

A DAY IN THE LIFE OF A CURATOR & PHD STUDENT FROM DOWN UNDER

June 29, 2012 Melanie Pitkin Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology 2012, Education, Egypt, Museum Archaeology Archaeology, archaeology curator, Assistant Curator, Australia, curator, Egypt, Eva Czernis-Ryl, fellow archaeologist, First Intermediate Period, Human appearance, Jewellery, Macquarie University, Macquarie University's Museum of Ancient Cultures, museum, museum archaeology collections, museum curator, Nicholson Museum, Paul Donnelly, Powerhouse Museum, South Tombs cemetery, Sydney, Sydney's Powerhouse Museum, Western Desert



A6008 – Roman pendant earrings. Collection: Powerhouse Museum. Image © Powerhouse Museum, all rights reserved.

So I thought I'd share some insights into what it's like working in archaeology Down Under (i.e. in Australia!) – specifically, in my role as an Assistant Curator of Design & Society at Sydney's [Powerhouse Museum](#) and as a PhD candidate in Egyptology at [Macquarie University](#).

As a museum curator, I don't really have a 'typical' day. In my position, I work quite broadly across the collection, from my specialist area in archaeology and antiquities (especially Egyptian, of which the Powerhouse Museum has a small but select collection) all the way through to [Muslim fashion](#), Central Asian and African textiles, historical and contemporary furniture, numismatics, ceramics and so on.

I always start the day by answering emails (actually, as I'm always connected, you can often find me answering emails throughout the night as well!) before I turn my attention to the different projects I am working on (rarely, if ever, do I work on a single project at a time – but that's what I love most about being a curator – the rich variety in what we do!).

Of interest to the 'Day of Archaeology' is an upcoming jewellery exhibition I am working on with my colleague, [Eva Czernis-Ryl](#), which is both a chronological and thematic look at the history of jewellery collecting in Australia. I am involved with developing the antiquities section with fellow archaeologist, [Dr Paul Donnelly](#), and have spent the last couple of days researching the nature of ancient jewellery in the many different public and private collections, which span almost all states and territories in Australia. Right now I'm reading the exhibition catalogue to 'Beauty and Betrayal – Ancient and Neo-Classical Jewellery' held at the Nicholson Museum, Sydney in 2010 and am liaising with Macquarie University's Museum of Ancient Cultures with regards to viewing some of their objects which we'd eventually like to have on loan.

I've also been down in our basement re-looking at some of our ancient jewellery, including our [Egyptian amulets](#), [faience beaded necklaces](#) and beautiful [Roman pendant earrings](#). At this early stage, we're gathering our corpus of ancient jewellery objects from which we can potentially choose from to narrate our story (note – the exhibition is not scheduled to open until October 2013). We're most interested in details like provenance (where was the piece excavated and how did it come into the collection?), interesting stories (around ownership and use) and of course, more practical matters like condition (is it suitable for display?) and costs (since loan objects involve fees, including insurance).

When I'm not 'curating', I'm studying for my PhD and doing other things 'Egyptian'! My thesis topic is on the typological dating of false doors and funerary stelae of the First

Intermediate Period (specifically, the reigns of Pepy II to Mentuhotep II – roughly 2400 – 2100 BC).

In brief, the First Intermediate Period was the first time in Egyptian dynastic history where there was a collapse in central kingship and a shift in administration from the Memphite capital to the provinces. My reason for studying false doors and stelae (slabs of inscribed stone usually placed in the west wall of the tomb) is that they are one of the best examples of Egyptian material culture which can be traced continuously at this time, which means they potentially offer an important benchmark for dating other objects and events of the period.

At this very moment, for example, I am transliterating and translating the stela of nfr-TbAw from a private French collection, one of almost 600 false doors and stelae I am working through. Apart from transliterating and translating them, I am also recording information about the owner and his/her titles, the collection location, acquisition/excavation details, bibliographic references, suggested date, commentary, parallels etc. Simultaneous to this, I am starting to test certain dating criteria on subsets of my corpus – like the writing of the Htp dj nswt offering formula as it applies to all those tomb owners holding particular groupings of titles.

To top things off, I'm in the preparation stages of a fairly long visit to Egypt! In September I will be heading to Tell el-Amarna to do some cataloguing work and will be returning again in November-December to work at the South Tombs cemetery. InshAllah or "God Willing", as they say, I am also scheduled to lead a couple of tour groups through Egypt and the Western Desert. Never a dull moment, I can truly say I've found my calling in archaeology!