

Petrie and the Intriguing Idiosyncrasies of Racism

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William Matthews Flinders Petrie, 'generally regarded as the father of modern Near Eastern archaeology' (Silberman 1991:80), is remembered as a veritable genius, renowned for his powerful memory and intellectual abilities which played an important part in many of the ground-breaking developments in methodology he brought about. Yet modern archaeologists are selective in deciding which parts of Petrie's legacy are to be highlighted. As a corrective to this, Silberman (1991, 1999) has not only drawn attention to the racist ideology that permeated Petrie's thinking, but also suggests that this framework of thought crucially influenced many of his revolutionary interpretive techniques. The final deed Petrie envisaged for himself was the donation of his head to the Royal College of Surgeons in London 'for further scientific study . . . [and] as a specimen of a typical British skull' (Drower 1985:424). As far as Silberman (1999) is concerned, such an act was wholly symbolic of Petrie's racially-informed viewpoint and of his self-identity.

As the progenitor of the stratigraphical method in Near Eastern Archaeology, Petrie championed a technique for relative dating that correlated the 'rise-*floruit*-fall' patterns (Silberman 1999:76) in stratified pottery sequences with the grand cycles of the rising and falling vigor of races responsible for them. The racial component of Petrie's methodology was explicit and he frequently complemented his artifactual analyses with considerations of ethnic physiognomies. To this end, Petrie carried out photography of exhumed remains, live subjects, and ancient portraiture in order to study facial features as an avenue to understanding the past. He maintained, for example, that the thirteenth dynasty Egyptian ruler 'Mermashau' had 'a high face of coarser type, with high cheekbones, quite unlike any of the earlier statues of kings, and suggesting a foreigner who had risen to be a general and thence reached the throne' (Petrie 1939:139).

Petrie's approach to biological variability can be attributed to the influence of Sir Francis Galton, the father of Eugenics. Though it is not known definitively when Petrie first learned about Galton's work, they began to correspond in 1880, before the young archaeologist made his initial trip to Egypt (Drower 1985:68). Galton's primary contribution to eugenics was his use of various statistical methods to assess the strength of a group's 'germ plasm' as a determinant of behaviour (Searle 1976:7). The import of mathematics into biology would no doubt have appealed to the numerically-inclined Petrie. Indeed, his first examination of human morphology in ancient depictions was under the commission of Galton himself, who earmarked art as a potential source of racial data.

During the 1880s there arose in England a fear that the 'national physique [was] degenerating' (Searle 1976:20). This fear was connected with 'a deep-seated anxiety about whether Britain may not have taken a wholly wrong turning in becoming a predominantly urban industrial society' (ibid). A proper understanding of the eugenics movement cannot therefore be divorced from a consideration of contemporary British politics. There was a growing uneasiness at this time about not only the spread of urban slums and growth in numbers of the lower class, but also the establishment of social welfare programs, which some saw as a waste of money. Petrie was an active member in several political organizations, including the Anti-Socialist Society and the British Constitution Association (he was elected as their

president in 1914), which passed a resolution 'viewing with alarm the vast and uncontrolled increase of expenditure on public assistance' (Drower 1985:342–343).

Petrie was anxious to put his archaeological findings to use in these political debates. His 1906 Huxley Lecture to the Anthropological Institute dealt with the reconstruction of demographic changes over ten thousand years of Egyptian history based primarily on 'variations in skull measurements' (Drower 1985:302). According to Drower, Petrie 'regarded himself first and foremost as a historian. Convinced that the past has a lesson to teach the present, he had developed a cyclical theory of human development: ancient civilizations teach . . . that mankind does not continually progress, but rather that each civilization in turn has its phases of excellence' (1985:428). He believed that once archaeology has revealed the way history works, Europeans can use this knowledge to save modern civilization from destruction. Britons were seen as being less and less productive as the current 'distaste for work and craving for amusement [operates] . . . in a manner very deleterious to character. It is a feature of a decaying civilization, as shown on the later Mykenaeen frescoes, and the rage for the circus in later Roman times' (Petrie 1907:20). The honeymoon of Enlightenment thought had ended in archaeology and British politics, giving way to a Culture-Historical approach and a dissatisfaction with industrialization and people's capacity for creativity. In line with Galton's statistical sensibilities, Petrie also remarked that 'so long as . . . the distribution of variation [of good and bad types] is Normal, most in the middle course and thinning away to the upper and lower limits, the society is stable and benefits by its variations' (1907:70).

Petrie's methodology was linked not only to domestic politics in his homeland, but, as Silberman (1991) demonstrates for us, to the wider colonial atmosphere prevalent in the Near East. Not only was the Muslim present looked down upon, but so too was the Muslim past, which was virtually non-existent as far as European archaeologists were concerned. Their interpretive devices were not applied to anything after the time of the Crusaders, and the "Late Arab" or "Turkish" period remained unnuanced and undivided' (Silberman 1991:82). This explanation accounts for Petrie's complete neglect of all Muslim art and scant attention at best to their architecture about which he comments that 'decadence is evident' (1911:47).

Indeed, the modern inhabitants of the Middle East were typically seen as the very reason for the region's deterioration. To this end, Petrie noted that 'Jerusalem has inherited a fatal dose of Turkish lethargy, but should now awake, and aim at a state of civic satisfaction' (Petrie 1936 in Drower 1985:413). Thus, it can be seen that archaeology, like most humanistic disciplines, was intimately embedded in the colonial enterprise. What modern Europe was doing in subordinating the Middle East was to be mirrored in the past and thus legitimated as natural and admirable. This can be identified as part of Said's notion of 'Orientalism', the representation (i.e. construction) of the Orient by a scholarly body of specialists in such a way that European political domination is justified. Egypt's destiny, for example, was to be colonized by outsiders, as far as Orientalist literature was concerned (Said 1978:85).

An interest in the annexation of ancient Egypt by foreigners or '[traces] of Europe in Egypt' (Drower 1985:263), was a prevailing theme running through much of Petrie's career (e.g. Drower 1985:157, 181; Petrie 1911, 1939). When coming across Greek pottery at Gurob in 1889 he exclaimed that it represents 'one of the great prizes that we have been waiting for, the contemporary remains of the Western races in their earliest contacts with Egypt' (Drower 1985:149). Petrie's vast corpus of work served 'to clear away the distorted view of supposing all the history [of Egypt] to have been a smooth uniform development of a single people. Even the earlier settlements of this and other lands were the result of the mixture of half a dozen races fighting for supremacy' (Petrie 1939:67).

For example, Petrie's cultural sequence for predynastic times in Egypt begins with the 'Fayum flint-users' at around 9000 B.C. The distinctive flint working seemed to him reminiscent of the Paleolithic Solutrean culture in Europe, and led him to suggest that, indeed, this fact betrays the origin of the Fayum civilization (Petrie 1939:3). Contemporary with this group was the 'Tasian beaker people' who must derive from either Spain and North Africa, or Germany, on the basis of artifactual styles. In any case, initial results from skull measurements appear to confirm this conclusion, showing 'a larger and finer skull than the [later] Badarian, like the square-faced Bronze Age man of Europe' (Petrie 1939:4). The subsequent Badarian people, who appear at 7500 B.C., are identified as deriving from Asia and co-inhabiting the land with the so-called 'Under-dog People' who were inferior in both material culture and physiology, presumably being overrun by the more powerful invaders (Petrie 1939:4, 6). Hence, even from the earliest times, Egyptian culture is born out of the conquest of outsiders (and Northerners at that) which is needed to invigorate the local gene pool after cultural decay and decadence repeatedly arises. The 'soul' of Egypt apparently belongs to the North, and it will be given up to European invaders again and again. Thus, it can be appreciated just how much Petrie's racial views both served and made use of concepts belonging to the dominant ideological paradigm of late nineteenth and early twentieth century imperialism. This much is beyond doubt.

Yet the question remains: in what way are we going to view the legacy of this salient figure in archaeology's development? Notwithstanding the inescapably racist nature of Petrie's ideas, I would like to avoid the danger of oversimplification. Petrie was a complex personality, and any attempt to understand him should be no less sophisticated. For all his talk about race, Petrie did not wholly conform to the stereotype of a racist who, for example, showed hatred or animosity to all who did not belong to his own race or did not emulate his culture. When commenting on a prospective assistant, W. O. Hughes-Hughes, Petrie noted with some disapproval that 'he thinks the Arabs ought to learn somewhat of our manners when they deal with us, whereas I always take them on their own basis' (Drower 1985:155). Quite telling in this regard is Petrie's friendship with Ali es Suefi, an Arab assistant who was extremely close to him. Petrie says it best himself: 'As far as character goes he is really more to me than almost any of my own race. . . . Perhaps none were sorrier at parting, or gladder when we meet again. A curious link in life but a very real one, as character is at the bottom of it' (Drower 1985:226).

As far as modern Egypt goes, Petrie tells us that he likes 'it better than most civilized places; one lives with the people more; . . . all their bye-play, and jokes, and songs, and wills and ways, give a colour and an interest to life here, which no one will ever reach in staid, school-boarded England' (Drower 1985:99). Based on these sorts of sentiments, we can see that Petrie did not scorn Muslims or modern Muslim culture. Furthermore, given all that has been written about Petrie's racism, one cannot help but feel a sense of surprise when reading the following passage:

Our judgments of the past must be based on the standards of the people themselves, and not according to other ages. Similarly, on the other hand we must not depreciate the moral grandeur of Isaiah or Amos because the sculpture of that age is trivial and its pottery ugly. Nor must we depreciate Greek art and philosophy because their politics were short-sighted. . . . Each civilization has to be adapted to its own conditions, and by its success in those conditions, and the benefits it has bequeathed to mankind, it must be judged by posterity (Petrie 1919:23, emphasis added).

At this juncture, Petrie appears to embrace a crude Herderian relativism. He argues against a project of cross-cultural comparison based upon a single set of criteria. Also, interestingly enough, he speaks against a rigid correlation between pottery styles and the moral strength,

and therefore the general health or vigor, of the race responsible for its production. In the context of all we know about Petrie, such statements are puzzling at best. In any case, they demonstrate the need for caution in formulating a simplistic conclusion concerning his contributions to archaeology.

In the worst case scenario, these views attest to blatant contradiction within the corpus of Petrie's oeuvre; in the best case, they reveal an appreciation of 'Otherness', of diversity. The image of a racist who wants to maintain some sort of homogeneous purity in his own people by opposing all interaction and intermixing with other races falls through when considering the following. For Petrie, the height of a civilization comes from the fusion of two races, with a subsequent decline in ability occurring in further generations. In this way, crossing is essential such that 'near the end of our period, . . . an entire mixture with another race will be requisite' (Petrie 1911:130). He goes on to note that

[because] the source of every civilization has lain in race mixture, it may be that eugenics will, in some future civilization, carefully segregate fine races, and prohibit continual mixture, until they have a distinct type, which will start a new civilization when transplanted. The future progress of man may depend as much on isolation to establish a type, as on fusion of types when established (Petrie 1911:131, emphasis added).

This point is quite intriguing because it seems to indicate a divergence in Petrie's thought from the Galtonian understanding of the role of eugenics. In England, eugenists mostly sought to 'weed out' the undesirables and simply improve the purity of the national 'germ plasm'. This can be seen in the reaction of the leading British eugenists in the 1930s to Nazi Germany. They viewed the Germans' ethnic cleansing projects 'with mingled emotions of admiration and alarm' (Searle 1976:35) because the Germans were supposedly stealing the ideas of the British and implementing them before anyone else. Petrie the historian took a different view, one that saw the establishment of distinct racial strains as only half of the story, precisely because of his plotting of cyclical processes throughout history.

As an archaeologist, Petrie's concern with race was certainly not out of place among his European colleagues. German archaeology, under the auspices of Gustaf Kossinna, identified material cultures with discrete ethnic groups, and was able to chronicle the German people backward through time as far as the Neolithic. Thus, the material record was put to use within the larger nationalist agendas circulating at the turn of the century, serving to demonstrate 'German prehistory as [being] that of a biologically pure master race' (Trigger 1989:164). By contrast, the British archaeological database indicated a turbulent past dominated by the conquest of Romans, Saxons, Danes, and Normans, closing off the possibility that any sort of racial purity was maintained through time. Nevertheless, what this communicated to the majority of British historians was that the successive intermixing of peoples at each stage in the country's past led to a sustained process of so-called 'hybrid vigour', not only biologically but culturally (Trigger 1989:168). While this provided a favourable intellectual niche for Petrie's ideas, he still diverged from it in certain respects. Most notably, the element of cultural and racial flux in history is greatly radicalized in Petrie's thought. Whereas most British scholars viewed repeated hybrid vigour as having a cumulative effect on the national germ plasm, progressively paving the way toward the present, Petrie's more cyclical characterization of history, corresponding with the 'rise-floruit-fall' patterns in artifact sequences, situated cultural and biological decline as being equally significant and as common as any increases in vigour.

Despite the intimate connection between Petrie's thought and the prevailing racist and colonial discourses of his time, there appears to have been some degree of individuality and distinctiveness in his concepts. I would therefore like to take issue with some of Silberman's

(1999) conclusions regarding the status of Petrie's contribution to present-day archaeology. Silberman states that because 'Petrie's pioneering utilization of stratigraphy and pottery typology cannot be easily separated from the larger ideology they served', archaeologists today 'rarely recognize how much ideological baggage [we] have inherited from him' (1999:77). For Silberman, it seems, the racist bent in Petrie's methodology was inherent within it, so that it necessarily becomes transferred across generations like genes within a nucleus. I agree that 'race remains a prominent (though scientifically unverified) element in reconstructions of ancient Near Eastern history', but do not view it in any significant way as some enduring 'impact of [Petrie's] eugenical thinking on Near Eastern archaeology' (Silberman 1999:76).

Quite ironically, even Silberman's (1991) own work suggests otherwise. He notes that, in today's Post-Colonial environment, archaeologists in this region no longer talk about Europe's connection to the past in terms of a shared Biblical tradition, but rather emphasize a more direct ancestry of the modern local population to ancient sites, still using ethnic terminology (Silberman 1991:84). I would therefore like to suggest that the past is still interpreted in ethnic terms, not because of the survival of Petrie's concepts, but due to the dominant trend in politics. In this politically unstable and often violent region, legitimate claims to the land are essential for a regime's or nation's viability. It is, I propose, this single fact which accounts for discourses on race and ethnicity both in colonial and in post-colonial times in the Near East, and *not* something specifically inherent in Petrie's theories. It is not hard to see that, given the perennial state of affairs in the region, talk of similarities to ancient peoples (whether as past colonizers or as presumed indigenous ancestors) would have taken place even without any input from Petrie. As we have seen, on at least one occasion, Petrie himself questioned the pottery-race linkage.

Thus, in the end, what are we to make of the imposing legacy of one Flinders Petrie? For quite some time, those coming after him have sought to ignore the racist issues associated with this founding father's work. Silberman has addressed this imbalance by revealing the extent to which the racist and colonial ideologies operating in Petrie's time influenced his thought. However, Silberman's project to bring racism back into the picture ends up by viewing such beliefs as an inalienable component of Petrie's work, which still lives on in the regular use of his concepts in the twenty-first century.

I have sought to demonstrate that things are more complex than this. Petrie was not a 'stereotypical' racist, but put his own idiosyncratic spin on some of the ideological issues bequeathed to him. Most importantly, racial and colonial discourses were going on long before Petrie and continued long after him. Moreover, many of his findings have been vindicated by archaeological research that is not contaminated by racist ideology. For example, more recent endeavours have largely confirmed his sequence of predynastic cultural change in Upper Egypt and shown that 'his serial ordering of graves does in fact generally reflect their true chronological sequence' (Bahn & Renfrew 2001:123).

Returning to an issue broached at the beginning of this paper, namely Petrie's donation of his head to science, we can now once more ask what it should symbolize for us today. Silberman is confident he knows the answer. For him, quoting Drower's comment (1985:424) that it was given as a specimen of a typical British skull, it represents the racist nature of Petrie's entire oeuvre (Silberman 1999:70). Yet Drower presents this information matter-of-factly and gives no reference for its source. I suspect it may belong to some of the 'colourful legends' and 'folkloristic exaggerations' which Silberman himself (1999:69) associates with this very event. Petrie, in keeping with his notion of racial vigor being normally distributed in a stable society, would probably view himself not as a typical example of a Briton, but as an *extraordinary* one.

Sir Francis Galton at any rate identified him as such because of his impressive mental capabilities (Drower 1985:68). It is quite possible that this comment was invented by someone who confused Petrie's racism with Galtonian racism, and failed to appreciate his idiosyncratic approach to the issue.

I would therefore tend to lend more credence to the comments of Dr. Thompson, head of the government hospital in Jerusalem, who M. Drower *does* quote. The former hoped that Petrie's brain might 'reveal some of the reasons for the remarkable capacity and retentive memory he had, even up to the day he died, of the most minute facts' (Drower 1985:424). Whether or not this is actually the case, Petrie's views about race and its import on history demonstrate, that reality, as it relates to human beliefs, is rarely simplistic. We must therefore take pains to avoid unfairly construing it as such, when we come to represent it in historical interpretations.

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Commentary: Mid-20th Century Development of Brazilian Archaeology (1964–1985)

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Two recent articles in the *International Journal of Historical Archaeology* provide a bit of light on the development of Brazilian archaeology in the middle 20th century. The first is one by Pedro Paulo de Abreu Funari entitled 'Class Interests in Brazilian Archaeology' (Vol. 6, No. 3, pp. 209–216, 2002) and the second is a heated response to Funari, along with his rejoinder, by James A. Delle, Igor Chmyz, Ondemar Ferreira Dias, Tania Andrade Lima, Betty J. Meggers, and Pedro Paulo de Abreu Funari, entitled 'On Collaboration, Class Conflict, and Archaeology in Brazil' (Vol. 7, No. 3, pp. 223–237, 2003).