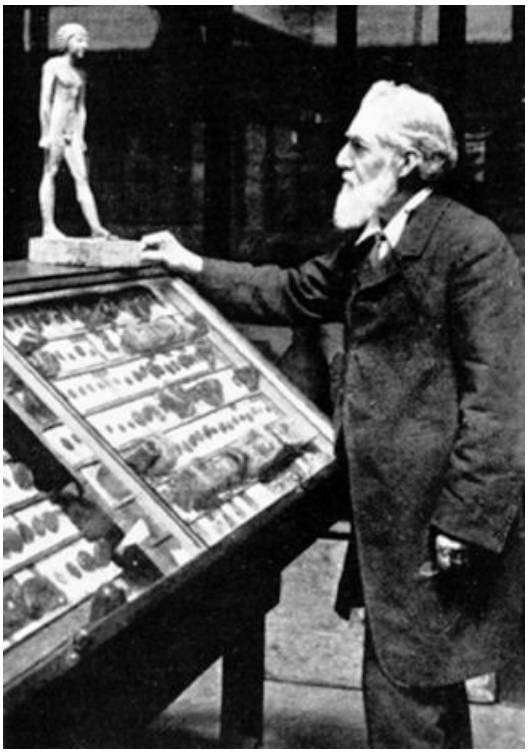
Flinders Petrie and eugenics

Kathleen L. Sheppard



Petrie pictured during the period discussed. By courtesy of the Petrie Museum of Egyptian Archaeology, UCL.

Archaeologists and historians alike recognise William Matthew Flinders Petrie and his invaluable contributions to the discipline of archaeology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. He is considered the father of scientific archaeology and is credited with developing a chronology of Ancient Egypt using the nondescript artefacts that other archaeologists had ignored. He occupied the first chair of Egyptology in England and is remembered for the museum built around his personal collection of Egyptian artefacts at University College London.

Although the archaeological aspects of his career are well known and appreciated, scholars have failed to notice Petrie's involvement and important contributions to other areas of science. He was not only an archaeologist but also a numismatist, anthropologist, metrologist, statistician and eugenicist.

Eugenics, a large part of Petrie's career, is largely left out of published works. However, an analysis of his unpublished correspondence, held in Special Collections at UCL, brings to light his eugenic interests and reveals his close relationships with eugenics pioneers, Francis Galton and Karl Pearson.

Throughout his career, comprised of over 50 digging seasons in Egypt, Petrie sent skeletons, skulls and bones back to Galton and Pearson at the University College London Anthropometric Laboratory. Over many years, Petrie corresponded with both Pearson and Galton about the bones, their measurements, different methods of statistical analysis for these measurements and what the results could mean for understanding the history of civilisation as a whole.

Petrie's association with both of these men, and the exchange of ideas, materials and theories among them, was influential in his own practical and theoretical work on civilisation, race and culture; the exchange was also important for Galton's and Pearson's research. *Racial Photographs from the Egyptian Monuments* was the first

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200903871 Published online by Cambridge University Press

work Petrie completed for Galton. According to the frontispiece, *Racial Photographs* is a *'series of 190 Photographs of the various races conquered or visited by the Egyptians*[that have] *been taken by Mr. Flinders Petrie from the monuments in 1887'* (Petrie 1887).

After skillfully finishing this photographic compilation, Petrie continued working for the Galton Laboratory, collecting, measuring, and delivering skeletal remains. In fact, the Laboratory requested so much from Petrie that, in 1895, there was no more room for the skulls and skeletons. As a result, the Anthropometric Lab was expanded. The remains were clearly important for Pearson and Petrie in their continued eugenic work.

Petrie did not stop his eugenic mission there. His historical analysis of civilisation in works such as *Janus in Modern Life* (1907) and *The Revolutions of Civilisation* (1911), demonstrate Petrie's adherence to a social evolutionary framework. In these two books, Petrie presented ideas about social change that reflected deep-seated eugenic influence. In *Janus*, Petrie (1907: 1) focused mainly on how the individual affected societal development and argued that good individual character led to good character for society, and furthermore that *'the character of a people is the essential basis of all their institutions and government.*If a state is successful, it is because a majority of its people, or at least a majority of the people who were in positions of power, were of good character. Thus, in order to create or maintain a society's integrity, Petrie (1907: 87) argued that the state must support the *'best stocks'* and *'tax down the worst stocks.'*

Four years later, Petrie (1911: 105) published *Revolutions*, a short volume in which the main purpose was to find the *'real nature of human progress.'*In *Revolutions*, Petrie argued that without diversity and competition within societies, there would be no progression. In man's striving with nature and with other men, the stronger would survive and be selected to continue. This was true in physical abilities like war and battle as well as in mental abilities like art and science. He claimed that in the not-too-distant future eugenics would be able to establish a new, capable civilisation in the place of an old, unfit one. Eugenic practices would *'carefully segregate fine races and prohibit continued mixture, until they have a distinct type which will start a new civilisation when transplanted. The future progress of man may depend as much on isolation to establish a type, as on fusion of types'*(Petrie 1911: 131).

The segregation of *'fine'* races would be done, as he had argued in *Janus*, through state-monitored marriages and reproduction as well as state-monitored abstinence and sterilisation.

Petrie's expressed purpose in these works was to demonstrate the path on which civilisation as a whole was developing; he chose to focus on the individual as the important component of a good society. Petrie's underlying purpose was to argue socially and historically for eugenic practices. Until Petrie, this discussion had been confined to biology. However, both biologists and archaeologists, represented by Galton and Pearson on one hand and Petrie on the other, agreed that it was the small, gradual changes caused by the controlled selection of favorable traits that would allow civilisation to evolve in a eugenically favorable direction.

Although scholars overlook Petrie's involvement with eugenics, his work adds a new lens through which to view these important developments in biology and social theory. He must be taken more seriously as a pivotal figure in the history of genetics and applied mathematics. Petrie was not 'badly misled' by anyone or their ideas, as some scholars claim, nor was his involvement in eugenics an accident; he was a believer in and a proponent of the biometric methods and the solutions eugenics offered to the ills of society.

References

- PETRIE, FLINDERS W.M. 1887. *Racial Photographs from the Egyptian Monuments*. London: British Association.
  - 1907. *Janus in Modern Life*. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons.
  - 1911. *The Revolutions of Civilisation*. London: Harper Brothers.
- Special Collections, University College London, London.

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200903871 Published online by Cambridge University Press

See also, Sheppard, Kathleen L. 2006. 'You call this archaeology?': Flinders Petrie and Eugenics. Unpublished MA dissertation, University of Oklahoma.

Authors

- **Kathleen L. Sheppard** HARN member, PhD candidate, History of Science, University of Oklahoma, Norman, OK 73019, USA (Email: HARNgroup@googlemail.com.

HARN
Histories of Archaeology Research Network

Back to Top

https://doi.org/10.15184/S2978855200903871 Published online by Cambridge University Press