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OPENING ADDRESS BY PROF S JAYAKUMAR,

MINISTER FOR LAW AND MINISTER FOR FOREIGN AFFAIRS

AT THE OPENING OF THE EXHIBITION

"ETERNAL EGYPT: TREASURES FROM THE BRITISH MUSEUM EXHIBITION" AT THE ASIAN
CIVILISATIONS MUSEUM

AT 7.00 PM ON WEDNESDAY, 10 FEBRUARY 1999

Excels

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am delighted to officiate at the opening of this landmark exhibition for the Asian Civilisations Museum. Some years ago, I visited "Alankara : 5,000 years of India", an equally outstanding exhibition curated by the staff of this museum. The Museum has come a long way since then, moving into this new home.

2 The Asian Civilisations Museum is a fine example of the new generation museums in Singapore today - housed in refurbished historical buildings installed with proper environmental controls. State-of-the-art methods of presentation are employed to engage and captivate their audience. These new generation museums have truly shed their archaic and stuffy image in striving to make themselves more accessible and relevant to the society they serve.

3 Beyond their traditional roles of collection, research and exhibition, our museums also serve the important role of educating and enlightening the public, while instilling pride in our own culture and heritage. Museums take us back to the achievements and way of life of our forefathers. They can even take us back to the beginnings of civilisation. The early river valley civilisations of man were all located in geographical Asia, bar one - that is, the civilisation that arose on the banks of the Nile 5000 years ago.

4 Closely linked to the Mesopotamian civilisation, the ancient Egyptians developed writing, sculpting, painting, techniques of preserving human bodies for posterity, jewellery making, metal casting, architectural expertise and building techniques that are remarkable even today. Knowledge and keen observation of nature led the ancient Egyptians to develop methods of irrigation, agriculture, astronomy, physiology and mathematics which were applied in every day life and to secure happiness in the afterlife. The techniques developed in the ancient days to monitor the rise and fall of the river Nile are still in use.

5 Even though the worldview of the ancient Egyptians was coloured by their strong religious beliefs, their scientific outlook and knowledge were often startlingly accurate and advanced. The pyramids at Giza bear witness to the architectural achievements of the ancient Egyptians. A saying in Egypt goes "Man fears time but time fears the pyramids".

6 The Pharaonic period gave way to and left a strong imprint on the Roman empire, one of the great civilisations of the western world. The ancient Egyptians' belief in nature worship, funerary rites and religious beliefs also find echoes in some of the cultures of Asia. For example, parallels in the early religious beliefs of the ancient Egyptians and early Indian Civilisation can be seen in the worship of nature - sun, moon, earth and sky. These principles of nature were deified into gods of the natural forces. Similarly, the elaborate royal burials of Egypt remind us of equally elaborate burials of Imperial China.

7 Interesting as such parallels may be, the primary purpose of this exhibition is to celebrate one of the great civilisations of the world and a legacy of Mankind. Through the vicissitudes of history, the British Museum in London holds one of the greatest collections of Egyptian artefacts in the world, outside Egypt. The Asian tour of the artefacts in this exhibition is made possible only because of the current renovation of the British Museum. Over the next three and a half months, Singaporeans will for the first and perhaps the only time, have the opportunity to travel back to the time of the ancient Egyptians right at their

doorsteps. The staging of such world-class exhibitions in Singapore underscores the

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important role that our museums can play in broadening the horizons of the Singapore public and contributing to the cultural vibrancy of the region.

8 Like many cultural endeavours, this exhibition is a multilateral effort between the United Kingdom, Hong Kong (the first stop on the exhibition's Asian tour) and Singapore. International exhibitions such as this will help to build and promote better cross-cultural understanding and cooperation between nations. The cultural dimension which these exhibitions bring will enable a broader and better appreciation of the political, economic and social problems that afflict many regions of the world today.

9 I wish the Museum every success in this landmark exhibition and all its future ventures.

10 It is now my pleasure to declare the exhibition open.

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National Archives of Singapore