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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/bha.16104>

The Rev. Greville John Chester and 'The Ashmolean Museum as a Home for Archaeology in Oxford'

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Greville John Chester (1830–1892), an Oxford alumnus and ordained clergyman, devoted the latter half of his life to travel and exploration in Egypt and the Levant, where he collected archaeological artefacts for the British Museum and other institutions. His devotion to Oxford University led him not only to become a prodigious donor to the Ashmolean Museum, but to intervene actively in the debate on the future of the museum and of the teaching of archaeology within in the University in a period of change.

Arthur Evans proclaimed his vision of the future of the Ashmolean Museum, to which he had recently been appointed Keeper, in the title of his Inaugural Lecture on 20 November 1884 (Evans 1884). This was not the Museum of Art and Archaeology in Beaumont Street that we know today, but the Old Ashmolean in Broad Street – now the Museum of the History of Science – founded by Elias Ashmole as the repository of the Tradescant Cabinet of Rarities in 1683: it was the first museum open to the public. During the following century, it acquired by miscellaneous donations a heterogeneous collection of artefacts, including some Roman antiquities, fossils, and minerals and natural history specimens including a large collection of shells and the disintegrating dodo, ethnographic specimens from Captain Cook's second voyage to the South Seas, and the Anglo-Saxon *Alfred Jewel*, given in 1718 (MacGregor 2001). Meanwhile, however, major parts of the building had been appropriated by the University for other uses, including a laboratory for the Curator who occupied the Chair of Chemistry. The German traveller Uffenbach, visiting in 1710, was appalled by its filth and that 'even the women are allowed up here for sixpence' (quoted in MacGregor 2001).

It was not until the curatorships of the brothers Duncan in the first half of the 19th century that the Museum acquired a firm direction. It was still dominated by Natural History specimens, as the frontispiece of its first printed catalogue of 1836 clearly shows (reproduced in MacGregor 2001), but the subsequent donation of a large collection of Anglo-Saxon antiquities from excavations in Kent strengthened the archaeological side to the extent that there were proposals to establish the Ashmolean Museum as one of *national*, i.e. British, antiquities (Ovenell 1986). Conversely, with 18th century Neo-classical taste asserting the overwhelming superiority of *classical* art, some attention began to be paid, after long neglect, to the University's own collection of ancient sculpture: the Arundel and Pomfret marbles (Vickers 2006). And, very much in tune with contemporary fashion, it now also owned a number of plaster casts of the most admired ancient statues, the foremost being the *Apollo Belvedere*, the *Discobolus* and the *Laocoon* (Kurtz 2000). Unlike the Arundel Marbles, these were elegantly displayed in the University's Bodleian Library.

With the appointment as Keeper in 1870 of John Henry Parker, who paid annual exploratory visits to Rome and enriched the Ashmolean with his own donations and indeed subsidies, classical antiquities received stronger support in the Museum. But despite the dominance of Classics in the University, and thirty years of rising interest in archaeology exemplified by the foundation of the British Archaeological Association and the Archaeological (later Royal Archaeological) Institute in the eighteen-forties, the University was slow in acknowledging the relevance of the subject to its teaching, and it was not until 1885 that it was to establish a Chair in Classical Archaeology (Kurtz 2000). Meanwhile Parker's efforts had been supported by an increasing influx of gifts from scholarly alumni of the University, who donated trophies from their journeys to classical lands. One of the most prominent, assiduous and original of these donors was the Rev. Greville John Chester (1830–1892), who from 1865 (Rowell 1870) began to shower vast numbers of objects on the Museum, that he had obtained on annual visits to Italy, the Mediterranean, North Africa, Egypt and the Levant, a practice which he was to continue until his death, twenty-seven years later, and through the provisions of his will, even beyond.

A Norfolk man from an armigerous family, whose members for the most part opted either for the army or the Church, Chester was one of the number of nineteenth-century clergymen-amateurs who pursued scientific and artistic interests with remarkable success. He was thirty-five years of age in 1865 when he first made donations to the Ashmolean Museum, but as an undergraduate at Oxford from 1849 to 1853 with a strong interest in archaeological artefacts, he had been long familiar with the museum, as becomes very clear from his later involvement. Rowell's perfunctory catalogue credits him with donations of a miscellany of objects given between 1865 and 1869, from 'a numerous collection of ancient Egyptian, Greek and Roman articles', including 'forty-four sepulchral lamps', 'a bronze celt from Sligo and a flint implement from [a] drift at Hoxne', to 'ornaments and implements used by the Kabyles' (Rowell 1870). This summary account indicates the donor's varied interests, embracing both the classical past and anthropology, ethnology and local history, and they indicate some experience of travel, both within Britain and abroad. These interests were not of recent origin – they went back many years, probably to Chester's childhood. He was nineteen years of age when he came up to Oxford University and as a first-year undergraduate at Balliol already corresponded with scholars and museum curators near and far, with inquiries and discussions about coins, seals, Roman roads and local finds, and with a Danish scholar about Scandinavian influence in Norfolk (Bodleian MSS). He graduated BA in 1853, attended theological college in Wells, and while there, published an extended article on the cathedral's stained glass (Chester 1855), but his contributions to archaeological literature had begun even earlier. Aged seventeen and eighteen, he had sent notices of local, including Roman, finds in Norfolk to the recently founded Archaeological Institute, of which he became a member

during his first undergraduate year, exhibited objects from a collection of his own, and participated in its meetings, and contributed articles to its *Journal* (*AJ* iv, 1847 – xlix, 1892). In 1856, appointed to a curacy at Crayke, he became the local representative for Yorkshire.

Yorkshire remained his home for more than a decade, for he was appointed priest in charge of the run-down Sheffield slum parish of St Jude's, Moorfields in 1858, aged twenty-eight (Odom 1922). There he made a considerable impact, 'affecting a marvellous change' (Alfred Gatty in *The Guardian*, reproduced in *ON* 1892) by turning a congregation of no more than six into a flourishing and lively parish, but not forgetting his other interests: he re-founded the Sheffield Field Naturalists' Society and took young parishioners on country expeditions, teaching them local history, geology, and botany, and doing his utmost to broaden their minds (*ON* 1892). In the city, he was an energetic and vocal advocate of reforms such as earlier shop-closing hours, took up the cudgels against injustice and abuse, and vehemently criticised the deplorable state of the workhouse, where he 'lifted the curtain from some scandals' – which did not endear him to the city fathers (*ON* 1892). He engaged fearlessly in controversy in the local press and proclaimed his often startling views from the pulpit – while still at Oxford, he had been a busy member of the Oxford Union debating society (Oxford Union 1848–1852) – and published pugnacious pamphlets and sermons. He was tireless as priest, reformer, teacher, publicist and pungent controversialist, writer of verse (Chester 1856, 1883), student of natural science, local history and archaeology. Amidst all this busy-ness, he found time to make his regular contributions to the *Archaeological Journal* for over forty years; – the very last paper he sent in to the Society reached them while he was already mortally ill (*AJ* xlix, 1892). He was only 62, and despite being described as a man of 'fine physical development with a stalwart figure' in his prime (*ON*), there are recurrent references to poor health and serious illnesses – an obituary attributes much of this to 'severe self-denial' during his tireless activities as a parish priest (*ibid.*).

By the age of thirty-five, concern for his health could no longer be ignored: he therefore retired from his Sheffield parish in 1865 and decided to travel to more benign climates. After a visit to Italy and a first tour in Egypt and North Africa – Rowell's publication of 1870 listed some of its fruits that came the way of the Ashmolean – he spent two years on a journey to the West Indies and the Americas and as locum tenens of the Archdeacon of Barbados, publishing a book of his travels after his return (Chester 1869), filled with acute observations on the countries he had visited, and not lacking in critical remarks. But his favourite interests were not forgotten: in Barbados he discovered rare prehistoric shell tools and pottery sherds, resulting in the prompt dispatch after his return of further donations to the Ashmolean Museum, which were warmly and gratefully received (Bodleian MSS), followed by publication in the *Archaeological Journal* (*AJ* xxvii). In Oxford, the founding of a new University Museum of Natural History in 1860 had already resulted in some transfers from the Ashmolean's holdings, while most of Chester's anthropological collections from the West Indies leaked away later, two years after the Pitt Rivers Museum of Anthropology and Ethnology opened its doors in 1884.

After this excursion to the Americas, Chester's annual travels henceforth were directed to the Mediterranean; his destination, by way of Italy and Malta, was most often Egypt, but he frequently visited Western North Africa and the Levant, particularly Syria and Palestine. He spent winter after winter in the South, departing, as was the custom, in November, returning in the spring. But so far from indulging in valetudinarianism in those sunny climates, he was busier than ever and moreover enduring harsh travel conditions and even physical dangers, as he explored the Nile valley, the Syrian coast, Palestine and Arabia by boat, on foot, on donkey-back and dromedary (see eg *PEFQS*). It was on those annual travels that he found his vocation as an indefatigable explorer and collector, and a major contributor of thousands of

objects to British institutions. This was the way of life in which he was to continue for the next twenty-seven years, as a student of the archaeology of Africa and the Near East, a fearless visitor to remote spots and explorer of unknown regions, and a notable and knowledgeable collector. Many of his finds were made on behalf of the British Museum (BM ANE 1864–92; Budge 1920) – his London home was in Bloomsbury, within easy reach – and he carried out expeditions for the Palestine Exploration Fund (*PEFQS*). He sold objects to institutions and collectors, as did other explorers such as Flinders Petrie, to finance further journeys and acquisitions; but in his relations with Oxford he was extremely generous, more often a lavish donor on his own behalf than a vendor, such was his attachment to his old university. From the time he embarked on his travels, a stream of gifts flowed from him to the Bodleian Library, to Oxford colleges, and to the Ashmolean Museum.

To the Bodleian he contributed over the years precious manuscripts (Craster 1981), including the first fragments of the Geniza papyri to reach Britain. At that time, the University's coin collection was also housed in the library. From 1888 to 1891, he successively donated large packets of coins – usually about one hundred at a time: gold, silver and bronze, mostly ancient, some medieval and Renaissance; they totalled over 1100, and included some great rarities, such as a ninth-century gold coin of Sigardus duke of Beneventum and a coin of Anastasius IV (Ashmolean H.C.R. Arch. Bod. Safe 40). The date of these donations is probably significant: it would seem that after more than one breakdown in health, he had decided to dispose of some – by no means all – of his collections; and indeed he had only another four years to live. The University's coin collection, and with it Chester's, was eventually transferred to the Ashmolean, where Dr Volker Heuchert, Collections Manager, showed me some important Chester coins in the Heberden Coin Room.

To Balliol, his old college, he gave twelve Eastern manuscripts, including a fourteenth-century Hebrew Pentateuch, a sixteenth-century Arabic Koran, an Amharic manuscript bought in Jerusalem from Abyssinian monks, and a Turkish and several Armenian manuscripts (Mynors 1963).

In the eighteen-eighties he presented six manuscripts – oriental, medieval and Renaissance – from his own collection, some of them among his earliest acquisitions, to Keble College, a recent Oxford foundation, in which he took an interest, probably for its concentration on theological studies; moreover, a nephew, also to become a clergyman, was a Keble alumnus (Parkes 1979).

But his contributions to the Ashmolean Museum, numbering thousands of objects, vastly surpassed these donations, as is revealed by his correspondence with the Keeper and other members of staff about his acquisitions and proposed donations (AMS 1887–1892). There is hardly one of its departments that does not contain objects originating with him, most visibly in the Egyptian Galleries, where a room has been named after him. The Chester Room, presided over by a photographic portrait of the collector, contains in its glass cases a wealth of small objects: amulets, including a large number of stone scarabs, small bronzes and mummiform *shawabti* figures; and there are several cases of seals, so all-important in the ancient world. By no means all of the objects in this room derive from Chester, but it commemorates the kind of small objects he acquired by preference (personal information from Dr Helen Whitehouse, Senior Assistant Keeper). These were, of course, found most convenient to transport, although we learn of problems with packing and shipping and safe delivery, not to mention getting such objects out of a country which had recently introduced strict laws about their export – even if these were rather laxly handled (Budge 1920). Over the years he built up a network of reliable dealers who respected his eye and his connoisseurship – essential among a sea of forgers – though he too was taken in by fakes from time to time.

He was a persistent and pertinacious negotiator, not to say haggler: it took him two years to acquire a major Egyptian artefact for a private collector (Petrie). Among the objects with a Chester provenance in the further Egyptian rooms are pottery, important textile fragments and part of painted diptych, acquired from Christian Coptic sources, but the most important is the so-called '*Battlefield Palette*', a Protodynastic slate fragment of the Third Millennium BC, showing two captives with tribal standards (Museum no. 1892-1171). Yet in some respects even more important than his enrichment of the Egyptian collection was the catalogue of the Department's holdings at the time, which he drew up in 1878–9 (Chester 1881a). Although the collection has since vastly increased, this first meticulous catalogue is still considered a classic.

Another part of the Museum that was greatly enriched by Chester's patronage is that of the Near East. The twentieth-century cataloguer of its seal collection declared that with these donations, which he continued to pour into the Museum, he 'laid the foundation for the Museum's collection of Near Eastern art' (Buchanan 1966).

But among the small objects his practised eye singled out for acquisition, his favourites were probably engraved gems. Two hundred of the museum's Roman gems have a Chester provenance (Henig and MacGregor 2004), and similarly some postclassical gems and pastes (uncatalogued); but some of the finest gems, now among the great treasures of the Department of Antiquities and evidence of his wonderful discernment, he kept in his own collection until his death. He bequeathed them to the Museum under the strict proviso, that they be shown 'without any fee or charge whatsoever, ... at least one day of the week ... to both graduate and undergraduate members of the University of Oxford' (Chester's Will, proven 4 July 1892). By far the largest number of the renowned Greek and Hellenistic gems in the Museum – 151 out of a total of 387 – have a Chester provenance (Boardman and Vollenweider 1978). Among them are a portrait of the Ptolemaic Princess *Arsinoe II* (cat. no. 283) of the early third-century BC, a *Maenad* (no. 295) of the second century BC, a fine, large figure of a goddess leaning on a pillar (no. 376) of the late third-century BC, and a head of *Zeus Ammon* (no. 351) of the second-century BC; but what is arguably the most important of the museum's Hellenistic gems, possibly a contemporary portrait of *Alexander the Great with the Horn of Ammon* (no. 380), was found by Chester in Beirut.

A touching personal relic of Chester is among some paintings he gave to the Museum: it is Paul Sandby's watercolour of his birthplace, *Denton Church and Vicarage*: Sandby's oil of Denton has been lost, presumably destroyed (Ashmolean 2004).

But the Museum's debt to Chester goes beyond his donations and his composition of the Egyptian collection catalogue. During the long years since his first association with Oxford, his intimate acquaintance renewed annually by frequent visits (during the summer months in England he seems to have virtually commuted between London and Oxford) he had become disenchanted with the University's neglect of its archaeological collections, to which he had devoted so many years of his life, so much labour, and indeed so much expense. In 1881 he gave public expression to his exasperation in a hardhitting pamphlet under the anodyne title '*Notes on the Present and Future of the Archaeological Collections of the University of Oxford*' (Chester 1881b), but the contents were far from anodyne. It pitches in with a broadside: 'Can nothing be done to protect, utilize, consolidate and properly arrange the Archaeological Collections belonging to the University of Oxford? ... Their present condition is simply disgraceful.' The archaeological collections, he explains, are five in number, distributed in different locations, many inaccessible 'and now threatened with deaccessions by amalgamations with the Gorgonica, Stuffed Monkeys and Fish in the New Museum [the Museum of Natural History], while the ancient sculptures of the Pomfret collection are

stowed away out of sight in the dreary vaults of the Taylor building’.

The pamphlet is not short of horrifying examples: ‘On the staircase two venerable slabs of Assyrian sculpture from Nineveh look strangely out of place under a spic-and-span Muse made of white ‘compo’ and in the Avernus below a white marble bust of S. Woodburne, Esq. by Behnes surmounts the sarcophagus of a Roman child!’ While part of the precious Castellani donation of Roman and Etruscan objects was altogether hidden away, he found access to the vaulted basement with some of the best Greek inscriptions ‘barred by the presence of an immense stuffed bullock.’ And, to crown it all, there was ‘the recent discovery that for years a number of valuable articles ... from the old Tradescant Collection had been packed away in a box in an outhouse in the basement, to which access by a ladder might easily be had from the street’ – a truly shocking state of affairs. In conclusion, Chester offers ten practical proposals for reform, with the re-location and amalgamation of all the archaeological collections of the University in the Museum itself, which should be given over entirely to this use; its extraneous ‘lodgers’ to be expelled and with ‘a strict order to the assistant keeper not to let visitors handle objects, [a] dangerous and indeed fatal practice.’

Chester could count on support from equally disturbed members of the University, and was confidentially negotiating between Keeper Parker, the University Vice-Chancellor (Benjamin Jowett, Master of his old college), and a potential major donor. This was Charles Edward Drury Fortnum, owner of a superb collection of ancient and Renaissance art, who was hesitant to entrust his collections, his ‘loved children’, ‘to a baby-farm where they might die for want of proper care’ (MacGregor 1997). But a new era dawned at last in 1884 with the appointment as Keeper of Arthur Evans, the future excavator of Knossos. He had great ends in view for archaeology in Oxford and a central place for the Ashmolean Museum, as Chester had advocated three years earlier. With the promise of much larger and grander accommodation to be supplied by enlarging Cockerell’s University Galleries of Art in Beaumont Street (Whiteley 1997), E was able to assure Fortnum of worthy accommodation for his great collections; this was achieved early in the 20th century. Sadly, Chester, who died before the dawn of the new century, did not live to see his life-time’s collections displayed in this Museum, but through his friendly contacts with the appreciative Evans he must have been reassured not only that his loved children would find a worthy home at last, but that the Ashmolean would indeed become ‘a home for archaeology in Oxford’.

Acknowledgments: My thanks are due to Dr Anne O’Connor, Department of Archaeology, University of Durham; in Oxford, to the late John Simmons, emeritus Fellow of All Souls, Professor Michael Vickers, Dr Helen Whitehouse, Dr Arthur MacGregor and Dr Jon Whiteley, Senior Assistant Keepers at the Ashmolean Museum, to Dr Susan Sherratt and Dr Volker Heuchert, to Dr Alan Tadiello at Balliol College, Rob Petre of Oriel College, to Marjory Szuhay and Fiona Wilkes at Wolfson College, and to the staffs of the Bodleian and the Sackler Library; in London, to Dr Henrietta McCall, Judy Rudoe, Dr Donald Bailey and Dr Dominique Collon of the British Museum, and the staff of the London Library; in Sheffield, to Sylvia Pybus, Gill Woolrich and Dr Sheila Duncan.

References

ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AJ</i>	<i>Archaeological Journal</i> , iv–xlix, 1845–1892
AMS	Ashmolean Museum Library Manuscripts, 1870–1892
BM ANE	British Museum Archive of the Ancient Near East, 1854–1889
Bodleian MSS	Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, MS Autogr. c.2, c.3, d.1, e.1, Summary Catalogue 29899–29902

ON *Obituary Notices of the late Rev. Greville John Chester, 1892*
PEFQS *Palestine Exploration Fund Quarterly Statements*

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