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FROM THE COLLECTIONS

Rediscovery of Gertrude Caton-Thompson's Fayum Lithic Collection

Noriyuki Shirai

Introduction

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, British archaeologists working in Egypt usually received financial support from organisations like the Egypt Exploration Fund and the British School of Archaeology in Egypt, to which many museums and similar institutions in the UK and abroad subscribed in expectation of a share of archaeological finds. After fieldwork, finds were transported to Cairo for the official division at the Antiquities Service in Egypt. The portion given to organisations in the UK was divided further, and these smaller portions were distributed to subscribers. In this manner, archaeological finds from Egypt were distributed worldwide.

Gertrude Caton-Thompson started her archaeological career when finds distribution was normal practice. Studying archaeology at University College London and in Egypt under Flinders Petrie, and following his advice, she carried out her first independent fieldwork in the Fayum (**Fig. 1**), a desert oasis approximately 60 km to the southwest of Cairo. There she discovered Egypt's earliest Neolithic farming culture on the former shores of Lake Qarun (Caton-Thompson 1983: 101–109; Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934). Her fieldwork over three seasons in 1924–5, 1925–6 and 1927–8 brought a large number of finds, mainly elaborate stone tools, to the UK, and these were distributed to 30 institutions in eight different countries. Her monograph entitled *The Desert Fayum* was published in London in 1934 several years after the distribution. Although the destinations of the divided portions were noted in this monograph (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: xiv), little further information was provided. It is hard to discover how thoroughly her finds were studied and published, and which institutions now house both published and unpublished finds. Since the time of Caton-Thompson, archaeological sites in the Fayum have been plundered by antiquarians and destroyed by the rapid expansion of agricultural land (Shirai 2010: 33–80 and 119–182). Thus, regardless of whether published or unpublished, study of Caton-Thompson's Fayum finds stored in museums and other institutions is important in order to obtain information no longer available in the field.

UCL Institute of Archaeology,
London WC1H 0PY, GB
noriyuki.shirai@ucl.ac.uk

Caton-Thompson's Fayum finds in the UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections

The largest portion of Caton-Thompson's Fayum finds is stored in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology at UCL and is well known to general public and academics. What may be less well known is that a portion of these finds is also held by the Institute of Archaeology. This was originally given to

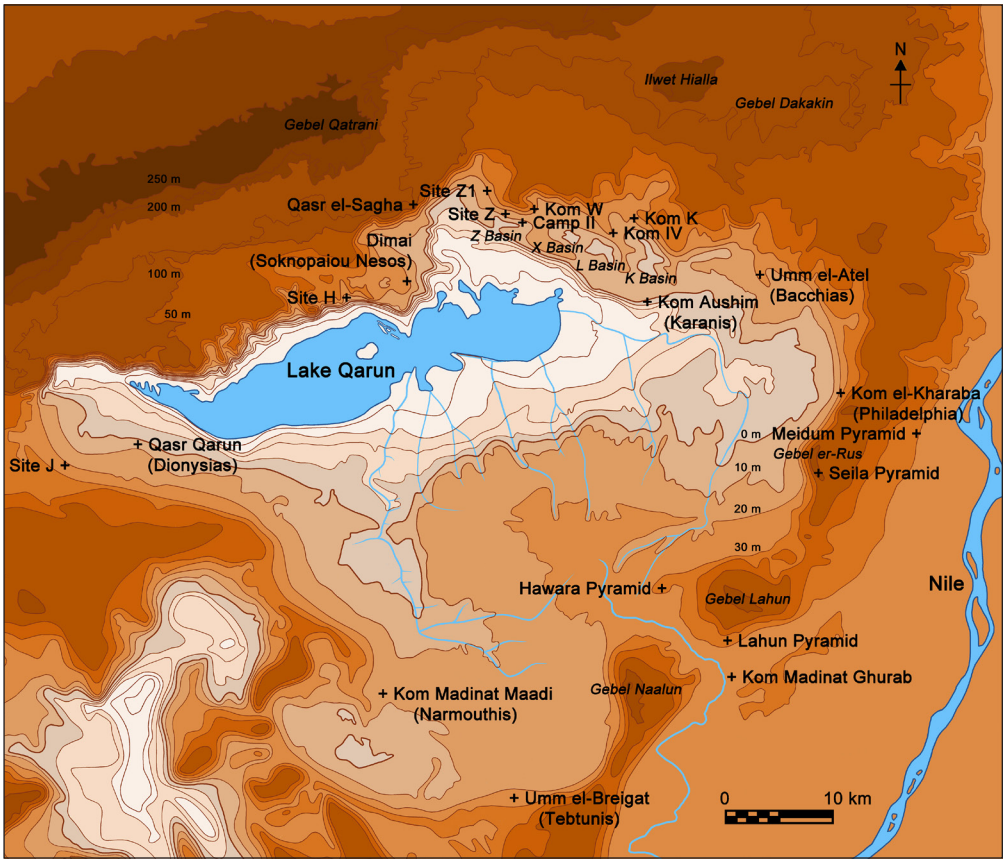

Figure 1: Map of the Fayum (Drawn by author).

the Wellcome Historical Medical Museum in London, then came to the Institute in 1955 when parts of the Wellcome Collection were dispersed (Russell 1986).

Only half of the artefacts were accessioned when they arrived at the Institute; another half remained unaccessioned until I started research in 2014. Each of the artefacts accessioned in 1955 was given the accession number '55/####' and registration number 'LP####'. The 'LP' prefix was assigned in the 1950s; it may have stood originally for 'Late Palaeolithic', although the register contained many objects, including the Fayum lithics, that were not of this date. The artefacts accessioned in 2014 and 2015 were given the accession number '2014/####' and '2015/####' respectively.

The total number of accessioned artefacts is 250, of which 247 are lithics including many formal tools, two cores and one unidentifiable item. There are 192 tools including 73 Epipalaeolithic, 96 Neolithic, 22 Old Kingdom, and one Middle Kingdom one in the Institute (see the list of artefacts on the UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections website). At the time of writing the whereabouts of 52 tools described as 'arrowheads' in the 1955 accession list are uncertain.

Caton-Thompson usually inscribed provenance, identification number and collection year on each artefact in black ink. Most such inscriptions are still readable, however, where they have faded, there is no other clue to the lost information. My study of Caton-Thompson's Fayum finds in the Petrie Museum indicated that she often marked the tools which she intended to publish with a black ink dot. However, I found that not all

stone tools published in *The Desert Fayum* were marked with a black ink dot, and two stone tools in the Institute (55/1188.1 and 2015/134) which were marked with a black ink dot were not published.

More than half of all accessioned artefacts in the Institute are from the 1927–8 season, the rest from the 1925–6 season. The most productive was the 1925–6 season, as prominent Neolithic sites such as Kom K and Kom W were excavated where many formal stone tools were found *in situ* (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 4–6 and 22–41). These important finds are stored and displayed in the Petrie Museum. Apart from excavations, Caton-Thompson walked over a large concession area on the northeast and southwest shores of Lake Qarun and selected formal stone tools at lithic concentrations recognised as surface sites, such as Camp II, Site L and Site X, as well as at sparse lithic scatters in broad areas such as Area L–X (between Site L and Site X) and Area Z–Z1 (between Site Z and Site Z1). These sites are located around large natural basins on the northeast shore of Lake Qarun (named by Caton-Thompson as the K Basin, L Basin, X Basin and Z Basin). The 1927–8 season was supplementary in nature, and focused on minor surface sites and post-Neolithic sites (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 6–9). In *The Desert Fayum*, the Neolithic sites visited in the 1927–8 season were not well described and finds were poorly published. Thus, the Fayum finds stored in the Institute provide new information about what was actually found at these sites.

Epipalaeolithic artefacts

Caton-Thompson misunderstood that the water level of Lake Qarun had lowered throughout prehistoric times, so that sites at higher elevations on the lakeshore were earlier in date than those at lower elevations, thus she misinterpreted microlithic tools found at lower elevations as dating to the later phase of the Neolithic – which she named the Neolithic B Group (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 55–59). She mapped the distribution of many Neolithic B Group sites, but published lithic artefacts from only a few (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: pls. XLIX–L). Her misinterpretation was corrected through new fieldwork conducted by the Combined Prehistoric Expedition (CPE) in the 1960s. Microlithic tools from these sites were redefined as Epipalaeolithic by the CPE. However, these finds were also minimally illustrated, though the assemblages characterised by high percentages of backed blades and bladelets and low geometric components were described to a certain extent (Wendorf and Schild 1976: 222–226 and 311–319).

Epipalaeolithic artefacts stored in the Institute are from more sites than those excavated by the CPE and include tool types not excavated and published by the CPE. One such tool is the Ounan point (**Fig. 2**), well known as the typical arrowhead in the Epipalaeolithic of North Africa, but Caton-Thompson did not know this and did not publish any examples. It seems that Ounan points tend to be found in particular areas in the Fayum which were not explored by the CPE (Shirai 2010: 188–206), and it is understandable that the CPE did not find any at their sites.

Neolithic artefacts

Caton-Thompson classified all Neolithic stone tools into more than 20 tool types (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 19–22). However, her classifications need some modification. In functional terms, the formal stone tool assemblage of the Fayum Neolithic consists mainly of 1) wood chopping tools (axes), 2) wood cutting/carving tools (adzes), 3) tree barking/plant peeling tools (gouges), 4) meat cutting/shell opening/wood whittling tools (pebble-backed knives and pebble-butted knives), 5) butchering/brush clearing tools (knife blades), 6) hair shaving/hide scraping/fish scaling tools (planes, pebble-backed scrapers, endscrapers and side-blow flake scrapers), 7) cereal harvesting tools (sickle blades), and 8) shooting/throwing tools (arrowheads and spearheads).

It seems that Caton-Thompson tried to put as many different Neolithic tool types

Figure 2: Ounan points from the Z Basin and Camp II (55/1197.1 and 55/1199.3 from left to right) (Photograph by author).

as possible in each portion for distribution (Shirai 2011). The portion in the Institute includes almost all tool types and provides a good idea about the diversity of Fayum Neolithic stone tools. Photographs of nine Neolithic stone tools now in the Institute were published without indication of provenance (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: pl. XXXIII–1, 13 and 21, pl. XL–37, pl. XLI–1 and 9, pl. XLV–17, 21 and 24).

It must be stressed that a number of tools stored in the Institute are from extremely minor sites like Umm el-Atel, Site I, Site J and Qasr Qarun, which were located in the peripheries of Caton-Thompson's concession area and visited only briefly by her. Umm el-Atel is known as a Ptolemaic-Roman town site, but the existence of Neolithic lithic artefacts at and around this site has not been published in detail (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 72) (**Fig. 3**). As Site I was

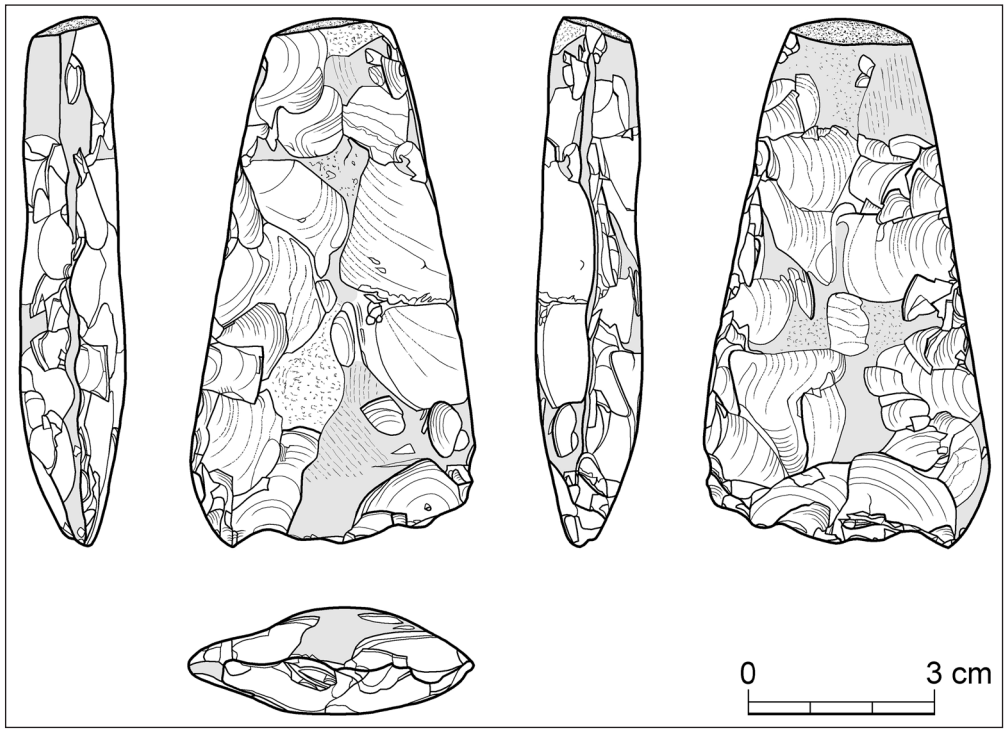

Figure 3: Flaked and ground axe from Umm el-Atel (2014/143). Cortex is left on the butt and shaded areas are well ground. The ground working edge is badly damaged by heavy use (Drawn by author).

poorly described, even its location and date have remained unclear. Qasr Qarun is known for a Ptolemaic temple, and a Predynastic settlement site described as 'near Qasr Qarun' by Caton-Thompson is actually located approximately seven kilometres to the southeast of the temple. The Predynastic lithic assemblage from this site was given to Manchester Museum, but the existence of Neolithic lithic artefacts at this site was not mentioned (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 69–71). However, there is another unnamed surface site somewhere between Site J and Qasr Qarun (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 86–87), and it is possible that Neolithic stone tools described as from Qasr Qarun are actually from this unnamed site.

Old Kingdom artefacts

Caton-Thompson sometimes found a scatter of Old Kingdom stone tools at Neolithic surface sites. Moreover, she encountered a few Old Kingdom settlement sites and published two remarkable sites named Kom IV (also called L Kom) and Site H with many finds (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: pls.LIV, LV and LVII). She classified all Old Kingdom stone tools into 10 tool types (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: 123–131), but her publication of these tools is not as thorough as for the Neolithic because she was not interested in the Old Kingdom.

Four of the 22 Old Kingdom stone tools stored in the Institute were published as from Kom IV (Caton-Thompson and Gardner 1934: pls. LIV–1, 9, 11 and 12). However, according to its ink inscription, one tool (55/1255) published as from there is from 'the K Basin SE shore'.

Final remarks

Caton-Thompson's Fayum finds collection that came to be stored in the Institute is a long-lost chapter of her work in the Fayum. It not only gives a hint of how she selected her finds for distribution and publication, but also broadens our knowledge about the material culture, its spatial distribution across sites and its transition through prehistoric and historic times in this cradle of Egyptian Civilisation. The full data of this collection are now accessible on the UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections website.

Online data

To see the full data of the collection, please visit http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/archaeology/about/collections/prehistoric

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Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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