

Discovering Egypt: Egyptian antiquities at the University of Melbourne

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of research undertaken into the collections of Egyptian antiquities at the University of Melbourne. There are four discreet groups of Egyptian antiquities within the greater Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University. One of these collections, a group of papyri from the Egypt Exploration Society, established the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University.

The research undertaken has provided a valuable historiography for these little known collections of Egyptian antiquities. Prior to this research being undertaken, only limited information was available on these collections and consequently they were considered historically obscure, archaeologically unimportant and culturally undervalued.

The most important research outcome has been the ability to place the objects from these collections into a more secure historical, and in some instances archaeological context, thereby inexorably increasing their significance, intrinsic value and use.

The information presented and evidence analysed in this study permits these collections, and the items within them, to be viewed not just as isolated sets of objects but as representative specimens of ancient Egyptian material culture and as examples of late nineteenth and early twentieth century antiquarian collecting traditions. These collections reflect the interests of those individuals who created them and may be seen to typify the era in which the collections were created.

Background

The Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University of Melbourne was created in the late 1980s as a result of the merger between the departments of Classics and Middle Eastern Studies (Burke, 1999, p. 6-1). The amalgamation of the individual departmental collections and the purchase in 1987 of a large collection of Cypriot material formed the basis of what is now known as the Classics and Archaeology Collection.

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Historical context

Discussions of the Egyptian collections at the University of Melbourne begin with Sir William Mathew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942) the founder of the discipline of Egyptian archaeology. The grandson of Captain Mathew Flinders, Petrie pioneered the study of objects in archaeology which had been for a long time dominated by the focus on architecture. He was the first to realise the importance of small items—potsherds, bricks, beads, tools and objects of everyday use—in the archaeological record which were often overlooked by other excavators at the time. He was also one of the first archaeologists to recognise foreign objects in the archaeological record. Through the study of objects found during the excavations of cemeteries and settlements he was able to provide an insight into the daily lives of ancient Egyptians. Petrie worked in Egypt from 1880 to 1924 before moving to Palestine where he worked from 1925 to 1938.

Petrie was influential in paving Australia's links to the Nile Valley and the Pharaonic civilisation. The four collections of Egyptian antiquities at the University of Melbourne owe their existence in some way to Petrie and his work in Egypt. The collections outlined are in the chronological order in which the University acquired them.

Egyptian Papyri Collection

The donation of five papyri from the Egypt Exploration Society established the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University of Melbourne in 1901 (Paterson, 1901). The Egypt Exploration Society was established in London in 1882 by Amelia Edwards in response to the unchecked plundering of sites and looting of antiquities in Egypt. The Society continues to support excavations and research into ancient Egypt. Four of the papyri came from the site of Oxyrhynchus and one originated in the Fayum.

The ancient site of Oxyrhynchus (modern Behnesa) was first excavated in 1896 by Petrie on behalf of the Society. He was joined by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt who were in Egypt searching for papyri in the Fayum area. Once it became apparent to Petrie that the site was unlikely to yield material of Pharaonic date, he handed the site over to Grenfell and Hunt. For more than ten years they concentrated on excavating the large rubbish dumps located on the edges of the ancient Roman town discovering thousands of papyri which still continue to be published. In 1922 the University acquired a further five papyri from the Society via the University of Sydney (Burke, 1999, p. 6-41). This second group of five papyri all originated from Oxyrhynchus.

Nine of the original ten are now in the Classics and Archaeology collection as one of the papyri was stolen in 1975. The papyri date from 77 to 350 CE. The subject matter consists of:

- an oath regarding the sale of a slave;
- a notice for the sale of land;
- an order for the delivery of a prisoner;
- a receipt for desert patrol tax;
- a receipt for a shipment of wheat;
- the conclusion of a petition regarding the robbery of cattle;
- a section from the first book of Thucydides;
- a letter from a magistrate to a fellow official; and
- an expense account related to the sale of weaving implements.

Petrie Collection

In early 1957 the Classics Department acquired a small collection of Egyptian antiquities via the Classical Association of Victoria. The collection consists of thirty-two objects including pottery, shabti, amulets, jewellery, figurines, scarabs and inscriptions which date from the Old Kingdom (2686–2125 BCE) to the Late Period (664–332 BCE). The collection was created by a pair of Melbourne brothers, Edward and Everard Miller, between 1910 and 1920 and named the 'Petrie Collection' after information contained within a letter found in the archives of the Classics Department (Miller, c.1920).

During the Australian summer of 1910–1911 the brothers undertook their first visit to Egypt. Everard departed Melbourne in early October 1910 and arrived in Cairo on 31 October, where he was joined by Edward from London on 3 November. The brothers spent some time exploring Cairo before beginning a boat cruise up the Nile on 8 November. Along the way they stopped at a number of sites such as Beni Hasan, Asyut and Dendera before reaching Luxor, where they visited many of the important archaeological sites including the Luxor and Karnak temples. From Luxor they travelled south to Aswan before returning to Cairo. Upon their return they visited Gizeh, Saqqara, Abusir, Heliopolis and Abu Roash. It was during this trip to Egypt that seven of the objects in the Petrie Collection were acquired.

Edward developed an interest in archaeology which he pursued after the First World War. He became a member of Petrie's excavations for two seasons: the first at the site of Illahun in 1919–1920 and the second at Sedment in 1920–1921. Petrie's 1919 excavations at Illahun were his first back in Egypt after the end of the war. While working in Egypt with Petrie, Edward wrote a letter to his brother in Melbourne which now resides in the archive of the Classics and Archaeology department. The letter written sometime in early 1920 lists a number of objects which Edward had sent to Everard. The list includes shabti, some of which were "covered with the salt encrustation they were found in" and

others “were naked, others dressed in sackcloth” (Miller, c.1920). Also included in the list is a bronze Osiris, pottery, *wedjat*-eye amulets, a scarab of Tuthmosis III and a jade bead. The archive also includes a number of handwritten notes by Everard which relate to items in the Petrie Collection, such as a pair of Arab coins, amulets, a pounder and toggle purchased by Everard during the 1910–1911 trip to Egypt.

Archaeology and history were interests Everard also pursued. When he died in July 1956 one bequest made in his will was to the Classical Association of Victoria of which he had been a lifelong member since its creation in 1912. This included books and manuscripts on Greece, Rome and Egypt, his photographic negatives (he was an excellent amateur photographer), lantern plates and paintings. The bequest was discussed at the association’s council meeting in March 1957, where it was decided that the books, slides and photographs were to be housed in the Department of Classics (“Notes”, 1957). Twelve large hand-made volumes of Egyptian photographs were given to the Australian Institute of Archaeology, where they reside today. The Egyptian objects were given to the Classics Department, along with Edward’s letter and handwritten notes relating to the collection.

Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection

In 1957 Professor John Bowman of the Middle Eastern Studies Department at the University of Melbourne purchased four large stone objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (Burke, 1999, p. 6-8). It is not possible to discern the impetus behind the acquisition as the original documentation associated with this purchase has been lost. However, it may well have been related to the acquisition of the Petrie Collection earlier in that year. Subsequent contact between the University and the Egyptian department of the Museum in the 1980s provides information concerning the objects and their provenance (Dorman, 1984a, 1984b, 1984c).

The material from the Metropolitan Museum included two stelae, an offering table and a fragment of wall frieze. The first stela, carved from limestone and dating to the Ptolemaic Period,

332–30 BCE belonged to Reshugemy daughter of Hapimeneh (Sem Priest of Min) and Sabirbenep (Celebrant of Min), (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984a). The stela is thought to have originated at or near the modern town of Akhmim, which in ancient times was home to a number of temples to the god Min. In 1918, the Museum purchased a number of items including the first stela from a collector of ancient Egyptian antiquities—Mr Waters S Davis of Galveston Texas (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984a; Winlock, 1920).

The second stela (also carved from limestone and dating to the Ptolemaic Period) was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1897 from the Egypt Exploration Society in recognition of financial support of their excavations at Oxyrhynchus (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984b). Consultation of the Egypt Exploration Society archives has confirmed that in 1897 the Society gave the Museum five objects from the Oxyrhynchus excavations, including a ‘Ptolemaic funeral stele’ (Egypt Exploration Society, 1882–1899).

The provenance of the third object, an offering table is unknown. Dating to the Late Period, 664–332 BCE, the table is carved from sandstone and is inscribed with images of loaves of bread, *Hes* vases and cuts of meat. The table belonged to Mr Joseph W. Drexel, a former trustee of the Museum and collector of Egyptian antiquities. During his life Joseph gave the Museum a number of Egyptian antiquities including casts of Egyptian sculptures, amulets, vases and coins. In 1889, a year after his death Joseph’s widow Lucy gifted to the Museum the remaining items from his collection, including the table, which had previously been on loan (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984c; “The New Egyptian Galleries”, 1911).

The final item acquired from the Metropolitan Museum is a fragment of wall frieze which originated from the temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri, located on the west bank of the Nile across from the modern town of Luxor. The fragment dates to the period of Hatshepsut’s reign, 1473–1458 BCE. The remaining decorative detail is from a frieze of *Kheker* elements, a design which dates back to the Old Kingdom in Egypt and is

coloured in red, blue and green. The Museum acquired the frieze fragment in September 1906 from Édouard Naville's excavations at Deir el Bahri for the Egypt Exploration Society (Egypt Exploration Society, 1900–1914). Like the stela from Oxyrhynchus, the frieze fragment was given to Museum in recognition of financial support of the excavations.

Royal Ontario Museum Collection

In 1968 Professor Bowman purchased a further collection of Egyptian antiquities, from the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Of the original twenty-one items listed in the correspondence between Professor Bowman and Winifred Needler, curator of the Egyptian collection, only seventeen can now be identified in the collection (Needler, 1968). The collection contains ceramics, jewellery, a stone vessel, a flint knife and arrowheads that date from the Predynastic Period c.4000 BCE through to the Ptolemaic Period 332–30 BCE.

The Royal Ontario Museum acquired much of its collection of Egyptian antiquities through the activities of Charles T. Currelly, founder, inaugural curator and director of the Royal Ontario Museum from 1900 to 1910. Through the collecting activities of Currelly the museum evolved from a small university collection as he travelled the world acquiring material from Europe, Britain, the Near East and Asia. He also collected material from North and South America. Currelly trained as an archaeologist under Petrie. After proving himself as an able assistant to the great archaeologist Petrie in London in 1901, he joined the excavations to Abydos later that year (Currelly, 1976). He learnt much about the value of antiquities while working with Petrie, which assisted him in his collecting activities. Currelly also worked with Édouard Naville at Deir el-Bahri.

Of the seventeen items acquired by Bowman, eight were previously catalogued by the Royal Ontario Museum and their provenance shows that most of the items were acquired by purchase from antiquities sellers and dealers. One object—a ceramic jar, came from the Egypt Exploration Society excavations at Abydos in 1908–1909. A

further four objects, fragments of blue glazed bowls, are likely to have come from the excavations at the shrine of Hathor located close to Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri where Currelly worked on the small finds.

Conclusions

The information presented permits these collections and the items within them to be viewed not just as isolated sets of objects but as representative specimens of ancient Egyptian material culture. These examples of late nineteenth and early twentieth century antiquarian collecting traditions reflect the interests of those individuals who created them and may be seen to typify the era in which the collections were created.

The ability to place the objects from these collections into a more secure historical and archaeological context increases their significance, intrinsic value and use.

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About the Author

Christine Elias has worked in registration, collection and exhibition management for over ten years. She has participated in archaeological fieldwork in Jordan and Syria and has recently completed her MA at the University of Melbourne.