

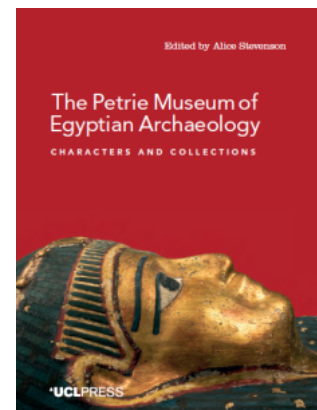


## Birmingham Egyptology Journal

Review by Stephanie L. Boonstra

A. Stevenson (editor). *The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology: Characters and Collections*. UCL Press: London. 2015. ISBN 9781910634356, Open Access PDF free. ISBN 9781910634042, paperback £10.00. 120 pages, 131 figures, and 6 appendices.

‘While people collect objects, objects also collect people as they journey through the ages’ [p. 79].



*The Petrie Museum: Characters and Collections*, edited by its curator Alice Stevenson to mark the centenary of the world-renowned museum, expertly demonstrates the characters, both past and present, famous and relatively unknown, whom the ancient objects of the museum have ‘collected’. From the ancient maker and owner, to the nineteenth century excavator and collector, to the modern curators and conservators, Stevenson’s collection of short articles written by a variety of staff members and academics connected to the museum illuminate the characters behind the rare and fascinating objects which currently reside in this small London museum. Rather than being an in-depth catalogue of artefacts in the collection, the book aims ‘to trace out some of the contours of this assemblage and relate just a few of the unusual stories and personalities behind the technical labels and the Egyptological references’ [p. 11].

*Characters and Collections* is comprised of a thirteen page introduction as well as thirty-five articles, each a modest one to two pages in length, and fully illustrated. Alice Stevenson wrote or co-wrote eleven of the short articles, while the other twenty-two contributors all bring their own research interests and expertise to their essays. The articles are not organised thematically or chronologically within the book, rather they move from the ancient past to the modern history of the museum and back. The book is richly illustrated with 131 figures throughout the 120 pages. The images within the book are a collection of object photographs, landscape photographs and paintings, archival photographs of early twentieth century London and Egypt, and a number of archival images of excavation plans, dig diaries, tomb cards, and more.

The introduction, which is the longest article in the book, was co-written by Stevenson and Debbie Challis, one of the museum’s Public Programmers. The introductory

article pays particular homage to Amelia Edwards, the founder of the Egypt Exploration Fund (now the Egypt Exploration Society) and the creator of the UCL Egyptian collection from which the Petrie Museum was born [pp. 12-5]. This article recaps the story of the museum from its infancy with Edwards to its recent and current exhibitions. Particularly interesting is the retelling of how the collection was boxed up and moved to protect it from the London Blitz in World War II, which damaged part of University College London's campus [p. 18]. This article makes a point of mentioning how the museum has combatted difficult subjects such as racism and colonialism, which was a genuine issue particularly in early Egyptian archaeology, with groundbreaking exhibitions, such as the award-winning 'Digging for Dreams' curated by Dominic Montserrat. This sets the tone for the rest of the volume, which makes a point to focus on many of the unsung heroes of the Petrie Museum [pp. 26-7, 56, 102-3, 106-7].

The rest of the catalogue is a series of short narratives, a selection of which will be highlighted.

Helen Pike, the other Petrie Public Programmer, authors the first short article about Violette Lafleur, a little known saviour of the museum [pp. 26-7]. Lafleur nearly singlehandedly sorted, packed, and saved the collection after the onset of World War II. She was never paid for her work but UCL bestowed upon her the title of 'honorary museum assistant' and she had somewhat disappeared from memory until Pike penned this article. Pike's apparent appreciation of this woman creates an important message that this catalogue aims to address the unknown as well as the famous.

Norah Maloney and Stevenson both write about some of the prehistoric artefacts in the collection, stone tools and beads respectively [pp. 28-31]. Maloney's piece is a standard overview of ancient stone tools with a brief focus on ones that reside in the Petrie Museum. However, Stevenson's article is particularly fascinating in its description of the worked meteorite iron bead (UC10738), which is the earliest example of worked iron throughout the world, dating to roughly 3400 BCE, 2000 years before the Iron Age.

Another Stevenson article outlines Flinders Petrie's creation of 'sequence dating' using the predynastic pottery of Naqada, which used mathematical modelling to order the pottery chronologically; an achievement that still impresses mathematicians. The Petrie museum showcases this feat in its expansive 'pottery gallery' [pp. 32-3].

Janet Johnstone, a consultant of ancient Egyptian clothing, discusses the Tarkhan dress, a linen dress discovered by Petrie and painstakingly conserved by the museum [pp. 36-7]. At the time of publication, carbon-14 dating placed the dress anywhere from the First Dynasty to the Fifth. Johnstone remarked that this fragile tunic, which still holds creases from the original wearer, is difficult to test due to its fragility; however, recently the tunic was securely dated to the beginning of the First Dynasty, and possibly even earlier, making the Petrie Museum's Tarkhan dress the world's oldest constructed garment.<sup>1</sup> This article highlights one of the incredible pieces that the Petrie Museum showcases.

In the next article about the Koptos lions [pp. 38-9], Stevenson highlights how objects, even monumental ones, can be rediscovered after years of being hidden away on shelves or packed away in boxes. These large limestone statues, once fragmented, were painstakingly reconstructed after their rediscovery and are now some of the largest and oldest life-size statues in the world.

The Petrie Museum contains what is potentially the earliest known royal sculpture from ancient Egypt [pp. 44-5], a limestone head, which Petrie believed to be of King Narmer. Stevenson notes that Petrie's identification of this piece is particularly difficult due to the

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<sup>1</sup> A. Stevenson and M. Dee. 'Confirmation of the world's oldest woven garment: the Tarkhan Dress', *Antiquity Project Gallery* 349 (2016), available at <http://antiquity.ac.uk/projgall/stevenson349> (last accessed 11<sup>th</sup> February 2016).

early Egyptologist's troubling proclivity to purchase artefacts from antiquities dealers. More recently, scholars have contested Petrie's theory, musing instead whether it might be the face of Khufu or that of his son, Menkaure.

Tracey Golding, the Petrie's Visitor Services Manager, covers some of the fascinating pieces of Egyptian clothing from a fashion perspective [pp. 46-7]. She remarks that the Qau bead-net dress, a beautiful garment of thousands of beads that is also a masterpiece in reconstruction, may have been a piece of high fashion attire for an ancient Egyptian dancer. While Johnstone's look at the Tarkhan Dress [pp. 36-7] is from a traditionally archaeological perspective, Golding's unique approach contextualises the garments in the collection with the modern world and creates a level of accessibility for a non-archaeological viewer.

Challis and Stevenson team up again to discuss the monumental Koptic relief of King Senusret and the fertility god Min [pp. 52-3], or more specifically, the Victorian censorship of the ithyphallic deity. To combat the perceived obscenity of an otherwise 'fine' piece, Petrie strategically covered the erect phallus with a label. The authors note that this nervousness over displaying depictions of genitalia continued until fairly recently, with Cambridge University only borrowing the portion of the relief with Senusret and leaving the offensive half behind to be excluded from a 1980s exhibition.

Stephen Quirke, a Professor of Egyptology at UCL, writes about the incredibly important, and little known Ali Suefi, a fisherman from al-Lahun who became Petrie's right-hand man for over three decades [pp. 56-7]. While histories of Egyptology exalt the European and North American early archaeologists, they often omit mention of the local people who were integral to the success of most excavations.<sup>2</sup> During his tenure at the Petrie Museum, Quirke has made a concerted effort to highlight the local workers who were fundamental to Petrie's excavations but have largely been ignored in the history books.<sup>3</sup>

John Johnston, a researcher at UCL, discusses the tale of Horus and Seth, a text in which the two male deities engage in a sexual relation [pp. 58-9]. This article demonstrates how not only was the original publisher of the text, Francis Llewellyn Griffith, uncomfortable with the episode but even the ancient Egyptians were prejudicial towards same-sex relations. The early texts, dating to the Middle Kingdom, show a consensual and willing relation, whereas New Kingdom versions were edited to emphasize Seth's seduction of Horus, rather than the affair itself. Johnston's article reveals the changing attitudes towards homosexual relations, even in ancient times, and displays the Petrie Museum's attention to sharing the LGBT side of Egypt [p.23].<sup>4</sup>

Sherif Abouelhadid, a native Egyptian, looks for evidence for music in ancient Egypt from a modern Egyptian's perspective [pp. 62-3]. He remarks that music is one of Egypt's timeless loves and links the ancient instruments seen at the Petrie Museum with songs sung in the region in modern times. While this article is not necessarily what would traditionally be expected in a museum catalogue, it continues with Stevenson's goal to humanise the collection and link it to the modern country and people from which it came.

Campbell Price, a curator at the Manchester Museum, recounts the heroic tale of Petrie's retrieval of 399 remarkable shabtis from the submerged Late Period tombs of Hawara [pp. 66-7]. Price uses Petrie's dig diaries to describe how Petrie was forced to strip off his clothes and plunge into the water to retrieve the shabtis 'while skulls bobbed around on the

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<sup>2</sup> M. L. Bierbrier (ed.). *Who Was Who in Egyptology*, 4<sup>th</sup> revised edition (Egypt Exploration Society: London, 2012).

<sup>3</sup> S. Quirke. *Hidden Hands: Egyptian Workforces in Petrie Excavation Archives, 1880-1924* (Duckworth: London, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> D. Challis. 'LGBT History Month and Petrie Participation', *UCL Blogs* (2014), available at <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/museums/2014/02/20/lgbt-history-month-and-petrie-participation/> (last accessed 25<sup>th</sup> February 2016).

waves'.<sup>5</sup> After Petrie's painstaking recovery and conservation, the 399 shabtis of exceptional quality were dispersed to collections around the world, including the Petrie Museum and Manchester Museum. This article creates a wonderful link between the objects and the Petrie's impressive archive of excavation work in a captivating way.

When visiting the Petrie Museum, visitors may be surprised by the large quantity of feline artefacts. Challis explains that this is due to Henry Langton and his wife who bequeathed their large collection of Egyptian cat artefacts to the museum [pp. 72-3]. The Langtons were so intrigued by ancient Egyptian cats that they even wrote a book titled *The Cat in Ancient Egypt* (1940). Challis notes that private collections such as the Langtons' can be problematic as their love and want for cat artefacts probably led to an increased urge to fill their demand, which would likely have led to the production of fakes. Challis ends her article by musing over how many of the Langton cats in the Petrie Museum are genuine and which are fake.

While Challis discusses the difficulties that private collections can cause, Stevenson remarks that the movement of artefacts between places and people adds to the life story of the object [pp. 78-9]. A fragment of the Book of the Dead was acquired by British collector William MacGregor in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, which was later bought by Henry Wellcome, the pharmaceutical magnate, at a Sotheby's sale in 1922. Thousands of Egyptian artefacts from his large collection were presented to the Petrie Museum in 1964 after Wellcome's death, including the Book of the Dead fragment. Stevenson notes that alongside the ancient writing on the papyrus, there are multiple modern notations denoting the various collections and auction house in which the object once resided. In this way, many artefacts in the Petrie Museum and similar collections provide interest to both Egyptologists and historians alike.

Challis' article titled 'The archaeology of race' deals with a difficult subject that plagues many museums [pp. 88-9]. She notes that one tray in a storage cupboard of the museum is labeled 'Memphis "Race" Heads', which contains fifty-seven terracotta heads from the Graeco-Roman period. Petrie believed that these heads were depictions of multiple different races and assigned them with labels such as 'Hebrew' and 'Persian'; his reasoning for assigning these races included 'resemblance to a modern Jewish Type coming from Germany' [as quoted on p. 88]. Challis notes that the ancient use for these heads is unknown and they may allude to the multicultural nature of ancient Memphis during the later periods. She also notes that Petrie's classification and description of these heads show his own racial stereotypes and emphasis on race. Perhaps this article could be enhanced by addressing the often racist nature of early archaeologists and museums, something that the Petrie Museum actively works to address and combat [p. 20-2].<sup>6</sup>

Kandace Chimbiri, an author of children's Black history, addresses the many Sudanese artefacts that are housed in the Petrie Museum [pp. 94-5]. She notes that while the museum is famed for its Egyptian artefacts, it also has a large collection of objects from Sudan, ancient Nubia. Chimbiri explains that the strong and stable civilisation based in Meroe had many Egyptian inspired objects and thus many museum visitors may not realise

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<sup>5</sup> W. M. F. Petrie. *Kahun, Gurob and Hawara* (Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner, and Co.: London, 1890), p. 9, as quoted by Campbell Price on p. 66.

<sup>6</sup> D. Montserrat. *Ancient Egypt: Digging for Dreams, Treasures from the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology*, University College London (Glasgow City Council: Glasgow, 2000); S. MacDonald. 'Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL: Invisible transformations', *The Best in Heritage* (2006), available at <http://app.thebestinheritage.com/presentations/2006/petrie-museum-of-egyptian-archaeology,-ucl,65.html> (last accessed 27<sup>th</sup> February 2016); K. L. Aitchison. 'How do current political views impact on the way we view ancient history?', *UCL Blogs* (2011), available at <https://blogs.ucl.ac.uk/events/2011/09/17/how-do-current-political-views-impact-on-the-way-we-view-ancient-history/#more-5132> (last accessed 27<sup>th</sup> February 2016). Petrie's use of racial stereotypes is a topic that Challis has discussed in depth in *The Archaeology of Race. The Eugenics of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* (Bloomsbury Press: London, 2013).

that the objects they are viewing are Sudanese rather than Egyptian. She finishes her article with an appeal for renewed research into the ancient cultures of Nubia.

For a more unique look at an artefact, Al-Saddiq Al-Raddi, a former poet in residence at the museum, wrote a poem inspired by a limestone frog from Meroe [p. 96]. A modern poem about an ancient artefact is definitely a novel addition to a museum catalogue, but like Abouelhadid's contribution [pp. 62-3], it demonstrates the desire of Stevenson to incorporate many voices and approaches to a catalogue of the people and objects connected to the Petrie Museum.

The Petrie Museum aims to illustrate Egypt throughout history, not just its ancient times. Carolyn Perry, the director of the MBI Al Jaber Foundation, writes about a medieval rock crystal container in the Petrie Museum [pp. 100-1]. Rock crystal objects were popular in the Fatimid Dynasty for their believed magical properties; however, this animal-shaped object is one of only a couple hundred to have survived. Perry remarks that this somewhat 'sad-looking' object is a 'significant reminder of the vibrant luxury of medieval Egypt' [p. 100], a period which is generally overlooked by Egyptologists.

In one of the final articles, Stevenson highlights the integral, yet often ignored, hard work of the early female archaeologists in Egypt [pp. 102-3]. Petrie himself hired many female archaeologists who went on to earn their places as pioneers in the field and even dedicated his final memoir 'to my wife [Hilda], on whose toil most of my work has depended'.<sup>7</sup> Hilda Petrie's mark was certainly left on the Petrie Museum and her handwritten numbers can still be seen on many of the museum's objects.

Perhaps the only shortcoming of this catalogue is its cursory approach to each character and object featured. This was clearly a concerted choice by editor Alice Stevenson in order to showcase as many artefacts and people as possible in such a short volume. This approach creates a desire for more information, possibly resulting in the reader visiting the collection or conducting their own research on its objects and people. *Characters and Collections* is an accessible book for both the ancient Egyptian scholar and non-academic alike.

In summary, *The Petrie Museum: Characters and Collections* is a must-read for any person interested in the ethical treatment, display, and publication of a collection of objects from a foreign country. Stevenson and her contributors masterfully demonstrate the vivid history, colourful characters, astounding objects, and the main objectives of the Petrie Museum within 120 short pages.

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<sup>7</sup> W. M. F. Petrie. *Seventy Years in Archaeology* (Marston and Co.: London, 1931), dedication, as quoted by Stevenson on p. 102.