

Petrie Curator Stephen Quirke on Xia Nai and His Egyptian Bead Corpus

In the archaeology of China, Xia Nai is famous as "the principal force" in energizing the discipline after the founding of the People's republic in 1949; he deserves equal fame in the archaeology of Egypt, from his remarkable doctoral thesis on Ancient Egyptian Beads, but war and post-war emergency prevented publication of his "systematic study of one of the most important kinds of Egyptian antiquities", and his name remains largely unknown in Egyptology (see Edward Field and Wang Tao, "Xia Nai: the London connection", in *Orientalia* 28, 1997, 38-41). As argued in the first chapter of the thesis, the bead is an unparalleled guide to the past, partly from its quantity and spread in the archaeological record, partly from the variety of choices in form, material and technique. Recognising this, Flinders Petrie (1853-1942) had assembled a unique chronological typology of beads at University College London (where he was Professor 1892-1933), but had never been able to analyse and assess the great collection. The task would fall to Xia Nai in 1938 as the topic of his PhD dissertation, awarded by the University of London in 1946.

The extensive archaeological archives of the Petrie Museum include two copies of the PhD and, the foundation of his research, the 1760 index cards for his meticulous corpus of the Petrie bead collection. This UCL asset is especially precious as it predates the upheavals of packing, repacking and postwar unpacking of the collections; the cards take us closer to dates of excavation or purchase, and are often the only surviving trace of primary documentation essential to assessing the original use, position and date of the individual beads or strings of beads. The chronological scope of the Petrie Museum extends far beyond the disciplinary confines of philological Egyptology, covering the six millennia from the Fayoum Neolithic to the first millennium AD (excluding the small number of second millennium AD examples that seem to have been intended to complete the technological range for the glass beads in particular). The contents are therefore of importance not only for archaeologists working on the material culture of Bronze Age Egypt, but equally for prehistorians, Romanists, and archaeologists of the Byzantine and early Islamic periods.

The cards allow a full appreciation of the great research operation as developed by Xia Nai; his characteristically meticulous attention to detail in recording is sustained across the entire chronological series that had accumulated at UCL from the work of Flinders Petrie and his contemporaries and immediate successors.

Xia Nai notes how subjective it is to separate beads from amulets in archaeology: he cites the colonial classic study by Winifred Blackman, *Fellahin of Upper Egypt* (London 1927), for the observation that "in modern Egypt, necklaces of ordinary blue beads are worn as charms against the evil eye" (p.6). This observation could be greatly expanded with more extensive documentation from the great collection of materials worn for health, assembled by Dr Tawfik Canaan in Palestine during the early twentieth century, under English occupation. Future research may reunite what

anthropology and archaeology have divided between them. For the initial study of the beads, scientific analysis required a hypothetical, testable base, the fictive "objective", and so the question was left suspended, bracketed for the future: the bead was accepted as the non-figurative form, leaving intact the category of Amulets as the part of the collection published by Petrie under that name two decades earlier (Xia Nai, *Ancient Egyptian Beads*, p.6-7). The summary offered to readers implies a whole future research programme: "throughout this essay, the term "beads" is used in this qualified sense, that is, it includes ordinary beads and pendants, but excluding amulets" (p.7).

Further reading on Xia Nai in London:

Ucko, Peter and Wang Tao, 2007. Early archaeological fieldwork practice and syllabuses in China and England. In P. Ucko et al. (eds.), *From Concepts of the Past to Practical Strategies: the teaching of archaeological field techniques*, Saffron Press, pp.35-56