

'The treasure dug up is not gold, but history' (Petrie, 1886)

THE PETRIE MUSEUM: A WORLD CLASS COLLECTION THAT NEEDS OUR HELP
(MPM hopes you will join her in supporting this very important effort.)

In the back yard of one of the world's great universities, University College London, lost in a building site and over a boiler-house are two rooms that were once the stables of a furniture manufactory accessed by a sloping horse-stairs. Hidden here is one of the world's greatest collections of Egyptian objects - true 'treasures' excavated by William Matthew Finders Petrie - the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.

If the name of any one man must be associated with modern excavation as the chief begetter of its principles and methods, it must be the name of Professor Sir W.M. Flinders Petrie. It was he...who first called the attention of modern excavators to the importance of 'unconsidered trifles' as means for the construction of the past...the broken earthenware of a people may be of far greater value than its most gigantic monuments.

(Baikie, *A Century of Excavation in the Land of the Pharaohs*)



Petrie outside the tomb in which he lived while surveying the Giza pyramids in 1880/1, during his first visit to Egypt.

Petrie was a renowned eccentric whose 'manners and customs' would be familiar to any reader of Amelia Peabody's diaries, from living in a tomb to painting tapioca over a fragile plaster pavement at Amarna! Petrie's indomitable wife, Hilda, shared Amelia Peabody's passion for pyramids: this comes from a letter of 1897 referring to a visit to the pyramid of Menkaure,

Without the usual tedious help I got to the top, leaping from ledge to ledge, at the south-west angle. From the top one gets a glorious view of enormous extent. The clamber is of no exertion (with skirt off). We lit candles, took off half our clothing, and crawled down two passages into the middle sarcophagus chamber of Menkara (sic). The changes of light and colour, and disposal of shadows on the pyramids during all that day were a continuous interest and joy.

What a shame we have no record of them ever meeting!



Petrie and Hilda, taken in 1903.

On a more serious note, the Petrie Museum is full of spectacular artifacts, and it also stands as testimony to Petrie's belief in practical learning. The author and journalist Amelia Edwards made a bequest to UCL to fund a Chair in Egyptology for her protégé, Flinders Petrie. She also bequeathed her collection, described in her will as including "ancient Egyptian jewellery, scarabs, amulets, statuettes of deities in porcelain, bronze and stone, funeral tablets, sculptures, pottery, writings on linen and papyrus and other miscellaneous monuments" (many of them excavated by Petrie). To Edwards' collection Petrie added his own, as the basis for a working museum and teaching collection.

The collection is especially important because so much of it comes from documented excavations. The 80,000 objects cover every period of life in the Nile Valley and is full of 'firsts': the first known monumental sculpture; a fragment of the first calendar; the oldest gynaecological papyrus, and some of the earliest metal and linen found in Egypt. (Some of these pieces are currently touring the US as part of the travelling exhibition *Excavating Egypt*. MPM will be speaking in October at one of its venues, the Michael C. Carlos Museum at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia.) The museum also houses a substantial archive of notebooks, diaries, correspondence, photographs and historic watercolours relating to the collection.

Despite being hidden away, the Petrie has done its best to increase public access. This historic lack of investment in museum infrastructure has had disastrous consequences; the roof of the museum leaks in thirteen places and blocked drains cause floods each year; in the 1960s and 1970s severe flooding saturated the cartonnage collection - only now being conserved thanks to support from the museum's Friends - and more recent floods have threatened First Dynasty ship-timbers, furniture and human remains. With the need to re-house the museum increasingly acute, curators campaigned for new premises but were never able to raise the funds necessary to achieve their goal.

In recent years museum policy has been to raise the profile and use of the collection in other ways. A fully-illustrated catalogue of the entire collection is now searchable on the museum's website (www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk). Further online resources include Digital Egypt for Universities, a 3000-page website setting the collections in context (www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk). At the same time, the museum has developed outreach initiatives with the aim of encouraging more Egyptians and others of African descent to study Egyptology and museology.

The collection desperately needs a new home. On its current site structural problems such as leaks in the roof, lack of environmental controls and blocked drains threaten the preservation of the collection. There is now a real opportunity to re-house the museum in a purpose-built space. The dramatic new galleries will be designed to encourage debate and discussion. Visitors will be able to see conservation, research and teaching taking place, through windows in the displays, with talks and demonstrations as befits a university museum. In the UK it is not considered polite to ask for money, but neither Edwards nor Petrie let this prevent them campaigning for funding to support a cause in which they passionately believed. The Petrie Museum now needs your help to make these plans a reality; to share the treasure - and the learning - that is Petrie's legacy.

If you can help the museum please contact:

Sally MacDonald, Director,

Petrie Museum

UCL

Malet Place

London WC1E 6BT.

Telephone +44 20 7679 2825 (fax 2886)

Email: sally.macdonald@ucl.ac.uk.

There are naming opportunities associated with substantial donations, but all help, whatever the size of the donation, will make a huge difference to the future of an internationally important collection. (US supporters can make tax deductible gifts through University College London Friends and Alumni Association, UCLFAA Inc).

For more information about the museum and how to visit see:

www.petrie.ucl.ac.uk or send for a brochure.

For information about the work of the Friends of the Petrie Museum, visit their website:

www.ucl.ac.uk/FriendsofPetrie

(where you will also find a review of *Letters from the Desert: the Correspondence of Flinders and Hilda Petrie* (M.S. Drower, Oxbow Books 2004).

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Jan Picton

Secretary, Friends of the Petrie Museum (Friends Voicemail: 020 7679 2369)

H.R.A. Institute of Archaeology, UCL.

Sessional lecturer, Egypt and the Ancient Near East