

NEAF Grant Report –

The Catherine Southwell-Keely Travel Grant (\$3,500)

The Cemetery 1000 at Tell Fara South – A Re-Examination of the Tomb Assemblages

Tracking down objects excavated almost a century ago is not quite like an Indiana Jones movie, but it is interesting, especially if your particular area of interest is the Bronze Age, and does require some detective work – perhaps more Clouseau than Croft, and definitely more basements and store rooms than Temples of Doom. Thus, such were the activities of last year and re-locating the surviving tomb assemblages from Tell Fara South, with the generous support of the 2017 Catherine Southwell-Keely/ NEAF Travel Grant.

In 1928, for almost three seasons, the British School of Archaeology in Egypt, under the direction of Flinders Petrie, excavated the site of Tell Fara South in southern Israel. The team uncovered the fortified remains of a settlement on top of a large mound, located approximately 24km east of modern day Gaza, and nine cemeteries in the surrounding area. The recovered material indicated occupation at the site from the Middle Bronze (approx. 1800-1600BCE) to the Roman Period, as well as later use by British and Australian troops during battles against the Ottoman Empire last century. Trenching and stabling for horses, coupled with millennia of erosion, have inflicted considerable damage to the Hellenistic and Roman levels on the mound surface.

Petrie identified the site with the biblical Beth Pelet, though an identification is yet to be confirmed. Based on the scarab seal finds, the Middle Bronze Age cemeteries were linked with the Hyksos Period, a phase in Egypt's history that saw the country fragment politically into a series of smaller provincial kingdoms, at least one of which was ruled by non-Egyptians – at the time, a situation unprecedented in the country's history. It was the early Egyptian (Theban) kings of the Eighteenth Dynasty that were finally able to oust this group and re-unite the country, after almost two centuries. Texts from the slightly later reign of Hatshepsut, describe a period of chaos during this foreign rule, and attribute much destruction to these Hyksos rulers, but whether these accounts are accurate remains uncertain. How this situation came about, and the involvement of the other states in the Eastern Mediterranean at the time, also remain murky historical territory, given few textual sources, and often conflicting interpretations for the time frames suggested by surviving material. There is a pressing need for new information to help clarify the situation.

Hence the possible importance of the tomb assemblages from Fara South, and the pottery, scarab seal/ amulets, metal objects and fragmentary human remains that survive from this Middle Bronze/ Hyksos Period. Despite their excavation almost a century ago, might there be information to be gained from a re-assessment of these objects that could shed some much needed light on the events of this period? With a wider range of analytical techniques and comparative material now available, far greater than in Petrie's time, might there be value in re-examining earlier excavated material, especially when its archaeological context is preserved and reliable. In early 2017, it was time to find out.

So did the Fara South material even survive, and if so, where was it, and in what condition?

When Petrie conducted excavations, his field directors and staff were instructed to complete a tomb card for each tomb as it was being cleared, listing all the finds and sometimes, a drawing of the tomb layout on the back. Fortunately, these cards survive, now housed in the archives of the Institute of Archaeology in London. Even more fortuitously, volunteer staff digitised the cards in 2016, making them readily accessible. These cards contain a wealth of information and show that not every find was taken from a tomb, with some marked NTH, 'Not to House'. It seems Petrie was selective in the objects he kept, often preferring to take only objects he had not seen before, objects he could give to patrons who had funded his excavations, or those objects not too costly to freight. For these objects, notes later made on the cards also record their original distribution to particular collections; primarily, the Rockefeller Museum in Jerusalem and the Institute of Archaeology in London, but also to regional museums in Belfast, Aberdeen, Manchester, Rochdale, Bolton, Swansea, Oxford and Cambridge. Objects originally sent to the Hull Museum are thought not to have survived, due to significant damage to the collection from bombing raids during World War II. Other objects have since also been located in Krakow, Kyoto, Glasgow and Liverpool.

In just over seven months, the whereabouts of around 70-80% of the objects were located. As to their current state of preservation, it is the pottery and the scarab seals that appear to have best weathered the past 3,700-ish years. Some of the pottery is in fragments, several vessels have been restored in earlier conservation work, and others are in almost perfect condition. Traces of charcoal on lamps or the occasional finger print still visible in the clay of some vessels, testify to how these vessels were made and used; ranging from large storage jars for olive oil or wine, to platters and dishes for serving food. Most of the scarab seal/ amulets are also relatively well preserved. The carved designs of their bases are still easily readable in most cases, and show a mix of religious beliefs and traditions from the Near East (particularly Syria), and Egypt, in use within the Fara South community. Rings and small daggers of bronze survive from some tombs, now corroded and very fragile. During the whole re-examination process, the curatorial staff and collection managers from the respective collections could not have been more helpful in the re-discovery of the Tell Fara South material. Their time and knowledge continue to be invaluable.

With the objects re-examined, recorded and photographed, the task now is to see what information might be learned, with the initial emphasis on establishing an accurate date range for the period the cemeteries were in use, and then placing them in their correct chronological context in relation to the broader Eastern Mediterranean; in other words, establishing when the Fara South community was active at the site, and who they were interacting with. The presence of at least some objects of Egyptian origin in the assemblages suggest the interaction may have been quite broad during the Middle Bronze Age, when the Eastern Mediterranean was characterised by much trade, contact and interconnections. Hopefully, the findings of this research project will prove valuable in contributing to a better understanding of this period.

Photo 1 – My temporary ‘office’ for seven months among the pottery collections in Jerusalem



Photo 2 – Petrie, still keeping an eye on things – at the Institute of Archaeology, London



Photo 3 – A cylindrical juglet, a characteristic vessel of many of the Fara South tombs

