

Borderlines: questions of definition among the documentary and pictorial archives amid the collections of the Petrie Museum

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(PLATES LIX–LXII) *

Gli archivi dei musei oltrepassano certi confini eretti tradizionalmente tra l'archeologia e la storia, tra gli oggetti e i documenti. Questo contributo presenta esempi del Petrie Museum che complicano la vita al confine, e identifica come atomo della ricerca scientifica l'unità di informazione che unisce, e può essere analizzata come, fonti multiple — permettendo la scissione di quell'atomo.

Introduction: is it real?

The identity and status of items floating between object collection and archive seem most acute with the replica or cast, an issue that affects all object collections. « Is it real? » means « is it ancient? » in a gallery of antiquities, disturbed by exhibition replica as much as by fakes.¹ How do we make sense of this strange object worldview? Object-numbering strategies in one collection over many decades may reveal how casts destabilise the Knowledge Project, with the same subversive power as the unrecognised forgery.

In 1999-2002, with government funding through the Designation Challenge Fund, Petrie Museum staff at UCL completed registration of the collections, at just under 80,000 object numbers, and successfully delivered online basic data (object name, date, number, provenance, material) together with a word-searchable description field and 80,000 digital images. Though awaiting an upgrade with edited descriptions, the database remains one of the largest illustrated online museum catalogues for general and specialist research access. Digitisation was made enormously swifter by a decision seven decades earlier. Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) had treated « his » collection as a mass of parallel sub-collections without any unifying identifiers, resulting in literally dozens of Petrie Collection nr. 1. Even each script had its own *ostraca* series, giving different Greek, Hieratic, and Coptic « no.1 »s; each narrow subject specialist will not notice how unmanageable this is for any museum trying to provide quick access to material for all different specialisms. In 1935 his successor Stephen Glanville arrived from the British Museum, and introduced the principle of a unique primary identifier for each object. The

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1. M. JONES, *Why fakes matter?*, London 1993.