Trails

Islamic Egypt

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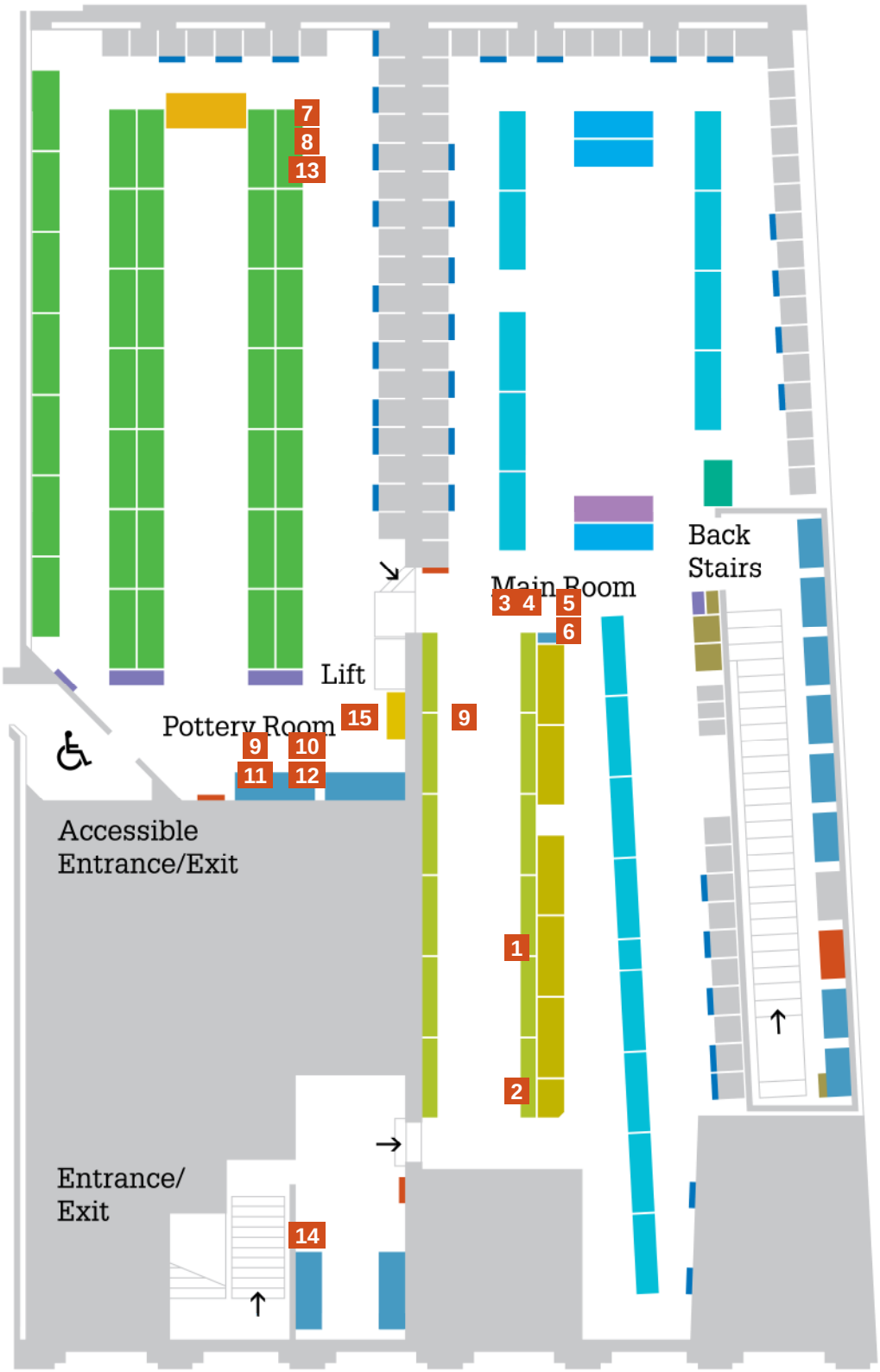
PETRIE

Museum of Egyptian Archaeology



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One of the many wonderful things about the collections within The Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology is continuity. The objects allow us to learn something of the cultures of the Nile valley from Neolithic times up to the present day.

For this we are indebted, of course, to Petrie himself. It is clear from both his excavation techniques and the objects that make up the collection, that Petrie was interested in process as much as in the end result. He wanted to know how things were made, from which raw materials and using which tools. He also wanted to see how things developed and changed over time, and was especially keen on building up typology series.

This interest has been enormously enriching for archaeologists and others, and we are in possession of a great deal of knowledge about areas such as weights and measures because of Petrie's approach to collection. This also throws light on why objects from the Islamic period in Egypt were included, since Petrie wished to complete typologies and in order to do so collected beyond the Roman era, in contrast to other scholars whose interest usually stopped at the end of the Pharaonic period. Thus, for example, for the huge number of Islamic glass weights in the collection: Petrie would not hesitate to buy objects that completed or added to his type series.

Excavations also yielded material from the Islamic era, and some of these objects are included in the trail. It is to the credit of Petrie and his pupils that this material was collected from excavation: some other excavators of the time discarded material from the upper layers in their search for the 'treasures' below. However, as this trail shows, there are some marvellous and intriguing objects from Islamic Egypt in UCL's Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.

Introduction

This trail highlights some of the objects on display in the Petrie Museum that were made in Egypt from the 7th century AD onwards.

Arabs troops first entered Egypt in AD639 under the instructions of the Caliph Umar, successor to Muhammad, with the aim of spreading Islamic rule to the west. After a struggle of a few years, the Muslims completed their conquest of Egypt, and Byzantine rule was ended. Whilst the religion of the land and the rulers may have changed, craftspeople continued in their work using the same materials and techniques that they had always done. It takes some years for objects and styles to emerge that are recognisably 'Islamic' in their style or purpose, and this trail focuses on those.

However, it must be noted that in most cases we do not know who made, commissioned or owned the objects, and since peoples of different religions have lived side by side in Egypt over the centuries, notably Muslims, Coptic Christians and Jews, we should be wary of labeling objects as examples of Islamic art. Suffice to say that this trail focuses on objects produced in Egypt in the period since Islam has been the accepted national religion.

The Objects

1 Arabic inscription UC16845, inscribed sandstone fragments UC16849 and UC16847, Fatimid Period (AD969-1171).

Main Room Inscription Case 11, left hand side, 3rd shelf from the top.

With the long history of worked stone in Egypt it is not surprising to find that this tradition continues into the Islamic period, though statuary was no longer produced.

Arabic inscription on sandstone fragment UC16849

The Petrie has a number of funerary inscriptions on gravestones from the early Islamic period. Inscriptions usually start with the Bismillah (‘in the name of God’, and standing for the whole phrase ‘In the name of God the merciful, the compassionate’) the phrase that starts every chapter of the Quran, save one. Not only does the phrase also appear at the beginning of many dedicatory and other inscriptions, but it is said by Muslims before they embark on an important undertaking.

Funerary inscriptions usually go on to give the name of the deceased, along with various blessings. Inscription UC16845 commences with the Bismillah and also includes a phrase which is part of the Shahada (‘there is no god but god’), which can be seen in the middle of the third line of text. Shahada is a noun derived from the verb to witness, and the recitation of it is the First of the Five Pillars of Islam. The phrase ‘there is no god but god’ is also called the Kalima, literally ‘word’. The Kalima also often appears on coins, as in Islamic coinage the word of God has taken the place of the portrait of the ruler.

Arabic inscriptions can be difficult to read since they often lack the diacritical marks used to differentiate letters of the same form and also those which show vowels. The type of script used can also make inscriptions difficult to read. UC16845 is a clear, but poorly worked inscription, the edges of the letters not well defined and the hesitant chisel marks clear. In contrast, fragments UC16849 and 16847 show beautiful calligraphic lettering. These two pieces are carved in the script known as Kufic, after Kufa, a city of learning in Iraq.

Kufic is one of the oldest styles of Arabic calligraphy. Since Arabic was the script in which the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Mohamed, written Arabic acquired the status of an almost sacred script. Hence it was felt important to beautify the script as much as possible, and even formalize the way that the letters were written, at least for formal purposes. Kufic script is characterized by its angular letters, obvious in these two fragments, and was widely in use in the 9th and 10th centuries, for Qurans and other purposes.

However, if you look closely at UC16849, you will discern a new development in the script which seems to be related to the Fatimid dynasty (AD969-1171). Visible on the 3rd and 4th rows is the upright of a letter which curves into a ‘swan’s neck’ shape. This form of the letter seems to be an innovation of Fatimid calligraphers and is just one of many new departures in the arts which suggest that the dynasty was consciously deciding to innovate. Scholars have suggested that this is because the Fatimids, named after the Prophet’s daughter Fatima and followers of her husband Ali, were the first dynasty to break away from the caliphate in Baghdad, and wished to use art as a means of emphasizing their difference.

2 Steelyards UC80575 and UC80576: Wrought iron with silver inlay, and bronze weight. 10th to 13th centuries AD.

Main Room, Inscription Case 12, right-hand side on the bottom shelf.

Steelyards may have been invented by the Greeks as far back as the 5th Century BC, but were in common use by the Romans around by 200BC and extant examples date from then. They were widely used in Islamic Egypt, rather than scales, not only for practical purposes but also because of the role of the scientific tradition in Islam.

The Quran and the Hadith (sayings and deeds of the Prophet) both refer to accurate weighing as a symbol of morality and justice, and balances were the subject of several treatises from the medieval period onward, notably al-Khazini's 'Kitab mizan al-hikma' (book of the balance of wisdom) of AD1120.

Steelyards consist of a beam with a sliding poise to counterbalance the load and were easy to use and generally accurate. There are two examples in the Petrie Museum, along with an assembly of saddles, hooks and a counterweight. The large steelyard is made of steel with the numerals in Arabic inscribed with silver. It is 2.37 metres long and can take a weight of 1820 lbs. It came into the collection with two suspending elements and corresponding calibrations, one ranging from zero to 900 ratls, the other ranging from 1900 to 1820 ratls (1 ratl = 1 pound). It is thought to date from the 10th century AD.

The bronze weight with the steelyards, however, was made at a later time. The engraving shows sections of knotted decoration with alternating roundels and calligraphic bands typical of the Mamluk period (AD1250 – 1517 see no. 7).

An interesting feature of the ensemble is that it had survived together, perhaps with pieces being added or taken away at various times, from the medieval period up to acquisition by Petrie since it was the property of a waqf, a type of pious foundation. The word waqf can be translated as 'to stop, or prevent' and essentially this means that property is withdrawn from market exchange and set aside for specific pious purposes. The waqf thus constituted an endowment, for the provision of designated services in perpetuity. In the 19th Century Muhammad Ali Pasha (AD1805-48) started the nationalistion of waqf so that the government could take the revenues. Petrie acquired the steelyards in a waqf sale in Cairo – it is not known exactly when.

3 Glass vessels UC22133, UC22151, UC22153

IC 19 (Glassware), 5th shelf from the top.

Glass vessels UC22133 and UC22153

These vessels were probably produced in the 9th and 10th Centuries AD, and are examples of different types of cosmetic vessel that probably existed contemporaneously.

The ‘molar’ bottle UC22153 is a characteristic type of Islamic vessel and takes its name from its four feet, which resemble the root of a molar tooth. The form originates in Egypt and some scholars think the shape is derived from imitations of the bone ‘dolls’ of the Late Coptic period. The shape spread across the Islamic world and is very common. The decoration is wheel cut.

The blue glass bottle UC22133 is of the type sometimes called ‘spear’ because of its tapering base. The shape means that they would have had to be stored horizontally, or with some kind of support or holder to keep them upright. The vessels are traditionally associated with kohl, a cosmetic used on the eyes from ancient times to today. This use has been confirmed by the discovery of a flask at al-Tur, in Sinai, that still had some of its contents. It was found next to a copper rod for applying the kohl to the eyes.

UC22151 seems to be a form of vessel somewhere between the ‘molar’ and the ‘spear’ and some scholars have tried to suggest a transition from one to the other in terms of practicality and function, however recent research has made it clear that all three different types existed at the same time. This example, also blue and probably coloured with cobalt, also has wheel cut decoration – just one of many ways in which Islamic craftsmen decorated glass.

4 Glass bowl fragment UC22194, 9-10th Century AD

Main Room IC19 (Glassware)

Islamic glassmakers drew on a great tradition of glass making and decorating in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt. A wide variety of techniques were used in the early Islamic period, such as wheel cutting (see above), cameo cutting, trailed and marvered glass and ‘pinching’, as in the bowl fragment UC22194.

Glass vessels were pinched with tongs or stamped whilst still hot to produce such versatile designs as the bird seen here. This fragment was found during Petrie’s excavation at Shurafa, and can be dated to no later than the 10th century AD on the basis of glass weights found on the site (Petrie: Heliopolis, Kafr Ammar and Shurafa LII, 25 and see no. 9 for glass weights)

5 Lustre glass fragment UC22665, 9-11th Centuries AD

Main Room IC19 (Glassware)

Lustre-painting on glass was an invention of the Islamic world and is the predecessor of lustre on pottery, a decorative technique which spread across the Mediterranean, culminating in the beautiful maiolica wares produced in Renaissance Italy.

The technique of lustre on glass was first practised in Egypt in the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Metal oxides were mixed in a liquid suspension and applied to the already formed glass vessel. The vessel was put back into the flame burning off the oxygen and leaving a chocolate brown stain. This example is comparatively rare as it has lustre on both sides of the glass and probably comes from a platter or shallow bowl, decorated with foliate designs.

Glass fragment UC22665.

From these beginnings, the dynamic Muslim craftsmen went on to invent lustre on ceramic, a costly and highly complicated process confined to specialised potters often from the same family who passed their secrets on through generations.

6 Glass beaker UC22006 Mamluk period (AD1250-1517)

Main Room IC19 (Glassware)

From lustre it was a short step to enamel colours on glass. Enamelled and gilded glass is the most celebrated type of glass from the Islamic world and was a specialisation of glassmakers during the Mamluk period (AD1250-1517). It was produced for export as well as for the home market, and fragments of enamelled glass from this time have been found in excavations in Britain.

Enamel colours were applied to the blown glass and heated to fuse the enamel to the body. Each enamel colour fused at a different temperature, so the process was laborious and, presumably, reserved for the elite.

The shape of this beaker is typical of the period and it is incredible that it has survived so well. This beaker has blue and white enamel bosses and trailed lines. Other enamel colours used were red, yellow, green and pink. If gilding was to be applied, it would be done last and gently heated to fuse it to the body.

The art of enamel glass in Egypt seems to die with the end of the Mamluks' supremacy and glass production for the elite shifted to Venice.

7 Brass Basins UC74847 & 8, Mamluk Period, mid 15th Century AD.

Pottery Room PC37, 4th shelf from the top on the right hand side

The Mamluks (meaning ‘owned’ in Arabic) were the ruling dynasty in Egypt from AD1250 to 1517, when the Ottoman dynasty was established. The Mamluk system relied on young boys brought from their homelands from the Caucasus or Central Asia, raised as Muslims and trained as administrators or soldiers. Far from their families, their allegiance was to their new state, and they were able to rise up through the ranks to attain some of the highest positions in the land. The Mamluk system was very hierarchical and one’s position within it subject to change, and this was reflected in art of the era.

Mamluk art is characterised by the use of inscriptions in a script called thuluth, often in discrete bands, and roundels bearing blazons. The inscriptions frequently state one’s position in society and relation to the ruler or immediate superior, and give praise to the ruling Sultan, listing copious titles. The pair of engraved brass bowls here are inscribed for the Amir Sayf al-Din Janim, the Mamluk of al-Sayfi Timurbay, officer in the arsenal of the Sultan al-Ashraf Inal (ruled Egypt AD1453-1461).

Brass Basin UC74847

The blazon within the roundel has the image of a cup, which suggests a relationship with the role of cupbearer, and also the symbol for a pen box, which was the cipher for the role of secretary. The symbol of the pen box is ingenious – it is actually a ‘bird’s eye view’ of a Mamluk pen box: the two long rectangles are for the reed pens, and the other shapes (circular and D-shaped) are for the ink, sand for blotting and silk to wipe the excess ink from the pen.

The thuluth script, with its long uprights, is well suited to decorating objects, as can be seen not only on the basins but on the glazed pottery fragments in front. It is thought that the script is named ‘thuluth’, which means one third, as the letter proportions are based on one to three widths of the reed pen nib.

Engraved and inlaid metalwork was taken to new heights under the Mamluks, including huge copper basins inlaid with gold and silver which must have been incredibly expensive to produce and were clearly for courtly use. Since the patrons who commissioned the extravagant pieces could clearly have afforded to purchase silver and gold vessels, scholars have pondered why forms made of base metal reached such heights of intricacy in their workmanship. A clue may lie in the Hadith, which states 'he who drinks from a silver vessel will have hellfire gurgling in his belly' and 'The messenger of god has forbidden me to drink from a vessel made of gold or silver'.

8 Aeolipile (UC25327)

Pottery Room PC37, bottom shelf on the right hand side

These mysterious objects are often named as aeolipiles in museum collections, perhaps because sphero-conical vessel does not sound very edifying, but in fact scholars are still unsure as to their purpose, although a variety of suggestions have been made. The object, of which there are several in the collection, is made from very dense pottery and with a small hollow inside and a narrow neck and mouth. The word aeolipile was originally applied to a device, from the 2nd century BC, which rotated due to steam pressure, however, the aeolipiles from the Islamic period are now more often thought to be containers.

Amongst the many purposes suggested for these objects, the following have some archaeological evidence to back them up:

A type of hand grenade. Examples have been found at Crusader sites throughout the Levant, and also some in an excavated 'Greek fire' factory. However, the fact that the objects are decorated throws some doubt on this theory.

Containers for mercury, or other dangerous or precious liquids. At least one example has been discovered with mercury still inside. The narrow opening would mean that the liquid could not spill.

Containers for an effervescent drink – the walls of the container would need to be thick to contain the effervescence. Some examples, though not in Egypt, have been found inscribed with exhortations to good health, and we know that there existed a fermented drink named fuqqa, the same term sometimes used to describe sphero-conical vessels in ancient works. But you would not get much of a drink for the small cavity in most examples!

It is to be hoped that more excavations will throw light on these fascinating objects.

9 Glass weights UC23015 and UC23009

Pottery Room Case M bottom shelf

Glass weights were made and used in Egypt from the 7th to the 16th century AD. The molten glass was stamped with inscriptions that have provided a very useful source of information for historians and archaeologists (see glass fragment UC22194). They were used to check the weight of coins, which were traded by weight and not according to their face value. However, they were produced in such quantities that they may also have been used as an unofficial currency.

Glass Weight UC23015

The glass weights were needed because metal coins were minted by hand and therefore susceptible to inaccuracy, moreover silver and gold coins were regularly shaved by criminals to collect the precious metal. Undamaged glass weights of the same denomination can be very precise in their weight, to within one or two hundredths of a gram, and were used by merchants to make sure that the correct value of money changed hands.

The weights give the name of the ruler or official under which they were produced, and sometimes an additional text, such as:

What was ordered by the servant of God, 'Abdallah, amyr of the faithful. Have exact measure and be not thou of the prevaricators.'

The sheer quantity of the glass weights from the Fatimid period shows the richness and vitality of the markets of Fustat/Cairo at this time. Imports from as far afield as China were traded alongside many home produced luxury wares such as ceramics, glass and textiles and were subject to a high degree of regulation, attested by the presence of ranks of market inspectors.

10 Rock crystal quadruped UC 25300, Fatimid Period (AD969-1171)

Pottery Room Case M

The Fatimid court was famed for its luxury, and accounts give us scarcely credible lists of precious items in the treasury and even markets.

Egyptian historian Ahmad al-Maqrizi (d. AD1442) wrote a History of the Fatimids, and stated that the treasury of the Caliphs included more than 17,000 objects made of rock crystal. Al-Maqrizi was probably using Ibn al-Zubayr (d. AD1167), as his source. Al-Zubayr's *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir wa al-Tuhaf* (The Book of Gifts and Rarities) goes even further – mentioning 36,000 examples of cut glass and rock crystal. Even though al-Zubayr probably held an official post treasury this seems to be an exaggeration. Nevertheless, the popularity and esteem of rock crystal is clear. This is partly due to the fact that was believed to have prophylactic properties, mentioned in the Qur'an (Qur'an XXXVII, sura al-saffat, vv.45-7) and elsewhere.

Only around 180 rock crystal vessels from this period have survived, and many of these are attributed to Fatimid Egypt. The famed Fatimid treasury was pillaged between AD1061 and AD1069 in a period of social disturbance and many pieces were dispersed outside Egypt. A number of rock crystal pieces came to Europe in the middle ages and can now be found in the treasuries of churches where they are often used as reliquaries.

In addition to magical properties, rock crystal appealed since it provided a degree of transparency that could not be achieved using glass. It was also prized since it was relatively rare (though some was to be found in the Egyptian desert) and very difficult to work. The Persian traveller Nasir Khusraw (d. AD1088) describes rock crystal being carved in the Lamp Market in Cairo, and we know that there was also a centre of manufacture in Basra, Iraq.

This small container is cut into the form of a quadruped – type not yet identified! The animal has short legs and a tail, ears and a long snout. A hole has been drilled under the chin of the animal and into the body, allowing contents to be inserted and sealed. There are several small zoomorphic containers like this in museum collections and they are the subject of some debate as they would appear to be not very efficient as perfume or unguent containers since the container element is horizontal. It has been suggested that they may have been meant to contain amulets, but this is unlikely with an animal form.

The container is possibly one of several items purchased at Memphis by Petrie 1 March 1908.

11 Wooden panel UC40775, Fatimid period (AD969-1171)

Pottery Room Case M

The Fatimid court, made rich through revenues from the trade crossing the Mediterranean via Cairo, was luxurious in every way. In addition to portable items such as rock crystal, the furniture and buildings were highly decorated, and intricate wood-carving was popular. Fatimid wood-carving famed for its high-relief and also the vibrancy of its figurative scenes. A variety of woods were used, some imported, and were used for architectural details and furniture as well as for decorative panels. Occasionally the panels were painted and inlaid with ivory, bone or wood of other colours.

Wooden panel with a figure seated and blowing a pipe (UC40775).

The figurative scenes often reflect court life and may feature musicians, dancing girls or courtly figures. Figural scenes were not frowned upon in secular contexts in Shiite Fatimid Egypt, as attested by this wide-trousered figure who sits playing a musical instrument (Petrie, Obj 113, Objects of Daily Use pl.39). Very few of the wooden panels have survived – wood was relatively scarce and was often reused. Panels with figures reused in the Mamluk period were turned inward so that the designs could not be seen, reflecting a different attitude towards figural representation on the behalf of the Sunni Mamluks.

A ban on figural representation is not expressly mentioned in the Quran, although the avoidance of idolatry is. However, in the Hadith (the sayings and actions of the Prophet Mohamed) there are much clearer references to the prohibition of figural representation and painting. The reason behind this condemnation was the belief that by fashioning the image of a living being, the painter or sculptor was attempting to place himself on par with God by taking on the role of creator - a role intended to be God’s alone.

12 Chess piece UC58942 Ivory, Fatimid period (AD969-1171)

Pottery Room Case M

This decorative chess piece of carved ivory probably dates to the Fatimid period (AD969-1171) and was perhaps collected by Petrie because of his interest in games and gaming pieces from earlier periods in Egypt, of which there are several examples in the museum (Petrie, Obj 003, Objects of Daily Use pl39).

Chess originated in India and reached Iran in about the 6th century AD. In the Islamic period there is no object that can certainly be identified as a chess piece before the 9th century AD, at the same time that treatises on the subject appear in Arabic. Knowledge of the game passed to the West from the Arab world, and pieces were often modelled on Islamic shapes (for example in Alfonso X the Wise's treatise on chess dated AD1283). The pieces were most often in carved ivory, and are abstracted representations.

Chess piece UC58942.

The piece here is a Rook, with a rectangular body and a deep cut in the top creating two horns, an abstraction of the shape of a castle. There are several examples of chess pieces from the Fatimid period, reflecting both the popularity of the game and of luxury possessions. However, the eccentric al-Hakim, caliph from AD996 to 1021, banned the game in 1005 and ordered all chess sets burned, perhaps due to a concern over gambling, but perhaps simply on a whim - at one point he also banned various foods including watercress and the making of women's shoes.

13 Astrolabe UC4108 Wooden astrolabe with brass grid or rete. Ottoman period.

Pottery Room, Pottery Case 37.

Astrolabes were invented in the classical world but were further developed in the Islamic world in response to the need to be able to know when it was prayer time and also the direction in which to face to pray to Mecca (qibla). Praying five times a day is one of the Five Pillars of Islam.

Astrolabes use calculations involving readings to do with the rising and setting of the sun and fixed stars in order to determine direction. There is evidence of their use for the siting and orientation of mosques, as well as use by individuals wishing to ascertain the direction of the qibla.

Astrolabe UC4108, back and front

Most Islamic astrolabes have on them a prayer line to indicate the times of the five daily prayers: sunset, nightfall, daybreak, midday and mid-afternoon. Shadows are used to determine daylight prayers, and twilight states for the others, however these will vary according to latitude, and the position of the sun. The astrolabe is a technical instrument and to be used accurately needs to be read by a specialist. By the thirteenth century professional astronomers were employed by mosques to calculate prayer-times.

Latitude plates were inserted into the astrolabe depending on what part of the world you were in (the Petrie example has two plates for latitudes 350 14' and 30 12', or 42') and fixed stars read off the grid or ankabut (which means spider due to its shape) that would then line up with a reading around the edge.

Astrolabes had other uses: a typical text on the astrolabe describes more than forty, including mathematical calculations, but each astrolabe was only accurate if it was made to very high specifications. This makes the Petrie's astrolabe something of an enigma: it is too crudely made to have any accuracy at all in terms of calculations, and was therefore perhaps used for teaching purposes, so it is very suitable that it should had found its way into a teaching collection!

14 Ali Suefi, photographed in the 1890s

(Reception area, case on right)

Amongst the many unsung heroes of archaeological excavations in Egypt are the locals who often made up the bulk of the essential workforce. We are lucky to know about several of the Egyptian supervisors who worked with Petrie and his pupils from his archive and also payroll lists, and the groundbreaking work by Professor Stephen Quirke has made some of this data more widely available (Hidden Hands, 2010). Ali Suefi of Lahun first appears in name-lists for work at Maydum in 1890-1, and thereafter his name can be regularly linked to specific contexts regularly until the 1922-25 campaigns at Qau and Badari.

Ali Suefi is singled out amongst the other workers seen in photographs here because Petrie recorded more personal information about him than his fellow workers. Petrie records his marital and his family circumstances, often sympathetically, and refers to him in the published report on the Naqada 1894-95 season as ‘my best lad, Ali Suefi’. Clearly a supervisor and archaeologist of some ability, he was also a fisherman with his own boat, as Hilda Petrie records: ‘Aly Swefy is here, one of our best old hands. Being a fisherman, he has a little rough boat below here, and rushes off sometimes to catch fish.’

15 Lake Dashur, Wool tapestry by Sayed Mahmoud

(Pottery Room)

The Petrie Museum does not nowadays make new acquisitions, however this tapestry of Lake Dashur by Sayed Mahmoud is a rare exception. The woollen tapestry reflects the brilliant colours and subjects of the tile fragments excavated by Petrie in the palaces of Akhenaten in Amarna, showing continuity across the millennia in the enduring landscape of Egypt. Sayed Mahmoud, born in 1969, created the tapestry by hand on a single vertical loom at The Wissa Wassef Art Centre, in Cairo.

The Centre was founded by Ramses Wissa Wassef in 1952 and to encourage young people to develop their artistic skills through crafts rather than through formal school activities, and continues to this day under the guidance of the Wissa Wassef family.

Ancient textiles are a strength of the museum, and it seems entirely in keeping with Petrie’s desire to traces techniques and crafts over time that this tapestry should be one of the very rare new acquisitions of the collection.

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