

ARTICLE

Margaret Murray (1863–1963): Pioneer Egyptologist, Feminist and First Female Archaeology Lecturer

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Margaret Murray, who was born 150 years ago, was one of the first archaeologists to be employed at UCL and one of the most distinguished, although her role in the history of archaeology is often underestimated. This article provides a brief outline of the career and contribution of a highly productive and innovative, if sometimes controversial, scholar, who also participated in the wider social movements of her time, particularly the campaign for women's suffrage.

2013 marks the 150th anniversary of Margaret Alice Murray, born on 13 July 1863, and the 50th anniversary of her death on 13 November 1963, just a few months after the publication of her autobiography, *My First Hundred Years*. The life of this remarkable woman is well worth celebrating, both in the archaeological world at large and especially in UCL, where she spent her entire academic career, from 1894, when she became one of the first students of the new discipline of Egyptology, until 1935, when she retired as Assistant Professor of Egyptology. In 1899 she was appointed to a junior lectureship, making her the first female lecturer in archaeology in the UK. She undoubtedly deserved to succeed Flinders Petrie to the Edwards Chair of Egyptology when he retired in 1933, but this was clearly a step too far for UCL. While taking pride in its progressive attitudes, the College did not appoint its first female professor until 1949.¹ UCL did how-

ever award Murray an honorary doctorate in 1931 and made her an honorary fellow the following year. The occasion of her 100th birthday was marked by the presentation of an address from the Professorial Board (**Fig. 1**). It is worth noting, in relation to the Institute of Archaeology, that Murray's life and career may have been a significant influence on Tessa Verney Wheeler, who played a major role in the foundation of the Institute, together with her husband Mortimer Wheeler. Tessa Verney would have known Murray both during her student years at UCL before World War I (although she studied History and Languages rather than Egyptology) and as a colleague in the 1930s, after she was married to Wheeler (Carr, 2012: 55–65).

Margaret Murray is often thought of primarily as one of Flinders Petrie's assistants and her work is wrongly overshadowed by that of the 'great man' (whom she regarded as a genius, though not without flaws). Certainly she sometimes acted as his assistant in the field, where she proved herself an accomplished draughtswoman as well as an excavator, while back home in UCL she took on much of the teaching and administration

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Fig. 1: Margaret Murray on the occasion of her 100th birthday which was marked by the presentation of an address from the Professorial Board (UCL Records).

while Petrie was away excavating in Egypt. She should, however, be judged as the independent scholar she undoubtedly was, who conducted her own excavations in Malta, Menorca and Palestine, and published a long list of scholarly articles and books on Egyptology and other archaeological subjects.

Teaching and departmental work at UCL

At an early stage she took over the teaching of beginners' language classes and later went on to teach courses on 'Egyptian History', 'Egyptian Religion', 'Manners and Customs' and 'Origins of Signs'. According to Rosalind Janssen (1992: 11–12), she was also the chief architect of the intensive two-year training course that was instituted in 1910, which led to a diploma known as the College Certificate in Egyptology. As well as training in Egyptian language and archaeology and fieldwork experience with Petrie in Egypt, the course included, apparently at Margaret

Murray's insistence, anatomy of the skeleton, physical anthropology, ethnology, mineralogy, drawing to scale and photography. This very practical syllabus stood the test of time, much of it surviving into the era of Petrie's successors. Many of the students who passed through the Department in the pre-war years went on to make their names in Egyptology and many recorded their debt to Margaret Murray. In 1931 they showed their appreciation by clubbing together to buy the robes required for her honorary doctorate, which she could not afford herself.

It is clear that Margaret Murray played a major role in departmental and college affairs, expressing her love for her *Alma Mater*, 'that great and splendid establishment', in the chapter in her autobiography which she devoted to her experiences as both a student and a member of the academic staff of the College – including 'entertaining, though wildly inaccurate memories of UCL in the late nineteenth century' (Harte

and North, 2004: 144). She took an interest in everyday concerns such as food (she served for many years on the Refectory Committee) and relaxation (arguing for a better common room for the women staff, who not only were separated from the men at that period but also had to put up with a smaller and stuffier room).

Excavation, fieldwork and museum activities

Margaret Murray only once excavated in Egypt with Petrie, at Abydos in 1902–03 (see above Fig. 1 in Picton, 2013). In her autobiography she records with some indignation a test that Petrie set her, sending her out by herself on the first day to lead the workmen across to the site. The men at first ignored the diminutive figure (she was 4ft 10ins tall) and refused to follow her orders; however, after she marched them back to camp and insisted that they lose a day's pay, she had no further trouble. She recalls that Petrie's male assistants underwent no such trials (Murray, 1963: 118–119).

Her independent excavations took place in the 1920s and 1930s on the Mediterranean islands of Malta, where she excavated the important prehistoric site of Borg in-Nadur, and Menorca, where she excavated two Bronze Age megalithic sites at Trepuco and Sa Torreta. In both islands the excavations were published in exemplary form for their time as *Excavations in Malta* (3 vols), 1923–29, and *Cambridge Excavations in Minorca* (3 vols), 1932–38. In 1937 she undertook a small excavation at Petra, in Jordan, and subsequently wrote a guidebook to the site, *Petra, the Rock City of Edom* (1939) and another book, *A Street in Petra* (1940).

As well as excavation she carried out other fieldwork; for instance in 1903–4 she spent a season at Saqqara, copying the sculptures on the walls of tomb-chapels. She also spent much time cataloguing collections in museums, including the National Museum of Antiquities of Scotland in Edinburgh, the National Museum of Ireland in Dublin, the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford and the National Museum of Malta in Valletta. One

of her most public activities took place in Manchester Museum in 1908 when she undertook (together with John Cameron) the unwrapping of a mummy, in front of an audience of five hundred (Fig. 2; Murray, 1910; Sheppard, 2012).

Publications

Margaret Murray published prolifically throughout her long life, producing on average at least one article a year, as well as a large number of books, with a total publication list of over 150 items. Initially her journal papers were on various aspects of Egyptology, but later expanded to include the archaeology of other areas, as well as folklore and ancient religion. Her books included the excavation reports described above, introductory textbooks on Egyptian and Coptic grammar, general books about ancient Egypt, as well as volumes on divine kingship and the witch cult in Western Europe. Her autobiography was published a few months before her death and even in her last few months, which were spent in hospital, she was still busily writing. This is not the place for a full bibliography, but I have included the most important books in the 'References' to this paper (Murray 1904; 1905; 1905–37; 1911; 1913; 1930; 1934; 1949; 1949). A list of her main publications can be found in Drower 2004.

Folklore and witchcraft

An issue that has cast a cloud over Margaret Murray's lasting reputation is the promulgation of her views on witchcraft – though these need to be considered in their historical context. Her basic thesis was that there was a pervasive witch cult in Europe that preserved the essential elements of a pre-Christian religion involving the worship of a horned god and originally practising human sacrifice. This theory, propounded in a number of books (Murray 1921; 1930; 1954) and a long series of articles as well as an entry in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* of 1929, was based on extremely literal interpretations of the witch trials of the Early Modern period, of folklore and of some archaeological evi-



Fig. 2: Margaret Murray (third from left) unwrapping a mummy at the Manchester University Museum in 1908. The other people in the picture are (from left to right): Mr Wilfred Jackson, Miss Hart-Davies and Mr Standen (photo: courtesy of Manchester Museum, The University of Manchester).

dence. Though long discredited in academe, her views were influential at the time and as late as 1953 she became President of the Folklore Society. Subsequently her views on witchcraft played a founding role in the formation of the modern Wiccan and other Neopagan movements – which has added to the discomfort of present-day female archaeologists, including myself, who would like to claim her as a worthy female ancestor, but do not wish to be associated with non-mainstream (not to say crackpot) theories of this kind.

Many of us experience similar difficulties with the Mother Goddess theory, equally rejected by mainstream archaeology and also supported by prominent female archaeologists such as Jacquetta Hawkes and Marija Gimbutas. There is of course no justification for the abandonment of academic rigour, but it is not too difficult to understand why

female archaeologists might prefer historical narratives that attribute power to women (whether as goddesses or witches) over the prevalent male-oriented accounts, where women are largely invisible or figure only in domestic roles. A final point one might make is that different but equally unacceptable theories propounded by male archaeologists of the time are given much more lenient treatment in the literature. Flinders Petrie himself, a supporter of eugenics, believed that Egyptian Civilisation could not have been the product of African peoples but was created by a race of intrusive white people – a view that is as clearly discredited as Murray's witch cult, and arguably more damaging, but which is rarely considered to tarnish Petrie's reputation.²

Margaret Murray's belief in witchcraft had a personal side and she seems sometimes to have practised magic herself. Drower (2004:

121) reproduces a quotation from Max Mal-
lowan's entry on Murray in the *Dictionary of
National Biography* (1961–70: 78):

Indeed, on one occasion she cast a
spell on an intended victim [a col-
league of whose appointment she
disapproved] in a saucepan at the
Institute of Archaeology in the pres-
ence of two reputable witnesses, and
achieved her aim with conspicuous
success. The subject immediately fell
ill, and was promoted to some higher
and more suitable office.

As Murray does not mention the subject in
her autobiography, we do not have her own
views on the matter, but, given her gener-
ally very rational approach to superstition
(clearly expressed in the chapter on 'The
Occult' in her autobiography), I attribute it
to the spirit of mischief that is manifest in
other accounts in that book, rather than to a
real belief in the efficacy of the spells (Mur-
ray, 1963: 175–183).

The Women's Movement

Margaret Murray was an active supporter of
the movement for women's suffrage. She
was a member of the Women's Social and
Political Union, led by Emmeline Pankhurst
and she participated in the first procession
of protest to the Houses of Parliament in
1907. She does not seem to have taken part
in any of the illegal activities of the suffra-
gette movement, but in her autobiography
she describes some of these actions with
approval, combined with sympathy for the
sufferings of the women in prison and dis-
approval of the differential treatment meted
out by the police to working-class women
and 'ladies' who took part in the protests.
She regarded the case for women's votes as
self-evident and she believed women were
the equals of men in their abilities, though
clearly not in the way they were treated by
society. She also writes approvingly of the
work of Marie Stopes, another UCL scholar,³

commenting that 'like all reformers she was
not particularly popular among her col-
leagues, but her work for women was out-
standing' (Murray, 1963: 173).

Within UCL she was a constant advocate of
the interests of women, both staff and stu-
dents, and she also supported the interests
of women outside the college. For instance,
Drower (2004: 119) records how during the
First World War she became an active mem-
ber of a committee set up by Elsie Inglis to
bring Serbian girls to England to train as
doctors (an organisation that persisted after
the war, with Murray's continuing active
support, later known as the Yugoslav Medi-
cal Women's Scholarship Fund). Her femi-
nism extended into her scholarship, which
included studies of various aspects of wom-
en's lives in ancient Egypt, including social
conditions and the roles of women in reli-
gion which, as she recounts in her autobiog-
raphy, were regarded by Petrie and others as
too 'unpleasant' for women to study.

In her own words

We do not learn much about Margaret Mur-
ray's private life from her autobiography,
except in relation to her childhood and her
family, but we do get a clear picture of her
personality. She emerges as determined,
resourceful, industrious, socially and politi-
cally aware and with a mischievous sense of
humour. A few quotations serve to illustrate
these traits. In a discussion of the grammati-
cal terms that created problems for her and
her fellow students learning Egyptian, she
glosses the term 'Semantic Object as an epi-
thet of aversion' (which I confess I have never
heard of) as 'He is just a horrid little Semantic
Object' (Murray, 1963: 95). In her account of
an occasion when a suffragette inveigled her-
self into a special lecture by Lord Haldane,
chained herself to a chair and entirely dis-
rupted the lecture, she writes (and this might
be read as a confession):

It never transpired how that invitation
card with the suffragette's own name

on it ever reached her. It only shows that young males, even though brilliantly clever, should not pit their wits against an organisation run by women. (Murray, 1963: 170)

My favourite quotation from the book refers to one moonlit night in Egypt in 1902 when she ventured out with two other women (Mrs Petrie and Miss Eckenstein) to investigate a possible incident at the Osireion, where they were excavating; she describes how ‘we three women joined hands and danced with a great variety of fancy steps all the way from the camp to the dig’ (much to the horror of the very Victorian Mr Stannus, who had insisted on accompanying them) (Murray, 1963: 116). This image of the exuberance of the three women, briefly set free by circumstances from the constraints of proper behaviour for women of the time, I find irresistible.

Legacy

Since her retirement in the 1930s, when she was clearly held in high regard within the profession, as witnessed by the honours bestowed on her by UCL, and particularly since her death in 1963, her reputation has gradually declined. She appears in many histories of archaeology as a mere footnote to Petrie, although recent attempts to redress this neglect include her inclusion in two books on women archaeologists of the past (Champion, 1998; Drower, 2004), while a full-length biography is currently in press (Sheppard, forthcoming). The general neglect of her role in the history of archaeology may in part be due to the simple passage of time and in part to unease about her views on the witch cult, described above, but probably owes more to the systematic exclusion of women’s contributions from the male-oriented construction of the history of our discipline, discussed by various feminist archaeologists (e.g. Diaz-Andreu and Sorensen, 1998; Root, 2004).

Within the College too, her imprint has, not surprisingly, faded. During the desegregation of the senior common rooms in 1969, the for-



Fig. 3: Water-colour portrait of Margaret Murray by her former student, Winifred Brunton; it is dated 1917, when Murray would have been 53 or 54 (photo: Stuart Laidlaw; UCL Art Museum).

mer women’s common room was named in her honour, but the Margaret Murray Room ceased to be in 1989, on its conversion for use as the office for the then Director of Finance and Planning (Harte and North, 2004: 144). Her name does, however, survive in the Margaret Murray prize, founded in 1935 and still awarded annually for ‘distinguished work in the Egyptology section of the Institute of Archaeology’. Of the two known portraits of her in UCL, one – a rather ugly bronze bust – exists in two copies, one in the Petrie Museum, the other lurking in a secluded corner of the IoA library, while a much more attractive small water colour by Winifred Brunton (**Fig. 3**), which once hung in the Petrie Museum, now languishes in the Art Collection stores.

In my opinion it is time now to rectify these omissions, both of understanding and recognition. Margaret Murray was a major scholar whom we should be proud to acknowledge

as an integral and important part of the history of our discipline. She certainly deserves a fuller re-assessment than she has yet received. As an immediate gesture, the Women's Forum of the IoA has proposed that the Brunton portrait be retrieved from the stores to hang in a suitably prominent place in the Institute of Archaeology – a most appropriate way to celebrate the 150th anniversary of a remarkable early archaeologist.

Notes

- ¹ The first female professor was Kathleen Lonsdale, later Dame Kathleen Lonsdale, the distinguished crystallographer (Harte and North, 2004: 179, 230).
- ² This situation might have begun to change, with new scholarship on the history of eugenics and Petrie's role in the movement (Challis, 2013).
- ³ Marie Stopes studied Botany at UCL, gaining a 1st-class degree in 1902. She was subsequently a lecturer at UCL from 1911 to 1918, when she resigned to concentrate on her writing and work on family planning (Harte and North, 2004: 150).

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