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How to cite: Van de Ven, A. Artefacts and Their Texts: Contextualising Ancient Near Eastern Collections from Excavation to Display. *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*, 2022, 33(1): pp. 1–32. DOI: 10.14324/111.444.2041-9015.1373

Published: 29/04/2022

Peer Review:

This article has been peer reviewed through the journal's standard double-blind review.

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 DOI: https://doi.org/10.14324/111.444.2041-9015.1373

Open Access:

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CONFERENCE PROCEEDINGS: ANCIENT LIVES, NEW STORIES: CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST[2]

Artefacts and Their Texts: Contextualising Ancient Near Eastern Collections from Excavation to Display

Annelies Van de Ven[3]

Abstract: Archaeological archives take up a significant amount of shelf space in any archaeological depot or museum, yet these are rarely presented as primary storytelling tools. As the public image of archaeology is still largely defined by the physical remains of sites and the finds that are associated with them, these are also often the focus of archaeological publications and displays, confining the purview of archaeological documentation to behind-the-scenes research. However, these records do not just illustrate an object, feature or site, they connect the past to the present as narratives of human interpretation and changes in archaeological and museological practice. In this paper, I draw from four brief case studies from my own research, each pertaining to different aspects of collection interpretation, display, and engagement. These practical examples highlight the importance of integrating documentary and material collections in research and outreach spaces. This integration helps us to present the diverse aspects of archaeological research, give value to under-resourced collections, explore meaning across different sources, and display the processes through which we create knowledge.

[2]**Ancient Lives, New Stories: Current Research on the Ancient Near East** was a conference held at the British Museum in London between 1st and 2nd December 2018, organised by Xosé L. Hermoso-Buxán and Mathilde Touillon-Ricci. This paper is part of the proceedings of that conference and have been edited by the organisers, with the support of *Papers from the Institute of Archaeology*.

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Introduction

Shelves upon shelves stacked to the brim with labelled, acid-free, files and boxes, each container holding documents of all sorts, from official letters and receipts for tea and biscuits to excavation photos and military survey maps. While the orderliness of these shelves, the state of the packaging, and the level of indexing of their contents differ across stores, depending on resources and expertise, archives are a staple of any cultural institution. Though these archival sources take up a considerable amount of dwindling storage space, they are not always incorporated into the narratives that we tell in museums through display and interpretation. Their common categorisation as documentation rather than important artefacts in their own right can mean that they are overlooked as potential foci of museum practice. Even where archives are used for research, public interaction with archival materials in the museum setting is not (yet) inherently intuitive, as most institutions focus on upholding traditional perceptions of being object-oriented.

The focus in archaeological research communication still tends to be on the samples, portable finds, architecture and the landscape of the site, and how we can interpret these archaeological elements to create narratives about the past. When, or probably more accurately *if*, the excavated material goes on display, their narratives will be translated into a form that is considered appropriate to a museum context. The selection process adopted in museums often favours the stories of high-profile objects, those that Raz Kletter terms 'goodies' (2015: 55). However, these are not the only narratives that a museum can present, and this strategy has led to an exclusion of important archaeological materials. As archaeologist Hedley Swain points out, while 'archives [here denoting material and documentary textual collections] should represent a prime research and heritage asset'… 'historically they have been under-resourced and underused' (2012: 352).

This attitude has begun to change as archives are increasingly being integrated into research, display, and outreach pertaining to ancient Middle Eastern collections. In this

article, I will be presenting four case studies from my own projects in three countries, working with mixed archaeological collections at Musée L (Musée universitaire de Louvain), the University of Melbourne, the British Museum, the British Library, and the National Archives. Each case study highlights a different facet of how archaeologists engage with archives, and each presents a different issue that archives help us address in our research and outreach. Beginning with the archive of an excavation, this article moves through the afterlife of archaeological fieldwork, exploring the publication of results, the long-term storage of collections, and finally their history of display. The four case studies will demonstrate the ability of archives to evidence the complexity and subjectivity of the archaeological process, ensuring the development of a more reflexive approach to our own processes of knowledge creation.

Defining Collections

For the purpose of this article, I define the term collection quite broadly to include all types of iconographic, textual, documentary, or material sources – the full gamut of artefacts that at once form the basis and the result of archaeological research. My choice of terminology in this instance is in contrast with the standard use of 'archaeological archive' in British and European traditions (Perrin et al 2014: 20) to indicate 'the cumulative finds, records, and associated data that result from a piece of archaeological fieldwork' (Swain 2012: 351). A key reason for my choice is to bridge the institutional practices in archaeological depots, museums, and archival institutions, each with its own terminology in relation to archaeological sources.[1] In order to differentiate subgroups within the collections, I use the term assemblage to indicate all samples and finds (bulk or individual) from fieldwork, and I use archives to indicate the documentary records that came forth from archaeological research processes and other forms of engagement with the archaeological assemblages (International Council on Archives 2016).

I retained a subdivision for clarity, however, there is also a very real physical distance between these two categories as their management is often allocated to separate buildings and institutions. While this division is often based on practical and material

needs, it has a conceptual impact on how we conceive these collections, creating a tradition of archaeological scholarship that is either object- or text- focused, as well as creating a hierarchy of sources depending on one's institution of employment (Van de Ven 2015). However, it is important to recognize both documents and finds as important sources of archaeological data that have equal potential to contribute to research, display, or outreach. This equalising means that rather than discussing source opposition, we can talk about source plurality (Myrdal 2008, 2012). In this approach to history, multiple source types are used to support one another in an attempt to address a particular issue or research question about the past. In the case of archaeological archives, this plurality is expanded beyond its original text-based conception by Janken Myrdal to include samples, individual finds, architectural features, and whole landscapes.

Excavation Experiences

All archaeological work yields some form of collection. While we are often directly engaged with quantifying the finds and samples within these collections, we are less aware of the archives that we are producing. It is only when dealing with absence and distance that the archives become immediately evident as significant sources of knowledge. At the end of each excavation season, when archaeologists not only leave their sites behind, but often also study materials, equipment, collections, and colleagues, it is the documentary record that is able to move with them. In times of conflict, when all other sources become inaccessible, as was the case in Syria in 2010 due to the start of the civil war, the archives become the primary source of knowledge. This had a massive impact on the state of archaeological scholarship in this area, as projects had to be re-conceptualised from active excavations to desk-based assessments, post-excavation write-ups, and cultural heritage analyses. As reports came in about site destruction and looting, the likelihood of a seamless re-commencement of fieldwork post-conflict became ever slimmer. Added to the disconnect that the conflict has formed between researchers and their sites on an academic level, there is also distancing on a personal one, as some colleagues became cut off in the conflict, while others were forced to move abroad to ensure their own safety.

The University of Melbourne was one of several Australian institutions working in Syria before the outbreak of the civil war. Together with teams from the Australian National University and the University of Sydney, they focused their work on the middle and upper Euphrates Valley. These cross-institutional collaborations were the training ground for a large number of academic archaeologists and heritage specialists working in Australia today, including several current University of Melbourne staff members. The primary sites of excavation in which the University of Melbourne participated were: the Middle to Late Bronze Age fortress of El-Qitar excavated from 1984 to 1987, the multi-period settlement of Tell Ahmar/Til Barsip excavated from 1988 to 1999, the Seleucid military colony Jebel Khalid excavated from 1986 onward, and the cave tombs of Shah Hamdan excavated from 1995 to 1997. These sites had already been under threat during both the Tabqa and Tishrin salvage projects (Jamieson and Kanjou 2009), with El-Qitar being particularly affected by the nearby construction of the Tishrin dam.

Bar a number of deaccessioned sherd assemblages, the materials from these excavations were preserved locally, some of the material was kept in stores for on-site research while more sensitive artefacts from completed excavations were transported to the National Museum of Aleppo. The status of much of the material from these three sites is currently unknown as the area was overrun by the Islamic State during the recent conflict. In addition to this, the National Museum of Aleppo was heavily damaged in the fighting between rebel and government forces in 2016. While the museum staff did their utmost to secure as many pieces as possible, the increasing bombardment of the building forced them to ultimately abandon their place of work and research, leaving the collections to an uncertain fate. Reports of looting and intentional destruction at sites in the Euphrates Valley further dampened the chances of full recovery (ex. Cockburn 2014). Photos from Jebel Khalid and its storerooms at Abu Qalqal show extensive destruction and looting by the Islamic state, including the bulldozing of the large public building excavated by the Australian team (Abdo et al 2017). This combination of inaccessibility and destruction means that those involved in the original excavations are forced to work on the basis of notes, study assemblages, photographs, sketches, and plans to create as robust a record as possible of their excavations. Due to

the conflict, these quotidian archives of archaeological practice have become the primary sources for research on Syrian heritage, completely inverting the dynamics of knowledge creation in our field.

In order to acknowledge the ongoing efforts of these archaeologists and the work of their Syrian colleagues, an exhibition was planned about the involvement of University of Melbourne archaeologists in Syria. The resulting bilingual English-Arabic exhibition, entitled *Syria: Ancient History – Modern Conflict,* was held at the University of Melbourne from March to August in 2017 (see Seale 2017; Jamieson and Jackson 2020). Due to the context of archaeological research in Syria, this exhibition was unlike its predecessors. The preceding exhibition, *The Dead Don't Bury Themselves*, focused on an intact assemblage of funerary material from Bab edh-Dhra' alongside several other loans related to ancient burial practices in the Levant. Prior to that, the *Mummymania* exhibition brought in a wealth of archaeological materials from Egyptian collections across Melbourne dating back to the early twentieth century. The Syria exhibition had no intact archaeological assemblages to rely on, nor gifts of Syrian objects from early collectors. So instead of focusing on ancient 'goodies', excavation tools, bulk samples and archives were used to highlight and demystify the meticulous process of archaeology (Bond 2018: 73). Field notebooks weathered by wind and sand physically manifested the human hand within a repetitive schedule of fieldwork. Watercolours, sketches, and plans highlight the different ways in which archaeological landscapes can be documented and experienced. Stamped passports indicate the distance between archaeologists and their areas of study, and borders that have now been closed to them. Photos of missing objects were included on screens in stand-alone cases creating a record of their existence while simultaneously representing of their loss. Images of past archaeological teams, collaborations between Australians and Syrians (see Figure 1), were included across the exhibition, reminding us that there is also a human element to this loss, as friendships and partnerships were cut off by the uncertainties of war.

Figure 1: Photos featured in the Syria exhibition, Annelies Van de Ven 20/06/2017

The archaeological materials on display in *Syria: Ancient History – Modern Conflict* were arguably the least elaborate or traditionally attractive of any of our previous exhibitions, being made up primarily of broken sherds that came to Australia from the earliest excavations as teaching or study assemblages (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Syria exhibition case, Annelies Van de Ven 30/05/2017

However, they represent the majority of material excavated on-site, and are some of our primary sources of information for interpreting and dating change. In any other exhibition, they may have been packed into a corner with little visitor footfall, but in this exhibition they were placed in the central display case, illustrating the processes of archaeology expressed through the other materials. In this way, the traditional role of text and object was inverted. As the documents had become the central storytellers of the exhibition, indicating a narrative of research and collaboration, but also of loss and fragmentation, the sherds of pottery further materialised this story. What emerged was an exhibition that was firmly founded in the experiences of archaeologists. Curators Andrew Jamieson and Heather Jackson underlined their personal engagements with the sites as the creators and interpreters of the archaeological assemblages and archives.

This is a significant choice, and one that breaks from the tradition of Middle Eastern archaeology exhibitions, where the long history of research and the availability of attractive collections in many museums around the world, has led to a tradition of more historicising presentations of attractive archaeological materials told through an authoritative and objective curatorial voice (Emberling and Petit 2018: 4). These representations have been successful at showcasing the significance of archaeological assemblages, conveying the histories and contexts of materials, engaging the public, and supporting the central missions of archaeological museums. However, as the Syria exhibition shows,[2] exploring different formats to defining and displaying archaeology allows us to place our collections in a new light, impacting both the way we approach them academically and their public reception.

This personal and reflexive approach proved to be a successful one, not just for the archaeological community, but also in terms of appealing to a wider public. The visitation for this exhibition was one of the highest the gallery had ever seen. There were 16,190 visitors over the exhibition's five-month display, not counting those attending for academic events such as symposia. This number was only ever surpassed by the *Mummymania* exhibition which drew 16,841 visitors. The exhibition also attracted new audiences including local Syrian communities who had previously been less present in museum visitation (Jamieson and Jackson 2020). The positive reception of the exhibition by wide and diverse audiences speaks to the importance of personal stories in museum exhibitions, not necessarily those of the original users of the archaeological materials, or their depositors, but also those of their excavators, researchers, and curators. The story of the Syria exhibition highlights how important it is for us to think about how we represent and curate the archaeological process (see also Emberling and Petit 2018: 5).

Archives of Writing

Besides the documentation necessary for recording the process of excavation, we are also often taking personal notes, filling in administrative paperwork and corresponding

with external stakeholders. All these elements come together to form a vast dataset, one that is intricately connected to our own contexts of research. However, in public expressions of research, publications, exhibitions, and presentations, we still favour select types of archives. The literary writings and journals of early antiquarian and archaeological researchers in the Middle East, for example, are widely acknowledged as significant historical documents, requiring preservation in museums, libraries, or special collections. They can easily be classified as display-worthy collections in their own right and have begun to crop up more and more in archaeological exhibitions around the world. Recent blockbuster exhibitions such as *I am Ashurbanipal* at the British Museum (Brereton 2018; Van de Ven 2019) and *Nineveh: The Great City* at the Rijksmuseum voor Oudheden (Petit and Bonacossi 2017) have featured small sections on the processes of excavation, bringing in sketches, notebooks and publications of the high-profile scholars related to this era of archaeological research.

This focus on prominent figures, noteworthy publications and aestheticized images in archaeological archives mean that little attention is given to the minutiae of the research project, nor the wider network of human relationships that research plays into (Lucas 2012: 235). It creates the impression of singular scholarly genius, which in turn limits the understanding we have of the wider processes involved in the creation of these archives. The Fonds Doresse held at Musée L, the museum of the Université Catholique de Louvain has all the trappings of a high-profile archive: it features significant scholars, articles on key finds and ample photos of well-known sites across Egypt. However, it also contains Doresse's personal notes from his thesis research and his correspondences while organising his publications. While the latter documents may seem mundane, they are important to our understanding of how archaeological knowledge is formed.

Jean Doresse started his career as a researcher in 1944, focusing on Coptic literature and archaeology. Four years later in 1948, he began excavations at Deir el-Gizaz with funding from the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale (Lucchesi 2009). The objects of the Fonds Doresse at Musée L are primarily related to these excavations, as Doresse left Deir el-Gizaz with a series of samples from the site as well as several ostraca, glass fragments, animal bones, textile scraps, spoon handles, and other small

finds from the site. Some of his notes on the pottery forms are still contained within the nine boxes of the Fonds Doresse. The others are primarily occupied by his photographic collections, thousands of negatives of archaeological sites, monasteries, and manuscripts, he saw during his travels around Egypt. One archive box, the heaviest of the nine, contains Doresse's research notes, pertaining not just to his archaeological excavations and regional survey but also the extensive bibliographical and administrative work that he undertook behind the scenes.

The earliest dated work in these files is an early edited version of his paper presented to the Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres (Doresse 1952, see Figure 3). The letters preserved in this archive only begin in 1963, when Doresse had just returned to France from his time working in Ethiopia, and was formally enrolled in a PhD program at the University of Paris.[3] The main discussion point in these letters is Doresse's thesis *Les anciens monastères coptes de Moyenne-Égypte (du Gebel-et-Teir à Kôm-Ishgaou) d'après l'archéologie et l'hagiographie*, defended in 1971. While the thesis was based on over a decade of archaeological field research in Egypt, the writing itself took four years of singular dedication and resulted in a rich and diverse archive of its own, ranging from sketches to book excerpts and from photos of inscriptions to ticket stubs. Doresse's thesis ultimately comprised of three volumes containing 858 pages and 109 images. Given this vast work, and the four-year process of writing up, Doresse must have created an overwhelming volume of notes and references. Though his research archive held at Musée L is extensive, it is certainly not comprehensive and has already been pre-curated through Doresse's own research decisions. The same is true for the assemblage of finds and samples kept within the other boxes of the collection. The archives and assemblages that we develop through the process of fieldwork, our choices of what to keep or discard, determine how the histories of this region are recorded, filtered and disseminated.

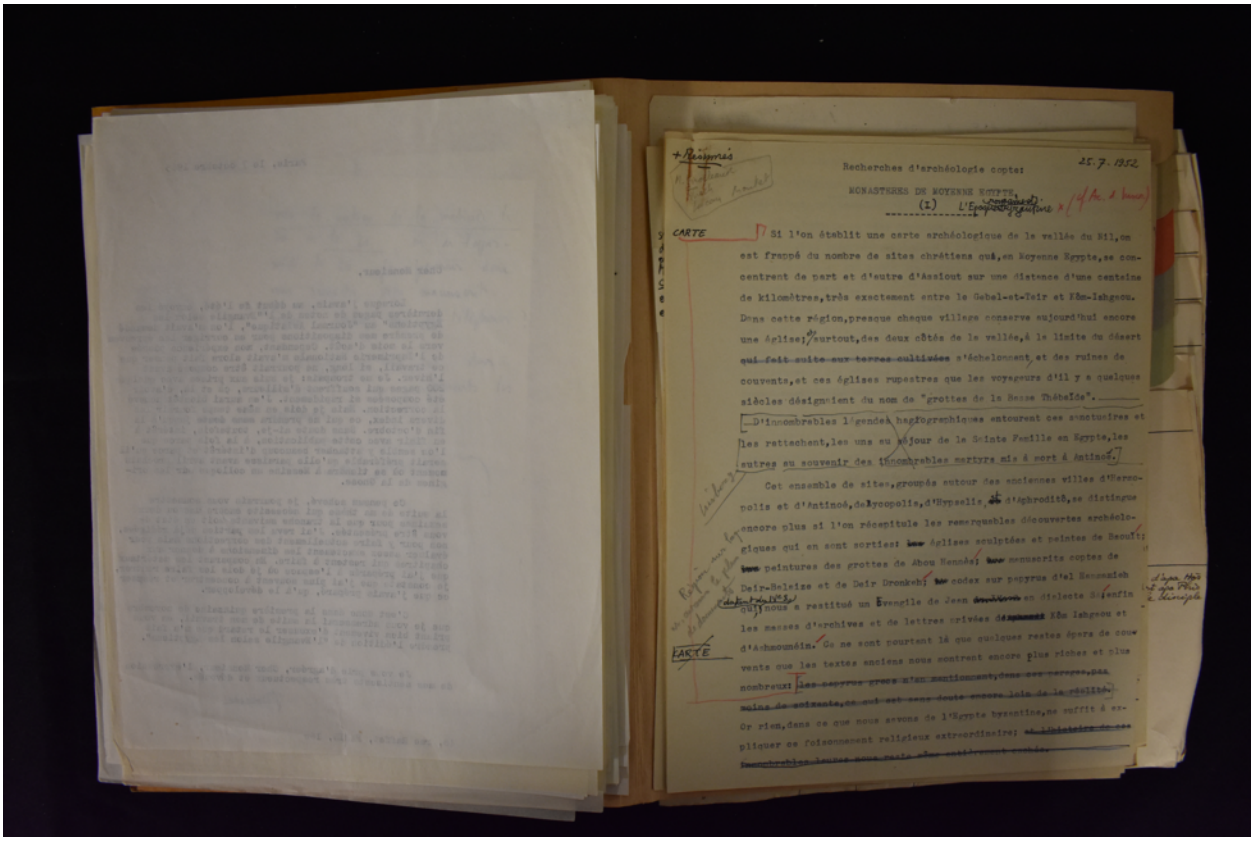

Figure 3: Doresse notes on his 1952 paper, Annelies Van de Ven 04/04/2019

By acknowledging the materiality of this collection, we can allow for a different type of analysis than would be the case with present-day digital archives. The physical subdivision of the folders indicates an internal logic in Doresse's research, with selected folders holding extended research into particular subtopics for additional publication. Individual saints and monasteries that loom larger within the thesis itself thus gain a physical indication of their significance. Other folders pertain to certain phases of research, planned inventories and figure captions. However, there is a great deal of overlap across the documents. To-do lists, chapter outlines, and reference cards show a mix of progress, stagnation, and on occasion regression across the four years. These items become an archival representation (Yakel 2003) created by Doresse, a manifestation of the intellectual and physical research process using his own system of categorisation. The iterative engagement of fieldwork, source identification, reading, writing, and editing is made clear, combining disciplinary standards and personal style.

The archive also indicates roadblocks and challenges in Doresse's thesis writing, highlighting a need to question our positivist assumptions about archaeological research. His insecurities directly challenge the way archaeological findings are so often presented in publications, as rational or objective, completely obscuring the subjective experiences and personal events that influence our practice (Wiltshire 2017: 290). In letters between Doresse and his supervisor Paul Lemerle we see several anxieties and unexpected delays in his submission. A folder put together during the author's years completing his doctorate in Paris is full of references that needed to be verified. This was a major problem for Doresse as much of his thesis work was based on sites, objects, and documents consulted during his time in Egypt in the 1940s and 1950s. In a period when digital copies were not available, Doresse often needed to rely on his own notes and memories to build his argument. Letters to Lemerle in a dedicated research folder show his frustration at the end of his thesis rewrites. On the 24th of October 1967, he writes that he is embarrassed at not being able to give the full reference as required by the University's thesis defence guidelines, a set of documents also included within the archive folder.[4] The files are full of references to stylistic discrepancies, difficulties negotiating thesis length, and cut-and-pasted chapter restructurings. It is through this process of writing and revision that Doresse's thesis went from being what his supervisor termed 'a collection of assorted material' (11th of March 1965) to a celebrated publication.

Doresse's notes highlight the phenomenon that Baird and McFadyen call the archive as 'a site of translation' between his on-site research and the final product of his efforts (2014: 15), but also potentially between the mind of the researcher and the wider public. Rather than being seen purely as research sources to be consulted in storage rooms, these kinds of archives can and should be used as artefacts for exploring and exhibiting the archaeological process. By placing them on display we take steps to publicly acknowledge the complexity and messiness of how knowledge is constructed. For a collection like Doresse's, held at a university museum with an educational mandate towards its student and research community, this narrative would be especially relevant and familiar, reflecting the challenges of the archaeological interpretation in a material way.

Finding Value in Storage

While the Doresse collection at Musée L only takes up nine boxes, accounting for a small proportion of the scholar's research papers and archaeological finds, the combined bulk of archaeological collections (archives and assemblages) make up around 10% of the museum's holdings, taking up a significant amount of its 620 m^2 of the museum's crowded storage space.[5] While no rationalisation is planned for the museum at present, stricter rules are being considered for future acquisitions. The experience at Musée L follows the increasing amount of scholarship calling for a response to the 'curation crisis' identified by Morag Kersel in 2015 as 'one of the most pressing matters facing archaeology today'. Archaeological collections are currently coming in faster than we can find space for them.

Storage is only the tip of the iceberg, as the accession of a collection into a museum, archive or research institution also implies a commitment to its ongoing conservation which, in turn, requires a constant flow of resources. In Dianne Fitzpatrick's recent surveys of almost 300 archaeologists working in the Middle East, we see that less than half of projects budget for the long-term care of their collections (Fitzpatrick 2011; 2013; 2016: 27; Jamieson et al. 2014). While a combination of digitisation and rationalisation of finds and archives into e-depots is increasingly being adopted as a response to this problem for bulk finds and archives, this brings issues of its own, including a temporary spike in staff and equipment costs and a regular plan for metadata linking and format updates (McManamon et al. 2017). Digitisation also fails to account for the full materiality and research potential of each element of the collection, which results in a possible loss of data. Combining the effects of this 'curation crisis' (Kersel 2015; Bauer-Clapp and Kirakosian 2017: 221) and the move towards digitisation-rationalisation (Baxter et al 2018), it is increasingly important for us to consider how our collections can continue to add value to the discipline on different fronts. While these questions have recently been given more attention, they are certainly not new to

the discipline, and in researching past responses we can gain some inspiration for our present approaches to these issues.

In her 2015 article, Kersel highlights a particular moment of curation crisis when the archaeological stores of Amman and Jerusalem were overrun with a glut of pottery and finds heralding from the necropolis of Bab edh-Dhra'. Paul Lapp's attention was drawn to the site during his time in Jerusalem in the late 1950s and early 1960s when a stream of Early Bronze Age pots began emerging on the black market. They were reported to be from Hebron or Qumran but Lapp noticed a lot of similarities between the material on the market and the surface samples described by archaeologist Sylvester John Saller in his 1964 article, as well as the materials uncovered in surveys undertaken in the 1920s by Alexis Mallon and Lapp's own mentor W. F. Albright (Albright 1924). Upon further investigation on-site, Lapp was able to confirm his suspicions (Lapp 1975: 104). In order to understand the original context of these finds, and to avoid a further loss of material to the black market, Lapp swiftly organised a campaign to the site with funding from the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR) at the time under the presidency of Albert Henry Detweiler. He dug there for three seasons (spring 1965, fall 1965 and spring 1967) and according to his mentor Nelson Glueck, by the end of three seasons, Lapp had excavated and transported over 6,000 complete vessels (Glueck Archives, letter dating to 17 August 1967).[6]

Lapp's original motivation for working on this site is one that feels particularly poignant today, with sites in conflict areas within the Middle East being pockmarked by looters. However, as the ASOR archives make clear, despite Lapp's enlightened attitude, the accepted processes of finds acquisition in the 1960s were in many ways vastly different from how we approach the issue today. A treasure trove of information on attitudes during this period is Nelson Glueck's diary describing his visit to the Levant in the summer of 1967. He states that there was 'a lot of ancient pottery, including some Bab edh-Dhra' ware' for sale around the city, and that he himself was a regular patron of these antiquities dealers, particularly of 'Khalil Shahin Kando, whose shop is only half a block away from the ASOR' (Glueck Archives, letter dating to 7 July 1967). He goes on to describe some of the antiquities laws in Jordan and Israel, describing a system of

partage that allowed for the sale of overflow on a legal antiquities market (see also Kersel 2019: 602). According to him, antiquities obtained in the field or a shop need to be presented to a government inspector before export, 'the government can confiscate any antiquity and then reimburse the owner through the equivalent of court procedures' (Glueck Archives, letter dating to 22 August 22 1967). The aim here was to ensure that unique and high-value items stayed in the country, while multiples could be sent abroad.[7]

Figure 4: The Dead Don't Bury Themselves exhibition, Annelies Van de Ven 28/09/2016

Glueck visited Lapp at ASOR (Jerusalem) in 1967 and was treated to a tour of the finds and records from Bab edh-Dhra' (Glueck Archives, letter dating to 17 August 1967).[8]

Upon the unexpected death of excavation director Pau Lapp in a swimming accident in 1970 (Campbell 1970; Hillers 1970), the analysis of the large archaeological site of Bab edh-Dhra' (Dead Sea Plain, Jordan) and its finds was left unfinished (Schaub and Rast 1989). Further vessels were uncovered during regional surveys by Walter E. Rast and R. Thomas Schaub in 1973 as well as David McCreery and Vincent Clark in 1977 under the auspices of the newly founded American Centre for Oriental Research (ACOR) in Amman (Rast and Schaub 1974; McCreery 1977). By the time of McCreery and Clark's survey, the stores were overflowing with Bab edh-Dhra' material. The ASOR archives include several letters from this period from the personal correspondences of archaeologist Nancy Lapp, the registrar for Bab edh-Dhra' and Paul Lapp's widow. A letter sent by McCreery to Lapp, Schaub and a fellow ASOR member Edward Campbell on 2 September 1977 highlighted the dire situation as the archaeologist notes that the collections were being stored in highly inadequate conditions with little monitoring or documentation leading to several missing items (Kersel 2015). A new home had to be sought for these collections.

As a result of this situation, a plan was developed to sell tomb groups to 24 ASOR member institutions to ease the burden on local resources. These sales came with some conditions as Lapp indicated institutions could only receive vessels if they promised to keep their tomb group intact within their collections and ensure their accessibility for display, teaching, and research (Jamieson 2015; Kersel 2015). While many of these groups were given to North American institutions, a few ventured further afield and one group of 45 Early Bronze Age vessels from Bab edh-Dhra' was sent to the University of Melbourne. In accordance with Nancy Lapp's plan, the pottery in the collection all heralds from a single complete tomb, tomb A72S, excavated in 1965. Thanks to our archaeological archives we can reconstruct the vessels' itinerary from the stores to Melbourne. It was purchased as part of the ASOR scheme in 1978 by Arthur Dudley Hallam, who was, at the time, a member of staff at the university's department of Middle Eastern Studies (Jamieson and Lee 2020). The package sent by Lapp to Hallam included photos, plans, excavation records, hand-written display signs from an earlier exhibition, and 44 pots each marked with a five-digit registration number and a P number.[9]

Despite the direct request from Nancy Lapp for the materials to be used for display and education, the Bab edh-Dhra' vessels were rarely seen in the gallery. It was only with Morag Kersel's 2015 article about the 'curation crisis' in which she presents Nancy Lapp's story, that the significance of this collection was revisited and revived at Melbourne, with a major exhibition, *The Dead Don't Bury Themselves*, held at the Classics and Archaeology Gallery of the Ian Potter Museum from September 2016 to March 2017. This exhibition featured the pots alongside the archival material that brought them to the university and defined their public-facing role (see Van de Ven and Jamieson 2018). This exhibition has since inspired a great deal of research into this collection, not just in the sense of its archaeological history but also in its potential as an outreach tool for object-based learning and engagement with students and seniors. The perceived monotony yet relative wholeness of the pottery are normally the qualities that earn a collection a place of relative obscurity in museum storage or minor displays. Kersel's publication of Nancy Lapp's story was essential to the re-centralisation of the Bab edh-Dhra' collection within the University of Melbourne's research and engagement. The Bab edh-Dhra' story highlights the significance of researching and displaying archaeological archives, not only to better understand the process of creating archaeological knowledge but also how archaeological collections are constructed and interpreted.

Archives Past to Present

Archives and assemblages are the results of complex processes, the same practices and pathways that produce and display archaeological knowledge. This means that the archive doesn't just provide descriptions for assemblages, it also continuously re-contextualises them to the social, political, scientific, and cultural conditions within which they are used. This dual function is equally manifested in the materiality of these collections, in their ability to simultaneously embody both persistence and change through time. However, this juxtaposition does not come without its tensions. As materials encompassing notions of past, history, and memory, the inherent tension

within these collections is expressed superbly in Walter Benjamin's work *On the Concept of History* in which he states that 'to articulate the past historically … means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger' (1974: 255). Archaeology, much like history in Benjamin's work, implies subjectivity, interpretation, and construction, a continuous coming together of past and present. In this process finds, documents, sites, and people are intertwined in a network of meaning.

In such a networked system, artefacts do not undergo a linear development from excavation to display. They are multifaceted, not tied down to any one specific moment or memory, but rather existing between and through them. One object that fully embodies this message is the Cyrus Cylinder (BM 90920, see Figure 5), a barrel-shaped cuneiform inscription that was placed as a foundation deposit by Median ruler Cyrus the Great after his conquest of Babylon in 539 BCE. It describes the conquest of the city as a peaceful one, a righting of the wrongs of his predecessor Nabonidus. It has since been used to position Cyrus as an enlightened and tolerant liberator, and to link the ruler to Persian, Iranian, Christian, and Jewish identities. The Cylinder does not look particularly noteworthy. It has the form of an elongated barrel made of unevenly baked clay and measuring in at about twenty-two cm. Despite the Cyrus Cylinder's unassuming appearance, it has become a central object within the Museum's current narrative on the pre-Islamic history of the region. The Cyrus Cylinder is a historically significant object that has a complex and contested public reception, which is reflected in the archival narratives that make up its wider collection. Though the documents related to the Cyrus Cylinder's excavation are fascinating in their own right (Curtis 2013; Finkel 2013; Van de Ven 2018), I will here be focusing on the documentation relating to its display and reception.

The Cylinder was uncovered as part of a formal excavation undertaken by the British Museum at the site of Babylon in March of 1879 and it arrived at the museum later that year (British Museum 1879 OP 4228, n.33). Early museum guides place the Cylinder among the Mesopotamian displays. Acquired in the heyday of imperial collection building, the Cylinder became part of a narrative of archaeological abundance. It first went on display in 1880 with a short label indicating the Cylinder's inventory number,

its material, period, find location, and contents. As a portable and cuneiform object inscribed in the round it was suitable for exhibition on one of the many display tables. Along with several other late discoveries from Babylon, the cylinder was placed on the miscellaneous antiquities table (BM 1884). The 1892 reorganisation of the galleries saw an arrangement of material according to type, placing the Cyrus Cylinder alongside other royal cylinders from Babylon and Assyria (BM 1892). This move towards classification within the collection shows an increasing integration of Mesopotamian history within the museum's practices though very much from an Assyriological text-based point of view. A further focusing of its context occurred in 1900 when the Cylinder became part of a display of inscriptions linked to the history of Babylon throughout a series on ancient empires (BM 1900).

Figure 5: Cyrus Cylinder on display in the Rahim Irvani Gallery at the British Museum, Annelies Van de Ven 19/10/2015

For over 30 years, Achaemenid period material was categorised within Mesopotamian history, their cultural and territorial peers. However, the emergence of nationalistic projects in the Middle East brought a change to this categorisation. A major figure in this change for Iran was the leader Reza Shah whose persianisation efforts strongly impacted international views of Persia including its portrayal in museums. After the success of the 1931 display in Burlington House (Pope 1931), the British Museum held their own exhibition on Persian Art (Wilson 1931) and began to reorganise its displays to create a small room devoted to Persian materials (BM 1932). In this new gallery, the Cylinder was displayed as part of a series of wall cases organised according to object type as well as chronology. This change to a less cluttered and more categorised display, allowed more clarity for visitors, while still presenting the cylinder as part of a wider body of royal inscriptions and Achaemenid materials. The drawings held in the British Museums archives from the 1952 and 1958 refurbishments of the Persian Gallery show a consistency in the display of the Cylinder, presenting it as part of a chronological series of cases on Persian history.[10]

1971 was the year of the Cylinder's first foray outside of the UK, an event that is documented extensively in the Foreign Office archives. What appears in the object's catalogue page as just another loan, was actually a highly political event that constituted a moment of defiance from the British Museum's curator Richard Barnett. He brought the Cylinder to Iran during a conference visit despite the hesitance of the government and the rejection of a loan by the Foreign Office earlier in the year due to fears related to their 'ultra-nationalistic ambitions' (Bailey 2004). However, despite these initial misgivings, upon the safe return of the cylinder, the idea of presenting the Cylinder to the Shah as a permanent loan, as a political token of goodwill was considered (NA NEP 26/1B 109-110 and 126).[11] This idea was ultimately rejected, and the Cylinder was in Iran for only seven days. The Cylinder went on display at Shahyad (now Azadi) Tower and became a mascot for Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah's celebrations of 2500 years of the Persian Empire. He hailed it as 'the first declaration of human rights', a descriptor that has stuck despite its anachronism. This visit also had an impact on the new British

Museum gallery opened in 1974. Though the gallery plan did not change, its designation goes from the Persian Gallery to the Iranian Gallery highlighting an affiliation with the modern nation-state. It would take another two gallery refurbishments for the Cylinder to be placed in its own display case, this time as a gateway object in the 2007 Rahim Irvani Gallery. However, this latest move was not without challenges, as the Cylinder's form and material mean that it is easily drowned out by the nearby Oxus treasure featuring several intricate gold pieces as well as the large-scale architectural reliefs along the gallery walls.

Studying the Cylinder through its museological archives means that each of its moves can be contextually qualified within the British Museum's history of interpretation. The inclusion of these museum documents in the archaeological archive becomes even more significant for their ability to trace the wider academic and political frameworks within which the museum operates. However, what the abovementioned documents are less good at assessing is the public reception of the Cylinder. This requires the inclusion of the voices of communities, groups, and individuals not traditionally admitted to the sphere of museological decision making. In the case of the Cyrus Cylinder, this has been done through on-the-ground visitor surveys pertaining to the artefact and its associated exhibitions (Sedgewick 2006; Francis et al. 2011) as well as social media analyses (Van de Ven 2017). While the former creates a profile of the average visitor's knowledge of and interest in the Cyrus Cylinder, the latter shows perceptions of the Cylinder by individuals with varying levels of existing knowledge. The visitor survey in the gallery indicated a surprisingly low connection to the Cylinder with only 21% of visitors studied interacting with it despite its central position within the gallery (Francis et al. 2011: 162). Those who do engage with it are regularly confused by its origins, some placing it within the culture of ancient Egypt while others struggled with the Iran-Iraq connections (Sedgewick 2006: 7 and 11). In contrast, the social media data tells a different story, one of deep engagement by several communities including prominently Iranian scholars, the Persian diaspora in the US as well as Zoroastrian and Jewish communities. Keyword analyses (see Figure 6) within these data sets also allow a diachronic view of modern interpretations of the Cylinder, highlighting the continued significance of the human

rights narrative, as well as the ongoing shifts between the Cylinder's Mesopotamian, Persian, and Iranian identities since the last refurbishment.

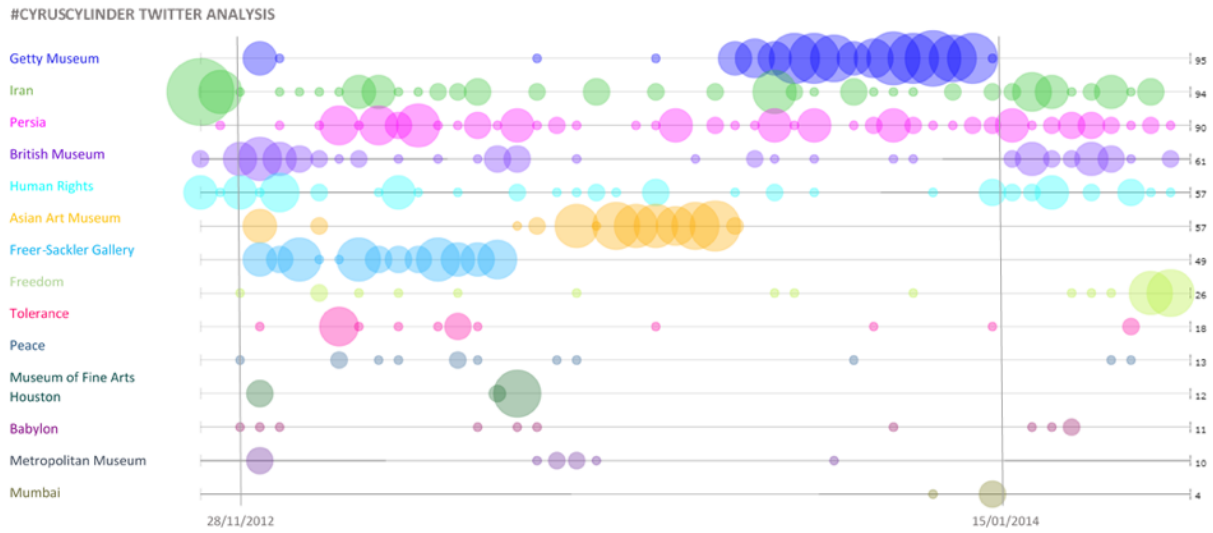

Figure 6: A basic visualisation of the social media data collected about the Cyrus Cylinder (Van de Ven 2017)

As this section shows, museum politics, collections management, and visitor studies documents can have an important role to play in our ongoing understandings of archaeological objects, and they are essential for creating a deep object biography. As the Cyrus Cylinder entered the museum, its narrative did not end, but rather grew more complex as it gained new meanings and associations, its archive growing along with it and constituting sources and products of research in their own right. These complex documents and datasets, both physical and digital, need to be preserved to allow a critical study of the reception of archaeological artefacts rather than just their initial use(s) and later unearthing.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the case studies above, archaeological collections include a variety of materials, each with its own implication on how we reconstruct the past. Archaeological biographies extend far beyond the original context of an artefact's use or its significance as a source of field data. Through continuous human interactions in professional and public settings, the things we study gain a whole constellation of meanings and interpretations that can never be completely disentangled (Van de Ven 2017). These histories are not always institutionally manifested—in journal articles or academic volumes—existing rather in the letters, candid photographs, notebooks, exhibition plans, and news articles of our archives. Alongside excavated objects, these documents provide a material manifestation of our research. They give important reflexivity to our work, recounting the processes through which our collections are accumulated and categorised (Vogt-O'Connor 1999: 3; Bauer-Clapp and Kirakosian 2017: 220). This is significant as ideals of academic objectivity in publication or display can sometimes be obscured by the personal and professional baggage that we carry with us. Acknowledging and reflecting on these biases through the medium of the archaeological archive ensures that our conclusions do not become disconnected from their context of formation, impacting both our research and communicative practices. By presenting four different examples, the aim was to address the complexity of archaeological collections in museums and explore the various assemblage–archive relationships that can contribute to them. In this approach, documents are not just tools for the interpretation of museological objects, they are artefacts of study and display in their own right. Both archives and assemblages simultaneously materialise and describe events, giving each of them the potential to both headline and support archaeological narratives. They enrich archaeological and museological research, providing a pathway to better understanding the past, our discipline, and our audiences.

In Melbourne, the exhibition of personal tools and archival materials from Syrian-Australian archaeological collaborations allowed a wider public a unique insight into field practices and team relationships. Expressing archaeology in a period of conflict

and loss, the refocusing of the exhibition away from 'goodies' gives meaning to bulk assemblages and everyday relevance to our study of the past.

The Doresse Collection presents us with the realities of archaeological research, the challenges met and shortcuts taken. Jean Doresse's archive materialises the long process of planning that determines the parameters of archaeological fieldwork, a process only hinted at through the associated study assemblages.

The revitalisation of the Bab edh-Dhra' collection at Melbourne following the publication of its connection to the educational mission of Nancy Lapp highlights how archives and assemblages can mutually reinforce one another's significance. In this case, a deep dive into the archives helped to justify the resources put into the whole collection's research, storage, and display.

Finally, the Cyrus Cylinder archive presents the breadth of documentation that can be incorporated into archaeological research. An examination of its exhibition records and the meanings that each re-display bestows upon the Cylinder reminds us that our construction of an artefact's narrative does not end when it enters a museum collection. All four examples speak to the importance of archives and the need for a more holistic consideration of their preservation and study within the field of archaeology. Their clear impact on object biography and interpretation, as well as the historiography of our discipline, shows that these sources should not just be allocated to the realms of storage facilities, but that they should be celebrated as integral parts of archaeological collections, with a role to play in research, display, and engagement.

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[1] I would like to thank archivist Kat Petersen for her guidance in developing the terminology to include the perspective of professionals working with historical archives.

[2] Several other exhibitions have shown approaches similar to that adopted in the Syria exhibition. A prominent example of this is *The Curious Case of Çatalhöyük*, a travelling exhibition without archaeological assemblages that instead uses reconstruction and digital technologies to engage visitors in the process of archaeological research.

[3] According to his documents, he began his PhD on the 1st of October 1963 and was supposed to finish within four years.

[4] All references to the archives of Jean Doresse are necessarily paraphrased as the originals are in French. At the moment these documents have not been digitized in any way to make them internationally accessible. It is my intention to fully transcribe and translate the archive and make them accessible alongside high-quality photos as part of my current FSR CR mandate.

[5] The museum is a diverse one with collections pertaining to archaeology, natural history, scientific apparatuses, ethnography, religion, modern- and classical art. Besides original finds and records, the archaeological collections also include numerous casts and copies, many of which collected by the archaeology department for teaching purposes.

[6] This was out of an estimated total of two million that were thought to be buried in the Bab edh-Dhra' necropolis. The Glueck Archives can be accessed at http://www.asor-glueck.org/resources/ [Last Accessed 10 March 2021].
[7] The legislation changed in 1976 when it became illegal to sell antiquities in Jordan (al-Shami 2009: 854).
[8] This visit came just a few months after the Six-Day War (5-10 June 1967) and tensions were high between Jordan and Israel. Archaeological work across the border became more difficult and Lapp's use of ASOR Jerusalem as a base while excavating at Bab edh-Dhra' was no longer possible. It was in response to this that ACOR was founded in Amman in 1968.
[9] This allows us to exactly pinpoint the origin of each item, the season of excavation and its location within the tomb group. Further encoding allows us to reconstruct the dating and forms attributed to the vessels during their original registration. What the information also allows us to do is to identify missing vessels. In the case of tomb A72S the records note 45 vessels, but It appears that one was lost in storage, and another in transit (P15 and 30). These narratives of transit are the focus of Morag Kersel's Follow the Pots project and provide important insight to the process of acquisition and collections management, highlighting it as a challenging part of the archaeological process.
[10] I would like to give my sincere thanks to Dr St John Simpson, Assistant Keeper of the Middle East Department for all his help in accessing these materials and for his expert insights into the collection.
[11] These inventory numbers correspond to the Foreign Office records regarding the Cyrus Cylinder held at the National Archives in Kew.

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