

# Antiquities in Airdrie Burgh 1895–2021: exploring museum history through collections

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## ABSTRACT

*North Lanarkshire Council Museums is the latest custodian of some of the founding collections of the Airdrie Burgh Museum, which was established in 1895 and closed in 1974. These reflect the wide-ranging interests of their original collectors, encompassing geology, natural history, ethnography and archaeology. This paper focuses on a collection of Mediterranean antiquities which survives today from the establishment of the museum. It results from a project funded by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland to investigate this collection, and demonstrates that it can be used to examine the museum's development and changing ethos over the intervening period. Although they were initially keenly sought after and welcomed as valuable gifts, later curators found little use for such objects in streamlined displays focused on local history and culture. Now, curatorial networks and the affordances of digital technology allow such collections of antiquities to be researched and shared with both local and wider audiences, while they can also contribute to local, national and global histories of archaeology, collection and display.*

## INTRODUCTION

This paper focuses on the collection of Mediterranean antiquities held by North Lanarkshire Council Museums, and charts its history, drawing on the objects themselves and on archival sources, in order to explore the history of the Airdrie Burgh Museum and the uses that can be made of such collections today. Many of today's publicly owned local museums can trace their origins to the rapid growth in museums which characterised the mid to late 19th century (Hill 2005: 36). In this period it became a matter of civic pride for each town to have its own museum as a mark of status and as a focus for intellectual activity and social improvement (Lewis 1992; Hill 2005). The early collecting activity of such museums was notable for the eager

desire to acquire as many objects as possible, to create collections which would inspire respect and admiration for their size and range as well as their scientific use. A key aim was for collections to achieve both depth in individual subjects, and breadth across all areas of antiquarian study; to be comprehensive, but also extensive. Museums' holdings were grown through purchases and through gifts, sometimes of single objects but also of whole collections made by private collectors, which represented their individual priorities, opportunities and interests. As a result, such museums encompassed large and disparate collections, exhibiting them in crowded displays prized for their range. While these collections were a matter of pride for museums' early curators, their heterogeneity proved problematic for later curators, especially in the period after

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the Second World War, as priorities shifted towards streamlined displays with a greater focus on the local area. Charting the changing fortunes of such collections can therefore illuminate both the priorities and the approach of the founders of local museums, and also how curatorial approaches have developed over the intervening decades.

While the turn away from such broad collecting in many cases led local museums to de-accession or transfer material, some objects have maintained their place in the collections up to the present day. These surviving collections form a legacy for today's museum curators, and raise the question of how they can be used for public benefit in a very different context. The antiquarianism of the 19th century, enabled by imperial and colonial structures, gave way to ever-increasing professional specialisation, creating challenges for curatorial teams who are not resourced to have subject-specific expertise in each area represented by such wide-ranging collections. While information on such objects' archaeological provenience, or findspot, is often absent, research can to some extent restore their provenance, that is their movements between people and places (see Joyce 2012 on the distinction between provenience and provenance). There remains, however, a marked asymmetry between the information which can be gathered on private collectors and public institutions in the UK, and the workers in the countries of origin who retrieved the objects from their context of deposition and sometimes sold them on. Small-scale projects that research collections and their histories, such as that undertaken by the author and funded by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland which gave rise to this paper, offer scope to support the identification and interpretation of such historical collections, and Subject Specialist Networks also have a role to play in connecting researchers and collectors, and sharing knowledge. In addition, the affordances of digital technology offer ways of sharing objects and exploring their multiple histories which go beyond traditional physical displays, and allow museum audiences access to parts of the collection which are kept in storage.

#### MEDITERRANEAN ANTIQUITIES IN THE NORTH LANARKSHIRE COUNCIL MUSEUMS COLLECTION

The current collection comprises 71 objects from the ancient Mediterranean, including some which can be identified as originating from Cyprus or Egypt. Around half are probably or possibly Cypriot, consisting mainly of pottery with two stone alabaster. These range from a Late Bronze Age (1550–1050 BC) spindle bottle of Red Lustrous Wheel-made Ware to Roman-period lamps, including jugs, bowls and unguentaria in both plain and decorated wares. No provenience or findspot information is available for any of these, with the exception of one White Painted jug (750–600 BC) accompanied by a handwritten memo stating that it was obtained at Famagusta in Cyprus in 1923 (Illus 1), presumably by purchase since it is unlikely to have been excavated there. Although no direct documentary evidence has been found, many of the unprovenanced objects are likely to have come from the collection of Andrew and Esmé Scott-Stevenson, who lived in Cyprus from 1878 to 1883, then in Braidwood in Lanarkshire until 1889 (see Reeve 2020a for a full account of the Scott-Stevensons' involvement with Cypriot archaeology and collecting). Andrew Scott-Stevenson came to Cyprus with the 42nd (Highland) Regiment of Foot, the Black Watch, at the outset of the British administration in 1878 and was made Assistant Commissioner at Kyrenia, where his wife Esmé soon joined him. Like many other visitors and temporary residents in Cyprus, including colonial officials, they amassed a sizeable collection of antiquities in Cyprus, through purchase or appropriation of objects found by others, and through casual exploration of tombs as well as more formal excavations. While there was some local resistance to the high-handed manner in which they appropriated antiquities, ultimately they were able to export their collection to Scotland, having requested and been granted permission by the British authorities (Reeve 2020a). Parts of their collection have been traced to various institutions in the UK, including the Victoria and Albert Museum (subsequently transferred to the British Museum), the



ILLUS 1 White Painted jug from Cyprus, Cypro-Archaic period, c 750–600 BC. (© North Lanarkshire Council Museums)



ILLUS 2 Egyptian pottery vessel marked '269' from John Garstang's excavations at Beni Hasan. (© North Lanarkshire Council Museums)

Pitt Rivers collection, and Derby Museum and Art Gallery (Reeve 2020a). There are similarities between the objects in Derby, in particular, and those in the surviving North Lanarkshire Council Museums collection, such as a transport amphora and Hellenistic plain wares (Reeve 2020b). The Derby collection also includes modern Cypriot pottery, which was an interest of Esmé Scott-Stevenson's, and this may explain the presence in the North Lanarkshire collection of similar relatively modern objects. This collection forms a small part of the wider diaspora of Cypriot antiquities in the UK, with highly varied histories of excavation, collection and display (Kiely & Ulbrich 2012; Nikolaou 2013).

The collection of Mediterranean objects also incorporates a group of around 20 pottery vessels from ancient Egypt, which can be traced to the excavations conducted in 1902–4 at the Middle Kingdom necropolis of Beni Hasan by the Egyptologist and archaeologist John Garstang (1876–1956) (Garstang 1907; Bommas 2012). The 'clumsy, careless technique' indicated by

their thick walls and uneven shapes suggest they were made specifically for funerary purposes (Bourriau 1981: 60). Two are marked with tomb numbers, one of which is decipherable as '269' (Illus 2). While Garstang's record-keeping was inconsistent and incomplete, these markings now allow these objects to be tentatively reunited with those surviving in other collections from the same findspot (Bommas 2012: 48, 63). Through the system of 'partage' operating at the time in Egypt, Garstang was permitted to export many of his finds, which he offered to museums as discussed below, resulting in their widespread distribution across the UK and beyond (Potter 2020; Stevenson 2019: 12–13).

The movement of these antiquities from these two countries – Cyprus and Egypt – to Scotland was part of a much broader appropriation of cultural heritage during the imperial and colonial periods, and was facilitated by contemporary attitudes towards ancient material culture which considered it appropriate for exchange and sale, in contrast to present-day views. Legal

frameworks in operation in both countries to control the export of antiquities placed no barriers in the paths of these groups of objects, in contrast to much tighter controls operating in Greece, and in Turkey following the 1884 Ottoman Antiquities Law, for example. After their export, their collection histories can be traced back to the period of foundation of public museums in the region, and the activities of local antiquarians and collectors, as discussed below.

#### DR JOHN HUNTER SELKIRK'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO PUBLIC MUSEUMS IN NORTH LANARKSHIRE AND AYRSHIRE

Airdrie Burgh was the first town in Scotland to adopt the Public Libraries Act, in 1853, though the early years of the public library were characterised by financial insecurity and insufficient space (Craig Strang 1985: 217–21). This changed in 1892 with a gift from the industrialist and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie (1835–1919), matched by local subscription, which enabled the construction of a new public library building in Anderson Street, opened in 1894 (Knox 1921: 118; Craig Strang 1985: 221). In order to increase the status of this institution and maximise its potential as a focus for the pursuit of knowledge in the area, it was decided that the building should also house a museum, and collections were sought for this purpose. To the great gratification of its founders, this was achieved at once through a large and varied donation from Dr John Hunter Selkirk (1835–98), a local antiquarian and geologist (MacNair & Mort 1908: 228–34),<sup>1</sup> which enabled a substantial museum to be inaugurated along with the library. This donation was part of Hunter Selkirk's 'Braidwood Collection', named for the village where he lived in South Lanarkshire. Throughout his life he tenaciously pursued the study of geology, on which he published and lectured, alongside antiquarian collecting which encompassed fine art, historic Bibles, weapons, clocks and coins. He was a Fellow of the Royal Physical Society of Edinburgh, a member of the Glasgow Geological Society and a Fellow of the Edinburgh Geological Society.<sup>2</sup>

Hunter Selkirk's collecting activities provide an insight into the competitive world of antiquarian collecting in the 19th century, and the way such collections were used altruistically for public benefit, and also to gain the reward of public approbation for their owners when handed over to civic institutions. In this phase of rapid museum expansion, a well-established system of reward operated around donations, through which donors were thanked at public meetings and in published museum reports, drawing attention both to the scientific value of the donation and the intellectual prowess and generosity of the donor (Knell 2007). Collecting and donating, as well as being a source of intellectual satisfaction, was therefore also a means of increasing one's standing in the local area and gaining a reputation for learning (Hill 2005: 57–60). The rewards at stake gave rise to keen competition between collectors. Described by a contemporary as gripped by 'collecting mania',<sup>3</sup> Hunter Selkirk's approach was endlessly acquisitive and bordered upon predatory, as seen through his rivalry with his business partner and brother-in-law, Dr Andrew Crusoe Selkirk (1815–96). A side benefit of their coal business was the access it gave them to geological specimens uncovered by their workmen. Hunter Selkirk ensured that he gained the most and best of these 'by early rising and judicious bribery of the workmen',<sup>4</sup> with the result that Andrew Selkirk gave up and handed over his own collection to his brother-in-law. This approach, of growing his collection through the acquisition of those of others, was pursued by Hunter Selkirk throughout his life; an obituary lists twelve 'minor collections' bought or gifted 'to swell his own extensive museum',<sup>5</sup> and there were doubtless more. One of these collectors commented, 'I might have had a good collection had Dr Hunter not harried my nest'.<sup>6</sup>

Hunter Selkirk's eagerness to acquire others' collections is a likely explanation for the presence in the Braidwood Collection of material from ancient Cyprus. A glimpse of this can be caught in reports of loans to the Lanark Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition held in 1890, which included:

ancient articles of glass and pottery, mostly got in the Island of Cyprus – tear bottles, oil lamps, made of something like red clay, oil cruces, lamp sencers, urns, bowls of various shapes ... also drinking cups all said to be of a period 4,000 years ago.<sup>7</sup>

These were described as ‘Phoenician pottery and glass ware ... used in decorating tombs in Kyrenia, Cyprus’.<sup>8</sup> The types of objects described align closely with those remaining in the collection today; the ‘lamp sencer’ [sic] may indicate the pierced incense holder of modern production (Illus 3). ‘Phoenician’ or ‘Graeco-Phoenician’ was a common descriptor for post-Bronze Age Cypriot antiquities, reflecting perceived cultural influences on Cypriot productions (Perrot and Chipiez 1885). Several factors suggest that this collection may have been brought to Scotland by the Scott-Stevensons, as outlined above. Firstly, they lived at Braidwood House in Braidwood, South Lanarkshire, which was less than a mile from Daleville House, Hunter Selkirk’s residence. It is therefore highly probable that the two families came into contact, though no direct evidence for this has been found. Secondly, the objects are said to be from Kyrenia, the Scott-Stevensons’ district in Cyprus, and thirdly, the presence of modern as well as ancient Cypriot objects aligns with their known collecting preferences. The Scott-Stevensons sought to sell groups of objects from their collection on several occasions (Reeve 2020a), and may similarly have sold objects to Hunter Selkirk, although it is also possible that he acquired them independently at a public auction, a common source of Cypriot antiquities for collectors in this period (Kiely & Ulbrich 2012: 327–9). The itineraries of these objects illustrate the diverse routes of Cypriot antiquities through private and public hands in this period, as disparate smaller collections were brought together and dispersed, gifted or sold to museums, and in some cases returned to the market or destroyed through accident (Kiely & Ulbrich 2012; Nikolaou 2013).

A large portion of Hunter Selkirk’s Braidwood Collection formed the bulk of the founding collection of the Airdrie Burgh Museum, consisting of geological specimens, coins, books, natural

history specimens, and these ‘Phoenician’ antiquities. Hunter Selkirk was extensively honoured for this donation, with the freedom of the Burgh, the role of opening the new museum in 1895, a commemorative marble plaque in the museum, and a grand celebratory dinner. The competition between museums, and the status that accrued from having extensive and rare collections, is evident in the speeches given on this occasion: the objects were valued not only for their intrinsic merit, but specifically because they were ‘superior’ to those owned by other museums.<sup>9</sup> As Knell (2007: 265) notes, ‘honour and patronage ... became the currency with which to win or buy favours, and through which the collections would grow’. Hunter Selkirk had promised Dr Andrew Selkirk that ‘by way of acknowledgement ... the result of their joint labours [would be called] the Braidwood Collection’.<sup>10</sup> However, at the point of this donation there was no acknowledgement of Andrew Selkirk’s contribution, and honour was bestowed on Hunter Selkirk alone.



ILLUS 3 Pottery incense holder from Cyprus, probably 19th century. (© North Lanarkshire Council Museums)

Beneath the surface of reciprocal honour and prestige, there was keen competition between local institutions for the gift of ready-made collections which it would have been time-consuming and expensive to try to replicate from scratch. Further donations were sought from Hunter Selkirk, who still retained extensive collections, and he promised gifts to other towns and institutions. At times this caused disappointment and resentment, and strenuous efforts were made to sway his decisions. In June 1897 the Kilmarnock Town Council welcomed a ‘princely gift’ from Hunter Selkirk, set out in a formal deed of gift:

I, John Robert Strathern Hunter-Selkirk ... do hereby hand over, give, bequeath and dispose to the Provost, Magistrates, and Town Councillors of the Burgh of Kilmarnock ... my collection of minerals, fossils, books, coins and antiquarian curios, to be placed in the Public Museum of Kilmarnock.<sup>11</sup>

This donation was welcomed in Kilmarnock as ‘most gratifying’ and ‘very handsome’ but in Airdrie disappointment was expressed at the loss of ‘a collection which Airdrie was at one time hopeful of receiving’.<sup>12</sup> It also drew forth a furious response from James Young (dates unknown; active in the 1890s), a geologist and collector from Lesmahagow (MacNair & Mort 1908: 134), whose collection, he claimed, had been handed over free of charge to Hunter Selkirk on the understanding that it was to remain in Lanarkshire. Young stated that

while I was spending money as well as time to make this collection what it is – of which Dr Hunter was the custodian – it was never with the idea that he could or would ever attempt to do with them as he thought fit ... although he may try to shine as something great, his greatness will seem but little in the eyes of such as I.<sup>13</sup>

It is evident that Hunter Selkirk’s assumption of the right to dispose of the ‘Braidwood Collection’, which had been produced through collective endeavour, and monopoly of the prestige associated with it, was deeply resented by

at least one of the collectors whose work he had taken over. The ostensibly gentlemanly arena of collecting was characterised by intense rivalry and gave rise to behaviour which Young, at least, considered underhand and disingenuous.

Hunter Selkirk appears to have thought better of this sweeping deed of gift, revising it in favour of Lanark in his will, made in January 1898 in the course of a long illness. His donation to Airdrie had been assiduously courted by the Airdrie Burgh Museum’s first Honorary Curator, Robert Dunlop (1848–1921), chemist at Stanrigg Oilworks and a collector of geology, natural history and anthropology (Ford 1988; Airdrie Public Library Committee 1954: 11). Dunlop also played an important role in securing the reinstatement of a donation for Kilmarnock, as claimed by him some years after the event:

at 5 o’clock a.m. on the 8th of January, 1898, I got a wire telling me a will was being made by Dr Hunter Selkirk in favour of Lanark. There were two inches of snow on the ground at the time, but I got on my bicycle and was at his house in two hours, travelling 17 miles. I stayed all night with him, and ... another will was made next day (the 9th January) by ten in the morning in favour of Kilmarnock.<sup>14</sup>

A codicil to Hunter Selkirk’s will of 9 January bears this out, though limiting the donation to ‘my collection of geological specimens’ provided that ‘the same be deposited in a suitable building within the Burgh of Kilmarnock’, while declaring the bequest void if Kilmarnock Town Council made any claim ‘under any Deed of Gift or pretended Deed of Gift alleged to be granted by me’.<sup>15</sup> A clear picture emerges from this episode of the intense competition between local municipalities for prestige-enhancing museum collections, and the lengths gone to in order to secure them.

The fate of the Braidwood Collection illustrates a broader truth of museum collections, that although popularly conceived of as well protected and preserved for the long term, they are inherently unstable and subject to change, deterioration and loss, and the intentions of their

founders are rarely achieved in the long term (Lubar et al 2017). The breaking up of this collection into different parts maximised Hunter Selkirk's reputational reward during his lifetime, though it was regretted by his contemporaries because it 'partially destroyed what ought to have been a lasting monument to his memory'.<sup>16</sup> However, it can be argued that the dispersal maximised the collection's impact and ultimately secured the long-term survival of parts of it. In any case, given the changes in museum collection and curation practices over the course of the 20th century, it is unlikely that the whole collection could have survived as a 'lasting monument'. The promised donation to Kilmarnock of the outstanding collection of geological specimens, with the proviso regarding their suitable accommodation, was the spur for the firm establishment of a public museum, and although the collection was largely destroyed by a devastating fire in 1909, the institution itself survived and was rebuilt (Lomax et al 2011: 332). Part of the collection given to Lanark, consisting of 'books, pictures, armour, fossils, coins ... to be known as the "Hunter Selkirk Collection"',<sup>17</sup> was disposed of at auction by Lanark Town Council in 1912, the council having secured powers to do so in 1907,<sup>18</sup> despite some concern expressed through the correspondence pages of the local press at this apparent 'gross breach of trust'.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, in Airdrie, the founding collection given in 1895 continued to form the core of the museum, and can be used to chart its fortunes in the succeeding decades.

#### THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AIRDRIE BURGH MUSEUM

A common feature of museum development in this period was that the energy, cultural capital and expertise of private collectors benefited the newly established public institutions to which their collections were transferred (Hill 2005: 47). In Airdrie, the antiquarian and scientific interests of local people, initially expressed through the collecting activity described above,

also supported the development of the Airdrie Burgh Museum in its early years. Robert Dunlop, who had played a major part in securing Hunter Selkirk's founding donation, was the first Honorary Curator of the museum. He was supported by a team of volunteer curators, each of whom had responsibility for arranging and maintaining cabinets which fell within their areas of interest (Knox 1921: 120); as a result, each area of the collection received some attention, which was more or less expert according to the knowledge and experience of each volunteer curator.

A small but steady flow of objects increased the museum's collections from local donors, though few antiquities. The development of the collections was thus largely passive rather than active, with the exception of the acquisition of material from excavations at Beni Hasan via John Garstang in 1904. Following his successful campaign in 1902–3, Garstang wrote to *The Times* to offer specimens of pottery free of charge to museums. This offer attracted considerable attention, with responses from more than 143 institutions, both in the UK and overseas (Stevenson 2019: 12–13), with the Airdrie Burgh Museum among them. This transaction was not initiated by the Curator of Antiquities, Mr Alex Turner (1862–1924), who was mainly interested in British antiquities (Gardiner 1926: 3, 10); the Airdrie Public Museum Curator's Minute Book records that the advertisement in the press had been noticed by Mr Thomas Jeffrey (1831–1906), a longstanding supporter of the museum and library, following which the Secretary, Mr John Gardiner (1863–1935), wrote to obtain specimens (see Craig Strang 1985: 224–5 on Jeffrey's and Gardiner's work with the library and museum). The Minute Book notes that 'Labels and other particulars are to follow in a few weeks', suggesting that authoritative information was provided by the excavators and formed the basis of the objects' interpretation in the museum.<sup>20</sup> There is no indication that the museum committee sought to influence what was sent; they were content to receive the disparate objects they were allocated. As Bommas notes, Garstang was 'overwhelmed' by the

sheer quantity of pottery which fell to his share from the Beni Hasan excavations (Bommas 2012: 48 n41) and thus adopted an ‘altruistic’ method of distribution (Stevenson 2019: 12), which allowed museums across the UK to gain Egyptology collections for the benefit of their local audiences without financial investment, while raising the profile of Garstang’s work. However, this also had the effect of separating tomb groups and widely dispersing excavated objects which became ‘lost or de-contextualised’ (Bommas 2012: 48), a legacy of contemporary archaeological and museum practice which remains part of the collection’s history.

A newspaper description of the museum’s collections from 1904 gives an insight into how the antiquities were perceived by visitors:

there can be no question about the vast antiquity of the collection. The various items are all of brown clay, evidently hand-shaped and sun-baked ... another collection of ancient pottery ware and glass [was] a gift of the late Dr Hunter Selkirk. The articles are of Phoenician make, were dug up in Cyprus ... and the workmanship shows an immense advance upon that of the Egyptian collection, being in fact quite equal to the standards of modern art.<sup>21</sup>

The displays seem designed to draw attention to the technical properties of the ancient objects, drawing comparisons between the Egyptian and Cypriot antiquities to illustrate progression in making pottery through time. Apart from some discussion of relative dating, this newspaper account does not discuss the two groups of objects from an archaeological perspective, suggesting that this was not foregrounded in the curatorial approach to display. Cross-cultural comparison continued to be the guiding principle in displaying the collections of antiquities; in 1909 a ‘large new case, filled with articles from the ancient tombs of Egypt, Cyprus, and our own country, drew much attention’.<sup>22</sup> While the labels which accompanied the Garstang donation were presumably incorporated into the displays, it is not clear that there was sufficient supporting information to allow visitors to make much sense of what they saw. The museum was open to the

public and access for schoolchildren was encouraged through a system of tickets distributed by teachers, but as later curators admitted, ‘the intellectual profit to the little visitors was only meagre’ (Gardiner 1926: 5).

In 1925 the library and museum moved to new premises on Wellwynd (Airdrie Public Library Committee 1954: 16–17), which, together with a renewed focus on education, prompted some changes in the curatorial approach to interpretation and display. This was in keeping with policy development at national level, which placed increasing emphasis on the role of museums in primary education, as recommended by the major report on UK museums by Henry Miers published in 1928 (Miers 1928; Lewis 1992: 34). Cases were now numbered and objects were accompanied by ‘small typed labels’ (Airdrie Public Museum Curator’s Minute Book 1925),<sup>23</sup> and the first Guide to the collection (Gardiner 1926) was produced. This gives some insight into the collections and their display and interpretation, although it describes the displays rather than enumerating the objects. The new museum space, spread across two galleries, was densely packed with upright cases lining the walls and ‘large double-sided cases’ occupying the floor of the larger room (Gardiner 1926: 9). The Cypriot and Egyptian antiquities continued to be displayed together in a single case, alongside ‘several ancient finds made in Scotland’ (Gardiner 1926: 15). The descriptions are somewhat romanticised: the Cypriot antiquities are said to be ‘reminders of the long vanished Graeco-Phoenician culture’, with the mention of ‘jewel trays’ and ‘fruit trays’ representing an imaginative engagement with the objects rather than evidence-based identifications. Similarly, the Egyptian objects are located in ‘that wonderful land of the Nile, the Pharaohs, the Sphinx and the Pyramids’ and are described as ‘very old red clay pottery, the largest piece evidently a bread plate’ (Gardiner 1926: 14). This guidebook therefore makes the most of the information which had accompanied the objects at their donation in order to enthuse and engage visitors, but indicates that there had been little curatorial interest in learning more.



Labels still extant on some of the ancient Cypriot objects may reflect successive curatorial approaches. Small handwritten paper labels, numbered non-consecutively between 75 and 457, may relate to Hunter Selkirk's management of his collection, or perhaps to its first accession into the museum. Square printed labels numbered between 1 and 14, larger and more legible, may reflect later attempts to make the collection more intelligible to visitors. These efforts were particularly focused on schoolchildren:

The objects ... are better classified – articles of the same kind being now in proximity; it has become possible, with a fuller staff, to arrange for the reception and showing round of children in large bodies; while the publication of this Guide will much facilitate the task of juvenile instruction (Gardiner 1926: 5).

At this point, antiquities were evidently a valued part of this collection and played a part in the new priority given to its didactic role. This direction of travel was reinforced by the 1938 Markham Report, which further emphasised the importance of education and a community focus for local museums (Markham 1938; Pearson 2017: ch 2).

The fortunes of the collections of antiquities changed decisively as a result of shifts in museum practice and priorities in the post-war period. The era of voluntary curatorship came to an end in 1946 on the death of the last Honorary Curator, Mr William McLean (?–1946), a self-taught expert in geology and archaeology (Airdrie Public Library Committee 1954: 22; Anon 1947). This was part of a broader trend in museums across the UK in this period, described by Pearson (2017: 187) as 'the end of the influence of the "gentlemanly" curator'. The museum was henceforth overseen by a Museum Advisory Committee chaired by Mr Edwin G Macnaughton (dates unknown), a Classicist, teacher at Airdrie Academy and later rector of Hamilton Academy in South Lanarkshire from 1950 to 1967.<sup>24</sup> This committee focused on 'the development of interests of an educational and cultural nature existing in the community',<sup>25</sup> with a strong local focus which encompassed loan exhibitions of fine art, but found little use for antiquities. This

new approach was very much in line with the recommendations of the 1938 Markham Report, mentioned above, which encouraged a focus on 'locality and identity' rather than 'displays of unrelated curiosities from the past' (Pearson 2017: 52), and was perhaps facilitated by the change in museum leadership. Remarks made in 1950 at the opening of an exhibition of pictures from the Burrell Collection demonstrate the extent of the change in ethos:

Of recent years there had been an entirely new conception of the functions of a museum and the part it should play in the life of a community ... It is a far cry from the old collection in Anderson Street ... The museum then was simply a repository for all that was dull, dead and dusty.<sup>26</sup>

The disparate antiquarian collections which had been eagerly sought and highly celebrated at the museum's foundation had by this point come to seem outmoded and irrelevant.

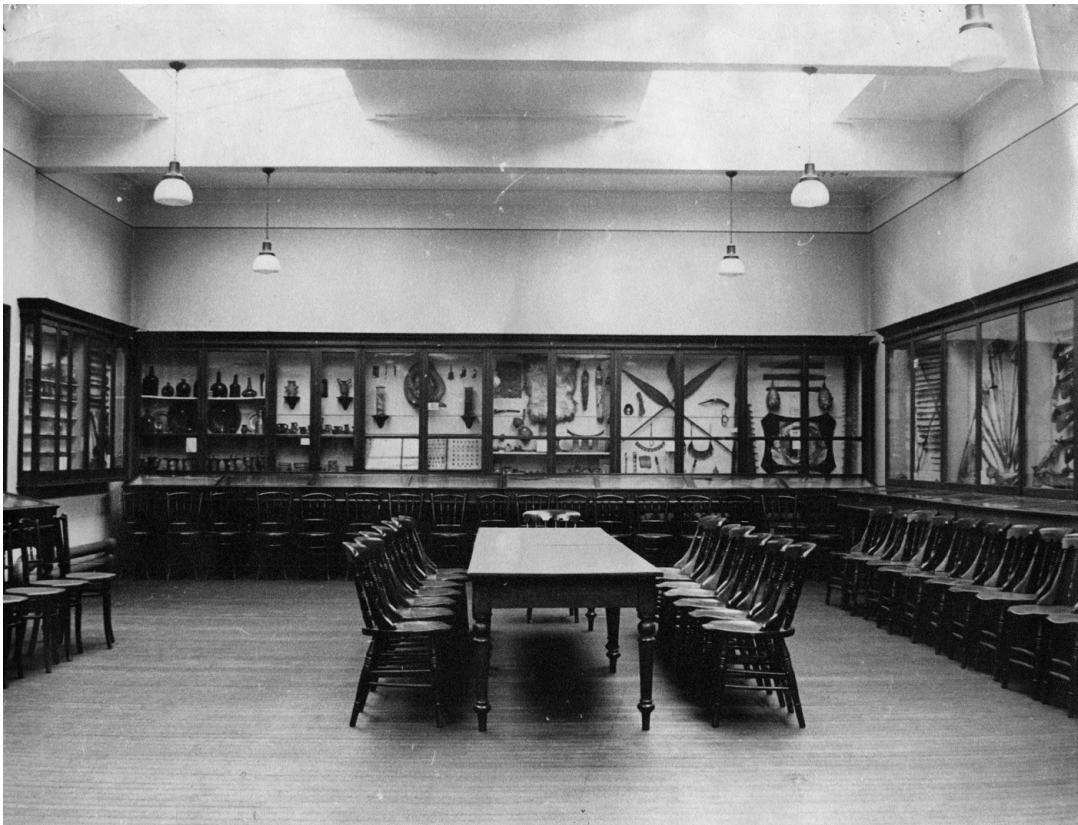
This change in approach was consolidated by a complete refurbishment of the library and museum in 1953, funded by a local businessman and benefactor, George Johnston JP (1880–1955) and a grant from the Carnegie United Kingdom Trust (Airdrie Public Library Committee 1954: 28). For most museums in this period, post-war austerity and lack of available materials imposed financial restraint and limited development (Lewis 1992: 36–7; Pearson 2017: 205). This resulted in 'makeshift' displays characterised by a 'do-it-yourself' approach (Wintle 2021). However, the funds made available for the library and museum encouraged high ambitions and allowed a complete refit, for which the key-word was 'modern'. Images from 1952 (Illus 4) and 1953 (Illus 5) allow a comparison of the different approaches. In 1952, large wall cabinets of dark wood are full of objects grouped by type, accompanied by glass-topped cases. By contrast, the 1953 redesign is comparatively empty, characterised by open space and clean lines. The dense displays which were a key feature of the museum's earlier incarnation were replaced by fewer cabinets showcasing a much smaller number of objects. These cabinets were designed

to be flexible, and could be covered with shutters to hang pictures. The light, bright interior had blue upper walls blending into the white ceiling to evoke the sky (Airdrie Public Library Committee 1954: 28). These design features, along with the plants forming a centrepiece, echoed a wider movement in museums towards professional exhibition design which prioritised innovative display and storage solutions and focused on colour, light and texture (Wintle 2021). They placed the new museum at the forefront of Northern European museum design, which prioritised ‘physical flexibility, innovation in lighting, informal and welcoming atmospheres with freshly cut flowers, multiple rest areas and the mixing of art and social history collections’ (MacLeod 2013: 133). In a newspaper article on

the redesign, great satisfaction was expressed with the museum’s up-to-date style:

The first thing that strikes you in passing through the door is that it is a wonderfully cheerful looking place to be a museum. The attractive colour scheme used in the decoration of the walls and ceiling, the light tone of the furnishings themselves, and the skilful placing of the lighting all combine to give this effect .... completely dispelling that ‘cluttered up’ atmosphere common to most museums.<sup>27</sup>

Pearson (2017: 8) demonstrates that many museums, after a period of experimentation and innovation prompted by wartime exigencies and focused on education and communities, returned to a more traditional curatorial focus on objects in



ILLUS 4 The main gallery of Airdrie Library Museum in 1952. (Photographer unknown. North Lanarkshire Archives GB1778, Monklands Photographic Collection, U6/1944(2). © North Lanarkshire Council)



ILLUS 5 An exhibition of paintings in the main gallery of Airdrie Library Museum shortly after its refurbishment in 1953. (Photographer unknown. North Lanarkshire Archives GB1778, Monklands Photographic Collection, U6/1945. © North Lanarkshire Council)

the post-war years. However, in Airdrie, the impetus provided by funding for revamped premises seems to have consolidated this streamlined and community-focused approach. In direct contrast to the eager accumulation which characterised the early years of the museum, most of its collections were now surplus to the requirements of the displays. In this context it is not surprising that the identities of the collections from Cyprus and Egypt became detached from the objects themselves. As Stevenson (2019: 194) comments, this is a common experience of such collections: ‘In the absence of formal documentation, and with the death of previous generations of curators ... many objects [are] rendered mute.’ The museum never returned to the proliferation of its earliest displays, though parts of the collection moved in and out of storage. Following the optimism of the 1950s, it entered a period of decline, eventually closing to the public in 1974.<sup>28</sup> Ownership of the

collections was passed to the Monklands District Council, and eventually to North Lanarkshire Council following local government reorganisation in 1996, in whose control it remains today (CultureNL 2016). Some of the collection of antiquities are currently displayed at Summerlee Museum, Cumbernauld Museum and Kilsyth Library in displays relating to local history, with the remainder kept in storage.

#### THE COLLECTION AND ITS USES TODAY

Museums are increasingly conscious of the need to reckon with the imperial and colonial histories intertwined with their legacy collections, and to explore these in partnership with museum audiences, especially local communities. As discussed above, the Mediterranean antiquities in the North Lanarkshire Council Museums collection were

set in motion by archaeological activity and collecting in Cyprus and Egypt under the aegis of the British Empire, which allowed these antiquities to be exported from their countries of origin and to join private and hence public collections in the UK. The presence of these objects in the collections requires ‘an honest and accurate reappraisal’ of their complex histories (Museums Association 2021), so that the museum and its collections can be understood in their global context. This in turn will increase the range of stories which the museum can tell through its collections. Some of these objects are currently used in displays relating to local history, for example Roman lamps illustrate Roman-period culture in Summerlee Museum, and there is also scope to use them to explore different themes within the history of the museum and its collections, including examination of British imperial legacies.

The entangled post-excavation histories of the antiquities in the North Lanarkshire Council Museums collection led to the identities and origins of individual objects becoming obscure or erased. This is a common experience of collections ‘orphaned’ (Voss 2012) by museum closures and mergers, changes in curatorial personnel, and a lack of original documentation – whether because it has become lost over time, or because provenience and/or provenance were never fully recorded. Research into these collections, such as that which informs this paper, has the potential to restore some of this missing information, while it must be recognised that some perspectives, for example of the Cypriot people who excavated many of the objects in the Scott-Stevensons’ collection, are unrecoverable. However, knowledge of a collection’s history enables links to be made to related research, for example on Saleh Abd El Nebi, Garstang’s *ra’is* (foreman) at Beni Hasan (Thornton 2020; Quirke 2010). These collections can also be put into broader national contexts, for example that of the widespread ancient Egyptian collections in Scotland (Potter & Maitland 2020), challenging the idea that ancient objects without provenience have little archaeological, historical or display value. Such additional information provides new ways for curators to engage audiences with the breadth of their collections – both

in terms of their archaeological significance, and as a point of connection between local, national and global histories.

Most Local Authority funded museum services are not in a position to employ curatorial staff with expertise across every area covered by their collections, especially those which have wide-ranging ‘legacy’ collections arising from the antiquarian tendency and imperial affordances of the 19th century. As such, sharing of knowledge and expertise is vital to allow the potential of such collections to be realised. Subject Specialist Networks, such as the Classical Collections Network, of which the author is Co-Chair, and the Money and Medals Network, organisations which provide advice and guidance in specific collection areas, have an important role to play in achieving this (Mendoza 2017: 44). While they vary in capacity and resources, Subject Specialist Networks offer one way of bringing specialists and objects together, providing support for curators and facilitating collection interpretation (Wintle et al 2021). This represents a pragmatic response to limited budgets and the need for each museum to prioritise what it identifies as its key collections and themes. Through the research project funded by the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland in 2021 on which this paper is based, these antiquities in the North Lanarkshire Council Museums collection have been re-identified, and their histories have been explored. The wares and periods of the ancient Cypriot objects have been identified, and priorities have been identified for conservation work in order to stabilise some of them, and potentially reveal further features such as painted decoration and pot-marks. This is, of course, only one form of expertise, and this project lays the groundwork for further investigation with museum audiences to explore diverse perspectives on these collections and their histories and to reflect this multivocality in their interpretation and display.

While some museums, such as Leeds City Museum in its ‘Collectors Cabinet’ (Bliss 2008: 25), choose to reflect the antiquarian origins of their collections in some of their displays, only a small fraction of many museums’ extensive collections can be displayed at any one time,

and choices have to be made as to which stories are foregrounded. However, more can be shared virtually, for example through online catalogues which offer wider audiences the opportunity to browse collections and give feedback, and provide a starting-point for collaborative research. This is an area which has attracted increasing attention at national level in recent years, such as the five-year project ‘Towards a National Collection’ led by the Arts and Humanities Research Council and launched in March 2020, which works towards ‘creating a unified virtual national collection’ (AHRC 2021) to allow cross-disciplinary and cross-collection research. Meanwhile, locally led initiatives, such as the online platform ‘CultureNL Museums Collections’ (North Lanarkshire Council 2019), offer visitors virtual access to individual objects and to collections interpretation, as well as stories and blogs about research which provide more detailed and contextualised information about legacy collections.

## CONCLUSION

As Lubar et al (2017: 2) comment, ‘Museums hold both objects and stories, and stories are even more easily displaced than artefacts.’ Antiquarian collecting by individuals in the 19th century, coupled with the competitive acquisition of such collections by fledgling public museums, gave rise to highly disparate collections, often with little information accompanying the objects. While some of these were further dispersed or lost in the course of the 20th century, others persist as ‘legacy’ collections and create both challenges and opportunities for present-day curators. Research into objects themselves and related archives offers scope to recover at least some of their stories. This study has demonstrated that there is potential to restore some of the background required to contextualise such collections, in terms both of their collection histories which intersect with local and global histories, and the identities of the objects themselves, creating knowledge which can be shared and built on in partnership with museum audiences.

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## NOTES

- 1 Hunter Selkirk had a long association with the Selkirk family. Originally named Hunter, he went into business with Dr Andrew Crusoe Selkirk, whose sister he married, and on Andrew Selkirk’s death in 1896 Hunter succeeded to his estate, upon which he adopted ‘Selkirk’ as part of his name. His full name is used throughout this paper for clarity.
- 2 *Hamilton Herald and Lanarkshire Weekly News* 1898 ‘Death of Dr Hunter Selkirk’, 25 March: 5.
- 3 *Carlisle and Lanark Gazette* 1912 ‘Dr Hunter-Selkirk of Daleville’, Professor Burns, 5 October: 4.
- 4 *Ibid.*
- 5 *Hamilton Herald and Lanarkshire Weekly News* 1898 ‘Death of Dr Hunter Selkirk’, 25 March: 5.
- 6 *Carlisle and Lanark Gazette* 1912 ‘Dr Hunter-Selkirk of Daleville’, Professor Burns, 5 October: 4.
- 7 *Lanarkshire Upper Ward Examiner* 1890 ‘Art Exhibition at Lanark’, 9 August: 4.
- 8 *The Scotsman* 1890 ‘Fine Art and Industrial Exhibition at Lanark’, 7 August: 7.

- 9 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1895 'Opening of the Airdrie Burgh Museum', 16 February: 4.
- 10 *Carlisle and Lanark Gazette* 1912 'Dr Hunter-Selkirk of Daleville', Professor Burns, 5 October: 4.
- 11 *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald* 1897 'Kilmarnock', 11 June: 8.
- 12 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1897 'Notes by the Way', 12 June: 4.
- 13 *Hamilton Herald and Lanarkshire Weekly News* 1897 'The Braidwood Collection. Strong letter from an Antiquarian', James Young, 9 July: 4.
- 14 *Kilmarnock Herald and North Ayrshire Gazette* 1911 'Public Library. Proposed purchase of Dunlop specimens', Robert Dunlop, 5 May: 8.
- 15 North Lanarkshire Council Museums 1898 'Last will and testament of Dr J. S. Hunter Selkirk', J S Hunter Selkirk.
- 16 *Carlisle and Lanark Gazette* 1912 'Dr Hunter-Selkirk of Daleville', Professor Burns, 5 October: 4.
- 17 North Lanarkshire Council Museums 1898 'Last will and testament of Dr J. S. Hunter Selkirk', J S Hunter Selkirk.
- 18 *Carlisle and Lanark Gazette* 1907 'Parliamentary Notice', 16 November: 1.
- 19 *The Scotsman* 1911 'Lanark Town Council and the Hunter Selkirk Bequest', 13 March: 8.
- 20 North Lanarkshire Archives, UA/1/10/1/02: Airdrie Public Museum Curator's Minute Book 1901–1909.
- 21 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1904 'Airdrie Museum Papers', 9 July: 6.
- 22 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1909 'Public Museum', 9 January: 4.
- 23 North Lanarkshire Archives, UA/10/6/2/2: Airdrie Public Museum Curator's Minute Book 1921–1930. Bound with 'Gifts 1913–1930'.
- 24 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1947 'Burrell Paintings Will Be Seen By 1,500 Children', 27 September: 8.
- 25 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1947 'Museum', 27 September: 7.
- 26 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1950 'Display of Paintings from Burrell Collection', 11 February: 6.
- 27 *Airdrie & Coatbridge Advertiser* 1953 'The Past in a Streamlined Setting. Modernised Airdrie Museum "Unequalled in Any Provincial Town"', 3 October: 8.
- 28 Airdrie Museum Collection: Collection History [no date], Summerlee Museum archives, unpublished, Coatbridge: Summerlee Museum of Scottish Industrial Life.

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