

## NEWS

# The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL

Jan Picton\*

University College London houses one of the world's most important collections of ancient Egyptian material, the majority excavated by Flinders Petrie, his students and his successors in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It is a museum of archaeology that helps to explain the development of a discipline that was in its infancy when Petrie worked in Egypt over a century ago (**Fig. 1**). It is a teaching collection, its densely packed cases entrancing, and sometimes intimidating, visitors who rave about its old-fashioned feel, but it is anything but frozen in time.

The basic facts are that the Petrie Museum tells the story of the Nile Valley from Predynastic Egypt to the emergence of Islam, with 80,000 objects covering every period of life in Egypt and the Sudan. The museum is full of acknowledged 'firsts' – with some of the earliest sculpture, metals, linen and complete garments to have been found in Egypt. In addition, the Petrie holds the largest collection of Roman-period funerary portraits of any Egyptian collection outside the Cairo Museum.

Flinders Petrie was fascinated by the 'hows' and 'whys' of the ancient world, so the museum attempts to answer key questions about the development of technology. Of course, it also holds the greatest collection of provenanced pottery which formed the basis

for Petrie's 'sequence-dating'. However, more intriguing to many are the everyday objects that humanise the past: the combs and hair curlers, razors and mirrors, costumes and jewellery that allow us to glimpse the way people lived.

A less visible but equally valuable resource is the wealth of archival material that supports the collection. Petrie's (and his students' and successors') excavation records, journals, tomb cards, letters, drawings, paintings and photographic negatives provide a treasure trove for archaeologists and researchers reassessing sites today (**Fig. 2**). The nature of funding for Petrie's excavations required that his 'share' of finds was distributed to many museums, but he also felt strongly that distributing objects to act as study material when the discipline was new, and publications few, provided a survival strategy for the material and would increase scholarly study and public interest. As new excavations begin at 'Petrie' sites, and as researchers attempt to reunite site material and tomb groups – whether on paper or in the digital world – the value of such an archive is immense. The recent UCL Institute of Archaeology annual conference (May 2013), *Forming Material Egypt*, addressed many of these issues.

Museums are continually challenged to find new ways of explaining their collections, of engaging broader audiences. The Petrie was one of the first museums in the world to put its entire catalogue online, and interpretation and editing of the database is

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\* UCL Institute of Archaeology,  
The Petrie Museum, Malet Place,  
London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom  
[j.picton@ucl.ac.uk](mailto:j.picton@ucl.ac.uk)



**Fig. 1:** 'Flinders, taking Khasekhemui bronzes etc. in front of store hut' (from Margaret Murray's photograph album, Abydos 1902). Petrie was a pioneer of archaeological photography as well as 'the father of Egyptian archaeology' (photo: Petrie Museum archive PMF/WFP1/115/5/2).

ongoing. One researcher unable to leave Egypt described it as 'being able to hold a museum in your hand'. The challenge is to use the limited space – both display and access, onsite and online – to best advantage.

In 2010, Tonya Nelson, the Petrie Museum Manager, oversaw the first major redisplay for 30 years. The museum was reconfigured to be more physically and intellectually accessible to the public. A key feature of the re-display was a new multi-purpose space (**Fig. 3**). As well as providing teaching space for the Institute's Egyptian archaeology and other courses (including *Artefact Studies*, *Museum Studies* and *Conservation*), and other UCL departments using the collection, it also hosts a programme of academic and public seminars and lectures, evening

classes, object-handling sessions, temporary exhibitions and music and film events organised by both the museum and the Friends. The public opening hours are staffed by enthusiastic volunteers who enhance the visitor experience, helping to increase visitor numbers every year.

In addition to providing an important teaching resource for a number of UCL departments, not just archaeology, the Petrie Museum welcomes children from London schools and hosts researchers from around the world. Its touring exhibition to the USA, *Excavating Egypt: Great Discoveries from the Petrie Museum*, attracted record audiences at each of its venues, and object loans are continually requested for international exhibitions (as I write there are loans

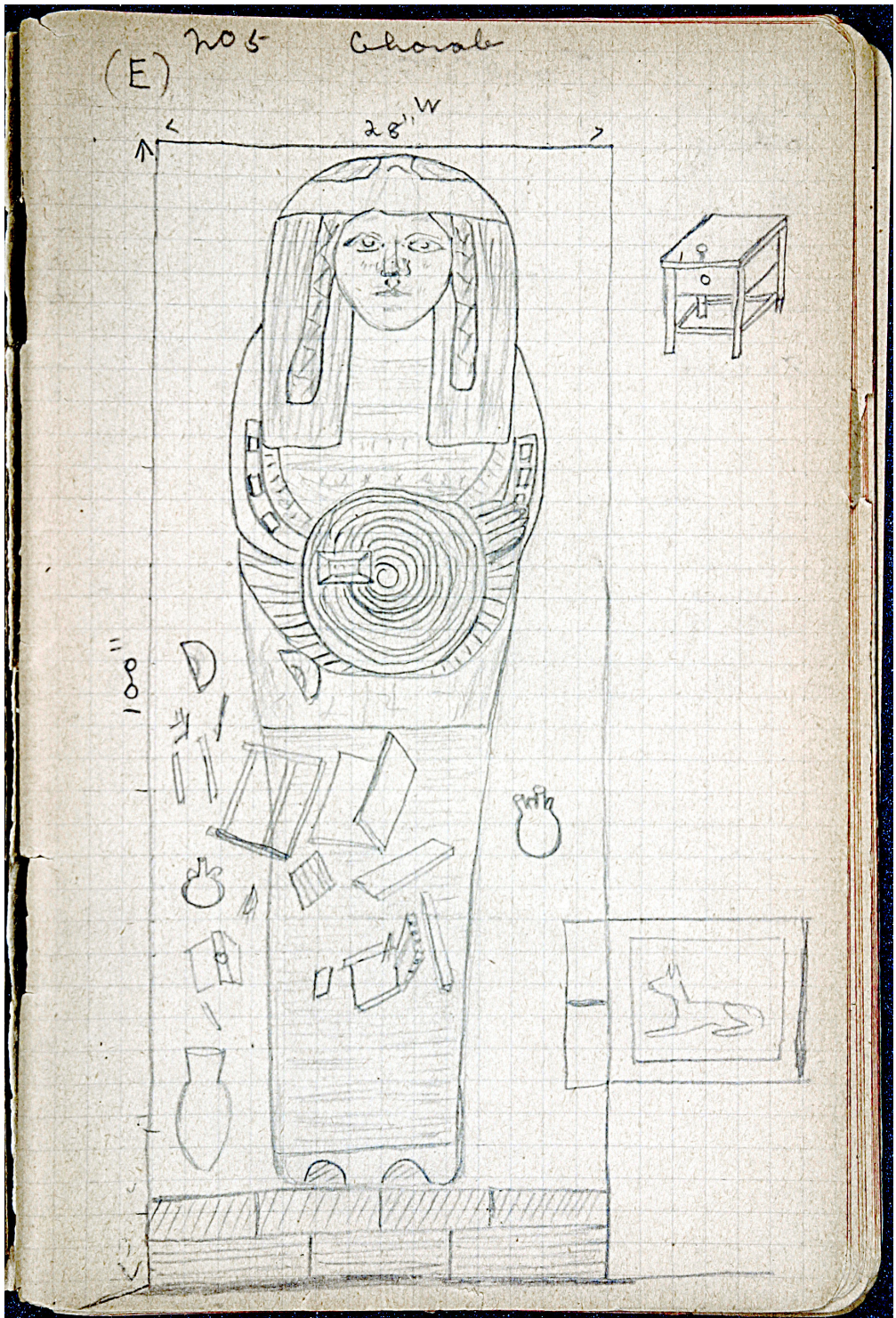


Fig. 2: Drawing of *in situ* burial, Grave 705, Gurob, from the unpublished field notebook 34a in the Petrie Museum archive.



**Fig. 3:** The multi-purpose space in the Petrie Museum, surrounded by object displays, with Professor Stephen Quirke at the launch of *Hidden Hands: Egyptian Workforces in Petrie Excavation Archives, 1880–1924* (2010).

out to major exhibitions in Berlin, Paris and Cambridge).

The Petrie Museum is one of the most experimental, innovative and creative public collections in Britain. The new space doubles as a 'learning lab' where visitors can test cutting-edge technological tools being developed to enhance the museum-going experience. Over the past five years, the Petrie Museum and UCL Department of Geomatic Engineering, in partnership with Arius3D, have been experimenting with the use of 3D imaging technologies, specifically photogrammetry and laser scanning, to make museum collections more accessible and engaging. Visitors to the Petrie Museum can use the museum's 3D image kiosks 'virtually' to pick up and rotate fragile artefacts to see them from different angles and perspectives. *3D Encounters* is a joint initiative supported by Arius3D using the latest imaging technology to create ground-breaking travelling exhibitions – the most recent is currently running at UCL Qatar: *3D Encounters: Where Science Meets Heritage*. The exhibition

explores how 3D digital replicas of museum collections can be used to advance museum, archaeological and conservation practice. The ultimate ambition is to build an outstanding 3D image library of Petrie Museum objects which can be made accessible online and to encourage other museums to do the same – to create a virtual global museum (<http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/petrie/research/3dpetrie>).

The redisplay also saw the installation of a new interpretative scheme that gives visitors new insights into the people, uses and meanings behind the objects in the collection. A QR-Scanner app for iPhone/iPad allows the user to obtain information about specific objects in the collection by scanning adjacent QR codes. With this project, the Petrie is pioneering a type of 'live' interpretation label that is constantly collecting and disseminating new information about the collection. The most recent feature has been the development of the first Petrie 'app'. *Tour of the Nile* offers iPad owners a way of inspecting two dimensional images of artefacts in



**Fig. 4:** A small part of the 1,000+ faience tiles, inlays and moulds from Amarna (Petrie Museum: display case WEC11).

three dimensions. A new 3DPetrie website is under development.

Some parts of the collection present their own particular problems in interpretation, solved creatively. The Petrie holds a huge collection of moulds and fragments of decorative faience tiles and inlays from Amarna (**Fig. 4**). The display case seeks to provide an archaeological context for the material, while a new arrangement of moulds and fragments recreates the original Petrie publication plates. The question remains, how to explain the original use of these modest fragments to the non-expert? The result is the acquisition of a modern museum-quality tapestry woven by Sayed Mahmoud of the Wissa Wassef Art Centre in Saqqara. The saturated colours of the tapestry and its vibrant scenes of life along the Nile breathe life into the fragments and paint a picture of the glorious naturalistic scenes that decorated the walls and walkways of the palaces of Akhenaten. This piece also helps to dem-

onstrate not just the rich artistic culture of modern Egypt but the continuity in the use of colour and motifs from the ancient past to the present.

The displays also demonstrate the museum's attempt to recognise the contribution of the Egyptian workforce to the success of Petrie's excavations. Dotted through the cases are photographs and potted biographies of his assistants and the objects they are associated with. This initiative came out of research by the Petrie's research curator, Professor Stephen Quirke, which resulted in the publication *Hidden Hands: Egyptian Workforces in Petrie Excavation Archives, 1880–1924* (2010).

The museum has an active Friends group who are celebrating their 25th anniversary this year. The Friends promote the museum through their lectures, events and publications. They also contribute substantially to the conservation of museum objects and are a major supporter of museum educational



**Fig. 5:** Gemma Aboe, conservation intern, at work on some of the Petrie Museum's *shab-tis*; her 18-month internship was funded by the Friends of the Petrie Museum and the British Museum.

and outreach projects (Fig. 5). The latest museum initiative supported by the Friends (alongside UCL, the Museums Association and the Egyptian Embassy) is a long-term loan to the Egyptian Cultural and Education Bureau in London. Over 150 Petrie Museum objects are to be displayed in three galleries in their newly-refurbished, Grade 1 listed, building in Curzon Street. The exhibition is curated by five young Egyptians resident in London, exploring themes ranging from the evolution of language to the science of medicine, as seen through the eyes of non-specialist, non-Eurocentric, volunteer curators.

The museum's public programme coordinates themed lectures and trails with programmes such as Black History month, LGBT History Month (as featured by Debbie Challis in *Archaeology International* 13/14: 34), National Archaeology Week, and National Science and Engineering Week. These events

showcase academic approaches to the ancient world in an informal way, but each event is designed to draw attention to areas of the collection that can often be overlooked.

Regular exhibitions have provided yet another interpretation of the past, whether photographs of Petrie working in Egypt, modern artists showing Egypt today, or more challenging exhibitions such as *Type-cast: Petrie, Politics and Eugenics* which led to the museum's Audience Development Officer and curator of the exhibition, Debbie Challis, writing *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (2013). This year's challenge to conventional representations of the past has been an AHRC-funded 'Timekeeper in Residence'. Museums have traditionally used linear time concepts as a way of organizing their collections: during her residency, artist-curator Cathy Haynes has explored how time is mapped, measured, modelled and lived – working with a variety of experts from astronomy to psychology, evolutionary genetics, theology, art history and philosophy. The project's final exhibition, *A Storm is Blowing*, ran until the beginning of August.

Museums worldwide feel the responsibility of safeguarding the culture of Egypt even if they cannot always agree on how it is to be done, especially following the Revolution in January 2011. Questions of repatriation, once frequent, have dimmed. The questions now are focussed more on how museums outside Egypt can support and assist colleagues within Egypt, whether archaeologists, conservators or museum professionals, to preserve the cultural heritage of Egypt both in museums and on site where it is subject to the pressures of urbanisation, land management and illegal activity. The Petrie Museum hosts visiting Egyptian curators and young museum professionals from the Middle East as part of a programme of sharing expertise and developing skills.

The museum's current site in Malet Place was only ever intended as a temporary location, and UCL continues to seek an alternative site with more display and multi-purpose

space, better environmental control, including a roof that does not leak, and a street frontage. The Petrie Museum is recognised internationally as a leader in its field, with MLA Designation as a collection of national and international importance; yet UCL has 25,000 students and staff and the majority of them have not been in the museum and many have never even heard of it. If you are one of those unfortunate people we can only recommend that you head to Malet Place


where a bright red banner invites you to enter one of London's finest collections – the Petrie Museum.

*The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL, Malet Place, London WC1E 6BT. Tel: (020) 7679 2884. Open to the public 1–5 pm Tuesday-Saturday, admission free. [www.petriemuseum.com](http://www.petriemuseum.com) [@PetrieMuseEgypt](https://www.facebook.com/Petrie-Museum)*

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