Sharing knowledge on collecting practices between London, Athens and Cairo to reconnect antiquities with their places of origin.

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Introduction

Professor Stephen Quirke and Dr Lucia Patrizio Gunning paired with Dr Despina Vlami from the Academy of Athens for this funding application, with the primary goal of exchanging knowledge with colleagues towards understanding and comparing historical Greek, Egyptian and wider European and Ottoman points of view on the collection of antiquities. The funding allowed us to work on building a framework for knowledge sharing with non-academic institutions in Greece and Egypt in order to locate and examine the significant relevant archives in London, Athens, Cairo and Alexandria. Our guiding principle was to promote multilateral exchange, as the foundation of multilocal independence, against the risk of bilateral relations of dependency between wealthier and less wealthy institutions.

Project aims:

In debates around restitution there is a pronounced bias towards the perspectives of the collecting parties, with far less information about how the removal of cultural heritage was perceived by people in the place of origin. Questions of restitution, return and to whom antiquities should belong are issues of social justice that rarely find political resolution. This pilot aims to exchange expertise and resources on the implications of collecting in both source and receiving countries. Exchanging knowledge on these collecting practices and establishing common agreed methodologies for access to archival sources will allow multifaceted, nuanced and effective consideration of the issues, and provide solid ground for agreeing the basis for resolving long contested arguments.

Project objectives:

Create a collaborative, multidirectional, knowledge exchange network with museum, archive and library partners in Greece and Egypt.
Determine extent and typology of material in Greek and Egyptian archives as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the British school of Archaeology in Athens.
Identify institutions, existing networks and legacy projects in Egypt to establish the basis for future partnership activities there.
Build connections to create an articulate, international knowledge exchange network with countries in the territory of the former Ottoman Empire focused initially on Greece and Egypt.

Project schedule stages as proposed (italics) and delivered:

1   Preparatory Activities in London:

Build on existing academic connections to establish a working group/network between UCL and external partners. This is a London based activity for Professor Stephen Quirke and Dr Lucia Patrizio Gunning to be carried out in the first weeks of the pilot.

In London we visited the British Museum Archives, the Victoria and Albert Museum archives, the National Archives and the Egypt Exploration Society, as well as the Hellenic Society and the

Institute of Classical Studies Library (where we observed the ongoing process of digitisation of their rare books thanks to a grant from the Levantis Foundation).

2   Networking and Investigative Activities in Athens, Cairo and Alexandria:

A   Following PI and Co-I discussion with and approval from the UCL IoA and Faculty Ethics Committees, identify, contact, and liaise with Greek and Egyptian non-academic partners with responsibility or experience from previous projects museums and libraries.

With the help of Dr Despina Vlami, Dr Patrizio Gunning contacted and organised meetings for her visit to Athens. Professor Quirke contacted colleagues in Egypt to organise his visit there. These first introductions ensured that we conveyed the project aims in a spirit of co-creation, through identifying points of shared interest and synergies with current activities and promoting open discussion of future priorities and critical assessment of the project aims. For the visit to Egypt, Professor Quirke adapted his visit following discussion of best practice approaches with the IoA Ethics Committee Chair, and guided by the principles of the Trust Code (Global Code of Ethics for Equitable Research Partnerships https://www.globalcodeofconduct.org/); in accordance with the code, his visit comprised (1) taking up invitations for meeting non-academic institution colleagues with whom he already had research relations in Cairo and Alexandria, (2) arranging meetings in Cairo with Egyptian academic colleagues in order to provide a guide to archive-user experience, (3) initiating first contact with further non-academic institution colleagues in Cairo, on the advice of colleagues in Egypt and in the UCL Petrie Museum.

B   Visit archive collections to see how they are organised and to determine the extent, types, and accessibility of relevant material. In Athens the primary archives for investigation are those of the Academy of Athens, the Foreign Office, and the British School at Athens. In Egypt, the locations and range of archival material to be examined in this pilot will build from the partnerships established in activities strand 2A. This kind of archive material is extremely varied in nature, state of conservation and accessibility and much material is not currently transcribed or translated. In-situ examination of the material and discussion with local specialists is vital to understanding its relevance and detail.

In Athens Dr Patrizio Gunning visited the Historical Archives of the Ministry of Culture, the Service of the Diplomatic and Historical Archives at the Hellenic Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the archive of the British School at Athens, and held talks with Dr Sophia Matthaiou of The National Hellenic Research Foundation. She wrote to the Archaeological Museum, the Benaki Museum, and The National Library, and established that no relevant correspondence was held there (although further contacts should be pursued with the Archaeological Museum as original correspondence might be held in the single departments). Contacts were also established with the Archaeological Society, of central importance but with requirement for notice that exceeded the time-frame of this project; the basis was laid for future visits to the archives there. The primary language of the archives is Greek.

In Egypt, Professor Quirke discussed with colleagues in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina and in Cairo the locations of archives at institutions of varying scale and affiliation, from the National Archives to the Egyptian Museum Cairo archive section and the archives of foreign archaeological institutes, their potential in relation to histories of collections, and the mechanisms of access. The archives are multilingual, with government documents in Turkish and Arabic to the mid-19th century, Arabic and French to the early 20th century, and then Arabic. Online digitised Arabic 19th-20th century governmental orders (National Archives) are an example of research resources that redress the Eurocentric narratives of collections history and can ensure Egyptian control of agendas for the future.

C   Share practical knowledge and protocols for digitisation and cross referencing of primary sources relating to the collection and export of antiquities, to historic legislation in relation to cultural heritage and to the establishment of national collections/museums in Greece and Egypt

This project had the parallel scope of pairing the digitization of the Petrie Museum or Archaeology at UCL with a wider project that would link it to other partners to better understand the context of the arrival of the collections to the museum. We identified two aspects that we wanted to pursue in this direction:

1   Undertake sample digitisation of material in the Petrie Museum archives to understand and overcome technical issues.
2   Connect the Petrie with international institutions to gain understanding of antiquities acquisition processes across the territories of the Ottoman Empire.

The benefits of this approach have been identified as:
•   enabling global access to the internationally significant Petrie archive
•   connecting the Petrie Museum to international partners
•   facilitating mutual understanding of the process of acquisition of antiquities within the context of late C19-early C20 imperialism and colonialism.

While it was not possible within the project visits to develop contact between UCL and Greek or Egyptian institutional digital services, the project meetings provide a basis for future development of this project goal. This potential can be tested immediately, for example, through sharing the Petrie Museum sample digitization process with project partners.

3   Activities in London:

Determine the nature and extent of material and collaboration that can be established in London and examine in detail material in the Petrie Museum. A list of Petrie Museum archive material has been prepared and included here.

As part of this pilot project, from Petrie Museum Archive documentation lists, we identified items relevant to histories of collections, and tasked and paid £800 from the project funds for UCL Digital Imaging to undertake the digitization of a small selection of representative items.

The items digitised were:
-       PMA/WFP1/16/11/1/3 the volume containing 1913-1930 copies of annual summary reports by Petrie to College (starting in 1913 as the year when the university purchased the Petrie collections), labelled as "Register of W.M.F. Petrie's purchases in Egypt and London salerooms" - 65 pages
-       a selection of Petrie correspondence relating to Egyptian antiquities laws: WFP1/C/5/MAS/1-8 (Maspero), WFP1/C/5/NEW/1-9 (Newberry), WFP1/C/5/ROSS (Ross) 1-18 letters and telegraphs plus photos.
-       a sample of 1880s-1930s photographs of objects, relevant to history of the collection. 10 film negatives and 10 b/w prints, from amongst the Petrie Museum Archive Negatives numbered to 6892 and loose prints (three albums had been previously digitised, as had the 35mm Petrie Museum Archive Slides).

In accordance with our proposal for two round-table discussions of project process and outcomes, the project ended with an online presentation with round-table discussion among project partners from Greece, Egypt and the UCL Petrie Museum (27 July 2023); and an in-person presentation to UCL staff and students with open discussion (30 July 2023).

Summary:

The following summary is written in relation to our four impact goals in our application:

Impact goal 1: *Knowledge of the extent and nature of archive material in Athens, Cairo and Alexandria, and reciprocal knowledge of UK material, will allow a significant improvement in understanding of multiple sides of the collecting 'equation.'*

Impact goal 2: *The tripartite sharing of expertise between UCL and Greek and Egyptian institutions will allow insight into material that is currently difficult to access and assess and the development of best-practice approaches to the documentation of collecting histories.*

Impact goal 3: *The pilot will seek to access historical archives and allow long-needed comparison of the legal and political frameworks within which collecting was practised, as well as the context of contested permits and agreements.*

Impact goal 4: *The establishment of a network between UCL, Athens, Cairo and Alexandria will form the basis for expanding connections between UCL experts and their counterparts in the geographical and historical scope of the former Ottoman Empire territories. This pilot will complement and can be linked to a separate project aimed at enabling global access to the internationally significant Petrie archive, largely formed during the period of British military occupation of Egypt during its final period of Ottoman suzerainty (1882-1914) and connecting the Petrie Museum to international partners.*

1.   We achieved the schedule of visits as proposed for the three 2-month phases in the application, resulting in a broad appreciation of the terrain of archives in each of the 3 countries, and we could identify in all 3 countries significant partners who are interested in the proposed network. The primary result of our project is an incipient network for archive research on collections history and its legal-political issues of provenancing.

2.   In accordance with the scope of this project, our contacts were primarily with archivists with a special interest in the history of collections. We benefited substantially in preparation and conduct of meetings from the guidance of academic colleagues who helped to introduce us to the archive terrain in Greece and Egypt. With the exception of the National Archives at Kew, the project participants and correspondents did not include archivists or librarians looking after the largest repositories of relevant material: British Library Manuscripts; National Archives of Greece, National Archives of Egypt. Any future project should assess this structural divergence and consider paths to enable the largest institutions to participate.

3.   In all three countries we identified different degrees of archive openness: the similar profile indicates shared researcher experience and provides a sound basis and important motivation for continuing the mapping of archives.

4.   We identified different degrees of digitisation between countries at least in relation to the archives that we inspected, with the accessed Greek archives more thoroughly digitised than English or Egyptian. However, this finding is provisional pending visits to the less open archives in all three countries.

5.   In support of new narratives in collections history, moving away from 19th century centres of powers, we envisage a future network with multidirectional interaction. At this stage the online international workshop between partners could not generate this dimension of interaction, because it was the first opportunity for Greek and Egyptian partners to meet. Post-project follow-up meetings beyond introduction would stimulate multidirectional and especially Greece-Egypt discussions and initiatives for a future further project.

6.   In relation to proposed exchange of digitisation protocols among partners, our contacts in partner countries did not extend to those with technical expertise, and our UCL meetings with digitisation staff did not give time to include discussion of principles of protocol-sharing between institutions. As this technical aspect would help promote multidirectional contact in practice, we consider this an essential task for future development of a multi-centred network.

7.   We consider the UCL Petrie Museum as a key partner for future development of a network, from its position as holder of an archive of significant scale and history, and from the existing network of museum contacts including in different regions of Egypt.

Future development and next steps:

A further short term (potentially six month) funding application would allow us to define and list the goals of each partner, to extend the network to other countries (Turkey and possibly Italy), and to include archives that we were not able to visit due to requirement for notice that exceeded the timeframe of this project (the Archaeological Society in Athens). This second small-scale project would also enable us to cement the links so far established, with the aim of identifying the targets and aims of each partner in participating in a larger future project. Our ultimate goal is a network of the archives interested in uncovering the documentation that will illustrate the links between the arrival of antiquities in museums and the export legislation in each country.

In anticipation of such a further funding application, we envisage three next steps:

•   July-October 2023: build a collection level description questionnaire to be sent to all partners and relevant archives to promote awareness of the project, as a small-scale initiative to consolidate the network in the immediate future.

•   September-October 2023: meet with UCL Petrie Museum colleagues to share available funding deadlines in UCL, museum and archives sector and beyond, and to propose interim network activities pending funding.

•   Online meeting with Innovation and Enterprise to seek feedback and advice on further development.