

DISCOVERY, RESEARCH, AND EXCAVATION OF
THE AMARNA TABLETS—THE FORMATIVE STAGE

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As it has been already stated in the Introduction, the corpus of Amarna tablets which is, or had been in the past, available for study counts altogether three hundred and eighty two texts and fragments. Unfortunately, it is only in case of thirty one of these texts that we can, more or less reliably, reconstruct their original find-spots. These thirty one inscribed and three uninscribed tablets or fragments were excavated at the site of Tell el-Amarna during a series of archaeological works conducted by several archaeological missions starting with the excavation directed by William M. Flinders Petrie in 1891 (Petrie 1892a; 1982b; 1894). Petrie arrived to the site in November 1891 and in spite of the gloomy archaeological situation he inaugurated his excavations already shortly after his arrival. With respect to the site Petrie himself refers to, among other things, previous activities carried out by both the Museum authorities and an infamous antiquities dealer (Petrie 1892b:356). It is only at the end of January 1892 that Petrie mentions in his unpublished journal, at present kept in the Archive of the Griffith Institute in Oxford: “At last I have got touch of the cuneiform tablets” (Petrie MSS, 24–30 January 1892—XIII, 94). What follows is the famous description of old rubbish pits under the house walls in which the tablets were supposed to have been found (also Petrie 1892b:356; id. 1894:23–24). He also mentions that “a bit of one (tablet) was found in re-clearing the house in which they were said to have been found” (so-called Block No. 19; Q 42.21). Over the course of his work Petrie was able to uncover altogether twenty one texts of both an epistolary and school nature (plus an uninscribed tablet; Ash. 1893.1–41 [429]); all of them presently housed in the collection of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (Ash. 1893.1–41 [408–428]). An inscribed cylinder seal (Ash. 1893.1–41 [416]; EA 355) represents due to its specific shape a unique piece among these objects. As far as the Amarna corpus is concerned it is rather unfortunate that neither in his publications relating to the excavations at Amarna nor in his journal Petrie specifies which tablets have been discovered in the individual rubbish-pits and which is the tablet discovered in the so-called Block No. 21. The situation is even more blurred with regards to the two texts (EA 343 and EA 349) that were not included in Sayce’s study (Sayce

1894:34–37, XXXI–XXXIII). In general his description of the discovery is not exhaustive and despite the fact that his words have been steadily repeated in both scholarly and more popular treaties of the Amarna tablets' discovery, the genuine context of the discovery might well remain partially unreconstructable.

As far as indisputable find-spot(s) of the remaining Amarna tablets are concerned both the excavations of the German Oriental Society (*Deutsche Orient-Gesellschaft*), under the directorship of Ludwig Borchard, and the excavations of the Egypt Exploration Society, headed first by Thomas E. Peet and subsequently by John D.S. Pendlebury, bring us more authoritative data. During Borchard's work in the area of the Main City two more inscribed tablets were uncovered, while the EES excavations enriched the collection by means of nine more inscribed and two more uninscribed tablets or their respective fragments. It was already 1913 when the D.O.G. mission discovered the two fragments (Borchardt 1914:34–36; Schroeder 1914; OLZ 1914–1918). Both of these school texts were discovered in a more remote area of the Main City and in both cases the tablets were found in a non-official context—EA 359 in O 47.2 (at present in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo; J.48396, SR 4/12223/0) and EA 379 in N 47.3 (Egyptian Museum in Cairo; J.48397; SR 4/12224/0). In the area of the Main City, or more particularly in O 49.23, another school text—EA 368 (at present in the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford; Ash. 1921.1154)—was discovered in the course of the very first excavation season carried out by the Egypt Exploration Society (then Egypt Exploration Fund) headed by the British Egyptologist Thomas Eric Peet (Peet 1921). Later on, during the 1933–1934 excavation season, eight more inscribed (plus two more uninscribed; BM 134867 and BM 13486) tablets were discovered by the EES mission, then lead by John D.S. Pendlebury. With the exception of a single tablet (EA 371; BM 13468) all the others were once again discovered in the administrative quarter located to the east of the Royal Palace in the Central City, previously excavated by W.M.F. Petrie—i.e. in the area of the royal archive and scriptorium (see Pendlebury 1951:I, 114, 150; II, Pls. LXXXIII, LXXXV). Unfortunately, leaving aside the published data of the discovery of the EES tablets, no other details could be elicited from the documents kept in the archive of the Egypt Exploration Society.

In light of this it is very unfortunate that, with respect to the total number of all Amarna tablets and respective fragments, the tablets with known find-spot represent less than ten percent of the material at our disposal.

The earliest modern history of the collection of the Amarna tablets is closely related to private excavations carried on at the site by the antiquities dealer Farag Ismaïn of Giza. Contrary to reports, referred to by J.A. Knudtzon

(1963²: 4), that the tablets were discovered either during the autumn or by the end of 1887, there are certain indications that the tablets might have actually been found already during late spring or over the summer of that year. The main evidence can be found in the documents housed in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, more precisely in the *Journal d'entrée*, in which several registration entries for objects coming from the region of Middle Egypt, Akhmim or even the site of Amarna itself and clearly identifiable within the reign of Amenhotep IV-Akhenaten can be recognized (J.IV:330f.; esp. J.28028–28030, J.28035–28037). Not all those entries are precisely dated but it is obvious that the earliest objects of Amarna provenience were registered in the Museum since May 1887 (Mynářová 2007: 13, fn. 10) with the name of Farag Ismaïl mentioned as the man who sold some them to the authorities. Contrary to various scenarios transmitted both in scholarly and more popular literature, the discovery of the Amarna tablets can hence no longer be interpreted as purely “accidental” since we can reliably trace its history back to the aforementioned private excavations.

The British Museum in London was to be the first official institution to host a rather extensive collection of the Amarna tablets. In this particular case it is linked to the activities of E.A. Wallis Budge who, as an Assistant Keeper of the Department of Egyptian and Assyrian Antiquities, was able to obtain a first set of the Amarna tablets already during his second mission to Egypt and Mesopotamia (1887–1888). Despite the eloquent description of his travels in the narrative autobiography *By Nile and Tigris* (Budge 1920), the probable scenario of his acquisition of the tablets can most clearly be deduced from the archival materials (especially letters addressed to Sir Edward A. Bond, Principal Librarian, and Sir Peter Le Page Renouf, Keeper of Oriental Antiquities; Mynářová 2007:16–26; Cathcart 2004:247–248) housed in the Archive of the British Museum. Immediately after his arrival to Cairo (via Marseilles and Alexandria) Budge met some of the antiquities dealers, including Marius Panayiotis Tano, a Cypriot dealer of Greek origin, whom he probably met a year before during his first mission to Egypt, as well as a newly appointed Director of the Antiquities Service and Mission archéologique in Cairo, Eugène Grébaut, only promoted in 1886 when G. Maspero returned to Paris. Among other things it was the general atmosphere of the strong Anglo-French rivalry of the 1880's and 1890's that made Grébaut's attitude towards Budge as an Englishman rather problematic, and his behaviour can be adequately described as undiplomatic.

On the evening of December 19 Budge boarded the train to Asyut, accompanied by a certain Frenchman and a Maltese and arrived at Asyut on December 20. According to the narrative of Budge, the Frenchman left the

train earlier at Deir Mawas which, by that time, served as a train station for Hajj Qandil, in order “to set out to try to buy some of the tablets said to have been found at Tell ‘al-‘Amârnah” (Budge 1920 I:134–135). On his journey to the south Budge embarked on a steamer and after harbouring for the night at Akhmim he reached Qena. It was in Qena where he met some antiquity dealers including an unnamed Frenchman, “an owner of a flour-mill in Cairo”, supposedly to be identified with Mr. Frénay, who was acting as an agent for the Louvre. It seems that on December 22 the steamer made a stop in Luxor where Budge conducted more business and it cannot be ruled out that he also met with an important collector of antiquities, the American missionary, the Rev. Chauncey Murch. Documents kept in the archives of the British Museum indicate that on several occasions Ch. Murch was involved in financial dealings conducted by the representatives of the British Museum in Egypt.

Contrary to the tradition, presented in Budge’s own eloquent autobiography, the Amarna tablets were not purchased on his return from Aswan to Cairo but already during his travels upstream to Aswan. In his letter, dispatched on December 27 from Daraw in Upper Egypt, Budge mentions his business conducted in Luxor, including a clear reference to the tablets: “A certain man had 71 cuneiform tablets written in a remarkable script, and when I had spent a night examining them I decided to bring them with me to make sure of securing them. They were found at a place whose name I will give in the future. Four of them were stolen by a Copt and the Paris authorities bought them for £40 and sent out a man on purpose to buy the remainder. The Copt did not know to whom they were going and so the Frenchman was baulked” (letter kept in the Central Archives, British Museum, see also the copy of the Minutes of the Trustees of the British Museum, Department of Oriental Antiquities 1888:2195; Mynářová 2007:18). On the basis of this document we can suppose that Budge purchased at least 71 of these tablets already at the very first occasion, that means still on his way south. In respect to the ambiguity of the information presented by him on several occasions, the possibility exists that he first studied and made a reservation for the tablets and only afterwards “secured” them for the British Museum. In such case the tablets would have been safeguarded by a trustworthy individual in Luxor.

The very same set of tablets also appears in the Minutes of the Trustees of the British Museum which took place on January 14, 1888. A clear reference to Budge’s communication is made, quoting that he “has secured 71 cuneiform Tablets in a remarkable script.” (see above) More details can be found in the Minutes from the committee of February 11 with reference to

Budge's letter of January 8 sent from Cairo. In this particular letter Budge mentions the reactions of the authorities of the Cairo (= Boulaq) museum, including their attempts to intercept the tablets, "fortunately in Mr. Budge's own possession" (the copy of the Minutes of the Trustees of the British Museum, Department of Oriental Antiquities 1888:2204; Mynářová 2007:18). As far as the actual number of tablets held by Budge is concerned there are some discrepancies in the data. In his letter of December 27, 1887 Budge mentions 71 tablets. In his autobiography we can read that by means of two sets from two different people Budge examined 76 tablets in order "to say, whether they were genuine or forgeries" (Budge 1920 I:140) but then he was "allowed to take possession of the eighty-two tablets forthwith" (Budge 1920 I:141).

In this respect the most reliable source is formed by the documents kept in the British Museum. The Minutes of the Trustees dated October 13, 1888 contain a report of Peter Le Page Renouf recommending the purchase of a set of the tablets from "Shipping Merchants and Agents" Messrs. Bywater, Tanqueray & Co. The Minutes mentions, literally, "A very valuable collection of 81 cuneiform tablets found near Tell-el-Amarna, in Upper Egypt (*selected by Mr. Budge during recent missions to Egypt), being a series of letters and dispatches from Kings of Mesopotamia, Syria, and Phoenicia, to Amenophis III and his son Amenophis IV, BC 1530–1450. The tablets illustrate the relations in which the correspondents stood to the Egyptian monarchs, either as relatives, allies, or vassals. One of them proves the correctness of the tradition that the wife of Amenophis III was a foreign lady, the King of Mitanni, North East of Palestine, addressing him as his "son-in-law". As a further illustration of the historical importance of the collection, Mr. Renouf quotes the substance of three of the tablets. The character of the writing is unique, and several new words occur. The price of the collection is £ 512, payable on the passing of the Museum vote for the current year" (see copy of the Minutes of the Trustees of the British Museum, Department of Oriental Antiquities 1888:2359–2360; Mynářová 2007:21). The purchase was sanctioned and on the very same day 81 Amarna tablets were registered in the collection. To understand the difference between the number given by Budge in his letter (71) and the number actually registered by the museum authorities (81), one has to keep in mind that the existence of the tablets was probably known already before Budge's arrival to Egypt. The original find—those tablets discovered during the private excavations of F. Ismaïl—might, in fact, have already been dispersed among various antiquities dealers by that time. It seems that between his Luxor purchase and the moment he dispatched the tablets to London, Budge might have purchased yet another

set consisting of ten tablets, whose origin still remains unknown. It is obvious that at the very end of 1887 and early in 1888 tablets were still up for sale, and it would not have been difficult for Budge to arrange another purchase. The same holds for the latter part of 1888, as witnessed by a letter of Ch. Murch addressed to P. Le Page Renouf and dated November 23, 1888:

... Reference to my correspondence with Mr. Budge concerning some of the purchases he made here last year will show that since about the 1st of August I have had to urge very energetically that payment be speedily made. Though the full expectation here was that the money would be paid June 1st, I managed to satisfy those concerned here they should be patient as long as the delay was unavoidable. According to Mr. Budge's account £650 were paid to Messrs. Bywater, Tanqueray & Co. on Sept. 15th. Though this payment was made, there have been various delays which it is unnecessary to explain at length, and to the present time only £100 have been received by us. On Oct. 8th, I wrote a most explicit letter to Messrs. Bywater, Tanqueray & Co. I insisted most urgently that the whole £650 be sent out immediately. I followed this letter by one to Mr. Budge three days later. It is a great pity that Mr. Budge did not see the Bywaters, as they have obeyed my instructions only so far as to send is a cheque for £100. Your creditor has been forced to borrow money from Greek usurers at the rate of 7 per cent per month. I have just returned after an absence of twenty days at Assouan, and I went to see him last night. I find that he is now in the state of mind which I have been fearing, and which I have more than once suggested in my correspondence about the matter, viz., he is afraid I am deceiving him about the money, and he is afraid he will never get it. As high as £20 have been offered here for the Clay Cuneiform tablets. He feels that the first lot was taken from him at too low a rate. On the whole I found him in a very bad humor last night.

(Archive of the Department of Oriental Antiquities,
British Museum; Mynářová 2007:22)

After he finished his tasks in Egypt and Mesopotamia Budge returned from Baghdad to London on April 24, 1888. In his autobiography he clearly states that among the objects purchased during his second mission were “eighty-two tablets from Tall al-‘Amārnah” (Budge 1920 I:338), providing yet another number. In this particular case, it is possible to trace the origin of the single tablet. The tablet, at present BME 29829, was—as distinct from the first subset—registered only on May 9, 1891, as the publication of the material by C. Bezold and E.A.W. Budge clearly indicates (Bezold—Budge 1892:No. 46; EA 176). Once again, a report signed by P. Le Page Renouf but undisputedly written by Budge himself, on May 4, 1891 and pertaining to his fourth mission for the British Museum conducted between 1890 and 1891, contains a list of “the most interesting” objects, including “one Tell el-Amarna tablet” (copy of the report, Central Archives, British Museum, 5 May 1891, 1700–1701/22–24; Mynářová 2007:23).

At the same time that the collection of the Amarna tablets, presently housed in the British Museum, was created due to the activities of E.A.W. Budge in Egypt at the very end of 1887 and in early weeks of 1888, the tablets also captivated the attention of scholars and representatives of other institutions. The Egyptian Museum in Cairo and its director Eugène Grébaut play an crucial part in these developments. The formation of the Cairo Amarna collection is, similarly to the collection of the British Museum and the Royal Museum in Berlin (nowadays Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, see below), linked to private excavations conducted at the site of Tell el-Amarna in 1887. In a significant way, the Cairo, London and Berlin collections represent part and parcel of the majority of the whole Amarna corpus and their respective histories constitute in fact one, single story.

The authorities of the Egyptian Museum were not ignorant of the private excavations at the site of Tell el-Amarna during the year of 1887 as several objects discovered were subsequently registered in its collections. The very first mention of the Amarna tablets in Museum documents (or more precisely in the respective volume of the *Journal d'entrée*) dates to the early weeks and months of 1888 (Mynářová 2007:26–28). The earliest mention—J.28151—represents two tablets (CG 4765 = EA 148, CG 4777 = EA 320), purchased in January 1888 from an otherwise unidentified man called “Philip” (*Journal d'entrée* IV:342–343). Three more tablets arrived to the Museum shortly afterwards and, in contrast to the first purchase, the provenance is mentioned as the region of Akhmim (*Journal d'entrée* IV:343–342). The three tablets (CG 4753 = EA 113, CG 4761 = EA 195, CG 4770 = EA 240, later joined to a tablet in Berlin, see VAT 2709) were registered as J.28160. A more precise date for the registration could not be established, but it seems that it was not too long after the registration of the first set, probably during February 1888. The background of the acquisition of the third and by far the most numerous set—J.28179—is well-known (*Journal d'entrée* IV:344–345; Mynářová 2007:26–27). Documents kept in the Egyptian Museum mention that 17 complete and 14 fragments of cuneiform tablets were seized in Giza. This information is further elaborated by Knudtzon (1964²:7, n. 1) who links this set with the aforementioned antiquities dealer Farag Ismaïl. This was obviously the moment when the precise origin of the tablets was established. The origin of the tablets at Tell el-Amarna in Middle Egypt is mentioned with the last set—J.28185—registered in the Museum in February 1888 and consisting of 16 more cuneiform tablets (*Journal d'entrée* IV:344–345; Mynářová 2007:27–28).

It was also in early months of 1888 that the largest set of Amarna tablets, today part of the collection of the Vorderasiatisches Museum in Berlin,

started to take shape. The Austrian antiquities dealer Theodor Graf played an essential role in this process (Bierbrier 2012⁴:219–220). Th. Graf was the owner of a prosperous carpet business, but during the second half of the 19th century he also came to be known as a very competent antiquities dealer. His connection to Josef von Karabacek was in light of this essential as it established a contact with Archduke Rainer of Austria and, particularly, his voluminous collection of antiquities, especially papyri from Medinet el-Fayum and Heracleopolis and mummy portraits (the so-called Faiyum portraits). According to his correspondence with J. von Karabacek (Hunger 1962) Th. Graf left Trieste for Alexandria at the end of October 1887, reaching Cairo around mid-November. In his letter to Karabacek, dated November 19, 1887 and sent from El Faiyum, he mentions his plan for an early return back to Cairo (Hunger 1962:75–76, No. 52). His return is confirmed by another letter of November 21, dispatched from Cairo, in which he reports in detail on papyri from Akhmim and requests Karabacek for instructions concerning their purchase (Hunger 1962:76–77, No. 53). After two weeks in Cairo, Th. Graf returned in the fall of the year 1887 via Alexandria and Trieste to Vienna. Not a single mention of cuneiform tablets appears in Graf's correspondence of 1887 and it seems that he was unaware of their existence. Unlike Budge, Graf did not travel further south to Luxor, where the tablets might have been available at that time, but spent his time only in the areas of Cairo and the Faiyum. This changed during another visit to Egypt in 1888. On November 9, 1888 Graf wrote to Karabacek in Vienna:

Was S. Keiserl. Hoheit Bemerkung in Betreff eines Verkaufes nach Berlin anbe-
trifft, so haben Sie Recht gehabt zu versichern, daß es sich um Papyri nicht
handeln könne! Ich werde Ihnen jedoch sehr dankbar sein, wenn Sie bei erster
Gelegenheit S. Kaiserl. Hoheit mittheilen wollten, daß das Königl. Museum in
Berlin, wie auch aus Zeitungsberichten ersichtlich was, von mir Thontafeln mit
Keilschriften, welche in Ober-Egypten gefunden wurden, gekauft hat, aber
erst, nachdem dieselben hier, wo ich sie zuerst zeigte, als falsch erklärt wor-
den waren! Ich war in Folge dessen gezwungen, damit in's Ausland zu gehen!
(Hunger 1962:84–85, No. 58)

Based on the list of acquisitions in the Registerbuch kept in the Vorderasiatisches Museum the tablets were acquired by different means, among these 58 VAT inventory numbers are clearly identified as purchases from Graf in Vienna in 1888. At the same time the Museum also purchased an extensive set of Amarna tablets, originally in the collection of Daninos Pasha in Alexandria, and consisting of 45 VAT inventory numbers. The by far largest set is identified as a gift of J. Simon. Among Simon's tablets occurs also VAT 1605 (EA 12), with the lower half further identified as a gift of von

Niemeyer in Cairo (Acc. 23/1890). At that time Felix von Niemeyer was acting as a diplomat (“Dragoman”) at the German consulate in Cairo and it is interesting to observe that VAT 323 (EA 144) and VAT 324 (EA 76) were both acquired by Dr. Winckler using funds of the German consulate in Cairo. The data given in the Registerbuch also reveal the origin of tablet VAT 249 (EA 164). In this case the tablet was purchased directly from a certain “Todrus” in Luxor, surely to be identified with the Egyptian antiquities dealer Todrous Boulos (Bierbrier 2012⁴:542; 2695/88 Acc. Journ. 2/1889).

The common sources for both the Berlin and Cairo collections are also confirmed by the reciprocal exchange of some Amarna fragments documented by Knudtzon (1964²: 7–9).

The origin and modern history of other collections of the Amarna letters is known slightly better. The origin of the first of the Amarna tablets to come to the Louvre (now lost) can be traced to the antiquities dealer Elias who sold a collection of thirteen or fourteen tablets to the French mill owner and consular agent in Akhmim, M. Frénay (Capart 1936:204, 348), despite the fact that in the correspondence and journals of Charles E. Wilbour a reference to the Amarna tablets and their non-availability in relation to Frénay is mentioned: “His (= E. Grèbaut’s, JM) main object was to get the cuneiform tablets said to be found at Amarna, but Consul Frénay tells me he got none.” (Capart 1936:461). Nevertheless, the tablets later belonged to the collection of Urbain Bouriant and it he probably sent one (EA 260) for examination to Jules Oppert in the Louvre (Sayce 1917; Knudtzon 1964²:8; Mynářová 2007:25). Tablet EA 209 (AO 2036), presented to the Louvre by Gaston Maspero, represents the earliest entry among the Louvre Amarna collection (Scheil 1890). It is beyond dispute that in the early decades of the 20th century individual Amarna tablets were still available on the antiquities market. One can suppose that in most cases these objects still derived from the very early stages of the exploration of the site by means of the private excavations (Mynářová 2007:36–39). This includes the so-called Murch fragment, now in the collection of the Oriental Institute in Chicago (EA 26, A 9356) and the two tablets in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, bought in Cairo in 1924 (EA 15, MMA 24.2.11; EA 153, MMA 24.2.12). Four tablets originally in the collection of Alexandros Rostovitz Bey were registered in the British Museum on May 11, 1903. These tablets probably passed through the hands of the antiquities dealer Panayotis Kyticas. Another tablet (EA 378, BME 50745) was also purchased through him or his family in 1925. A single Amarna tablet (EA 380, BM 58364) might originally have come from the excavations of W.M.F. Petrie in 1891–1892, according to the study of C.B.F. Walker (Walker 1979). In 1911 the tablets from the collection of the Russian Egyptologist

V.S. Golenischeff were ceded to the Pushkin Museum of Fine Arts in Moscow. Finally, in January 1918 the Louvre collection was enlarged to altogether seven tablets, including that of Maspero, by means of a purchase conducted by G. Bénédic. The very last museum acquisition of an Amarna tablet can be identified in the records of the Musées Royaux d'Art et d'Histoire in Brussels in 1933 (EA 369, E.6753).

This brief overview of the modern history of the Amarna tablets indicates that the early formative stages were rather “wild,” and it is highly probable that one will never be able to fully reconstruct the wanderings of the individual tablets. It is however clear that in order to complete the picture of the discovery itself and its context archival data must be studied and taken into consideration.