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## Captain Nemo/Lt-General Pitt Rivers and Cleopatra's Needle — A Story of Flagships

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Recently re-reading Verne's *20,000 Leagues Beneath the Sea* for our children I was struck by the marked similarities between the novel's elusive protagonist, Captain Nemo, and the renowned later 19th century British archaeologist, Lt.-General Pitt Rivers. Could they have been the same person? How could something so seemingly blatant have gone unnoticed? These questions are, of course, only raised in a spirit of academic tongue-in-check. Yet, in an ethos of 'learning through amusement' (itself directly relevant to the themes of this study), exploring the parallels between these two 'heroic' individuals provides insights into the nature of 19th century science, Victorian edification and disciplinary institutionalisation (e.g. Levine 1986). This eclectic contribution will, moreover, be introduced with the third component of its headline title – *Cleopatra's Needle* – as this provides an appropriately quasi-nautical parable on the project of 19th century archaeology and the problem of 'deep time' (Murray 1993).

### Cleopatra's Voyage

The transshipment of the obelisk, *Cleopatra's Needle*, is a tale of both imperial symbolism and high seas adventure, and was thoroughly covered in a series of articles in *The Illustrated London News* between March 1877 and September of the following year.<sup>(1)</sup> Embedded in Alexandria and threatened by construction adjacent to the City's railway station, it was only through the private benefaction of the eminent surgeon, Erasmus Wilson, that it was to be shipped to London; Britain's capital, of course, 'needing' an obelisk in the same way that they adorned Paris and Rome. The engineering solution hit upon by Messrs. Baker and Dixon was ingenious. It required building a great wrought-iron pontoon (*The Cleopatra*) around the prone, *in situ* 150 ton monument. Having a deckhouse and accommodation for three men, though 'submarine-like' it had to be towed by steamer (*The Olga*) during its voyage to London (see e.g. Harris 2001 concerning the history of submarine technology). However, in October 1877 a severe gale in the Bay of Biscay caused its abandonment, with six crew of *The Olga* losing their lives attempting to rescue those in their tow. Cast adrift, *The Cleopatra* was eventually picked-up by another steamer destined for Spain, and was left in the port of Ferrol with a claim of salvage against her. Only in January of the following year was she finally delivered by steam-tug to London (the cost of the enterprise rising by 50% to c. £15,000.00).

Not surprisingly, the arrival of the obelisk in the city drew great crowds. Having previously

detailed the engineering methods to be employed in its erection (as it had also celebrated the manner of its encasement and shipment from Egypt), on September 21st 1878 *The Illustrated London News* announced that the obelisk had been raised at the Thames Embankment. Remarkably, the same article also outlines the contents of the 'time capsule' that was placed within two large earthenware jars beneath the obelisk: bibles in a number of languages, a Bradshaw Railway Guide, a Mappin's Shilling Razor, a box of hairpins, a case of cigars, pipes, an Alexandra Feeding-bottle, an assortment of toys, a complete set of British coins (including an Empress of India rupee) and, the photographs of 'a dozen pretty Englishwomen'. In short, a thoroughly domestic, middle-class assemblage of Christian Victoriana on which to 'found' a rare monument of exotic antiquity, and its placement created the kind of extraordinary juxtaposition of 'things' that was a hallmark of post-Medieval globalisation.

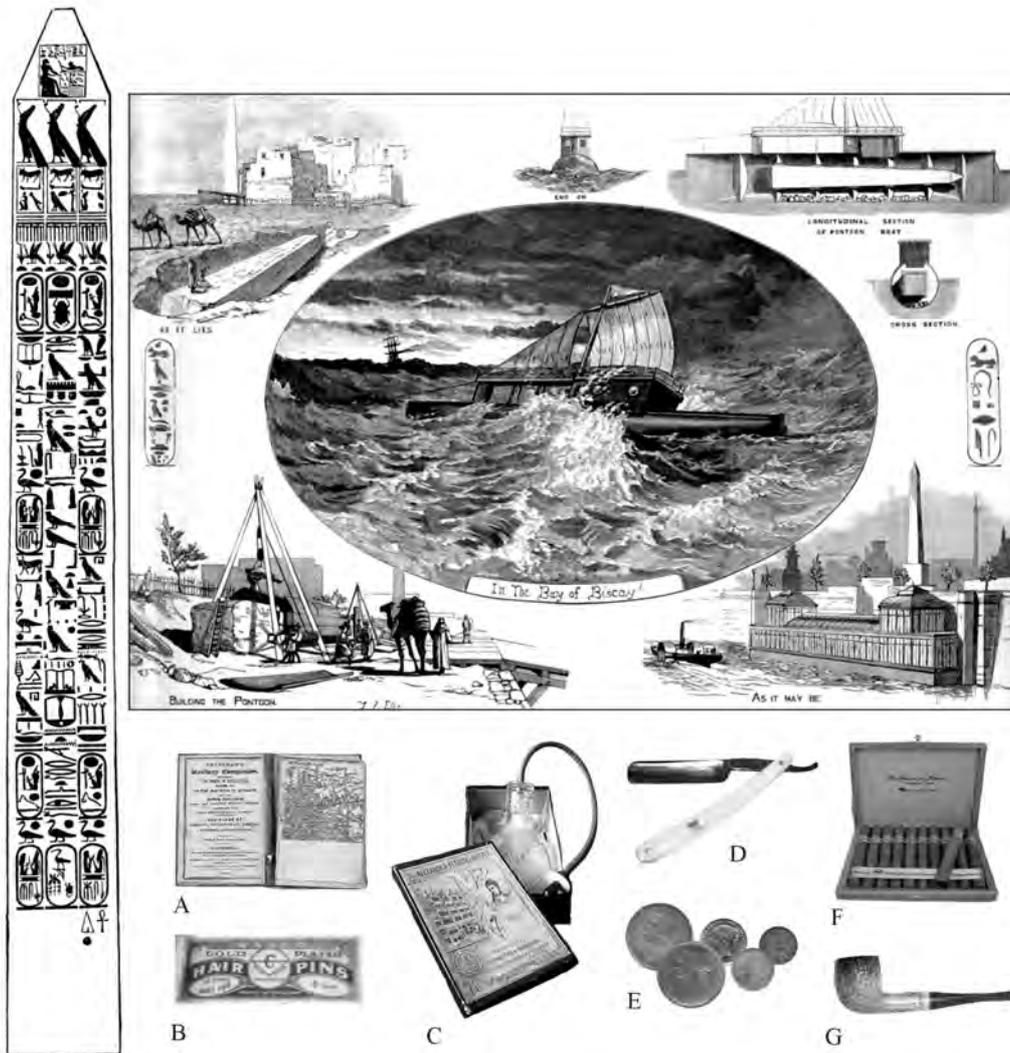
Our concern here is not so much with the obvious relevance of a modern-day empire re-working the monumental spoils of another from antiquity, the actual archaeological content of the pontoon only being of secondary importance. Rather, it is the 'delivery' of the past through engineering, and the very act of setting the time capsule beneath the obelisk that are crucial.<sup>(2)</sup> Of the latter, this 'message to the future' highlights the problem of time in the later 19th century. As marked by the rise of futuristic science fiction, be it Verne or Wells (e.g. *The Time Machine* or *The War of the Worlds* respectively of 1895 and 1899), archaeology's opening up of the 'gulf of antiquity' also made possible the projection of time (and the present) into the future, and marks a fundamental change in the immediacy of 'being human' (see papers in Murray 1999 and Lucas 2004 on 'time'). Ironically, it would seem that the past which *The Cleopatra* delivered did not appear quite ancient enough (at least for later, mid 20th century tastes). Apparently the obelisk was left unprotected during the Blitz in order that it might accrue further signs of age and wear (Bell 1978: 29; Lowenthal 1985: 151).

### Engineering the Deep

Verne's popular novel was first published in 1869 (and translated into English four years later) and concerns 'events' in 1866. Having as its narrator, Monsieur Aronnax, Assistant Professor at the Paris Museum of Natural History, it celebrates the technology of Nemo's great submarine, *The Nautilus* (particularly its electricity). It includes long descriptive passages of deep sea creatures, going to pains to detail the classification of their families and types. Nemo throughout conducts various experiments and eventually reveals to Aronnax his master-work, a manuscript of his oceanic studies. In short, *20,000 Leagues ...* is deeply concerned with the nature of science, progress and investigation. (The narrative is precise to the dates of the year as it unfolds and stresses exact navigational accuracy throughout; this sense of its 'fixing' adding an air of reality to Verne's fantastic tale.)

'Archaeology' does, in fact, feature in *20,000 Leagues ...* when in Part Two (Chapter Nine) Nemo and Aronnax explore Atlantis.<sup>(3)</sup> Yet, essentially included to mark the fall and vanity of civilizations, this episode need not overly concern us, but rather the fact that both Nemo and Pitt Rivers control and engineer entirely *personal projects of science*. Nemo's was, of course, his great submarine; in the case of Pitt Rivers it was his Cranbourne Chase estate and the 'groundbreaking' series of excavations he conducted there. Sitting squarely at the heart of both were their own museums, both ordered 'the deep' – respectively, the seas and time. Along with an extensive scientific library and art gallery, *The Nautilus* had a vast collection of marine specimens arranged in glass cases throughout its saloon and which is reportedly worth millions.

It was the context and intent that motivated Pitt Rivers' museum, and his related Cranborne Chase 'amusements', that made them more than just another eccentric pursuit by a member



of the landed gentry (e.g. various garden follies). Having first lent his collections to Bethnal Green Museum, upon inheriting his title and estate he established his museum in Farnham House in the early 1880s (with a supplementary ‘research’ museum and art gallery opening at King John’s House in 1891).<sup>(4)</sup> Farnham’s contents were wide-ranging, involving displays of peasant life and agricultural implements, and both ethnographic and archaeological collections, with the latter including material from his excavations. Yet, in contrast to that at King John’s House, the General considered this an ‘educational’ museum. As such, ‘originals were not necessary’ (1891: 116) and, aside from models of his excavations (Evans 2004), it also contained plaster-cast replicas of artefacts. Nor did Pitt Rivers’ benefactions end with his museum. He opened his Larmer Grounds for public recreation, replete with dining halls, a bandstand and a theatre (his zoological menagerie at Rushmore Park was not generally open to visitors; Bowden 1991: 144–150). As laid-out in his 1891 lecture to the Society of Arts, motivated by a programme of social and political evolution, he was explicit in his agenda to educate the working class masses (recently enfranchised by the vote) and thereby steer them from radical politics (1891: 115–120; see Dudley Buxton 1929, Thompson 1977, Bradley 1983 and Bowden 1991: 141–142, and also Arnold & Olsen 2003 concerning the similarly eccentric Welcome Trust Museum).

Pitt Rivers and Nemo would share in their corporate ‘support’ identities, as Pitt Rivers’ outfitting of his farm labourers in a standard livery could be compared to the personally

designed uniforms of Nemo's crew. However, the management of his estate never aspired to Nemo's 'totalising', whose his international crew even had their own language and aquatic cemetery – *The Nautilus* was, in effect, *their country*. There are, of course, other significant differences between the two, including the entire scale and pace of their 'projects'. Nemo, a tormented anti-hero, denying his personal history and without national alliance, relentlessly criss-crossed the seas to force an end to world armament. Pitt Rivers' efforts were, alternatively, very much rooted in the local landscape of Cranborne Chase, Dorset and tied to a national agenda; the promotion of the gradual evolution of its populace through education and, as such, was avowedly anti-(French) revolutionary and reflects the laudable values of Victorian edification.

Both characters, nevertheless, shed a former identity and donned new personae: Pitt Rivers (formerly Lane Fox) upon inheriting Cranborne Chase, and Nemo taking to the seas following the death of his family. Certainly neither were shy of proclaiming themselves. Nemo's personal flag was emblazoned with a commanding 'N', with many of the fixtures of his vessel engraved with his motto, *Mobilis in Mobili*. Pitt Rivers similarly had a personal medallion struck to be placed in his excavation trenches as dating evidence. Designed by Sir John Evans (president of the Numismatics Society; see Evans 1943: 154–155), it clearly celebrates the achievements of the 'new' archaeology/prehistory of the post-1860 era (and also Pitt Rivers' central role in its formulation). Whilst generally evocative of the compass of the Freemasons' symbol, the tripod/triangle of the theodolite in its centre conveys the command of site surveying techniques.<sup>(5)</sup> The skull to its left references craniological studies, with the array of prehistoric implements denoting the establishment of artefact chronology.<sup>(6)</sup> In short, its message announces the capture of both prehistoric 'space' (theodolite survey) and 'time' (finds classification).

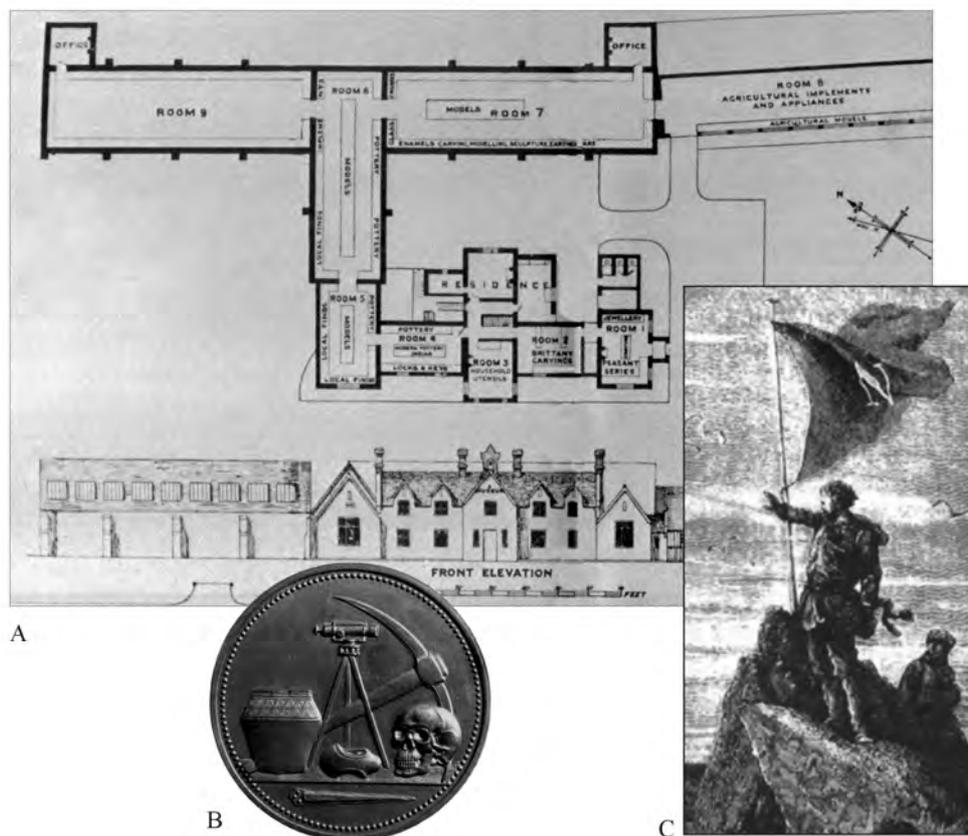
It must be presumed that the General participated in choosing the medallion's components as its embolded pick-axe (still another bladed 'weapon' / implement) resonates with that which lies just right of him in his oil portrait by Frank Holl (see Bowden 1991: fig. 25). Though obviously 'archaeological', the medal's prominent human skull also evokes a sense of *memento moré* and, in this capacity, it is surely relevant that Pitt Rivers had its motifs carved upon his sarcophagus in Tollard Royal Church (*ibid.*: fig. 8). This suggests that the medallion's imagery had qualities of a very personal iconography; a case of personal and disciplinary identity being closely interwoven.

This 'emblematisation' could, in the case of Pitt Rivers, also be seen in relationship to both the flourishing of private/public institutions at that time and also companies (many of whom also required corporate 'identifiers'). Equally, it would have parallels in the unprecedented invention of honorific orders that marked the expansion of the British Empire in the later 19th century (Cannadine 2001: 85–100). By way of contrast, the signifying 'marking' of our two protagonists might be compared with the renowned engineer, Isambard Kingdom Brunel (see Torrens 1998: 55 concerning his destructive archaeological legacy). Yet, with his energies engaged with building great ships, bridges and railways – forever acting upon the world – he evidently did not have time or the inclination to indulge in the 'stamped' self-advertising of Nemo or Pitt Rivers.<sup>(7)</sup>

Issued after his coming into the titled classes, Pitt Rivers' medallion, of course, resonates with heraldic coats-of-arms. Yet, at the same time it also attests to a massive change in the character of the 'project of archaeology' during the later half of the 19th century. The chronicle-/letter-type excavation accounts that were typical of its first half and which were usually read aloud at Society meetings (often accompanied by displays of their finds), denotes an immediacy of intent. In other words, they were not writing or digging for 'us' (Evans *forthcoming*, see also

Hodder 1989). From the century's middle decades this began to change and the practice of archaeology came to be seen as a longer term project. Site reports were far more strictly 'textual' (i.e. to be read privately rather than the verbatim transcript of meeting addresses) and extensively illustrated. Equally, as the shelf-age occupied by the subject's journals began to amass (especially *Archaeologia*, publishing the index of its first fifty volumes in 1889) and major archaeological monographs began to appear, the achievements and 'new traditions' of the subject would themselves bring their own *weight* into its practice. In fact, the manner in which the monographs of individual researchers were issued in serial format – Pitt Rivers' four great Cranborne Chase volumes (1887–98) being only the most obvious instance, amongst Roach Smiths' *Collectanea Antiqua* (1848–68) and Evans' various 'implements' studies – almost verges on a 'self-institutionalisation'. In this context, nothing so clearly epitomises undertaking archaeology for 'eternity' than Pitt Rivers' medallions. Like the earthenware time capsules of Cleopatra's Needle, they are messages to the future, or at least its archaeologists.

Great excavation projects themselves also have a capacity to serve as national/international 'flagships'. By the orchestration of reportage and resources, and/or the application of innovative techniques or new modes of interpretation, they knowingly 'stamp the field'. Today we could cite Carver's Sutton Hoo or Hodder's Catal Huyuk, whereas earlier Wheeler's Maiden Castle and Clark's Star Carr would be candidates. In many respect it is the latter which is the most relevant, as (promoted by various 'Retrospective' overviews) it centrally relates to the formulation of post-WWII 'World Prehistory' whose roots were avowedly anti-national (Evans 1995). The later 19th century saw the advent of grand 'official' archaeological projects within Britain. Amongst the foremost would have to be the Society of Antiquaries-sponsored Silchester campaigns of the 1890s. Although highly personalised enterprises, Pitt Rivers' Cranborne Chase excavations would also fall into this category. There



is an intentionality in their lavish production and scope that proclaims that the excavations were meant to mark the course of the discipline (which indeed they did upon Wheeler's promotion of him as the founding father of 'scientific' archaeology; 1954: 25–29, see also Bowden 1991: 154–167).

The proclamation of archaeology as a *science* during the second half of the 19th century has been outlined by others and need not be rehearsed. Rather, what is crucial is the degree to which Pitt Rivers espoused scientific method (Bowden 1991; Evans *forthcoming*). Foremost was his concern with *proof*. Involving the verification of named 'witnesses' so that archaeological data should be such that it could stand in a 'court of justice', this would have no parallels amongst his contemporaries. (The many 'antiquity of man' papers of the time being little concerned with actual demonstration.) Equally, there is the extraordinary emphasis in his 'late period' sites, such as South Lodge or Wor barrow, upon modelling the deposition of finds. (Having previously associated accurate section rendering with 'proof', he actually stopped producing precise sections in his reports in favour of their 'average' finds-projected deposition.) The influence of his background in military ordnance evidently provided a basis for his archaeological procedures. He was clearly familiar with *test adjudication* (i.e. measuring the advantages of one gun-type over another; 1858), whereas we equally know from his published papers that he was interested in the physical *modelling of general scientific principles* (1861). From this we see the two strands of the explicitly scientific technique that Pitt Rivers later brought to bear on his archaeology; effectively he *was engineering the past*.

Of course, how it is we ultimately know that Nemo and Pitt Rivers were not one and the same comes down to one very fundamental point; their relationship to militarism. Verne's anti-hero was vehemently opposed to the arms trade, whereas Pitt Rivers' background in military ordnance clearly shaped much of his archaeology. It provided not only its scientific procedures but also much of its content, as his early studies were greatly concerned with defensive earthworks and weaponry. Pitt Rivers' was not alone in his military background within the subject. Whilst Wheeler's wartime career offers the most obvious parallel, the contribution of a number of other 'military/engineering archaeologists' has been overlooked (especially to the development of survey techniques; see e.g. the Orkney studies of Lt. Thomas, commanding HM Surveying Vessel *Woodlark*; 1851).

In the end we have determined that Farnham House (nor even the Wor Barrow itself) was not *The Nautilus*, nor was Nemo actually some lost half-brother or counter-ego of Pitt Rivers. Nevertheless, comparing Verne's fictional anti-hero and Britain's premier archaeologist of the later 19th century provides insights into Pitt Rivers' very personal project of science. The sense that in an era when the 'short' Christian ideological framework had been significantly eroded by scientific investigation, *museums* – and particularly their new classificatory ordering of the world – provided a basis of legitimatisation and propelled programmes of action. The 'gulf of time' and the antiquity of humanity created by a more scientific archaeology (and geological techniques) equally fostered an awareness of distant futures. 'Time' became something beyond immediacy and ancestry, and into whose vast horizons flagships could sail and 'messages' be sent (*via* medallions, time capsules, great books or even monument legislation) – all be them invariably rooted in their 'presents'.

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## End-notes

(1) *The Illustrated London News* was obviously greatly taken with the discoveries of Egyptology during the later half of the 19th century; the Egyptian Exploration Fund/Society being established in 1883.

(2) See Jarvis 2002 concerning the history of ‘time capsule-type’ deposition and Gombrich’s renowned study of the Pioneer 10 spacecraft plaque on the impossibility of *universal symbolic* communication (1968).

(3) Set in a distant future, Verne’s posthumous tale, *The Eternal Adam*, concerns a campaign of excavations sponsored by a senior statesman in order to demonstrate the irreversibility of evolution and the continuous progress of civilisation. This theory is disproven when first ‘we’ (the twenty-first century ‘present’) are discovered and eventually Atlantis is unearthed in what should be primordial muds. That these once great civilisations met their ends through natural catastrophe reflects upon the ultimate failure of culture to domesticate nature (Chesneaux 1972: 193–195). McConnell 1981: 69–105 discusses H. G. Wells’ ‘evolutionary fables’ and Murray 1993 considers Rider Haggard’s fiction in the light of the gulf of ‘time’ and the loss of faith wrought by Victorian science (see also Evans 1994).

(4) The original impetus behind Pitt Rivers’ collections may have been the Great Exhibition of 1852, whose ‘evolutionary’ contents apparently inspired many such efforts at that time (Stocking 1987: 5; Bowden 1991: 47). It is, of course, equally possible to envisage the Crystal Palace itself as a great flagship, simultaneously propelling and celebrating Victorian culture, technology and Empire.

(5) See Sweet concerning antiquaries and Freemasonry (2004: 131 and note 47). Contrary to expectations, request searches by the Grand Lodge of Freemasons have failed to find any indication that Lane Fox/Pitt Rivers was a member of the order (John Soane, on the other hand, most certainly was; see below and Taylor 1982). Similarly attesting to the importance of mapping/survey, a theodolite also dominated the ‘logo’ of the Palestine Exploration Fund of 1865.

(6) Showing a Collared Urn and Battle axe, with a Bronze Age rapier below, the dominance of weapons may reflect the General’s concerns with primitive warfare (Pitt Rivers 1867 and 1868); see also Evans *forthcoming* concerning the potential impact of Britain’s 19th century colonial wars on his studies.

(7) Where a comparable commemoration of (self as) ‘project’ might be sought is Sir John Soane, the celebrated early 19th century architect, most renowned for his Bank of England. As has elsewhere been discussed (e.g. Woodward 1999: 30; Evans 2000), Soane seems to have had an extraordinary awareness of time and decay. This seems almost to verge on obsession in his writings that muse on what future archaeologists might make of his eccentricity curated houses. Similarly, having completed the bank he had his assistant, Joseph Gandy, paint the great complex as a ruin to rival those of ancient Rome (Evans 2000: fig. 1). He also had Gandy produce tableaux showing his many buildings arranged together as if models, as if otherwise posterity would not acknowledge the scale of his collective works.

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