

‘LABELLING AND CATALOGUING AT EVERY AVAILABLE MOMENT’: W. S. BLACKMAN’S COLLECTION OF EGYPTIAN AMULETS

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Introduction

Winifred Susan Blackman spent the better part of four months between November 1926 and February 1927 attempting to convince the pharmaceutical magnate Henry Wellcome to fund her ethnographic research. Her book, *The Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (Blackman 1927), was just about to be published and she was anxious to return, this time to focus on communities in Lower Egypt. The frantic toing and froing of correspondence between Wellcome’s assistant Louis Malcolm and Blackman has been well documented by Frances Larson (2009: 213–17), as has the fact that Blackman’s persistence eventually paid off: she received a grant for a year of work, which she managed to get renewed annually until 1933.¹ In return, Blackman promised ‘to collect a number of most interesting charms, primitive medicines and so on’ for the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum.² That ‘number’ turns out to be considerable: an estimated 4,000 individual items.

Yet despite renewed interest in Blackman’s work and her connection to Wellcome (see, for example, Hill 2006, Hopkins 2003, Ikram 2000, Larson 2009, Sattin 2000), the objects themselves have never formed part of recent accounts. Indeed, very little is known about them as only a few have ever been displayed or published.³ The material legacy of Blackman’s fieldwork is now largely held by the University of Oxford’s Pitt Rivers Museum, after being transferred there in 1985.⁴ In early 2012, a two-month ‘scoping’ exercise was conducted in order to establish the nature and extent of Blackman’s collection, as well as to arrange it into a more manageable order for future cataloguing. In this article I provide an account of some of the preliminary results of this exercise; that is, some background to the collection and an introduction to the types of objects contained within it.

Winifred Susan Blackman

In 1927 the Science News Service issued two ‘exclusive’ press releases introducing ‘one of the most romantic personalities among the many Egyptologists who

are daily setting out from this country'.⁵ The person in question was Winifred Blackman, described in one of these typescripts as being at the very 'forefront of her profession'. It had taken many years, however, for Blackman to get to this stage in her career, and her interests and their pursuit had been strongly influenced by her personal connections and circumstances.

Blackman was born in 1872, the eldest of five children. The most notable of her siblings was her brother, the Egyptologist Aylward Manley Blackman, and it was through her brother's fieldwork in Egypt and Nubia that Winifred became acquainted with life along the Nile. Although Aylward's work was largely archaeological, he also had a keen eye for ethnographic detail, including the use of amulets (see, for example, Aylward Blackman 1910). He encouraged Winifred to read widely in anthropology, recommending in particular the works of Edward Tylor, William Robertson Smith, and Edward Lane.⁶ Blackman was enthralled by these scholars and in 1912 enrolled in the University of Oxford's anthropology diploma course, after having been 'recommended as an industrious and intelligent student by Dr Seligman',⁷ a personal acquaintance of her brother's. During her studies Blackman presented to the Pitt Rivers a series of ten blue-glazed modern Egyptian amulets (1913.24.6–.15),⁸ suggesting that she already held an interest in such material when she commenced her training in Oxford. References to charms also featured prominently in her first publications (see, for example, Blackman 1916).

Blackman graduated in 1915, but remained in Oxford. She continued to be drawn to the Pitt Rivers Museum where she volunteered until 1920, working on the card indexes, including those for the series of amulets and charms (Blackwood 1951).⁹ With funding, primarily from the Percy Sladen Memorial Fund, Blackman undertook her first ethnographic research in the early 1920s, becoming 'one of the first women to adopt anthropology as a profession' (*ibid.*). She would continue to struggle for funding for the next two decades, however, and money was a constant source of worry. Wellcome's sponsorship offered some reprieve, but she was forbidden from collecting for anyone else, which she considered 'a bit outrageous'.¹⁰ Nevertheless she felt that she had no alternative, and she ploughed every penny of these funds into collecting amulets.

Blackman saw her work as an exercise in salvage anthropology; and her mantra—which she repeated both in her publications and in her communications with Wellcome—was that Egyptian customs were rapidly dying out. It was a common refrain in the early part of the twentieth century (see, for example, Foucart 1919: xii, El Shakry 2007: 47–53), and was deemed particularly pressing for Egyptologists, as these customs were considered to be the last known 'survivals' from ancient times (see also Ghallab 1929, Wainwright 1919). Blackman's interest in such survivals (Figure 1 here; see also Blackman 1925, 1926) had been conditioned by her mentor in Oxford, Robert Ranulph Marett, who had a long-standing interest in 'savage' religious beliefs (see Stocking 1995: 163–72). The Pitt Rivers Museum, with its strong connection to Edward

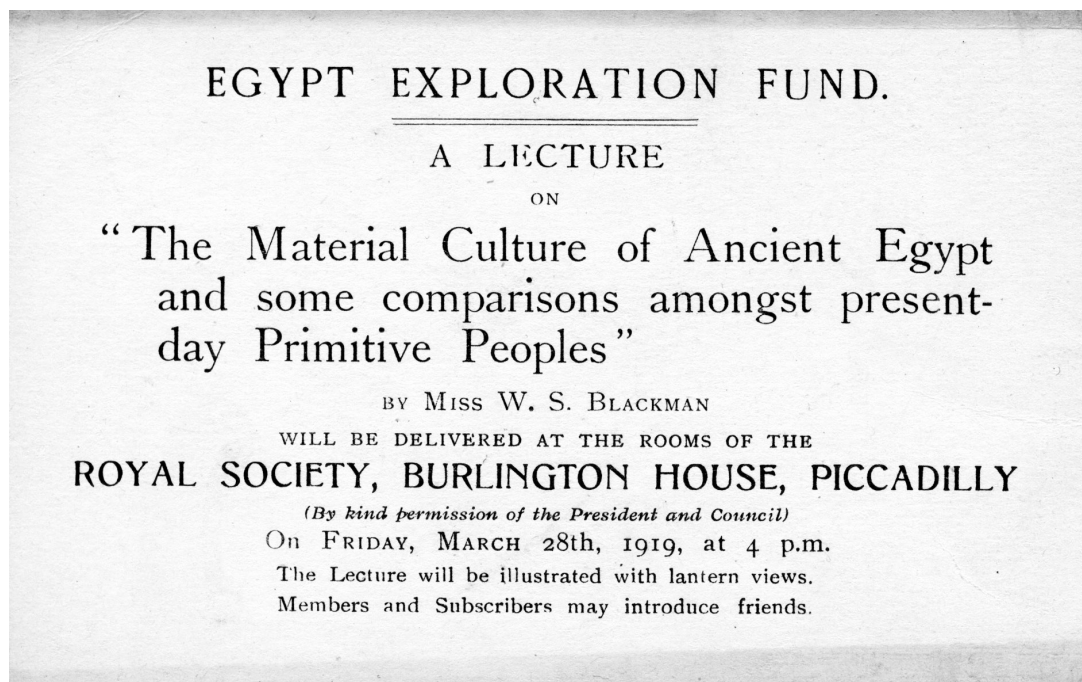


Figure 1. Ticket for a lecture given by Winifred Blackman in 1919. Courtesy and copyright, Egypt Exploration Society.

Tylor and his notion of survivals (Tylor 1871; see Wingfield 2009: 32–3), materialized such social-evolutionary concerns and further framed Blackman’s thinking. Wellcome too was anxious to ensure that she acquire evidence of such continuities with the past, and Malcolm emphasized in his communications with her that it was ‘especially necessary to note the difference, if any, in the procedure of the ancient Egyptian methods mentioned in the medical papyri’.¹¹ Such a concern is unsurprising given ancient Egypt’s privileged position within the Wellcome Museum as the oldest point of reference in the Hall of Primitive Medicine (see WHMM 1920: 15).

The legacy of Blackman’s time at the Pitt Rivers Museum is also clear from her recording practices: ‘I have taken no end of trouble about accuracy. I did not work under Mr Balfour for over eight years in the Pitt Rivers Museum for nothing, and you know what a master of accuracy he is!’¹² Consequently, her notes for each object were written as if they were for a card catalogue. Blackman brought museum practice into the field, which in turn facilitated the transmission of the objects into Western institutions.

Blackman’s Wellcome Collection

Blackman arrived in Cairo in March 1927 to begin her first season of work for Wellcome in the southern part of Beni Suef province. She was armed with three

Accessions No. (Stores)	Classification	Group	Section	H.M.M.
A 108351. 35182.	L		AM EGY	
<u>CHAPIN</u>				
Description of object	Stone, pink. For a pregnant woman who fears that the child has not quickened. 7" x 5" 8" x 3"			
	Obtained from the Sheikh Afear at Agaur, near Benna, Lower Egypt.			
Bought of	Arab wise-woman from Embaba. Cairo, 1929. (Miss Blackman, Book 3, No.592).			
Value	In return for grant of £250.0.0.			
At present		Case No.	3083.	
To be placed	B.			

Srv. W 48

Figure 2. Example of a Wellcome Historical Medical Museum 'Flimsy Inventory Card'—'A' number. Courtesy and copyright, Wellcome Collection.

large trunks for specimens, a Burroughs, Wellcome and Co. medicine chest (Hill 2006), and a camera. Nine months later Wellcome received his first instalment of eclectic objects 'illustrating the life of the Fellahen',¹³ with an assurance from Blackman that 'I do not think you can fail to be pleased with the collection I have made for your museum'.¹⁴ Malcolm, however, was less than impressed by the assortment of musical instruments, pottery, baskets, model tools, and small amulets that Blackman had so carefully documented (Larson 2009: 215).¹⁵

Despite Wellcome's and Malcolm's misgivings, Blackman's objects were subsumed within Wellcome's swelling sea of material. Each individual item was subsequently subjected to a series of cataloguing protocols (Bywaters 1987): they were assigned to a section, such as 'AM EGY'; given a unique accession number prefixed with the letter 'A', which was duly stamped or written on to a small luggage-label; furnished with a classification (e.g. 'L' or 'XX'), also noted on the luggage-label in blue crayon; provided with a detailed, typed catalogue card (Figure 2); physically numbered, usually with a small, inked 5-digit 'R' number; diligently measured in inches; and carefully packed away together with Blackman's original handwritten notes that she had attached to pill-boxes, cigarette cartons, envelopes, and luggage-labels (Figure 3). Most objects also still had Blackman's own catalogue numbers associated with them, which sat side-by-side with the other Wellcome numbers.¹⁶

Blackman continued to supply amulets by the trunk-load following each season, and consequently Wellcome's numbers proliferated. They also began to



Figure 3. A selection of objects and associated documentation in the Winifred Blackman amulet collection at the Pitt Rivers Museum, University of Oxford. Courtesy and copyright, Pitt Rivers Museum University of Oxford.

overlap, contradict, and confuse. Some objects did not receive an ‘R’ number, others received a differently configured ‘R’ number (e.g. 2584/1936). Labels became muddled and lost. In the end, there were simply too many; at least one trunk of around 450 objects was never registered by Wellcome’s cataloguers, and these retain only the numbers Blackman assigned them.

The sheer amount of labour that has already been invested in registering Blackwood’s collection is striking. She herself confessed to being overwhelmed by the assembled mass of amulets, commenting to her mentor John Myres that ‘I cannot keep up to date, though I am labelling and cataloguing at every available moment’.¹⁷ In the midst of all of this documentation and multiple numerical sequences it would be easy to lose sight of the objects themselves and their own humble materiality. The collection includes: bones (ancient human and animal), stones, padlocks, incense, shells, seeds, nuts, forged antiquities,¹⁸ *kus klebeh* and *kus kutteh* (vaginas of a dog and cat respectively), beads, skins of various animals (such as hedgehogs and crocodiles), earrings, pellets, rhinoceros and other horns, buttons, necklaces, dung of various animals, rosaries, bracelets, sticks, animal teeth, pairs of crows’ legs, crows’ heads, gazelle hooves, coins, and necklets of umbilical cord.¹⁹ There are also many unidentified powders and dried plants.

The uses to which these were put were eclectic. To ward off the evil eye is a commonly recorded function, but most of the amulets are documented as addressing very specific ailments—including eye diseases, joint pains, skin

complaints, and viral infections. Other objects promised alleviation from life's other anxieties: from childbirth complications to marriage difficulties, employment worries to legal disputes, and personal animosities to the angst of unrequited love. The utility of most of the objects is listed as being gender and age specific.

Almost all of the objects are recorded as having been collected from 'wise-women', who as Blackman explained in a talk given at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum in 1928, 'go about telling fortunes and selling their wares, and doctoring the peasants and the poorer people at Cairo...women from the Soudan, from Morocco, from Tunis, from all the way right up to Assouan'.²⁰ These individuals seem to have flocked to Blackman following her fortuitous encounter with one such 'wise-woman', who had taken pity on Blackman after she had sprained her ankle in May 1928. The two 'made great friends, and she brought others, until at last my house became the halting place for all these people. I used to have as many as six and eight at a time... I had to literally push these women away at the end'.²¹

Although the vast majority of the collection now in the Pitt Rivers Museum is comprised of small trinkets (mostly pebbles and beads), there are a few larger, more general ethnographic items. These include a felt hat worn by the Fellahin (A108523), baby clothes (A109539), and an example of 'bride of corn' (A60730), which had been discussed at some length in Blackman's original ethnographic account (Blackman 1927: 171).

Creating Order

The Blackman collection is but one of several collections of amulets that were transferred to the Pitt Rivers Museum from the Wellcome Trust, including the de Mortillet, Lovett, and Hildburgh collections. Taken altogether, the volume of material to be sorted, catalogued, and photographed is daunting. Some parts of the collection were processed in the 1980s, but it is only recently that it has again been possible for the museum to devote resources to documenting the tens of thousands of ex-Wellcome amulets now in its care. Some of the Lovett material was catalogued in preparation for the inclusion of some of the material in Felicity Powell's exhibition *Charmed Life: The Solace of Objects*, held at the Wellcome Collection in London in 2011–12,²² while the de Mortillet amulets have been addressed as part of 'Small Blessings: Animating the Pitt Rivers' Amulet Collection', a project funded by the Designation Development Fund (2012).²³

Unlike these initiatives, the present project was smaller in scale on account of more limited funding and time constraints. As such, full cataloguing of the collection was not possible. Nevertheless, it was feasible (with the assistance of a group of dedicated volunteers) to take a first step towards making the



Figure 4. Volunteer Alice Williams sorting Blackman objects into bags and boxes; from a photograph taken by the author in May 2012. Courtesy and copyright, Alice Stevenson.

collection more accessible and manageable. In the first place, this has been achieved by transcribing all 3,072 of the Wellcome's flimsy 'A' card accession records relating to the collection into a searchable Word document file. Given the multiple schemes associated with the objects themselves, it was decided that it would be too time consuming to order them according to any of their previously ascribed numbers; instead, each object was given a new number from 1–3,510, prefixed with 'PRM' (which will form the basis for a future Pitt Rivers Museum accession number), individually bagged together with its Wellcome and Blackman labels, and sequentially stored in 26 numbered boxes (Figure 4). A separate spreadsheet has been created to act as a concordance between the Blackman, Wellcome, and Pitt Rivers Museum numbers. As a result, it is now possible at least to search for and locate specific items in the collection.

Conclusion: The Collection's Research Potential

Blackman assured Wellcome that no other museum possessed such objects, and she was convinced that her research would be of the 'greatest value both to Anthropologists and to Egyptologists'.²⁴ Certainly, her book (Blackman 1927) was well received at the time (see, for example, Dawson 1928, Peet 1928); but as disciplinary boundaries solidified, her work was increasingly regarded in Egyptological circles as unorthodox—and the style of ethnographic enquiry that she had learnt in Oxford was quickly superseded as anthropology moved out of the 'museum era' (Stocking 1995). Today, her research can be critiqued for presenting a 'flattened history' that neither considers change through time (Wendrich 2010: 275–6) nor the active strategies of local individuals in manipulating the collecting context for their own ends (ter Keurs 2007: 5).

Where then does this leave a vast collection such as this? The simple stones, shells, glass beads, and animal teeth that Blackman acquired might seem insignificant—but perhaps therein lies their significance: these were valuable objects because they were not. They were easy to acquire and circulate, being small and widely available, and as such were particularly potent resources that attracted biographies. Consequently, such assemblages are potentially good focuses for studying the processes of valuation, the agency of amulets during the course of acquisition, and for exploring the systems of exchange through which objects become part of collections, as Jude Hill (2007) has suggested. Regardless of whether or not 'survivals' exist here, there is evidence for the use, citation, and negotiation of past materials within modern contexts, which could be explored. Such engagement with amulets, whether ancient or modern, continues to fascinate (as shown by recent work with Egyptian source communities at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology),²⁴ and the collection might serve as a departure point for renewed investigation into the role of amulets in modern Egyptian life. There are many possible histories that could be explored through this material, albeit not the ones Blackman envisioned eighty years ago.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

1. Blackman received seven grants in total, ranging from £100 to £250.
2. Blackman to Malcolm, 12 November 1926; Wellcome Collection, Wellcome Library, Archives and Manuscripts, WA/HMM/CM/Col/12.
3. In June 1929 Malcolm informed Blackman that ‘your collections are now scientifically arranged and they are in the Hall of Primitive Medicine’; Malcolm to Blackman, 10 June 1929; as note 2. At least seventy-one objects were also sent to Amsterdam in 1931 for display during the International Conference on African Children. There is a list in the archive; as note 2.
4. Objects collected by Blackman are also held at a number of other institutions. Steven Snape tells me that, according to inventory lists, the University of Liverpool’s Garstang Museum holds in excess of 500 artefacts; Julie Hudson tells me that the British Museum holds 116 items (Af.1981.14.1–116); and Rory Cook tells me that the Science Museum, London, houses 66 objects formerly in the Wellcome Museum, including the parturition chair specially made for Wellcome (A60841; see Larson 2009: 214). All these, except the British Museum’s more general ethnographic material, are of a similar character to the objects in the Pitt Rivers Museum.
5. The Science News Service was a pioneering operation based in London, dedicated to disseminating scientific news to newspapers and non-specialist magazines. The 1927 release about Blackman was written by the service’s overseer, Charlotte Haldane. I am grateful to Tony Simcock, of the University of Oxford’s Museum of the History of Science, for this information. The two original typescripts are held at the Pitt Rivers Museum; University of Oxford, Pitt Rivers Museum Manuscript Collections, Miscellaneous Manuscripts 1–2.
6. Aylward Blackman to Winifred Blackman, 17 January 1910; University of Liverpool, Special Collections, D84/1/26. Notably, Aylward observes of E. W. Lane’s 1836 *Modern Egyptians* that although ‘what he says hold good today for most things...he saw very little of the Fellahin and country landowners, and nothing of Upper Egypt and Nubia and what he says about the Copts is quite on second hand authority’. This may be why Winifred focused much of her early work in Upper Egypt and continued to have a life-long interest in Coptic saints, although she published little on them.
7. Register of Diploma Students, School of Anthropology and Museum Ethnography, University of Oxford; see <<http://history.prm.ox.ac.uk/students.php?all>>.
8. Along with more locally procured items from her home town of Norwich (Petch no date). In total, Winifred Blackman donated 101 objects to the Pitt Rivers Museum, of which 67 were from Egypt. The remainder includes ethnographic material from the UK, Nigeria, India, Germany, Finland, and France. Most were donated prior to her Wellcome work, but twenty-four items were received in 1933 (1933.58.1–24), all of which relate to her original research (Blackman 1927). For access to detailed records for these items, go to <<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/databases.html>>.
9. Blackman’s work at the Pitt Rivers can be traced through the museum’s annual reports from 1912 to 1920.
10. Blackman to John L. Myres, 8 February 1928; University of Oxford, Bodleian Library, Myers Papers, MSS. 4/fol.116–123. There are several letters from Blackman in this collection, covering the period 1927–1931, and dealing with her financial concerns, her health, and brief accounts of her collecting practices.

11. Malcolm to Blackman, 16 May 1927; as note 2.
12. Blackman to Malcolm, 20 August 1929; as note 2.
13. Blackman's own typed catalogue of this first collection survives at the Wellcome; as note 2.
14. Blackman to Malcolm, 8 December 1927; as note 2.
15. The Pitt Rivers Museum holds the amulets from this first season, but not the pottery vessels or musical instruments. The remaining objects are in the British Museum, which also holds material from the first and second Wellcome seasons. I am grateful to Julie Hudson for confirming the Wellcome numbers associated with the British Museum collection.
16. These refer to papers now held at the University of Liverpool's Garstang Museum. It is clear from these that Blackman continued to travel to Egypt subsequent to the withdrawal of her annual Wellcome grant in 1933, at least until 1939; and that she carried on collecting similar types of objects. The notebooks referred to on the Wellcome flimsy 'A' cards do not themselves appear to be part of this archive; rather, Blackman seems to have divided the pages of some of these notebooks into new categories, perhaps in preparation for publication. These pages can still be matched to the 'A' cards, and they provide further detail on the use of objects now in the Pitt Rivers Museum. Blackman also started to renumber the object categories, and the twelve notebooks that are in the archive (I–XII) include reference to objects collected between 1929 and 1939, although these are now difficult to match to the objects that survive at the Pitt Rivers Museum. The University of Liverpool also holds more than 3,500 negatives and prints of Blackman's photographs, primarily from her work in the early 1920s, together with some correspondence. The Special Collections department of the University of Liverpool's Sydney Jones Library also contains letters from Blackman to her family (D84/1/31–35). Again these are from the period 1920–1924. I have been unable to locate any material relating to Blackman's activities in the decade prior to her commitment to a mental hospital in 1950 and her death shortly thereafter.
17. Blackman to Myres, 12 July 1928; as note 10, MSS. 4/fol 138–144.
18. Including examples of shabtis, scarabs, and bes figurines, although there are relatively few of these in comparison to other object types. Initial estimates suggest that there are only about twenty-five such examples.
19. Blackman to Malcolm, 21 July 1929; as note 2.
20. From an unpublished manuscript entitled 'Report of speeches at a demonstration, and of an address by Miss Winfred S. Blackman, at the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum, 54a Wigmore Street, W.1, on Tuesday, October 16 1928, at 8:30 pm'; as note 2, WA/HMM/RE/D/.6. During the talk, Blackman exhibited many objects of the type now in the Pitt Rivers Museum and described some of their uses.
21. *Ibid.*
22. For more information, visit <<http://www.wellcomecollection.org/whats-on/exhibitions/charmed-life.aspx>>
23. For more information, visit <<http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/smallblessings.html>>.
24. Blackman to Malcolm, 21 July 1929; as note 2.
25. I am grateful to Alice Williams for information on this point.

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