

Commentary I: Flinders Petrie, *A Digger's Life*

Our task for today is to compare the historical Indiana Jones with Egyptologist Flinders Petrie, as seen in Petrie's account of his experience overseeing an excavation. There are many themes we could focus on, but several recur in his writings more often than others. First, let's talk about the general lack of cinematic adventure in actual excavations or expeditions. So much of Petrie's account is that of a quiet man living alone on the fringes of the Egyptian desert, getting up each day to read some books, review his account books, pay the wages of his men, and take a brisk stroll to see how well a pit is being excavated. Hardly the exciting stuff of Hollywood! When I was doing my own research reading through the field diaries of Aurel Stein in northwestern China—you'll encounter plenty of him in this course—I was struck by just how little of interest there was in most of what he wrote on a daily basis. A single journal might contain 400 pages of handwritten text, but perhaps only 3-4 pages worth was deemed sufficiently interesting or memorable to make it into my research notes. So much is instead merely the mundane work of applying STEM skills in the field while swatting away bugs: making maps, taking photos, developing those photos (an arduous task in the old days), making notes about dimensions of pits, documenting the number of miles walked that day, calculating mathematical equations related to your excavations, etc. We could also note that the archaeologist himself rarely does any actual physical labor. Recall the humorous quote when Petrie describes his daily eggs being cooked for his morning breakfast—quite a leisurely morning indeed! As is clear from Petrie's account, almost any activity that might cause a sweat is left to the unskilled local laborers—Petrie valorizes the labor of the mind, not of the hand (that's actually a fairly recurrent theme in all of human history). Along with that theme is the pejorative attitudes toward the natives. We can think of any number of examples from Petrie's text to support this point, for they are legion. The local Arabs are described as acting like children (often they actually are children!), they are unreflective, unthinking, mechanical, incapable of creative or higher thought. Obviously, so this line of reasoning goes, they need a more capable man—and a more capable mind—to guide them toward productive action. More often than not, this man ends up being cast in racial and intellectual terms—he is a white man who practices science. Note Petrie's quote about how the “faces of the men are the best guide” to their abilities—a great example of the influence of anthropometry. Also, the locals believe in *jinn*s (genies), but Petrie believes in rational deduction from the evidence. The local dark-skinned people don't appreciate their own history, but he does—and he preserves it in the “right” way (i.e., scientific way). Ultimately, this serves to justify Petrie's removal of artifacts: he claims to be removing them from a dense, mechanical, racially inferior people who are incapable of preserving or learning from these objects in a rational, evidence-based, scientific way that serves a greater good. With that lofty abstract discourse in hand, the Western archaeologist manages to distinguish himself from all his competitors in the field: Petrie describes the “immoral” trade of local antiquities dealers and the “thieves” who steal stuff from his digs. But from another perspective, we could simply say that all these people are engaged in a fairly similar activity: trying to make a living from the simple act of removing old objects from the ground. Finally, we can also think of the constant valorization of Jewish, Greek, and Roman history—the preferred lineage of Western civilization, and the only things worth collecting for the historical Indiana Jones. The Muslim legacies of all these lands—and most lands targeted by Western archaeologists will have long Muslim pasts—are completely ignored, and often scorned. But it is not only that the Greco-Roman and Hebraic-Christian past is preferred—it also is singled out as the key influence in anything admirable in local populations. Recall Petrie's quote in which he says that one group of local women don't

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have the “oppressive” custom of veiling like other Egyptian women do—and then he ascribes that custom to Greek colonization of this area in the distant past!

We can also be a bit bold and highlight some convergences between Petrie and the historical Indiana Jones that perhaps aren't so reprehensible. In this category we might note the generally voluntary nature of collaboration between the foreign archaeologist and local laborers—that is, Petrie, despite all his tasteless criticisms and dismissive attitudes towards the locals, does clearly pay his workers fair market wages, and no one is working for him because they are forced to. Indeed, the demand for work opportunities under his payroll vastly outpaces the number of jobs he has to offer. Remember that the historical Indiana Jones can't do anything if the locals—both elites and lower classes—don't have a positive incentive (from their perspective) to engage him and help him. You can't just walk into other countries and do whatever you want. Voluntary help is needed. This can be easy to forget when we only see the public accounts intended for public consumption. When we start reading private diaries and the like, we'll see that most archaeologists admitted in private that they had to treat the locals with respect, and that the power balance was not nearly as much in his favor as he often made it appear to be in public accounts (and this account from Petrie is a public, published account, not private—which means he edited/censored it to cater to an audience back home). Also, you could note that Petrie doesn't replicate his pejorative views toward everyone in Egypt—he does occasionally say nice things about Arabs who are higher up the social and economic ladder, and sometimes these people even become friends. In other words, most Western archaeologists simply project the same class, gender, and cultural biases abroad as they did back in their own countries, where they also looked down upon the laboring masses and said similarly insulting things about them.