

The Petrie Museum of 'Race' Archaeology?

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The essay makes the case that the Petrie Museum at UCL—a collection of objects from Egypt and Sudan comprising over 7,000 years of history from the Nile valley in northern Africa—is as much a museum of 'race' archaeology as Egyptian archaeology. Tracing the relationship between slavery, racism and curatorial practices at museums, I excavate the lifelong beliefs of William Petrie in migration, racial mixing and skull measuring through objects such as the craniometer now housed at the Department of Statistical Sciences. The correlation of racialised groups and purported intelligence in Petrie's work is examined, and I finally claim that his ideas need to be re-examined for an understanding of the Petrie Museum and their legacy within UCL today.

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The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at University College London (UCL) is made up of a collection of 80,000 objects from Egypt and Sudan that comprise over 7,000 years of history from the Nile valley in northern Africa. The museum is celebrated for its combination of objects, excavation and archival records, which give a unique insight into the ancient context of the collection as well as the work of the museum's founding archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853-1942). These records also give an insight into the racially determinist viewpoints of Petrie and how he interpreted some of the objects in the museum according to ideas about race in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Petrie was far from alone in having such strongly articulated and deeply held views on race and ability; Augustus

Henry Lane-Fox Pitt Rivers (1827-1900) and Alfred Cort Haddon (1855-1940) had different but equally racially deterministic visions that influenced the respective university museums at Oxford and Cambridge that they helped found. In this paper I argue that it is necessary to acknowledge the racially deterministic ideas of founding figures in museums in order to address the corrosive legacy of racial construction and hierarchies traditionally privileging the collectors and people belonging to these institutions. This is even more pertinent when the material culture in question has been removed from a country under British imperial occupation that used racial hierarchies to justify military and economic intervention. This paper offers some brief 'snapshots' from within the museum collections and archives to make the case that the Petrie Museum is as much a museum of 'race' archaeology as Egyptian archaeology. However, before I present those examples some thought should be given to how race and constructions of race have been understood within the museum sector more widely.

Museums and 'Race'

Museums housing collections of ethnographic / anthropological material or collections with connections to slavery and the slave trade have obvious reference points to the construction of racism and race. The work of George W. Stocking Jr and James Clifford, particularly led the way on re-evaluating anthropological collections and their collection history within the context of ideas of about race. The impact of anthropological collecting with regard to specific countries and continents has long been explored in more detail in numerous studies, particularly with regard to museums and collections from indigenous communities or colonised peoples. For example, Annie Coombes' *Reinventing Africa: Museums, Material Culture and Popular Imagination in Late Victorian and Edwardian Britain* (1994) drew attention to how collections taken from Africa formed ideas of British national identity as well as the ethical quagmire around the collection methods – even by the standards of the time - such as the punitive British military expedition against the Kingdom of Benin (now Nigeria) in 1897 Louise Tythacott has offered an example of how spatial

organisation and object interpretation promoted scientific racism in Liverpool Museum to the public in the late Victorian and early Edwardian period.¹ In fact, such racially deterministic ways of looking at human beings were common in museums worldwide until World War Two, as the 1933 *Races of Mankind* exhibition at the Field Museum of Natural History in Chicago illustrates.² Many museums that house and display anthropological collections that were influenced by scientific racism, such as the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, now actively promote programmes that deal with the legacy of colonialism and racism embedded in the history of their collections.³

A number of museums have engaged with human enslavement and its legacy in a more permanent way than the temporary self-congratulatory froth of 2007, when the bicentenary of the abolition of the slave trade was commemorated in the UK.⁴ The permanent London, Sugar and Slavery display at the Museum of Docklands in London and the International Museum of Slavery in Liverpool, both opened in 2007, are two of the best examples of a long-term and nuanced engagement with the history and contemporary issues resulting from the enslavement of millions of Africans.⁵ However, many of the initiatives and identification of heritage and collections with the history of enslaved Africans were short-lived and short-term. There is frequently debate over what histories are taught and represented in educational institutions. In an article on 'race' and public trust in museums in the US, Regina Faden has pointed out that 'minority communities are not asking for anything extraordinary, they want to see a history of the US that includes the stories of their

¹ L. Tythacott, 'Race on display: the 'Melanian', 'Mongolian' and 'Caucasian' galleries at Liverpool Museum (1896-1929)', *Journal of Early Popular Visual Culture*, 2011, 9, 2: 131-142.

² T. L. Teslow, 'Reifying Race. Science and art in Races of Mankind at the Field Museum of Natural History' in Sharon Macdonald, ed., *The Politics of Display: Museums, Science, Culture*, London, Routledge, 1998.

³ C. Gosden, F. Larson, with A. Petch, *Knowing Things: Exploring the Collections of the Pitt-Rivers Museum 1884 – 1945*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.

⁴ L. Smith, G. Cubitt, K. Fouseki, and R. Wilson, *Representing Enslavement and Abolition in Museums: Ambiguous Engagements*, London, Routledge, 2011.

⁵ D. Spence, T. Wareham, C. Bressey, J. Bam-Hutchison, and A. Day, 'The Public as Co-producers: Making the London, Sugar and Slavery Gallery, Museum of London Docklands', in C. A. Scott, ed., *Museums and Public Value*, Ashgate, UK, 2013.

families and reflects their experience, like other Americans'.⁶ This is not a new development. The reclamation of history by 'special interest' groups was predicted by historian Arthur Shomburg in 1925 and increasing scrutiny of the absence of African-American and American-Indian histories in museums in the US has been taking place since the early 1960s.⁷

It is clear that collections in museums that evidence the experiences and exploitation of enslaved Africans or with material culture collected (or taken) from colonized and indigenous people have a distinct relation to race and its construction in the western world. However, constructions of race and racial thinking have pervaded museums more widely. Petrie had deeply held views about race that affected his collecting practices and analysis, the legacy of which can be seen in the museum and UCL more widely. The examples of Petrie's racially deterministic thinking presented in this short paper are just a few from Petrie's long career as an archaeologist.⁸

Snapshots of 'race' from the Petrie Museum and beyond

The first example illustrates how ideas and research around race were shared amongst academics within UCL more widely. The Department of Statistical Sciences holds a craniometer, used for measuring skulls that belonged to Petrie. A letter accompanying the instrument that is dated to 6 April 1911 and from the Egyptologist and Petrie's assistant at UCL, Margaret Murray to George Dancer Thane, Professor of Anatomy identifies it as Petrie's. The craniometer is part of a measuring kit; accompanying it are various notes describing the use of the other instruments, some of which appear to be in Petrie's handwriting and identifying measuring devices as belonging to polymath scientist Francis Galton. The craniometer corresponds to Petrie's description of an ideal measuring device that he had made to Galton in 1883:

⁶ R. Faden, 'Museums and Race: Living up to the Public Trust,' *Museums and Social Issues: A Journal of Reflective Discourse*, 2007, 2, 1: 78.

⁷ K. Message, *Museums and Social Activism: Engaged Protest*, London, Routledge, 2014.

⁸ Some of the examples are presented in more detail in my book *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie*, London, Bloomsbury Press, 2013.

A frame length enough to go round the head with a fixed point in front & another on one side & sliding pistons with narrow ends to pass through the hair & read off on a scale would enable breadths and length to be quickly read off.⁹

The instrument needs to be placed within the context of the stress on measurements of the body to define racial difference – particularly the head and skull – in physical anthropology during this period. A particular focus was placed on the head as it was deemed important to measure the capacity of the skull in order to extrapolate 'brain mass and social attributes such as social intelligence'¹⁰.

A clear example of this focus on skull size and the reading of social attributes from calculated brain mass can be seen in a graph of 'skull triangles' by Petrie on the purpose of three-dimensional graphs for The Anthropological Institute's journal *Man* published in 1902. The graph mapped skull dimensions and brain mass then positioned different racial groups against intelligence and climate, with 'aboriginal', 'eskimo' and 'negro' skulls plotted as least intelligent while 'English', 'Ancient Egyptian' and 'German' plotted as most.¹¹ The graph is typical of Petrie's and the wider anthropological community's assumptions around skull size, intelligence and race. The same year saw the publication of a paper by Cicely Fawcett and Alice Lee entitled 'A Second Study of the Variation and Correlation of the Human Skull with special reference to the Naqada Crania' in Karl Pearson's and Walter Weldon's (both at UCL) new anthropometrics journal *Biometrika*.¹² This was based on a collection of skulls that Petrie had made at the request of Pearson from his excavations at the early Egyptian (or Predynastic) site of Naqada in 1894-5. The rigorous systems of analysis of the skulls that Fawcett and Lee applied were influenced by recent

⁹ W. M. F. Petrie to F. Galton, letter dated 12 February 1885, Galton Archive: 297, UCL Special Collections.

¹⁰ M. Kwint and R. Wingate, *Brains: Mind as Matter*, UK, Profile Books, 2012, 41.

¹¹ W. M. F. Petrie, 'The Use of Diagrams', *Man*, 1902, 2: 81-85

¹² C. D. Fawcett, with A. Lee. 'A second study of the variation and correlation of the Human Skull with special reference to the Naqada Crania', *Biometrika*, 1902, 408-467.

international standardisation in anthropometric measuring and reflected the importance placed on statistical analysis of 'racial features' in inheritance by Pearson at the National Eugenics Laboratory at UCL.

Returning to the 1885 letter on an ideal craniometer from Petrie to Galton, this letter illustrates a burgeoning friendship and working relationship between the younger archaeologist and the older scientist. Petrie had been marked out by Galton as a (literally) visionary mathematician in his *Inquiries into Human Faculty* (1883) and Galton had persuaded the Royal Society to fund Petrie's first major publication *The Pyramids and Temples of Giza* (1883). In 1886, when Petrie was commissioned to take 'Racial Photographs from the Ancient Egyptian Pictures and Sculptures' by a British Association for the Advancement of Science committee chaired by Galton, the £20 awarded was little more than a token and Galton funded the expedition from his own private resources. The result was a collection of 150 casts of 268 heads, 40 photographs and further photographs of the casts with notes by Petrie identifying these different heads of people – usually from towns in (now) Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Israel – into different racial types. Some of these casts were exhibited as 'Syrian Heads' at the South Kensington Museum under the auspices of the Palestinian Exploration Fund and they had an afterlife as illustrations in philologist A. H. Sayce's *Races of the Old Testament* (1891); a popular publication marketed as a 'gift book' or Sunday School prize book. The casts were donated to the British Museum and it was thought that the Petrie Museum did not own any of the casts or material from *Racial Photographs*. As a result of research behind the 2011 Petrie Museum exhibition *Typecast: Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie*, one cast and a small collection of photographs from Petrie's Racial Photographs were recognised as such in the collection and archives of the museum. Petrie repeatedly intellectually returned to the work he carried out in 1886-87.

Among the numerous trays of terracotta objects excavated or purchased from around the ancient site of Memphis in lower Egypt is a drawer marked 'Memphis "Race" Heads'. It contains 57 small heads, probably from terracotta figurines, that

date from the Ptolemaic/Greek (330-30BC) or Roman (30BC-AD400) ruled Egypt. Occasional typed labels on yellowing paper indicates a head's racial identity as perceived by Petrie, such as 'Sumerian' (an ancient civilisation located in present day Iraq). This tray is a fraction of about 300 heads preserved in the Petrie Museum collection, though no other drawer is similarly marked. The discovery of these heads, which Petrie argued were by Greco-Egyptian artists carefully recording racial types, merited a mention in *The Times* on 15 May 1908. Petrie recorded his frustration with the lack of 'any collection of ancient portraiture of Races beyond that which I made in Egypt twenty-two years ago' in his second excavation report on Memphis.¹³ Memphis was a diverse city comprising groups of Jewish, Greek, Macedonian Greek, Egyptian, Persian and other peoples in the Persian, Ptolemaic and Roman ruled periods.¹⁴ The exhibition *Alexander's Legacy – The Greeks in Egypt* in 2011 at the Allard Pierson Museum in Amsterdam, used dozens of similar heads from Alexandria and Memphis to illustrate ethnic diversity in the cosmopolitan hubs of Ptolemaic Egypt. The Louvre in Paris displays terracotta heads from Smyrna, dating to the same period, to illustrate diversity in the Hellenistic (or Greek influenced) world. However, the heads could have had religious or festive uses¹⁵ and their purpose is 'shrouded in mystery'.¹⁶ Assuming that the heads represent 'ethnic types' arguably project assumptions about western portraiture and representations of 'otherness' onto the ancient past and needs more interrogation. The heads may equally show the caricatures of the ancient world or the stereotypes of the modern.

Jumping forward to the 1920s, debate over the racial origins of the newly found early agricultural settlements found at the site of Badari was affected by assumptions about racial intelligence, civilisation, migration and skull measuring. Petrie, who had

¹³ W. M. F. Petrie, *The Palace of Apries (Memphis II)*, London, British School of Archaeology, 1909, 16.

¹⁴ D. J. Thompson, *Memphis under the Ptolemies*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 1988; N. Lewis, *Greeks in Ptolemaic Egypt: Case Studies in the Social History of Hellenic Egypt*, Oakville: American Society of Papyrologists, 2001; D.E. McCoskey, 'Race before "Whiteness": Studying identity in Ptolemaic Egypt', *Critical Sociology*, 2002, 28, 1-2: 13-39.

¹⁵ S. Ashton, *Petrie's Ptolemaic and Roman Memphis*, London, Institute of Archaeology, UCL, 2003.

¹⁶ D. M. Bailey, *Catalogue of Terracottas in the British Museum. Volume IV: Ptolemaic and Roman Memphis*, London, The British Museum Press, 2008.

overseen the recent excavations at Badari, argued in *Man* that the Badarian civilisation was 'Solutrean' (i.e. Palaeolithic European) and had migrated into Egypt from an 'Asiatic centre' from the Caucasus as 'the resemblance of the Colchians [a region in the southern Caucasus] to the Egyptians, stated by Herodotus may be remembered'.¹⁷ However, Petrie's colleague Guy Brunton, who had actually carried out the excavations at Badari, stated in a letter in the next issue of *Man* that the finds from Badarian culture has the strongest affinity with Nubian and used anthropometric measurements of fifty of the skulls to argue that 'the type is essentially the same as the Predynastic Egyptian, but with some Negroid tendencies'.¹⁸ Brunton challenged Petrie's racially deterministic assumptions about racial intelligence and migration while using the same anthropometric tools that Pearson and Petrie had used. This challenge was repeated in the anthropological section of the British Association for the Advancement of Science meeting at Oxford in 1926 where Petrie again argued that the Badarian settlements showed 'Caucasian' origins. Gertrude Caton-Thompson, who had worked alongside Brunton at Badari, gave evidence from her investigations of the habitation mounds that the culture was an 'advanced native neolithic' one, not the result of a migrating tribe with European origins.¹⁹

Petrie's beliefs in migration, racial mixing and skull measuring were lifelong. In 1933, he retired from UCL, but continued to excavate in Palestine and settled in Jerusalem. A cuttings book in the Petrie Museum archive records Petrie's advocacy of the 'Benefits of Migration' to Britain for persecuted Germans (Jewish and non-Jewish). In this 1939 letter to the *Palestine Post*, Petrie outlined the benefits that generations of foreign migrants, such as the Romans, Huguenots and more recently German and German-Jewish, brought to Britain; arguing that 'foreign migration has been the making of Britain'.²⁰ Petrie's argument reflected his ideas about civilisation being a

¹⁷ W. M. F. Petrie, 'Early Man in Egypt', *Man*, 1925, 25: 129.

¹⁸ G. Brunton, 'Early Man in Egypt', *Man*, 1925, 25: 168.

¹⁹ 'Proceedings of Section H: Anthropology of the British Association, Oxford Meeting. August 4-11, 1926', *Man*, 1925, 26: 171-172.

²⁰ W. M. F. Petrie. 'Letter to Palestine Post', 19 January 1939, Cuttings Book, Petrie Museum Archives.

product of the 'right' sort of racial mixing through migration of the most talented and fit people that were outlined in his Huxley Award lecture thirty years previously.²¹ However, the most vivid example of Petrie's lifelong commitment to his belief in the power of the skull to illustrate the racial and character attributes of a person is the donation of his own head to science on his death in 1942. According to Dr W. E. Thompson, the chief bacteriologist of the hospital in Jerusalem in which Petrie died, Petrie asked for his head to be sent to the Royal College of Surgeons in London as a 'specimen of a typical British skull'.²² The story of the donation of Petrie's head has since become shrouded in mythology and his intention of it becoming an object of study and education has been overlooked in the difficulties of interpretation and embarrassment around Petrie's original motivations for it.²³ Ultimately the donation of his head to science illustrates Petrie's belief not just in racial determinism but also the power of museums to study and educate about race.

Conclusion

An exhibition *Revealing Histories: Myths about Race* (2007-09) at the Manchester Museum examined the construction of race, racism and racial identities within the museum collections.²⁴ A predynastic black-rimmed vase excavated by Petrie at Naqada and labelled by him as belonging to the 'New Race' formed part of the display. When Petrie first excavated these vases in the Naqada cemetery in 1895 he thought that the unusual material uncovered belonged to a migrating Libyan 'new race' that entered Egypt in the first intermediate period (2180-2040 BC). A few years later Petrie accepted the evidence of Jacques de Morgan that the material belonged to the predynastic period (i.e. before the first dynasty in 3100 BC approx). Petrie's biographer Margaret Drower commented on the oddness of both his analysis and

21 W. M. F. Petrie. 'Migrations: The Huxley Lecture of 1906', London, Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland, 1906.

22 W. E. Thompson to A. Keith, Letter dated 9 October 1944, Petrie Museum Archives.

23 S. Perry and D. Challis. 'Flinders Petrie and the Curation of Heads', *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 2013, 38, 3 : 275-89.

24 B. Lynch and S. J. M. Alberti. 'Legacies of Prejudice: Racism, Co-Production and Radical Trust in the Museum', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 2010, 25, 1: 13-35, 24.

the fact that he clung to his theory for two years in spite of other evidence.²⁵ However, it is not odd when Petrie's thinking is put in context of his deeply held views on racial determinism and migration. Evidence of Petrie's early belief in this migrating Libyan race re-emerged last year when a black-rimmed predynastic pot, possibly given by Petrie to a fellow archaeologist, was found in a garage in Cornwall²⁶ (Stevenson, 2014; Kennedy, 2014). Alongside the pot was a commercially printed card describing it as 'Libyan Pottery' discovered by Prof W. M. Flinders Petrie in 1894-5 with a faintly pencilled number 1754 indicating the tomb site number. The vase is currently on display in the entrance to the Petrie Museum and understanding what Petrie meant by 'Libyan Pottery' makes our interpretation richer. Petrie's racial ideas continue to have an impact and need to be re-examined for an understanding of the Petrie Museum and their legacy within UCL today.

²⁵ M. S. Drower. *Flinders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology*, Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, 1985, 215.

²⁶ A. E. Stevenson, 'A Piece of a Giant Jigsaw: a newly re-discovered pot from Naqada', *UCL Museums Blog*, 11 March 2014, accessed 17 July 2014; M. Kennedy, 'Battered pot found in Cornish garage unlocks Egypt excavation secrets', *The Guardian*, 26 May 2014.