

Flinders Petrie: A Life in Archaeology, 2nd edition, by Margaret S. Drower, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1995 (1st published in 1985). xxiv + 500 pp. ISBN 0-299-14624-3 (paperback)

Reviewed by

Richard B. Woodbury
Department of Anthropology
University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

Sir William Matthew Flinders Petrie, K.B.E., F.R.S., F.B.A., revolutionized Egyptian archaeology in the first two decades (1880-1900) of his long career: he set new standards by insisting on keeping a complete record of all that was found, including broken as well as whole objects; he introduced the use of pottery styles for dating, rather than using only inscriptions; he substituted “a sympathetic and personal relationship” with his workman for the customary use of the lash to spur them on; he rewarded care and vigilance; he extended the list of kings of Egypt back to their beginning; and “his most triumphant and ingenious contribution to archaeological method [was] the system known as Sequence Dating,” today called seriation. He also stunned classical archaeologists by dating early the Minoan civilization on the basis of sherds found in dated Egyptian contexts—a technique now familiar as cross-dating. His work was a total contrast to the carelessness and looting that passed for Egyptian archaeology in the 19th and early 20th centuries. His career is painstakingly chronicled here by one of his last students.

Flinders Petrie was born in 1853 and as a child too sickly to be sent to school he was educated by occasional governesses, by his father (a chemist, civil engineer, and surveyor) and mother (a geologist and ancient coin collector), and by his own precocious interest in all matters scientific or historical. At ten he was reading a chemistry textbook as a pastime, collecting and selling ancient Greek coins, and calculating specific gravities.

At nineteen he began surveying nearby earthworks and tumuli with a homemade sextant. Recovered from his childhood illnesses except for colds (which plagued him throughout his life) he enjoyed walking tours with his father, on one of them averaging 37 miles a day. In 1877 they surveyed Stonehenge, producing a more accurate plan than any previous ones and later that year he presented the British Museum with a set of 40 plans of earthworks and stone monuments. His future fieldwork in Egypt always included minutely accurate surveys of the tombs, temples, and pyramids he excavated.

The course of Petrie’s career was set when he was 13 and he and his father read a book on the “divine guidance” under which the pyramids of Egypt were built—they were “so perfectly oriented” that humans could not have designed them. It is a mark of his early scholarly acceptance that in 1874 the Royal Society published his first book, *Researches on the Great Pyramid*, evaluating all available published information. In 1880 he was at last able to go to Egypt and carry out his own precise surveys, correcting the past errors of others. “The climate agreed with him and he relished freedom from the restraints of conventional dress; he often went barefoot, and he ate, worked and slept as and when occasion offered.” Until the 1930s he was in the field nearly every year and brought out a report on each year’s work before the next season, since he held, that “not till discoveries were made known did they have any value.” Every year he held a public exhibition of the results of the past winter’s fieldwork. He also wrote constantly for the general public.

It is unnecessary to summarize the immense detail on Petrie’s career and personal life, month by month and even week by week, in Drower’s excellent biography. A year by year list of sites he dug, from 1881 to 1938, is a great help to the reader, as are excellent maps of the Nile locating each of the sites. Illustrations are numerous and interesting, though some are printed too dark. There is also a very helpful tabular chronology of Egyptian history.

One of Petrie’s continuing worries was with the archaeological authorities in Egypt, with whom he had to divide each season’s artifacts, often knowing that what the Cairo Museum took would all be sold to tourists. Repeatedly he was refused a permit to dig at a site of his choice; the British authority in Egypt had turned over control of antiquities to the French, who were jealous of any excavation except by their own colleagues. Petrie also had constant difficulty securing financing for his work even after he received a position at University College with a small fixed income and each winter free for fieldwork. Research funds came entirely from private subscriptions and were a frequent problem, though he was famous for his Spartan economies. Drower quotes several entertaining accounts by visitors to his field camps who were appalled at the meager and monotonous diet and his ragged clothes. However, James Breasted of Chicago observed that “with all his eccentricities...[he] established in the end a record of maximum results for minimum expenditure which is not likely to be surpassed.”

At the age of 43 Petrie married Hilda Umlin, who had begun drawing artifacts for him at University College and rapidly developed a skill and enthusiasm for Egyptian archaeology that she carried through their many years of close collaboration in the field. She may have been partly responsible for Petrie’s camps now having a full-time cook and a much improved menu (Petrie had once said he preferred canned sardines from England to roast duck from the Nile).

In 1904 Petrie published *Methods and Aims in Archaeology*, a fascinating compilation of his practical knowledge and views, from the qualifications of a field archaeologist to the importance of publishing a drawing of every artifact, because he considered museums untrustworthy repositories. He instructs on how to hire laborers, make squeezes of inscriptions, classify pottery types, and much more that was involved in his research a century ago, though not surprisingly much of his technical advice is now outmoded. On ethics Petrie is still timely: “spoiling the past has an acute moral wrong about it” and “whatever is not businesslike in archaeology is a waste of scanty material which should be left for those who know how to use it.”

Petrie’s career was mostly in Egypt, but in 1926 political unrest there made work too difficult and he shifted to Palestine. His last fieldwork was in 1938. In 1940 he was hospitalized for a severe malaria attack and remained too weak to leave. He died in 1942 in Jerusalem. Petrie regarded himself as a historian, archaeology being only a means to that end, and developed theories of civilizations’ cyclical nature that are unimportant compared to the vast contributions he made to Egypt’s history. He gave close attention not only to the identification of a tomb’s occupant but to the technology revealed in its contents—weaving, carpentry, carving, and all. He was a workaholic, would not have a telephone in his home (an interruption), disapproved of tobacco and alcohol, but attracted a constant stream of enthusiastic students and assistants who enjoyed his company, appreciated his dedication to work, and carried on his methods of painstaking recording, measuring, and preserving.

One of Petrie’s influences on archaeology’s future is not mentioned in this volume: his contribution to A.V. Kidder’s field techniques and archaeological goals. The American Egyptologist, George Reisner, employed workmen trained by Petrie in his meticulous excavating and recording techniques and also Arthur Mace, who had worked with Petrie, and thus Reisner adopted much of Petrie’s approach. In turn, Kidder received his first formal archaeological training from Reisner as a student at Harvard, which included substantial influences traceable to Petrie.

Some of his contemporaries considered him dogmatic and impatient of all authority; at the same time he was himself an authoritarian with scant respect for the opinions of others. Nevertheless he achieved wide respect and scholarly recognition for his great accomplishments. This carefully researched biography is a fascinating record of an incredible man and the transformation he wrought in Egyptian archaeology.