

# PENN MUSEUM

# ARCHAEOLOGIST;

# PART 2

June 29, 2012 William Hafford Day of Archaeology 2012, Museum Archaeology archaeologist, Asia, Beijing, Birger Helgestad, Dhi Qar Governorate, Fertile Crescent, Kyle Cassidy, La Caixa Museum, London, Mediterranean, Penn Museum, Penn Museum Archaeologist, Pennsylvania, Phil Jones, professional photographer, Research Associate, Ryan Placchetti, Secretary, Spain, specialist, Ur, Western Asia

My Day of Archaeology continues ([for first half, click this link](#))

12:00 Lunch with my Research Associate, Ryan Placchetti, discussing our efforts and the closer and closer ties with our British colleagues; how to make the definitive version of the dataset. We have recorded all of the field catalogues at this point and are moving on to examining every artifact we have from Ur, starting with a small subset, that of cylinder seals. Those need to be updated in a unified database, but the unified (if still somewhat flawed) database won't be up for another week or two according to our colleague, Birger Helgestad, in London.

Got a message from a friend who is a professional photographer that he will be available to help document the second half of my day (he took the picture in my first post, but months ago). My computer secretary file shows that the afternoon should be spent as most afternoons have been this week, writing entries for an artifact loan from Penn Museum to La Caixa Museum in Spain. Many of these artifacts were excavated at Ur and thus relate to my overall project. I have written 14 entries so far, but there are at least another 20 that need to be done. I've farmed a further dozen out to Phil Jones, a Sumerologist here at Penn, since they have lengthy cuneiform inscriptions. I have studied both Akkadian and Sumerian but am by no means a specialist in the languages.

Some of the objects we're sending have been sent out on traveling exhibits before. I wrote entries for a few of them when they went to Beijing, but those were around 1,000 words each. These have to be only about 100 words. It's good practice to be concise, but any archaeologist will tell you that every object is more complicated than it looks, and when you want to discuss the significance of a particular object, you are almost inevitably tempted to write and write and, well

you get the point. Much like this blog entry, I could be more concise, so I'll just get to the task of writing exhibit catalogue entries.



*Writing entries for artifacts going on loan; photos by Kyle Cassidy*



*High prow and stern boat model is in the background; flat, decked boat is in the foreground.*

3:30pm I've spent the past hour and a half in the Traveling Exhibits holding room, examining some of the more complex artifacts that I am writing about. The first is a pair of clay boats that seem simple enough, but one of them is expected, the other is not. As I write about these artifacts, I try to make sure that all of our info on them is correct, correlates with field records where available and with archaeological thought of the period, styles, etc. The boat from Fara with high, curved prow and stern is exactly what we would expect from southern Mesopotamia in the Early-Middle Bronze Age, a reed river or marsh boat, with bundles of reeds tied together at stem and stern. The other, said in our records to be from Ur in the Old Babylonian (Middle Bronze) period doesn't quite fit. First of all,

the excavator at Ur does not mention a model boat from this season or any season within four

years of the accession date. Secondly, the flat form with partial deck at prow and stern is in the history of ship building usually seen to be later, typically the end of the Late Bronze Age. Essentially, this appears to be a sea-going, plank-built vessel, akin to those on the Mediterranean at the time of the Sea Peoples and beyond. Maybe this is an early occurrence of that type, but without good context, I can't know. I can't solve the issues right now, but I can mention the questions in the interpretation of significance in the brief catalogue entry.

Apart from boat models, I'm also covering stone statuary today. I look again at

an example from Khafaje and wonder where the left eye came from. In early photos, it is missing, yet this statue has two eyes. The left (proper) is a replacement, but I'm not sure when it was put there or by whom. We are sending two similar statue heads to Spain as well and I take a look at them. I take notes on these and a few other pieces, formulating most of about six catalogue entries, though I still have to chase down references for the bibliographic sections.



*Examining ED sculpture from Khafaje; notice the resemblance?*

Even though I've been working with artifacts for 20 years, I still get an extraordinary feeling when in the presence of something so old, something formed by human hands thousands of years ago. Even in a relatively clinical environment, the power of ancient artwork is palpable. This is the kind of inspiration that keeps me going in writing some of the entries that might otherwise seem mundane. It's why I wanted to be in the holding area today rather than only in my office checking books. When working directly with the objects, I notice things I can't possibly notice in photos, and the personal enjoyment I get at staring into the shell and bitumen eyes of a 4500-year-old stone worshiper, or feeling the curve of a 3600-year-old model boat is indescribable. I may be working on virtual recreations of the ancient city of Ur, but I still believe in the importance of physical museums and the power of seeing ancient things in person. We need digital collections for study and understanding, dissemination of information, teaching, and for many other reasons; but, we need the presence of antiquities in publically accessible institutions as well to promote that unusually motivating and inspiring connection with too-long forgotten people across millennia.

We are all people, and we all are part of history.