

Small Space, Big Ideas: The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

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The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL, displays material from the pre-dynastic period of Egypt, from all periods through the Old, Middle and New Kingdoms – as well as from Ptolemaic, Roman, Coptic and Islamic Egypt. This range illustrates the diversity of antiquity in the Eastern Mediterranean and down the Nile Valley into Africa. The refurbishment of the museum last summer has enabled us to use the main gallery much more for teaching (**Fig. 1**), because we now have a seminar space, as well as being able to seat more people in the museum for our public events. After a short closure, we reopened in September 2010, since when our visitor numbers have increased by around 60% – and there have been more public events, book launches, meetings, seminars and discussions than ever before. We struggle to meet the demand for use of our space and juggle the needs of researchers. The Petrie Museum is, despite the size and range of its collections, a small museum in terms of space and resources.

My job as Audience Development Officer at the museum is to raise its profile (both within the University and externally), increase its usage, expand audiences and run engaging learning activities. There has been a regular public programme at the museum since 2007, and interest in the talks, films and trails we put on has increased. One of the good things about being a 'smaller' univer-



Fig. 1: Teaching in the newly refurbished Petrie Museum.

sity museum is the freedom to experiment with activities and articulate differing ideas about the ancient world, cultural heritage and Egypt. Another great aspect is the access we have to people and cutting edge research. Recently, I invited some PhD students from the Institute of Archaeology to give talks at the Petrie as part of our public programme. The newly refurbished space can comfortably seat about 40 and is intimate enough for there to be a good discussion afterwards (rather than just having a typical Q & A session). The museum is a perfect conduit for public engagement in a relatively informal environment. I have found that people are particularly appreciative of hearing about new research from postgraduates and, apart from fitting into the 'impact' agenda, it provides an excellent experience for the researchers delivering the talks.

Programming Research

Dr Amara Thornton who has just completed her doctorate on 'British Archaeologists, Social Networks and the Emergence

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of a Profession: The Social History of British Archaeology Abroad 1870-1939', was one of the first postgraduate 'guinea pigs'. Her talk, entitled 'The London Season: Flinders Petrie, John Garstang and the Annual Exhibition', was given at the Petrie in November 2010. Amara presented some of her PhD material on the annual exhibitions of Flinders Petrie, which followed each excavation season, and

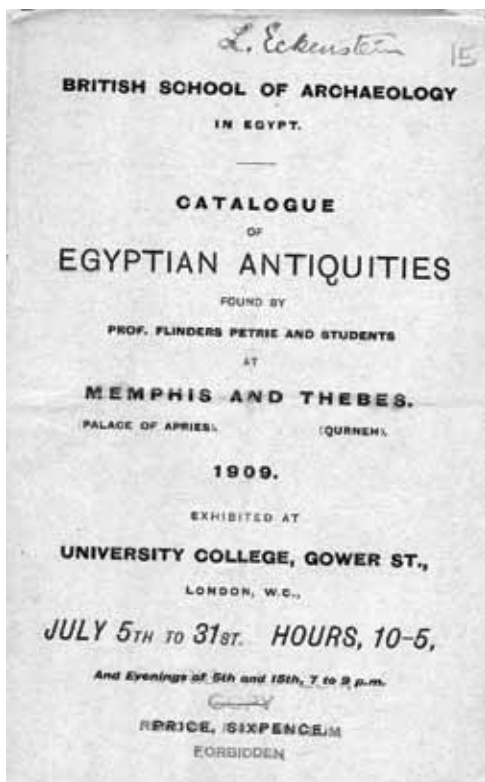


Fig. 2: The front cover of Flinders Petrie's catalogue for the 1909 exhibition of his newly excavated finds from Egypt.

explored the historical context. She used some of the Petrie Museum's archive collection of catalogues (**Fig. 2**) to illustrate how the objects were displayed – and the value ascribed to the material for 'sale' to subscribers to the excavations. Most importantly, she showed the influence they had on archaeologists in training, specifically John Garstang,

who helped found the Liverpool Institute of Archaeology at the turn of the 20th century.

'The London Season' talk led to a wide ranging discussion on exhibitions and the acquisition of antiquities between Amara, myself and members of the audience. It is worth sharing some of the visitor feedback to illustrate how much people appreciated hearing about new research from someone in their early career. For example, comments included: 'Great to hear about current research on an interesting subject'; 'I think it is a good idea to take advantage of PhD work'; and 'I enjoyed looking at the museum and the talk about topics I had never thought about before.'

Paul Harrison, a PhD candidate working on the contemporary reception of Ancient Egyptian religion within esoteric groups, was asked to offer an 'alternative' look at the 'Book of the Dead', as a response to the British Museum's block-busting exhibition. Paul gave the talk 'Profane Egyptologists' in January 2011 and explored the importance of the ancient past to many groups of people today (**Fig. 3**). There had been a great deal of interest in this talk from the moment it was advertised, and it featured at number 8 in 'Ten things to do in January' in *BBC History Magazine*.

The museum was full, with standing room only. The audience was made up of people who had gone to the 'Book of the Dead' exhibition or seen the BBC History listing, as well as of practitioners in esoteric religion. It is again worth repeating some visitor feedback to illustrate how valued Paul's talk was: 'I thought it was brilliant! Alternative views to the Book of the Dead?! Awesome!'; and 'I found it interesting, elucidating and easily digestible. An interesting angle to Egyptology with the acceptance of less academic takes'.

Obviously, Amara and Paul are only two of many doctoral candidates at the Institute, but they exemplify how valuable it is for the museum to be in contact with Institute students and how we can help disseminate their research to a wider public. The Petrie Museum also disseminates new and old

research ideas in an engaging way through programming events relating to a ‘themed’ month or week, such as Black History Month or National Science and Engineering Week.

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History Month

Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender History Month has been running in London since 2004 – and is now UK wide. Taking place in February, the month aims to celebrate the achievements, historic and contemporary, of LGBT individuals and movements. It is the ideal opportunity for a university museum to share work on the study of sexuality in antiquity with a wider public, although a small museum, such as the Petrie, would not normally have the time or budget to cultivate the connections offered by the LGBT History Month. It also provides us with the platform to generate new audiences and explore related areas in our collection. When we began programming events in 2008 we were, at that point, the only museum involved in LGBT History Month in Camden, but we have fostered a great relationship with Camden LGBT Forum.

I was keen to put on a programme of events at the Petrie Museum and asked John J. Johnston, a PhD student at the Institute working on mortuary aspects of personal identity and display in the Ptolemaic period, to give an overview of Egyptian Sexuality. This was a vast topic aimed at a public audience; however, John presented a splendid talk which was both scholarly and accessible, called ‘Beyond Isis and Osiris: Alternate Sexualities in Ancient Egypt’. He introduced the concept of ‘queer archaeology’ and looked at ‘Creation Myths’ in Egypt, the myth of Horus and Seth, various figures such as Hatshepsut, Alexander the Great, the Ptolemies, the legacy of the Fayum portraits and Antinous.



Fig. 3: Modern replica items, consecrated for ritual use: (c) Richard J. Reidy, The Temple of Ra, San Francisco, provided for Paul Harrison (fc).

Even given our concentration on publicity, the number of enquiries we received during that first year was surprising – every event we have run since has been busy. The LGBT History Month at the Petrie has gone from strength to strength and there is not the space here to detail all the events which John and I have put on. This year they were themed around Alexander the Great: I wrote a ‘Greeks in Egypt’ trail, while John gave a talk ‘Alexander and Hephaestion: Homeric Romance?’. I want to quote just one of the many positive responses we had: ‘Absolutely wonderful. The lectures put on by the Petrie are always challenging. Great stuff.’

The fact that the Petrie Museum can put on challenging and informative events, academically based yet accessible, is due in part to our relationship with the Institute of Archaeology and its students.