# Between the Field and the Museum:
# the ongoing project of archaeological context

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*Taking the distribution of finds from the Egypt Exploration Fund as a departure point, this article examines the potential for a more holistic approach to museum collections and archives that extends the project of archaeological context from place to process. The importance of advocating archives in museum practice and in higher education is also emphasised.*

In summer 2012 I undertook a scoping exercise to ascertain the scale and complexity of the Egypt Exploration Fund's (EEF) finds distributions from all of its excavations between 1882 and 1915. The results of this work underscored the complexity of this activity, which drew together a wide network of people and institutions. I have argued more extensively elsewhere [1] that while it is tempting to envisage such dispersals as a linear transmission of objects from the field to the museum, in fact both excavation and curatorial practice were informed by the same artefact-based approach to the construction of the past [2] and that both arenas impinged upon each other in highly complex ways. This conclusion challenges the common misconception (for Egyptian archaeology especially) that « museums have always been, and continue to be, a relatively peripheral player in archaeological motivation ».[3]

What I wish to consider a little further in this paper is how the idea of archaeological context actually emerged through this intersection of excavation and museum practice via the process of finds distribution. Key to this argument is the recognition that museums are not simply the sum of what is displayed in their galleries. They are also repositories for stored collections of

1. A. STEVENSON, *Artefacts of excavation: the British collection and distribution of Egyptian finds to museums, 1880-1915*, in « Journal of the History of Collections » (2013), doi: 10.1093/jhc/fht017.

2. A. HENARE, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange*, Cambridge 2005; C. EVANS *Delineating objects: nineteenth-century antiquarian culture and the project of archaeology*, in S. PEARCE (ed.), *Visions of Antiquity. The Society of Antiquaries of London 1707–2007*, London 2007.

3. H. SWAIN, *An Introduction to Museum Archaeology*, Cambridge 2007, p. 12.

objects and associated documentation (labels, correspondence and photographs etc.) that accumulate around objects, entangling them within particular histories of acquisition and curation. Consequently, I advocate here a more holistic approach to the management of archaeological collections that seeks to capture within documentation systems, and make more widely visible, the multitude of possible linkages that can be made between an object and related documentation. In so doing the process of ascertaining context can be extended beyond simply establishing a physical find-spot in Egypt. Furthermore, I argue that such a holistic approach to collections management is important not only from an intellectual point of view, but also from the perspective of encouraging inclusive and collaborative museum practice. Finally, I would suggest that the complexities of finds distribution demand that archival research activities be more centrally situated within not just museum training, but also within undergraduate / postgraduate education.

### EEF *Finds Distribution*

When the EEF's establishment was announced in « The Times » on 1 April 1882 it bore the alluring headline *Egyptian antiquities*. Yet the final sentence of the article admitted that it « must be distinctly understood that by the law of Egypt no antiquities can be removed from the country ». Nevertheless, two years later the EEF was able to devote a section of its *Annual Report* to the account of "votes of antiquities" to various museums outside of Egypt. Thus began the often symbiotic relationship between excavators' priorities and curatorial desires, with the latter often directly influencing the choice of site and manner of exploration, including the positioning of museum agents in fieldwork. This was made possible not only by shifts in the types of objects that began to be recognised as worthy of museum display in the late nineteenth century, but additionally by developments in the topography of museums across the UK and elsewhere at this time.

The Fund's initial approach to excavation in the early 1880s was embedded within wider trends in mid-nineteenth century colonial cultural practice,

including its appeal to biblical and classical narratives, and in garnering support from individuals whose explorations had caught the public imagination.[4] The spoils of their adventures were not only widely publicised, but were also publically visible through the acquisition of visually striking sculptures, *objets d'art* and artefacts bearing texts for the burgeoning national museums of Europe. These were objects that were considered to be able to speak for themselves as either the material facts of history or else as "wondrous curiosities".[5] The EEF's first season of work under Naville departed little from these previous practices and resulted in two monumental gifts being presented to the British Museum — a granite falcon and a kneeling figure of a scribe.[6] With Petrie's appointment into the Fund's service, however, the nature of the returns was somewhat different with many small objects boxed up and shipped from Alexandria's port to Liverpool's docks. This shift from Naville's unwieldy, monumental finds to Petrie's more humble, yet manageable offerings, was a crucial part of instituting a new type of museum object.[7]

This influx of Egyptian material was also coincident with the steady growth in the numbers of local museums in Britain,[8] particularly in response to municipal reforms that permitted local councils to establish institutions for the public's social benefit. By the end of the nineteenth century the EEF were regularly receiving subscriptions directly from museums keen to expand their collections. In total, between 1883 and 1915, the EEF dispatched objects to some 73 UK institutions, from large national museums like the British Museum, to provincial organisations such as Truro Museum in Cornwall. Public libraries and private schools were also beneficiaries. More than 35 institutions in the US accepted distributions of objects, principally museums in the northeastern states. Globally, at least a further 30 museums in 13 countries received antiquities.

4. D. CHALLIS, *From the Harpy Tomb to the Wonders of the Ephesus. British Archaeologists in the Ottoman Empire 1840–1880,* London 2008.

5. S. MOSER, *Wondrous Curiosities. Ancient Egypt at the British Museum*, London 2006.

6. Accession numbers 1883,1107.2 and 1883,1107.1.

7. A. STEVENSON, *Artefacts of excavation*.

8. D.K VAN KEUREN, *Museums and ideology: Augustus Pitt-Rivers, Anthropology and social change in later Victorian Britain*, in « Victorian Studies » 28/1 (1984), pp. 171-72.

## *Creating Context*

On 5 January 1900 Francis Llewellyn Griffith wrote to the EEF committee about « a very serious matter », concerning the distribution of objects.[9]    He noted that although « Petrie spent a fortnight writing labels and wrapping up the objects with them » there had been « several dreadful instances of his labels having been neglected ». As a result Petrie drafted a circular addressed « to curators of museums » (pl. ØØØ, 1), outlining the importance of his tags (pl. ØØØ, 2-3). A few years later Petrie produced a more in-depth guide to archaeology in which he insisted that it was

> imperative not only to record, but also to publish, the facts observed; when in future the elements of scientific management may come to be understood, a fit curator may succeed in reuniting the long-severed information.[10]

Both these snippets of instruction serve to underscore the manner in which the emergent idea of archaeological context was to be performed by tacking between the excavated object and documentation. They also draw attention to Petrie's concern that archaeology as a discipline should be critically aware of museum procedures, as well as fieldwork. Arguably, it was actually the former that was more important in informing Petrie's development of a more systematic archaeology. Collecting the past had been his earliest passion [11]    and objects were a central rationale for his first excavations for the EEF:

> Here lies, then, the great value of systematic and strict excavation, in the obtaining of a scale of comparison by which to arrange and date the various objects we already possess. A specimen may be inferior to others already in a museum, and yet it will be worth more than all of them if it has its history.[12]

It was therefore museum collections that were in Petrie's mind's eye when he

9.   I am grateful to Alice Williams for drawing my attention to these letters, which are currently held in the EES Lucy Gura Archive.
10.  W.M.F. PETRIE, *Methods and Aims in Archaeology*, London 1904, p. 49.
11.  M. DROWER, *Flinders Petrie. A Life in Archaeology*, London 1985; W.M.F. PETRIE, *Seventy Years in Archaeology*, London 1931.
12.  W.M.F. PETRIE, *Tanis II*, « EEF » 4, London 1888, p. vii.

embarked upon fieldwork, not the archaeological landscape that might be revealed. The site was a merely a point of reference: a context.

Context in archaeology can be defined in a number of ways. Darvill offers three:[13]

1.   A generic term for the smallest identifiable stratigraphic unit recognized in an excavation.
2.   The position of an archaeological find in time and space established by measuring and assessing its associations, matrix and provenance.
3.   The physical and cultural circumstances surrounding the deposition of archaeological material and the formation of archaeological deposits.

The second definition is the closest to Petrie's conception, although he himself did not actually use the word in his 1904 textbook, referring rather to an object's « source ». The recording of this source via object marking was considered by Petrie to be « a very needful part of the record ».[14]   These object markings played an important role in the extension of artefacts into the wider terrain of emerging archaeological methodology through links to related products of excavation, including memoirs, lists and correspondence. Whereas antiquities could be "wondrous curiosities", the excavated artefact (often unassuming small finds) required the support of this documentation to be made meaningful. Context was thus created not just in the archaeological site within Egypt, but further performed in the exhibitions of finds in London, the newspaper reports, EEF Committee meetings and in the hands of curators — all of which coalesced within an artefact's biography. Moreover, in distributing these marked objects, together with circulars drawing attention to their entourage of documentation, the notion of archaeological 'context' itself was disseminated and enacted across the world.

Today, the concept of archaeological "context" tends to be most readily associated with specific "provenance" or "find spot" (in large measure a result of its formulation within contract archaeology in the 1970s in the US and UK). However, given the diaspora of excavated objects the term's original Latin

13.   T. DARVILL, *Concise Oxford Dictionary of Archaeology*, Oxford 2008.
14.   PETRIE, *Methods and Aims*, p. 51.

meaning (*contexere*) seems more apropos, as it means to connect or weave together.[15]   Finds distribution, which created a web of documentation for authentication and drew together networks of people, effectively knitted together new forms of museum object. Such artefacts, as Gosden and Knowles have observed, are

> best viewed as indicative of process, rather than static relations, and this process is ongoing in museums as elsewhere, so that there is a series of continuous social relations surrounding the object connecting 'field' and 'museums'.[16]

Searching for Petrie's labels or squinting at an ancient vessel trying to ascertain the faded digits on the base is a crucial task in reconnecting a museum piece to its find-spot and tracking down assemblages fragmented across the globe. However, a holistic approach to collections management — by which I mean the integration of archival, photographic and other relevant information within object records — is important not only to (re)constructions of the ancient past. It is also significant for establishing other facets of an object's biography and for permitting the telling of additional narratives of archaeological practice. Stephen Quirke's work [17]   is an example of this, demonstrating the potential for shifting our disciplinary emphasis from founding fathers to hidden hands.

Take, for instance, the cipher scrawled on the base of Predynastic pottery vessel UC5699 now in the Petrie Museum: 1817, a reference to a grave at Naqada.[18]   The same number is noted on a sequence dating slip also now held by the Petrie Museum, which Petrie used to create his famous seriation of prehistoric graves,[19]    thereby linking this object to western histories of archaeology and Victorian scientific endeavour. This set of digits, however, also allows this vessel to act as a key to other discourses, because amongst Petrie's notebooks is #138 belonging not to Petrie, but to Hugh Price. Inside the number

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15.   I. HODDER, *Reading the Past*, Cambridge 1986, p. 122.
16.   C. GOSDEN - C. KNOWLES, *Collecting Colonialism. Material culture and colonial change*, Oxford 2001, pp. 4-5.
17.   S. QUIRKE, *Hidden Hands,* London 2010.
18.   W.M.F. PETRIE - J. QUIBELL, *Naqada and Ballas*, « ERA » 1, London 1896.
19.   W.M.F. PETRIE, *Sequences in prehistoric remains*, in « Journal of the Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland » 3/4 (1899), pp. 295-301.

1817 is pencilled beside the sketch of the tomb in which UC5699 was found. It is not Petrie's name that is next to this, nor Price's, but rather the Egyptian excavator: Ali Redwan. A single museum database field entry recording "collector" is therefore insufficient. The tomb number also holds together the group of objects Redwan revealed, artefacts that further documentation shows were sent to Chicago, Munich, Manchester and Oxford.[20]

Notably, such distributions brought additional individuals into the escalating documentation surrounding distributed objects.[21] Thus although in many cases it may be difficult to trace connections between object and site, the biography of an object is not necessarily curtailed, as local stories can be accommodated within global narratives. Disparate collections invite disparate responses that can be revealing about the reception and construction of material Egypt. Indeed, the stories that I have encountered in my pilot project provoke intriguing questions about how material Egypt was formed in contrasting settings around the world. For instance, how EEF finds from Abydos ended up and were displayed in Cedar Rapids' (Iowa) Masonic Lodge in 1912 or in Kyoto, Japan at around the same time. The possibilities, therefore, for weaving together new accounts are multifarious and certainly not exhausted by these brief suggestions.

Given that labels, letters and lists are integral to the continuing project of establishing archaeological context, references to their existence should (ideally) be as visible in museum databases, paper records and online resources as the antiquities themselves. However, in a climate in which museum funding and staffing — particularly for collections management projects — is limited, such aspirations for detailed documentation work may seem overly ambitious. Yet it is also a question of advocacy. It is too easy for such endeavors to be considered (especially from the outside) as behind-the-scenes or (worse) peripheral activities of management and spreadsheet accountability that serve only the narrow interest of scholars. I think, however, that there is a much stronger case to be

20. E. BAUMGARTEL, *Petrie's Naqada Excavation: a supplement*, London 1970.

21. In a process that has been referred to as the « relational museum », cf. C. GOSDEN - F. LARSON, *Exploring the Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum 1884-1945*, Oxford 2007.

made for promoting documentation and archival work more positively as valuable community and educational activities and resources.


*Advocating Archives*

The recognition of hidden narratives within the histories of Egyptian assemblages resonates with the post-colonial/post-modernist turn in museology more generally. To date, most of this literature has concerned ethnographic collections,[22]   but the principles it promotes have considerable relevance for Egyptology. Given the limits of space here, I will comment only briefly on one aspect: community museology. As intellectually defined, this area often focuses upon the processes of consultation for exhibitions [23]    or collaborative display. [24] In practice, however, community museology can be more than this. In its fullest sense it involves shared curatorship and collections access, including to material (objects and documentation) held in storage.[25]   This can allow not only the process of how curators make sense of collections to be made more transparent, but can also invite alternative intersections, be they from local historians interested in the individuals involved in finds distribution or journalists seeking grand narratives.

And it is here that archaeological context as process continues, for such interventions continually alter the biographies of objects. This is especially the case if those interactions can themselves be captured within documentation systems in dedicated database fields or paper files.[26]   With the increasing presence of online collections, alongside wider trends in participatory digital culture, such catalogue enhancements are more likely to become visible beyond the museum and the back-room database, contributing to new perceptions of

22.  L. PEERS - A. BROWN (eds), *Museums and Source Communities: A Routledge Reader*, London 2003.
23.  K. EXELL, *Engaging with Egypt. Community consultation and the redevelopment of the ancient Egyptian galleries at the Manchester Museum*, in V. GOLDING - W. MORRIS (eds), *Museums and Communities*, Oxford 2013.
24.  *E.g.*, G. TULLY, *Community archaeology: general methods and standards of practice*, in « Public Archaeology » 6/3 (2007), pp. 155-87.
25.  R. BOAST, *Neo-colonial collaboration: Museum as contact zone revisited*, in « Museum Anthropology » 34/1 (2011), pp. 56-70.
26.  C. REED, *Revisiting Collections*, London 2013.

the « relational museum ».[27] It is also a form of prospective collecting, for our own archival research generates new material that might be informative for future generations seeking to understand the questions that drove us to undertake our research. In the same way that we are attempting to understand how archaeological knowledge was previously encountered and constructed through archival and museum research, so too might future scholars look back upon our work with new questions of their own.

Despite these developments as museums enter the "second age",[28] and notwithstanding the frequency of research enquiries concerning objects and archives from specific excavations, the value of archival research to archaeological enquiry remains notably absent from the majority of degree programmes. This was drawn into relief by a survey conducted by the Higher Education Funding Council for England.[29] The results demonstrated that although an emphasis was placed upon excavation as an essential archaeological tool in university courses, there was a widespread failure to recognize related archives, collections, and records as equally important and linked resources. No such survey exists for Egyptology and while I know that there exists an appreciation of the pedagogical value of archives and moves to incorporate histories of collections within museum learning,[30] I suspect that these may be exceptions. Yet given the sheer scale of the material legacy of finds distribution and its role in the establishment of systematic archaeological research in Egypt, together with the beginnings of more reflexive disciplinary practice, museums and archives as archaeological field-sites should have more prominent roles in Higher Education. This is important not only for developing deeper learning and an understanding of how archaeological knowledge has been (and can) be formed, but additionally to ensure that future practitioners are informed of the complexities

27. H. GAISMAR - W. MOHNS, *Social relationships and digital relationships: rethinking the database at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre*, in « Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute » 17/S1 (May 2011), pp. S133-S155, online: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2011.01693.x> (DOI: 10.1111/j.1467-9655.2011.01693.x).

28. R. PHILLIPS, *Re-placing objects: historical practices for the second museum age*, in « The Canadian Historical Review » 86/1 (2005), pp. 83-110.

29. D. HICKS - G, MILNE - J. SHEPHERD - R. SKEATES, *Excavating the Archives. Archive Archaeology and the Higher Education Sector*, London 2009.

30. Liam McNamara, personal communication.

that underlie the formation of material Egypt. I would also suggest that such activities might also make us better field archaeologists because archival work can encourage us to be more conscious and self-reflexive in how we document and visualize practice in ways that might stand up to historical scrutiny.

*Conclusion*

The rich opportunities afforded by the documentation generated by the distribution of excavated finds from Egypt to museums is exceptionally rare for historic collections. Although the late nineteenth and early twentieth century constituted the "museum era" with museums profiting from colonial enterprises around the world, in reality very few world archaeology collections from that time have the contextual depth Egyptologists have available to them across such a range of sites and periods.[31]   These are not, of course, unproblematic sources and engaging with the ephemera of decades of object interactions spread across so many museums is a hugely complicated task. Nevertheless, with increased research, access and education these resources can offer a wealth of emerging contexts allowing the museum to once again become a place of discovery and exploration, as well as a space for display and representation.

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31.   D. HICKS - A. STEVENSON (eds), *World Archaeology at the Pitt Rivers Museum: A Characterization*, Oxford 2013.