

Artefacts of excavation

Alice Stevenson and **Emma Libonati** on the AHRC-funded project ‘Artefacts of Excavation’, which aims to examine the practice of object distribution and its impact on archaeology, Egyptology and museums.

In September 1883 Amelia B. Edwards stood before the Sixth Oriental Congress in Leiden and enquired: ‘Is there then no possibility of organising some system of enquiry by means of which information may be sought and collected throughout Europe and America, whereby the particulars of dispersed relics may be collected for the benefit of science?’ More than one hundred and thirty years later a new collaborative project between the University of Oxford, University College London, and the EES is attempting to address that very same problem, this time for material excavated by the EES and Petrie’s British School of Archaeology in Egypt (BSAE).

‘Artefacts of Excavation’ is a three-year project, funded by the UK’s Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), which is investigating the international distribution of archaeological finds from EEF/EES and BSAE excavations between 1880 and 1980. Scouring through museum collections, pouring over object catalogues, and sifting across archives for information about dispersed antiquities are activities on which many Egyptologists have spent countless hours, either tracking down objects from particular excavations or building up histories of specific museum collections. What there has never been is a critical examination of the whole practice of distribution or how it impacted upon the development of – and relationships between – archaeology, Egyptology, and museums. Previous work has also tended to focus only upon the early period of exploration up until 1925, the year Petrie left to excavate in ‘Egypt over the border’,



Finds from Grenfell and Hunt’s EEF-sponsored work in the Fayum, 1901, being crated and loaded onto a camel for transport.

London exhibition of finds from the BSAE Hawara excavations of 1911. Some of the Roman mummy portraits that can be seen are now in museums in Brooklyn, Copenhagen, Edinburgh, Manchester and Oxford.



Palestine. Finds distribution, however, continued until the late 1980s, albeit in much changed social, political, and intellectual conditions.

The project is an ambitious undertaking, not least because of the sheer number of institutions that benefited from what was known as the ‘partage’ system. From the late 19th century onward such agreements permitted a share of finds from officially-sanctioned excavations to be exported after the Antiquities Service had made a selection. Following a temporary exhibition of the season’s work in London, assemblages of artefacts were then divided up. Division was principally on the basis of institutional sponsorship, or by taking into account geographical clusters of subscribers’ donations that enabled local and regional museums to benefit in kind. We estimate that through such means more than 140 institutions around the world received material between the founding of the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1882 and the First World War alone: some 75 in the UK, about 35 in the US, and more than 30 others globally. Countries as far apart as Japan, South Africa, New Zealand, Australia and Canada were beneficiaries. In all, hundreds of thousands of objects were dispersed in this way.

By studying the necessity of an exchange in objects for patronage of excavation it is possible to trace how these finds became objects of colonial desire and to contribute to histories of late 19th- and 20th-century nationhood and imperialism. Similarly, by exploring their complex afterlives – as these finds continue to be circulated both institutionally and commercially – we aim to follow shifting attitudes to archaeological heritage through to the present day.

Whereas Edwards had to rely upon advertisements in literary journals and labour-intensive correspondence campaigns to gather information, today the internet provides a far quicker and easier way to re-connect the distributed mass of a century of fieldwork in Egypt. One of the project’s first tasks has therefore been to establish a website, hosted at the Griffith Institute in Oxford, that can both accommodate the outputs of our research and provide a tool for sharing information. This is important because untangling this history is no easy feat, especially for the non-specialist: it is a maze of paperwork, specialist terminology, and opaque site codes. The initial goal of the website is to provide institutions that received material – including museums, schools, and libraries – with background details that can help to identify and contextualize collections. To this end, we have not only made available the distribution lists held by the EES and UCL’s Petrie Museum, but also provided background information that we hope will assist non-specialists to understand these documents and permit them to make discoveries for themselves. For example, we are pulling together details about the people who worked on excavations and the different excavators’ marks that were written on finds from specific years of fieldwork.

Sharing data online is part of an ongoing endeavour and we welcome feedback as the project develops.

Although one aim of the project is to establish the scale and extent of the spread of objects, it is archival research that lies at the heart of the research. Our points of departure are the records held at the EES and the Petrie Museum, which document the division of excavated material and their intended destinations. Correspondence

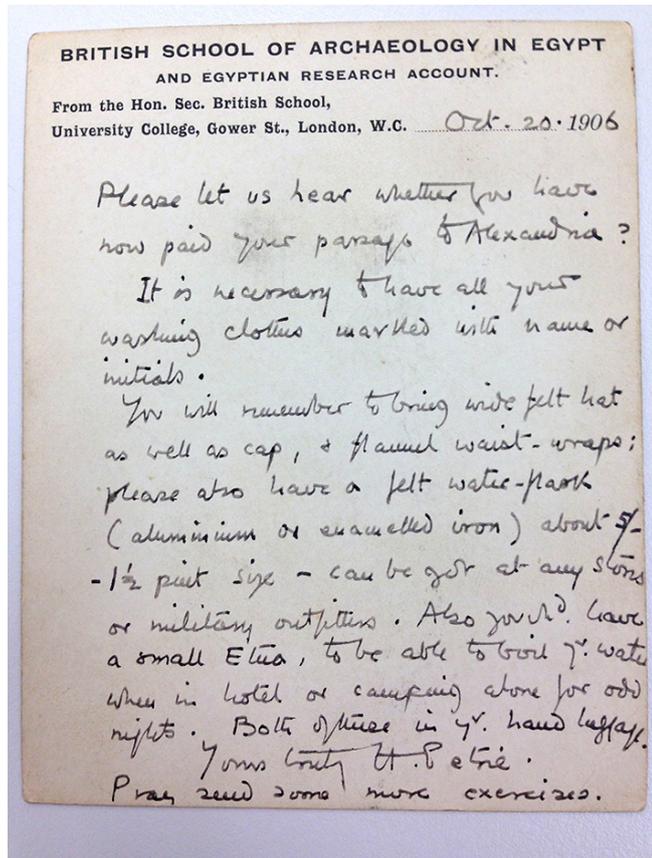


files in these institutions, in the Griffith Institute, and in museums around the world give further insight into some of the diverse motivations to contribute funds to excavations and the responses that people had to the crates of Egyptian antiquities that turned up at the doors of museums, schools and libraries. It is here that the project begins to encounter the huge cast of characters who became caught up in the discovery and circulation of ancient Egyptian material culture. As noted in the Pitt Rivers Museum’s ‘relational museum’ project, people do not just collect objects – objects also collect people.

In terms of discovery, the exploits of Flinders Petrie are well known, but fieldwork is always a team effort, built upon the labour of numerous individuals. As Stephen Quirke (2010) has shown in his monograph of the same title, this includes the ‘hidden hands’ of Petrie’s Egyptian workforce. Through archival research in the EES and in the Petrie these people can be reinstated into tales of uncovering material *in situ* by identifying excavation find-spot marks on objects, linking artefacts back to specific

individuals whose names were not otherwise dispersed along with the finds.

That workforce also included numerous Western personalities who are mentioned only in passing in excavation memoirs and whose careers have made little impression upon the discipline. These people have a very limited presence in central London's archives, but their stories remain to be uncovered in other repositories



Far left: Old Kingdom stone vessel. The markings record its collection history from its excavation from Mostagedda (tomb 10012), its acquisition by Henry Wellcome (R4031/1537) and finally it being accessioned into the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL (UC25504).

Left: Letter from Flinders Petrie to Edwin Ward advising him on what to wear on excavation. Courtesy of the National Museum of Scotland Library.

around the world. A case in point is Edwin Ward (1880–1934), a Museum Assistant in the art department of Edinburgh's Royal Museum. Ward joined Petrie at Rifeh in 1907 and Memphis in 1908 in order – according to the Museum's 1906 annual report – to bring the Museum 'into closer connection with the work of archaeological exploration'. His archive in the National Museum of Scotland provides a different angle on how BSAE digs were organised and how they progressed. For instance, amongst Ward's papers from Petrie are instructions on exactly what to wear on an excavation, how to get there, and methods of planning and building a dig house.

Vignettes like these are not just illustrative, but make it possible to interweave more personal stories with the sweeping narratives of imperial exploration in Egypt. The complex tales that artefact distributions can tell affect both local and national histories, and many more insights can be gained by tracing the path of an object from the earth to the display case.

□ Alice Stevenson is Curator of UCL's Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology. Her research focuses on the archaeology of Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt. She also has an interest in disciplinary histories. Emma Libonati is a research associate on the AHRC-funded project 'Artefacts of Excavation'. She is primarily interested in the material culture of the Hellenistic and Roman Near East, in particular the production of stone sculpture.