

Repatriating prehistoric artefacts to Egypt: Fekri Hassan's Naqada and Siwa study collections

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Between 1975 and 1981 Professor Fekri Hassan worked in the Western Desert and Naqada Region of Egypt, investigating numerous sites. During these projects he collected some of the most important study collections relating to the Egyptian Palaeolithic, Epipalaeolithic and Predynastic periods. The authors describe how this material arrived in UCL stores, the process of repatriating it back to Egypt and the Institute of Archaeology's collections policy.

Throughout 2009 and into 2010 a large project documenting the prehistoric study collections of Prof. Fekri A. Hassan held in the off-site stores of UCL was undertaken by Geoffrey Tassie and Joris van Wetering. These collections, originally amassed between 1975 and 1981, had been donated to the Egyptian Government by Hassan in early 2009. The holding of such large collections and their subsequent repatriation raised several questions about UCL's acquisition and collections policy.

History of Hassan's work at Naqada

As part of the survey work related to the construction of the Aswan High Dam in the 1960s, the Combined Prehistoric Expedition led by Prof. Fred Wendorf surveyed along the track of the proposed electricity lines. In 1968 the CPE found a settlement dating to the Naqada I Period in the vicinity of the modern village of el-Khattara in the Naqada region. The discovery of an early settlement near to the important settlement and cemetery remains found by J. De Morgan³ and W. M. F. Petrie & J. E. Quibell⁴ at the end of the 19th century sparked the interest of the archaeological community.

In 1975 T. R. Hays (University of Texas) instigated a multidisciplinary project to survey the west bank of the Naqada region between the modern cities of Ballas and Danfiq. This survey resulted in the discovery of several early settlements along the desert edge and test excavations were conducted at a number of these sites.⁵ The material collected primarily related to the Predynastic to Early Dynastic periods (Naqada I to III, c.3900–2900 BC).

The Predynastic of Naqada Project

Hassan, who was involved in both previous projects as a geoarchaeologist, took over the survey from Hays in 1978 and instigated the Washington State University *Predynastic of Naqada* Project.⁶ A systematic survey was conducted whereby a transect, 22km long by 0.4km wide, was run from the edge of the cultivation into the low desert margin. The information obtained included archaeological data on prehistoric and historic sites, topography

and geomorphology, surface geology and sedimentology, plants, water sources, and land-use.

As expected, several new early cemetery sites were discovered in the low desert away from the floodplain edge. Other types of sites not used for habitation or burial contained a large

percentage of axes and other tools, which seem to imply either production or use areas. Hassan also re-investigated several known sites, including the settlement sites of South Town and North Town found by Petrie and Quibell, and the cemetery with the First Dynasty royal tomb found by De Morgan; the cemetery consists of at least two other large mastaba tombs and numerous smaller tombs dating to the Early Dynastic Period.

Of the settlement sites found during the 1975 survey, Menchia Kh.3 was extensively excavated between 1978 and 1981. The excavation revealed a settlement with predominately Naqada I remains (Fig. 1), but also a distinct Naqada II occupation, as signature hard orange ware pottery was discovered scattered throughout the different excavation units. A few graves were excavated in a cemetery



Figure 1 The Naqada I-IIB settlement Menchia Kh.3 showing a deposit of black-topped red ware vessels



Figure 2 Burial 4 in the Naqada IIC-D cemetery at Menchia Kh.3

found directly south of this settlement, all dating to Naqada II (Fig. 2).

The project is currently being prepared for publication in a series of monographs covering both the survey and excavations, along with several research articles.⁷ The final report will also include the results of older excavations in the Naqada region, providing a comprehensive overview of cultural development and changing settlement patterns in the Naqada region from the Predynastic to the Old Kingdom.

Archaeological research in the Western Desert

Between 1975 and 1977 Hassan worked in the Western Desert concentrating on three main areas: Siwa Oasis with the nearby smaller Gara and el-Areg oases; Bahariya Oasis; and the desert edge of the West Delta. Although H. Junker had investigated the West Delta desert edge during the 1920s,⁸ Hassan's work in this region was the first to record Middle Palaeolithic remains. At both Siwa and Bahariya oases Hassan was also the first to investigate the prehistoric remains in a scientific manner.

In the Siwa and Gara oases Epipalaeolithic (Garan 8300–6600 BC) and Neolithic (Siwan 5700–3900 BC) sites were investigated from 1975 to 1976. Although several sites of Neolithic date were discovered, no pottery was identified as relating to these occupations, which contained endscrapers, composite tools, raclettes, and pressure flaked bifacial tools. The Epipalaeolithic occupations identified at more than twenty sites show an abundance of straight backed bladelets, blades, burins, double burins, microburins, Krukowski microburins, along with denticulates, endscrapers on a blade, perforators, sidescrapers, notched pieces, scaled pieces, geometric triangles and leaf and stemmed points (Figs 3, 4 and 5). Other artefacts found included grinding stones and ostrich eggshell beads, and possibly associated pottery at two sites. Apart from hearths that probably represent campsites, the only structure found was a semi-circle of stones at Shiyata 1.⁹

At Ain Khoman playa, Bahariya Oasis several sites had surface scatters of lithics represented by endscrapers, notches, burins, denticulates, blades and some bifacial pieces, but no microliths, indicating Terminal Palaeolithic occupations. A similar artefact assemblage was found at a site in the nearby oasis of Ain el-Heiz Bahari. Roman and Ptolemaic remains were also found at both Siwa and Bahariya oases.

Hassan's work along the West Delta desert margin in 1977 included

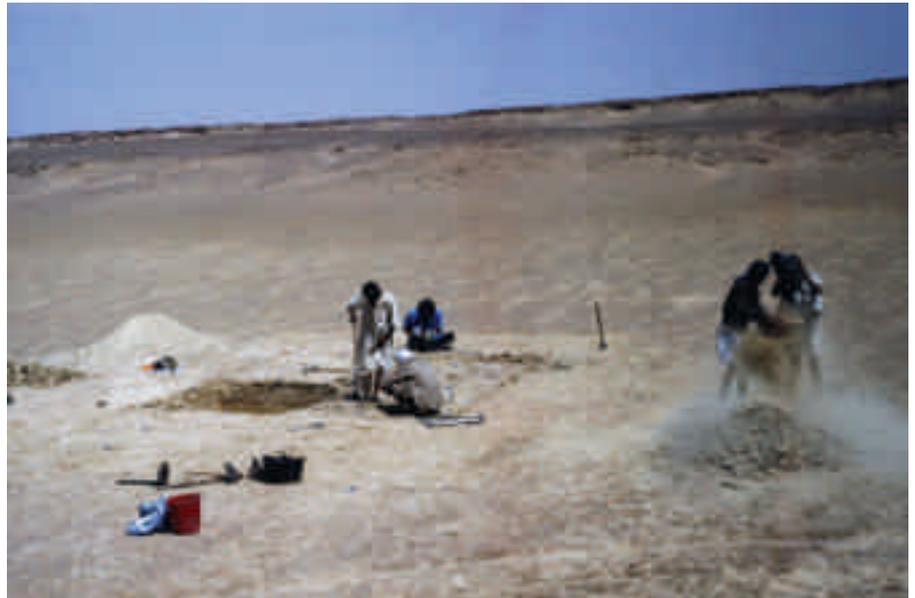


Figure 3 Siwa Oasis: the excavation of site 75/32



Figure 4 Siwan lithics: blade from site 76/20

investigating the Neolithic site of Merimde Beni Salame,¹⁰ as well as Middle Palaeolithic (c.50000 BP) sites in the Khatatba region.¹¹ The two main sites in the Khatatba region provided a vast



Figure 5 Siwan lithics: points from site 75/28

quantity of lithic material, much of which showed Levallois technique on both the flakes and cores.

From Egypt via the USA to the UK

After the end of the 1981 *Predynastic of Naqada* season, as part of a so-called *Partage* (division of finds) agreement, Hassan arranged with the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (later renamed the Supreme Council of Antiquities (SCA)) to take

about 500kg of archaeological material with him to Washington State University in the USA for further analysis.

These *Partage* agreements, undertaken at the end of a season of excavation, were commonplace in the 19th and early 20th centuries, but became rarer from the middle of the 20th century, and after the passing of Egyptian Law 117 in 1983, no archaeological remains could leave the country, unless the Permanent Committee of the SCA gave written permission for scientific study that could not be conducted in Egypt.

As Naqada was one of the major players in state formation in ancient Egypt, along with Abydos and Hierakonpolis, this material is one of the most important data sets excavated or collected relating to this period. While in the USA, some of the pottery from the Naqada collection was transported from Washington State University to the University of California for Renée Friedman to analyse as part of her doctoral research on settlement ceramics.¹² The lithic material from Naqada was studied in the USA by Dianne Holmes as part of her doctoral research undertaken at the Egyptology Department, UCL on Upper Egyptian lithic development.¹³ The lithic material from Siwa was examined by George Gross for his Master's dissertation at Washington State University.¹⁴

In 1994, Hassan was appointed Petrie Professor of Egyptian Archaeology at UCL, bringing his collections with him. Initially most of these objects were housed in an annexe to his office in 25 Gordon Street, where they could be handled or examined by students. Hassan's original intention was that more research should be undertaken on the material using UCL's scientific facilities. The following



Figure 6 Work in UCL storage: cataloguing the collection



Figure 7 Work in UCL storage: Tassie packing one of the black-topped red vases

year, when the Egyptology Department was incorporated into the Institute of Archaeology, the offices and Edwards Library were moved into the Institute building from their original homes in Gordon Street and DMS Watson Building. As Hassan's new office was not large enough to accommodate his study collections, they were placed in the off-site storage facilities of UCL.

Recording the collections and repatriation to Egypt

Due to Hassan's retirement in autumn 2008, the future of the collections needed to be secured. Throughout 2008 and 2009 Tassie and van Wetering had been archiving the paperwork, photographs and plans held in Hassan's office relating to his collections.

The search for new storage facilities for his collections led Hassan to offer the material as gift to the Egyptian Government via the agency of the SCA. After negotiations between Prof. Hassan, Prof. Stephen Shennan, Ian Carroll and the Secretary General of the SCA, Dr Zahi Hawass, it was decided that the collections should be catalogued and repacked before being shipped to Egypt. Therefore, in the summer of 2009 Tassie was put in charge of inventorying the collection (Fig. 6). The inventorying took three months with a further month to compile the resulting report. The initial process was the sorting of the material by site and broad material type. This entailed emptying the boxes, which often contained not only material from different sites, but also personal objects and some paperwork. Once the objects had been sorted the process of

repacking and inventorying could begin. However, due to its age (30+ years), much of the original packing matter had to be exchanged for modern material: zip-seal bags and acid free tissue. Photographs of a selection of artefacts from each box were also taken for inclusion in the report, these included items such as cylinder-seal impressions, a polished stone axe, complete pottery vessels and a painted wall section. The artefactual material was weighed, rather than counted, to speed the process of inventorying. The complete ceramic vessels presented specific problems, and needed to be carefully wrapped in acid-free tissue and placed within padded material so that they were not damaged in storage or transit (Fig. 7). Some of the ceramic vessels also required conservation treatment and partial restoration (Fig. 8). Several other items, such as bone awls, mud-palettes, siltstone palettes, and bullae were also treated in the same manner, being wrapped in acid-free tissue and placed in their own small containers within the larger boxes. The collection totalled 85 medium-sized boxes. The majority of the material from the *Predynastic of Naqada* Project comprised potsherds and lithic artefacts, with a few boxes of environmental remains (Figs 9, 10 and 11), while, the majority of the material from the Siwa and Western Desert projects comprised lithic artefacts, with a few boxes of environmental remains and one box of pottery.

The final report contained a listing of every bag, detailing what it contains and a photograph of a selection of artefacts contained in each box. Within a few weeks of the report being delivered to



Figure 8 Work in UCL storage: van Wetering examining sherds for reconstruction of vessels of the Naqada collection



Figure 9 A siltstone palette from the late Naqada II cemetery at Menchia Kh.3



Figure 10 A selection of bifacial tools from PWT.144

the SCA, Dr Hawass sent Khaled Saad, Director of the Prehistoric section of the SCA, and Mustafa Rezk Ibrahim to inspect the material and accompany it back to Egypt. This process involved checking the contents of the boxes against the inventory. With the help of Momart, a professional shipping company, the boxes were repacked into six large padded crates for transportation to Egypt (Figs 12 and 13). The collections eventually arrived in Egypt during early March 2010.

UCL Institute of Archaeology Collections Policy

The Institute of Archaeology has from its inception been actively concerned with the ethics of archaeology and collection. There has always been a progressive attitude towards the theory and practice of working with objects and archaeological material in general. Historically, it has been a complex process to formulate a policy around collecting, in order to decide what material is collected, how it enters the department and what happens



Figure 11 A black-topped red ware vessel (FS 613) with an ancient repair to its lower body from Menchia Kh.3, area VIII, Naqada I-IIB

to it while in the Institute's care, and its eventual disposition. The following is a brief history of Institute practice, which is relevant background to the history and movement of Hassan's material.

In 1934, when he founded the Institute of Archaeology, Mortimer Wheeler stated that one of its aims was to provide "training in fieldwork techniques and the ancillary skills needed for the proper recording of the publication of fieldwork".¹⁵ Another stated aim of the newly founded Institute was "to provide properly classified collections of material, derived where possible from scientifically conducted excavations, for the use of the student and the research worker".¹⁶

Inherent within these statements is the emphasis on the use and collection of provenanced material, from known sites, that has been legally acquired and collected. Judging from the Institute's records, this general principle of acquisition and collecting worked well until the 1980s. At that time financial pressures across the university sector, brought about by the politics of the day, led many institutions to consider ways of generating income.

By 1990 these financial explorations led the IoA to draft its first formal policy on the acceptance of objects and material coming into the department. This policy clearly states that "The Institute of Archaeology is totally opposed to the looting of and illegal export of antiquities and adheres to the *ICOM Code of Professional Ethics* which opposes acting 'in any way that could be regarded as benefiting such illicit trade, directly or indirectly'". This policy was applied to all the Institute's activities in relation to collecting and working with archaeological material, although it was specifically meant to apply to any prototype companies of the Institute.

The conception of this policy was the subject of much vehement debate and polarized arguments throughout the 1980s about collecting and the types of activities in which the Institute should be involved.



Figure 12 Ian Carroll, Khaled Saad and Mustafa Ibrahim overseeing the collections being loaded in the packing crates

In brief the Institute had, following encouragement from the management of UCL, considered setting up a commercial company to raise funds by allowing space to be rented to individuals to undertake paid analytical work and conservation. However, the actual and potential damage to the Institute's reputation and the lessons learnt from other institutions that had already set up companies, as well as opposition from within the Institute, led to the recognition that these fund-raising activities were counterproductive and not in keeping with the Institute's original founding ethics.¹⁷ This policy stayed in place until 1998 when further debate led to review and revision.

In 1999 the Institute took a unique and firm stance on the illicit trade in antiquities, by issuing the "Policy Statement of the Institute of Archaeology, London, Regarding the Illicit Trade in Antiquities". This lengthy document urges the Government to sign and ratify the 1970 *UNESCO Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property* and the 1995 *Unidroit Convention on Stolen and Illegally Exported Cultural Objects* and states the implications for staff in supporting this policy.¹⁸

There are a number of reasons why this policy came into being. Within the IoA there was a general agreement that the 1990 policy needed updating. Curatorially there was growing awareness that across UCL and in the IoA there was a need to manage all aspects of collecting to recognized standards, using established practices like the Museum Documentation Association's exit and entry procedures.

The Institute itself had undergone various course reviews, and was offering Master's Degree programmes across the heritage and archaeological sector, and was now increasingly involved in world archaeology. However, as the illicit trade in antiquities continued unabated, there was a pressing need for an institute concerned with all these issues to take an ethical stance. The 1999 policy resulted in a number of practical outcomes that allows the Institute to manage its collecting.

The 1999 policy was reinforced in 2009 by the launch of a UCL wide

Cultural Property Policy, which requires all staff across UCL to register centrally any material brought into the University. It defines cultural property as "individual objects, collections, specimens, structures, or sites identified as having artistic, historic, scientific, religious, or social significance, whether or not they are held and maintained principally for their contribution to knowledge and culture"¹⁹ and the policy applies to all UCL sites and activities both in the UK and abroad. A requirement of this policy is that all material brought into UCL for study is done so with the relevant legal permissions. Initially discussed in 2005, it came about as a recommendation from the enquiry into the high profile case concerning 654 incantation bowls that were brought into UCL's Hebrew Studies Department for doctoral research. Interestingly, not only does this document support and reinforce existing procedures and policies in place at the Institute, but the Archaeology Department is used as an example of good practice by UCL.

Returning to the subject of Hassan's Naqada and Siwa study collections, there were several press reports, particularly in the UK and Egypt. Most of the reporting concentrated on the quantity of material being returned, legal ownership and the original documentation surrounding the removal of the material.²⁰ It needs to be clearly stated here that the documents available demonstrated that the material had been legally excavated and exported from Egypt. The material's subsequent arrival at the Institute did not breach any national or international laws and



Figure 13 The crates being loaded onto the lorry by representatives from Momart for transportation to Egypt via Heathrow Airport

conformed to Institute collecting policy, which itself is based on international conventions.

The future of the collections

According to Dr Zahi Hawass and Khaled Saad, the collections will be stored initially and some items temporarily displayed in the Ahmed Fakry Museum in Dakhla Oasis, a museum dedicated to the prehistory of the Western Desert. The Western Desert collection may remain there and be put on permanent display. The Naqada collection will eventually be displayed in a new museum dedicated to the prehistory of Egypt, to be built at Naqada or Qena. It is hoped that with these two significant collections Egypt can create museum displays that will allow visitors to learn more about the prehistoric Egyptian cultures.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Obtained his doctorate from UCL, Institute of Archaeology in 2009 and is currently Honorary Research Fellow and Associate Lecturer at Winchester University and Director of the Wadi Tumilat and Kafr Hassan Dawood Excavation and Survey Project, Egypt. He has worked extensively with Prof. Hassan in the Delta, Sinai and Faiyum, where he undertook postdoctoral research.
- 2 Studied Egyptian Archaeology at Leiden University, Faculty of Archaeology and UCL, Institute of Archaeology. He is currently organizing the field documentation of the *Predynastic of Naqada* Project and preparing it for publication. He has worked extensively with Prof. Hassan in the Delta and Sinai.
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- F. A. Hassan, "Nagada (Naqada)", in *Encyclopedia of the archaeology of ancient Egypt*, K. Bard (ed.), 555–7 (London: Routledge, 1999).
- 7 A paper will be presented at the 4th International Conference on Predynastic and Early Dynastic Egypt, New York 2011; also J. van Wetering, "Re-locating De Morgan's Royal Tomb at Naqada and identifying its occupant", in *Northeastern Africa – new ideas and discoveries. Proceedings of the International Symposium on the Prehistory of Northeastern Africa*, M. Kobusiewicz & M. Chłodnicki (eds), (Poznan: Archaeological Museum, in press).
- 8 H. Junker, *Bericht über die von der Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien nach dem Westdelta entsendete Expedition (20. Dezember 1927 bis 25. Februar 1928)* (Vienna: Denkschriften der Kaiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften in Wien, Philosophisch-historische Klasse, 1928).
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- 10 Dr Z. Hawass invited Prof. Hassan and his team to collaborate in his investigations by studying the palaeoenvironment and prehistoric ecology of Merimde Beni Salame, using material from his excavations at the site. Z. Hawass, F. A. Hassan & A. Gautier, "Chronology, sediments, and subsistence at Merimde Beni Salama", *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 74, 31–8, 1988.
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- 14 G. T. Gross, *Six sites in the Siwa Region, Northwestern Egypt: lithic artifacts and subsistence*, unpublished MA dissertation (Pullman: Washington State University, 1980).
- 15 J. D. Evans, "The first half-century – and after", Golden Jubilee Lecture No. 1, *Institute of Archaeology (Golden Jubilee) Bulletin* 24, 3, 1987.
- 16 I. Thompson, "The study-collections of the Institute of Archaeology in Golden Jubilee", *Institute of Archaeology (Golden Jubilee) Bulletin* 24, 219, 1987.
- 17 K. Walker Tubb, "Point, counterpoint", London, regarding the illicit trade in antiquities" in *Illicit Antiquities: the theft of culture and the extinction of archaeology*, N. Brodie & K. Walker Tubb (eds), 280–300, One World Archaeology Series 42 (London: Routledge, 2002).
- 18 The UK Government eventually accepted the 1970 UNESCO convention in 2002, although have still not fully ratified it, and subscription to the 1995 Unidroit agreement is still awaited.
- 19 2009 UCL policy: <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/cultural-property/policy.shtml>
- 20 The media attention attracted by the repatriation of so many objects unfortunately led some writers to speculate that this material was being returned to Egypt as part of the ongoing process by the SCA to retrieve smuggled and illegally exported artefacts. However, *Al-Ahram Weekly* 11–17 March correctly reported that the artefacts were legally given to Hassan as part of an agreement on the division of finds: <http://sites.google.com/site/weeklyahramorgeg/home-1/prehistoric-objects-to-go-to-dakhla>. *Art News* Spring 2010, although questioning the legal ownership of the objects, agreed that they had been legitimately exported, and that the Institute had acted ethically and legally.