

## RESEARCH UPDATE

## Artefacts of Excavation

Alice Stevenson

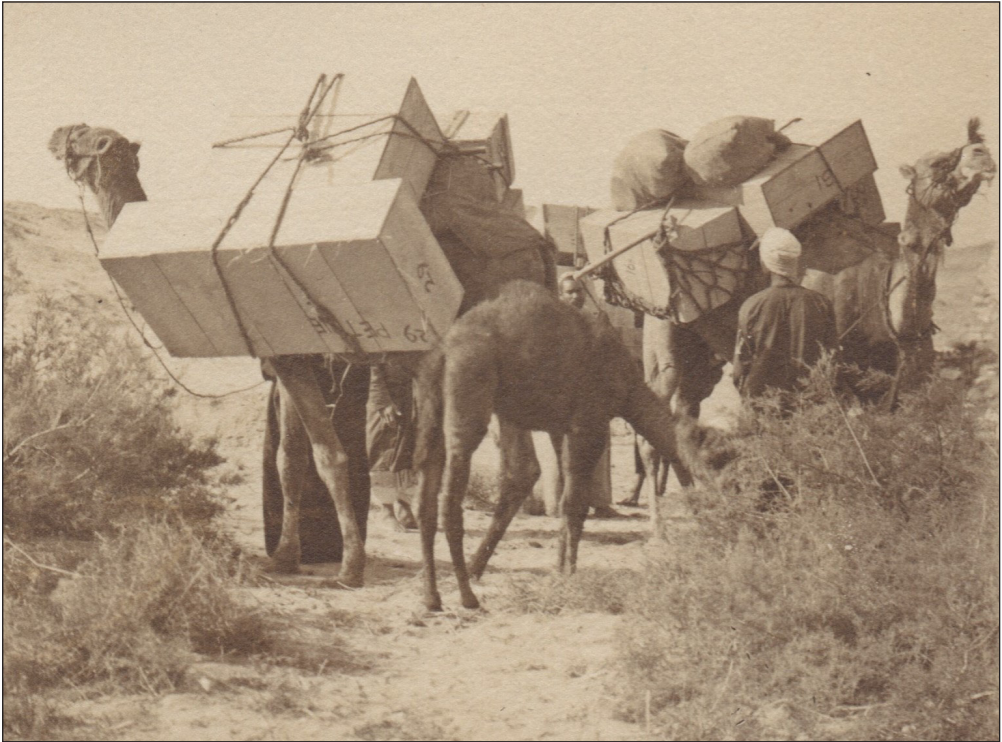
Egypt's cultural heritage is amongst the most widely dispersed of any country following centuries of intense colonial and imperial interest in its history, monuments and antiquities. The three-year *Artefacts of Excavation* project, which began in 2014, is examining one facet of this: the distribution of finds from British excavations in Egypt to institutions worldwide, between 1883 and the present day. The profile of dispersal is daunting and it has not been the project's aim to track down individual objects, many of which have circulated through multiple hands and numerous institutions via a variety of mechanisms over the decades (**Fig. 1**). Rather, one of the first strands of the project has been to create an online resource to assist others in making connections for themselves and to map out the full scope of the finds dispersal network. The second research strand involves a more holistic consideration of these trans-national circulation practices, examining their role in the development of archaeology as a discipline and the museum as an institution. This involves a multi-sited set of case studies focussing on the history, legacy and politics of collecting, and which has sought to be sensitive to a broad range of social attitudes, circumstances and customs that have informed receptions to, and uses of, archaeological objects over the

last 130 years (Stevenson 2016; Stevenson, Libonati and Baines 2017; Stevenson, Libonati and Williams 2016).

At the outset we predicted that up to 175 institutions might hold, or have held, objects originally acquired through British-led fieldwork in Egypt. Three years on and that estimate looks conservative. It is now clear that through partage—by which means a share of the antiquities from licensed excavations were permitted to be exported from Egypt to sponsors worldwide—that at least 350 institutions, in 27 countries, across five continents, acquired archaeological finds. There are few, if any, other areas of world archaeology that have a material legacy of that scale. This short research update provides an overview of our project aims, together with an example of the distribution of finds from one excavation season of the Egypt Exploration Fund in 1899, to draw into relief some of the histories that we are encountering.

**Project Website**

The Griffith Institute at the University of Oxford hosts the project's web-resource (<http://egyptartefacts.griffith.ox.ac.uk/>) and this provides an overview of the distribution activities of British archaeological organizations that worked in Egypt, together with information about the institutions and private individuals who acquired material from them. This online repository lists almost every site excavated by British teams between 1883 until 1989, with the focus being the work of the Egypt Exploration Fund/Society



**Figure 1:** Camels loaded with crates of artefacts from the Petrie-led British School of Archaeology in Egypt excavation at Kafr Ammar 1912 (Photo Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL).

(EEF/EES), the British School of Archaeology in Egypt (BSAE), the Egypt Research Fund (ERA) and Flinders Petrie's privately-funded expeditions. Each field-site listed has links to information about the multiple seasons of work conducted there and the known destinations of the resulting finds. Users can additionally search the web pages by institution to see which seasons of work may be represented in any one museum's collections, or they can query by excavation season and archaeological site to ascertain the possible locations of the material results of specific campaigns. The distribution records in the archives of UCL's Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology and the EES are the primary source for the project, and these have been digitized and made available through the project website. A gazetteer of object marks, which were inked onto artefacts by

excavation team members, is also being compiled in order to facilitate the identification of information that could link objects back to archival records and thence to their find spot in the field.

### **Legacies of fieldwork and the museum**

The 'Artefacts of Excavation' web-resource can be freely used by archaeologists, museum professionals or any other interested party to rediscover objects that may be significant in the reinterpretation of ancient sites and which can provide the basis for new questions about past societies. Such a strategy has been central to the British Museum's Naukratis project, for example, whereby the relocation of artefacts from older excavations is set beside new fieldwork at the site (Thomas and Villing 2013). Our project's focus, however,

is not only on the ancient lives of things, but what their post-excavation circulation and afterlives can tell us about more recent engagements with these materials.

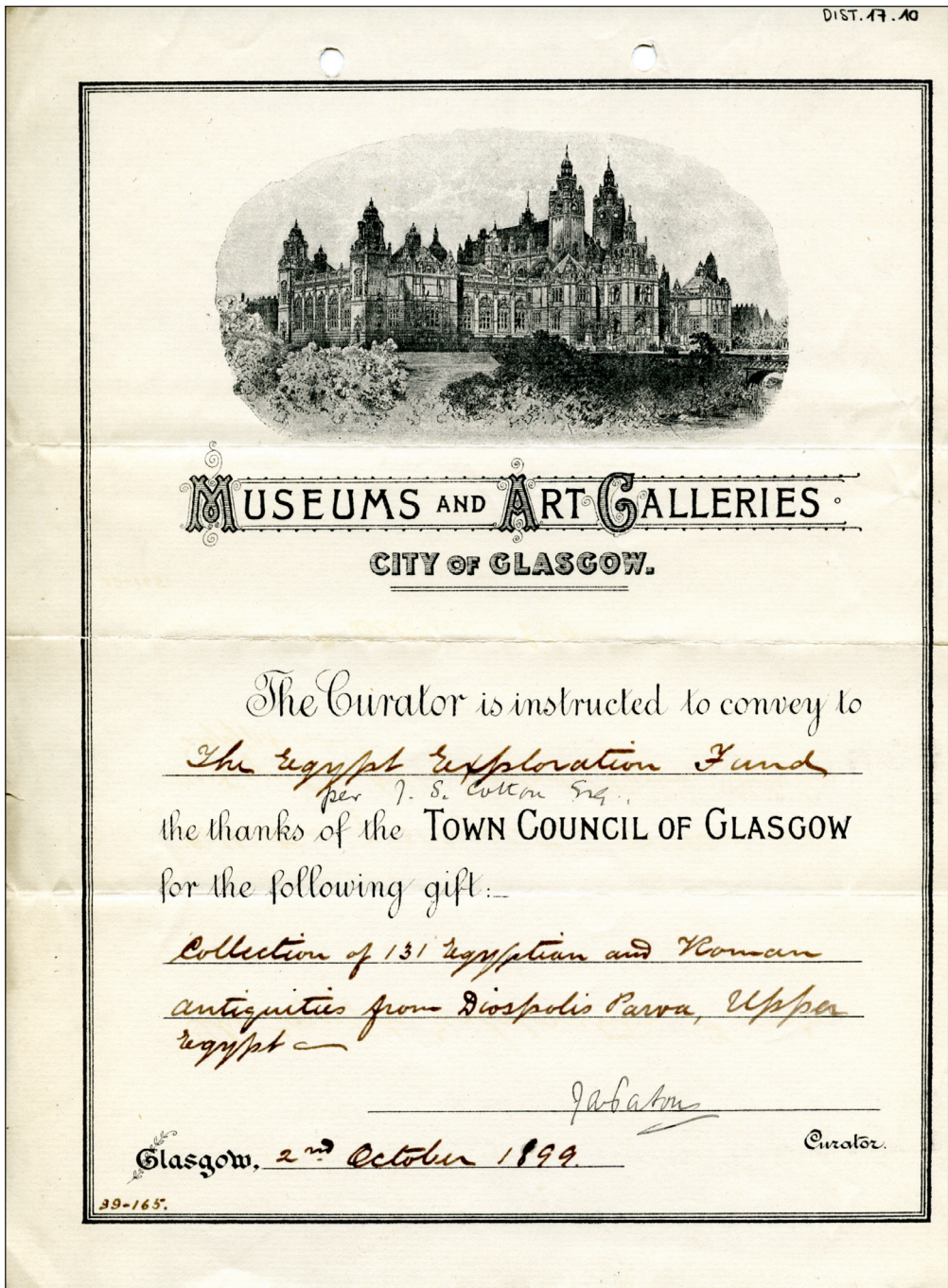
The history of finds excavated from a series of multi-period cemeteries in Upper Egypt between Abadiyeh and Hu, which were collectively referred to as Diospolis Parva (Petrie 1901), can serve here as just one example of the density of issues that are being unravelled through our research. The campaign was mounted in 1898–1899 under the auspices of the EEF, which in the absence of government support relied upon what was essentially a crowd-funding model to finance its work (Thornton 2013). This piecemeal approach to fundraising resulted in at least 46 institutions receiving objects from this single fieldwork season. In the UK that encompassed national museums like the British Museum, municipal organizations such as Reading Museum and Art Gallery, the private schools of Eton and Harrow, and the universities of London, Manchester and Glasgow (**Fig. 2**). Internationally, museums in Canada, America, South Africa, Australia and eventually also Ghana all benefitted.

The narratives that are entangled with these finds are historically and geographically contingent. Initially, several of the finds from the site were labelled as belonging to a 'new race' by Flinders Petrie, who thought they belonged to invaders from outside of Egypt, and the ceramic finds were used by him to construct 'sequence dating' for Predynastic Egypt (fourth millennium BC). This was the first example of what is today known as seriation, a method of relative dating that places artefacts into what is assumed may be their chronological order (Trigger 1996: 290–297). Many of the objects were sent out to institutions as emissaries for these new archaeological concepts and their associated 'please keep with the object' labels emphasized to curators the importance of date and context.

The biographies of other artefacts from the site are not only associated with Petrie, however, but lead back to members of the archaeological team. This includes numerous

women who were key partners in the archaeological process through their on-site activities such as marking objects with a note of their find-spot, surveying contexts and documenting the fieldwork that was being undertaken by Egyptian workmen. Amongst this number was Henrietta Lawes from Caversham in Reading who joined the expedition in 1898, and it was through her agency that Reading Museum obtained several crates of finds from Diospolis Parva in 1900 (but sadly, little else is currently known about her). Reading's museum was part of a burgeoning municipal museum movement in the Victorian and Edwardian era that coveted Egyptian antiquities for inclusion in the typically dense and cluttered displays of the period. Many such municipal museums were established to support industry at the local level (e.g. through the 1845 Public Museum Act). Museums, however, were not just the result of industrialization as their collecting and display strategies were also informed by its narrative of social progress. Within such accounts of the past, ancient Egypt was regarded as holding a privileged position as both a setting for biblical events and as the origin of Western civilized society.

After the Second World War, however, ideological changes that accompanied Britain's move away from an expansionist imperialistic power towards an actively decolonizing nation diminished the power of such narratives (Wingfield 2011). Under further pressure from post-war austerity and within a general societal move away from Victorian bric-a-brac consumption towards the minimalism of modernist aesthetics, UK museums began to rationalize their collections. Reading Council, like many in the 1950s, resolved to sell off 'exotic' holdings from its museum and refocus instead upon local histories. Artefacts from Diospolis Parva were once again dispersed. Several of the Predynastic items collected on site by Henrietta Lawes and her colleagues, for instance, were sent to West Africa and the new national museum in Accra, which opened on the eve of Ghana's independence



**Figure 2:** Letter from Glasgow Museums dated 1900, acknowledging material from excavations at Diospolis Parva. (Photo Egypt Exploration Society, Lucy Gura Archive (Dist 17.10)).

from Britain in March 1957. In this setting Egyptian antiquities became caught up in a complex West African dialogue between new cultural institutions, symbolic nationalism and pan-African ideologies in which Egypt was considered to be one part of a pre-colonial Ghanaian heritage (Stevenson in prep).

In tracing the attitudes towards artefacts through these sorts of case studies, it has become clear that archaeology and museum practice were strongly affected not only by intellectual trends, institutional politics and specific personalities as has been the focus of most scholarship in this area, but also by transformations in the wider world around them. These varied societal mind-sets impinged upon the way in which Egyptian things were valued and we have coined the term 'object habit' as a shorthand that refers to the rationales by which groups in different times and places came to appreciate (or not, in some cases) archaeological finds (Stevenson, Libonati and Baines 2017). Further case studies of object habits across Europe, North America, the Commonwealth and in Eastern Asian countries like Japan are demonstrating the many complex ways in which Egyptian artefacts came to represent far more than just themselves in these distributions. For instance, in the 1910s and 1920s Japanese archaeologists did not necessarily have an interest in ancient Egypt *per se*, as much as the methods of Flinders Petrie which they were keen to apply to the construction of Japanese prehistory (e.g. Hamada 1923). Moreover, the Japanese acquisition of Egyptian artefacts from the British had a subtext relating to the Anglo-French ability to exploit Egypt's past, which was seen as a model for the Japanese's own imperial ambitions and colonial heritage practices in the Asia-Pacific region (Stevenson in prep.).

### The Future

Until the end of 2017 we will be documenting the diverse roles of the many individuals historically involved in archaeological

practice in Egypt and the extensive transnational networks through which ideas about the past were exchanged alongside finds. We are now at the stage of engaging in dialogue with institutions worldwide to share archival records and piece together more artefact journeys. With some 270 other excavation seasons conducted by British teams in the century between 1880 and 1980, and which resulted in the export of hundreds of thousands of finds, the potential for exploring further object biographies will not be exhausted by the end of the project. To this end it is hoped that the website will form a departure point for others to develop research projects of their own in the future.

The pathways of objects can be traced online at <http://egyptartefacts.griffith.ox.ac.uk>, and the project can be followed on Twitter @excavatedegypt.

### Acknowledgements

The 'Artefacts of Excavation: the international distribution of finds from British excavations in Egypt, 1880–1980' project (2014–2017), is supported by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) under grant number AH/L004569/1. It is a joint research project shared between UCL and the University of Oxford. Alice Stevenson is the project lead (Co-Pi) with Emma Libonati as the full-time Research Associate here at UCL, while through the University of Oxford the project team has involved John Baines (Co-Pi), Sarah Glover, and project DPhil student Alice Williams.

### Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

### References

- Hamada, K** 1923 Egyptian archaeological objects that has recently arrived at the Kyoto Imperial University. *Shirin*, 8(1): 131.
- Petrie, W M F** 1901 *Diospolis Parva*. London: Egypt Exploration Fund.

- Stevenson, A** in prep. *Scattered Finds: Archaeology, Egyptology and Museums*. London: UCL Press.
- Stevenson, A** 2016 Conflict antiquities and conflicted antiquities: Addressing commercial sales of legally excavated artefacts. *Antiquity*, 90: 229–236. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2015.188>
- Stevenson, A, Libonati, E and Baines, J** 2017 Introduction – object habits: Legacies of fieldwork and the museum. *Museum History Journal*, 10(2): 113–126. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2017.1328780>
- Stevenson, A, Libonati, E and Williams, A** 2016 'A selection of minor antiquities': A multi-sited view on collections from excavations in Egypt, *World Archaeology*, 48(2): 282–295. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00438243.2016.1165627>
- Thomas, R I and Villing, A** 2013 Naukratis revisited 2012: Integrating new fieldwork and old research. *British Museum Studies in Ancient Egypt and Sudan*, 20: 81–125.
- Thornton, A** 2013 '... a certain faculty for extricating cash': Collective Sponsorship in Late 19th and Early 20th Century British Archaeology. *Present Pasts*, 5(1): 55. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/pp.55>
- Trigger, B** 1996 *A History of Archaeological Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wingfield, C** 2011 From Greater Britain to Little England: The Pitt Rivers Museum, the Museum of English Life, and their six degrees of separation. *Museum History Journal*, 4(2): 245–266. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1179/mhj.2011.4.2.245>

**How to cite this article:** Stevenson, A 2017 Artefacts of Excavation. *Archaeology International*, No. 20: pp. 58–63, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5334/ai-352>

**Published:** 14 December 2017

**Copyright:** © 2017 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

**][** *Archaeology International* is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by Ubiquity Press.

**OPEN ACCESS** 