

MEETINGS, MUSINGS AND MISPLACED VIRTUE

July 12, 2014 Rachael Sparks Curation, Day of Archaeology, Day of Archaeology
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Here is me hugging a pot from the collections

I'm Keeper of Collections at the Institute of Archaeology, UCL, a job I juggle with my role here as a lecturer and Near Eastern archaeology specialist. This can make my day-to-day tasks both varied and unpredictable, as no matter what the diary says, you can never tell what you might be called on to do.



Some objects from the Institute of Archaeology Collections – how lucky am I to work here?

My day begins in soggy London Town, striding across a string of parks in my daily walk from Holborn to the Institute in Gordon Square. Today I'm wielding my second best umbrella, after a disastrous gust of wind demolished my rather fine Book of the Dead parasol yesterday. There's a brief encounter with a former colleague en-route, during which we admire each other's rain protection gear, then I arrive to see what the day holds.

I've got one research visitor and three meetings scheduled for today. Those aside, I plan to carve a path through my email backlog. It's been steadily building, thanks to a recent spell of leave, combined with several days keeping my head down to finish off a chapter for an exhibition catalogue. I am still feeling quite virtuous for completing this – totally misplaced virtue, I should add, as the piece was several weeks overdue.



Sherd fest. For those of us who love pottery.

My email inbox is the usual distracting mix. So for the rest of the morning –

I agree to be interviewed for a student's MA dissertation about online museum catalogues

Get briefly stumped by a question about one of the sites mentioned in the chapter I submitted yesterday. Is John Garstang's Chaushli the same site as Çavuşlu Höyük? A bit of investigation make it look as though it is. Who knew?

Answer queries on data protection protocols and how to use photographs of people ethically in your research.

At first sight, the last tasks may seem totally unrelated to collections, the Near East, or archaeology. But there is no such thing as a lecturer who just lectures. The job is a minefield of different administrative roles and duties, with everyone keeping their head down at staff meetings in case they suddenly find themselves assigned to a new committee or given one of those life-consuming roles such as First Year Tutor that everybody dreads. For my sins, I act as Exam Coordinator for the Egyptology degree (ironic: I don't read hieroglyphs), and Chair of the Ethics Committee (not ironic: I think of myself as a fine upstanding individual). Exams are done and dusted for now, but ethical queries never seem to go away.

Suddenly, a couple of hours have flown by, and it's time for my first meeting of the day, over in the History Department with a colleague who wants to talk about a possible teaching collaboration with the Institute. She runs a programme where students do group projects using primary and secondary sources to explore specific historical problems – and wanted to find out whether any of the Institute's archaeological archives might be suitable for this. We retire to the staff room for coffee, and come up with a couple of ideas – maybe setting her students to explore the roles of some of the women who have contributed to

Near Eastern fieldwork projects, or investigating the history of our interesting but under-explored RAF aerial survey archive of Middle Eastern sites.



Here's how you got your photographs back from the printers in 1930s Jerusalem – some gems from the Margaret Murray archive

As it happens, I've just completed an audit of the archives, so am very conscious of how many gaps we have in our knowledge of these collections and where they came from – so am very excited at the prospect of having somebody research our research materials. Who knows what they will find?

Back to the office; my research visitor has arrived, and is happily drawing Hellenistic sherds from Tell Nebi Mend for a publication that is underway. Looking good!



Drawing sherds can just make somebody's day.

Then back to those applications. Suddenly 2 pm (how *does* that happen?), and time for meeting number two. Over to the staff room for more coffee, and an emergency planning meeting with Ian, our Collections Manager, and Jayne, Head of Collections Management across UCL (we're all managers here). We've just been told that we're going to have to move our offsite collections store, and it's all a bit traumatic. Fortunately, there were chocolate éclairs on hand to help us concentrate (thanks Jayne!). As with all meetings, we emerge with lists of other things to do.



Problems seem less problematic if you have coffee and cake

And then finally it's time for the last meeting of the day – an informal chat with another member of the Institute's ethics committee about dealing with student queries. Which just leaves me enough time to knock up my Day of Archaeology post, rustle up a couple more images, and look with regret at all the emails I didn't manage to get finished, including one which I absolutely, hand on my heart, promised I'd sort out today. Ah well. Clearly not such a fine upstanding individual after all.