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Opening the stable door: new initiatives at the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

Sally MacDonald, Roy McKeown, Stephen Quirke

The Petrie Museum at UCL contains a world-class collection of Egyptian objects that ranges chronologically from early prehistoric to Islamic times, but it is inadequately housed and remains little known outside Egyptology. It has now been designated as of national importance and its staff have ambitious plans to provide greater access, via the Internet and in other ways, to the 80000 objects it contains.

In May 2000 the *Guardian* journalist Maeve Kennedy visited the Petrie Museum and described it as a scrofulous building stuffed with treasures. She is right. The museum's current home – two rooms in a nineteenth-century stable off a goods yard – is completely inadequate to meet the needs of its world-class collection of Egyptian material and its growing audience. The museum, founded in 1893 as part of UCL's Department of Egyptology (the first in the UK), was intended to help train archaeology students. Amelia Edwards, its founder, and Professor William Flinders Petrie, its first curator, saw it as a collection "for study rather than popular show". It remains a university museum, with UCL staff and students as a core audience, but with increasing numbers of outsiders now discovering what one recently described as "this wonderful secret".

In 1998 the museum was formally designated by the Museums and Galleries Commission as being of national importance. Designation has brought access to new sources of funding, but also the remit to begin to serve a broader national audience. The museum's strategic plan, adopted by UCL in 2000, lists target audiences both inside and outside the university. The main priority is to find a safe and accessible new home for the museum, but, until a suitable building, is found staff are working on several initiatives, both physical and virtual, to improve offsite access to the collections.

Outreach projects

Our most significant physical outreach project is a touring exhibition of objects chosen from the museum's collections: "Ancient Egypt: digging for dreams". It is supported by the Heritage Lottery Access Fund and is designed to interest a wide audience. It addresses the modern Western obsession with ancient Egypt, questions our assumptions and fantasies, and looks at ethical issues such as the trade in antiquities and the presentation of human remains in museum displays (Fig. 1).

A second outreach project is directed at the formal education sector. Few non-specialists are aware of the vast chronological scope of the museum's collections, from the Palaeolithic through to Islamic Egypt (Figs 2, 3). As a first step towards broadening their use, three handling collections have been developed and piloted for different audiences: an ancient Egypt collection for primary schools, an Islamic Egypt collection for secondary schools (Fig. 4), and a Classical Egypt collection for use in tertiary education. The museum is currently exploring the possibility of employing, in partnership with the British Museum's Education Department, an Arabic-speaking outreach teacher to run

Figure 1 *A display in "Ancient Egypt: digging for dreams", a touring exhibition of objects from the Petrie Museum. This view is of part of the section on Western fantasies of ancient Egypt. A clip from the 1932 film* The Mummy *plays in the background. Croydon, November 2000.*

Figure 2 *An ancient Egyptian funerary figure made of painted wood, from the eighteenth dynasty, 1550–1295 BC; height 28.8cm (museum no. UC 8824).*

Figure 3 *The Petrie Museum houses many objects from Islamic Egypt, such as this cosmetics container made of rock crystal from the Fatimid period, 969–1171 AD (museum no. UC 25300).*

Figure 4 *(above) Objects from the Petrie Museum's Islamic Egypt handling collection for secondary schools, developed in conjunction with the British Museum's Arab World Education Officer.*

handling sessions on ancient and modern Egypt in London schools.

Further outreach projects include several collaborations with artists. Thanks to funding from the Year of the Artist, the Booker Prize-nominated Egyptian author Ahdaf Soueif is in residence at the museum for part of the academic year 2000–2001. We do not yet know what this initiative will lead to – perhaps short stories based on objects in the collections – but we are confident that it will bring a new perspective to bear on some of the material. We hope that the work she produces here will be published in both Arabic and English.

Digital outreach

Our main outreach initiatives will, however, be on line. Money from the government's funding for designated museums has enabled us to embark on an ambitious programme of digitization, to create by March 2002 a complete illustrated online catalogue of the museum's 80 000 objects (Fig 5). Through this project we aim to make our rather under-used collection available anywhere in the world, by providing a digital resource for students, schoolchildren and anyone interested in Egyptian archaeology. It should also vastly improve service to our existing academic audience, allowing students and researchers worldwide to plan their work and make best use of their time when they visit the museum. A further benefit of digitization is that we will be able to use the data as the basis of improved information systems to help us to manage the collection more efficiently. And it opens the way for

Figure 5 *(below) Dan King, image-capture technician for the Petrie Museum's digitization project, photographing a scarab (an engraved gem in the shape of a sacred beetle). Computer delivery of images benefits both researchers and the public by providing access to small objects in the collection.*

closer collaboration with other museum collections, for example by reuniting material originally excavated from the same site but subsequently dispersed.

The initiative to deliver the entire collection over the web already places the Petrie Museum at the cutting-edge of developments in the digital museum world. Yet there remains the very real danger that the virtual Petrie Museum might hover in the ether hidden from all but those in the know – the informed subset of researchers who know the Petrie or happen to have come across the website. Ironically, we risk duplicating in the virtual environment the inaccessibility of the real museum. Although our database represents a major advance, we are well aware of the need to promote its use to various audiences. We expect Egyptologists to require little explanation or assistance but believe that other groups will need the collections to be set in context by our addressing such questions as who made the objects and why, how were they used and what did they mean? We are now starting to experiment with different ways of interpreting and enhancing the raw data for a range of new audiences.

The Hawara Labyrinth project

These new audiences include many students and staff in higher education who work outside academic Egyptology. We want to encourage wider use of the collection across disciplines by providing multiple paths of access to the objects in it and by expanding information about them.

In 1999 Narushige Shiode (a research student at UCL's Centre for Advanced Spatial Analysis (CASA)), proposed a collaboration with the Petrie Museum to develop virtual-reality models of Egyptian monuments. We suggested an exploratory set of reconstructions of Hawara, one of the many sites in the Nile Valley excavated by Petrie. We did so for several reasons. Both the ancient Egyptian and the ancient Roman periods are represented at the site, which thus captures some of the diversity of the collections in the museum. Both periods at Hawara are represented by famous monuments of art history – ancient Egypt by the vanished Labyrinth, the architectural complex most highly praised by classical Greek writers; and ancient Roman Egypt by the panel portraits found by Petrie and still today one of the most astonishing legacies of classical Mediterranean painting. Specialists continue to debate the original form of the destroyed Labyrinth, and this allows us to exploit the learning and research potential of 3-D reconstruction (Fig. 6). Thus, Petrie's reconstruction can be compared with other possibilities rendered more plausible by recent excavation of other architectural complexes of the same period.

There is, however, always a danger that 3-D models look so dramatic that they seduce the viewer into seeing the model as a simple photo-style image of "how it really was", when, often, we do not know. By using as an example a monument, the form of which is debated, we aim to show how 3-D models can be used to test hypotheses advanced on the basis of specific, often limited evidence. We are not trying to persuade people that either the Petrie model or the new model is "true"; we hope to encourage them to look critically at the evidence on which each is based, and assess their relative merits, as a means of better understanding the past.

"Digital Egypt for Universities"

The Graduate School at UCL generously funded the Hawara Labyrinth Project, enabling it to become a prototype for a more ambitious plan. Our broader aim is to provide online contexts for a range of sites of all periods of Egyptian prehistory, ancient history and early medieval history – an interpretive online learning resource. In the summer of 2000 the Petrie Museum and CASA received first-year funding from the Joint Information Systems Committee of the Higher Education Funding Councils for two posts in a new three-year initiative, "Digital Egypt for Universities", as part of the UK programme to develop a distributed national electronic resource.

What do we aim to achieve in these three years? First and foremost, we aim to illustrate the potential of collections, particularly university collections, for exploring a range of subjects dealing with the past, present and future. University collections, as an institutional element of higher education, have a special role to play in such exploration. Ideally, a museum of Egyptian archaeology should be no more confined to archaeology than a museum of geology is to its subject, or an art gallery to either art history or art. The role of the academic disciplines involved is to identify and assess the knowledge contained in the objects, and then to share that knowledge with wider communities, within and beyond higher education. The material objects in the collections invite a wide range of responses, from the analytical to the aesthetic and the sociological. From an ancient Egyptian inscribed stone we may have as much to learn from anthropology or comparative literature, psychology or the history of medicine, as from Egyptian archaeology and philology. The important thing is to construct an interface between disciplines, so that learning and teaching become multi-dimensional activities. This is where the web provides an ideal arena for future development. It is informal, learner friendly and relatively private, and it encourages unhindered exploration across disciplines conventionally divided by separate funding for the sciences and the humanities.

With 80000 objects, a web database in the making, and extensive photographic and other archival resources, the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology offers copyright-cleared materials of unrivalled scope for building the educational websites required. The Institute of Archaeology at UCL, to which the Petrie Museum is now administratively and academically attached, is home to conservation studies and museology as well as to expertise in the relevant archaeological periods and techniques. It is a natural starting point from which UCL can take a lead in the development of new roles and new lives for university museums in general and for Egyptian and Sudanese archaeology.

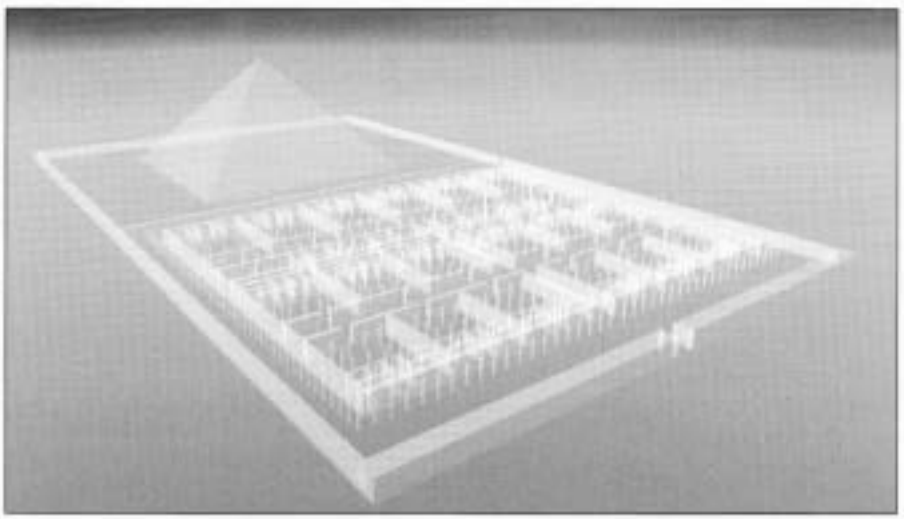

Figure 6 *An image from the Petrie Museum's project "Digital Egypt for Universities" showing a virtual reconstruction of the Hawara Labyrinth, an ancient Egyptian architectural complex built in the early 1800s BC by the twelfth-dynasty king Amenemhat III but destroyed during the Roman period. The original form of the complex remains uncertain. The model shown here is based on Petrie's reconstruction and it can be "flown through" on UCL's website: http://www.casa.ucl.ac.uk/digital_egypt/hawara/*