
INTERVIEW

Interview with Dr. Alice Stevenson

Chloe Ward

Dr. Alice Stevenson is the newly appointed Senior Lecturer in Museum Studies at UCL Institute of Archaeology and the course coordinator for Collections Curatorship and Ancient Egyptian Archaeology. In this interview she reflects on her career in academia and museums to date, especially as the curator of the Petrie Museum, as well discussing some of the issues and challenges facing museums in the 21st century. An audio version of this interview can be found here: <http://doi.org/10.5334/pia-526.s1>

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Chloe Ward is an archaeologist and MPhil/PhD candidate at UCL Institute of Archaeology focusing on the use of historical archives in current archaeological research, especially for Egypt, the Sudan and the Near East.

Chloe Ward on behalf of the PIA: Hi Alice, first of all thank you for taking the time for this interview. Maybe you could start by telling us a bit about your background and career to date?

Alice Stevenson: I came to study archaeology and anthropology 18 years ago and I did so not because I necessarily had ambitions to be involved in excavations or fieldwork in the traditional sense, rather it was the products of fieldwork that I really wanted to work with, so stuff, things, collections. So a museums' career, has always been in my mind's

eye, since I was a teenager. After completing my BA in Archaeology, I went and did an MA in Museum studies before trying to find a job in the archaeology or heritage sector. But I really missed academic life so I came back to do a PhD, and it was at that point that I specialised in Prehistoric Egyptian archaeology by working mainly with museum collections and archives. My subsequent post-doctoral work was largely nothing to do with Egyptology, one of them was actually here in the Institute of Archaeology, I was a research fellow on a museum storage project, spent some time in the Egypt Exploration Society as the archivist before moving on to the Pitt-Rivers museum in the University of Oxford, where I was the Researcher in World Archaeology, so I got to research and teach, and write about all sorts of things from all sorts of times and places. I'm really quite omnivorous when it comes to world archaeology.

CW: After working at the Pitt Rivers Museum in Oxford you made the move to UCL where you've been the curator of the Petrie Museum since 2013. Can you describe what your main role has been?

AS: It's a very varied role, the curator at the Petrie is a mediator, they're the main point of contact between the many stakeholders, communities and interests in the museum, and the care and the management of the collection itself. So that meant that I was working with colleagues to promote the collection, to connect students and staff to the collection for teaching and for research. My role also included being responsive to media requests and doing a small amount of research on the collection to promote it, and of course working on documentation and collections management.

CW: The Petrie Museum was obviously conceptualised as a teaching collection rather than for public display, do you feel that there is ever a clash between the two broad aims of the museum as they stand today?

AS: I think in terms of the variety of the work that the Petrie has been doing, in terms of its research and its events

programming, I don't believe there has been a clash. Because those various areas inform each other, and there are lots of different perspectives that you can take on the collection as a whole. However, in terms of the more static, physical display that people can go and visit, yes I feel that there is currently a mismatch between the ethos of the work that the team do and what we've actually got on presentation at the moment. I think the present interpretation is inadequate, I think it's largely inaccessible to the majority of the public and students. And I think it's unrepresentative of all the challenging work that we've done: we've confronted things like the eugenic legacy of the collection, the colonial legacy of the collection, all the active programming that is done around alternative sexualities. All that sort of thing, yet the display labels are written primarily for a really specialist, niche Egyptological audience. They use conventions and abbreviations only known to the few. And I think that is a real shame, and now that



Artefact displays in the Petrie Museum, around 2001. Stevenson (2015)

we've got an online database, the entire collection is online, that sort of detailed specialist knowledge is still accessible for those that want to go that extra mile. But I think there needs to be more for the general public, and I also think there needs to be a new introduction. We have been working on an interpretive strategy that confronts the collection's history, but also would make it more relevant to contemporary debates in heritage, to link it more strongly with Egypt as a modern country. But ultimately, the Petrie is really going to need a new space if it's going to realise its full potential and that there is sufficient conditions to ensure that the collection is stable for the next century.

CW: Something you've been involved with on the public development side of the museum was the publication of a book on the Petrie Museum collections, which you also edited, can you tell us a bit about that and the thoughts behind it?

AS: In 2015, it was the centenary of the museum being open as a museum to the public so the Petrie team decided that a glossy, souvenir number would be a fitting tribute for such an internationally renowned collection. And we didn't have, at that point, any accessible introduction to the collection, but producing that was going to be daunting because with more than 80 600 objects, tens of thousands of years of history, where do you start with someone like that. And we also had less than a year, to write, produce and publish a book. What we decided to do was a small 120-page volume in which we traced the contours of the collection, so people could get a sense of the scope from the Palaeolithic axes to the Islamic glass, from the smallest objects to the monumental objects. I also wanted to challenge ideas about the nature of the collections, because it's far broader than the term

Egyptian archaeology might popularly suggest. We've got objects from the Sudan, that is a very important part of the collection, but also from Korea, China, Nigeria, Palestine, Syria, India, Iraq; so it really is quite an extraordinary collection. I also wanted the contributors to place more at the forefront all the different characters that have become entangled with the history of the Petrie, because the museum takes its name from one famous, white male figure, and it's all too easy for Finders Petrie to always be at the centre of the narrative. But archaeology has always been a team endeavour and it's based on the labour of others, so we also wanted to look at the agency behind the collection, that meant the Egyptian workforce, it meant things like the huge number of women that were involved actively in fieldwork and in the production of knowledge about the past. So that was something that we got to address by doing that book.

CW: It's obviously been very successful and is actually available for free on the [UCL website](#), for any who's interested. It must have been a great opportunity to get everyone who works in the Petrie museum involved?

AS: Absolutely and in fact it was necessary because you need a range of voices, and no one person has expertise on a collection like that. So I'm really grateful to all the contributors for penning material so swiftly and allowing me to edit that so swiftly as well.

CW: Having worked yourself in two relatively small museums, at least in regards to the physical space, what do you think will be the fate of these smaller museums? Do you feel they can stand their ground against larger institutions such as the British Museum?

AS: I think that the comparison with larger institutions is a bit of misnomer because smaller

institutions offer something quite different, they offer something quirkier, more experimental, more individual and more intimate. I personally don't think it's necessary to market them or promote events on the same sort of scale or in the same sort of mould. Institutions can have very modest budgets and a small number of staff, and still really punch above their weight. What really makes a difference, I think, is the institutional context. I've worked mainly in university museums but staff working in a local authority museum will have very different constraints and opportunities. So that's really the context rather than size.

CW: Despite some of the difficulties, what do you think are the advantages of these smaller and often more specialist museums?

AS: I think such museums can be more strongly embedded within their local communities, they can be more responsive to the local communities than some bigger institutions. And it's both an opportunity and a challenge for those local institutions to see how, in particular, objects or specimens from other parts of the world might be relevant and useful and meaningful in a local context.

CW: Something you and some of your colleagues have been quite passionate about recently is condemning the deaccessioning and sale of museum artefacts to private individuals, the statue of Sekhemka is an obvious example [see [Independent 2016](#) or [BBC 2014](#)]. Do you think we're likely to see more of this in the future? What can we do about it, if anything?

AS: Deaccessioning in itself is not necessarily a bad thing, it's an act of part of managing museum collections. But the way that museums go about that has to be on a case-by-case basis, it has to be done transparently, it has to be accountable, and it has to be ethical. The management of those sorts of things will be dependant on the

nature of the object, of the collection, of the institution, but I think we do need to take extra care with antiquities and with world heritage. I hope that we don't see any more examples of what Northampton Borough council did when they sold off the ancient Egyptian statue, but I do think we need to be prepared. We need to be more vocal if we are to challenge those who seek to commercialise and to commodify heritage in illegal or unethical ways. I argued recently in a paper, published in *Antiquity* last year (Stevenson 2016), that really means that we need to, as a profession, have a position of radical transparency about the history of our discipline, if we are going to have an open dialogue with other interests and other stakeholders. So I think it's going to be challenging but I think it's something we all need to be prepared to be able to do.

CW: This is something that your work with ACCES has presumably promoted, supporting less well known Egyptian and Sudanese collections?

AS: Yes, so [ACCES](#) which is the Association of Curators for Collections from Egypt and Sudan, is one of many subject specialist networks (SSN) in the museum sector that were established more than a decade ago, something called the 'Renaissance in the Regions programme'. At the time they were set up to be networks connecting large museums, small museums, non-specialist, specialist researchers, the public, academics, etc. That was the initial aim to bring new vibrancy to collections, knowledge and sharing of that, but I think now there is a much more pressing issue in the political climate. I think because of austerity, because of Brexit there is a pressing role for subject-specialist networks to act as a form of advocacy for smaller collections. To be able to amplify the concerns of maybe a small, local collection as to its importance nationally and to try and challenge cases where museums or collections are under threat of being closed or disposed

of. So I think these sort of subject-specialist networks are much more active now, and more important, than they've ever been.

CW: Over the course of your career you've been involved with a number of research projects such as the Artefacts of Excavation project which is still ongoing, could you tell us a little about that?

AS: Artefacts of excavation is a three-year AHRC funded project, we're in the final year now. And that's a project that came out of a pilot study I did at the Pitt-Rivers museum, and has now expanded to look at a century of British fieldwork in Egypt and where all the finds from that went and what the politics, the history and the legacy of that is. We found that over the course of this century at least 325 institutes in 25 countries, across 5 continents received material from these excavations. I can't think of any other area of World archaeology that has such a legacy of that scale or that scope. What that means is that what we've been doing in the project is not try to track down every single object, that's impossible given the multiple routes of transmission, and that the object biographies are very complex. But rather to create an online resource that will act as a way to help non-specialists make the connections between objects that they may have in a cupboard and these wider excavation histories. So that is something the project team and I have been working on and that is a website hosted at the Griffith Institute <http://egyptartefacts.griffith.ox.ac.uk>. But for my part, I'll be devoting most of the rest of this year research wise to try and finish off the book which is being published by UCL Press. And that's looking at what these distributions can reveal about the history of archaeology and the history of museums from about the 1880s onwards, and it's looking at contexts not just here in the UK, but transnationally in Kyoto, New York, Cape Town, and it's also hoping to try and tackle questions around ownership and the ethical status of these objects today in the 21st century.¹

CW: Any other projects you're working on at the moment?

AS: Well I did receive Grand Challenges funding this past year, that's a project entitled 'Curating Heads - critical perspectives on human remains research', and that is a project working with Mark Thomas at UCL's department of Genetics, Evolution and Environment together with a team which includes students from science and technology studies, as well as UCL Museums and Collections. The aim is to extract and genome sequence DNA from Jeremy Bentham and Flinders Petrie with a view to a wider programme of research on the history, legacy, and ethics of the practices of researching, exhibiting and curating human remains. So there is hopefully going to be some events and we will put together an exhibition proposal for that, so that's something I need to get on with. I'll also continue to be working on an advocacy document for museum collections to present to the all-parliamentary group for the protection of cultural heritage.

CW: Moving on from your past career in museums, you're obviously just starting in a new position as senior lecturer in Museum Studies at UCL Institute of Archaeology. First of all congratulations, can I ask what inspired your move? it's a bit of a change from curation and of course Egyptology which is something you've focused on in the past.

AS: Thank You. Yes, I'm delighted to be here. Although I hugely valued my time as a curator, it's ultimately teaching, research and the writing side that I am the most passionate about and I think given my career path which has kind of weaved between museums, archives, Egypt, and world archaeology, I think it is a logical step now in my career. I've never really considered myself an Egyptologist, and I've always worked comparatively with a broad range of material. I'm looking forward to the opportunities that

there are to research and teach using a wider spectrum of types of collection.

CW: You're not the first to transition from the Petrie museum to the Institute, do you feel its become a bit of a natural step as you've begun to take on a more educational role?

AS: Not necessarily, I think each individual in that post would have different priorities and the institutional strategies of the museum over time have altered and changed as well. So I don't think it's inevitable by any means. For me personally, I've juggled a lot of interests and projects over the years, and I've taking the opportunities that have come along to continually challenge and expand my work, and this is one of those opportunities.

CW: Presumably teaching is something you enjoy?

AS: I do. I very much enjoy teaching, I find it enormously gratifying, not just because it gives me the opportunity to support and help students develop but I have also found that, in turn, teaching has challenged my own academic thinking and writing. Several of my published papers have actually risen directly from subjects that I have been asked to teach, and that in the preparation I've done for courses, in the reading and putting together course materials you find gaps in the literature and you put together ideas in new ways. So I think at its best such course preparation, teaching, and research can all be mutually reinforcing; they can lead to new book proposals and there is always new research that is changing the content of lectures. Even students' questions have helped refine the way in which I, myself, am asking a question or approaching an issue.

CW: Museum Studies is a hugely popular Master's degree at the moment not just at UCL but also across the country, any thoughts on why this is?

AS: Sounds like a research topic *[laughs]*. I think in part it's due to the success of the museum sector in the last few decades in re-energising the public perception of what a museum is, can be, its relevance to communities and contemporary society. But I think there is also something very attractive about the range of jobs and opportunities that you have in museums. I think the diversity of museums, the diversity of roles, allows all sorts of people to identify themselves in different environments. So I think museum studies is a good foundational course for people finding their way in this cultural context.

CW: Amongst the number of Universities teaching museum studies what do you think makes UCL stand out as a particularly good place to study the subject?

AS: I think that UCL is exceptionally diverse in the range of expertise, the range of projects, the range of courses that it houses and supports. And then you look beyond this department and you find that there are all those other departments that are also really engaged and interested in museums, their collections, their functions. I think that it is that interdisciplinarity which is one of the outstanding strengths of UCL and I think it allows students to forge their career interests across heritage, material culture studies, world archaeology, history, conservation, public archaeology, visitor studies, education, etc. Of course, UCL is really fortunate in having a range of museums and collections that actively engages with students and academic activities.

CW: I suppose one of the main advantages are the resources available on our doorstep such as the British Museum and also within the university, we've talked about the Petrie but there is also the Grant museum and obviously the Leventis gallery here at the Institute. As someone who's worked with UCL Museums and Collections is this a resource you're

planning to use in your own teaching, and hopefully encourage others to do so?

AS: Absolutely. At the present time I think one of the courses which I'll certainly be taking on is *Collections Management and Care*, and that's a subject which I think is perhaps to readily seen as just a necessary routine activity that in itself isn't intellectually stimulating. But having worked extensively with databases, documentation systems, storage facilities, I know that couldn't be furthest from the truth and that museums professionals are faced with complex, critical issues on a daily basis. And so, what I'm really looking forward to is working with my colleagues, here at UCL Museums and Collections, and more broadly across London's museums to find real world examples of problems that museum professionals have faced. So, that students get a chance at authentic learning and really get their teeth into some really quite knotty problems.

CW: You seem to have been quite interested in is the history of museology and museums, is this something you're keen to develop further through your new position?

AS: I very much hope that will be something I might be able to do. I've spent the last decade working extensively with archives as well as objects and museums, and it's increasingly clear to me that histories of disciplines are really integral to the way that we need to be thinking about archaeological and museological problems, etc. Because they're not just anecdotal vignettes, we don't just do it to chronicle advances, but they really allow us to critically look at the political, social and economic conditions that shape knowledge, that shape the production of knowledge. I also think that there is a huge moral and ethical imperative too. If we are going to be responsive to a diverse range of interests in different sorts of pasts, as well as act professionally with regard to being stewards of that past, then I think we need to be informed

as to the context in which we work. And it offers students a great opportunity to think critically, not just about the kinds of questions that we are asking of collections, of museums, of the past, but also about how we judge what is a valid answer, and I think that is a really useful life skill anyway. I think grounding that longer perspective is really crucial.

CW: Anything else you are hoping to add to Museums Studies and the way it is taught here at UCL?

AS: It's early days, so I still need to orientate myself around this landscape of huge number of courses and what is needed and where I might be useful. But in future I would very much like to develop a distinctive course on museum archaeology in particular, which looks at archaeological practice and knowledge production in museums, at the national, international, and transnational level. I think, in addition to contributing to the specifically museum studies side of things, I'm also hoping to integrate it more within archaeology courses generally, including at undergraduate level, maybe. I really would hope to embed the idea that archaeology is something that isn't just something which happens in terms of excavation, but that there are longer term professional responsibilities towards the results of fieldwork and that there are continuous research opportunities to engage with objects and archives from that fieldwork. So I would like to be able to instill this idea that curation isn't just about managing collections, it's a research active process as much as any other facet of archaeology. Developing courses that help students have a professional identity in the heritage sector is something that I look forward to working with colleagues on.

CW: I think it's very clear that the Petrie Museum's loss is the Institute's gain. So as a final question is there anything you are going to particularly miss about the museum or are you looking forward to moving on?

AS: I'm very much going to miss working directly with the Petrie Collection on a daily basis; its objects, its archives. The history and research potential of that place is truly exceptional and I hope that I can still advocate for its importance here at UCL and internationally to other communities and stake holders in my new role. But I'm delighted to be here, I'm really looking forward to having more time to devote to teaching and research and to be part of the community of staff and students at UCL.

Competing Interests

Chloe Ward's MPhil/PhD research, 'A (Re) Assessment of the use of documentary archives from the 19th and 20th Centuries in the Archaeology of Egypt, Sudan and the Near East ' is being supervised by Alice Stevenson in conjunction with Stephen Quirke.

Audio Version

An audio version of this interview can be found here: <http://doi.org/10.5334/pia-526.s1>

Further Links

Dr. Alice Stephenson's Profile: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/people/staff/astevenson>

Chloe Ward's Profile: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/archaeology/people/research/ward>

Petrie Museum Centenary Volume: http://discovery.ucl.ac.uk/1468795/4/The_Petrie_Museum_of_Egyptian_Archaeology.pdf

ACCES (Association of Curators for Collections from Egypt Sudan): <https://accessn.wordpress.com>

Artefacts of Excavation: <http://egyptartefacts.griffith.ox.ac.uk/>

Petrie Museum: <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/petrie-museum/>

Notes

¹ See also ongoing *Exporting Egypt* exhibition at the Petrie Museum.

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