

Between the field and the museum: the ongoing project of archaeological context

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Taking the distribution of finds from the Egypt Exploration Fund as a departure point, this article examines the potential for a more holistic approach to museum collections and archives that extends the project of archaeological context from place to process. The importance of advocating archives in museum practice and in higher education is also emphasised.

In summer 2012 I undertook a scoping exercise to ascertain the scale and complexity of the Egypt Exploration Fund's (EEF) finds distributions from all of its excavations between 1882 and 1915. The results of this work underscored the complexity of this activity, which drew together a wide network of people and institutions. I have argued more extensively elsewhere¹ that while it is tempting to envisage such dispersals as a linear transmission of objects from the field to the museum, in fact both excavation and curatorial practice were informed by the same artefact-based approach to the construction of the past² and that both arenas impinged upon each other in highly complex ways. This conclusion challenges the common misconception (for Egyptian archaeology especially) that « museums have always been, and continue to be, a relatively peripheral player in archaeological motivation ».³

What I wish to consider a little further in this paper is how the idea of archaeological context actually emerged through this intersection of excavation and museum practice via the process of finds distribution. Key to this argument is the recognition that museums are not simply the sum of what is displayed in their galleries. They are also repositories for stored collections of

1. A. STEVENSON, *Artefacts of excavation: the British collection and distribution of Egyptian finds to museums, 1880-1915*, in « Journal of the History of Collections » 26/1 (2014), pp. 89-102.
2. A. HENARE, *Museums, Anthropology and Imperial Exchange*, Cambridge 2005; C. EVANS *Delineating objects: nineteenth-century antiquarian culture and the project of archaeology*, in S. PEARCE (ed.), *Visions of Antiquity. The Society of Antiquaries of London 1707-2007*, London 2007.
3. H. SWAIN, *An Introduction to Museum Archaeology*, Cambridge 2007, p. 12.