

Discovering Egypt

Egyptian antiquities at the University of Melbourne

Christine Elias

Introduction

The Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University of Melbourne was created in the late 1980s as a result of the merger between the departments of Classics and Middle Eastern Studies.¹ The amalgamation of the individual departmental collections and the purchase in 1987 of a large collection of Cypriot material formed the basis of what is now known as the Classics and Archaeology Collection.

This article presents the results of research undertaken into the holdings of Egyptian antiquities at the University of Melbourne, of which there are four discrete groups within the greater Classics and Archaeology Collection. One of these, a group of papyri from the Egypt Exploration Society, established the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the university.

Historical context

Discussion of the Egyptian collections at the University of Melbourne begins with Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853–1942), the founder of the discipline of Egyptian archaeology. The grandson of Captain Matthew Flinders, Petrie pioneered the study of objects in archaeology, a discipline that for a long time

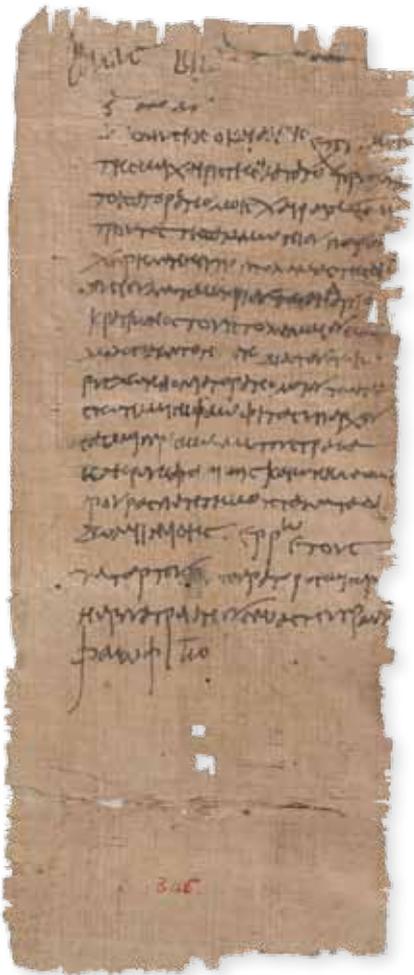


had been dominated by the focus on architecture. Petrie was the first to realise the importance in the archaeological record of small items—potsherds, bricks, beads, tools and objects of everyday use—that were often overlooked by other excavators at the time. He was also one of the first archaeologists to recognise foreign objects in the archaeological record. Through the study of objects found during the excavations of cemeteries and settlements, he was able to provide an insight into the daily

lives of ancient Egyptians. Petrie worked in Egypt from 1880 to 1924 before moving to Palestine, where he worked from 1925 to 1938. He was influential in forging Australia's links with the Nile Valley and the Pharaonic civilisation. All four collections of Egyptian antiquities at the University of Melbourne owe their existence in some way to Petrie and his work in Egypt. The collections are outlined here in the chronological order in which they were acquired by the university.

Previous page: Flinders Petrie using his pin-hole camera in Abydos, Egypt, 1900–01. Reproduced courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, University College London

Below: Papyrus: Notice from Dionysius to the Agoranomi concerning the cession of 50 arourae of land, Egypt, 100 CE, papyrus, ink, 17.7 x 7.4 cm. Reg. no. 1901.0004, gift of the Egypt Exploration Society, 1901, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection



Egyptian Papyri Collection²

The donation by the Egypt Exploration Society of five papyri established the Classics and Archaeology Collection at the University of Melbourne in 1901.³ The society had been established in London in 1882 by Amelia Edwards in response to the unchecked plundering of sites and looting of antiquities in Egypt, and continues to support excavations and research into ancient Egypt. Four of the papyri came from the site of Oxyrhynchus and one originated in the Fayum.

The ancient site of Oxyrhynchus (modern Behnesa) was first excavated in 1896 by Petrie on behalf of the society. He was joined by Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, who were in Egypt searching for papyri in the Fayum area. Once it became apparent to Petrie that the site was unlikely to yield material of Pharaonic date, he handed the site over to Grenfell and Hunt. For more than ten years they concentrated on excavating the large rubbish dumps located on the edges of the ancient Roman town, discovering thousands of papyri, which still continue to be published. In 1922 the University of Melbourne acquired a further five papyri from the society, via the University of Sydney.⁴ This second group all originated from Oxyrhynchus.

Nine of the original ten are now in the Classics and Archaeology Collection. One was stolen in 1975. The papyri date from 77 to 350 CE. The subject matter consists of an oath regarding the sale of a slave; a notice for the sale of land; an order for the delivery of a prisoner; a receipt for desert patrol tax; a receipt for a shipment of wheat; the conclusion of a petition regarding the robbery of cattle; a section from the first book of Thucydides; a letter from a magistrate to a fellow official and an expense account related to the sale of weaving implements.

Flinders Petrie Collection⁵

In early 1957 the Classics Department acquired a small collection of Egyptian antiquities via the Classical Association of Victoria. These 32 objects include pottery, shabti, amulets, jewellery, figurines, scarabs and inscriptions, dating from the Old Kingdom (2686–2125 BCE) to the Late Period (664–332 BCE). The collection was created by a pair of Melbourne brothers, Edward and Everard Miller, between 1910 and 1920, and was later named the 'Flinders Petrie Collection' after information contained in a letter found in the archives of the Classics Department.⁶

Shabti, Egypt, 1295–1186 BCE, wood, paint, linen, 17.5 x 7.0 cm. Reg. no. 0000.0632, bequest of Edward Miller via the Classical Association of Victoria, 1956, Flinders Petrie Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection



During the Australian summer of 1910–11 the Miller brothers undertook their first visit to Egypt. Everard departed Melbourne in early October 1910 and arrived in Cairo on 31 October, where he was joined by Edward from London on 3 November. The brothers spent some time exploring Cairo before

embarking upon a boat cruise up the Nile on 8 November. Along the way they stopped at a number of sites such as Beni Hasan, Asyut and Dendera before reaching Luxor, where they visited many of the important archaeological sites, including the Luxor and Karnak temples. From Luxor they travelled south to Aswan before returning to Cairo. Upon their return they visited Gizeh, Saqqara, Abusir, Heliopolis and Abu Roash. It was during this trip to Egypt that seven of the objects now in the Petrie Collection were acquired.

Edward developed an interest in archaeology, which he pursued after World War I. He became a member of Petrie's excavations for two seasons: the first at the site of Illahun in 1919–20 and the second at Sedment in 1920–21. Petrie's 1919 excavations at Illahun were his first back in Egypt after the end of the war. While working in Egypt with Petrie, Edward wrote a letter to his brother in Melbourne, which now resides in the archive of the Classics and Archaeology Department. The letter, written some time in early 1920, lists a number of objects that Edward had sent to Everard. The list includes shabti, some of which were 'covered with the salt encrustation they were found in' and others 'were naked, others dressed in sackcloth'.⁷

Also included in the list is a bronze Osiris, pottery, *Wedjat*-eye amulets, a scarab of Tuthmosis III and a jade bead. The archive also includes a number of handwritten notes by Everard that relate to items in the Petrie Collection—such as a pair of Arab coins, amulets, a pounder and a toggle—all purchased by Everard during the 1910–11 trip to Egypt.

Archaeology and history were also among the interests that Everard pursued. When he died in July 1956 one provision of his will benefited the Classical Association of Victoria, of which he had been a member since its creation in 1912. This bequest included books and manuscripts on Greece, Rome and Egypt; his photographic negatives (he was an excellent amateur photographer); lantern plates and paintings. The bequest was discussed at the association's council meeting in March 1957, where it was decided that the books, slides and photographs were to be housed in the Classics Department.⁸ Twelve large, handmade volumes of Egyptian photographs were given to the Australian Institute of Archaeology, where they reside today. The Egyptian objects were given to the Classics Department, along with Edward's letter and handwritten notes relating to the collection.



Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection⁹

In 1957 John Bowman (later to become a professor in the Middle Eastern Studies Department at the University of Melbourne) purchased on behalf of the university four large stone objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.¹⁰ It is not possible to discern the impetus behind the acquisition as the original documentation has been lost. But it may well have been related to the acquisition of the Petrie Collection earlier that year. Subsequent contact between the university and the Egyptian department of the museum in the 1980s provides information concerning the objects and their provenance.¹¹

The material from the Metropolitan Museum included two stelae, an offering table and a fragment of wall frieze. The first stela, carved from limestone and dating to the Ptolemaic Period, 332–30 BCE, belonged to Reshugemy, daughter of Hapimeneh (Sem priest of Min) and Sabirbenep (celebrant of Min).¹² The stela is thought to have originated at or near the modern town of Akhmim, which in ancient times was home to a number of temples to the god Min. In 1918, the museum purchased a number of items, including the first stela, from a collector of ancient

Egyptian antiquities—Mr Waters S. Davis of Galveston, Texas.¹³

The second stela (also carved from limestone and dating to the Ptolemaic Period) was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum in 1897 from the Egypt Exploration Society in recognition of the museum's financial support for the society's excavations at Oxyrhynchus.¹⁴ Consultation of the Egypt Exploration Society archives has confirmed that in 1897 the society gave the museum five objects from the Oxyrhynchus excavations, including a 'Ptolemaic funeral stele'.¹⁵

The provenance of the third object, an offering table, is unknown. Dating from the Late Period, 664–332 BCE, the table is carved from sandstone and is inscribed with images of loaves of bread, *Hes* vases and cuts of meat. The table belonged to Mr Joseph W. Drexel, a former trustee of the Metropolitan Museum and collector of Egyptian antiquities. During his life Drexel gave the museum a number of Egyptian antiquities, including casts of Egyptian sculptures, amulets, vases and coins. In 1889, a year after his death, Drexel's widow, Lucy, gifted to the museum the remaining items from his collection, including the table, which had previously been on loan.¹⁶

The final item acquired from the Metropolitan Museum is a fragment of wall frieze originating from the temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri, located on the west bank of the Nile across from the modern town of Luxor. The fragment (illustrated above) dates to the period of Hatshepsut's reign, 1473–1458 BCE. The remaining decorative detail is from a frieze of *Kheker* elements, a design that dates back to the Old Kingdom in Egypt and is coloured in red, blue and green. The museum acquired the frieze fragment in September 1906 from Edouard Naville's excavations at Deir el-Bahri for the Egypt Exploration Society.¹⁷ Like the stela from Oxyrhynchus, the frieze fragment was given to the museum in recognition of financial support for the excavations.

Royal Ontario Museum Collection¹⁸

In 1968 Professor Bowman purchased a further collection of Egyptian antiquities, from the Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto. Of the original 21 items listed in the correspondence between Professor Bowman and Winifred Needler, curator of the Egyptian collection, only 17 can now be identified in the collection.¹⁹ The collection contains ceramics, jewellery, a stone vessel,

Kheker frieze fragment from the Temple of Queen Hatshepsut at Deir el-Bahri, Egypt, 1473–1458 BCE, stone with polychrome and incised decoration, approx. 43.0 x 80.0 x 17.5 cm. Reg. no. 1957.0011, purchased from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, 1957, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection

a flint knife and arrowheads, all of which date from the Predynastic Period (c. 4000 BCE) through to the Ptolemaic Period (332–30 BCE).

The Royal Ontario Museum acquired much of its collection of Egyptian antiquities through the activities of Charles T. Currelly—founder, inaugural curator and director of the Royal Ontario Museum from 1914 to 1946. As a result of Currelly's collecting activities as he travelled the world, acquiring material from Europe, Britain, the Near East and Asia, the museum evolved from a small university collection. Currelly also collected material from North and South America. He had trained as an archaeologist under Petrie, and after proving himself as an able assistant to the great man in London in 1901, joined the excavations to Abydos later that year.²⁰ He learnt much about the value of antiquities while working with Petrie, which assisted him in his collecting activities. Currelly also worked with Edouard Naville at Deir el-Bahri.

Of the 17 items acquired by Bowman, eight were previously catalogued by the Royal Ontario Museum; their provenance shows that most were purchased from antiquities sellers and dealers. One is the ceramic jar illustrated on page 14.

A further four objects—fragments of blue glazed bowls—are likely to have come from the excavations at the shrine of Hathor, located close to Hatshepsut's temple at Deir el-Bahri where Currelly worked on the small finds.

Conclusions

The information presented here enables these collections and the items within them to be viewed not just as isolated sets of objects but as representative specimens of ancient Egyptian material culture. These examples of late 19th- and early 20th-century antiquarian collecting traditions reflect the interests of those individuals who assembled them and may be seen to typify the era in which the collections were created.

The collecting activities of private individuals was only one way in which Egyptian antiquities became part of both state and university collections in Australia. The other major way was through financial support for archaeological excavations. The ancient Egyptian collection at the National Gallery of Victoria, for example, contains much material acquired in this manner, largely as a result of the gallery's support for excavations undertaken by Flinders Petrie and the Egypt Exploration Society.²¹ Although the University

of Melbourne did not acquire any Egyptian material via this method, it did provide financial support for at least one excavation, undertaken at the Amman Airport site in Jordan by Professor Basil Hennessy from the University of Sydney in 1975.²² The University of Melbourne may have also contributed to a number of other excavations undertaken in Palestine and Israel during the 1950s and 1960s, including Dame Kathleen Kenyon's excavations at Jericho and Jerusalem.²³

Author's note: The information in this paper was first presented at the Museums Australia National Conference held at the University of Melbourne in September 2010. A copy of the conference paper is available at www.ma2010.com.au/program.html.

Christine Elias has worked in registration and collection and exhibition management for over ten years. She has participated in archaeological fieldwork in Jordan and Syria and has recently completed her Master of Arts at the University of Melbourne.

The Classics and Archaeology Collection is part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection, managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art. Regular exhibitions are mounted in the Classics and Archaeology Gallery, and the catalogue can be searched online at <http://vm.arts.unimelb.edu.au>.

Beaker, Egypt, c. 4000–3200 BCE, clay, height: 20.0 cm. Reg. no. 1968.0041, purchased from the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada, 1968, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection



- 1 J. Burke, 'Classics and Archaeology Virtual Museum Project final report', University of Melbourne, School of Fine Arts, Classical Studies and Archaeology, unpublished report, 1999, p. 6/1.
- 2 The Egyptian Papyri Collection comprises registration numbers 1901.0003–1901.0006 and 1921.0001–1921.0005, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 3 E. Paterson, Letter to the Rev. Edward Sugden, 17 January 1901. Papyri file, Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 4 Burke, 'Virtual Museum Project final report', p. 6/41.
- 5 The Flinders Petrie Collection comprises registration numbers 0000.0628–0000.0632, 0000.0634–0000.0653, 0000.0656–0000.0657, 0000.0668–0000.0669 and 0000.1388–0000.1389, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 6 E.E. Miller, Letter to E.S. Miller, c. 1920, Flinders Petrie file, Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 7 E.E. Miller, Letter to E.S. Miller, c. 1920.
- 8 *Iris: The News-sheet of the Classical Association of Victoria*, vol. 44, no. 1, May 1957, pp. 1–2.
- 9 The Metropolitan Museum of Art Collection comprises registration numbers 1957.0010–1957.0013, Classics and Archaeology Collection.
- 10 Burke, 'Virtual Museum Project final report', p. 6/8.
- 11 P.F. Dorman, Letters to Dr C. Hope, 16 July 1984, 4 September 1984 and 11 October 1984. Metropolitan Museum of Art file, Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 12 Copy of Metropolitan Museum of Art accession card for 18.2.3, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984. Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 13 Copy of Metropolitan Museum of Art accession card for 18.2.3; H. Winlock, 'Stela of Pernesbastet from Hassaia', *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology*, vol. 6, 1920, pp. 209–11.
- 14 Copy of Metropolitan Museum of Art accession card for 97.4.141, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984. Metropolitan Museum of Art file, Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 15 Egypt Exploration Society, 'Distribution register', 1882–99. Collection of the Egypt Exploration Society, London.
- 16 Copy of Metropolitan Museum of Art accession card for 89.2.663, New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1984. Metropolitan Museum of Art file, Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne; 'The new Egyptian galleries', *Bulletin of the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, vol. 6, no. 11, November 1911, pp. 203–5.
- 17 Egypt Exploration Society, 'Distribution register', 1900–14. Collection of the Egypt Exploration Society, London.
- 18 The Royal Ontario Museum Collection comprises registration numbers 1968.0041–1968.0055 and 1968.0058–1968.0060, Classics and Archaeology Collection, University of Melbourne Art Collection.
- 19 W. Needler, Letter to Professor J. Bowman, 30 January 1968, Royal Ontario Museum file, Classics and Archaeology Archive, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 20 C.T. Currelly, *I brought the ages home*, Toronto: Royal Ontario Museum, 1976.
- 21 C.A. Hope, 'A note on the collection of Egyptian antiquities in the National Gallery of Victoria Melbourne', *Göttinger Miszellen*, vol. 65, 1983, pp. 45–50.
- 22 Burke, 'Virtual Museum Project final report', p. 6/9.
- 23 Burke, 'Virtual Museum Project final report', pp. 6/8, 6/9.