A Legacy of Partage in the Bryn Mawr Special Collections

Student: Lara Fields, Faculty Supervisor: Monique Scott, Field Supervisor: Marianne Weldon

Our Collections: A Testament to Archaeology’s Legacy

The Bryn Mawr College Special Collections has benefited materially and intellectually from the historic legacy of pioneering Egyptological scholars like William Flinders Petrie and Sarah Yorke Stevenson. Thus, the material present in the Bryn Mawr Special Collections has created a space to look into archaeology’s past intimately. Through archival research, I have traced how a specific collection came to be acquired by our institution, and the legacy it demonstrates in terms of the history of archaeological collecting in the United States.

A Brief Introduction to Egyptology

Egyptology is the study of the ancient Egyptian past, including the regions’ archaeological and material remains. Egyptology as a profession came into being under problematic colonial contexts at the turn of the 20th century. As a result of demands by European museums for antiquities, the focus of early archaeologists centered on the acquisition of objects, rather than deep study into the social history of the past.

What is Partage?

Standard practice in archaeology involved multiple institutions funding a single project in return for a cut of excavated artifacts. This method of distribution has been termed partage, and constituted the initial ways the University of Pennsylvania built their foundational teaching collections.

Sarah Y. Stevenson

Funded largely by the Egyptian Exploration Society (EES), the prolific archaeological work by William Flinders Petrie stood out from his contemporaries for its rigorous application of standardized methodology and record keeping. Petrie’s work eventually came to the attention of Sarah Y. Stevenson, a Philadelphia philanthropist and an integral member of the founding circle of the Penn Museum. Stevenson made first contact with Petrie for the fledgling museum in 1891. Their professional relationship and the museum’s subscription to the EES allowed the institution to acquire its initial collection of Egyptological material.

Donations to Bryn Mawr College

By 1907, the University of Pennsylvania had established its own excavations in Egypt. To make room for incoming collections, the institution began to sell or donate extent objects to American institutions eager to found their own teaching collections. A batch of objects from Petrie’s excavations, including those from the Egyptian sites of Thebes, Abydos, and Dendereh were donated to Bryn Mawr College that year. A letter of thanks was sent to Sarah Yorke Stevenson on behalf of the Board of Directors:

“... Secretary was requested to express to you, and through you to the American Exploration Society, the grateful thanks of the Board of Directors of the Trustees of Bryn Mawr College for these gifts...”

-Edward Bettle, Jr.

Illustration of the Osiride Court at the Ramasseum, Thebes, Egypt

Sarah Y. Stevenson

William Flinders Petrie

Letter from Edward Bettle, Jr. to Sarah Yorke Stevenson

October 19, 1907.

museum studies program