



Authoring the ancient sites of Cyprus in the late nineteenth century: the British Museum excavation notebooks, 1893–1896



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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the performance of archaeology in the field. To do so it examines the notebooks recording the British Museum excavations in Cyprus during the period 1893–1896. Archaeologists have described the practices of writing and drawing as a performance that accords archaeology its disciplinary identity. However, there have not been systematic studies of the centrality of fieldwork in the disciplinary culture of nineteenth-century archaeology as there have been for other field sciences. Histories and geographies of science have shown that field knowledge was produced through a variety of spatial practices – including inscriptive practices – whose meaning, processes and intentions were embodied in the material artefacts of science, such as instruments and notebooks. Drawing on that work, this paper locates the British Museum notebooks as material objects of science in the disciplinary landscape of late nineteenth-century Cypriot archaeology and in British classical archaeology more broadly. In doing so, this paper furthers our understanding of how classical archaeology became established as a field-based scientific discipline in the later nineteenth century. This paper argues that the British Museum notebooks functioned as paper tools in the field: they constructed a new interpretative model of the ancient Cypriot artefacts that placed the island within the prehistoric Greek world. This archaeological model was established through the more accurate, schematic, abstracted and numerical syntax of the notebooks. Importantly, the British Museum archaeologists through the use of the notebooks as paper tools created a new entity, the excavated Cypriot artefact, that was firmly associated with the conditions of its discovery and evaluation processes.

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This paper considers the performance of archaeology in the field by examining the notebooks that recorded the three seasons of large-scale archaeological excavations conducted in Cyprus by the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities of the British Museum from 1893 to 1896. Archaeologists have recently described writing and drawing as performances in the field that accord archaeology its cultural identity. Particular importance has been accorded to drawing as one of the ‘fundamental representational devices of archaeology’s visual vocabulary’, and whose changing format demonstrates the emergence of archaeology as a scientific discipline in the late nineteenth century.¹ Indeed, it has been argued that the British Museum notebooks and their published version,

Excavations in Cyprus, demonstrate one of the earliest attempts to present archaeological data in a systematically clear and coherent manner.² While historians of science have studied the histories of other field-based disciplines, such as geography and botany, archaeologists – despite recent calls – have not yet systematically considered the centrality of travel writing and fieldwork in their disciplinary history.³ Elsewhere, the focus on the epistemology of the field has shown that knowledge was produced there by a variety of spatial practices that may be characterized broadly as

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¹ C. Simonetti, Between the vertical and the horizontal: time and space in archaeology, *History of the Human Sciences* 26 (2013) 102; J. Flexner, Where is reflexive map-making in archaeological research? Towards a place-based approach, *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 24 (2009) 10.

² L. Steel, The British Museum and the invention of the Cypriot Late Bronze Age, in: V. Tatton-Brown (Ed.), *Cyprus in the 19th Century AD. Fact, Fancy and Fiction*, Oxford, 2001, 160–167; A.S. Murray, A.H. Smith and H.B. Walters, *Excavations in Cyprus: Bequest of Miss E. T. Turner to the British Museum*, London, 1900.

³ S. Moser, On disciplinary culture: archaeology as fieldwork and its gendered association, *Journal of Archaeological Method and Theory* 14 (2007) 235–263; N. Herringman, *Sciences of Antiquity: Romantic Antiquarianism, Natural History, and Knowledge Work*, Oxford, 2013.

movement, performance and encounter.⁴ By drawing on this scholarship, this paper locates the British Museum excavation notebooks as material objects in the disciplinary landscape of late nineteenth-century Cypriot archaeology and in British classical archaeology more broadly. In doing so this paper furthers our understanding of how classical archaeology became established as a field-based scientific discipline in the later nineteenth century.

The British Museum excavations conducted in Cyprus from 1893 to 1896 were funded by a private bequest made by Emma Towner Turner (1811–1892). Turner, born in Oxford, seems to have lived at her family house for most of her life. In 1892 she bequeathed, in her will, £2000 to the museum for the ‘purpose of excavation or survey of sites in Europe, Asia or Africa in furtherance of the study of the antiquities of Greece, Rome or Egypt or of Biblical Antiquities’.⁵ By this time, Heinrich Schliemann’s discoveries of the remains of the Bronze Age Mycenaean settlement at Hissarlik – the ancient site of Troy – in Asia Minor during the 1870s had revived popular interest in the prehistory of the Eastern Mediterranean and had directed the focus of classical archaeology’s investigations to the pre-classical remains of the ancient Greek civilizations in the region (Fig. 1). Following these developments, the British Museum’s classical archaeologists went to Cyprus in order to study the ancient history of the island in relation to the Aegean civilizations of the Late Bronze Age (from 1650 B.C. to approximately 1050 B.C.) by finding and studying Mycenaean remains, and by bringing them back to London for exhibition. This meant that the excavation sites on the island were chosen by the British Museum because of their associations with the pre-classical and classical Greek world, as corroborated in ancient Greek literature, and because of the discoveries made at those sites in the early 1870s by Luigi P. Di Cesnola, the then American consul in Cyprus.⁶

The organization of both private and institutional excavations, including those of the Turner Bequest, followed a similar pattern in the Eastern Mediterranean. They involved a ‘director’, the workmen – hired ‘unskilled’ local labourers – and their overseers.⁷ The instructions given by the British Museum to its on-site archaeologists show that, in this case, the distinctive traits of an emerging scientific archaeology can be found in the exact practices of collecting through excavation: recording, preserving, ordering and securing the provenance of objects. Alexander S. Murray (1841–1904), the then keeper of the Department of Greek and Roman Antiquities, instructed the on-site archaeologists ‘to report mainly on the results’ that were obtained and to ‘advise as to the best methods of observing and recording such results’.⁸ Following Murray’s recommendations, the British Museum Trustees instructed the Turner Bequest archaeologists to ‘superintend the work as an archaeologist’ and to ‘control the excavations’.⁹ These instructions point to

concerns with methodology and the field that were common in the nineteenth-century field sciences since scientific subjects were still ‘disciplining’ themselves in terms of both their practices and their personnel.¹⁰ Thus, as Mary Beard and Christopher Stray point out, archaeology was aggressively trying to define its disciplinary boundaries and a basic scientific principle was being formed: that the accurate location of objects found within a site established their value as data.¹¹ Nevertheless, at the time of the Turner Bequest excavations there was still no single standardized methodology for reporting ancient relics, apart from a general tendency towards empirical exactness in collecting methodologies based broadly on antiquarian methods of illustration, written reportage and classification. Archaeology was still not established in British universities and neither the Society of Antiquaries nor other prominent public institutions such as the British Museum published manuals on how to undertake archaeological fieldwork.¹² However, it has been argued that in the Eastern Mediterranean in the late nineteenth century the transition of adventurous archaeological explorations to authoritative scientific expeditions was shaped by the involvement of public institutions such as the British Museum.¹³ The British Museum was an authoritative institution at the top of the museum hierarchy that endowed its archaeologists and agents with official support, authority and scientific rationalization for their overseas work.¹⁴

Following a critical review of the theoretical context for this historical geography of archaeology, this paper investigates the material connected with the Turner Bequest excavations in Cyprus. First, there is a close analysis of the six notebooks in which the results of the excavations were recorded, examining their materiality, research themes and function in the field, and placing them within their specific contexts: the ancient sites of Cyprus and the changing practices of British archaeology. Then the paper turns to explore the textual content of the notebooks and the ways the excavations associated with the Turner Bequest were represented in them. Finally, the paper focuses on the graphic content of the notebooks – drawings of the artefacts, sketches and maps of tomb-sites – and its use as a representational tool that provided an impersonal and objective account of the archaeological investigations. Overall, the paper argues that the notebooks functioned as paper tools in the field, which constructed a new interpretative model of the ancient Cypriot artefacts in a pre-disciplinary archaeological landscape. In particular, the more accurate, abstracted and numerical imagery of the notebooks firmly placed Cyprus within the Greek world and constructed the theory of the

⁴ S. Naylor, Historical geography: knowledge, in place and on the move, *Progress in Human Geography* 29 (2005) 626–634.

⁵ Turner left bequests in her will to various charities and hospitals, however the British Museum was the single largest beneficiary (10% of the total of just under £20,000). T. Kiely and A. Ulbrich, Britain and the archaeology of Cyprus. I, The long 19th century, *Cahiers du Centre d’Etudes Chypriotes* 42 (2012) 305–356. These excavations will be referred to hereafter as the Turner Bequest excavations and the notebooks as the Turner Bequest notebooks.

⁶ Murray, Smith and Walters, *Excavations in Cyprus*, 57–58, 89, 90.

⁷ A. Berggren and I. Hodder, Social practice, method, and some problems of field archaeology, *American Antiquity* 68 (2003) 421–434.

⁸ Alexander S. Murray report to the British Museum Trustees, 22 September 1893, 101, Department of Greece and Rome Archives, Departmental Reports, British Museum, London [hereafter GRDRBM].

⁹ Report of Sir Edward M. Thompson to the Trustees of the British Museum, 13 October 1894, Department of Greece and Rome Archives, Trustee Minutes, British Museum, London [hereafter GRTRBM], 361; Report of Sir Edward M. Thompson to the Trustees of the British Museum, 14 October 1893, GRTRBM, 139.

¹⁰ C.W.J. Withers, Science, scientific instruments and questions of method in nineteenth-century British geography, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 38 (2013) 167.

¹¹ M. Beard and C. Stray, The academy abroad: the nineteenth-century origin of the British School at Athens, in: M. Daunton (Ed.), *The Organization of Knowledge in Victorian Britain*, Oxford, 2005, 371–387; R.E. Kohler, Finders, keepers: collecting sciences and collecting practice, *History of Science* 45 (2007) 428–454; C. Evans, Delineating objects: nineteenth-century antiquarian culture and the project of archaeology, in: S. Pearce (Ed.), *Visions of Antiquity: The Society of Antiquaries of London, 1707–2007*, London, 2007, 267–305.

¹² Although archaeological reports were published in specialist journals, such as *Archaeologia*, only in 1904 did the first manual appear when W.M.F. Petrie published his *Methods and Aims in Archaeology*; P. Lock, D.G. Hogarth (1862–1927): ‘...A specialist in the science of archaeology’, *The Annual of the British School at Athens* 85 (1990) 175–200.

¹³ H. Goren, Scientific organizations as agents of change: the Palestine Exploration Fund, the Deutsche Verein zur Erforschung Palastinas and nineteenth-century Palestine, *Journal of Historical Geography* 27 (2001) 153–165; A. Stevenson, Artefacts of excavation: the British collection and distribution of Egyptian finds to museums, 1880–1915, *Journal of the History of Collections* 26 (2014) 89–102.

¹⁴ A.A. Shelton, Museum ethnography: an imperial science, in: E. Hallam and B.V. Street (Eds.), *Cultural Encounters, Representing Otherness*, London, 2000, 155–193.

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