

REMAINS OF THE PAST FOR THE FUTURE: POLITICS OF THE PRESENT

July 24, 2015 Alice_Stevenson Archives, Curation, Egypt, Explore Posts, Finds, Museum Archaeology archives, Ethics, Flinders Petrie, looting, Museum Archaeology

It's on rainy, soggy miserable English summer days like this that I am delighted to be a museum archaeologist. As a curator responsible for some 80,000 artefacts here in UCL's [Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology](#), there's plenty to keep me busy indoors (as I talked about [last year](#)). It does not, however, mean I'm insulated from the outside world, its problems and politics. And it is not all blue skies out there.



*Sunshine. Image of Nefertiti around 1350 BC.
Excavated by Flinders Petrie's teams (UC040)*

Today I've been thinking a lot about the legacies of what we, as archaeologists, do. For instance, one of our fundamental principles is that it is essential to record what is found and from where, since once you dig something up, you've destroyed its context. Museums are then often the caretakers of such discoveries and their related archives, supposedly to be held in trust for future generations. But for how long and why? We look to the past a lot in our profession, but we rarely look more than a few decades into the future. Yet here I am, surrounded by the legacy of more than a century of archaeological fieldwork in Egypt. I hope it will remain safe and accessible for centuries (millennia?) to come.



Displays in UCL's Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology

The why is because archaeology is not just the moment of discovery. Although we endeavour to publish fully, what we present is always to some degree subjective and affected by our own social, intellectual and political contexts. Archaeology is never-ending project of interpretation, questioning and re-interpretation. The objects we recover are therefore important resources for further research, teaching, outreach and engagement. They will mean different things, to different communities. We also need the archives not just as a historical footnote, for amusing anecdotes or to add a nostalgic flavour to exhibitions. They're also archaeological objects, documents for further enquiry and resources for examining how we come to know what we know about the past.



Hilda Petrie directing her husband on excavations at Abydos, Egypt in 1922.

For how long do we hold things? Well, that also depends on social, intellectual and political contexts. Most museums in the UK can de-accession objects, but there are clear [ethical guidelines](#) on doing so. I spent much of today reviewing these following a workshop last week where I met with curators, journalists, professional museum organisations, academics and campaigners to discuss two cases where those ethical guidelines were clearly contravened. This included the financially-motivated sale of an [ancient Egyptian statue by Northampton Borough Council](#). It was sold at Christie's auction house to a private, anonymous buyer for an exorbitant sum. Amongst the many reasons why we should be angry is the fact that such actions simply fuel powerful market forces that ultimately encourage [looting of archaeological sites](#) and the destruction of the past.

I made [similar arguments](#) last year when the St Louis Branch of the Archaeological Institute of America (AIA) put objects excavated by Flinders Petrie's teams in 1914 on the Bonhams' auction block. That an archaeological organisation would reduce archaeology to an economic value is, to me, shocking and they were rightly [admonished by the central branch of the AIA](#). These were just a few of the hundreds of thousands of objects excavated in Egypt that were sent to institutions around the world. It is a huge legacy that we have an ongoing duty of care for, as I'm currently investigating through an [AHRC-funded project](#). As stewards of the past, we archaeologists have a professional responsibility to act ethically, to be politically aware of our actions and to be cognizant of the wider social context in which we work. Otherwise I don't believe you can consider yourself an archaeologist.