

Going head to



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Debbie Challis examines the curious 19th-century eugenic theories that inspired Flinders Petrie to travel to Egypt to collect archaeological data illustrating what he thought were the different racial types



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Among the numerous trays of terracotta antiquities in the collection of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology (part of University College London) is a drawer marked 'Memphis "Race" Heads'. It contains 57 small heads, probably from terracotta figurines, dating from the Ptolemaic or Roman period (300 BC–AD 400). Occasionally one of Petrie's original labels on yellowing paper demarcates a 'race type' for a particular head. These are just a small fraction of about 300 heads preserved in the Petrie Museum collection but no other drawer is labelled in this way and it was probably done for

teaching purposes by the archaeologist William Matthew Flinders Petrie (1853-1942). Like so many other anthropologists and archaeologists of this period, Petrie believed in a fixed racial hierarchy defined by the then assumed norms of Western civilisation, as well as the size and shape of crania, indicating brain size. He also held that a person's facial features portrayed his, or her, moral characteristics imprinted by generations of genetic inheritance.

Petrie thought the heads that he collected 'were the figures of more than a dozen races', made by Graeco-Egyptian artists who were carefully recording 'foreigners' in Memphis. He used examples from

1. William Matthew Flinders Petrie circa 1897. © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

2. Front and side view of unlabelled terracotta head. UC48550. © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

3. Front and side view of woman's head. UC48514.

4. Front and side view of 'Ptah Priest'. UC 48519.

his own period to ascribe identities to these heads; arguing, for example, that one head (UC48515) was 'Hebrew' due to its facial resemblance to 'a modern Jewish Type coming from Germany'. Another head (UC84527) Petrie designated as Persian commenting that it showed the 'high-bred Aryan type' typical of the 'magnificent creation' of the Persian Empire. Yet, similar heads and figurines were produced across the Hellenistic world; there is, for example, a vast collection of them from Smyrna (now Izmir in Turkey) displayed in the Louvre.

It is extremely difficult to discover the function of these terracotta heads. They could have been

head with race



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used for satirical, votive, decorative or medical purposes or for a combination of these. What we do know, both from inscriptions on stone and papyri, is that Memphis was an international city in which groups of Egyptian, Jewish, Greek, Macedonian, Roman, Persian, and

other peoples lived side by side. So, while these figures fit into a wider pattern of production with similar terracottas across the Hellenistic world, their heads give us a glimpse of the ethnic diversity in Memphis. Whether these ancient figures are religious offerings or racial

5. 'Hebrew' head, UC48515.

6. 'Aryan' head, UC84527.

7. Front and side view of 'Foreigner' head. UC48527.

8. Drawer of heads, marked the 'Memphis "Race" Terracottas' collected and labelled by Flinders Petrie and held in the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

stereotypes depends on who is looking at them. Petrie's emphasis on racial types in reading these heads and the lack of archaeological information about their discovery makes any contemporary interpretation of them problematic.

The discovery of the heads featured in *The Times* on 15 May 1908. Petrie probably fed the story to the newspaper, knowing of the interest in defining race at that time. He later emphasised their importance in his excavation report:

'The absence of any collection of ancient portraiture of races, beyond that which I made in Egypt twenty-two years ago, leaves the identification of these very varied types to



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depend entirely upon chance observation... Unfortunately archaeology, like literary scholarship, too often leaves the weightier matters of the world's history neglected. There is not even any series of composite portrait heads from coins, which are greatly needed for the character study of celebrated kings'.

(Petrie, *Memphis II*, 1909)

Here, Petrie refers back to his 1886-87 expedition to collect casts and photographs of 'racial types' from monuments and sculpture in Egypt, as well as underlining his belief that character could be discerned in the features of the face.

This project had been commissioned by the British Association for the Advancement of Science (BAAS), who set up a committee at their 1886 annual meeting 'for the purpose of procuring with the help of Mr Flinders Petrie, Racial Photographs from the Ancient Egyptian Pictures and Sculptures'. The polymath scientist Francis

Galton chaired the committee, which was composed of eminent men from across the scientific world. They included the collector and archaeologist General Pitt-Rivers; the zoologist Professor William H Flower; the surgeon and anatomist Professor Alexander Macalister; the geologist and geographer Frederick W Rudler; and British Museum Keeper and founding member of the Egypt Exploration Fund, Reginald Stuart-Poole. When it was discovered that the grant was insufficient, Francis Galton personally gave Petrie further funds of around £300.

Stuart-Poole listed the most important subjects for Petrie to capture, which mainly included monuments from the time of the 19th Dynasty (1292-1186 BC) when Seti I and Ramses II were defending the large Egyptian empire from growing powers in the region. Petrie's main site for his BAAS commission was in and around Luxor; namely the Luxor temple, the temple complex

9. The Northern Race from the Tomb of Merenptah, No. 774 in Petrie's Racial Photographs (1887) © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.

10. Amorites from the West Pylon at the Ramesseum, No.s. 146-8 in Petrie's Racial Photographs (1887) © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology.

11. Two rows of captives are shown being led away by Ramses III before Amen-Ra on the inside doorway of First Pylon of the temple of Medinet Habu.

at Karnak, temples around Thebes, and tombs in the Valley of the Kings. Before the trip Petrie outlined to Galton his preferred option of making a 'squeeze' [a moulding or cast of an object, or an impression or copy of a design, obtained by pressing a pliable substance round or over it]; he squeezed soft, thin paper moistened with paste into a relief so that an impression was made which could then be turned into a mould for a cast.

The scale of Petrie's task was immense and perilous for often he made squeezes of heads reaching out while perched up high on rickety ladders. On the West Bank of the Nile in the Temple of Ramses III (1186-1155 BC) at Medinet Habu, he took casts of captives dedicated to Amen from the First Pylon, which is 27 metres high and 65 metres long. Inside is a procession showing vanquished people being led into captivity from which Petrie took casts.

Both the casts and photographs that Petrie took at Thebes were put on display at the BAAS annual meeting at Manchester in 1887 and a report was published later the same year. There are few original copies of this report and the photographs in it are very small: for example, the image of a member of the Northern Race (8) from the Tomb of Merenptah KV8 (Racial Photographs No. 774), while the photograph of a cast from the West Pylon at the Ramesseum shows Amorites (Racial Photographs No. 174-178). Before the casts entered the collections of the British Museum, they were exhibited at the South Kensington Museum as 'Syrian portraits', under the auspices of the Palestine Exploration Fund (PEF), from October 1887 until early 1888. These Racial Photographs became intertwined





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with biblical archaeology and the faces were seen as Old Testament types by a 19th-century audience.

Francis Galton chaired and almost single-handedly supported Petrie's BAAS expedition and his thinking influenced the drive to create a visual typography of race in ancient Egypt. Galton had been observing genetic inheritance since the 1860s and, in 1883, he published *Inquiries into Human Faculty* in which the term 'eugenics', from the Greek for 'good' 'blood' or 'stock', was coined. (Here, I should stress that 19th-century genetic studies, although the forerunners to modern genetics, differ vastly from contemporary research.) It was in this book that Galton referred to the correspondence he shared with Petrie about visual arithmetic describing him as possessing 'one of the most striking examples of visualising power it is possible to imagine'.

By 1886, Petrie and Galton had established a friendly working relationship and their mutual interest in race and genetic inheritance was shared with a wider number of individuals working in archaeology, anthropology, geography, biblical studies and philology. It is that interest and those connections that inspired Petrie's journey to Egypt to collect 'racial types' from its ancient monuments and these examples informed his later work.

Galton and his eugenic ideas had a profound influence on Petrie: from New Race theory in his 1896 Naqada excavations, to skull-collecting for the National Eugenics Laboratory at UCL until the 1930s, to his advocacy of sterilisation of the 'unfit' along eugenic principles in his polemical *Janus in Modern Life* published in 1907.

There are numerous examples from across Petrie's work that could illustrate his attitude to race, but it is

most vividly seen in a three-dimensional chart that Petrie published as guidance in creating compound diagrams. In 1902, in the anthropological journal *Man*, Petrie mapped out the mean of five variable dimensions of skulls belonging to different ethnic groups and plotted them on a 'sheet of other components, the races of the hottest climates being at the top of the chart and the coldest at the base, the least intelligent at the left hand and the most intelligent at the right'. Although this paper is about statistical tools, Petrie's view of the hierarchy of different peoples and the importance of skull shape – both brain capacity and facial features – is clear.

Petrie applied his eugenic ideas about family inheritance and reading the head for positive and negative characteristics to himself. He took pride in his family lineage and in the first chapter of his autobiography, published in 1931, he detailed his genealogy; he thought he had inherited characteristics from his forebears, such as the 'handling of men and materials' from his paternal grandfather. He wholly attributed his skills to his genetic inheritance, echoing Galton's premise that it is nature, not nurture, that shapes not only our noses but our intellect, our morality and our other personality traits. Even during his final illness he making plans for the future of his own head that he believed to be important to science.

Some 30 years after excavating and collecting the terracotta heads at Memphis, Petrie died in Jerusalem in July 1942 and was buried in the Protestant cemetery on the summit of Mount Zion – but his head was not. Then 35 years later, in 1977, it was found by Barbara Adams, the then assistant curator at the Petrie Museum, in the Royal College of Surgeons in London.

12. The First Pylon of the temple of Medinet Habu on the West Bank at Luxor.

13. and 14. details from the inside doorway of the first Pylon of Medinet Habu showing conquered? sea peoples, identified by Flinders Petrie as Teucrians, being into captivity.

Unless otherwise marked, all the photographs are © Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL (www.ucl.ac.uk/museums/petrie).

Petrie's head had been sent there in confused circumstances in the midst of the Second World War.

According to a letter in the Petrie Museum Archives from Dr WE Thompson, the chief bacteriologist of the hospital in which Petrie died, the archaeologist had asked for his skull to be sent back to London as a 'specimen of a typical British skull'. Petrie clearly believed himself to be a perfect specimen of a 'British type' with a head and skull worth future study. This final donation by to an institution is testament to his lifelong belief in and study of eugenics and his belief in the power of reading the head to understand the identity and personality of a person. ■

• *The Archaeology of Race: The Eugenic Ideas of Francis Galton and Flinders Petrie* by Debbie Challis is published in hardback by Bloomsbury at £65.

