Archival Survey of The Joint Expeditions

Introduction:
The Joint Expedition to Ur of the Chaldees (in modern day Iraq) by the Penn Museum and the British Museum provided both of these institutions with a wealth of unique objects between the years 1922 and 1934. The archaeological work at Ur occurred during a time when archaeologists could bring a portion of the objects they excavated back to their own countries. This project examined the process of excavation and dividing archaeological materials from Ur between three museums -- the Penn Museum, the British Museum, and the Baghdad Museum. Looking at archival documents, I have been able to identify conflicts caused by this process and determine how archaeological materials were valued by various parties to the excavation. The archival records have also helped revealed how the press shaped public knowledge of ancient Ur.

Methods:
I analyzed hundreds of archival documents in my examination, and my results summarize data collected in the following surveys:
• review of expedition documents from the Penn Museum Archives and Ur Digital Archives
• review of Leonard Woolley’s excavation reports
• review of the Board Minutes of the Penn Museum
• survey of newspaper articles in the Zotero Ur Documentation Library and Penn Museum Microfilm Collection
• survey of secondary scholarship related to my research questions.

Results and Conclusions:
The inter-institutional conflicts seen in the archival documents from the Joint Expedition revealed a number of insights into this early archaeological process. One important observation was the continuity of partage-related conflict (that is conflicts concerning the division of objects) throughout the expeditions. The maintenance of equality between three museums in three different countries was a struggle between personalities. Despite this it seems each of the three institutions involved in division received a fair share of excavated objects as per the original agreement of the Joint Expedition. This speaks to the importance of compromise and diplomacy in accomplishing the goals of archaeology, and Woolley demonstrated this early on in the development in professional archaeological practices.

My examination of evaluations of archaeological materials was equally insightful. Woolley branded his archaeology with scrupulous data collection and frequent publication. Although the Royal Cemetery launched the expedition to celebrity status making headlines across America and London, it was not necessarily Woolley’s primary concern. Woolley recognized archaeology as a destructive process that cannot be undone and the importance of recording context because of this. Thus we should consider Woolley and his contemporaries as intermediaries between the “smash and grab” archaeology of antiquarians in the 18th and 19th centuries and the professional methods we know today.

Year of Discovery Museum Exhibit

Preliminary survey of materials for the upcoming archival exhibit on Sumerian Archaeology at the Penn Museum. This exhibit will open in early March and will feature original archival prints, sketches, and watercolors chosen by myself and Senior Archivist Alessandro Pezzati. Photo Credit: Kamillia Scott

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