17 Reclaiming the Archive

The Contribution of Egyptian Women to the Archaeologies of the Delta (1880–1924)

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I Introduction

In the last few decades, an Egyptianising turn has helped to highlight the Egyptian contribution to the archaeological knowledge production process. This trend focused on the Egyptian 'workforce', whose contribution had been hidden in the early history of Egyptian archaeology, although the photographic record captures their dominance not only in terms of numbers, but also as regards to working operations.[1] While this (overdue) turn is welcomed, it does, however, focus on male contribution, thus rendering female contributions invisible. Additionally, it retains the colonial framework by continuing to refer to Egyptian contributors as 'workforce', hinting solely at their physical contribution and denying them any intellectual contribution to the overall knowledge production process. Moreover, within this turn, Egyptians are usually portrayed as a homogeneous collective and as victims. They are denied multivocality, and the persistence of auto-colonialism driven by social class bias is most often ignored.[2]

In this short chapter, I consider the representation and contribution of Egyptian women to archaeology as suggested by the archaeological archive. I do so by looking at Flinders Petrie's Delta excavation archives (1880–1924), reflecting thereby on the biases and absences in the record through a female Indigenous archaeologist lens. By highlighting the instances of recording Egyptian women in the colonial archive, and by reflecting on what such rare recording occasions can reveal, I centre not only the roles played by women, but also the strategic narcissism through which Egyptian women were, and at times still are, (un)seen. As an acknowledgement of the role they have played in the overall archaeological knowledge production process, I also challenge the persistence of colonial framing by referring to Egyptian male and female members of the excavations as 'archaeologists' rather than as 'workforce'.

[1] Quirke 2010.
[2] Abd el Gawad and Stevenson 2021.

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II The Few Recorded Names

> One of the 'men' is a quick lively woman named Amina Nakhla which means Amina Palmtree and she is a good worker, and shouts at her boy if he doesn't bustle back.[3]

This is how Hilda Petrie painted Amina Nakhla, one of the Egyptian women archaeologists who was part of Petrie's school of archaeology in Egypt 1905–1930. Her name, together with her late husband Makha'in and her daughter Shafya, is also unexpectedly featured in Petrie's 1905–1920 journals and letters. Petrie rarely named the two hundred Egyptian men, boys, girls and women who contributed to his excavations beyond the immediate circle of his supervisors. When he did so, it was usually only to illustrate general procedure rather than to introduce an individual.[4]

Amina was a widow with six children. She managed to win an entry for herself in Hilda's letters for her and her daughter's, Shafya, skills compared to the men's, according to Hilda. Shafya and Amina caught Hilda's attention by their ability to wield the hoes just like all the other men. Hilda identified Amina as a Copt, a widow and a poor person. Thus, Amina was seen only through the lens of religious, social and economic status and not through her intellectual skills or abilities. This was the case despite the excellence she had shown, which is precisely what had gained her an entry in Hilda's letters and, subsequently, in the archive. When attempting to praise her archaeological skills, Hilda replicates the Egyptian social stigma by identifying Amina as one of the 'men'. This implies that she saw such physical and intellectual abilities as exclusively male. The same occurred to Sabha Girgis, another Egyptian female archaeologist, whose name was recorded by Hilda in the same letter for being a Copt. Bias towards Egyptian women archaeologists then seems to have been gender neutral as even Hilda Petrie, while being a woman herself, repressed these women by focusing on their social and religious status rather than on their contribution to the excavation and, subsequently, to knowledge production.

Another two Egyptian women's names given by Petrie are Fatima I, Um Mohamed, who was Ali Sueifi's first wife, and Sara, Ali's second wife. Both were referred to solely because of the disputes they had with Ali and the impact such disputes had on the work progress. Petrie usually provided excuses to justify his interest in Fatima or Sara and the space they both occupied in his journals. In the Journal for 10.1.1897 he states:

[3] Drower 2004: 199.
[4] Quirke 2010: 61.

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> I beg my friends, pardon if I give too large a dose of Arab affairs, but it is very seldom that one can see so far into their minds: and nothing is more fascinating than getting inside the thoughts of another race of men.

Petrie usually took Ali's side when framing the disputes and advised him to stay stronger. In a racist tone and turn Petrie states:

> I must do Ali justice to say that he was wheeled into having Fatima by his mother, contrary to all his inclinations, as he declared he would sooner have the blackest negress.

The disputes seem to have been resolved, since in 1900 Hilda refers to an unnamed wife of Ali baking bread. Margaret Murray's photograph album shows both Fatima, Um Mohammed, and Sara, Ali's second wife, making bread.

The only records we have of the full names of the Egyptian woman archaeologists are in Petrie's recruitment and paylists, including those meant to keep track of payments. Yet while these feature the names of Egyptian women archaeologists, they should not be taken as representative of the total number of women's contributions. These lists remain selective as they do not include the (mostly) women removing earth or bringing food to the excavations. Thus, even when names are recorded, they continue to reveal gender and excavation role biases.

Entries about Egyptian women in the archive are stark evidence of strategic narcissism, which can be defined as a tendency to define the world only in relation to the West.[5] This strategic narcissist lens has shaped and defined how and why local archaeologists are (un)recorded in the colonial archival record.

III Captured by the Colonial Lens

While Egyptian archaeologists dominate the archaeological photographic archive, their names and stories are unrecorded.[6] We only have their faces without their names, except for payrolls, where names are meticulously recorded for the sake of keeping track of finances. Only the *reis* (chiefs), who acted as the director's right hands, and sometimes eyes, as Petrie himself reveals in his diaries, had the fortune of being recorded and identified, given the beyond-archaeological assistance and closer relations they had with the foreign archaeological mission's directors. The majority, while fundamental to the work, remain as unrecorded faces. This phenomenon documents colonial attitudes and their impact on local family histories and memories, most of which are lost forever.

[5] McMaster 2021.
[6] Riggs 2019.

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Egyptian women were photographed as part of the wider collective rather than being explicitly asked to pose in group photos in the way Egyptian male archaeologists were sometimes asked to. This should not be solely read as colonial gender bias, but also as a response to local traditions and conservatism.

The only instance where Petrie took a photo of an Egyptian woman archaeologist was the case of the 'Tanis girl', Mohammed Hassan (Figure 17.1). On 22 February 1884, during Petrie's first season at Tanis (modern San el Hagar), a girl excavator was seeking employment in Petrie's excavations. For fear of misogyny and as a way to ensure she could secure employment, she gave her father's name, Mohammed Hassan, instead of her female name. Petrie found the story amusing and stated to his *reis* Ali Jabri: 'Did they think I did not see it was a girl!' He took a photograph of her, a rare occasion for a young Egyptian female excavator at the time, but he still included her in his diaries as Mohammed Hassan. He never bothered to even ask her real name.

Figure 17.1 San el Hagar (Tanis) girl (left), named as Mohammed Hassan in Petrie's 1884 Tanis archive, and Mohammed Hefnawi (right)
Petrie photograph 'Tanis series' no.105 from a copy at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology Archive

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No other photographs of Egyptian women excavators could be found in Petrie's Delta archaeological archive except for the few photographs in Margaret Murray's album, which reveal a more ethnographic lens. The photographs feature Ali's wives, Fatima (Figure 17.2) and Sara (Figure 17.3) baking bread. These photos should be used as evidence to highlight the roles Egyptian women have played outside the field, for this labour equally contributed to the overall process of archaeological knowledge production. A glimpse of the Egyptian women archaeologists at work is offered by the Tell el-Amarna 1926–1927 excavation archival records (Figures 17.4 and 17.5).

Figure 17.2 Fatima, Ali Sueifi's first wife
Margaret Murray Album 1889–1900

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Figure 17.3 Sara, Ali Sueifi's second wife
Margaret Murray Album 1889–1900

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Figure 17.4 Girls and women in the excavation of Tell el-Amarna by the Egypt Exploration Society in 1926–1927
Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

Figure 17.5 Girls and women in the excavation of Tell el-Amarna by the Egypt Exploration Society in 1926–1927
Courtesy of the Egypt Exploration Society

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IV Listen to Her! Strategic Empathy through the Archaeological Archive

In 2018, I was invited by the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology to guest curate an exhibition on Egyptian women as part of University College London's Black History month events and activities.[7] Titled 'Listen to Her!', the exhibition was primarily intended to turn the volume up on the contribution and activism of ordinary contemporary Egyptian women – those who might not have broken the glass ceiling of female activism as defined by the 'West', but whose daily presence in Egypt's public space, broadly defined, is, by local terms, an act of activism.

The tension that exists between the geographical, socio-political and cultural positioning of University College London (UCL) and the Petrie Museum, and the mission of Black History Month's centring of Black female pioneers, generates similar challenges to the ones I face as an Indigenous female researcher who works with the archaeological archive. On the one hand, visitors' surveys conducted at the Petrie Museum usually reveal public resistance to, if not resentment of, modern layers of Egyptian heritage.[8] Audiences prefer the ancient concept of Egypt, as drawn and displayed by the museum, to its present presence. On the other hand, western stereotypes tend to solely focus on wider Middle Eastern and North African women's external attire. When it comes to female activism, such a gaze deprives them of agency and right of choice, and whitewashes their long history of activism. This is evident, for example, in calls to export the 2017 #MeToo movement to the Middle East, which ignore how, since 2012, Egypt has been witnessing large waves of female protests calling out sexual harassment. These protests led to the introduction, in 2014, of an Egyptian Penal Code that defines and criminalises sexual harassment for the first time and increases penalties for other related crimes. Most recently, in August 2021, it was amended to turn sexual harassment from a misdemeanour into a felony, and penalties have increased

[7] Listen to Her! 2019.
[8] MacDonald and Shaw 2004.

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as a result. Alternatively, UCL, like many other UK-based institutions and entities, focuses on celebrating pioneering women. Those who contributed to women's history's 'firsts' rather than the ordinary women. While celebrating the history of female firsts is an absolutely welcomed and long-overdue positive change, by obscuring the activism of ordinary women whose contributions, for a variety of socio-cultural, political and religious reasons, might not match the 'history of firsts' as it is usually celebrated and defined by academic institutions, we run the risk of replicating the repressive cycles they are constantly pushing against.

The main challenge and commitment for the exhibition was to centre the agency, influence and authorship of Egyptian women. Showcasing stories of Egyptian women defying case-by-case existing stereotypes and defined by 'strategic empathy' can offer a more balanced solution to existing biases and absences. While rooted in the field of political and international relations,[9] strategic empathy can be useful for unsilencing the archaeological archive regarding Egyptian women's contributions. This is because strategic empathy pays particular attention to the ideology, aspirations and emotions that drive and constrain the other, and opens up to how others view themselves and the world around them.[10]

The primary means of applying strategic empathy is through small group framing rather than assuming the 'Other' is a homogenous collective. The 'Listen to Her!' exhibition, thus, focused on six individual and collective stories narrating the various repressive labels females face in Egypt through their various life stages and their local forms of activism. From the girl excavator Mohammed Hassan, to the singer Mounira al Mahdia, the single mom shoe polisher Seesa, the equal pay factory worker activist Wedad el Demerdash, the anti-sexual harassment graffiti artists and the hijabi superhero webcomic author Deena Mohammed, the exhibition showcased the realities of Egyptian women's lives and their day-to-day activism to claim their right to the public space.

[9] McMaster 2021.
[10] Abd el-Gawad and Stevenson 2023.

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The main aim of the exhibition was to offer a model of strategic empathy engagement using the historical archaeological archives, contemporary events and conditions, and the usual museum setting to counter colonial as well as modern and contemporary stereotypes and stigmas surrounding non-Western museums. In this respect, not only are the silences in the archive uncovered but, most importantly, in addition to being acknowledged as (post-)colonial subjects, the real-life conditions of local communities are put forward as a multivocality endowed with a multiplicity of (at times conflicting) needs and expectations. In other words, their complexities are acknowledged just like what is afforded to any other society beyond the narrow colonial lens usually offered in Egypt-focused exhibitions.

The story of the 'Tanis girl' Mohammed Hassan was the exhibition's conversation starter in that it set the tone and the narrative to follow (Figure 17.6). Mohammed Hassan's known biography was used to showcase the inequalities (some of which still exist) Egyptian girls faced in rural Egypt during the early nineteenth century. Girls were usually denied education in favour of their brothers.[11] They were also denied access to much of the public space, which was restricted to boys and men. Yet, when it came to economical contribution to families' income, all of these restrictions were lifted, and girls and women were allowed access to not only spaces, but also equal opportunities.

[11] el Saadawi 1983.

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Figure 17.6 San el Hagar (Tanis) girl, Mohammed Hassan panel for 'Listen to Her! Turning the volume up on Egypt's ordinary women' exhibition 14 September–22 December 2018

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Here, the archaeological archive acted as a contact zone between the three timelines within which Egypt can operate in museums: antiquity through the ancient Egyptian collections, the recent past through the history of archaeology collections and communities and the contemporary present through and within which women operate. The exhibition was the first attempt to recover Mohammed Hassan's, 'Tanis girl's', voice beyond the archival record and to amplify her voice and the activist nature of her attempting and succeeding at securing a job within Petrie's excavations. As a result, in 2020, Mohammed Hassan became part of the Petrie Museum's permanent display alongside Petrie, Ali Sueifi and Hilda Petrie (Figure 17.7). This marks the first and only instance where an ordinary contemporary Egyptian woman is celebrated as a member of an excavation team within ancient Egyptian museum displays.

Another lasting impact of the exhibition is a board of honour with the names of all the women archaeologists who took part in Petrie's excavations currently on permanent display at the museum. Mohammed Hassan is currently an annual standard feature in the Egypt Exploration Society's International Women's Day social media posts alongside Amelia Edwards. She has also featured in a *Nature* piece commemorating the contribution of women of colour to the history of science.[12] Such modern reception will not make up for how her name remains unrecorded given Petrie's bias towards recording the exoticness rather than the humanness of a girl bearing a boy's name for employment's sake. Yet it is an attempt to bring her the much-deserved social justice and inclusion she and her contemporaries deserve.

[12] *Nature* 591: 501–502.

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Figure 17.7 San el Hagar (Tanis) girl, Mohammed Hassan, as featured at the entrance galleries of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian and Sudanese Archaeology since 2020

V Concluding Thoughts

By resorting to gender and class selectivity in their attempts to recover Indigenous contributions to archaeological knowledge production, scholars can replicate the very same colonial model the current Egyptianising turn aims to challenge. In the case of women, archaeological archival records could be used as a contact zone to provoke strategic empathy towards local, particularly female, communities. By forefronting their conditions, needs and activism, we can bring some social justice not only to past local communities (Table 17.1), but equally to contemporary community groups.

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Table 17.1 *Girls and women in Petrie's Delta excavations 1884–1914*

Date	Site	Girls/women
1884	San el Hagar	Fatimah um Afi
		Amneh um Ahmed
		Amneh um Ali
		Amneh Hassan
		Amneh Hassanen
		Amneh um Muhd
		Amneh Salameh
		Amneh Salim
		Fatimah Abd el Bar
		Fatimah Dafani
		Farha
		Fatimah (um Abdallah)
		Fatimeh um Ahmed
		Fatimeh Ali
		Fatimeh um Basha
		Fatimeh Um Basha Ali
		Fatimeh Um Salah
		Fatimeh Ibrahim
		Fatimeh Suliman
		Fatimeh Umbarak
		Gemeleh Salameh
		Fatimeh Hassanein
		Khadidjdah
		Khadijeh
		Khadijeh (um) Ibrahim
		Khadijeh Mahmud
		Mabruka um Ali
		Amneh Minajdi
		Sabha Minajdi
		Sabha Minshawi
		Um El Shah Minajdi
		Saida Musi
		Aisha Mutwaly
		Asharieh Mutwali
		Fatimah Um Rakha
		Salimeh Um Rakha
		Fatimah Riani
		Sabha AbduAllah
		Sabha Ali
		Sabha Ali Salameh
		Sabha Salameh
		Saida Salameh

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Table 17.1 (*cont.*)

Date	Site	Girls/women
		Sarieh um Salim
		Umalkher Hassanen
		Umalkher um Daud
		Umbaraka um Ibrahim
		Zenab Ali
		Zenabeh Ali
		Zenib
		Ali Jabri
1885	Nabira (Naukratis)	Fatimeh Dafani
		Fatimah Riani
		Aisha
		Fatimeh Ali
1886	Nabasha and Dafanna	Fatimeh Ahed
		Ayesha (um) Ahmed
		Amneh Ali
		Amneh Ahmed
		Fatimeh um Auad
		Fatimeh Abd er Rahman
		Fatimeh Ahmed
		Fatimeh Ali
		Fatimeh Faraj
		Fatimeh Jibali
		Fatimeh Muhd
		Fatimeh Sidahmed
		Hafizeh
		Khadra Ibrm
		Khadjyeh Hassan
		Khadra Khalil
		Khadra Muhd
		Mabruka Khalil
		Mariam Ahmed
		Ayesha Muhd
		Ayesha Mutwali
		Sabha Hassan
		Sabha Minshawi
		Sabha Sherqawi
		Sabra um el Gandur
		Saida Gandur
		Saida Um Said
		Um el Farah Shalabi
		Hagar shehati
		Um Ali

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Table 17.1 (*cont.*)

Date	Site	Girls/women
1913-14	Lahun and Memphis	Um es Sad Arifa Yusuf Zeynab Musi Zeynab Mustafa Zenab (um) Ali Aysa Huseyn Aysa Salem Sabra

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