan University” and 3 Hungarian Universities. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, April 6th 1997, 12.

²⁴ A protocol of scientific and cultural exchange with Hungary. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, July 3rd 1999, 12.

by local audiences. The Hungarian media expressed considerable interest in the events. Hungarian television channels broadcast the dance performances across multiple platforms, contributing to greater cultural visibility and strengthening the image of Egypt as a country with a rich and vibrant artistic heritage. These events also deepened mutual appreciation and highlighted the role of performing arts in advancing cultural diplomacy between the two nations.²⁵

A cultural program was established to promote the exchange of student delegations between various faculties in Egypt and Hungary. This initiative was agreed upon during the International Cultural Week held in the city of Pécs, Hungary. Notably, Egypt was the only Arab country representing both the Middle East and Africa at the conference. Dr. Ahmed Hassan Sayed, former Egyptian Cultural Consultant in Hungary, represented Egypt at the event. Other participants included representatives from the embassies of Austria, Mexico, the United Kingdom, Russia, and Romania. During the conference, it was agreed that the exchange program would not be limited to academic visits but would also involve collaborative scientific projects and mutual visits to key touristic and cultural sites in both countries. Furthermore, the program aimed to assist students from Egypt and Hungary in obtaining scholarships to pursue further studies in other countries around the world, thereby contributing to the internationalization of higher education and strengthening academic networks.²⁶

In 2000, to celebrate the 30th anniversary of the establishment of the Agricultural Scientific Center, the Egyptian Cultural Office in Budapest organized a cultural week featuring events that showcased various aspects of Egyptian art and culture. The opening ceremony was attended by the Deputy Minister of Agriculture of Hungary, highlighting the importance of the event at the governmental level. As part of the celebrations, the center also organized a seminar in cooperation with the Egyptian–Hungarian Businessmen Association. The seminar focused on Egyptian–Hungarian bilateral relations, with particular attention to Egypt's strategic role in the Middle East. A keynote address was delivered by the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Hungary. Among the distinguished attendees were Mr. Osama Haggag, former Egyptian Ambassador to Budapest, and Mr. Ahmed Hassan Sayed, former Egyptian Cultural Consultant in Budapest.²⁷

In 2001, Hungary made a significant cultural gesture by donating ten packages of books and CDs to the Library of Alexandria. During the same period, Hungary also proposed hosting a “Coptic Arts Exhibition” in Budapest and offered to send experts in the fields of music and theatre to Egypt. These initiatives were discussed during a reception hosted by Mr. Farouk Hosny, then Egyptian Minister of Culture,

²⁵ Four shows of Egyptian traditional dancing in the Hungarian touristic cities. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, August 14th 2000, 28.

²⁶ Student exchange programmes between Egypt and Hungary. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, September 1st 2000, 40.

²⁷ An Egyptian cultural week in Budapest. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, September 27th 2000, 33.

for his Hungarian counterpart, Mr. Zoltán Rockenbauer, and the accompanying Hungarian delegation. The visit took place from 10 to 14 March 2001, during a series of cultural events held in Egypt. At the reception, the Hungarian Minister emphasized his country's readiness to deepen cultural cooperation with Egypt. He recalled the cultural, educational, and scientific cooperation agreement that had been signed in 1999 and was set to expire in 2001. Highlighting the success of the agreement, he called for its extension. Among the proposals raised was the organization of a "Coptic Arts Exhibition" in Hungary and a reciprocal exhibition showcasing Hungarian painters in Egypt. In the field of performing arts, the Hungarian Minister noted that Hungarian theatre groups had already participated in theatre festivals in Egypt. He also introduced the Hungarian cultural event "Valley of Arts Festival" and expressed Hungary's willingness to host Egyptian theatre troupes performing folklore pieces. In response, Mr. Farouk Hosny requested enhanced cooperation in the area of library sciences, including the exchange of expertise and workshops, either by sending Egyptian specialists to Hungary or inviting Hungarian experts to conduct training sessions in Egypt. The two ministers also discussed heritage preservation and literary translation. Hungary expressed interest in supporting the restoration of historical Egyptian texts and organizing workshops for Egyptian creatives. Proposals were made to translate works of Egyptian literature and poetry into Hungarian and vice versa, with the support of the Egyptian Book Organization. The importance of stage design and theatre technology was also mentioned, and Hungary offered to send instructors to teach these subjects at Egypt's Academy of Arts. Mr. Samir Gharib, Director of the Egyptian Book Publishing Authority, proposed joint projects involving historical texts, including the exchange of images and microfilms between Egyptian and Hungarian institutions. Mr. Rockenbauer affirmed Hungary's readiness to implement all proposals discussed during the two-hour meeting, which was held at the Egyptian Ministry of Culture. Representing Egypt at the meeting were several high-ranking officials, including Mr. Fawzy Fahmy, former Director of the Egyptian Academy of Arts; Mr. Mohammed Ghoneim, Director of the Department of Cultural Relations; Dr. Samir Sarghan, Director of the Egyptian Book Organization; and Dr. Gaballa Ali Gaballa, Deputy Director of the Egyptian Supreme Council of Antiquities, alongside other Egyptian cultural officials.²⁸

Based on documentation I gathered from the Hungarian National Archives, it is evident that both Egyptian and Hungarian leaderships placed strong emphasis on several key areas of cooperation. Their efforts focused on developing bilateral research ties, strengthening educational relations – particularly between universities – and expanding opportunities for student mobility. A major priority was to facilitate the exchange of students between the two countries. Hungarian students were given the opportunity to study Arabic in Egypt, while Egyptian postgraduate students were able to pursue their studies at Hungarian universities. This demonstrated a shared commitment to deepening educational and

²⁸ Hungary dedicates to the library of Alexandria a vast collection of books and CDs. *Al-Ahram newspaper*, March 11th 2001, 14.

cultural relations. Cultural diplomacy was also pursued through various initiatives, including the organization of artistic and folkloric events. Egyptian traditional dance performances held in Budapest offered Hungarian audiences a deeper appreciation of Egypt's cultural heritage, while Hungarian dance groups performing in Cairo allowed Egyptian audiences to experience Hungarian cultural traditions. These exchanges brought the two societies closer on a cultural level and promoted mutual understanding. One important initiative during this period was the effort to reopen the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Cairo, which had been closed since the 1970s. Both sides recognized the value of such institutions in enhancing bilateral relations and promoting cultural outreach. However, progress required the drafting and mutual approval of a comprehensive cultural cooperation plan. While this work plan was modified several times due to differing priorities, it eventually served as a framework for ongoing collaboration in arts, education, and heritage. Archaeological cooperation also emerged as a significant area of shared interest. Hungarian scholars expressed a desire to establish an Egyptology department in Hungary to support research and introduce Hungarian students and the wider public to ancient Egyptian civilization. This not only advanced academic exchange but also reinforced Hungary's position as an active partner in preserving and studying world heritage. The revitalization of Egypt's cultural infrastructure during the 1980s also played a role in facilitating international cultural exchange. The area around the Pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx, which had become overcrowded with residential buildings, was cleared under the direction of then Minister of Culture, Mohammed Abdelhamid Radwan. This initiative aimed to restore the visual and symbolic integrity of Egypt's most iconic heritage sites and improve the tourist experience. Radwan was widely praised for his dedication and effectiveness, which marked a significant shift in cultural policy leadership. Another milestone of this period was the reopening of the Egyptian Opera House, which had been closed since 1971. The revival of Egypt's musical and theatrical life was seen as essential to restoring the country's cultural prestige and promoting Egyptian arts on the international stage. The 1983–1985 Egyptian–Hungarian cultural work plan was particularly notable for expanding cooperation in the training of aspirants and reinforcing institutional links between universities. Although the cultural relations between the two countries initially faced challenges in the early 1980s—evidenced by the repeated revision of the work plan—the overall trajectory remained positive. Cultural cooperation continued to grow in areas such as music, art, theatre, archaeology, and student exchange programs. The role of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Cairo was instrumental in this development. Its mission has been to present the richness of Hungarian cultural heritage to Egyptian audiences and to support the Hungarian community living in Egypt. As a tool of cultural diplomacy, the centre aimed to strengthen existing ties and encourage further collaboration in education, science, and the arts. A key goal of the institution was to expand its network of Egyptian partners, while also providing regular Hungarian language courses to the public. Through these sustained efforts, the cultural and educational partnership between Egypt and Hungary evolved into a dynamic and multidimensional relationship, marked by shared values, institutional trust, and mutual respect.

The Role of Cultural Diplomacy and the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Advancing Egyptian–Hungarian Relations

The Hungarian Cultural Centre in Cairo presented the second edition of the Yearbook of the Office of the Hungarian Cultural Counsellor, published in cooperation with the Embassy of Hungary. This edition is dedicated to the research conducted by the Hassan Fathy Survey Mission in Egypt. Divided into two volumes, the first presents the research efforts of 2016–2017, while the second introduces the results from 2018–2019. The Faculty of Architecture at the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, with the participation of Hungarian architects and architecture students, launched an expedition to Egypt in the spring of 2015 to undertake comprehensive documentation of Hassan Fathy's surviving architectural legacy. Hassan Fathy (1900–1989) was a visionary architect whose work left a profound impact on generations of designers. His New Gournia project became a foundational experiment in community-based, sustainable architecture. Fathy's legacy highlights not only the distinctiveness of 20th-century Islamic architecture and his unique place within it, but also his lasting global relevance. Fathy was a pioneer of environmentally conscious and socially engaged architecture long before sustainability became a widely recognized concept. His work continues to offer important lessons – even decades later – for those concerned with eco-friendly, low-cost, and culturally rooted design. In its early years, the Hassan Fathy Survey Mission focused on documenting the rapidly deteriorating buildings designed by Fathy, particularly in Upper Egypt. From 2018 to 2019, the scope of the project expanded to include new fieldwork in Alexandria, Fayyoun, and the Greater Cairo area. During this phase, the Mission also established a partnership with the Rare Books and Special Collections Library of the American University in Cairo. This collaboration provided access to an invaluable archive of original plans, handwritten notes, and early photographs of the buildings under study – materials that had previously been largely unavailable, even within existing publications. These documents offer vital insights into details and architectural connections that remain understudied, despite Fathy's extensive bibliography. His approach to integrating historical preservation with vernacular architecture remains just as relevant today as it was in the mid-20th century. In the current global context – marked by escalating climate challenges and growing demographic pressures – Fathy's philosophy has become even more pertinent. Understanding and supporting the architectural needs and realities of the Global South has become a global responsibility. The Hassan Fathy Survey Mission contributes to this broader task by analyzing both historical and contemporary examples of sustainable architecture, conducting extensive fieldwork, and disseminating its findings within academic and professional circles. Through these efforts, the Mission aims not only to preserve the legacy of a pioneering architect, but also to engage with the pressing architectural and environmental issues of our time.²⁹

²⁹ Vasáros 2020: 11.

On November 21, 2021, the Egyptian Embassy in Hungary participated in the annual Diplomatic Bazaar held in Budapest, under the auspices and with the participation of the spouse of the President of the Republic of Hungary and the spouse of the Hungarian Foreign Minister. The event featured displays of reproductions of Pharaonic antiquities, Egyptian artifacts and collectibles, and traditional Egyptian cuisine. The Egyptian pavilion received enthusiastic attention from attendees, including the Hungarian First Lady, who expressed particular interest in the pavilion's exhibits and cultural offerings. Hungarian President János Áder had previously demonstrated his appreciation for Egyptian heritage during his official visit to Cairo from November 30 to December 1, 2019. As part of the visit, he and his accompanying delegation toured Luxor, where they visited a number of significant ancient sites, including the Karnak Temple, the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut, the Valley of the Kings, the Valley of the Queens, and the Colossi of Memnon. President Áder expressed his daughter also visited local markets in Luxor, where they purchased souvenirs to commemorate the trip. In 2023, Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Mr. Péter Szijjártó, and Egyptian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Mr. Sameh Shoukry, reached an agreement to expand bilateral cooperation in the field of education. As a result, Hungary increased the number of annual undergraduate and postgraduate scholarships offered to Egyptian students from 115 to 200. On March 3, 2024, Dr. Ayman Ashour, Egypt's Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, and Dr. János Csák, Hungary's Minister of Culture and Innovation, jointly inaugurated the Egypt–Hungary Academic and Scientific Forum at the Ministry's headquarters in Egypt's New Administrative Capital. The event was attended by senior officials and university presidents from both countries. The forum included sessions on future collaboration in scientific research, student and faculty exchange, and institutional partnerships. Discussions also addressed mechanisms for deepening cooperation between Egyptian and Hungarian universities, including preparations for upcoming visits by Hungarian academic delegations. Further strengthening these ties, on March 5, 2024, Dr. Mohamed Dīaa Zein El-Abedin, President of Ain Shams University, received a high-level Hungarian government delegation. The delegation included Dr. Péter Zakar, Vice President for Public Relations; the Director of the Public Technology Group for International Relations; Dr. József (surname not specified), Vice President of Beit Beamham for Public Affairs and Strategy; Dr. Áron Bereczky, Vice President for Science and Innovation; and Petro Perini, Secretary General for International Affairs. The visit reaffirmed both sides' commitment to expanding cooperation in higher education, research, and technological development.³⁰

³⁰ State information Service: Your Gateway to Egypt: 2015 (online): Egypt and Hungary (last accessed September 10th 2025)

Preserving Cultural Heritage and Expanding Academic Ties: Egypt and Hungary's Shared Vision

Egypt and Hungary both regard the protection of cultural heritage as a matter of paramount importance. In this regard, Egypt sets an outstanding example, Hungarian Minister of Culture and Innovation János Csák stated following his official talks in Cairo on 4 March 2024. During his visit, the Minister held discussions with Dr. Neveen Youssef Mohamed Al-Kilany, Egypt's Minister of Culture. Speaking to MTI after the meeting, Minister Csák highlighted the extraordinary richness and diversity of Egypt's cultural heritage, which encompasses not only the Pharaonic era but also the legacies of the Coptic Christian Church and contemporary Muslim-majority Egypt. "In Egypt, there is careful attention to preserving every valuable monument – from antiquity to the modern age," he said. He further emphasized the Egyptian government's significant efforts to ensure peaceful coexistence among religious communities and to combat violence often rooted in sectarian tensions. Csák also noted that in a country with a still rapidly growing population, the Egyptian government is taking active steps to ensure that younger generations benefit from access to cultural and educational institutions. On 3 March, he held discussions with Dr. Mohamed Ayman Ashour, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, as well as with senior officials from the Ministry of Public Education and National Education. Csák remarked that both Egypt and Hungary share a similar outlook on the role of culture – understood not merely as a field of policy, but as a way of life, a mindset, and a worldview. He acknowledged Egypt's current efforts to develop a higher education system that meets the demands of the modern era. As part of this initiative, the country is encouraging the establishment of foreign university campuses. British, American, and Chinese institutions have already opened fee-paying branches in Egypt, and they are reportedly operating successfully. Csák mentioned that the Egyptian government expressed appreciation for Hungary's recent university model reform and its potential relevance to the Egyptian context. Talent development was a key topic in all of Csák's meetings, including his discussion with Prime Minister Mostafa Kamal Madbouly. He explained that the discussions addressed how scientific research and universities are financed, and that there are ongoing plans to establish joint academic programs offering dual Egyptian–Hungarian degrees. Agricultural cooperation was also addressed, particularly in the areas of irrigation farming and the development of drought-resistant crop varieties. Csák pointed out that irrigation remains a critical challenge in Egypt. In response, several Hungarian institutions—including Eötvös Loránd University (ELTE) and the University of Debrecen – have signed agreements with Egyptian partners to engage in collaborative research on these pressing issues. As part of his visit, Minister Csák delivered a keynote speech at the Hungarian–Egyptian Rectors' Conference held in Cairo. He cited the long-standing Hungarian archaeological presence in Egypt as a model of sustained and meaningful cooperation.

He also visited the sites of several earlier Hungarian-led archaeological excavations, further reaffirming the depth of the two countries’ academic and cultural ties.³¹

Dr. Ayman Ashour, Minister of Higher Education and Scientific Research, inaugurated the first academic year (2025/2026) at Al-Ahliyya Cairo University in Sixth of October City. The ceremony was attended by Mohamed Sami Abdel Sadek, President of Al-Ahliyya Cairo University; Dr. Maher Mesbah, Secretary of the Council of National Universities; Dr. Mohamed Mohsen Al-Attar, Vice President for Academic Affairs; along with other vice presidents, faculty deans, members of the university’s advisory committee, the university’s Secretary General, presidential advisors, faculty members, and students. The Minister and the University President jointly participated in the flag salute in front of the university dome to officially mark the beginning of the new academic year. This was followed by an inspection tour, during which the Minister visited various facilities including auditoriums, classrooms, and laboratories. He reviewed the availability of technological resources, monitored faculty and staff attendance, and ensured that the university was providing a high-quality, supportive learning environment that encourages creativity and academic excellence. At the start of the visit, Dr. Ashour held a meeting with the university’s deans and program coordinators, where he commended the spirit of collaboration and shared vision among the institution’s leadership. He emphasized that public universities alone could not have accommodated the growing number of students without the Ministry’s strategic policies and the political leadership’s support for private education. This framework integrates free public education, private universities, and international university branches, ensuring that diverse academic and research needs are met across a broad spectrum of students from varying social and economic backgrounds. Dr. Ashour further noted the significant rise in student enrolment at private universities, reflecting growing public confidence among students and their families in the quality of private higher education. He expressed appreciation for the political leadership’s efforts in establishing private universities with state-of-the-art infrastructure, modeled on international best practices. He emphasized the importance of integrating these institutions into regional alliances and fostering partnerships with academic, research, and industrial stakeholders, in line with the presidential “Alliance and Development” initiative and the objectives of the National Strategy for Higher Education and Scientific Research. Highlighting the complementary relationship between public and private institutions, the Minister stressed that their connection is based on cooperation and mutual integration. He reiterated the importance of fulfilling the founding missions of universities and providing students with innovative, high-quality educational experiences through modern, interdisciplinary programs aligned with global standards. He also drew attention to the increasing number of international

³¹ Hungarian conservative: ‘Egypt and Hungary have a similar mindset’ — Minister of Culture and Innovation Visits Cairo 2024

students in Egypt and the establishment of Egyptian university branches abroad, reflecting growing international trust in Egypt's higher education system.³²

Public Engagement with Cultural Heritage in Post-Revolution Egypt

Egyptians living in urban areas, far from major archaeological sites, responded differently to the growing concern around heritage loss during the years following the 2011 revolution. While many expressed sadness and grief over damage to cultural heritage, their primary focus was often on navigating the volatile political climate and ensuring basic survival – an understandable concern given the national context. By 2013, two years after the revolution, Egypt was undergoing a major political transition. Correcting the country's political trajectory had become a priority for many citizens, especially after the contested events of 2012. The year 2012 was especially difficult for Egyptians – politically, economically, and socially – as the country was governed by President Mohamed Morsi, a member of the Muslim Brotherhood. Despite this instability, a significant portion of the population continued to view cultural heritage preservation as a national priority. Young Egyptian archaeologists were particularly vocal in calling upon the government to take stronger measures to protect and conserve Egypt's rich archaeological legacy. Social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter emerged as crucial tools for heritage activism. Expert-led groups dedicated to heritage protection gained strong visibility and influence, using these platforms to educate, mobilize, and raise awareness among the general public. Their efforts contributed meaningfully to shaping how cultural heritage was perceived and advocated for, especially in terms of historical awareness and national identity. While it is often easy to place blame on officials for the lack of site protection, certain logistical and structural realities cannot be ignored. Many archaeological zones in Egypt cover vast and difficult-to-monitor terrain. For instance, the distance between the Giza Plateau and Dahshur is approximately 23 kilometers. Securing such extensive areas requires immense resources. In response, new barriers and protective walls were constructed to help separate archaeological zones from nearby residential developments. The international community has also played an active role in supporting Egypt's heritage protection efforts. Global organizations have imposed sanctions on illicit antiquities dealers and have worked closely with the Egyptian Ministry of Antiquities to recover looted artifacts. These efforts are critical, as every lost artifact – be it a sculpture, painting, or temple fragment – represents an irreplaceable piece of Egypt's cultural

³² Minister of Higher education and the President of Cairo University inaugurate the First Academic year at Cairo National University September 22nd 2025

identity. Although looting and illegal occupation of archaeological sites are not new phenomena, they spiked significantly in 2013. While looters were largely blamed, other contributing factors included Egypt’s rapidly growing population, increasing urban expansion, and challenges related to food security. In contrast to high-profile sites like Luxor, many other archaeological zones were not economically integrated into the lives of local residents. In such areas, there was little economic incentive for communities to protect nearby heritage sites. The economic crisis following the 2011 revolution dealt a major blow to the tourism sector and resulted in a surge in unemployment. Under the regime of former President Hosni Mubarak, cultural heritage and Egyptology were often viewed through a detached lens. Egyptian history was frequently presented as a neutral or depoliticized subject, disconnected from the lived experiences of citizens. Moreover, Egyptology had long been regarded as an orientalist field, with academic resources typically written in foreign languages and largely inaccessible to local communities. Compounding this problem was the lack of engagement with local populations residing near archaeological sites. These communities were often treated with suspicion and excluded from heritage spaces, viewed as potential threats rather than stewards. In reality, while some individuals may have exploited these sites, the broader population was denied the opportunity to engage with their own history. Access to these cultural resources remained largely limited to foreign tourists, sidelining Egyptian citizens from participating in their own heritage. After the removal of Mohamed Morsi and the Muslim Brotherhood from power in 2013, Egypt’s cultural heritage sector continued to face severe challenges. One of the most distressing incidents was the looting of the Mallawi Museum in Minya Governorate, a major cultural loss. In the absence of sufficient state protection, activists and heritage professionals took on the role of public guardians. Their advocacy placed enormous pressure on decision-makers to act urgently to safeguard vulnerable sites. Media campaigns were launched to draw public attention to at-risk monuments and institutions. These grassroots efforts had a lasting impact. Activist pressure played a significant role in shaping the 2013 Egyptian Constitution, which included specific provisions aimed at protecting and preserving the country’s archaeological heritage. These developments marked a critical shift in national policy, signaling the importance of inclusive heritage governance that prioritizes both the material preservation of monuments and the engagement of the communities who live alongside them.³³

³³ Hanna 2013: 371–372, 375.

Egypt's Cultural Diversity and the National Effort to Preserve Intangible Heritage

Egypt is distinguished by its remarkable cultural diversity, setting a model for regional heritage preservation. The country's geographic and social complexity is reflected in its varied cultural expressions – from Nubia in the south, with strong African influences, to Sinai and Marsa Matruh, where Levantine and Eastern Desert traditions are evident. Meanwhile, the oases of Siwa preserve customs rooted in the deeper African desert. This rich tapestry of cultural identities illustrates Egypt's position as a crossroads of civilizations. Cultural heritage includes both tangible and intangible elements. Tangible heritage encompasses material possessions such as monuments, artifacts, and traditional crafts. Intangible heritage refers to non-material cultural expressions – such as oral narratives, poetry, music, customs, beliefs, and rituals – that are transmitted from generation to generation within communities. These traditions form a living legacy, continually reshaped yet rooted in the past, and they contribute profoundly to the unique cultural identity of each region. Importantly, cultural heritage is not confined to specific customs, attire, arts, or literature; rather, it represents the accumulated experience and identity of generations. It includes folk arts, marriage rituals, storytelling, proverbs, dance styles, healing practices, local judicial customs, traditional games, and the tools used in various crafts. In many desert communities across Egypt, particularly in Nubia and the Western Desert, a distinctive visual culture has evolved, often referred to as “the art of the desert,” characterized by intricate geometric and symbolic patterns. This artistic tradition has adapted and expanded over time, influenced by Egypt's historical exchanges with neighboring civilizations. As a result, Egypt today possesses one of the most diverse and layered cultural heritages in the Middle East and North Africa. It stands as a vital reference point for understanding the traditions of the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Sub-Saharan Africa, and Western Desert tribes. Additionally, Egypt's Pharaonic legacy provides a unique and globally recognized civilizational identity that has no parallel in the region. Despite this rich heritage, much of Egypt's traditional culture has historically been undervalued or misappropriated. In earlier decades, cultural artifacts and crafts were sold off at low prices, long before Egyptians recognized their true value. Consequently, many of these cultural items ended up in museums and collections abroad, sometimes presented as belonging exclusively to other regions, without acknowledgment of their Egyptian origin. This was particularly problematic for Nubian heritage, which has often been fragmented or attributed to other African or Levantine cultures. In response, Egypt began a national campaign to reclaim and document its diverse heritage. Over the past few decades, efforts have been made to establish regional museums and heritage documentation projects. These initiatives have brought together scholars, artists, and cultural experts to recover, preserve, and showcase local traditions. However, the process has not been easy. Much of the intangible heritage has disappeared, and with it, the knowledge held by older generations who once

acted as cultural custodians. In many areas, crucial vocabulary and traditions have faded due to social change, migration, and the lack of proper documentation. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, the Egyptian government launched a national project in 2020 dedicated to safeguarding Egypt’s cultural and historical legacy. This initiative aimed to assert Egypt’s cultural ownership over its traditions—monuments, foodways, crafts, and artistic expressions – by formalizing their status as part of the national identity. Such efforts are not only essential for Egypt but also serve as a model for other countries. Preserving cultural heritage ensures continuity across generations, reinforces national identity, and provides future generations with a meaningful connection to their historical roots.³⁴

Dr. Hossam Al-Damarany, a researcher specializing in cultural heritage, emphasized that the Egyptian leadership has been making significant efforts to safeguard and preserve the country’s cultural legacy. He noted that the Ministry of Culture had taken a major step by appointing a dedicated consultant responsible for overseeing matters related to intangible cultural heritage. This consultant was also tasked with organizing various cultural events aimed at educating younger generations about the richness of Egyptian heritage, the significance of its preservation, and the traditional customs and practices inherited from Ancient Egypt across different aspects of life. Among the proposed initiatives was a recommendation for the Egyptian government to submit an official request to UNESCO. The objective of this request was to document and safeguard Egypt’s intangible cultural heritage as a vital and irreplaceable part of the nation’s legacy. This initiative reflects the depth and richness of Egyptian civilization and highlights the urgency of preserving such cultural expressions for future generations. When discussing why Egypt has succeeded in preserving its cultural identity – despite experiencing prolonged British occupation – Dr. Al-Damarany pointed to language as a key factor. He compared Egypt’s experience with that of Tunisia, Algeria, and Morocco, which were colonized by France. In those countries, French cultural and linguistic influence was more deeply rooted, resulting in a blending of Arabic and French in everyday speech. This linguistic hybridization has been viewed by many as a sign of diminished cultural sovereignty. In contrast, Egypt maintained Arabic as its official and dominant language, despite British efforts during the colonial period to promote English. The Egyptian people strongly resisted these pressures, recognizing that language is one of the most powerful vehicles of cultural preservation. By protecting Arabic as a national and cultural symbol, Egypt effectively safeguarded a core component of its identity. This linguistic resilience contributed significantly to Egypt’s broader success in maintaining its cultural heritage across generations.³⁵

³⁴ Balk 2020.

³⁵ Ramadan 2023.

Conclusion

This paper set out to explore the trajectory of Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations in the 20th and early 21st centuries, with particular emphasis on two central questions: Why did cultural relations between the two countries remain relatively limited between the two World Wars? And what changed in the 1950s to turn this relationship into a more sustained and dynamic partnership?

The archival and press sources consulted provide clear answers. During the interwar decades, cultural ties were weak and sporadic, largely due to geopolitical instability, the onset of the Second World War, and the limited mutual familiarity between the two societies. While occasional exchanges and cultural gestures did occur, neither Egypt nor Hungary had formed a comprehensive understanding of the other's culture. The limited scope of cooperation during this period reflects broader constraints on international cultural diplomacy in the context of rising nationalism and global conflict.

A clear turning point emerged in the 1950s, when both countries, navigating their respective post-war realities and ideological realignments, began to view cultural exchange as a strategic tool of diplomacy. From this period onward, cultural cooperation expanded considerably, with joint projects in education, archaeology, fine arts, theatre, music, and folklore. These developments were well-documented in confidential reports from the Hungarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, archived in the Hungarian National Archives, as well as Egyptian newspaper accounts. Of particular note was the drafting and revision of bilateral cultural work plans throughout the 1980s, which signaled both sides' growing institutional commitment despite occasional financial and political obstacles – such as the 1977 closure of the Hungarian Cultural Centre in Cairo due to tensions over Egypt's foreign policy.

Educational cooperation played a central role in strengthening cultural ties. From aspirants' training to postgraduate exchange programs, Egyptian students studying in Hungary (and to a lesser extent, Hungarian students studying in Egypt) gained first-hand exposure to each other's academic traditions and cultural settings. These exchanges also helped build personal networks and cross-cultural competencies that supported long-term collaboration between universities and research institutions.

At the same time, efforts to preserve and promote Egyptian cultural heritage – especially during the turbulent years following the 2011 revolution – highlighted how domestic challenges intersected with international cultural diplomacy. Activist networks, young archaeologists, and civil society actors pushed for stronger heritage protections, even as political instability made many sites vulnerable to looting and degradation. The 2013 Egyptian Constitution marked a pivotal step in institutionalizing heritage protection, and recent cooperation with Hungary, such as the Hassan Fathy Survey Mission and academic forums, underscores a shared commitment to cultural preservation.

Recent developments – such as the expansion of bilateral academic forums, dual-degree programs, and the increase in scholarships offered to Egyptian students – suggest

a promising future for Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations. Ministerial visits and high-level dialogues have reaffirmed the depth of mutual interest, particularly in areas such as heritage conservation, university partnerships, and cultural diplomacy.

In sum, this study has shown that while Egyptian–Hungarian cultural relations were slow to develop in the early 20th century, they gained momentum in the post-1950 period through deliberate state initiatives and institutional cooperation. Today, these relations reflect not only shared historical interests but also a broader understanding of culture as a diplomatic resource and a foundation for long-term international collaboration.

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