

## CECIL TORR, FLINDERS PETRIE & THE CHRONOLOGY QUESTION<sup>=</sup>

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*During 1892 the English gentleman-scholar Cecil Torr conducted a heated, often acrimonious, public debate with Flinders Petrie regarding the implications of Mycenaean Greek material recently discovered in Egypt. That debate serves to remind us that our orthodox chronology of the ancient world emerged out of a world of alternative ideas, often at variance with those acceptable to modern scholarship. In particular, Torr challenged the logic of Petrie's chronological conclusions, exposing the inherent racism of his historical beliefs.*

Cecil Torr wrote only one book on Ancient Egypt, *Memphis and Mycenae. An Examination of Egyptian Chronology and its Application to the Early History of Greece*, published in 1896<sup>1</sup>. In its day, it caused quite a stir amongst serious-minded scholars, earning itself reviews in the United Kingdom national press, as well as in leading academic journals. The reviews were without exception dismissive, the book sold poorly, and today Torr is largely forgotten. But in the 1890s he was well known as a critic of the academic establishment, engaged in fierce public debate with Flinders Petrie about the implications of the discovery of Greek artefacts in Egypt<sup>2</sup>. Appropriately, one reviewer of *Memphis and Mycenae* began by characterising heretics as “the chief safeguards of orthodoxy” because they ensure that believers will not be “careless about the reasons of their faith”<sup>3</sup>. As a scholar, Torr was undoubtedly a heretic, and, as with many heretics, the prevailing orthodoxy has all but extinguished his memory. But a brief retelling of his clash with Petrie has a twofold benefit. First, it recalls a man of considerable wit and not a little charm. Secondly, it exposes an unsavoury belief that helped to define the present orthodoxy – an idea of which Torr was already critical more than a century ago.

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To understand Cecil Torr as a scholar, we must appreciate his character and circumstances. He was born into established gentry in Surrey in 1857, and so was a near contemporary of Petrie, born in 1853. As befitted his class, Torr studied for a legal career at Cambridge, but his adult circumstances were sufficiently comfortable for him to overlook salaried work, and instead indulge a taste for foreign travel and scholarship.

<sup>=</sup> This paper is dedicated to the memory of my cousin and oldest friend, Mark Denton (1966-1999).

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<sup>1</sup> C. Torr, *Memphis and Mycenae. An Examination of Egyptian Chronology and its Application to the Early History of Greece* (Cambridge, 1896). In 1988 the book was republished under its original title along with material relating to Torr's debate with Petrie, and another with the archaeologist John Linton Myres (see note 9), under the imprimatur of the Institute for the Study of Interdisciplinary Studies. Below I give page references to *Memphis and Mycenae* in the form 42 (47), where the first number refers to the original edition and the second number to the republication.

<sup>2</sup> The debate was initiated by Torr's abrasive review of Petrie's *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob* (see notes 5 and 19) in *The Classical Review*. From May to November 1892 the two protagonists exchanged open letters in *The Academy*. Characteristically, Torr had the last word over an increasingly curt and exasperated Petrie.

<sup>3</sup> Books Editor, *The Guardian*, 9<sup>th</sup> September 1896.

A visit to Greece at the age of twenty-three sparked an interest in ancient history, which was intensified by journeys in the Middle East and Egypt two years later. Upon his return he began writing about ancient Greece<sup>4</sup>, and as a man in his thirties paid increasing attention to Petrie's discoveries of Aegean artefacts in Egypt, particularly at Kahun and Amarna. Petrie believed that this material demonstrated the true antiquity of European civilisation<sup>5</sup>; Torr maintained that Petrie had found worthless rubbish dumps<sup>6</sup>.

Of course, these were the years in which Petrie emerged as the archetypal driven academic devoted to practical knowledge. By contrast, Torr seems more of an intellectual butterfly. Violet Markham describes a charming and witty host, who was nevertheless "rude and acrimonious on paper"<sup>7</sup>, and "could argue any thesis however outrageous and make black appear white when so minded"<sup>8</sup>. Torr undoubtedly possessed a mischievous intellect, but he was not so much frivolous as a lively wit dedicated to logic. The mischief that most appealed to Torr was puncturing the pomposity of scholars, whenever they formed themselves into a closed circle of mutual admiration. He was, needless to say, generally disliked as a result by the academic establishment, although he could count amongst his friends Wallis Budge, Keeper of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities at the British Museum.

He seems to have derived particular enjoyment from antagonising Petrie<sup>9</sup>. Torr was a tenacious logician, who subjected Petrie's theories and conclusions to detailed analysis as each new volume of his archaeological discoveries was published. Although Petrie's biographer has dismissed this debate as "a long and tedious exchange"<sup>10</sup>, in these criticisms we see Torr as a serious and meticulous scholar. In later life, he recalled how a friend, confronted with *Memphis and Mycenae*, had described it as:

"... a book to be given away with a pound of tea – he said readers would require at least a pound to keep them awake all through"<sup>11</sup>.

Torr argued that a chronology of Ancient Egypt should be based entirely on the true succession of kings with their reign lengths so far as these can be ascertained from their monuments and other contemporary texts. In this way it would be based on the least speculative data. His approach precluded the "astronomical" methods that were coming into vogue, especially Sothic dating as championed by Brugsch and Mahler<sup>12</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> Apart from *Memphis and Mycenae*, his most important works on ancient history are *Rhodes in Ancient Times* (Cambridge, 1885), *Ancient Ships* (Cambridge, 1894), and *Hannibal Crosses the Alps* (Cambridge, 1924). Throughout the 1890s, he contributed articles and reviews on a wide range of ancient world subjects to various periodicals, especially *The Classical Review* and *Revue archéologique*.

<sup>5</sup> W. M. F. Petrie, "The Egyptian Bases of Greek History", *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 11 (1890), 271-7. See also the discussions of relevant finds in *Illahun, Kahun and Gurob* (London, 1891), and *Tell el Amarna* (London, 1894).

<sup>6</sup> Torr, *Memphis and Mycenae*, 66 (49).

<sup>7</sup> V. Markham, *Friendship's Harvest* (London, 1956), quoted by M. Durkin in the Introduction to the reprint of *Memphis and Mycenae*, ii.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* i.

<sup>9</sup> Petrie was certainly not the only notable target for his wit. For example, a review of *Memphis and Mycenae* by Myres in *The Classical Review* 10 (1897), 447-53, sparked another caustic exchange. Torr maintained that Myres had so misrepresented his arguments that one submission included a covert threat to sue the Editor for libel – a threat which, needless to say, never materialised. The exchange of papers can be found throughout *The Classical Review* 11 (1897), including Torr's libel "threat" on p. 225.

<sup>10</sup> M. S. Drower, *Flinders Petrie. A Life in Archaeology* (London, 1985), 185.

<sup>11</sup> C. Torr, *Small Talk at Wreyland*, 3<sup>rd</sup> series (Cambridge, 1923), 2.

<sup>12</sup> Torr, *Memphis and Mycenae*, 53-60 (41-6).

He also dismissed the significance of the ancient eruption of Thera<sup>13</sup>, and it would no doubt have amused him to see how controversial that event still is in scholarship today.

According to Torr, for a chronology to be true, it must rely on the maximum amount of unequivocal data and the minimum amount of speculation. It must also be specific to Ancient Egypt because it would rely entirely on evidence internal to Egyptian archaeology. This is a simple logical strategy, and yet, as he freely accepted, the resulting chronology would not correspond with reality. It would always be shorter than reality because our knowledge is imperfect, and as our knowledge increased, so the chronology would literally grow larger. Those unfortunate tea-drinkers who did struggle to the end of *Memphis and Mycenae* were astonished to read the author's final conclusion:

Upon the whole, the evidence that points to intercourse, direct or indirect, between Greece and Egypt in the Mycenaean age, points to a period that began in 1271 at the latest, and ended in 850 or thereabouts. This evidence, however, is of very little weight; and there is evidence that tends to contradict it<sup>14</sup>.

His conclusions, therefore, seem to be self-defeating, but only insofar as they reveal an interesting discrepancy between the requirements of logic and the requirements of history.

Torr's position seems entirely at variance with our modern concept of ancient world chronology insofar as we regard it as a structure that should correspond as nearly as possible to reality. For Torr this notion was far from self-evident since he maintained that chronology is a problem of logic, and so only a logical solution would be sufficient. *Ideally* our chronology of the ancient world would correspond to reality and be applicable across all cultures; but *ideally* we would have all the relevant data, which clearly we do not. So the appropriate chronology question for Torr was not how to be most *right*. This would be logically absurd since we cannot measure success unless we already know the reality by some other means, i.e. how do we assess whether a chronology is right or wrong unless we know the real "dates"? Instead he asked how to be most ergonomically *wrong*. Torr's approach ensured that the error in ancient world chronology would be in only one direction, and result only from a lack of data. The resultant chronology would be as near to reality as objectivity would allow, whilst subjective criteria such as historical modelling, inference, assumption and speculation would have no part to play.

τούτων δὲ οἰκισθέντων ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ οἱ Ἕλληνες οὕτω ἐπιμισγόμενοι τούτοισι τὰ περὶ Αἴγυπτον γινόμενα ἀπὸ Ψαμμητίχου βασιλέος ἀπξάμενοι πάντα καὶ τὰ ὕστερον ἐπιστάμεθα ἀτρεκέως

Torr is far from alone in rejecting the assumption that a chronology corresponding to reality is a prerequisite for writing about the past. Heavyweight support for his position comes from Herodotus, for example in the following remark about Greek settlement in Egypt in the 26<sup>th</sup> Dynasty:

Because of our regular contact with these settlers in Egypt, the first foreigners to settle there, we Greeks have an accurate knowledge of Egyptian history *beginning with king Psammetichus and ever since*<sup>15</sup>.

According to Herodotus, we can understand Egypt in historical terms from the 26<sup>th</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Torr, *Memphis and Mycenae*, 70-4 (53-6).

<sup>14</sup> Torr, *Memphis and Mycenae*, 69 (51).

<sup>15</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories*, Book II, 154. Greek text after A. D. Godley, *Herodotus* Vol. 1, (Cambridge, Massachusetts, rev. ed. 1926).

Dynasty onwards because from that time there are European sources to rely on. Before then we must rely on non-European sources, and so history, as we understand it, becomes more problematic. Of course, this was no impediment to Herodotus' writing, and he is frequently criticised by modern scholars precisely because his account of Egyptian history *before the time of Psammetichus* (Psamtek I, 664-610 B.C) does not seem to embody a chronology that corresponds to reality<sup>16</sup>. If we are to be fair to the great historian, we must recognise that for him absolute chronology *per se* was not a necessary prerequisite to writing about the past. Many cultures indeed have been, or still are, able to understand the past without recourse to an absolute chronology. In our own culture, palaeontologists accept that new data *de sui generis* may distort the chronology within which they work, whilst astronomers do not even agree about the concept of time let alone chronology. As sophisticated historians we find it risible that in 1650 the<sup>rd</sup> Archbishop of Armagh, James Ussher, established that the universe was created on 23 October 4004 B.C. Yet the infelicity of applying a historical date to the beginning of creation should serve to remind us that the orthodox chronology of the ancient world is actually a rather parochial concept, quite unsuited to describing the reality of time in its fullest measure.

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Not surprisingly, every reviewer of *Memphis and Mycenae* condemned Torr's position, precisely because the resulting dates could not be in accordance with reality. Myres remarked that:

"... the balance of probability is against Mr Torr's reckoning, especially as Mr Torr's dates are admittedly *minima*, whereas the dates from 'dead-reckoning' are by no means *maxima*"<sup>17</sup>.

This is a clever rhetorical trick since it casts Torr as an extremist. His lowest possible dates sit at one extreme, with a set of maximum possible dates at the other extreme, and the truth, as the British establishment maintains, ought to lie somewhere in-between. Nevertheless, the past century has not been kind to Myres in this matter: the orthodox dates he sought to defend have proved to be impossibly high – as it turns out, they were themselves the putative *maxima* opposed to Torr's *minima*. For example, the beginning of the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, which today we might set around 1570 to 1539 B.C, was at that time set anywhere between 1822 to 1700 B.C. Torr fixed this date around 1271 BC, although he knew this was much lower than historical reality. Still, he maintained:

"If anyone likes to put the beginning of Dynasty 18 a century before 1271 B.C, I cannot prove that he is wrong, although he cannot prove that he is right"<sup>18</sup>.

Torr's date was based on known data, whereas the higher chronologies of his contemporaries were fleshed out with assumption and speculation. But if the emergent orthodoxy was speculative and illogical, why was the academic establishment so quick to dismiss Torr? And why was so much emphasis put on defending its own improbably

<sup>16</sup> Of course, for expository convenience, I am being chauvinistic in my use of the term "reality". Ancient Egyptian interpretations of the past, generally beginning with the reign of the sun god on earth, are entirely in accordance with ancient Egyptian reality. They only fail to correspond to the reality embodied in our own orthodox ancient world chronology, and more generally in our own culture's understanding of time and history, which is all that I mean to imply by my loose use of "reality".

<sup>17</sup> J. L. Myres, *Classical Review* 11 (1897), 129.

<sup>18</sup> Torr, *Memphis and Mycenae*, ix (3).

high dates?

The first part of the answer is, of course, the issue raised above. For most scholars, then as now, a chronology that has no pretension to accord with reality must be pointless and unworkable as a matter of common sense. However, a second issue arises from the fact that Torr's chronology had to be specific to Egypt. If this were accepted, the significance of Petrie's discovery of Mycenaean material in Egypt would be much diluted because it would not offer cross-dating for Greek civilisation – and dating Greek (i.e. European) civilisation was a matter of the utmost importance to Petrie and many of his academic colleagues.

In 1892 Torr wrote a stinging and dismissive review of Petrie's thesis on Greek involvement in Ancient Egypt<sup>19</sup>. Ostensibly Petrie had simply summarised how his archaeological findings in Egypt from the late 1880s shed light on early Greek culture. But in characteristically detailed fashion, Torr pointed out the huge logical gulf that existed between those discoveries and the historical conclusions Petrie inferred from them. For example, Petrie explained the importation of Greek goods into Egypt, from the New Kingdom until the rise to power of the 22nd Dynasty, in these terms:

“These are part of the products of that great wave of Graeco-Libyan conquest, which swept almost over Egypt time after time”<sup>20</sup>.

Superficially we might see in this remark only an old-fashioned and naïve view of history, but Petrie continued:

“Why may not a similar Mediterranean invasion have poured into Egypt in 2000 B.C as it did in 1200, 1100 and 1000? The Libyo-Greek league may have already been strong enough to pour in a horde on the country already beaten down by the Hyksos invasion”<sup>21</sup>.

Emboldened by his own speculation, he proposed his final and most speculative conclusion about the Greeks in Egypt:

“... that we have tangible remains of the Greek or Libyo-Akhaian invasions of Egypt as far as [1400 B.C]. And that we have pushed back the hazy and speculative region to before 2000 B.C, and shown some reasons for looking to a rise of European civilisation before 2500 B.C”<sup>22</sup>.

In these remarks, and more generally in his work, Petrie set out two provocative propositions: that European civilisation was more than 2000 years older than had until then been supposed; and that Egyptian civilisation was the product of a series of decisive European interventions. For example, *The Making of Egypt*, published at the end of his distinguished career, attributed the magnificence of Egyptian culture and history to a cycle of foreign interventions, which continually improved the native stock

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<sup>19</sup> C. Torr, *The Classical Review* 6 (1892), 127-31. The review was nevertheless characteristically witty. For example, Torr criticised Petrie for developing his scenario partly on the basis of de Rougé's identification of the Ramesside-era “Aqauasha” with the Achaeans. This, he suggests, “rests on no evidence whatever beyond the fact that the names Aqauasha and Achaeans both begin with A. So it was a very ingenious identification, and quite the finest thing of its kind since those comparisons between Macedon and Monmouth in King Henry V”, *ibid.* 129.

<sup>20</sup> Petrie, “Egyptian Bases”, X (III).

<sup>21</sup> Petrie, “Egyptian Bases”, X (V).

<sup>22</sup> Petrie, “Egyptian Bases”, X (V).



by means of domination and interbreeding, concluding that:

“... Egypt never originated any new civilisation, but was a fertile ground for implanting the products of other lands. Each new movement entered Egypt at its best, and deteriorated gradually under the easy conditions of life in Egypt”<sup>23</sup>.

The explanation for these highly speculative propositions is to be found in his equally provocative politics. Little is made within Egyptology of Petrie’s politics, yet throughout his career he used his historical theories to expound a case in favour of European colonial rule, especially in Egypt, as the most efficient means of advancing mankind<sup>24</sup>. We might like to suppose that these beliefs were incidental to his scholarship, but with regard to his account of the Greeks in Egypt they are absolutely central: Petrie supported an improbably high chronology because it confirmed the antiquity and cultural pre-eminence of European civilisation. By the thorough and detailed application of logic, Torr exposed the enormous *non sequitur* at the core of this account, and, in the highly personalised debate that ensued in the pages of *The Academy*, Petrie was unable to defend his views.

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Torr won that battle, but, of course, he lost the war. His devoted application of logic to the problems of ancient history has proved to be entirely inappropriate to the work of other historians. Moreover, many of his criticisms of the work of Petrie and others were simply wrong. But he did expose the mistakes of others, and in particular showed how Petrie allowed his deeply held political beliefs to exaggerate the significance of his discoveries. Regarding the spurious Graeco-Libyan alliance, Torr exposed an inherently racist dimension to the orthodox chronology of the ancient world even as it was being formulated. But the scholarly establishment rallied in defence of Petrie and vilified Torr. If Torr is a forgotten heretic, it is largely because Petrie has assumed a place amongst the canon of scholarly saints. But it is also due in no small measure to the character of the man himself, and the contrast he offers to his great contemporary. Whereas Petrie prided himself on hard work and practical endeavour, Torr preferred home-made cider and the relaxed company of friends, with whom to argue outrageous ideas. And whereas Petrie embroidered history with his extreme political beliefs, Cecil Torr put his faith instead in logic, wit and his own quirky charm.

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<sup>23</sup> W. M. F. Petrie, *The Making of Egypt* (New York, 1939), 161.

<sup>24</sup> Petrie’s political beliefs cannot be overlooked simply by making reference to the endemic racism of late-19<sup>th</sup> Century European scholarship, as definitively analysed by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (London, 1978). Petrie was an openly political figure, whose historical theories were inextricably bound to his political beliefs, as most clearly illustrated in a pamphlet he wrote for the Anti-Socialist Union, *Socialism in Working Order* (London, 1910). The defining racism of these beliefs was explicated in a series of articles published in the aftermath of World War I, e.g. *The Tutelage of the East*, *The Yale Review* (1918), 335-49, and *The Outlook for Civilisation*, *The Yale Review* (1922), 225-41. The language and argumentation of these publications is essentially the same as that employed in *The Making of Egypt*, but marshalled instead to the case in favour of colonial rule and the restriction of democratic government.