

Forgotten Pioneers Of Archaeology In Victorian Oxford: The Rev. Greville John Chester (1830-1892)

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SUMMARY

Greville Chester was a Balliol man who entered the Church, but after an arduous incumbency in a slum parish retired at the early age of thirty-five, seeking to restore his health by a journey to Egypt. This was followed by annual visits to Mediterranean lands, during which he carried out some expeditions on behalf of the Palestine Exploration Fund, but above all indulged to the full a passion for collecting archaeological artefacts. These he conveyed to several museums, principally the British Museum and the Ashmolean, by way of sales and a huge number of donations, some of which were recognised as having opened up a whole new field for museum scholarship.

A recent edition of *ASTENE*¹, the Bulletin of the Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Near East, carried the following notice in reporting the opening of the Sackler Gallery of Egyptian Antiquities at the Ashmolean: Two travellers to Egypt were acknowledged in Christopher Brown's [the Director's] address. 'Flinders Petrie as traveller deserves our attention', the Editor writes, 'Greville Chester is unfamiliar ...'

Not unfamiliar enough, one might add. Quoting from the opening address, the editor refers to 38 visits by Chester to Egypt; and his settling into the Luxor Hotel, available at tea time to local dealers – statements repeated over and over again when he is mentioned and almost the only 'facts' anyone who has heard of him remembers. The first, although it comes from his friend Flinders Petrie himself,² overestimates the number of his winter visits, crediting him with 38 by the year 1880, a physical impossibility: his first took place in 1864–5, but his Mediterranean travels were interrupted by an extended tour over more than 2 years to the West Indies and the Americas. Luxor with its incomparable climate was certainly one of the regular stopping-off points for a man who originally went out for the sake of his health (and indeed he died of emphysema); and as for his regular commerce with dealers, this crops up in contemporaries' reminiscences, without relating it to the destination of his purchases: the enormous enriching of Britain's museums. This shows up most crassly in the reminiscences of Sir Ernest Wallis Budge³ of the British Museum, itself a tremendous beneficiary of Chester's collecting activities. This is how Budge puts it (the strapline at the top of the page reads '*Greville Chester the Collector*'): 'On returning to England at the end of his first journey, he found that the Keepers of the Departments of Antiquities at the British Museum wanted to buy most of his acquisitions, and he made it convenient to sell them, making a small profit on the transaction. Each year he bought more than the last, and each year the Keepers increased their purchases, and thus, little by little, Chester became a source of supply, more especially for the Egyptian Collection. His taste and judgment were good, and he quickly profited by the hints of the Museum experts; *given a little more capital and boldness he would have developed into a first-class dealer* [my italics]'.⁴

¹ No. 18, Winter 2003.

² *70 Years in Archaeology* (1931), 22.

³ *By Nile and Tigris*, 2 vols. (1920), I, 84–5.

⁴ *ibid.* 85.

Leaving aside for the moment the question whether this would really have been Chester's aim, it was true that he was not rich, but he was able to start on his foreign travels after the death of his mother, who left him an income in trust.

An alumnus of Balliol, he was descended from a well-connected, armigerous family, its seat the elegant Early Georgian Chicheley Hall in Buckinghamshire, built in 1719. His father, a younger son, was a clergyman, Rector of Denton in Norfolk, where Greville Chester was born.⁵ Greville, too, opted for the Church, and after various curacies, one the family living of Farndish near Wellingborough, at the age of 28 chose to take on the arduous task of an incumbency in the slum parish of St Jude's Moorfields, Sheffield, where he was enormously successful, increasing the congregation from six to 100s, and becoming notorious both for his kindness and indefatigable efforts to improve both the circumstances and the aspirations of his flock, and for his fearless and outspoken battles in sermon and press on behalf of the most downtrodden poor in this industrial city, and for his attacks on the arrogant capitalists who ran it. He resigned his post after five years, having worn himself out in the service of his parish, and with the help of his legacy embarked on a second career as traveller and collector, and eventually as a generous and indeed lavish benefactor of numerous institutions, above all in his beloved Oxford.

Budge, a servant of the British Museum was of course a collector himself on its behalf, and was supplied with funds for the purpose. On his first mission to Egypt in 1886–7, he was guided about Cairo by Chester – by then an old 'Egypt Hand' with more than 20 years' experience of the Near East – who took him a round of dealers and private collectors. But giving the impression that Chester had been a tyro on his early travels, guided by the British Museum experts, was entirely false.

Chester in fact, beside his studies, had manifested a passionate interest in antiquities from childhood, perhaps originally inspired by objects found in the vicinity of his home and brought to the Rector. He was only 17, when he 'communicated notices of Roman remains in Norfolk' to the *Archaeological Journal*, the organ of the Archaeological Institute,⁶ to be followed by many more – the last, virtually composed on his deathbed and sent from Naples, published after his death. He became a member of the Institute in 1850, while a first-year undergraduate. In the course of time, he brought to the notice of the *Journal's* readers news of finds not only in Norfolk, but the numerous places he explored on visits to friends and family and later from Oxford and from the vicinity of his parishes. His interests were not limited to Roman, Anglo-Saxon or medieval remains including coins and many seals, but included pre-historic arrow heads, urns and flints and bone disks: indeed, although his anthropological and ethnographic finds were not very numerous, they were not unimportant. During his first undergraduate year, aged 19, he also exhibited 'antiquities from his [own] cabinet': they included a small bronze bull's head, found at North Waltham, Hants, a bronze fibula from Lakenheath, Norfolk, and a 'curious copper figure of a sleeping knight', which he attributed to the 13th century.⁷

On the West Indian voyage, undertaken to act as locum tenens for the Archdeacon of Barbados, his extracurricular interests were not forgotten. On the island, he discovered a quantity of interesting prehistoric shell implements, which he proceeded to write up⁸ and on his return presented to the Ashmolean Museum, where they were warmly received. In

⁵ The Ashmolean owns a watercolour by Paul Sandby, whose brother George preceded the Rev. William Denton as Rector; the painting was given to the museum by Greville Chester.

⁶ *AJ* iv (1847), 252.

⁷ *AJ* vi (1849), 404–5 and plate, headed 'Antiquities in the Museum of Greville J. Chester, Esq.'

⁸ 'Carib implements from the West Indies', *AJ* xxv (1869).

the reorganisation of the museum which followed shortly after the foundation of the Pitt Rivers Museum, they were transferred there, together with a number of other objects of anthropological interest which he donated over the years.⁹

But several years before this, while still a schoolboy, he had initiated a correspondence with British Museum Keepers, at first about medieval coins; but once he started on his Mediterranean travels, he corresponded with the learned Egyptologist Keeper Samuel Birch, offering at first gnostic gems and then a great variety of finds, from Egypt, Syria and Palestine: he had embarked on his travels and energetic collecting, with the Museum in mind. His address in England was at first Bloomsbury Court, and then the newly built Russell Chambers, both convenient to the Museum, and the latter still extant. Clearly, his expertise was already such that the Museum was glad to buy his offerings, although they often kept him waiting an unconscionable time for his money – ‘will the Keeper bring *last year's collection* before the Trustees?’, he inquires, not best pleased – after which there will be further waiting-time until the money will come through.¹⁰ Among the antiquities he has collected in the next bundle for despatch are counter-marked Roman coins, inscribed pottery, a little blue glass figure the like of which he has never seen before, a Phoenician stone with a crowned figure and several lines of inscription, which he wishes to give to the Museum, a Greek funeral inscription, another dedicated by a physician to Isis and Osiris, a Phoenician stone found in the mounds of Crocodilopolis, a small talisman covered with Phoenician inscriptions of several lines, curious Egyptian hatchets and other implements ‘like our bronze “celts”, and the strange types found at Tel el Yahoudeh in the Delta’. He had seen a beautifully preserved small ‘Sphynx’ of black stone in the Fayoum, but dared not risk bringing it for the Museum – exports of antiquities had come under the jurisdiction of the Egyptian Antiquities Service and, *in theory*, they were strictly forbidden, all finds to be preserved for the Cairo Museum of Antiquities: in actual fact, even the museum servants themselves¹¹, let alone quantities of dealers, were adept at secretly selling objects abroad, while Budge made use of friends in the British army in Egypt to export his rather larger purchases for the Museum on their ships.¹² This activity, albeit for the benefit of the British Museum at home, was frowned upon, somewhat to Budge’s indignation, by the British Consul General, Sir Evelyn Baring, but Chester’s collections of small objects usually passed the Customs without much trouble, although at a later stage he complained that ‘the antiquities for the Ashmolean I had to smuggle out of Egypt at the expense of 10/- . It was a hard matter to get them out at all. I had a Jew, a Christian and Musselman each stuffed with things coming backwards and forwards’¹³ – until they were safely on their way to England. By the time Petrie came to Egypt for the first time as a young man of 27 in 1880, Chester had become as expert as any connoisseur, with a keen eye and discernment. Petrie, a very different character from Budge, without an ounce of the other’s jealousy and malice, calls him ‘a notable figure in Egyptian matters’ and remained Chester’s firm friend until his early death.¹⁴

But there were other activities of Chester’s beside his much-remarked-upon collecting, which occupied him in Egypt and the Near East. Not for nothing did Sir Walter Besant, for 18 years Secretary of the Palestine Exploration Fund, call him ‘an explorer of no mean

⁹ Pitt Rivers Museum Object Catalogue Accession Numbers 1886.1.1037.1-15, 1969.34.1-8.

¹⁰ BM ANE Archive Letterbook CA-CHE ii 1868-1881, f. 79.

¹¹ Budge, *op. cit.* I, 111.

¹² Budge, *op. cit.* I, 116.

¹³ Ashmolean Museum Letterbook 1836-1888, AMS 16 / 1 / 0013b, letter to Keeper Parker from Taormina, 26 February 1872.

¹⁴ *Seventy Years in Archaeology* (1931), 22.

order'.¹⁵ He conducted in fact two major explorations for the Society: in 1875 he made a hazardous journey to the then little-known isle of Ruad off the Syrian coast, the Phoenician Aradus: Besant surmises that he was then the only living European to have landed on the shores of this 'very ancient and interesting place', returning, Besant says, '*more suo*', with a pocketful of coins. The second, according to Besant, an 'even more valuable contribution to geographical and archaeological science', was his journey to the Biblical sites of Lower Egypt, [when he] travelled from San to El Arish and cleared up the difficulties about Lake Sirbonis... These journeys were also noteworthy in the fact', Besant continues, 'that they cost the Society next to nothing. We gave Chester beforehand what he roughly estimated – it was very little', and the Society's Minutes amply bear out these remarks.

Chester's reports of these voyages make fascinating reading, especially when he comes to describe the journey from San to El Arish. San he found 'an unusually squalid village of mud hovels', but 'looking eastwards towards the Tel the huge mounds appear to open and the space between is filled with, as it were, an avalanche of immense stones, which are the remains of the western pylons of the Great Temple. ... Strewn all about in all directions are papyrus-bud columns, obelisks, colossi and shrines, overthrown indeed, but otherwise in a marvellous state of preservation; the inscriptions and carvings in the finest style of Egyptian art, being as fresh as though they had been cut yesterday. It is a great solitude, and brooded over by a deep silence, which makes the scene of ruin and desolation all the more striking.' From there he continued East by a roundabout desert route, surrounded on all sides by marsh and swamps, meeting up after several hours' journeying with the sheik of the Suarka Bedouin and his people, with whom he had arranged for a supply of camels and for guidance across the desert as far as Gaza. On the way he remarked various ancient debris until he reached a place named Migdol on the map drawn up five years before by the celebrated Egyptologist Heinrich Brugsch, but he could not believe that this really was the spot.

Worse was to follow, for he found grave errors of fact in Brugsch's delineation of the route as he continued further East, not without great travails, the worst the crossing of the marsh. 'It at once became evident that no camels could pass upon the treacherous soil without being engulfed. I therefore ordered my tent to be pitched in the desert ..., and, taking with me two of the Bedouen, prepared to cross the swamp on foot. ... The difficulty of proceeding was great. The surface of the marsh, which extends for miles, was covered with drifting sand and ... with long crystals of brown sand, through which, as though through a cake, the feet went down into a greasy mud, of which large masses adhered to the boots each time they were withdrawn. The farther I went the wetter did the marsh become. Over and over again, I was tempted to turn back ...', but the intrepid traveller persevered until he 'had the satisfaction of standing on the remote and rarely visited site of Pelusium or Sin.' From the top of the Tel he saw the sea beyond more marshes: 'The desolation is complete and awful'. The sun had set before he crossed the marsh on his return journey, and he rejoiced to find an Arab on the edge of the desert who was waiting to conduct him to his tent, well after nightfall. The next morning he reached the shore of the Mediterranean in about 2½ hours and 'after a welcome bath in the waves' continued until he found a narrow strip of sand extending as far as the eye could see, with the Mediterranean on the left, and 'the great Lake Sirbonis' on the right. Continuing along the strip of sand, with the intention of regaining the desert at Mount Casius, which Brugsch's map ... *represents as joined to the Gebel by a tract of sandy desert hills*. Little did I then imagine that the whole course of my route would be altered by that Isthmus being a mere creature of the learned doctor's imagination and having no

¹⁵ Besant in *Obituary Notices of the late Rev. Greville John Chester, B.A., formerly incumbent of St Jude's, Moorfields, Sheffield*. Watlington, 1892, 7.
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existence in fact!¹⁶ Never one to bend the knee to reputed authority, Chester finds it impossible to believe that 'Herr Brugsch can ever have visited Lake Sirbonis', adducing both topography and the absence of plant life to its being a salt lake, hence finding Brugsch's proposed route of the Exodus almost entirely mistaken.

I am not competent to judge between Brugsch and Chester, but the detailed maps executed by the German army command during the last world war do seem to accord with Chester's report: the inscription 'Halbinsel' – peninsula – justifies Besant's remark that he had 'cleared up the difficulties about Lake Sirbonis'.

Others of his explorations may not have been so spectacular, although these constant travels on foot, or on donkey, or dromedary-back, surely were more arduous than one would expect from a man not in robust health. One particular interest he pursued in Egypt, and one that chimed well with his calling as a clergyman, was his investigation of the indigenous Christians, the Copts, not only their beliefs and rituals, but their houses of worship, their monasteries, and their ancient arts and crafts, whose then little-regarded relics were of as great interest to Chester as those of the ancient Egyptians. The ever watchful editor of the traveller's bible, *Murray's Guide to Egypt*,¹⁷ who saw tourism to Egypt expand in ever growing proportions, was relying on long-term experienced and knowledgeable resident Britons, like the Rev Dr Grant of Cairo, to supplement their original edition, a reprint of Sir Gardner Wilkinson's *Modern Egypt and Thebes*. By 1873 a new, entirely revised edition proved necessary, to take account of a totally changed political situation as well as new, improved means of transport; together with the opening of the Suez Canal four years before, this made Egypt with its famous ancient monuments and the constant additions to their number ever more accessible. An additional informant is now credited for his contribution: it is Mr Greville Chester, thanked for 'a most interesting paper on the Coptic Churches of Old Cairo – a subject which has never before received the attention it merited.' Several pages of the Handbook and its future editions are indeed devoted to descriptions of Coptic churches and monasteries to be added to visitors' routes; Chester had meanwhile published 'Notes on the Coptic Churches of Mus'r el Ateykh' and had now added to this, 'Notes on the Coptic Days of the Wady Natrun and on Dayr Antonios in the Eastern Desert'.

But while he was still in touch with the British Museum, his collecting activity was more and more directed towards institutions at Oxford, to which he remained devoted. And although some were by way of sale, by far the greatest number of the many thousands of objects in Oxford with a Chester provenance consisted of donations by him; and they included a number of Coptic objects. Among his donations to the Ashmolean, there is the astonishing number of 38 'St Menas Pilgrim Flasks' – made of unglazed clay between AD500 and 640 at the Coptic site dedicated to St Menas, shown as *orans*. Chester acquired them between 1871 and 1891 and gave a further 18 to other museums.¹⁸ His earliest donations to the Egyptian department are listed in the *Catalogue of the Egyptian Antiquities in the Ashmolean Museum Oxford*, which he compiled in 1879 (it was not published until 1881) – a meticulous, pioneering effort for Oxford, although not the first Egyptian catalogue for a museum in Britain.

The Ashmolean was not the only Oxford institution to benefit from his largesse. As one of the first to retrieve papyrus fragments from the Cairo Geniza, he gave them to the

¹⁶ PEF QUARTERLY STATEMENT 1880, 142-151.

¹⁷ *A Handbook for Travellers in Egypt; including descriptions of the course of the Nile through Egypt and Nubia, Alexandria, Cairo, the Pyramids, and Thebes, THE SUEZ CANAL, the Peninsula of Mount Sinai, the Oases, the Fyoom, etc. Fourth edition, revised on the spot* (London. John Murray, Paris, Malta, Cairo and Alexandria, 1873).

¹⁸ *AJ* xxix (1872), 120.

¹⁹ Susanne Bangert, who kindly provided this information, adds that, being porous, the flasks could not have held water for long.

Bodleian Library, this gift preceding the acquisition of the bulk of them by Cambridge;²⁰ to his old college he gave various historic oriental manuscripts;²¹ the Ashmolean, however, was by far his greatest beneficiary, and there is hardly one of its departments that does not own objects with a Chester provenance; but in the context of my claiming him as a pioneer in archaeological matters, it is his contribution to the Near Eastern antiquities in the Museum which deserves to be singled out, for his were the first seals from the Near East to reach the Museum. Briggs Buchanan paid him this tribute in his Ashmolean catalogue: 'From 1871 until his death in 1892 Chester continued to pour seals of all kinds as well as thousands of other objects into the Museum, some bought with Museum funds, most of them with his own; thereby laying the foundation for the Museum's outstanding collection of ancient Near Eastern Art'.²²

But his greatest affection, and in many ways his greatest expertise, was lavished on the engraved gems, which he retained in his own collection, and bequeathed to the Museum on his death. And although they include one of the most important and most beautiful Hellenistic stones now in the Ashmolean, a – possibly contemporary – portrait of Alexander the Great with the horns of Ammon, Chester's originality was once again to the fore, in his acquisition of some very rare early Christian gems and the Magical gems originating in Egypt, for which he perhaps had a special predilection.

And one other of his special contributions to archaeology in Oxford must not be forgotten. There had been simmering dissatisfaction in the University over its neglect of archaeology, an important field of inquiry in Britain at least since the 1840s, and this despite the dominance of classics at Oxford; the ancient sculptures it had inherited, the Arundel and Pomfret Marbles, were neglected, and in the Ashmolean Museum, then in its original home in Broad Street, antiquities jostled for space with a chemical laboratory, modern plaster casts and zoological specimens – Chester particularly relished the absurdity of the presence of an immense stuffed bullock. He, too, was exasperated with this state of affairs, and never one to shirk controversy gave expression to it in a hard-hitting and witty pamphlet with the anodyne title, *Notes on the Present and Future of the Archaeological Collections in Oxford*; but the contents were far from anodyne. The pamphlet certainly stirred things up and attracted press attention, without leading to immediate reforms, but when the University, under Jowett as Vice-Chancellor, showed signs of moving in this matter, Chester acted as a go-between with C. D. E. Fortnum, who was to become the Museum's 'second founder', with his – and Chester's – collections eventually finding a worthy home in Cockerell's building in Beaumont Street. Chester, of course, did not live to see this. Would he have been surprised at the blows Fate dealt some of the relics by which he might have been remembered? The shelf of books Petrie dedicated to his memory in University College London was destroyed in the last war; where his church stood in Sheffield, there is now a derelict site; even Sandby's oil painting of Denton which he gave to the Ashmolean together with the watercolour was accidentally destroyed in 1965; and he was not commemorated in the *Dictionary of National Biography*. But not all is forgotten: he has been given generous credit for his achievements in that invaluable compendium, 'Who was Who in Egyptology'²³ and here in Oxford, the visitor to the Egyptian galleries in the Ashmolean Museum is welcomed by the Chester Room, which makes sure that he is not forgotten by those who care about these things.

²⁰ Personal information from Dr Benjamin Richler of the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem.

²¹ See R. A. B. Mynors, *Catalogue of the Manuscripts of Balliol College, Oxford* (Oxford, 1963).

²² *Catalogue of Ancient Near Eastern Seals in the Ashmolean Museum. I, Cylinder Seals* (Oxford, 1966).

²³ W. R. Dawson and E. P. Uphill in M. L. Bierbrier (ed.), *Who was who in Egyptology*, 3rd rev. ed. (Egypt Exploration Society, 1995), 96-97.