

MANAGING THE MONSTER

July 29, 2011 Rachael Sparks Day of Archaeology 2011, Education, Museum
Archaeology archiving, Australia, Bernard Law Montgomery, bronze figurine head, bronze head, Department of
Egyptology, Egypt, Egyptian army, Eleanor Roosevelt, enthusiastic collector, Eros, Farouk, final researcher, Gayer-
Anderson, Gustaf, Harappa, Indus Valley, Institute of
Archaeology, Israel, Jerusalem, Jordan, Lecturer, London, Marshal, Marta, Massachusetts, National Gallery of
Australia, Northern Cemetery, Oxford, Pakistan, Palestine Archaeological Museum, Pitt Rivers Museum, Portland Art
Museum, Prince, research students, researcher, Sara, Sweden, Syria, Tell Brak, University College London, Veronica Seton-
Williams, Winston Churchill

I'm Keeper of Collections at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, in London. The collection was founded back in 1937, and has over 80,000 objects from all around the world, with a sum total of two staff to manage the monster. Mine is an academic post, so I'm expected to combine teaching duties with museum work. My day is often an eclectic mix of activities – with my lecturer's hat on I might be writing or giving lectures, marking, meeting with students, reviewing chapters my doctoral students have drafted, revising course handbooks, attending meetings or writing papers. But with my museum hat on I might be getting objects ready for other people's handling sessions, cataloguing backlog material in the collections, updating our databases, writing a blog post for the collections, fielding research queries, supervising visiting researchers or finding jobs for my volunteers. I never really know what the day is going to throw at me, and when I do make plans I often find they get overturned the minute I get to my desk.



Today I have four researchers booked to visit the collections, so I'm hoping this will give me some free time to work on other things. But we shall see ...

9.00 am. I get to work, and prepare for my first visitors, Marta and Sara. They are both students from Sapienza – Università di Roma, and this is the third day of their visit. One is looking at Early Bronze IV pottery from the Southern Levant for her doctoral dissertation, the other is investigating a collection of seals from Tel Rifa'at in Syria. I get their objects out of storage, and lay it out on the researcher tables, along with our visitors' book and some associated archival material. When they get here, we have a chat about their stuff, which leads to me logging into the database to try and track a few things down. One of Marta's jars is from the Northern Cemetery at Beth Shan, but doesn't seem to be in the publication for that site, so I see what our records have to say about it. It seems it was transferred here from the Palestine Archaeological Museum in Jerusalem, now the Rockefeller, back in 1938 – only a year after the Institute was founded. The associated documentation doesn't say much else, but I make a note of the former museum number, in the hope that their original catalogue card back in Israel may have more

details about the context – if I can get hold of a copy. I also check our archival database for letters relating to Tell Rifa'at – last year I had a volunteer making transcripts of some of this material and I'm hoping there will be something useful for Sara somewhere in this. There isn't.



10.00 am. No more queries, so I head into the artefact store, to continue with a project from yesterday – reorganising the contents of some of our shelving. First I consolidate some archival material that is in temporary storage here until it can be fully sorted and sent on to Special Collections, including documentation relating to the former Department of Egyptology, animal bone from excavations at Ain Ghazal in Jordan, and the work of Veronica Seton-Williams, a former lecturer at the Institute. Once this is all in one place, I'm much happier.

10.20 am. It occurs to me that it would be useful to have a few photographs of visiting researchers doing their thing, to use in lectures about the collections and general publicity. So I pop next door and ask my Italians if they would mind being photographed. They agree, so I get them to fill out consent forms and take a few shots for the files.

10.30 am. I'm now waiting for my third researcher, a student currently enrolled in the Principles of Conservation course here. She's writing a Master's dissertation on fakes and pastiches, and wants to find out if we have anything suitable in the collections for her to investigate. While we don't have too many fakes kicking around, there are a few questionable items, including a vessel that has been deposited here temporarily as a possible donation but which we are likely to reject – not only because its authenticity has been questioned, but also because there are doubts over its provenance and legality. I will be recommending to the owner that he offer the vessel to the government of the country of origin as the most ethical resolution to all of this, although of course they are unlikely to want if it turns out to be modern.

Rebecca arrives, and we go into the store to look at some of the options. We pick out for more investigation a bronze head of an African male that looks a bit odd and a marble herm with a bronze figurine head glued inappropriately on the top. Then, for the *pièce de résistance*, I produce a

reconstructed model of a cart drawn by two bulls. The cart looks fabulous – it's got a perforated body, one wheel, a small human figurine, and a bull, with the missing parts restored in plaster and painted to match, and then a wooden frame constructed to create a yoke, fix the wheels in place and so on. But there's a problem. When you look at the accession numbers on the individual components, it becomes clear that while most pieces come from the Indus Valley site of Harappa in Pakistan, the wheel comes from another site and culture entirely – Tell Brak in Syria. It also looks like the stylised human figurine sitting with hands around knees was clearly never meant to belong to the group. If, indeed, there is a group. The whole thing is another pastiche, but far more misleading than our bronze-headed herm, as superficially it all looks fine. There doesn't seem to be any documentation to tell me who reconstructed the cart, or why, but I'm guessing this was done for some past exhibition. Now it stands as a warning against taking anything at face value.



11.30 am. Sara finishes looking at her seals and impressions and stops by to give me some copies of three articles that she has in press, on the use of colours in Mesopotamian wall paintings, visual representation of the moon in 3rd millennium glyptic, and 'the Astral family' in Kassite reliefs. She tells me that she just sat the viva for her doctorate two weeks ago, so is now free to begin working on some more publications, hence her visit to the collections now.

12.00 pm. I grab a sandwich and eat it at my desk. Download the photographs I've taken and add appropriate metadata.

1.00 pm. Back in the stores, sorting out the archives. There's a whole lot of reboxing going on. After Rebecca goes, I bustle about putting away her objects and the Rifa'at material. Before I know it, it's 2 pm, and my final researcher has arrived. This time, it's a student called Lucy who's doing the MA in artefact studies part-time. She's trying to come up with a topic for her Master's dissertation, which she won't be writing up till next year. We talked about this last week, and I suggested that the Gayer-Anderson collection of Ptolemaic/Roman jewellery might be interesting. So she's come in today to look at the

objects we have, and see if the topic has legs. Its lovely stuff, and at the moment, we know next to nothing about it, so it would be really useful to have someone properly contextualise the group.

R.G. Gayer-Anderson is one of our more interesting collectors – he trained in medicine, then worked as a doctor for the Egyptian army, before joining the Egyptian civil service after the First World War. He was an enthusiastic collector of all sorts of things, which he eventually donated to various museums around the world – with his ethnography collection going to the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford, his collection of Egyptian scarabs to the Portland Art Museum, and his Indian artworks to the National Gallery of Australia. University College London received his collection of classical antiquities, which he purchased in Egypt, as a bequest. He also made some more eclectic bequests, leaving Egyptian rings to five notables of his day – Winston Churchill, Field Marshal Sir Bernard Law Montgomery, Sweden’s Crown Prince Gustaf, Egypt’s King Farouk, and Eleanor Roosevelt. History hasn’t recorded what they made of his generosity.

3.00 pm. Printed out some box labels, and back to attack the store again. I’ve moved on from the documentation archive now and on to our European collection of lithics and pottery. Most of this is stored in one of our teaching rooms, but we have some overflow in the stores which has got rather disorganised over time. I’m not having that, so now seems like a good moment for whipping it back into shape. I’m not sure who’s winning at the moment, but I am feeling very determined.



5.00 pm. My last remaining researcher packs up for the day. She’ll be back again on Monday. This leaves me with a table to sherd to clear away and some tidying up of the researcher room to do. I still haven’t finished the store move, but I guess it will still be there after the weekend. I collapse back in my office, which looks rather like a bomb hit it. Perhaps that’s a sign of a successful day.