

# Creating Voices: Ancient to Modern at the Petrie Museum

Debbie Challis\*

How do you voice the ancient past? How do you speak a language, the pronunciation of which is contested? Can animate objects speak and if they could, what stories would they tell? Who has the right to make those decisions? These questions cannot be answered in this paper and arguably not at all. However, I hope to go some way to understanding ideas behind voicing the ancient past, the potential of storytelling around objects from Egypt and enabling the visitor to speak with and to the museum space and material. The first session of the seminar series 'Voices in (and around) the Museum', hosted by the UCL Mellon Programme, aimed to explore how voices and sounds emanating from objects affect research, collecting and display in the internal and external spaces of the museum. Here I argue that understanding more about 'voices' in the museum can assist us with exploring that nebulous 'in-between' space, the space between the story of the object as presented by the museum and the object as perceived by the visitor, rather than simply directing an interpretation narrative.

Oral histories around various themes and objects have long created voices in the museum, whether as part of a project to understand more about the objects – such as Manchester Museum's 'Collective Conversations' project – or to collect oral histories as 'objects' in themselves, like the Museum of London's 'London's Voices' project.<sup>1</sup> Obviously, however, there are no Ancient Egyptians to give us their insights into object use or histories. The nearest we can get to hearing the Ancient Egyptians speak is in the written words they left behind, whether in hieroglyphs on inscriptions, fragments on *ostraca* (fragments of pottery used as surfaces for inscriptions) and letters, lists or literary writings on papyri.

The UCL Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology has almost 80,000 objects, including a large collection of papyri from the Middle Kingdom (2134 – 1782 BC) as well as later periods. Although much of this papyrus is fragmentary, it gives tantalising glimpses of peoples' lives as well as of the literature of Ancient Egypt. The curator of the Petrie Museum, Stephen Quirke, suggested using some of the fragments of our papyrus to creatively draw on Ancient Egypt. Papyri thus became a 'social object' used to spark creative conversations with participants in the group (cf. Simon 2010). However, before I explain this in more detail, it is worth thinking about how we hear Ancient Egypt today and why we felt using objects as conduits for creative and social conversations was appropriate.

## Talk like an Egyptian

The main writing associated with Ancient Egypt is, of course, the hieroglyphs. The iconicity of hieroglyphics has positioned them as a visible language between drawing and writing, but where in this fluidity does sound or speech exist? Jan Assmann has pointed to the use of hier-

oglyphs on monuments to make impermanent existence permanent:

This was the 'sacred space of permanence' that, as a communicational situation, was open to the divine. In this space one became physically present through monuments and gained speech and voice through hieroglyphs. (1994: 26)

Monuments and *stelae* inscribed with hieroglyphs are therefore vocal objects, making a further case for bringing the voices of Ancient Egypt to life in the museum.

*Digital Egypt for Universities* is a website aimed at introducing the Petrie Museum's objects from all periods of Ancient Egypt to higher education students in Egyptology and other disciplines. One of the features of the site is bringing sound to papyrus and explaining how the different scripts – hieroglyphic, hieratic, demotic and Coptic – for the Egyptian language were used in different times and in different spaces. The site explains the uncertainties around the sound of the Egyptian language, due in part to the absence of vowels in earlier scripts, and the differing views on the sounds and position of the vowels. It is generally agreed that the 'language seems not to have changed substantially between the Late Egyptian (from New Kingdom, starting 1550 BC) and Coptic phases.' (Digital Egypt for Universities 2002) Arguably the 'lack of knowledge on vowels brings two advantages':

1. It provides a cultural continuity to modern Egypt, because Arabic too can be written without vowels.
2. It opens the eye and ear of the reader to the variability of sound, obscured in reading more familiar writing. If it seems hard to 'hear' the Ancient Egyptians speaking their language, just as it is hard for us to hear Shakespeare or Chaucer, do we know what they or their readers in each period and place sounded like? (Digital Egypt for Universities 2002)

\* Audience Development Officer,  
Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL,  
London WC1E 6BT, United Kingdom

*Digital Egypt* gives a range of experiments in the pronunciation and use of Ancient Egyptian as a human language. As an example, read the extract below from the 'Prophecy of Neferty' while listening to the experimental reading of it:

itrw Sw nw kmt  
 DA.tw mw Hr rdwy  
 tw r HH mw n aHaw r sqdw.f  
 wAt.f xpr.ti m wDb.f  
 Ts r nt  
 st mw r nty m st wDb  
 iw rsw r xsf m mHyf  
 nn pt m TAw wa  
 iw Apdw DrDri r mst m XAt nt tA-mHw  
 ir.n.f sS Hr gswy  
 stkn sw rmT n gAw

The river of Egypt is dry,  
 the water is crossed on foot.  
 Water is sought for boats for its sailings.  
 Its course is turned into its shore,  
 its sand back into flood,  
 the place of water into what should be the place  
 of the shore.  
 The south wind does battle with the north wind,  
 there will be not one wind for the sky.  
 Alien birds will give birth in the pool of the Delta.

It has made a nest on the (Delta) fringes,  
 even approaching people out of famine.<sup>2</sup>



**Audio Clip 1:** <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/literature/nefertytransl.html#6>

This academic information is useful in a museum context as it gives a voice, however rudimentary and experimental, to part of the Ancient Egyptian language, allowing the visitor to consider how some Ancient Egyptians may have sounded and spoken.

### Voicing Ancient Egypt

Another way of 'recreating' the voice of Ancient Egypt is to literally give life to some of the documents left behind by translating them and placing them in context, often through characterisation. On the BBC History website 'Voices from Ancient Egypt Gallery', John Ray has collected six different voices found on material from Ancient Egypt:

The letters, temple carvings and coffin inscriptions of Ancient Egyptians offer us an insight into the private life of an extraordinary civilisation. The collection of readings performed here range across 3,000 years; they include a letter from a king, a princess's prayer and the dream of a temple dancer. These are the testimonies of real people, citizens of Ancient Egypt; some important, others

less so, but all very much alive in the words that survive them. (Ray 2011)

This idea of voicing citizens of Ancient Egypt has been influential in museum interpretations. For example, the World Museum in Liverpool created stock characters based on the kind of writings that actors can perform in videos amongst the display, such as a servant girl gossiping about other servants. The idea of these characters is to give glimpses into everyday life in Ancient Egypt in the new gallery devoted to the period, which re-opened in December 2009.

One of the problems with this kind of approach can be heard in a rare recording of Tutankhamen's trumpet, which was played by a bandsman for the BBC in 1939. Such an instrument would never be played again today for obvious concerns around the safety of the object. This recording is useful for people wanting to recreate the sound of the ancient instrument. However, the trumpet is played in the band traditions of the British army and, though no denigration to the player is intended, it is Ancient Egypt as perceived by 1930s Britain.<sup>3</sup> The problem with imaginatively recreating voices or characters from Ancient Egypt is heard in Tutankhamen's trumpet: the characters recreated and enacted will always reflect contemporary concerns and positions from within both scholarship and the museum.

### Voicing Objects

Nina Simon (2010: chapter 4) outlines the ability of the objects to spark conversation, link to social experiences and become 'social objects' in *The Participatory Museum*. Simon argues that giving museum visitors the tools 'to discuss, share and socialize around the objects' can create a more accessible and engaging museum with greater relevance to people. There is a problem with this idea, which Simon admits, as visitors do not always have the same emotional investment in objects, while other items are not always obvious conversation pieces. Simon's model may be said to work more for objects relating to 'social history' or forms of shared history, but ancient objects need a little more facilitation.

Drawing on the idea of voicing Ancient Egyptians creatively, fiction and imagination can be used in a social way to produce 'creative objects' that can also give voices to visitors and their visions of Ancient Egypt. The 'Creating Traditions' workshop at the Petrie Museum was a literary trigger for creativity around the participants' own histories, ideas and two pieces of museum papyri. This idea was based in part on my own interest in the way the Imagist poet H.D. fleshed out textual fragments of the ancient Greek poet Sappho. It was also informed by a Grenadian group who came to the Petrie Museum as part of a course looking at archives, petitions and personal history. The group was led by writer Aysha Johnson and historian Gemma Romain to link African traditions and history from Egypt through to the modern Caribbean. In this workshop the group found original ideas and creativity in the gaps between fragmented histories and identities.

In 2010 and 2011, the Petrie Museum ran the creative writing / speaking workshop called 'Creating Traditions' based on two small fragments of literary composition as an inspiration for people to create their own stories in the museum. This was influenced by the 2010 Camden Black History theme around 'Inner-city Griots' based on the role of a 'griot', a performer of stories and histories in words and music in parts of West Africa (Lott 2002). We used two fragments of literary papyrus to enable modern Griots to draw creatively on Ancient Egypt. The first fragment of papyrus (UC32156a) is the beginning of a literary composition from Lahun in the Late Middle Kingdom (1991-1782 BC):

There was a man called Neferpesdjjet,  
Who was a bold commoner [. . .]  
[. . .] belonging to [him], called. . . i  
Who was the commander, [who directed?] the  
porters.  
Then those porters said to him [. . .]  
It is good to make bread for you and sweet to  
make beer for you and all . . . ,  
but what are you going to have made for us.  
(Collier and Quirke 2004: 35)

The second (UC32271b) is part of a literary composition from the same place and period, and has the only known reference to 'lotus-eaters' in Egyptian literature:

Inundated [. . .], I being loved  
I am given things (?). Let me be given sweetness,  
let (me) be given  
love, by the openers of the house, by  
the consumers of lotus-plants. Indeed surpasses  
love of me in the body of  
everyone, hour. (Collier and Quirke 2004: 51)

The papyri were brought out for participants to look at so they could get a sense of the physical nature of the object and then, led by Johnson, the group used them as a conduit for creating their own stories within the museum. The workshop was originally planned for Black History Month in October 2010, but we found it more effective for groups who already knew each other, and were comfortable with discussing their own histories and interests. Therefore we re-ran it in 2011 for a group from Croydon Supplementary Education Project, who saw the papyri, looked around the Petrie displays and then continued work at their base in Croydon.<sup>4</sup> The group was mainly comprised of mothers with young children, whose stories linked to oral memories and stories about migration, mostly featuring women. We encouraged them to give their own voices to the papyri and continue the project in their groups outside the museum. Admittedly these were ephemeral voices, but ones that could also be heard externally.

Another entirely different project that the Petrie Museum has worked on together with the UCL Grant Museum of Zoology is a digital learning environment called 'Soundscapes'. The finished product is both an interactive and educational resource for UCL students. The environment's digital format allows for the incorpora-

tion of a combination of media such as images, sounds, and videos about Ancient Egypt. The objective of applying such media to a digital learning environment is to engage students not only through what they read, but what they see and hear. 'Soundscapes' will initially focus on the story of the hunter versus the hunted, drawing on images from both the Petrie and Grant archives and stock sounds from media businesses. At the moment, this is a project for higher education students, but there is scope for extending the experience to the visitor. Ultimately, our difficulty in such a small space as the Petrie is embedding these sounds and voices within the experience of visiting the museum itself.

Using creative writing to give voice to the ancient objects in the museum and make connections with communities whose histories are connected to those objects is the focus of a poetry residence in 2012. The Petrie Museum in partnership with the Poetry Translation Centre have been awarded Arts Council Grant for the Arts funding for a four month residency for acclaimed Sudanese poet Al Saddiq Al Raddi. Saddiq will work with objects from Meroë in Sudan to give voice to them and articulate feelings about Sudanese history. This work will assist Petrie staff and community groups in interpreting these objects and history in the new museum space. Our aim in the new Petrie Museum is to build on our work in this area and articulate multiple voices through community participation to speak the museum, objects and ancient histories. In this way we aim to give Ancient Egypt and Sudan many voices that can speak to visitors in the present and the future.

## Notes

- 1 More about and examples from the Manchester Museum's 'Collective Conversations' project, which started in 2004, can be found on the museum website: <http://www.museum.manchester.ac.uk/community/collectiveconversations/> [Accessed 1 September 2011]. The 2003-04 oral history project 'London's Voices' can be found on the Museum of London's website: <http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/archive/londonsvoices/default.asp> [Accessed 1 September 2011].
- 2 Prophecy of Neferty, 6. (Papyrus Hermitage 1116B, lines 26 to 30), *Digital Egypt for Universities* (2002): <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/literature/nefertytransl.html#6> [Accessed 1 September 2011].
- 3 A recent radio programme on this performance, Ghost Music, re-broadcast the sound of Tutankhamen's trumpet to the world. The trumpet sound can still be heard in a news article on the BBC News website. See Christine Finn, 'Recreating the Sound of Tutankhamen's Trumpet', updated 18 April 2011, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-13092827> [Accessed 8 September 2011].
- 4 Croydon Supplementary Education Project (CSEP) is a leading provider of supplementary education programmes for the Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) Community in Croydon. <http://www.csep.org.uk/> [Accessed 29 May 2012].

## References

- Assmann, J** 1994 Ancient Egypt and the Materiality of the Sign. In: Ulrich Gumbrecht, H and Ludwig Pfeiffer, K (eds.) *Materialities of Communication*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 15-31.
- Collier, M** and **Quirke, S** 2004 *The UCL Lahun Papyri: Religious, Literary, Legal, Mathematical and Medical*. Oxford: Archaeopress.
- Digital Egypt for Universities** 2002 *Audio Examples of Different Languages Spoken in Ancient Egypt*. Available at: <http://www.digitalegypt.ucl.ac.uk/sound/index.html> [Accessed 1 September 2011].
- Lott, J** 2002 Keepers of History. *Research Penn State Website*. Available at: <http://www.rps.psu.edu/0205/keepers.html> [Accessed 1 September 2011].
- Ray, J** 2011 Voices from Ancient Egypt Galley. *BBC Website*. Available at: [http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/human\\_gallery.shtml](http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/ancient/egyptians/human_gallery.shtml) [Accessed 6 September 2011].
- Simon, N** 2010 *The Participatory Museum*. Santa Cruz CA: Museum 2.0.